P. Pratap Kumar (ed.)

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This anthology is part of the Open University book series *Religion in Focus.* The series aims to publish “textbooks that introduce religions as they are actually lived” and which “examine contemporary religious activities and communities and the varied ways in which texts and traditions are employed in the evolution of religion.” The present volume on Hinduism edited by P. Pratap Kumar from the University of KwaZulu Natal certainly fulfills these aims.

Introductory books on Hinduism are restricted, for good reasons I think, by the didactic need to give a reasonably coherent presentation of the traditions known for better or worse as “Hinduism.” Significant texts and historical developments have to be covered in a manner which necessarily will throw a shadow on more specific practices and underexpose the enormous and significant variations within these traditions. Educators who teach courses on Hinduism will therefore also feel the need for supplementary material that can make up for this limitation. Many of the chapters in *Contemporary Hinduism* perfectly serve this purpose.

Some of the chapters in the book clearly introduce Hindu practices as “they are actually lived” (some with explicit reference to Lived Religion scholarship, e.g., Antoinette DeNapoli), whereas other chapters are more like overviews of certain branches or practices within Hinduism. As a supplement to introductory textbooks the Lived Religion chapters, in the opinion of this reviewer, serve best. The point of Lived Religion scholarship is to place religious practices in the context of the lives of actual people in order to show how religion is inextricably interwoven with other aspects of people’s lives, such as material conditions, life experience, cultural backgrounds, etc. The value of some of the chapters of this book is that they make tangible these broader contexts.

The book is divided into three broad categories: Hinduism in diaspora, contemporary Hinduism in north India, and contemporary Hinduism in
south India. This is a reasonable typology that organizes the chapters along well-known lines of distinction. In the first chapter Jeffery Long exemplifies three different types of diasporic Hinduism. He does this instructively by a description of the architecture, interior, and the activities going on in three different Hindu centers in North America. Two of those are typical of Hindu temples established by and primarily for groups of Indian immigrants but they also welcome guests from the non-Indian community in a manner that is not equally typical of temples in India. Both also typically serve as cultural centers with educational activities directed at the younger generation. The third institution, a Vedanta Centre affiliated with the Ramakrishna Mission, represents a type of “export-import” Hinduism that is primarily aimed at and adopted by non-Indians, but Long is critical of such categories, because identities both within and without the immigrant communities are fluent and changeable over time. Deepak Shimkhada’s account of the Nepali diaspora in California also adds new interesting perspectives to our knowledge of Hindu diaspora communities. On the one hand, he emphasizes the conservativeness of this tradition in the context where immigrants are separated from the historical changes going on in their homeland, and, on the other hand, the willingness to adapt to new settings, such as when notions of death pollution are softened with the argument that pollution cannot cross the Pacific Ocean to America.

In the section about Hinduism in north India Michael Baltutis offers some interesting material about the Indrajatra festival in Kathmandu. As in Shimkhada’s chapter, the recent changes in the Nepali political structure are the dynamic background of the festival. Due to these changes the festival is now more articulated in the context of ancestor worship than as a kingship ritual. The chapter is also an interesting and vivid ethnographic description of this ritual, which is rarely mentioned in general textbooks. Antoinette DeNapoli has done extensive field work among a group of female sādhus in Rajasthan. These women have taken formal initiation within the daśanāmī or the nātha orders, but as female ascetics their practice seems to differ from the male ascetics within the same orders. The practices of these women are much more focused on devotional satsaṅga and social service than is the case among the male ascetics. As such “renunciation” for these women is more a matter of full-time devotion than of actual rejection of social relationships. DeNapoli’s presentation is detailed and empathic. This adds many nuances to the picture, but I miss an attention to the social life conditions of these women. For lack of these real-life contexts and apart from the acknowledgment of the pain felt when leaving family and friends, the description seems perhaps to romanticize the spiritual experience within the community a bit. Robert Orsi, one of