

THE LIFE OF HINDUISM. Edited by John Stratton Hawley and Vasudha Narayanan. University of California Press 2006. Pp. 324. \$19.95. ISBN: 0-520-24914-3.

Criticizing a textbook is easier than writing one. More important and more relevant is whether or not one would recommend its use or assign it oneself. With this book, the answer is an unequivocal yes. Hawley and Narayanan are among a small and select group of scholars who have insisted upon and worked to describe a nuanced and complex view of Hinduism that attends both to deep and diverse theological traditions and to ethnographic observations of Hindus at home, in temples, and in other public arenas. The present volume contributes primarily to the latter perspective. The authors have produced a useful and student-friendly collection of tried and true descriptions of Hindu rites and accounts of Hindu religious experience.

I assume this is what a textbook usually is: a representative snapshot of the field focused on a particular theme. To the extent that a textbook exemplifies this, however, criticisms of it slip easily into criticisms of the field as a whole. For readers of this Journal, it is important to signal that while this book represents well the current state of the field in Hindu studies, it need not be taken as a statement about its possible future.

The edited collection is divided into eight parts: worship, life cycle, festival, performance, gurus, caste, diaspora, and identity. Most of the individual chapters contain well-known ethnographic descriptions of specific Hindu religious practices; two chapters are published for the first time in this volume. Appropriate to the genre, the editors take few risks in their selection of materials. On the whole, these are engaging descriptions of Hindu religious practice that have been used successfully in classrooms for many years, not cutting-edge studies that may or may not find scholarly approval. With one exception, discussed below, the chapters are judiciously selected to convey a solid introductory overview of common Hindu rituals and other practices.

In their introduction, Hawley and Narayanan opt for a generic description of Hinduism as composed of “five strands”: doctrine, practice, society, story/performance, and *bhakti*—a description that seems to owe an unacknowledged debt to Ninian Smart’s dimensions of religion and to suffer from the same problems of non-specificity. None

of these “strands,” not even the last, demarcates any special boundary for Hinduism. (11-16) Still, the book, the editors insist, focuses only on practice, which seems to be synonymous with “life” in the title.

While reading, I was reminded of Tocqueville’s observations about the American propensity to personify abstractions. The ever present tension in all religious studies, here exemplified with respect to Hinduism, is the fact that there is no life of Hinduism apart from the lives of Hindus. The infinite diversity of the latter tends to thwart any stable or complete description of the former. The contents of this volume admirably impart a sense of the great complexity in real Hindu communities and individual lives. At one level, the editors’ introduction recognizes this complexity: “More strikingly than any other major religious community, Hindus accept and indeed celebrate the complex, organic, multileveled, and sometimes internally inconsistent nature of their tradition . . .” (11) As a statement about contemporary educated Hindus who have appropriated the felt need for unity and coherence in “Hinduism,” this may be true. As a matter of history or as a matter of localized Hindu perceptions today, however, I am less convinced because what Hawley and Narayanan label an acceptance and celebration of diversity is more often experienced as a lack of interest or an active disinterest in how others do things. Apart from the important and growing constituency of English-speaking, educated Hindus, I can’t imagine a South Indian of any Hindu caste or sect, for example, positively accepting or celebrating religious practices of Bengali or Nepali Hindus: “That’s just what *they* do.”

There are two chapters of the book that seem out of place, namely those by Chakravarti and Tilak. Chakravarti’s short chapter is not a study of contemporary epitomes of Hinduism, but rather an example of a creedal epitome that emphasizes increasingly significant core beliefs among diaspora Hindus. The editors do not give sufficient context for this chapter and an undiscerning reader would easily assume that the traits identified by Chakravarti—monotheism, karma, caste, divine incarnation, and nonviolence—are shared as a matter of common belief by all Hindus, when in fact they are not, at least not without a lot of qualification.

Similarly, the essay by Tilak, author of several academic works, is not written from an academic perspective (indeed, his whole purpose is to criticize that perspective), but rather from a particular position of advocating a nativist agenda. This agenda has also been pursued aggressively, especially in online forums, by Hindus, some professional academics, some not, who think that academic presentations of

Hinduism are misleading and/or insulting.¹ Tilak contends that most of the great Indian scholars of Hinduism suffered from an “inferiority complex” caused by power inequities under colonialism. After calling into question almost everything about current academic views of Hinduism, Tilak asks,

Can a non-Hindu researcher carry out research on Hinduism? The answer must be a qualified yes: yes, but not on his or her own. . . . Research on Hinduism should involve “mentorship” of responsible Hindu/Indic scholars . . . (281)

Here the suggestion is quite literally that all scholars of Hinduism who are not Hindu themselves must have their research approved and corrected by someone who is Hindu. I find this misguided as to what scholarship is about. First, it is not news to say that political realities condition academic perspectives, attitudes, and endeavors. Second, it seems counterproductive to berate sincere humanistic efforts by scholars to understand and to inform others about both what is beautiful and what is troubling in Hindu traditions from our current hermeneutic situation. The crucial distinction missed by Tilak is the fact that most scholars of Hinduism do not intend to learn and to teach about Hinduism itself but rather to learn and to teach about the possibly universal human phenomenon called religion through the lens of Hindu texts and practices. One does not need to be Hindu to learn from Hindus and Hindu traditions. To say otherwise is to make an unsubstantiated challenge to the whole history of humanistic scholarship.

