

# Religions of India in Practice

by Donald S. Lopez Jr.

PRINCETON READINGS IN RELIGIONS  
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XVI + 648 PAGES + INDEX

The publication of Donald S. Lopez Jr.'s *Religions of India in Practice* indicates a significant development in the way that Indian religious traditions have been taught in the western academy. Since its inception as an academic field of study in nineteenth century theological schools in Europe, religious studies has, until quite recently, been primarily concerned with the hermeneutical exegesis of sacred texts. The strong influence of the colonial encounter on the canonization of academic disciplines, commonly known in today's parlance as Orientalism, further emphasized the primacy of ancient written texts as a way of establishing what was seen as the authentic religious traditions. These written texts were primarily written in the ancient languages of India, such as Sanskrit and Pali. It was not until the second half of the twentieth century that serious work was attempted on religious texts belonging to the living vernaculars of contemporary India. The scholarly emphasis on the practice of religious traditions is an even more recent development, partially owing its existence to a number of intellectual developments in anthropology, history, and sociology which emphasized the study of the everyday as opposed to focusing on the social elite.

The extremely eloquent and critical introduction to the volume, written by Richard Davis, will no doubt be an invaluable resource for instructors who require a solid historical overview of the major Indian religious traditions. At the same time that Davis skillfully outlines the major tenants of the religious traditions of Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Jainism, and Sikhism, his subtle knowledge of critical debates about the influence of colonialism on the canonization of religious tradition adds a theoretical sophistication to his overview. For instance, though Davis acknowledges the historical depth of all of the popular religious traditions, he is right to point out that classifying many of these traditions under the rubric of Hinduism is a very recent development. He furthermore points to the important influence and bias of the colonial census in both enumerating and delimiting different religious communities. Davis works hard to undermine the colonial enumerating logic which has so often characterized the study of Indian religion, and notes that "If this anthology helps us to see Indian religious history less as the unfolding of distinct, self-contained formations, and more as a dynamic process of borrowing, conflict,

and interaction between and within religious traditions, it will have served its purpose." (page 4).

Following Davis's illuminating introduction, the book contains forty-five richly detailed articles representing various themes from five major religious traditions, including Buddhist, Hindu, Jain, Muslim, and Sikh. The organization of the book, however, does not place together articles which describe any one particular religion. Instead, one finds the text divided into four sections, including "Songs of Devotion and Praise," "Rites and Instructions," "Remarkable Lives and Edifying Tales," and "Traditions in Transition and Conflict." This organization schema should be very helpful to instructors who wish to teach courses about religion in India in ways which challenge the commonly accepted colonial classifications of separately-existing and distinct religious traditions. The collection is particularly good in its representation of the religious practices of women.

The thirty contributors featured in this volume are all leading scholars of Indian religion, who teach in departments of Religious Studies, as well as the more unlikely disciplines of English, History, Anthropology, Art, South Asian Studies, and Near Eastern Languages. As such, the volume represents some of the most recent and sophisticated interdisciplinary research on the practice of Indian religions today. Strikingly, however, the scholars who have contributed to this volume are all employed at universities located in North America, excepting McLeod (in New Zealand) and Mir (in Malaysia). Not a single contributor to the volume is employed by an Indian university. This raises interesting questions about the way that Indian religion has been construed as an object of study outside of the subcontinent. In India, after all, the very few existing departments of religious studies are quite recent creations of schools of theology. The academic study of religious

texts in India has primarily been done in philosophy departments, and the study of religions in practice, if done at all, has been in departments of sociology, anthropology, or history. Religions of India in practice, it seems, continue to be a fascination of western-based scholars. ■

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