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Review: Bourgeois Hinduism, or The Faith of the Modern Vedantists: Rare Discourses from Early Colonial Bengal

Chad Bauman
Butler University, cbauman@butler.edu

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specializing in one particular exegetical approach, while Li seems to have been hostile to both Daoism and Buddhism alike.

This last point is, of course, no more than a quibble, of no substance to the main argument, but it may perhaps serve to remind us of the irreducible complexity of the religious environment studied by Zhiru. It is her willingness usually to confront—if not always to solve—such complexity that is one of the most attractive virtues of this book. More monographs as well researched and well considered as this one are certainly needed, and I do hope that circumstances will allow the author to bring further studies as useful as this one to completion.

T. H. Barrett, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London.


The centerpiece of Brian Hatcher’s Bourgeois Hinduism is the full, annotated translation of a short, obscure Bengali text published in 1841, the Sabhyadiger vaktītā (Discourses by members). The “members” in question were associated with the Tattvabodhini Sabha (Truth-Promoting Society), which was founded in 1839 by Debendranath Tagore, the young, spiritually inclined son of a wealthy Calcutta entrepreneur. The twenty-one discourses included in the text were delivered in 1839 and 1840 by Debendranath and other members of the society (some of them, like Aksayakumāra Datta, Ramacandra Vidyāvāgīśa, and Iśvaracandra Vidyāśāgara, prominent in their own right).

Debendranath, father of Nobel Laureate Rabindranath Tagore, is perhaps best known for his eventual leadership within the Brāhma Samāj, the society founded in 1928 by Rammohan Roy. The great prominence of Rammohan and his Samāj has obscured Debendranath’s role and that of the Tattvabodhini Sabha in the Bengal Renaissance and accounts for the fact that the latter have received relatively little attention. One of Hatcher’s central and most provocative claims, however, is that the prominence of Rammohan in histories of this period is due in large part to the work of Debendranath and the Tattvabodhini Sabha. According to Hatcher, Rammohan’s legacy and the influence of the Brāhma Samāj had begun to decline in the years immediately following Rammohan’s death in 1833. And though Rammohan’s influence is clearly felt in the Sabhyadiger vaktītā, its discourses make reference neither to him nor to the Brāhma Samāj. The Sabhyadiger vaktītā reflects a time, therefore, when members of the Tattvabodhini Sabha were thinking independently, reformulating Hinduism in the light of Enlightenment rationalism and the exigencies of colonial life without any particular sense of ideological loyalty, except to other members of the society. Hatcher therefore suggests, and with good reason, that it was only later, in 1842 when the Tattvabodhini Sabha took over everyday management of the Brāhma Samāj, that it began intentionally to dedicate itself to the “propagation of Rammohan’s Vedantic theism” (21). Along the way, and retroactively, the Tattvabodhini Sabha reimagined Rammohan as its founder and intellectual forefather. According to Hatcher, the Sabhyadiger vaktītā discourses reveal their authors “to be proponents of a generalized Brāhma theology, but the absence of Rammohan from those discourses suggests the degree to which that theology had floated free of any unifying organizational memory.
In order to fully understand themselves as a community, the Tattvabodhini group needed to remember Rammohan; they needed to reincorporate him within their story” (58). The work of the Tattvabodhini Sabha therefore revitalized Rammohan’s legacy while concomitantly concealing the Sabha’s own important role in the events of this period.

*Bourgeois Hinduism* also explores the ways in which the early Vedanta-oriented faith of the *Sabhyadiger vaktrā* reflects the well-educated, middle-class circumstances of Calcutta’s *bhadralok* (“civilized” or “respectable” people), who were at this time coming to terms with both their newfound wealth and their changing position in colonial Bengal. While the *bhadralok* did not constitute a “homogeneous socioeconomic class,” in part because the group included traditionally prominent families as well as those who had achieved their status more recently through modern methods, they did share a “coherent set of cultural goals” (69).

The *Sabhyadiger vaktrā*, Hatcher suggests, addresses these shared cultural goals and concerns and “demonstrates that the earliest members of the Sabha were actively creating a framework of middle-class values centering on rationality, benevolence, hard work, and worldly success” (69). The *Sabhyadiger vaktrā*’s “rational” faith is a vaguely theistic one and differs from that of contemporaneous Euro-American deism primarily in the fact that it draws from the Upanishads for inspiration and justification.

