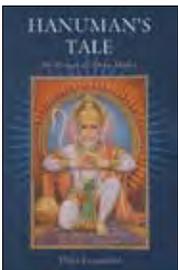


## India

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**Philip Lutgendorf.** *Hanuman's Tale: The Messages of a Divine Monkey.*

New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007. 448 pages, appendix, glossary, bibliography, index, b/w photographs + images. Paper, US\$24.95; ISBN 13: 9780195309225; ISBN 10: 0195309227.

PHILIP LUTGENDORF claims not to have written “The Book” (27) on Hanuman (the so-called “monkey-god”) in English. Hanuman is arguably the most popular Hindu deity in India today: he is the humble servant of Lord Rama, whose story is narrated in the epic Ramayana, a text at the center of much religious and political debate in contemporary India; wrestlers, bodybuilders and others worship him for his physical prowess as well as moral (and sexual) self-control; Hanuman may earlier have been a “lesser,” “folk” deity, yet is hugely popular today among

educated, middle-class, urban dwelling, upper-caste Hindus. Thus, Hanuman is a lens through which to view numerous critical issues in the study of religion generally, and “lived Hinduism” today. Hanuman’s appeal is broad indeed, and Lutgendorf examines these and other issues with amazing detail and erudition.

Tracing how Hanuman’s popularity has grown to surpass that of his “master,” Lord Rama, is central to *Hanuman’s Tale*. Lutgendorf’s interests are: (a) stories told *about* Hanuman; (b) interpretations of Hanuman by devotees and scholars; (c) speculating about what the “messages” of Hanuman might suggest about psychosocial and cultural realities; (d) avoiding the arrogant claim to have “unveiled” the “meaning” of Hanuman that is hidden from devotees; and (e) presenting a “representative sample” (30) of Hanuman narratives *not* found in the Ramayana(s). The majority of his interviews and fieldwork were conducted mainly “in urban or semi-urban locations in Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh” (29). He also spent a lot of time in Maharashtra, Rajasthan, and Karnataka. Lutgendorf notes that much more work could be done in villages, among tribals, and with non-Hindi materials. This caveat in no way detracts from the impressive amount of material Lutgendorf has analyzed in this text.

Lutgendorf’s review of the history and historiography of Hanuman focuses on questions regarding the rise of Hanuman *worship*. He adeptly shows that Hanuman remains a liminal deity, eluding any/all simplistic categorizations or “history.” One highly problematic explanation for the rise of Hanuman worship proffered today is as a “response to an Islamic menace” (66). Lutgendorf challenges “historical” readings of perceived (and real) Hindu-Muslim tensions that claim: (a) to be evident in the Ramayana itself; and (b) to be explanations for the rise of Hanuman worship. He then offers three examples—each from regions in which Hanuman is extremely popular—to provide more nuanced readings of complex historical processes: (a) Karnataka, especially the images at Hampi (Vijayanagara period: fourteenth to sixteenth century); (b) Maharashtra, where Samartha Ramdas Swami (1608–1681) is viewed as an incarnation (*avatar*) of Hanuman and usually credited with the rise in Maruti’s (a.k.a. Hanuman’s) regional popularity; and (c) the Ramnandi Order of “militarized sadhus or holy men” (61–87). Tulsidas (author of the Hindi *Ramcaritmanas*) is a fourth example often connected to these arguments, and is treated more fully in chapter three. Regional Ramayanas, moreover, frequently highlight themes quite apart from those associated with religious-political struggles (65). Lutgendorf then turns his attention to the proliferation of Hanuman in Hindi popular literature in chapter three. While not leaving historical questions/issues aside, the remainder of the book clearly changes with this chapter. Now, the reader is treated to a vast array of modern textual resources (printed and/or engraved on temple walls), and offered compelling interpretations of how such “texts” translate into practice. Any description of this section of the book—in spite of its centrality to the overall text—would fail in comparison to the richness of the stories themselves, as well as the ease with which Lutgendorf moves among vastly diverse stories, languages, regions, and historical periods. In short, the remainder of the book “brings to life” the continued innovations of Hanuman worship in the modern period.

Hindu Studies specialists will appreciate Lutgendorf's attention to historical detail, nuanced (and new) arguments regarding the rise of Hanuman worship in the modern period, discussion of the complex interactions between "text" and "context," political implications of certain readings/uses of select themes, gender issues (both Hanuman's association with hyper-masculinized Hinduism, and Hanuman's often ambiguous relationship to "the goddess"), the frustrations of searching for the "origins" of Hanuman (or any other deity, for that matter), the immense collection of Hanuman narratives, and the extensive fieldwork upon which he supports his arguments. The appeal of the book reaches a much broader audience, too. His book traces, for example, theoretical and methodological issues in the study of religion generally through the lens of how "Hindu" religion(s) have been treated historically both by scholars and devotees. Lutgendorf's book ought also to find an audience among folklorists, anthropologists, and "performance studies" scholars whose interests may intersect with the author's presentation of the constantly shifting/evolving perceptions (orally and in printed texts) and performances of Hanuman tales; the corpus is large enough for Lutgendorf to call it *Hanumayana*, which also has been (and continues to be) narrated, performed, and changed according to the regional and/or performer's choice. The malleability of Hanuman himself (literally: he can change shape and size at will; and figuratively: his broad appeal—to wrestlers, the middle-class, and so on) lends itself well to further research on this ever-popular Hindu deity, especially regionally-specific studies from non-Hindi speaking areas. Lutgendorf acknowledges this lacuna, yet his numerous non-Hindi sources may challenge his own humble opinion. With the proliferation of textbooks using words such as "Living," "Life of," "Lived," or "In Practice," one sees the explicit shift toward integrating contemporary orthopraxis into the discussion long dominated by attention to textual (especially Sanskrit) Hinduism(s). Lutgendorf (and others) have been focusing on the so called "lived" forms of Hinduism(s) for more than two decades now.

Lutgendorf's research on Hanuman began during a year in India (1989–1990), and *Hanuman's Tale* builds upon both his many publications about Hanuman, as well as his earlier monograph on the *Ramcaritmanas* (*The Life of a Text*, 1991). The present work includes expanded and modified materials from several published essays, but is not a mere compilation of earlier work. The storytelling Lutgendorf examines is animated further by his own gifts as a writer/storyteller himself. The experience, depth, and breadth of knowledge Lutgendorf has gained through this time is clearly evident in *Hanuman's Tale*. One can only hope that this text does not become "fixed"; rather, this reviewer hopes it leads to ever-increasing attention to the shifting tails/tales of *Hanumayana* lore and practice.

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