

# Deceptive Majority

How did it come to be common sense that the vast swath of the population of South Asia once known as ‘untouchable’ are and always have been Hindu?

Grounded in detailed archival and ethnographic research, *Deceptive Majority* unearths evidence that well before the emergence of twentieth century movements for Dalit liberation, the subset of ‘untouchable’ castes engaged in sanitation labor in colonial India conceived of themselves as constituting a religious community (*qaum*) separate from both Hindus and Muslims—a community with its own prophet, shrines, rites, legends, and liturgical songs. This book tracks the career of this tradition alongside the effort to encompass it within a newly imagined Hindu body politic—a majoritarian project advanced in complex, distinct, yet convergent ways by colonial administrators, Hindu nationalists, the Congress Party, and Mohandas Gandhi. A sensitive account of contemporary religious life in the north Indian city of Lucknow illuminates both the embrace and the contestation of Hinduization within a Dalit community. A weaving together of the history and ethnography of religion, *Deceptive Majority* reveals the cunning both of the architects of Hindu majoritarianism and of those who quietly undermine it.

**Joel Lee** is Assistant Professor of Anthropology at Williams College, Massachusetts.