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UNFORGETTING CHAITANYA: VAISHNAVISM AND CULTURES OF DEVOTION IN COLONIAL BENGAL. By Varuni Bhatia. New York: OUP. 2017. 291 p.

Bhatia writes pointedly in the Introduction, "...this is a book about unforgetting Chaitanya and recovering Vaishnavism in colonial Bengal" (2). By the act of unforgetting, the author implies a simultaneous chiding of the *bhadralok* over forgetting the significance of Vaishnavite origins as well as a demand of a renaissance leading to recuperation, a collective process the author calls anamnesis. By locating literature that has Chaitanya as its literary axis within the larger Bengali Vaishnava traditional nexus, the author hopes to achieve another "world picture" of the anamnesis operating in relation to the "forging of a Bengali colonial subjectivity" (4).

In the chapter *A Religion in Decline in an Age of Progress*, Bhatia follows the two trajectories that general outlook towards Vaishnavism (led by Chaitanya) took in the mid to late 19th century: one was informed by "Christian missionaries, colonial administrators, and Westernized Bengali intellectuals" (21) of the Vaishnava followers who brought on the slow descent of a once rich, radical and wholesome value system into a corrupt, compromised and profligate

lifestyle, while the other was informed by "Bengali literary historians, cultural revivers, Vaishnava theologians, and anticolonial activists" (26), being that of the later address to the loss of Vaishnava tradition from Hindu theism. From this point, the author follows the discourse prevalent during the time that pointed to the decline of Vaishnavism in the eyes of the late 19th century Bengali *bhadralok*. This chapter also provides a succinct hagiographical account of Chaitanya which supplements the historical-religious history of Vaishnavism.

By choosing texts of varying attitudes (Kennedy's sympathetic account, Ward's accurate/unsparring fieldwork and Wilson's background analysis of Hindu textual traditions to posit Vaishnavism within the larger Hindu framework) towards the practice of Vaishnavism, the author deftly exposes the white saviour mentality of the Evangelists as well as their rejection of the existing Vaishnava belief system as a part of the Indian theology they often wrote off as pagan-heathen traditions (the author astutely points out how one of the chosen authors is reminded of Catholicism). The section that succeeds it, explores the discourse that put into action "a program of reformative and culturalist regeneration" (41) with the two approaches the discourse takes—the cultural-nationalist and the religious-reformist. The first approach replaces the discourse of decline with that of loss, leaning towards a Romantic imagination and nostalgia for the past while through the second approach, Bhatia elucidates how Vaishnavism

provided a site for Bengali nationalism and its transition into Gaudiya Vaishnavism, which involved an “Evangelical remaking” (46).

Untidy Realms explores the manner in which the *bhadralok* entrusted themselves with the preservation of the Vaishnavist traditions, a preservation which operated along the two axes of culture and religion. The author titles it so because she strives to describe the unusually plural nature of Vaishnavist traditions, which continued in perfect harmony in the face of opposites, thus giving the impression that Vaishnavism transcended all boundaries. However, Bhatia takes the reader on a comprehensive tour of the making of modern Vaishnavism by tackling the rituals in practice in Bengal (in the penultimate section), instead of simply perusing and critically examining the *Bhadralok* disciplinary discourse. Using the example of two Vaishnavas (from the Bengali middle class/indigenous cultural elite) and elite Vaishnava families, Bhatia examines what these untidy realms were (in the opinion of the abovementioned), that needed to be trimmed from the genteel and appropriate/pure Bengali Vaishnavism. What is commendable about these sections is that there is a thorough biographical assessment of the Vaishnavas and that no fact or opinion, especially that pertaining to missionary and western influence, is presented without historical-biographical-cultural evidence. Moreover, the subsequent section on deviant sects is approached in the very same manner, leaving no room for any ambiguity.

