

History of Hindu India for everyman

By Koenraad Elst

Nowadays, multiculturalist state authorities in Western countries encourage the newer and more exotic religious denominations to produce textbooks explaining in simple language their own traditions and doctrines. While formally serving as textbooks for the religion's own followers and their children, their interest for the authorities lies in the religion's self-presentation to society at large. This way they know what gestures to make and what gaffes to avoid, and what holidays to acknowledge in the official calendar. An additional benefit is that it streamlines the religions' self-understanding in a multiculturalism-friendly sense: even religions with a record of intolerance find they cannot get away with a straightforward restatement of their monopolistic claims on truth, and end up teaching pluralism to their children in spite of their inherited dogmas.

This latter consideration is really quite unnecessary in the case of Hinduism, because the Hindus never needed any prodding from outside to take a pluralistic view of religion. Hinduism itself is already a commonwealth of communities, doctrines and practices, so it is thoroughly comfortable with peaceful co-existence in spite of differences. The Dutch, British and American textbooks of Hinduism that we have seen are simply being authentic when they declare *unisono* that Hinduism has a hoary tradition of heartfelt pluralism. Thus also the latest Hinduism textbook, under review here, *The History of Hindu India from Ancient to Modern Times*, by the editors of *Hinduism Today* magazine (Kauai, Hawaii) and Prof. em. Shiva Bajpai. It says: "Hinduism does not dictate one way as the only way. Hindus believe 'truth is one, paths are many'" (p.6), and: "Hindus accept the spiritual efficacy of other paths and never proselytize" (p.107) So, no chest-thumping let alone the sound of war-drums in this pleasantly shaped Social Studies "textbook for all ages".

General appreciation

The internal plurality of Hinduism is at once a major challenge for those who cherish an ambition to present the religion to the world in a not-too-bulky textbook. In comparing Dutch and British textbooks published by the Arya Samaj, Vivekananda Centre, Vishva Hindu Parishad, ISKCON and other Hindu groups, we could not help noticing a certain bias in favour of the publishers' own sectarian assumptions in spite of a serious over-all effort to make the presentation inclusive of all strands of Hinduism.

Thus, the ISKCON textbook speaks of the Devas (normally translated as "gods" or "deities") as "the demigods", in keeping with the quasi-monotheistic ISKCON view that only Krishna is God, all while recognizing the other gods as lesser but nonetheless divine beings. The edits proposed by the Vedic Foundation in the California textbook affair included the systematic replacement of "the gods" by "God" or "the manifestations of God", obviously from an internalized Anglo-modernist bias (borrowed from Christianity) against polytheism. What such organizations should keep in mind during their editing is whether every Hindu can recognize his own religion in the description they give of it. We don't believe that the Vedic seers thought of Indra as merely a "demi-god", or that today's ordinary Hindu devotee thinks of Ganesha, Lakshmi and Saraswati, the three deities he worships on Diwali, as lacking in distinct identities.

The great step forward made in this book is that it is consistent in its attempt to represent Hinduism rather than just one of its sects. While some textbooks try to confine Hinduism to the Vedic tradition, here we read that by 600 BCE, “the social, religious and philosophical ideas and practices central to Hinduism are fully evident. These are in continuity with the religion of the Indus-Sarasvati culture, the teachings of the Vedas, Dravidian culture and elements of the tribal religions.” (p.4) If any bias was to be expected here, given the affiliation of the *Hinduism Today* editors, it would be to Tamil Shaiva bhakti, embodied in the tradition of the Nayanar poets. These get hardly half a page (p.33), and after having been ignored in so many introductions to Hinduism, it was about time they got their due. (For the same reason, it is commendable that Tiruvalluvar, recently honoured with a giant statue on India’s southern tip, is highlighted, p.77-78.)

