TIF - A Prehistory of Religious Modernity

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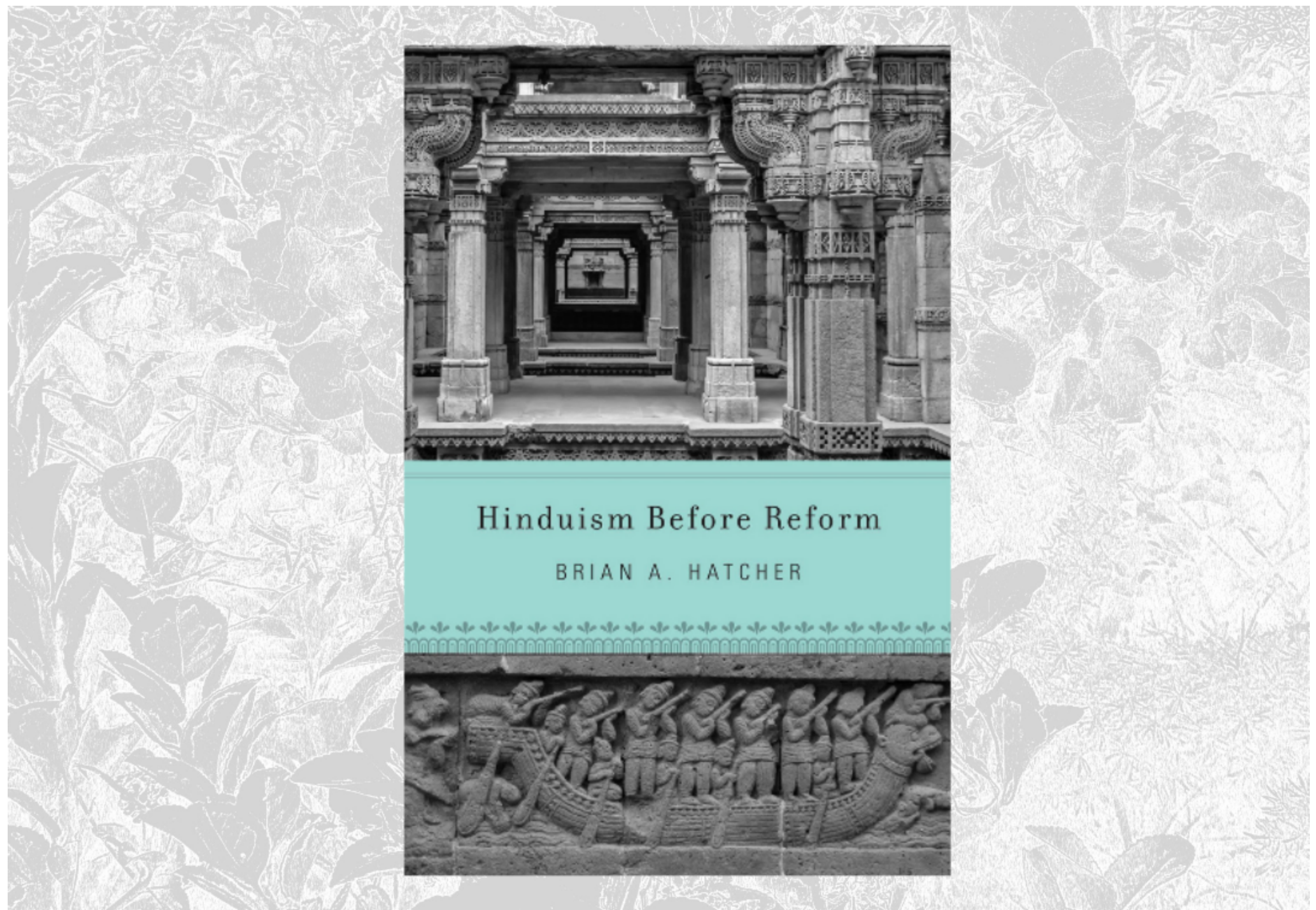

A comparative study of the Brahmo Samaj and the Swaminarayanis, two sects seen as polar opposites, raises questions on both the superiority of the Hindu reform project during the colonial period and on claims that traditionalist faiths are intolerant.

