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by Achintya Kumar Dutta, Hyderabad, Orient Blackswan, 2024, 384 pp., # 1495 (Paperback), ISBN 978-9-35-442513-4

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BOOK REVIEW

Explorations in colonial Bengal: essays on religion, society, and culture, by Achintya Kumar Dutta, Hyderabad, Orient Blackswan, 2024, 384 pp., ₹ 1495 (Paperback), ISBN 978-9-35-442513-4

Having the distinction of being the primary centre of East-West interaction during colonial period, Bengal was the first region in India which has had tremendous influence of British culture. Even so, the edited book under review presents a rich and nuanced exploration of the socio-cultural and political history of colonial Bengal, focusing on such aspects that have either been under-researched or have sparked significant scholarly debates. It comprises 13 chapters divided into two sections: 'The Many Worlds of Bengali Culture' and 'Aspects of Bengali Politics, Society, and Economy.' This division reflects the editor's intention to provide a comprehensive overview of Bengali society and culture, with a particular emphasis on intellectual and ethno-cultural aspects in the first section, and socio-political and economic features in the second.

The book in its entirety highlights the less-studied aspects of Bengali history, particularly the cultural and religious movements that shaped the region's identity. The first section of the book delves into Bengali culture, with a significant focus on Vaishnavism, a religious movement that played a pivotal role in the formation of a Hindu-Bengali identity. The chapters in this section bring to light the evolution of Vaishnavism in Bengal, examining its ethnic, cultural, social, and religious dimensions. For instance, Santanu Dey's chapter dealing with the *Gobindadaser Karcha* (Cost of Govindadas), a contested text from colonial Bengal, offers a fascinating exploration of the authenticity debates surrounding this document and its impact on the Vaishnava community. Dey's analysis of the cultural milieu of colonial Bengal and the role of vernacular texts in shaping Bengali literature is particularly insightful. The chapter highlights the importance of the text in the cultural imagination of Bengal, showing how the debate over its authenticity influenced the perception of Vaishnavism among the multiple ethnic communities in the Bengali society.

Arun Bandopadhyay's chapter on Bhaktisiddhanta Saraswati, a key figure in the revival of Vaishnavism in Bengal during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, is another standout contribution. The chapter traces the intellectual and religious currents that influenced Bhaktisiddhanta, particularly the non-dualistic Vedantic philosophy popularized by figures like Rammohan Roy and Vivekananda. Bandopadhyay's analysis of Bhaktisiddhanta's efforts to rejuvenate Vaishnavism and his emphasis on pure devotion offers a nuanced understanding of how religious movements can adapt and evolve in response to changing social and cultural contexts. The chapter also situates Bhaktisiddhanta within the broader intellectual history of Bengal, showing how his work was both a continuation and a departure from earlier religious reform movements.

Varuni Bhatia's chapter on the role of women in the evolution of Bengali Vaishnavism adds a crucial gendered perspective to the study of this religious tradition. Bhatia's focus on the Baishnabis, the female devotees of the Vaishnava tradition, reveals how these women challenged the patriarchal structures within Bengali Vaishnavism and carved out spaces for themselves in both the religious and secular spheres. The chapter's examination of the portrayal of Baishnabis in Bengali literature, particularly in the works of prominent writers like Rabindranath Tagore and Saratchandra Chattopadhyay, provides a compelling

analysis of how gender and religion intersected in colonial Bengal. The discussion on the social identities of Baishnabis, ranging from devotees to prostitutes, underscores the complex and often contradictory roles that women played in the religious and cultural life of Bengal.

The second section of the book shifts focus to the socio-economic and political dimensions of Bengali history. This section includes chapters on topics such as the financial policies of the East India Company in eighteenth-century Bengal and the contributions of agricultural scientists like Nitya Gopal Mukherji to the development of agriculture in colonial Bengal. Rajat Datta's chapter on Indian finances under British rule offers a detailed analysis of the economic challenges faced by the East India Company and the role of indigenous bankers in supporting the Company's financial needs. Datta's exploration of the money market in colonial Bengal and the participation of indigenous traders in the region's economy provides valuable insights into the economic history of Bengal and the ways in which local actors navigated the challenges of colonial rule. Bipasha Raha's chapter on Nitya Gopal Mukherji highlights the contributions of a key figure to the development of agricultural science, besides providing a fascinating glimpse into the intersection of science, agriculture, and colonial policy in Bengal. Raha's analysis on Mukherji's handbooks on agriculture and sericulture reveals his vision for agricultural education and his efforts to promote scientific methods in farming, which were crucial for the modernization of Bengal's agrarian economy.

The book also includes chapters that explore the cultural and social history of Bengal through the lens of literature and music. For example, the chapter on Rabindranath Tagore's engagement with sound recording technology in the early twentieth century offers a unique perspective on the intersection of culture and technology in colonial Bengal. The authors, Dipannita Dutta and Subhayu Chattopadhyay, examine how Tagore's recordings on phonograph and gramophone influenced the development of Rabindra-Sangeet, a genre of Bengali music that remains popular to this day. The chapter provides a fascinating account of how technological advancements were integrated into the cultural life of Bengal, highlighting the innovative spirit of Bengali entrepreneurs and their efforts to preserve and promote Bengali cultural heritage. Similarly, Amit Dey's chapter on Bengali folk songs explores the ways in which these songs responded to the socio-religious and economic challenges of colonial Bengal. Dey's analysis of *jari*, *baul*, and *maijbandari* songs reveals how these musical traditions critiqued social inequalities and religious orthodoxy, offering a voice to marginalized communities in Bengal, which contributed much to the development of a unique Bengali identity that was both inclusive and resistant to hegemonic structures.

Overall, the book offers a substantial exploration of diverse areas dealing with Bengali history, culture, and society. Its emphasis on under-researched topics and its engagement with ongoing scholarly debates make it a valuable contribution to the field of ethno-cultural and religious studies. The chapters are well-researched and thoughtfully written, providing readers with new insights into the complexities of Bengal's past. One of the book's key strengths is its interdisciplinary approach, which allows it to address a wide range of topics, from religious reform movements and gender dynamics to economic policies and technological advancements. As such, the book is both informative and engaging, offering a deeper understanding of the colonial Bengal in terms of religion, society and culture, which would appeal to a wide audience.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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