

Review

The Oxford History of Hinduism: Modern Hinduism, edited by Torkel Brekke. New York: Oxford University Press, 2019. xi + 317 pp., £73 (hb). ISBN 9780198790839.

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Under the general editorship of Gavin Flood, volumes produced for the Oxford History of Hinduism aim at providing ‘authoritative, comprehensive coverage of the history of Hinduism’ (p. xi). The present volume takes up modern Hinduism, framing its overall purpose around both the period of the modern and the thematic of modernity in South Asia. As is by now customary in such works, the period of the modern in South Asia is said to effectively commence with the nineteenth century. Nonetheless, in Chapter 1, Adrian Plau usefully directs attention to developments taking place in the early modern era (circa the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries), as these can be said to provide the ‘framework and building material’ out of which the modern ‘ism’ was ‘constructed’ (p. 33). The editor’s instinct for including this chapter is sound and should be applauded. Recent trends suggest that greater attention is being paid not only to early modern Hinduism, but to patterns of continuity that can be found to help correct an over-emphasis on tropes of modern rupture. Plau’s discussion of vernacular literary cultures, the formation of devotional *sampradāyas*, and the significance of such figures as Kabīr, Nānak, and Caitanya, identifies some useful threads to follow. Placed immediately after Brekke’s brief but thoughtful Introduction, this represents a promising start for the volume. Sadly, that promise is not entirely fulfilled.

Almost by necessity, an edited volume like this one struggles less with the goal of providing authoritative discussions and more with achieving some vision of comprehensiveness. This is not simply due to the fact that no single volume can possibly cover all the figures, moments, movements, debates, and developments of the period; it is just as importantly a reflection of the inevitable challenge of tying chapters together in a way that promotes reflection on dominant historiographical frameworks or directs attention to fruitful interconnections.

The remaining chapters in Part I on ‘Early Hindu Reformers and Reform Movements’ illustrate the problem. These chapters are dedicated respectively

to Rammohun Roy (Dermot Killingley), Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay (Hans Harder) and Bhaktisiddhānta Sarasvatī (Ferdinando Sardella). To begin with, one might argue that of these figures it is only Rammohun who counts as ‘early’ (on this see Hatcher 2020). But beyond that fact, this particular selection of topics suggests the persistence of problematic historiographic habits, not least the focus on the formative work of great men. And while there is certainly nothing new in commencing the story of modern Hinduism with Rammohun Roy, therein lies the problem. Given the precedent set by Plau’s chapter, one might have expected the editor to ask his authors to challenge conventions a bit more aggressively. After all, in the Introduction, Brekke makes a point of stipulating that modern Hinduism is not necessarily synonymous with ‘reformed Hinduism’ (a view he graciously traces to me; see Hatcher 2016). So why begin the book with an entire section framed under the rubric of reform? Newcomers will probably get the impression that if modern Hinduism is not synonymous with reform, it certainly begins with it, and remains oriented around that concept and trope.

It all feels reminiscent of older approaches to the ‘awakening’ of Hinduism through the agency of singular individuals (see Sharma 2002). Yet if this is indeed the premise behind Part I, readers may wonder about the criteria for inclusion or exclusion; would we not expect to find (at the very least) the likes of Swami Vivekananda, Dayananda Sarasvati, and Mahatma Gandhi? Here the inclusion of Bankimchandra is noteworthy; Brekke justifies this decision on the grounds of Bankim’s role in redefining categories like Hinduism and *dharma*. The point is well taken and does offer a bit of a shift from the roster of ‘usual suspects’. The same may be said for the decision to include a chapter on Bhaktisiddhānta, whose programme to institutionalize Caitanyite Vaiṣṇavism is often thought to fall outside the standard framework of reformed Hinduism. Reflecting a recent and promising increase in scholarly efforts to excavate and resituate the work of figures like Bhaktisiddhānta and his father, Kedārṇāth Datta Bhaktivinod, this is a valuable development. However, by including this material in a section on reform—in which the category of the ‘Bengal Renaissance’ also remains to the fore—the editor may have missed a further chance to do useful taxonomic work around operative categories. If nothing else, the fact that these three figures hail from Bengal occludes the many important developments taking place elsewhere in colonial South Asia. And since Plau has already gestured toward a repositioning of the modern in relation to the early modern, why not carry that critical impulse forward? We miss an attempt to (for instance) place Rammohun within the Persianate literary sphere or to evaluate Bhaktisiddhānta’s organizational initiatives as they grew out of, or departed from, earlier Caitanyite traditions.

