

Book Review

Vaisnavism: Contemporary Scholars Discuss the Gaudiya Tradition

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Scholarship is a wily animal. It has penetrating eyes and a sharp tongue. It is a predator that lives on its wits, endowed with phenomenal memory and keen intellect. It is adaptable, making its home in almost any climate commanding respect from those around it. It knows a variety of languages. It is energetic, alert, and like most creatures of prey hungry for conquest. Ironically, scholarship is also a lonely beast, for by nature it must remain aloof from the territories it inhabits, never able to become a part of what it observes. The object of its desire seems unattainable, as though attainment were a betrayal of its own nature; it hunts for food which it cannot completely digest.

Is there an Uncertainty Principle in scholarship which says one can either objectively understand a subject's place in the universe or subjectively realise the truth it contains, but not both? It appears so, although some scholars have broken the old and attained what they observed. In Gaudiya Vaisnava history, Jiva Goswami, perhaps the most Prolific Indian theologian of the 16th century, dovetailed his erudition to a life of devotion after meeting the great saint Chaitanya Mahaprabhu. In the 19th century, Bhaktivinoda-Thakura found the object of his scholarship in a rare copy of the Bhagavata Purana, gave up his magisterial duties and dedicated himself to a life of devotion. But these are the rare exceptions.

An intriguing feature of author Steven Rosen's 25 interviews (including four with Indian professors and two with women) is that they permit us to observe an intelligent and deeply committed community of scholars from behind a nearby curtain, to listen to them from the next room, and what we see and hear is revealing: it is a profile of people who have been given a glimpse of the object of desire, a taste of the fruits of scholarship dangling inches from their lips, and the ways in which they react.

This unusual and fascinating insight into the scholarly mind may not have been intentional. Steven Rosen did not intend his book to be an expose of its subjects; he is not the Barbara Walters of Indology. He set out questioning what is the Gaudiya tradition, where did it come from and where is it going. The book provides positive answers; some explicit answers:

- Vaisnavism, like Christianity, is a living religion, numerically the largest segment of modern Hinduism, as pervasive in India as Christianity is in the western countries.
- The basic tenet of Vaisnavism is that we are spiritual beings living in a material world. Consequently, we live on the surface of emotions and know only the thinnest veneer of true experience. Vaisnavas use practical methods, such as chanting and dramatic performance, to revive spiritual emotion and reach the deeper, spiritual levels of experience.
- Vaisnavism encompasses the most egalitarian of theologies: the worship of Radha and Krsna. It is the only religious tradition to recognise the pre-eminence of both the female and male aspects of God. (This is most true of the Gaudiya tradition. In Judaism, Kabbalists also recognise the dual aspects but do not emphasise them.)
- Its goal, divine love of God, is not easily attained, but it is attainable; there are self-realised Vaisnavas through history whose lives provide us with examples to study and

follow.

The interviewees in this remarkable collection almost unanimously describe a discovery eminent in their work; and those who do, while demonstrating academic protocol and exercising professional restraint, project a mood of excitement about their chosen field. It emerges, however, only from between the lines of their replies and comments. There is the impression that, in Studying vaisnavism, their Western sensibilities underwent a transformation which they are prepared to acknowledge-but discretely. If proximity to vaisnava doctrine permitted a vision of life's mysteries that Western academic traditions did not afford, the vision is to be discussed in subdued whispers.

'What may have been meant by this is...'

'Perhaps what can be seen is...'

'Another way of understanding this might be...'

'As a scholar, all that I can say is...'

From our vantage behind the nearby curtain, we sense people holding back the emotional side of their understanding, as though it were improper to reveal how deeply one can be touched by the discovery of eternity or by other truths found in authentic spiritual traditions such as Gaudiya Vaisnavism. The restraint may be politically correct, but for readers it is distinctly uncomfortable; the elation of knowing the soul's permanence, the soothing poetry of self-realisation, the bliss of our place in transcendence are not mere sidebars to the understanding of a people and a tradition. They are the essence.

This reserve may also be an inherent quality of the scholarly animal; when it finds its prey, it dissects it ever so politely. There is no bloodlust in scholarship. The closest it gets to raising its adrenal flow may be the restrained awe these interviewees demonstrate. And in that restraint, author Rosen has accomplished his purpose: the substantiation of Gaudiya Vaishnavism as an authentic spiritual tradition, not a religious cult; based on history and theology, not emotion and sentiment.

Religion is by nature an ecstatic experience. It was the loss of the ecstatic experience that sent entire communities of young people scurrying East in their search for spiritual fulfillment and triggered the subsequent brouhaha over cults and brainwashing. Rosen's subliminal message is to not throw the rice out with the rinse water. Not all Indian religious movements to have emerged from the '60s are panfrangi-flavored panaceas to a spiritually depleted America. Just see how excited this group of scholars gets over Gaudiya vaisnavism!

The book serves its purpose well. There is very little information on Bengal from the 13th to the 18th centuries. In his effort to substantiate the authority and historicity of Gaudiya Vaisnavism, Rosen has pieced together a significant document in the form of interviews with contemporary scholars and historians.

Rosen is a subversive writer, if somewhat obviously so: his interviews stack neatly one on the other, forming a well reasoned validation of the Gaudiya tradition. He even manages to adhere to the sastraic rule of reserving deeper, more intimate subjects for the final few chapters, much like the Bhagavatam, which admonishes aspirants to study carefully the first nine' Cantos before attempting to penetrate the pastimes of Krsna and the gopis described in the tenth.' Rosen's role as an interviewer is, nonetheless, qualified by his desire to rectify what

he sees as misconceptions.

His talk with associate professor and Chaitanyite biographer Tony Stewart, for example, explores the concept of inspirational writing. He argues eloquently for the theological authority of experiential texts, such as the Vaisnava dramas. Since Chaitanya's time, such dramas and the accompanying songs (kirtana) were held up as evidence of the Vaisnava community's sentimentality. The clear distinction between the deviant behaviour of pseudo-Vaisnavas (sahajiyas) and the real thing is made emphatically clear. Rosen's interview with author and professor William Deadwyler drives the point home even deeper.

There is an interesting blend to Rosen's choice of interviewees. There are luminaries, the elite of Indian studies, mixed with less recognised spokespeople. Some are eloquent about their subject, others less so in communicating their particular focus. The thread of eminent discovery binds them all.

It is an ironic mismatch, scholarship and the religious experience. Scholarship looks to make intelligible, breaks things down into cause and effect, describes its observations in sequential narrative. The religious experience, in its pure form, is not rational, disobeys rule of logic and reason, and the closer scholarship approaches its core the more religion laughs at its formal attempts to classify and describe. By drawing on a crosssection of the Vaisnava community-practitioners as well as observers-Rosen's work manages to temper the irony with insight and occasional flashes of wit.

Vaisnavism: Contemporary Scholars Discuss the Gaudiya Tradition is in places an esoteric work. So are the deeper discussions in most religious traditional like treasure maps drawn with the intention of dissuading less determined seekers. If treasure were easily attained, we'd all be rich. If ecstasy were cheap, we'd all be smiling. (One feels sympathy for teachers such as Dan Smith who struggles to keep his students interested in the numerous battles of Valmiki's epic, tale *Ramayana*.)

Treasure maps are also just that: maps showing the way to a destination. For anyone looking to go the extra distance in their search for enlightenment, here is a compact work that points out the blind alleys and pitfalls as well as the major highways and backroads of Vaisnavism.

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