Brian A. Hatcher, *Hinduism Before Reform*. Cambrige, MA: Harvard University Press, 2020.

Brian Hatcher has long been a preeminent authority on 19th century Bengali liberalism. His work is massive in its scope and in details; especially so on Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar — the ardent campaigner for widow remarriage and women's education, and the founder of the Sanskrit College in Calcutta (Hatcher 1996 and 2014). He has also translated Vidyasagar's text on remarriage — written in stiff and impossibly Sanskritised Bengali — into highly readable English; no mean task, that (Vidyasagar 2011).

Hinduism Before Reform is especially interesting because Hatcher has abandoned his familiar terrain. Moving away from the high noon of liberal reformism — what he calls the "empire of reform" — he goes back to Rammohun Roy (1772-1833), the pioneer of the reformist impulse, who spanned the transitional moment between late 18th and early 19th century, and who founded the Brahmo Samaj, perhaps the most influential reformist association in the 19th and early 20th centuries. In a more sharp break, Hatcher crosses Bengal to move to Gujarat, to Ghanashyam/Nilakantha/Sahajanand Swamy (1781-1830), the founder of the Swaminarayan sect: a sect that is generally regarded as conservative and illiberal.

Though the Brahmo Samaj declined radically from the early 20th century, and at present clings to a nominal presence; the fortunes of the Swaminarayan sect have flourished.

Near-contemporaries to each other, both Rammohun and Sahajanand had travelled widely in India and abroad and had set up religious associations of enormous consequence. The Brahmo Samaj, in its heyday, was famed for its liberal social and religious reform — somewhat on European Reformation lines. It claimed to retrieve the monotheistic core of authentic Hinduism, and rid it of the dross of idolatry and priesthood. Eventually, however, it came to form a separate sect which went through two internal schisms. The Swaminarayanis, on the other hand, were followers of Vaishnavism. Though the Brahmo Samaj declined radically from the early 20th century, and at present clings to a nominal presence; the fortunes of the Swaminarayan sect have flourished. It has travelled with the Gujarati diaspora to many different parts of the world, to strike deep and expansive roots everywhere.

The two figures of Rammohum and Sahajanand, and the histories of the Brahmo Samaj and the Swaminarayanis, therefore, present a highly interesting study in contrasts and overlaps. Such a comparative study of two distinct religious formations — usually held to be polar opposites in socio-religious ideology — has never been attempted before; sect studies almost always deal in singulars (see for instance Heimsath 1964). Hatcher, therefore, has introduced an entirely new perspective and methodology to studies of modern Indian religion.

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Hinduism Before Reform's methodological departure from Hatcher's earlier corpus of closely-focused and substantial explorations is more to raise questions than to provide substantive accounts. In doing so, he wanders into very large questions about the nature of modern Hinduism.

Temporal leaps and double takes

Hatcher wants us to rethink our unquestioned certainties, familiar categories, and inherited frames of thinking. He reviews the historiographical and polemical frames through which the Brahmo Samaj and the Swaminarayanis have been understood. In the process, he introduces and explains certain new keywords — the notion of "polity", for instance — to understand religious institutions. He explores Hinduism as chronotope, as a negotiation with time and space, via Radhakrishnan's (1927) and Zaehner's (1980) definitions. The latter, in particular, studied how Hinduism confronted Western cultural influence and remade itself in interface with modern global religious trends.