Taking cue from the European Romantic Movement (and imagination) that subscribed to ideas like individuality, nativity and

indigenous knowledge, the author introduces Vaishnavist traditions as folklore and Chaitanya as a “regional deity and devotee”. The author draws upon Bendix’s assertion of nationalism resting on “the essentialist notions inherent in authenticity, and folklore in the guise of native cultural discovery and rediscovery” and uses it as a background for the third chapter, in order to explore the other dimension (apart from the *Bhadralok* reformation/renaissance, or Gaudiya Vaishnavism) of Vaishnavist preservation, which was spurred on by a Swadeshi Nationalism. To this end are listed in elaborate detail, historians and their major theoretical contributions such as Dinesh Chandra Sen and his position on Bangla as an authentic and relatively older language (as opposed to a new and derived one) and Haraprasad Chaudhari’s looking back at the neglected Vaishnavist literature that supplied Bengali literature language and literature a sound and wholesome base not requiring Western paradigms.

Bhatia calls Sishir Kumar Ghosh the protagonist of *Recovering Bishnupriya’s Loss*. His efforts at a collective that brought together diverse Vaishnava devotees through his journal *Shri Bishnupriya Patrika* are covered extensively. This gives the reader an insight into what constituted Vaishnavism (free from colonial influence) for such intellectuals and to what extent such personalities would go to perpetuate the Vaishnavist discourse. The author also skillfully situates these efforts into the overarching theme of the procedure of “unforgetting” by placing an emphasis on and by examining the tasks undertaken by the journal to acquaint the readers with Vaishnavist literature,

advertisements, book reviews of hagiographies and works in progress, as well as a practice of awarding authentic texts brought in for examination. The untidy realms that the author discusses in the second chapter are revisited again to show how the journal engaged with them, by either trying to tidy them or stayed silent upon the matter.

Utopia and a Birthplace addresses the historical controversy surrounding Chaitanya's birthplace towards the end of the nineteenth century. The purpose for the chapter is to situate this preoccupation within the larger attempt of the *Bhadralok* to resuscitate Vaishnavism and to understand it as counterproductive to the same (the author calls it an "anomaly"). Datta's *Svalikhita Jibani* is an ideal example that not only helps the author make specific claims about the nature of Chaitanya's birthplace, but also general claims about the humanness and the oft manufactured nature of a sacred space. Datta's pilgrim-like outlook to Nabadwip, his spiritual dreams/visions, his geographic fixation with Chaitanya's birth and his use of colonial tools of knowledge, all lent his claim credibility and applause. The account of Datta's campaign is followed by various Gaudiya efforts made after his death to make his claim solid. A section on Nabadwip also finds its way into the chapter, which makes the chapter all the more informative and adds to the already meticulous research.

The author's unique style of not letting even the minutest historical detail go by unnoticed is what makes the book an accessible and

comprehensive read. Every chapter has sections vividly etched in biographical and historical detail, making it impossible to misconstrue the purpose of the book. Several sections, such as "Women and Vaishnavism: Transgression and Patriarchy", "Between Manuscript and Print: Authenticity, Purity, and the Politics of Selfhood", "Celebrating Gauranga's Birth Anniversary" and "Nabadwip: History, Topography, Discourse", might not seem fundamental to the tone of the book at first, however, a careful evaluation is likely to impress the reader with the richness it lends to the primary and more aligned sections. The conclusions provided with each chapter are essential in outlining the main argument as well as in understanding the author's precise commentary on the chapters. The personal approach the author adopts in the Epilogue deserves special mention and altogether, the book provides a fine and comprehensive account of Vaishnavism, keeping at its centre the controversial figure of Chaitanya, and addressing the controversies and ambiguities surrounding it in a pervasive manner.

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AMBEDKAR AND OTHER IMMORTALS: AN UNTOUCHABLE RESEARCH PROGRAMME. By Soumyabrata, Choudhury. New Delhi: Navayana, 2018. 272 p.

Soumyabrata Choudhury in this book attempts to explain certain