

# Book Review - Sources of Indian Tradition

*Sources of Indian Tradition* is a two volume set including many of the key documents of the religion and history of the Indian subcontinent. India has some of the best conditions for human life in the world and therefore it has long been one of the most populated places on earth. The large Indian populations have given rise to some of the greatest religions on earth, including Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism, and Jainism. Only the Middle East, with the Abrahamic religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, can compete with India in religious innovation. In history, too, India has been an important player in the world since time immemorial.

As a result, the literature of India is too vast to readily digest. The Abrahamic religions have one sacred book each, including the Koran (Islam), the Bible (Christianity), and the Tanakh (Judaism). Although some are more authoritative than others, Hinduism has dozens of sacred texts, including the Vedas, the Upanishads, the Epics (Ramayana, Mahabharata), the Puranas, and the Sutras. Buddhists, Jains and Sikhs have large bodies of scripture as well. *Sources of Indian Tradition* provides many of the most important parts of key texts to allow readers to more quickly grasp the Indian religions.

Ainslee T Embree (1921-present), a Professor of History Emeritus at Columbia University, edited the volume one, covering antiquity to 1800. Steven Hay edited the first edition of volume two, covering 1800 to the modern day. The second edition of volume two was a combined effort of Ainslee T Embree and the following:

1. Rachel Fell McDermott – Professor of Asian and Middle Eastern Cultures
2. Leonard A Gordon – Professor of History Emeritus at Brooklyn College and Director of the Southern Asia Institute at Columbia University
3. Francis W. Pritchett - Professor Emeritus of Modern Indic Languages, Columbia University
4. Dennis Dalton – Professor Emeritus in Political Science at Barnard College, Columbia University

This list of editors illustrates the high quality of both volumes of *Sources of Indian Tradition*, including both the writing and the choice of content. Overall, volume one contains more religious material and volume two contains more social and political material.

Nonetheless, the material is difficult. Western students with Greco-Roman thought processes and a Judeo-Christian heritage (if not beliefs) can struggle with the Indian worldview, and Romance-Germanic language speakers can founder on the difficult-to-pronounce Sanskrit and Hindi terms. Without a basic knowledge of India, volume one of *Sources of Indian Tradition* can

be nearly impenetrable on the first reading. The second reading is easier. Volume two is also easier to digest, as it includes more modern fare. Both are very long, however.

One virtue of both volumes of *Sources of Indian Tradition* is that much of the material therein is primary historical data. Eyewitness accounts of events, testimonies of involved leaders, and actual data provide a clear window into people and events, while summaries and commentaries written hundreds or thousands of years after a person or event can provide at best a cloudy window, or sometimes even a door. Editors inevitably introduce bias, consciously and unconsciously, by what they include and how they frame their inclusions. However it is simply impossible to identify, much less to include, all of the source documents of the major people and events in India for over 2,000 years. These editors have selected with reasonable fairness.

For example, students for the past 50 years in Western schools hear nothing of how colonialism benefitted the colonies. Teachers from grade school to university drone on sanctimoniously about the wickedness of colonial powers and the moral vacuity of the West. *Sources of Indian Tradition*, however, reveals that in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, for example, many prominent Indians realized the benefits of British rule over their country. Some even opposed independence for India on the grounds that only the British could keep Hindus and Muslims from killing each other. The history of post-independence India suggests that there was at least of modicum of sagacity in that concern. Like everything else in human life, colonialism had advantages and disadvantages for colonizers and colonized, and *Sources of Indian Tradition* reveals that.

In some areas the emphasis of *Sources of Indian Tradition* is lacking. The editors spend over 100 pages citing works by and about Mahatma Ghandi and almost no time mentioning World War 1 or World War 2. Also important as Ghandi was to Indian independence, the major events in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century certainly deserve some ink. Two million Indian soldiers served from France to the Middle East in World War 1, of whom nearly 75,000 died. Two and half million Indian soldiers fought for Britain in Europe, Africa, and South Asia during World War 2, of whom nearly 90,000 died. The war even involved the Indian homeland. The Indian Army defended eastern India against the Japanese, while Japan invaded India with the help of the 43,000 strong Indian National Army and advanced as far as Kohima in Nagaland.

*Sources of Indian Tradition* includes useful sections on Pakistan and Bangladesh. Modern geographers may not realize that historical India includes modern Nepal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, and even parts of Afghanistan. The Partition of 1947 effectively removed about one-third of the total land area of India and displaced up to 15 million people; Muslims fleeing to Muslim-majority areas and Hindus fleeing to Hindu majority areas. Up to two million people died in the violence and scarcity that followed. The country was partitioned because Muslims and Hindus could not agree on a plan of governance for the new state.

In conclusion, the two-volume set *Sources of Indian Tradition* is an indispensable part of any library on India. The set provides good primary data on India, its people, religion and history. No one can fancy themselves an expert on India, or even a serious student of India, without being familiar with these works.

#### Questions

1. What material should have been included, and what material should have been excluded?
2. How much original material should students of world religions read? The Vedas? The Upanishads? Something more?
3. What political and religious biases do you discover in this selection?