The general structure of the book is chronological, from the Vedic poets and Harappan cities down to modern Indian democracy and its state religion, “secularism”. These chapters are interspersed as appropriate with cultural intermezzos on dress, food, the arts, rituals, pilgrimage cycles, etc. As a didactic device, every chapter opens with a challenge about what you would do in a thorny situation in which Hindus have found themselves, and ends with a list of exam-type questions. Where would you go if you lived in a Harappan village and you found the river on your doorstep, the Saraswati, was drying up? If in the present age, you are given the chance to go to college, would you abandon your family of blacksmiths back in the village? If after growing up in the West with a resolve to be independent, you meet the prospective groom your country-born parents have sought out for you, what would you do?

The hard part

And when faced with the back-breaking toleration tax and numerous discriminations imposed by the Delhi Sultans and Aurangzeb, would you convert to Islam? For indeed, this book doesn’t avoid the unpleasant issues of Islamic persecution and “British rule’s mixed blessings” (p.62). We can only commend the spirit in which the authors go about this challenge: “We now enter what historians call a ‘difficult period’ of Indian history. (...) Muslim historians recount in detail the destruction of cities, sacking of temples, slaughter of noncombatants and enslavement of captives. British accounts reveal the mismanagement and greed that led to famines that killed tens of millions of people and ruined the local industry during their rule. (...) It is difficult to study such unpleasant pasts in a way that leads to understanding, not hatred. (...) True reconciliation comes when people honestly face the past, forgive misdeeds, learn to truly respect each other’s religious beliefs and traditions and promise to move forward in peace.” (p.42)

Very briefly, the canard is laid to rest that Hindus lost to Muslims because of the caste system, a claim heard from both anti-Hindu missionaries and Hindu reformists. In fact, many castes participated in warfare together. As any strategist could have told the moralizing caste-mongers, victory was by virtue of “superior military organization, strategy, training, weapons, horses and mobility”, which the natives had neglected. (p.45) Conversely, “the caste system was a main obstacle to conversion. It guaranteed to Hindus a secure identity and place in their community, which they would lose by converting.” (p.49) In their revolt against Muslim rule, Hindus observed a certain morality of warfare: “While Shivaji was not above sacking an enemy’s city if he needed the money, he did not kill noncombatants, take slaves or damage Muslim holy sites.” (p.48)

Far from fostering resentment, these chapters breathe a spirit of positive thinking. As illustrated by the title of chapter 3, "Hinduism endures: 1100 to 1850", it emphasizes Hinduism's capacity for survival over its losses. In the time of Muslim and then British domination, "the country remained overwhelmingly Hindu despite foreign domination and religious oppression". (p.41) Since all is well that ends well, this makes it easier for Hindus to take a cool view of these painful episodes than for, say, the Zoroastrians or the Australian Aboriginals.

If anything, this book errs on the side of being over-diplomatic in describing inter-religious conflict. Consider this: "India's transition to freedom brought with it a terrible tragedy. Pakistan was partitioned from India on the basis of religion. A huge migration followed as 7.5 m Muslims moved to Pakistan from India and an equal number of Hindus and Sikhs fled Pakistan." (p.65) The first two sentences keep the active agent of Partition out of view, as if it was impersonal destiny overcoming India, when in fact it was the Muslim League's violent agitation that forced both the British and Congress into compliance. The last sentence suggests a symmetry between the Muslim and Hindu-Sikh "migrations". In fact, Hindus and Sikhs were terrorized into fleeing their ancestral homes which they had wanted to stay inside multicultural India, whereas the Muslims simply moved to the promised land they had carved out for themselves (with the seeming exception of East Panjab where the Muslims were put to flight, but only after millions of hapless Hindu-Sikh refugees from their own new state started streaming in with their horror stories).

Historicity

On the whole, this book respects the findings of modern scholarship, rather than sweepingly committing its allegiance to either the traditionalist or the secularist position. Thus, rather than speaking out prematurely, it acknowledges uncertainty where appropriate: "The relationship between the people of the Indus-Saravati civilization and those who composed the Vedas is not clearly understood." (p.3) Rather than triumphantly dismissing the Aryan Invasion Theory as a well-refuted colonial conspiracy, it soberly observes: "Many scholars now dispute this theory because all the evidence for it is questionable." (p.4)

Another nod to prevailing scholarly custom is the periodization implicit in this chapter title: "Hindu India: 300 to 1100 CE" (p.21), for indeed, the Orientalists divided Indian history into a Vedic, Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim and British period. Concerning the authorship of the Vedas, the existing belief is noted: "Hindus regard them as spoken by God" (p.3), only to return to the realistic assumption of human authorship: "the holy texts had to be composed well before 2000 BCE" (because by that time the mighty Saraswati had shriveled, p.3), and "a few [women] even composed several of the holy Vedic hymns" (p.5). So, clearly the Vedic hymns were the handiwork of human poets.

