

Encyclopedia of Hinduism

Denise Cush, Catherine Robinson, and Michael York, eds. *Encyclopedia of Hinduism*. London: Routledge, 2008. 1086 pp. \$265.00. Hardcover. ISBN: 9780700712670.

“**T**here is a challenge in producing an encyclopedia of Hinduism when the editors, many of the contributors, and scholarly debate in general are not sure that such a thing as Hinduism really exists or that an encyclopedia can do justice to the fluidity, diversity, and complexity of the beliefs and practices so designated” (x). So begins the introduction to *Encyclopedia of Hinduism*. The term “Hinduism” was coined in the West to denote the beliefs of people in a certain geographic area in Northern India. The editors of this encyclopedia make clear that they are among those who question the use of the term Hinduism to represent such a diverse set of beliefs. After making that point clear they delve into what constitutes the tradition known as Hinduism.

This volume does not assume any previous knowledge of Hinduism. The term and concept definitions and short entries can be understood, for the most part, by those with little or no knowledge of Hinduism. The longer entries seem to be intended more for those with a basic or more advanced knowledge of Hinduism, but novices to the subject can comprehend the more complex entries with the aid of definitions and shorter explanations of concepts. A helpful section explains the layout of the volume and provides a thematic list of entries. This is useful, allowing a reader to view a list of all of the entries under a particular broad topic, and is of particular interest to those new to Hinduism who wish to explore a broader subject and all the subtopics involved in that particular subject. A full index is provided. Entries conclude with a list of suggested additional readings on a subject.

The editors make clear their desire to provide an encyclopedia of Hinduism that allows for a look at the origins, history, and traditions of Hinduism. Additionally, they want to focus on the present and what followers of Hinduism believe, and how they put their beliefs into practice in their daily lives. The editors state in their introduction the areas of study in this encyclopedia that they feel are lacking or underrepresented. This sets a realistic aim for what can be achieved. This can be seen as both a strength and weakness of this volume, depending on the reader’s information needs. One weakness is that women’s issues are not as fully explored as they could be. The editors have admitted this weakness and attribute it to one of the biographic criteria for this encyclopedia, “that sufficient time had passed to facilitate an accurate assessment of their enduring influence” (xi). While there is truth in that statement, the role of women in Hinduism throughout its history is sufficiently vast and has been documented well enough that it could have been more fully explored.

The editors state that their aim is to make Hinduism comprehensible to undergraduates. The presentation of topics is user friendly with an A-Z listing that allows for easy browsing. The editors’ aims are achieved by including a well-rounded group of contributors providing entries on a very diverse set of issues. The contributors to the *Encyclopedia of Hinduism* are some of the foremost experts in the field. This book contains more than nine hundred entries that range from 150 to five thousand words. They vary from definitions to an in-depth look at history, theory, doctrine, and social aspects of Hinduism.

The editors admit to a Northern Indian bias in terms of numerous areas of scholarship, and state that though they intended to provide more diverse opinions, they were not able to achieve this aim. The fact that certain areas of scholarship on Hinduism are dominated by those in certain geographical locations, mainly Northern India, is to be expected based on the dominance of the Hindi culture in these areas; however, the editors' attempt to provide views of Hinduism throughout the world demonstrates a desire for objectivity. The editors strive for balance and objectivity by including contributors having a scholarly background in Hinduism as well as those with a religious perspective, including practicing Hindus.

I recommend *Encyclopedia of Hinduism* for purchase for undergraduates in religious studies programs as well as graduate students in seminaries or schools of theology. This encyclopedia has achieved a fair balance between the traditions and history of Hinduism as well as current-day issues and movements within the religion.

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