Hinduism is currently followed by one fifth of humankind, not only in South Asia. Far from being a monolithic theistic tradition, the religion comprises thousands of gods, a complex caste system, and hundreds of languages and dialects. Such internal plurality inspires vastly ranging rites and practices amongst Hinduism’s 700 million adherents. It is therefore not surprising that scholars have been hesitant to define universal Hindu beliefs and practices.

In the forthcoming English translation of his book "Der Hinduismus" (1998), Axel Michaels, professor at the Department for Classical Indology at the South Asia Institute, Heidelberg, breaks this trend. Michaels examines the traditions, beliefs, and rituals Hindus hold in common through the lens of what he deems Hinduism’s "identificatory habitus", the constitution of identity by the identification with something different, a cohesive force that binds Hindu religions together and fortifies them against foreign influences. Thus, in his analysis, Michaels not only locates Hinduism’s profoundly differentiating qualities, but also provides the framework for an analysis of its social and religious coherence and the understanding of it in its totality.

Michaels blends his insightful arguments and probing questions with introductions to major historical epochs, ample textual sources as well as detailed analyses of major life-cycle rituals, the caste system, forms of spiritualism, astrology, devotionalism, ritualism, and heroism. Along the way he points out that Hinduism has endured and repeatedly resisted the missionary zeal and universalist claims of Christians and Muslims, Buddhists and Jains alike. He also contrasts traditional Hinduism with the religions of the West, "where the self is preferred to the non-self, and where freedom in the world is more important than liberation from the world."

Engaging and accessible, this book will appeal to laypersons, students, and scholars alike as the most comprehensive introduction to Hinduism yet published. Not only is "Hinduism. Past and Present" refreshingly new in its methodological approach, it also presents a broad range of meticulous scholarship in a clear, readable style, integrating Indology, religious studies, philosophy, anthropological theory and fieldwork, and sweeping analyses of Hindu texts.

By bringing together text and context, the canonical and the marginal, the fixed word and the ever-changing action, past and present, and by treating them as a whole, Michaels bridges the gap between Indology and the Anthropology of South Asia. The book makes you wonder how else a comprehensive interpretation of Hindu culture should look like, and focuses a spotlight on the South Asia Institute as a place of innovative writing and thinking on Indian society and religion.