

[HINDU BOOK REVIEW](#)

Category : [June 1988](#)

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Vivekananda

His Gospel of Man-Making Editor/Publisher: Swami Jyotirmayananda 885 pages.
\$15.00

There isn't a decade that flits by that doesn't produce some exposition on Swami Vivekananda, the late 19th century's peerless Hindu monk and missionary. Both Westerners and Easterners have contributed to what is undoubtedly the greatest word reservoir on a Hindu personality. There are biographies - even comic book versions - monographs and extensive volumes of his writings and oratory.

Swami Jyotirmayananda's able contribution for the 1980 decade is a reference compendium. If, as a writer or speaker, one is looking for a famous or noteworthy person's pronouncements on Vivekananda, here it will be found - with minimal effort as the entries are alphabetized and finely indexed. For instance, here is what Huang Xin Chuan, a Chinese scholar, says, "He made a prophecy that the Chinese culture will surely be resurrected one day like the Phoenix and undertake the responsibility of the great mission of integrating the Western and the Oriental cultures." An engaging statement, considering China's current flirtation with entrepreneurial capitalism and the reflowering of its culture

This book is not one to curl up with, but is significant in its wide-angle look at Vivekananda. It includes a detailed chronology of Vivekananda's life and over 100 pages of photos.

The Way of Vaishnava Sages

Author: N.S. Narasimha 422 pages. Univ. Press of America \$18.75

When we first received and quickly glanced at this book, we thought, "Good to see a novel-type format on the disciplines and lives of deepminded Vaishnava wise men." Unfortunately, this book only lives up to part of that expectation. Narasimha is a former monk of either the Hare Krishna order or an order associated with Bhaktivode Thakur. While in India, he heard faint tales of a South Indian medieval manuscript by Visnu-vijay Swami and tracked it down in the hands of a Vaishnava recluse in the Himalayan foothills. Narasimha found the recluse and lived with him for several months.

Using Visnu-vijay Swami's sketchy notes and discourse dialogue as a framework, Narasimha has constructed a full-blown fictional story on the interaction between Chaitanya/Krishna holy men, 15th century Kerala's king and a consortium of businessmen eager to expand their spice trade with the Europeans. At stake is corruptive influences from the West and wholesale destruction of Kerala forests for the spice growing.

The plot is fine but is contrived to allow for plenty of Krishna preaching, and this is the major problem. The long-winded dialogue with its constant currents of a darkling, delinquent and demented world in need of overhauling by surrender to Krishna is like reading a hundred issues of Back to Godhead at a single sitting. It's really too bad some of the original dialogue by Visnu-vijay Swami wasn't left in so we could see what the Chaitanya monks were actually saying 500 years ago. So we ended up skipping the preaching dialogue to find the plot line and pick up on some of the fascinating historical details that pop up once in awhile.

Vaishnava Sages does have some savory and gripping moments. Our favorite scene is when a Himalayan yogi, weathered and lean, wrapped in long, dreadlock hair and a tiger skin is slipping through a tree grove towards a spiritual discourse gathering in a meadow. Two guards at the assembly, cautious of recent tiger maulings, quickly sight and release their arrows at the moving tiger skin as the yogi emerges through a thicket. With eyes hardly flickering, the yogi's lightning hands thwack the two deadly arrows down into the underbrush. As it turns out, the yogi is one of the Chaitanya Vaishnava sages.

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