

## Review

*Hinduism Beliefs & Practices: Major Deities and Social Structures, Volume 1*, by Jeaneane Fowler. Brighton/Chicago/Toronto: Sussex Academic Press, 2014. x + 357 pp., £24.95 (pb). ISBN 978-1-84519-0622 (pb).

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Jeaneane Fowler's *Hinduism: Beliefs and Practices* is the first of a two-volume survey of Hinduism targeted at college students new to the subject (building on Fowler's previously published work with the same aim, as she tells us in the preface to this volume). This review will cover Volume 1. Fowler situates Hinduism within the classical Sanskrit tradition, as exemplified by the Vedas, epics (Ramayana and Mahabharata), and Puranas. But at the same time, in this first volume, she emphasizes how this tradition relates to everyday society, past and present, and how it is actually put into practice. With this in mind, Fowler informs us that she has set aside the religion's more literary or philosophical dimensions for the second volume. Consequently, although Fowler does go so far as to discuss Hinduism's famous myths in this volume, she puts more weight here on institutional and domestic religious activities, such as the traditional guru-student relationship and making vows to deities for benefits. In effect, then, as Fowler tells us, this is a study of 'living Hinduism', grounded in empirical observation. To this end, she frequently refers to the findings of specific scholars in the field to synthesize a consensus. Fowler's emphasis on religious practice over philosophy will help college students to see that Hinduism can be approached not simply in terms of a classical tradition but as present-day religion.

Although this volume downplays historiography in favor of sociological observation, it does helpfully provide historical reference points for readers to situate the main texts introduced. Being concerned with essential practices more than historical explanations, Fowler bypasses the impact of Muslim and colonial political control, and for the most part does not differentiate between ancient and modern forms of Hinduism (hence, she brings together current caste politics and classical antecedents, such as Manu's Vedic-era laws). But Fowler does highlight era-specific differences to make a specific point, such

as when comparing women's rights in ancient and modern Indian society. It would be wrong, then, to suppose that this survey aligns with the Orientalist perspective that Hinduism constitutes a 'timeless' tradition. Fowler's straightforward discussion of caste and gender relations introduces a contemporary, sociologically-informed sensibility to the study of classical Hinduism. For instance, she does not hold back in observing that religious doctrine has been used to support a social structure of inequality (as we would probably also expect to uncover in studies of other religious traditions). While centered on the Hindu mainstream and its conventions, then, this survey operates as a kind of antidote for scholarship that would explain religion only in its own idealized terms.

In this vein, Fowler's discussion of gender in Hinduism (and Indian society at large) stands out as an especially worthwhile and timely contribution. Reacting to the widely reported rape and murder of a female student on a bus in Delhi in 2012 (discussed in Chapter 10), Fowler concludes that Hinduism has moved away from its Vedic days, when women had largely equal access to education (albeit conditioned by caste or class constraints) and were not nearly as secluded as in recent history. The import of Fowler's discussion is that the situation for Indian women is certainly problematic, indeed discouraging, but that if Hindu society is willing to question long-entrenched religious rationalizations for oppression then a more equal social structure is nonetheless possible within Hindu practice. On the subject of gender, Fowler also brings up the apparent paradox that the divine feminine is such a core element of Hinduism at the same time that women are seemingly oppressed in the name of religious tradition. She looks at this problem from the standpoint of widespread perceptions about the power and danger of female sexuality. Goddesses are endowed with wild female energy that can help or harm, and women's bodies are similarly unstable, being periodically impure due to menses and birth. Through such investigation, Fowler keeps the focus within classical Hinduism while contributing an analysis in line with the current questioning of tradition.

The fact that Fowler has divided this survey into two volumes (the second of which is forthcoming) affords her more latitude to organize such a broad and diverse topic as Hinduism in thematic chapters. Even within the reduced scope of this volume (that is, 'beliefs and practices'), Fowler is challenged to bring together a range of disparate topics. In sum, then, one may perceive that they broadly constitute three major sections (in the opinion of the reviewer; Fowler herself does not formally acknowledge such sections). The first section, comprising Chapters 1 through 4, succinctly introduces key concepts in Hinduism, such as karma, samsara, and dharma. This discussion also includes a chapter briefly summarizing the main scriptures, and also one on the key institutions of varna (social class) and jati (caste). Fowler's explanation of the distinction between these institutions is useful for understanding the relation of religion to society discussed in later chapters. Insofar as this volume

allots greater attention to Hinduism in its social context, those who desire a more thorough exploration of classical literature (for example, if analyzing the Ramayana in fuller detail) may want to supplement this volume with other texts, such as Fowler's promised second volume.

Once Fowler has introduced the essential concepts, scriptures, and religious institutions of Hinduism, she assigns the next three chapters (5 through 7) to each of the main three devotional traditions, respectively based on Shiva, Shakti (the Goddess), and Vishnu, along with the various deities or avatars associated with them. One could consider this to be this volume's second section. The reader may initially construe this second section as being a bit distant from the first section (that is to say, jumping from broad religious concepts and human institutions of worship to the lives of certain deities). However, inasmuch as Fowler has signalled that she will focus more on how the worship of these deities fits into the social fabric (versus discussing their mythologies in greater detail), we can see a common thematic thread running between these sections. Thus, Chapter 4 ends with an examination of the Brahmanic ideal of the four stages of life, while Chapter 5 opens with a discussion of Shiva's outsider status, as one who prefers wild places and the company of those who live on the margins of society. In the broader picture, this transition prompts a consideration of how social conformity/marginality and privilege manifest and are upheld in Hindu society. With a similar awareness of the societal ramifications of religious practice, in Chapter 7 Fowler looks at how the basic sentiment of love (including erotic attachment) in devotion to Krishna also becomes a potentially class-levelling practice. Thus, religiosity contains the seeds of not only bondage but also emancipation.

In what could be considered as a third (and final) section (Chapters 8 through 11), Fowler highlights the domestic or more personal dimensions of Hindu practice (as opposed to the broader religious principles introduced in the first section). Here Fowler fully explores what takes place in everyday Hindu life with such topics as women's religious activities (as noted above), temple and home rituals, conventions of worshipping a deity, vow making, and pilgrimage. Taken as a whole then, while the 11 chapters (alternatively three sections) cover a wide variety of subjects within Hinduism, they maintain a certain disciplinary unity in looking at doctrine through the lens of Indian society (hence 'living Hinduism'). As many educators surely know, introducing a multifaceted topic like Hinduism to an audience with no prior academic background in it can be challenging, and the effort to make the material accessible can easily run afoul with explanatory digressions in the subtleties of Hindu doctrine. Informed by the need for broad coherence, Fowler has done an admirable job of bringing all the strands of Hinduism together—at least those that are contained within the scope of this first volume. Further, Fowler has presented this material in lively, accessible prose, which will help students to appreciate that they are studying a tradition that is not only ancient but also contemporary and dynamic.