

The Brahma Samaj and its Vaishnava Milieu: Intersections of Hindu Knowledge and Love in Nineteenth Century Bengal

Ankur Barua, Leiden/Boston: E.J. Brill, 2021, pp. 204+5 Appendices, References and Index. Price not stated.

Amiya P. Sen*

This is an intensive study of the complex and productive intertwining of older Vaishnava religious articulations and modern reformist Brahmodharma in colonial Bengal by a young scholar whose intellectual interrogations I have consistently admired. This happens to be a subject that has also enthused and interested me and Barua's competent study contributes much by way of whetting my long standing curiosity.

Arguably, Rammohun Roy has to be a key figure for this enterprise, as the forerunner to a movement that rightly or wrongly identified (Advaita) Vedanta as quintessential Indian thought and as someone whose critical comments on the *Bhagavad* and on Chaitanya Vaishnavism proved to be greatly consequential. It has been my belief that the Vaishnava revival in modern Bengal led by figures like Bankimchandra, Sisir Ghosh and Kedarnath Dutta was, in a sense, the creative response to such criticism. The Brahma-Vaishnava symbiosis also represents a growing spiritual angst within Brahmos who could not have been untouched by the phenomenal religious and cultural awakening associated with neo-Vaishnavism. Nothing comparable occurred during the same period in the Sakta-Saiva tradition. Brahmos were among the earliest to woo Vaishnava religious idioms and vocabulary though it is important also to specifically underscore the Gaudiya or Bengal lineage here for I know of only one Brahma turned Vaishnava, Tarakishore Chaudhury (later Santadas Baba), who preferred to join the Nimbarka *sampradaya*.

Barua's book has nine chapters in all to which are added five interesting and useful Appendices. Of these the one concerning "Worship of the Infinite" a partial translation of Nagendranath Chattopadhyay's

Ananter Upasana (1900) I found particularly interesting, if only because of the departures it appears to make in defining 'upasana/worship' compared to Rammohun's own somewhat restricted understanding of the term. Nagendranath, it has to be remembered, was also implicated in a fiery controversy on the question of image worship with the orthodox Hindu apologist, Pundit Sasadhar Tarkachudamani. This work studies several prominent figures from 19th century Bengal of which only Bankimchandra was a non-Brahmo. Intriguingly though there is no specific chapter assigned to Keshabchandra Sen. Surely, in the context of this study, Keshab's deep association with Vaishnava bhakti and his interesting if also idiosyncratic experiments with religious universalism deserved fuller and more focused treatment. I wondered too why the early Rabindranath with his penchant for Vaishnava poetics and *rasa* has not been adequately accommodated.

Barua ably demonstrates how Brahma discourses beginning with Maharshi Debendranath were increasingly infused with Vaishnava religious sentiments and vocabulary. Reportedly, such devotional idioms and articulations were consciously adopted as also adapted, accepted but also creatively reworked in the light of certain fundamental theological postulates vital to Brahmoism. In religious matters, for instance, Vaishnava devotional culture had to be stripped of both image worship and ornate ritualism. In social matters, similarly, Brahmos remained true to *bhadralok* inhibitions about grass root Vaishnavism with its alleged 'licentiousness' and the 'low life' of wandering *Bauls*, *Boshtoms* and *Bairagis*. However, this creative interplay of an older humanism with new social concerns, sectarian piety with Universalist vocabularies also created greater ecumenical space. The Brahma Samaj after Rammohun increasingly moved

* An author and historian.

away from the concept of a seemingly sterile *nirguna* (if not also *nirakar*) Brahman, arguably in search of a more active and reciprocal relationship between God and man, at times going even beyond a purely Vaishnava religious imagination. By the 1870s, two of the key attractions for Brahmos were Ramakrishna's recurring voyages into rapturous *samadhi* and the concept of Motherhood of God.