Hatcher's mission is to question the presumed gap between reform and its Other. In the process, he problematises the accepted superiority of the reform project, as well as tries to recover an apparently traditional and ritualist faith from aspersions of intolerance. For instance, he sceptically describes Martha Nussbaum's (2008) fieldwork among Swaminarayanis at Bartlett near Chicago at a time of violent Islamophobia in India – itself partly fuelled by multiple Hindu sects and establishments. Nussbaum's endeavour, Hatcher says, was simply to identify communal elements in the Swaminarayan temple; she had no interest in understanding the religious phenomenon as such. He does not however tell us what Nussbaum had discovered at the temple, nor indeed about whether the temple actually propagated communal discourses. Surely, given the prominence of the sect in India and abroad, that would have been a pertinent question for Nussbaum to ask. Equally, it would

have been a question for Hatcher to have answered at some length in his book.

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There is a large body of work on Rammohun's life, writings, and contributions to socio-religious modernity (see Robertson 1995 and Joshi 1975, for instance). The Swaminarayanis too have also attracted scholarly attention, most notably Raymond Williams' (1984) history of the beliefs and practices of the sect. Perhaps because of this biographical archive, Hatcher has not gone into very much detail about the religious and social beliefs of the respective faiths apart from a broad overview of their central tenets.

For instance, he does not delve much into how Swaminarayanis cleared their own distinctive path among the many variants of traditional Vaisnavism; or which strain of Vaisnavite philosophy they follow and recreate. There is no sustained engagement with their religious or social thinking and activism. (Hatcher does focus on the broad facts of Sahajanand's life, as portrayed in *Satsanghi Jivanam*, the standard sectarian hagiography; and on some of the facets of Rammohun's life, especially his travels and fortunes.) He does mention that while Rammohun's campaign for the abolition of widow burnings is well known, Sahajanand too criticized the rite. It would have been interesting to see how the two formulated their criticism and how they reinterpreted scripture to do so in their different ways.

> *One misses, too, references to the vernacular scholarship on those two figures [...] Hatcher would have been able to bring together the two kinds of [vernacular] scholarship; to underline [...] the varied nature of early modern religious understandings in India.*

Hatcher extensively and innovatively uses the sectarian biography of Swamainarayanis as a source for Sahajanand's biographical details and especially for his institution building and regulations. His account of the sect's structure and internal organization is very interesting. But he does not read the biography as a modern hagiographical *text;* nor does he explore how it departs from or continues older textual traditions. He does not place them against the matrix of other relevant and adjacent regional religious developments: the controversial Ballabhacharyas in Gujarat, for instance, or early modern syncretist traditions — Hindu, Muslim and Christian — in Bengal (see Killingley 1990). Instead of situating Sahajanand within his contemporary religious milieu, he swings back to the 12th century trial of Chakradhar, founder of the Mahanubhav sect, under the local Yadava kings.

The temporal leap backwards clarifies the relations between the political state and religious polity, an abiding concern in the book. But he soon abandons the theme. There is also a somewhat brief mention of the Pirs of Bengal but he goes nowhere in particular with it, notwithstanding the very rich studies of Sufi Pirs by Richard Eaton for both Bengal (1993) and Bijapur (1978) . There are several of these rather surprising double-takes and abrupt invocations which are rapidly left behind.

Navigating the milieu

One misses too references to the vernacular scholarship on those two figures. On Rammohun, at least, there is a

whole range of Bangla scholarly works which are most illuminating (see, for instance, Biswas 1989). No doubt, there are also many studies of the Swaminarayan sect in Gujarati language as well, the sect being so vastly important to regional and diasporic religious life. Better than anyone else, perhaps, Hatcher would have been able to bring together the two kinds of scholarship, to underline, even more strongly than he has done here, the varied nature of early modern religious understandings in India. He, however, compensates for that by delving deep into Rammohun's own writings and into the sectarian literature of Swaminarayanis.

One is keen to know why the lower castes were attracted to Sahajanand's creed and how they fared in the sect once the upper castes came to constitute the major devotees.