The discourses are replete with admonitions to abjure luxury, “restrain” (but not reject) the senses and passions, obey God’s laws, and work diligently for the betterment of humanity. In fact, the *Sabhyadiger vaktrā*’s this-worldly asceticism, embodied in the ideal of the *brahmavisāgha grāha* (godly householder) rather than the renouncer, is so plainly redolent of the Calvinism and Puritanism described by Max Weber in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* that one would have been surprised had Hatcher not made the connection (he does). It is in this sense that the faith of the Tattvabodhini Sabha is “bourgeois Hinduism.” And from the shape of this “bourgeois Hinduism,” so appropriate for what Hatcher, borrowing a phrase from de Vries, calls Bengal’s “industrious revolution” (10), we learn something about the reasons for the popularity of neo-Vedantic ideas among today’s middle-class Hindus.

These and other arguments comprise the first four of *Bourgeois Hinduism’s* eight chapters. In chapter 5, Hatcher evaluates the extent to which the rhetoric of Christian missionaries, who were becoming increasingly influential in Bengali society at this time, influenced the work of the Tattvabodhini Sabha and the Brāhma Samaj. Rammohan engaged repeatedly in debate with Christians, and the Brāhma Samaj eventually dedicated a portion of its energies to countering their criticisms. But the *Sabhyadiger vaktrā* makes no reference to Christianity or Christian ideas, again suggesting a degree of independence of thought and reflection in the early years of the Sabha. In chapters 6 and 7, Hatcher analyzes more closely the style and scope of the text and provides evidence for his conclusions regarding authorship of individual discourses in the text. (One of the intriguing—and infuriating—elements of the *Sabhyadiger vaktrā* is that its discourses are signed only with initials.) Chapter 8 contains a full translation of the text.

Hatcher, whose other books include *Idioms of Improvement: Vidyāsāgar and Cultural Encounter in Bengal* (Oxford, 2001) and the underrecognized *Eclecticism*
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and Modern Hindu Discourse (Oxford, 1999), is an excellent writer with an ear for the well-turned phrase. And Bourgeois Hinduism is a well-balanced work; neither the translation nor the material that frames it overshadows the other, and both are made stronger by their appearance together. Hatcher avoids the arrogance of including detail for detail’s sake, and the chapters of the book are short and fast-paced. The result is an admirable text that would be of interest to specialists yet accessible enough even for undergraduates.

Chad M. Bauman, Butler University.


How does one best understand the life of a religious leader? Should one focus on the teachings she produced, the social and political context of her formative years, or the ritual forms of the new tradition? How much weight should one give to autobiographical, biographical, or hagiographical accounts? How best can scholars distinguish among the three? How do charismatic leaders systematize and transmit their charisma, or “X factor,” both to their immediate followers and to future generations? How do religious groups emerge, develop, and react to changing social, technological, and political circumstances? Nancy Stalker’s detailed history of the life and times of Deguchi Onisaburō provides a fascinating response to these and other perennial questions in religious studies.

Oomotokyo, one of the so-called New Religions of Japan, grew out of the partnership of two unique individuals: an illiterate peasant woman named Deguchi Nao (1837–1918), who in the late nineteenth century began to receive and write down divine messages, and an eccentric young spiritualist, Deguchi Onisaburō (1871–1948). While there have been numerous studies focusing on Nao and the formation of Oomoto, this is the first book-length treatment in English of Nao’s son-in-law and successor, Onisaburō. By framing her study around the concept of Onisaburō’s “charismatic entrepreneurship” (3), Stalker is able to explore the full range of his writings and activities during his tenure as leader of the sect. This tenure covers an important but understudied span in the religious history of modern Japan and includes the ascension of Oomoto, Onisaburō’s “excellent adventure” (149) and near execution in Mongolia, his subsequent arrest in Japan, and the two suppressions of the sect at the hands of the state. The focus on charismatic entrepreneurship also allows Stalker to consider the full range of Onisaburō’s personality: his religious fervor, political calculations, nationalism, pacifism, narcissism, and flamboyant cross-dressing. In this way, Stalker provides a wonderfully messy picture of the battles and inner tensions between Onisaburō and Nao over the message of the sect.

This book is at its most effective when exploring how Onisaburō negotiated issues of religion and the state, the use of media technologies, and imperialism. In Stalker’s treatment of Oomoto, we see a religious movement develop and grow not simply as a series of texts (indeed, texts in the traditional sense are largely absent from the latter half of the book) but as a group of practices that engage fully with Japanese society and the world. For example, in chapter