If Part I is premised on the overarching thematics of reform and reformers, the remaining two parts of the volume are better seen as somewhat artificial containers designed to accommodate a set of disparate (if nonetheless

worthwhile) thematic explorations. There are some useful essays here, but they remain isolated forays into discrete topics like cinema (Gayatri Chatterjee), tourism and pilgrimage (Knut Aukland), New Age, and Online Hinduisms (Kathinka Frøystad and Heinz Scheifinger, respectively). Some of these chapters may find a life of their own, since they seem particularly suitable for assigning to undergraduate students. Here I think especially of Tanisha Ramachandran's chapter on 'Mūrti, Idol, Art, and Commodity' and Vineeta Sinha's on 'Modern Hindu Diaspora(s)'. These essays are well organized and work to empower readers with terminological sophistication and sensitivity to diverse contexts. They are substantial enough to serve as stand-alone readings for newcomers but not so weighty as to overwhelm.

Other thematic forays in the volume are less successful, veering too far to one extreme or another. When I say this, I have in mind some of the more richly researched and therefore denser of the thematic chapters. Here I think especially of the much-needed chapter on 'Caste and Contemporary Hindu Society' (Divya Vaid and Ankur Datta). To my ear this errs a bit too much on the side of a literature review, notwithstanding its compelling opening reference to the suicide of Rohith Vemula in 2016 in the context of relentless pressure from upper-caste students and organizations like the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad. Challenging for first-time readers in a different way may be the chapter on 'Hinduism in the Secular Republic of Nepal' (David Gellner and Chiara Letizia). Its inclusion is important since, as Jessica Birkenholtz has rightly noted (in *Reciting the Goddess*, 2018, pointing to Hatcher 2016), Nepal is often omitted from textbook treatments of Hinduism. The recent dramatic political history of Nepal makes the inclusion of such a chapter all the more important, if only because of lingering perceptions of Nepal as the world's only 'Hindu kingdom' (p. 275). However, the character of the essay seems somewhat out of step with that of other chapters, featuring tabular data on religious communities, castes, and ethnic groups. Other chapters, like Werner Menski's on 'Hindu Law in Modern Times', may leave the unwitting reader feeling—from the opening sentence—as if dropped *in medias res*. The issues of state, law, and religion are eminently worthy of attention in a volume like this, and Menski is the one for the task, but I am not convinced that this chapter will prove useful to most readers.

Let me be clear: the chapters I have just mentioned are all thorough and are 'authoritative' in the sense highlighted by Flood as general editor. I merely question their fit to the purpose of a volume that otherwise seems geared to provide useful, basic orientation to the subfield of modern Hinduism. Other chapters seem to me less worthy of inclusion. Manjari Katju promises a 'History of Hindu Nationalism in India', but this proves to be far more than is delivered. What we have instead is a rapid review of basic Hindutva ideology and the rise of the Bharatiya Janata Party. Perhaps not without its utility, but a far cry from a history of Hindu nationalism in India. I would likewise question the wisdom of Pankaj Jain's decision to dedicate a section of his essay

on 'Modern Hindu *Dharma* and Environmentalism' to a chapter-by-chapter review of the contents of Christopher Chapple and Mary Tucker's *Hinduism and Ecology* (2000), no matter the pioneering role of that volume. If his goal is to highlight an overall lack of attention to meat-eating as a 'major cause for global warming', it might have been better simply to state that claim and then address some of the evidence for and against it. But would this be the place for that?

Elsewhere I have reviewed the volume *Hindu Law* published in this same series (Olivelle and Davis 2018; see <http://readingreligion.org/books/hindu-law> for the review). I believe these two volumes share the same limitations, which are inherent in such works. However, in comparison to the volume edited by Olivelle and Davis, which seeks to map the key features constituting a subfield, *Modern Hinduism* is less comprehensive; one might say that it offers some snapshots, but not a panorama. Scholars of modern Hinduism should take advantage of its stronger features, while contemplating what it does—and does not—do.

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