The Brahmos, as Hatcher rightly says, were bourgeois nationalists par excellence — a point already made by Rajat Ray, Sumit Sarkar, and Partha Chatterjee. But Hatcher extends this by following up on Milinda Bannerjee's (2018) notion that they also formulated a political-theological concept of modern national statehood. He does not elaborate on why either Bannerjee or he himself thinks so, nor does he use Brahmo discourses to show what exactly such a notion would involve. In fact, Brahmos — despite their many and intense internal debates and several schisms — are taken as an undifferentiated whole, descending from Ramohun's reformism to Rabindranath Tagore's, and thence to Amartya Sen's. Perhaps, they are credited with far too many innovations — the colonial project as well as all rational-modern ideologies — political and religious.

Hatcher is entirely right to assert that Brahmos were, almost always, upper caste and middle class. True, though they mobilized opinion in different parts of India, they rarely crossed the ranks of a highly educated professional elite. At the same time, it is also true that they did break with the comfort zone of Hindu brahmanical gender in ways that brought them a great deal of social opprobrium. Rammohun's piercing criticism of Hindu cults and sects made him an unacceptable figure among Brahmin leaders of his times. Hatcher remains rather silent about these rebellious aspects.

In contrast, Hatcher brings forth an interesting point: that Sahajanand at first found a base among low caste Kolis and Kanbis, before he was discovered by an upper-caste following. One is keen to know why the lower castes were attracted to Sahajanand's creed and how they fared in the Swaminarayan sect once the upper castes came to constitute the major devotees. Indeed, one wants to know far more about how the guru navigated the problem of caste within a multi-caste following.

The 'befores'

The organization of the book is also intriguing. Hatcher constantly slides away from his dominant protagonists — modern religious figures and sects, or the making of modern Hinduism/s — into meanings of certain words used by other scholars. For instance, he comes back again and again to Peter Marshall (1987) who uses the word "bridgehead" to describe a transitional moment in Bengal's passage from early to full fledged modernity.

[Hatcher recovers] a time when India was neither nation nor merely a political form, but was a map of sacred spaces or a collection of disparate 'countries'.

The notion of the bridgehead is indeed relevant since both Rammohun and Sahajanand spanned the period between late 18th to mid 19th century and travelled along the two phases of modernity. In this connection,

Hatcher insistently returns to the notion of 'befores' — before reform, before Western castigation of non-modern religions — when several colonial scholars looked at Sahajanand and his work with greater sympathy, and when the dichotomy between reform and conservativism was still not a settled one. He extends this play on 'before' to "Religion Before India" (31-33) or "India Before India" (41-47), to recover a time when India was neither nation nor merely a political form, but was a map of sacred spaces or a collection of disparate 'countries' — though he does not quite define what the word 'country' could have meant at that time.

It is an important exercise to remind us of this prehistory, as it were, of religious modernity, in order to establish connections rather than breaks. It is also interesting that early colonial officials did not find the Swaminarayanis in any way offensive to their western and modern sensibility. Hatcher rightly retrieves an earlier colonial world where not only Indians but also their new rulers shared a certain horizon of understanding.

Hinduism Before Reform is constructed as convoluted and looped musings and reflections, rather than a conventional study of the lives and works of Rammohun and Sahajanand.

These are interesting insights, but they are not entirely new departures. There is a very rich and suggestive literature that explores the notion of early modernity, to break up the tripartite temporal periodization of ancient/Hindu, medieval/Muslim and modern/colonial. Hatcher does not refer to the debates, initiated by Rao et al (2001), C.A. Bayly (2004), and Dipesh Chakravarty (2011), among many others; but his preferred term "early colonial modernity" does partake of and extend the notion of early modernity, with his stress on the distinctiveness of the 'early-colonial'.

Hinduism Before Reform is constructed as convoluted and looped musings and reflections, rather than a conventional study of the lives and works of Rammohun and Sahajanand, of their possible lineages and later refractions and afterlives, or of the contemporary parallel religious movements against whose grain they would have constituted themselves. Hatcher moves back and forth among a range of post colonial scholarship on Hinduism under colonialism, and draws from them to problematise existing concepts and frameworks. It is an interesting and innovative departure from the tenor of his earlier work.

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