



Book Review

Knut A. Jacobsen: *Hinduism in the World: Migrations and Global Presence*. London: Routledge, 2025, 203 pp.

Indians constitute the largest national diaspora, with more than 35 million nationals and their descendants around the world, but Indian religions have not been particularly visible in religion and migration scholarship. Christianity in the US and Islam in Europe have received most attention from researchers. Although Christianity and Islam constitute the largest global religious diasporas, including many migrant groups of Indian origin, as the world's third largest religious tradition, one might expect Hinduism to be more visible. This is not to say it is neglected. There is plenty of good research, but Hinduism has not been especially prominent in general presentations and theorizations of migration-based religious diversity.

The Norwegian Study of Religion professor Knut A. Jacobsen is among the leading experts on global Hinduism. An exceptionally productive scholar, he has published numerous significant works, including several handbooks and encyclopaedias on Indian religions. His recent *Hinduism in the World: Migrations and Global Presence* provides an overview of many key aspects of Hinduism's global dispersion. The book's seven chapters discuss different features of the Hindu diaspora from colonial to postcolonial times. This concise

book is not the easiest of reads, and it requires some basic knowledge of Hindu traditions, terminology, religious practices, and ideas.

The book "examines the role of migration, the movement of people, and the global presence of Hinduism to try to understand some of the diversity of Hindu traditions worldwide, as well as understand some aspects of how Hinduism spreads across space" (p. 2). The key to Jacobsen's approach is his argument that seven different processes have contributed to the emergence of global Hinduism. The processes are "migration, sacred sites, Hindu gurus[,] and the idea of India as the global guru, the term 'Hinduism', new followers and, finally, the remarkable invention and success of modern yoga" (p. 3). A further point is that not all of global Hinduism is related to India, for it also has its origins in Sri Lanka and Nepal, among other countries.

The first chapter discusses the seven processes in some detail, of which migration is deemed the most important. Migration is seen as a historical phenomenon with deep roots, though most of the attention is paid to colonial ('old') and postcolonial ('new') migrations to Africa, the Americas, Europe, and Oceania. Post-slavery indentured labour alone numbered 1.5 million so-called coolies between 1834 and 1937. Some migration streams are quite complex: for example, the colonial East African migration

that led to forced remigration in the postcolonial period. Postcolonial migration has again gathered pace in recent decades, as Indian labour has found its way to the Gulf states and many Western countries. Even the rise of new religious movements in the 1960s and 1970s had much to do with Indian migration: the Hare Krishna movement grew out of an Indian guru's migration to the United States. Chapter 2 discusses the case of Sri Ananda Acharya's 'spiritual migration' and his eventual settling in Norway in the early twentieth century. Jacobsen also presents several other individuals, including people venerated by Shakta traditions as contemporary living deities in Europe (Chapter 4).

Sacred sites are the focus of Chapter 3, which examines the Ilam (Sri Lankan) Tamil Hindu diaspora. The Tamil Hindus live in Southern India and Sri Lanka, and the chapter focuses on Tamils of non-Indian origin. Temple worship is central for Ilam Tamils, and they have been among the diaspora's main temple builders, though they have been somewhat invisible in both public and political debate and in inter-religious activities. These building projects have long been followed in the research: for example, by Martin Baumann, Annette Wilke, and others in the German-speaking realm. Jacobsen provides us with further detailed discussions of temple building processes and how they entail transnational connections of builders, travelling sacred statues, and internal competition between religious

leaders. He also argues that a major transformation of Hinduism in the diaspora is related to the growing role of temples in religious practice, or 'templeization' as he calls it.

Chapter 5 presents numerous examples of the sacralization of rivers and mountains and other non-Indian spaces. Jacobsen writes: "Whenever Hindus settle in sufficient numbers, public temples are likely at some point to be established, and there is, in addition, the likelihood that landscapes will be identified as sites of divine manifestations, which function to expand the geography of the Hindu mythologies" (p. 147). This often requires innovative theological thinking and has led to the relaxation of the idea of India as Hinduism's only sacred land. Jacobsen considers this cosmological rethinking as a recurring phenomenon of Hindu diasporas (p. 155).

Chapter 6 discusses the idea of India as a global guru. This means India's special role as understood through the lenses of Hinduism – today, often with Hindu nationalist overtones. Hindu missions, individual gurus, and political agendas merge. This also includes elements of the homogenization of Hinduism, promoting its "superiority" (p. 165) in relation to other religions. Although Hindu nationalism has been successful in India, its role in the diaspora is less clear. Homogenizing tendencies seek to provide a common basis and core for the inherent diversity of Hinduism. Even the term 'Hinduism' is important according to Jacobsen, for it unifies

a diverse religious tradition under one term (pp. 17–21).

Hinduism's global spread has been supported by travelling gurus and Hindu movements, resulting in (non-Indian-origin) converts and other supporters. The invention of modern postural yoga, which combines Western gymnastics and Hindu thought, has become an exceptionally successful form of physical and spiritual practice around the world (pp. 22–24). Hindu nationalists have sought to benefit from yoga's success by inaugurating the United Nations International Day of Yoga, but their political influence has thus far remained low outside India (p. 183). Nevertheless, Hinduism is gaining much new influence and many new followers around the world.

I expected the book to be more of a general introduction than a collection of specific case studies. In fact, it is a hybrid of the two. It provides much basic information not easily available elsewhere, but it also delves quite deeply into selected issues. The pages thus contain substantial amounts of detail and plenty of Hindu terminology. This makes the book's use as a textbook on the Hindu diaspora challenging, especially for readers unfamiliar with Hindu theology and movements, who will need a companion work to read alongside it. That said, I think the book's ability to combine historical hindsight with contemporary detail and a summary of the major shifts within Hinduism is valuable. An issue that might have

been developed further is the seven processes of change. Some have their own chapter; others are discussed throughout the volume. This makes it challenging to identify all Jacobson's argument's key components, and whether it could be used for developing theory in the subject area.

Hinduism in the World is a welcome addition to the scholarship of religion, migration, transnationalism, and diaspora. The combination of older colonial and newer postcolonial diasporas gives depth to the debate, allowing careful consideration of the changes in the strands of Hindu thought and theology. Highlighting the key role of Ilam Tamil Hindus in building temples across the West and pointing to the latest developments of Hindu nationalism provide a welcome bird's eye view for evaluating more specific phenomena in different contexts. The book is suitable for advanced readers already knowledgeable in the basics of Hinduism and as additional reading for those interested in the nexus of religion, migration, and diaspora.

Tuomas Martikainen
University of Turku

Tuomas Martikainen is Professor in the Study of Religion, University of Turku. Email: tuomas.martikainen@utu.fi