

Religious Revivalism as Nationalist Discourse: Swami Vivekananda and New Hinduism in Nineteenth-Century Bengal

Review >
South Asia

Balanced assessments of the socio-political impact of Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902) are quite rare, as the tendency either to excessively glorify or unfairly condemn: Vivekananda, Hinduism, Vedanta, and Hindu nationalism, usually dominates any debate on the issue. Shamita Basu's latest book, *Religious Revivalism as Nationalist Discourse: Swami Vivekananda and New Hinduism in Nineteenth Century Bengal*, is, therefore, a welcome break with this tradition.



Swami Vivekananda
ca. 1935.

By Victor A. van Bijlert

Shamita Basu's approach to Vivekananda's role in Indian nationalism is inspired by post-Marxism, Subaltern Studies, and Cultural Studies, but her allegiance to the Subaltern approach is evident from her references to Antonio Gramsci's views on the role of philosophers as opinion-leaders of the masses. Of crucial importance in this study is Ms Basu's emphasis on social and political mobilization through internalized religion. Rather than shy away from the troubled issue of religion, she tries to present its liberating potential, especially through Swami Vivekananda's attempt to mould it into an ideology of modernity, national unity, and equality.

What was the great achievement of Vivekananda in comparison with so many other Hindu religious reformers in the nineteenth century? According

to Basu, Vivekananda 'wanted to advocate a form of Hinduism that was a far cry from the parochial version of the religion which the orthodox Hindu leaders wanted to popularize'. The Swami tried to propagate a form of Hinduism that would offer a 'common ground of spiritual unity among all the religions and sects'. To achieve this goal in 'India, in which every community would have its own cultural space, [this Hinduism] would require a conception of religion whose spiritual openness would provide the cultural framework to accommodate diversities and enable a democratic nation to hold itself together' (p 129). Vivekananda's reconstruction of what was then standard Vedantic Hinduism 'would be capable of claiming legitimacy for itself not as a religion but as a universal moral philosophy' (p 129).

According to Vivekananda, the metaphysical principle of ethics lay in the

following argument: if I injure others, I am in a deep metaphysical sense injuring myself, because the one Universal, infinite Soul inheres in all. This realization 'provided the spiritual ground for ethical action, and it was argued that the universal philosophy of Advaita provided for the salvation of mankind as a whole' (p 182). The concept of the universal Soul thus provided a solid foundation to the idea of nationalism and Indian national identity. Basu argues that 'Vivekananda claimed that the social significance of religion must be perceived in its ability to offer a comprehensive philosophy of ethical action' (p 182). Vivekananda's philosophy of nation-building along these Vedantic lines was a great source of inspiration for the radical Indian nationalists of the early twentieth century.

Drawing on contemporary social and cultural theory, as well as many nineteenth-century Bengali documents, printed and in manuscript form, Shamita Basu presents a novel and imaginative interpretation of Vivekananda's position in Indian social and political history and his influence on Indian philosophy. <

- Shamita Basu, *Religious Revivalism as Nationalist Discourse: Swami Vivekananda and New Hinduism in Nineteenth Century Bengal*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press (2002) 213 pp., ISBN 019565371-8.

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Bengal Studies

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