
BOOK REVIEW

Frazier, J., ed. 2013. *The Bloomsbury Companion to Hindu Studies*. London: Bloomsbury. xiii + 407pp. ISBN 978-1-4725-1151-5. Pbk. 978-1-4725-6717-8. E-bk. £24.99. (Originally published in 2011 as *The Continuum Companion to Hindu Studies* 978-0-8264-9966-0.)

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The Bloomsbury Companion to Hindu Studies (BCHS) is a comprehensive survey of the academic study of Hinduism. The authors of this edited volume provide a detailed overview of the development of scholarship and different methodological approaches to the study of Hinduism, as well as highlighting some of the key debates amongst scholars. The BCBS is impressive in both the scope and depth of its scholarship. The editor indicates that the BCBS aims to highlight those scholars who are not biased by the “blind-spots of the past,” but adopt “new ways of looking” and thereby identify “both the *complexity* and the *consistency* of the linked religious cultures we call Hinduism” (p. 1). Consequently, the authors of the various chapters contest both the conceptualization of Hinduism as a unified tradition, and the proposition that Hinduism is so fragmented, that it must be understood as “a plurality of distinct religions” (Stietencron, 2001: 33).

The BCBS covers the range of topics that one would expect from such a volume. Chapter 1 provides a good introduction to the ongoing debates about unity and continuity within the Hindu tradition(s), as well as identifying important issues such as the relationship between the normative textual traditions and the lived experience of Hindus. Chapter 2 introduces various “Key Themes,” including short sections on Vedic culture; *bhakti*, ascetic and *tantric* traditions; as well as sections on topics such as caste, religious practice and modernity. Chapter 3 provides an overview of “The History of Hindu Studies.” This chapter identifies commentators on Hindu culture from early Greek visitors to India, such as Megasthenes in the fourth century BCE, through Al Biruni’s important observations in the eleventh century CE, to the Theosophists’ esoteric interpretations of the Hindu traditions

in the nineteenth century. The author provides a synopsis of the work of important Indological scholars working in the colonial period, such as Max Müller. The chapter concludes with a very brief account of the development of Hindu studies in the twentieth century.

Chapter 4, which is entitled “Current Approaches,” expands on many of the Key Themes identified in Chapter 2, with short articles on subjects such as yoga, iconology and Hinduism in the colonial period. The most relevant section in this chapter for those who utilize or are considering fieldwork is Marie Lecomte-Tiloune’s section on “Hindu Society in Anthropological Perspective” (pp. 151–58). Unsurprisingly Lecomte-Tiloune focuses her discussion on caste, because, as she observes, Louis Dumont’s study *Homo Hierarchicus* can be “described as ‘traumatic’, inasmuch as the entire discipline has had difficulty recovering from it ever since” (p. 153).

There is a summary of various methodological approaches to the study of Hinduism in Chapter 5. For scholars interested in ethnographic studies of Hinduism, the short section on “Anthropological Approaches” is of limited value. The examples of anthropological research identified should be familiar to most academics and students of Hinduism. The author provides summaries of Fritz Staal’s groundbreaking 1983 study of Vedic rituals and C. J. Fuller’s seminal 1992 publication *The Camphor Flame*. While, of course, these important examples of research must be mentioned, a detailed section on a more recent, and possibly less well-known anthropological study, for example Joanne Waghorne’s study of modern temples *Diaspora of the Gods*, would have been welcome.

Chapter 6 is a summary of the regional forms of Hinduism. In many ways, this is the most useful section of the *BCHS*, as the authors elucidate how “the diverse regions of the Indian subcontinent have developed distinct forms of Hinduism” (p. 245). However, the authors also acknowledge inter-regional diversity and indicate continuities and mutual influences across regions. For example, there is a brief section on the diverse local rituals and different mythic narratives that are associated with the pan-Indian festival of Divali. The final chapter outlines the development of scholarly debates around a number of key themes, such as gender, and indicates various avenues that still require further academic exploration.

One cannot but admire both the breadth and the depth of the *BCHS*. All the contributors are clearly highly knowledgeable about the various issues, debates and scholarship in their particular areas of expertise. However, I am not particularly sure who this volume is aimed at. Undergraduate students would struggle with the *BCHS* as there are many places where terms or references are left unexplained. For example, there is a reference to the important mythic narrative of the Churning of the Ocean (p. 86), which is not given any further explanation. On the other hand, Indological scholars who are researching various aspects of the

Hindu traditions should be familiar with the issues and debates identified in their specialist areas. I feel that this volume falls between two stools being too specialized and technical for some readers, while not exploring the key themes in sufficient depth for other readers. The main strength of the *BCHS* is to point the reader to the significant writers on the key themes identified.

References

- Stietencron, Heinrich von. 2001. "Hinduism: On the Proper Use of a Deceptive Term," in G. Sontheimer and H. Kulke, eds, *Hinduism Reconsidered*. New Delhi: Manohar.
- Waghorne, Joanne. 2004. *Diaspora of the Gods: Modern Hindu Temples in an Urban Middle Class World*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195156638.001.0001>