In my view, the editors have chosen to engage in a debate that they cannot win. By incorporating an argumentative essay that relies on personal status, rather than textual or ethnographic evidence, to make claims about Hinduism, the editors do more than acknowledge the absolute right of Hindus to speak for themselves. They also accept, and inadvertently encourage, a mode of purportedly “academic” writing that excludes certain kinds of people, namely non-Hindus and “assimilated” Hindus. It is proper and helpful for the editors to have included chapters on the increasingly important diaspora perspectives on Hinduism, but the level of critical distance arguably narrows too much in both the Chakravarti and Tilak chapters.

Fortunately, the editors also wisely solicited an alternative vision to that of Tilak for the book’s final chapter. The authors Patton, Ram-

1. For an account and critique of this agenda in educational circles, *see*, recently, Martha C. Nussbaum, *The Clash Within: Democracy, Religious Violence, and India’s Future* (Harv. U. Press 2007).

Prasad, and Acharya offer the concept of “interlogue” as a translation of the Sanskrit term *samvada*, which is glossed as “transformation through conversation.” (289) The critical distance and humane academic viewpoint of this chapter palpably assuage the vitriol of Tilak’s chapter. The authors argue against monolithic interpretations of Hinduism and insist upon a “continuing process of moral inventory about our own intellectual practices.” (291) A deft use of traditional Hindu interpretative techniques and concepts gives the authors a firm ethical foundation for recognizing many views of Hinduism.

Finally, reviewing this book in the present journal afforded me the opportunity to pay close attention to elements of the law that might appear in a book on a religious tradition. This particular focus revealed certain blind-spots both in the field and in this book. Many of the chapters in the book indirectly display the importance of law in contemporary Hinduism. Jacobson’s description of marriage, for instance, relies on regular allusion to legal limitations on marriage practice without addressing any nuance of whether India’s very complex marriage laws have affected marriage practices or not. Similarly, Bharati’s reflections on becoming a Hindu monk are imbued with concerns over duties and rules of ordinary life. If renunciation led to a situation in which he had “no more leisure for rules” (85), we can only assume that non-renunciation implies adherence to a set of rules about which we learn very little in this or most other books on Hinduism. Finally, legal issues pertaining to Hindu temple construction in the U.S. are not considered in Narayanan’s essay on the first major Hindu temple in Pittsburgh.

Law is never considered as such in this book, as an institution that influences the “life” of Hindus and Hinduism. These examples and others indirectly show that law is not a central focus of Hindu studies, the concept being seemingly distant from the field. It is not that law is unknown to Hinduism. Indological, historical, and anthropological studies all confirm the significant place of law in the development of Hindu traditions in all periods.² The issue is rather that law’s relevance

2. The best survey of classical Hindu legal traditions is still Robert Lingat, *The Classical Law of India* (J.D.M. Derrett trans., U. Cal. Press 1973). For colonial India, see Lloyd & Susanne Rudolph, *Legal Cultures and Social Change: Panchayats, Pandits, and Professionals*, in *The Modernity of Tradition: Political Development in India* 253 (U. Chi. Press 1967); Marc Galanter, *Law and Society in Modern India* (Oxford U. Press 1989); and Bernard S. Cohn, *Law and the Colonial State in India*, in *History and Power in the Study of Law: New Directions in Legal Anthropology* (June Starr & Jane F. Collier eds., Cornell U. Press 1989). A good ethnographic study, with a useful bibliography of other anthropological studies of law in India, is Robert M. Hayden, *Disputes and Arguments amongst Nomads: A Caste Council in India* (Oxford U. Press

to people *as Hindus* or to institutions *as part of Hindu traditions* is set aside in favor of a particular view of Hinduism that is dominated by mythology and ritual. Hindu traditions are extremely fertile terrain for scholarship in these latter areas, but a neglect of law has blinded scholarship to the many ways in which legal rules and practices affect especially Hindu households and families, with marriage and caste being only the most visible legal elements of this realm.

I make these remarks not to criticize this book in particular. The editors fairly represent current focuses in the field. In so doing, however, they have tended to reinforce the idea that certain subjects such as law need not be investigated with regard to Hinduism.

These critical remarks aside, this a good, even very good, collection. I can imagine using even the chapters I have criticized here by turning them into primary sources of how some contemporary Hindus understand religious belief and academic representations of Hinduism. In some cases, more editorial guidance to readers might have enhanced some of the chapters, but this guidance can also be given in the context of a classroom, the likely home for this book in any case. As for the law, we can only wait and see whether future projects might attempt to incorporate the significant, but as yet understudied, role of law in Hindu traditions, especially contemporary ones.

*Donald R. Davis, Jr.**

1999). Finally, I will also refer to the online *Cooperative Annotated Bibliography of Hindu Law and Dharmaśāstra*, <https://mywebspace.wisc.edu/drDavis/web/hindulaw>.

* Assistant Professor, Department of Languages & Cultures of Asia, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, Wisconsin.