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Book Seeks Roots of Middle-class Hinduism

BLOOMINGTON, Ill.— A chance discovery made nearly 20 years ago has led to a new book from Illinois Wesleyan University's Brian Hatcher, a Fulbright-Hays research fellow and authority on Hinduism in India.

Hatcher, the McFee Professor of Religion, has made a career out of introducing students to the richness and complexity of Asian religious life. In 1990, he was conducting research at the London-based British Library, which holds over 150 million items in all known languages and formats, when he “stumbled upon” what he believes is the only existing copy of an 1841 Bengali pamphlet.

This unsigned text recorded a series of discourses given in Calcutta (now Kolkata) in the years 1839-40. The text provided “a series of puzzles to solve,” said Hatcher. However, it would be over a decade before he decided to try to solve the puzzle.

“It took a lot of sleuthing to find out who these people were,” said Hatcher, who set out to “do a translation [of the discourses], identify these authors, and place the whole thing in its historical context.”

Hatcher's sleuthing led to a remarkable conclusion, revealed in his new book, *Bourgeois Hinduism, or the Faith of the Modern Vedantists: Rare Discourses from Early Colonial Bengal* from Oxford University Press, in which he argues that the authors of these discourses were attempting to articulate a new interpretation of Hinduism. The book includes a complete, annotated translation of the original Bengali pamphlet.

Hatcher concluded that the discourses were the work of a group of middle-class Bengali scholars, poets and businessmen. During the 1830s, this class of Hindus had come to enjoy increased prosperity and social engagement.

“These were upwardly mobile men who were looking for a way to be Hindu and enjoy some worldly prosperity” at the same time, said Hatcher. As a result, “they began to articulate a code of religion congruent with their bourgeois aspirations.” This code was unprecedented in many respects. Yet the proponents of this newfound religious identity also called upon ancient

sources of Hindu spirituality as a guide for developing a modern form of theism they referred to as “Vedanta.”

This is Hatcher’s third book. His first two, *Idioms of Improvement: Vidyasagar and Cultural Encounter in Bengal* in 1996 and *Eclecticism and Modern Hindu Discourse* in 1999, also deal with Hinduism.

During his latest trip to India in the spring of 2007 — while conducting a research project funded by a Fulbright–Hays Senior Research Fellowship — Hatcher journeyed back to several towns near Kolkata that he had first visited as a graduate student. Here he witnessed concrete evidence of changes to the Indian economy since moves toward liberalization during the 1990s. This trip helped confirm a core thesis of his new book. Hatcher argues that many of the aspirations and tensions embodied within today’s Indian middle class “can, in fact, be thought of as standing in some kind of continuity” with the “bourgeois Hinduism” articulated in those 19th-century discourses he discovered.

In this respect, Hatcher hopes the book will not only help revise our understanding of religious change in early colonial Calcutta but will also promote further reflection on the ways contemporary middle-class Hindus seek “meaningful linkages between spiritual concerns and material aspirations.”

A professor with Illinois Wesleyan since 1992, Hatcher graduated from Carleton College in Minnesota with a bachelor’s degree in chemistry in 1980. Earning his master’s degrees in divinity from Yale University in 1984 and in religion from Harvard University in 1986, Hatcher received his doctorate in the comparative study of religion from Harvard in 1992.

A past recipient of the Distinguished Service Award from the Cultural Association of Bengal, Hatcher’s research has been honored with several major grants and fellowships, including the the ASIANetwork/Freeman Foundation Student-Faculty Fellowship and a 2006-07 Fulbright-Hays Faculty Research Abroad Fellowship through the U.S. Department of Education, which allowed him to conduct research in Kolkata, India, and the United Kingdom.

Founded in 1850, Illinois Wesleyan is a private liberal arts institution located in Bloomington, Illinois, with an enrollment of 2,045 students from 39 states and 22 countries. With 184 faculty scholars, the student-faculty ratio is 11 to 1 and the average class size is 17. The University offers 41 major areas of study, plus programs in pre-med, pre-law, pre-dentistry, pre-engineering, pre-veterinary science, pre-seminary studies, and professional programs in business, the fine arts and nursing.

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