I have to confess that I did not quite comprehend some of the heuristic categories that Barua employs in this study. On pages 16 and 28 respectively, he speaks of the "Vedantic monotheism" and the 'advaitic worship' of Rammohun. Now Rammohun did not use 'Vedanta' in the conventionally accepted sense of the term (end of the Vedas/essence of the Vedas) but as the particular sub school associated with Sankara and unwittingly encouraged this questionable collapsing of categories in the years to come. Also, it is doubtful if he knew enough of other Vedantics like Ramanuja, or the *bhedabhedins* Bhaskara and Nimbarka. To the dualist Madhva he rendered great disservice by comparing him to Carvaka. Theistic effusions and the act of pious worship are clearly absent in Sankara. For Rammohun too, *upasana* was simply the mental acknowledgement of Brahman's existence (*tatastha lakshanam*) and not as it were, locating any humanly cognizable quality (*swarupa lakshanam*) in the designer God. This is a problem later evocatively posed in the *Kathamrita* where Ramakrishna wonders just how God was to be adored if one could not know of His qualities. Rammohun clearly confused monism with monotheism and remained undecided between a personal God and the supra-personal. Such confusion, I might hazard the guess, came partly from his grounding in *tantra* which was dualistic in its approach but monistic in its conclusions. Contrary to Barua's claim (p. 31) I also believe that Rammohun's divergences from Sankara were quite radical, not simply 'occasional' and the question therefore is why despite deviating so strongly from Sankara, Rammohun preferred to situate himself within his spiritual lineage.

On p. 4, the author credits key Brahmo figures like Debendranath, Rajnarain Basu, Protap Mozoomdar and Sibnath Sastri with advancing a 'bhakti infused advaita'. This brings to mind pre-modern Vaishnava-Vedantics like Madhavendra Puri, Madhusudan Saraswati and Sridhar Swami who are known to have attempted the same. It might have been interesting to know if the pre-modern and modern reconciliations had hermeneutically some features in common. I wondered also if the figures under study were sufficiently aware of certain

difficulties inherent in such reconciliations. Even with the reportedly Vaishnava inflected vocabulary of some Brahmos there was really no room for accommodating the categories of *avatar* and *avatari*, both of which were vital to Gaudiya Vaishnavism, the philosophical construct of *acintyabhedabheda* or for that matter, the very concept of *lila* as an inscrutable ontological play. Maharshi Debendranath preferred *santa bhava* but which the Gaudiyas considered the most inferior of all the *bhavas*. And if *madhura*, the *bhava* that the Gaudiyas most valorized spoke effusively of the 'sweetness' or 'love' of God, this also carried a strong undercurrent of eroticism which most puritanical Brahmos would have been uncomfortable with.

I was a little surprised to learn that the Brahmo Sabha/Samaj was established in 1829 (p. ix) and not 1828 as is commonly accepted or that Dwarkanath Tagore was an 'industrialist' (p. 5). 'Dridha biswas I would have preferred to translate as 'firm faith', not 'firm confidence' (p.107) and in the Gaudiya idiom, 'parikara' probably better translates as 'servitors' compared to 'companions'. Appendix A would have been infinitely more useful if, instead of including the births or deaths of chosen individuals, it had listed important texts, institutions or events relevant to Barua's project, as for instance the publication of Rammohun's *Goswami Sahit Vichar*, Bankim's *Krishnacharitra*, Keshab's bhakti wave at Monghyr, the earliest printed copy of the *Bhagavat* in Bengal and Bhaktivinod's well known apologetic speech on this text (1869), the *Viswa Vaishnava Sabha* and Nagar Sankirtans.

One cannot agree more with the author's claim that the interface between Brahmoism and Vaishnavism represented an attempt at resolving the continuing antinomy of reason and revelation, reminding us of the dynamism inherent in traditions and the multiple trajectories that modernity can take. The Bengali author and critic, Chandranath Basu who was also the first to coin the term 'Hindutva' in 1892 had once argued that the chronological arrangement between tradition and modernity was not always successive. Basu's point here was that tradition and modernity could coexist in a dynamic interplay of values and preferences and that one did not necessarily fully give way to the other. Barua's brilliant study underscores this possibility poignantly. For the sake of several interested scholars and students who would also like to access this engaging study, I do wish that Brill would seriously consider bringing out a cheaper South Asia edition soon.