

Deepak Sarma (ed.), *Hinduism: A Reader*. Blackwell, Oxford, 2008, pp. vii + 413, ISBN 9781405149907 (pbk). Review doi: 10.1558/arsr.v21i3.387.

Every major world religion has a body of literature underpinning beliefs and practices within them. These texts, often divided into primary and secondary sources, are subjected to interpretation and re-evaluation over the years, some being prominent at different times in the life of a religion. These texts can be the basis for developments and new directions within a religion. Deepak Sarma in *Hinduism: A Reader*, has collected within one volume a number of the most important and influential texts within Hinduism. The book, however, goes beyond this by incorporating contemporary texts and issues into the second part of the volume.

Part 1 is a compilation of extracts from the classical text of Hinduism. These are ordered chronologically commencing with extracts from the *RgVeda*. Sections from five *Upanisads* deal with 'esoteric teachings about the nature of the sacrifice, about the nature of the *atman* and *Brahman*, their relationship with one another, as well as the mechanism of *karma* and rebirth in *samsara*' (p. 25), in other words, some of the primary concepts in Hinduism. Other texts deal with important *Brahmanic* rituals. The epic tales of the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* are represented and, finally, significant aspects of the *Puranas* and the Law code of Manu conclude this section.

Part 2 presents a wide variety of contemporary issues and texts from *Papers Relating to East India Affairs*, viz *Hindoo Widows and Voluntary Immolations* to the *Constitution of India*. The two parts are designed to be complimentary, setting the 'classical' or *Brahmanic* texts against more recent 'texts written by people who were grappling with how to interpret them for a modernized Hindu and Indian society' (p. 1). The sections do work well together. The three articles on caste issues from Ambedkar, for example, can be read in light of the earlier extracts from the Law codes of Manu. The chapter containing excerpts from Kancha Ilaiah's 2005 book *Why I Am Not a Hindu: A Sudra Critique of Hindutva Philosophy, Culture and Political Economy* further develops the theme of caste inequities. These excerpts provide a fascinating personal account of growing up in a *Dalitbaujan* family, part of the *Kuruma Golla* caste, an experience a world away from the *Brahmanic* view of society predominantly explored. This is also the most contemporary of the sources used. These two chapters challenge the sacred texts, suggesting, in the case of Ambedkar, that they be dismissed and for Ilaiah, that they lack any relevance for many Indians incorporated under the umbrella term 'Hindu'.

Other excerpts incorporated into the contemporary issues section provide an insight into early developments of contemporary issues. These include Savarkar's ideology of *Hindutva*—Hindu-ness—published in 1923, which can be read in the context of subsequent political developments in India, including the rise of the Bharatiya Janata Party. Sections on *Papers Relating to East India Affairs*, *The Hindu Marriage Act of 1955* and the *Constitution of India* provide solid background information on selected topics.

The juxtaposition of the classical texts with the contemporary texts and issues does provide some balance between *Brahmanic* and popular expressions of Hinduism; however, as the latter relate to the colonial and post-colonial period, the reader may be led to believe that challenges and alternative expressions are a relatively recent phenomenon.

Not every page of this text is gripping but this is not the intention of the volume. It does provide a valuable source for accessing seminal texts and issues within Hinduism. Sarma's introductions to the sections are well thought-out and balanced commentaries, placing the sections within their broader contexts. The book's strength is in providing ready access to these sources to enhance the study of Hinduism.

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