

Book Reviews

HINDU WORLD.

An Encyclopedic Survey of Hinduism.

Compiled by Benjamin Walker.

In two volumes.

(Allen and Unwin, 10 gns. the set).

Review by Whitall N. Perry.

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If Hinduism first and foremost connotes one of the great oriental religions, the term likewise comprises a multi-faceted phenomenon of spiritual, intellectual, political, social, and ethnic plexuses, — a primordial revelation or series of revelations "churned from the waters" at the dawn of time, and a vast system whose ever-expanding reverberations are still reaching down the centuries towards the farthest confines of the last age, or Kali Yuga. The compiler of this aptly titled work has endeavoured to extract a manageable survey of this phenomenon in a manner at once accessible and convincing to any serious lay reader in need of an erudite reference manual that is something less than a library. Quite candidly he stakes his claim for this attempt on the basis that no other work of its kind exists, and in fact the closest recent book in scope may well be A. L. Basham's excellent compendium, *The Wonder That Was India* (an entry in *Hindu World* under INDOLOGY lists the major western contributors in the field over the last two centuries). In assessing the value of one- and two-volume "dictionaries" and "encyclopaedias" of world religions and cultures, a margin of indulgence has to be ceded to the inevitable restrictions on space, and to the fact that the compiler's partialities will stand out more boldly than is the case with the collective impersonality of a fully exhaustive work. The chief merits of *Hindu World* are its documentary reliability and scholarship (if somewhat delimited to the socio-anthropological approach of modern historical criticism), its admirable classification of subject matter, and its extreme readability combined with thoroughness of treatment.

An ingenious system of indexing eliminates pagination while facilitating references. Thus, of the more than eight thousand items composing the Index, those given in capitals refer to separate articles entered in their proper place alphabetically, while those in small print have a key word or words annexed indicating the article in which the item is to be found; conversely, copious cross references are provided by an asterisk against each word in an article which in turn is treated as a separate entry; another convenience is a list of contents at the beginning of each volume. Every article is followed by a bibliography giving primary sources, which accumulated together are comprehensive (readers of

Studies in Comparative Religion will be interested to know that Coomaraswamy and Guénon both figure in the source material). To show how this works, a reader seeking information on astrology, for example, will find through the 14 ex that the documentation is provided under the headings of "Astronomy" and "Divination". Again, the entry under AEON outlines the doctrine of cosmic cycles, showing among other things the complexities surrounding the definition of *manvantaras*; but further details can be had by tracing "Manvantara" through the Index to the heading "Manu", where the complexities are found to be inextricably compounded! Reincarnation might have received a special article; instead, it is intelligently relegated to its proper setting under the entry ESCHATOLOGY, where it is equated with *sam-sâra*, "transmigration".

Through more painstaking editing the Index would be still larger ("Judgment" is missing, for example, even though the idea recurs in the articles on YAMA, HELL, ESCHATOLOGY, and KARMA). The doctrine of *avatâras* is explained under the heading GOD, but neither by index nor cross reference is the listing "Vishnu" placed in apposition with "Avatâra", although in the article under VISHNU are to be found the names of the ten best known *avatâras* (plus interesting information about still further "descents" of Vishnu). Again, while the entry on Swâmi Vivekânanda tells us he was a member of the kâyastha or clerical caste, an asterisk that is missing would facilitate the reader's discovery of the not astonishing fact that "most authorities designate the kâyasthas as *śudras*".

These volumes invite endless browsing. One learns that each yuga or "age" of mankind "is preceded by a period called its *samdhyâ*, 'morning twilight', and is followed by a period called the *samdhyamsa*, 'evening twilight' ". There is a very full section on SACRIFICE. Another article suggests that the famous rope trick has its prototype and possibly origin in an ancient shamanistic initiatory rite setting forth symbolically the dismemberment and subsequent reintegration of the aspirant during his spiritual ascent (with echoes of this feat coming from Lisieux in the Middle Ages and from sixteenth-century Magdeburg). The article on MECHANICS even documents a widespread belief (c. AD 600) in flying "engines", *yantra*, built by Yavana (Greek) artisans for Indian kings. Yoga is treated under different headings, with a prudent warning conveyed in the section on OCCULTISM against the dangers of the grosser practices and postures. Indeed, one sees very clearly in this book how India has been able to nurture and contain everything from the highest realms of spirituality (*satyasa satyam*) to the basest aberrations of materialism (*nâstika*) with its *point de chute* in the dreadful antinomianism of the sinister Kâpâlîka sects. If India is a land of pitfalls for the unwary western seeker, *Hindu World* could likewise be considered an *ignis fatuus* for the unguarded reader: the compiler is obliged to set forth an amorphous welter of information; he is after all a lexicographer, not a guru, and some of the material is explosive.

Inevitably, though, any reference work poses as a target for scholarly rebuttals over errors of commission and omission, and such faults are not lacking here. Taking the first category: everything pertaining to caste, while admirably documented, carries an undertone of virulent contempt (particularly as regards Brahmins); nowhere is there found even a rudimentary assessment of the profound principles stemming from archetypal realities on which the whole system is based. But perhaps this is not surprising on the part of one who can write under NASTIKA (=denier, nihilist, atheist): "Indian

nonconformity is one of the finest chapters in the history of Hindu and Buddhist speculation". "Priestly editing", we are told, has been responsible for a great deal of *forgery* in the "mass of Sanskrit texts". The generality of Hindus will be gratuitously offended in reading that the *Bhagavadgitâ* "may have borrowed (the idea of the deity incarnate as a saviour of all mankind) from the teachings of the New Testament," that "spiritually it is a disappointment... replete with tautology, contradiction and rhetoric... conceived by a mind ridden with vague philosophical concepts", while knowledgeable Westerners will simply brush this off with derision; but to reject *Hindu World* on this basis would be as irrational as to spurn the *Sacred Books of the East* because Max Müller was capable of writing that the *Brahmanas* "deserve to be studied as the physician studies the twaddle of idiots and the ravings of madmen". It seems, alas, that it often takes one kind of person to document spirituality and another to understand it. The compiler says that not "every byway of the vast panorama of Hinduism has been described here in all its scholastic variora". One flagrant exception concerns the sexual domain. The Hindus being methodical and scientific in regard to everything pertaining to Mâyâ deal frankly with sexual phenomena no less than other matters in the realm of formal manifestation, but the ever-recurrent stress this receives in the book would give the idea that all Hindus with the exception, perhaps, of a few obstinate ascetics are sex-crazed (again it must be emphasized that taken alone the documentation here cannot be much faulted, although a certain scepticism is admissible to say the least in the face of some of the extravagances recorded).

In the second category: why, when nearly three pages are devoted to Sri Aurobindo is there nothing at all on Sri Ramana Maharshi? A good deal of space is allotted to Buddhism and Islam, which is justifiable considering the roots that the former and the impact which the latter have had on Hindu culture; by extension Jainism and Sikhism are also covered, and even Christianity: why, then, are the Parsees ignored except for dropping their name once or twice in the articles on Maga and Zoroastrianism? And why is there no rubric on Indonesia, the site of Hinduism's great exterritorial flowering? By all rights the Gypsies should also be included, as they form one of the most fascinating enigmas on the periphery of Hinduism.

Hindu World will certainly be a standard reference work pending the rather improbable appearance of a better compendium; therefore it is to be hoped that the book's reception will be such as to allow for a second edition, once it has passed the screening of scholars from India and the West to permit the necessary and inevitable rectifications and additions. And if the second edition could be intelligently illustrated (since Hinduism is also a feast for the eyes), this would still further heighten its appeal.