On the other hand, introducing the epic's hero Krishna as "the eighth incarnation of Lord Vishnu" (p.9), without quote marks, detracts from the book's purpose of teaching "history". Let alone the secularist deconstruction, even in the epic itself he is a down-to-earth war consultant and womanizer suffering an all too human fate, with most of the Bharata clan killed in the fraternal war in which he guides them, all his own relatives killing each other while drunk, and he himself dying in a silly hunting accident. It is only in later interpolations like the Bhagavad Gita that he gets deified.

Fault-finding

In a book review, it is only proper to indulge in some fault-finding, if only by way of useful suggestion to the publishers for well-deserved future editions. So, please bear with the pedantry that follows.

There are extremely few spelling errors in this book, but I found a few on the maps, where *Tapti* is rendered as “Tapi” (p.112), and *Mizoram* as “Mizeram” (p.87). The river-name *Satlej* is given the sloppy British-colonial transcription *Sutluj*, following the same confusing pattern as *Panjab* / “Punjab”, *Pashtu* / “Pushtu”, *Pandit* / “Pundit”. No big deal, but considering the importance the Vedic seers accorded to correct pronunciation, why not just do our best? And speaking of maps, the map of pilgrimage sites (p.87) should have covered the Islam-occupied parts of the subcontinent along with the Republic of remainder-India, so as to include places like Hinglaj and Nankana Sahib.

The epic’s name *Mahâbhârata* does not mean “Great India” (p.9). Rather, it means “great [epic of Vedic king] Bharata’s clan”, just as *Bhâratanyam*, discussed on p.55, refers not to *Bhârat*/India but to the dance style conceived or at least described by an ancient choreographer named *Bharata*.

Likewise, it is admittedly traditional but by scholarly standards not acceptable to analyze the word *guru* thus: “*gu* means darkness and *ru* means remover.” (p.14) Well, *guru* is cognate with Latin *gravis*, whence English *gravity*, and means “heavy”. Anyone is free to fantasize meanings into words, but a textbook should aspire to higher standards.

The history of the caste system is complicated and the authors have wisely chosen to treat it only briefly. Still, they could have done better than this: “Later on, the varnas divided into hundreds of sub-sections called jatis (castes).” (p.4) *Varna* and *jâti* are two distinct systems that ended up combining, and if at all one preceded the other, certainly *jati* came first. *Varna* is the layeredness of complex societies, characteristic of late-Vedic society when it started expanding from the Saraswati-Yamuna region to the rest of India; *jati* means “tribe” and was the social formation prevailing in most of India. As these tribes integrated into the wider Hindu society, they retained their identity through endogamy and became castes. In most of India they received or grabbed a place in the *varna* hierarchy, but that was mainly a ritual label immaterial to their internal self-organization. *Varna* is late-Vedic, *jati* is pre-Vedic.

Finally, in our opinion it was not a good idea to include a section on the chakras (p.94-95). Kundalini yoga and the chakra system are medieval innovations, i.e. fairly recent by Indian standards, and have remained very marginal before becoming fads in the 20th century. Of all pre-Independence Hindus, 99% never heard of them. Writing their exact history is a job that largely remains to be done, and an introductory textbook is not the place to do it.

That said, among social studies textbooks this book is now the best introduction to Hinduism.

Shiva Bajpai & editors of *Hinduism Today* magazine, 2011: *The History of Hindu India from Ancient to Modern Times. A Textbook for All Ages* (a Social Studies textbook), Himalayan Academy Publications, Kapaa (Hawaii), 119 pp., US \$ 19.95, ISBN 978-1-934145-38-8, also available as e-book.