The Rāmāyana and the Study of South Asia
by Susan S. Wadley

The Rāmāyana, while a tradition that is several thousand years old, is also arguably the most important story in Indian literature today, for it is the birthplace of the hero, Rāma, that has been the center of the Hindu-Muslim controversies at Ayodhya in recent years. In 1994, Syracuse University, along with the American Forum for Global Education, hosted an NEH Summer Workshop for high school teachers focusing on this epic tradition. The Rāma story tells of the events leading to the forest exile of Pākrasātha, accompanied by his wife Śiśuka and his brother Lakṣmana, and of the happenings during the 14-year banishment. During their forest stay, Śiśuka is abducted by the demon Rakṣasa. The war to recover her, the royal couple’s return to their kingdom, and their subsequent coronation culminate in many oral and pictorial retellings of the story. One group was to understand the Rāmāyana, as a tradition, as a story, as a series of popular practices even today, that is a profound testimony to the central role of Hindu culture in India. Beginning with a focus on the story itself, which is too complex and eclectic to be presented in an encyclopedia, we moved outdoors to comparisions with other retellings of the Rāmāyana in both India and America, both as verbal art and as sculpture, painted, and danced art. We also looked at the ways in which the Rāmāyana has been used over time, examining the stories associated with it, including that most modern of practices, its association with Hindu fundamentalism and a holy war between Hindus and Muslims.

Teachers attending the NEH workshop developed lessons for use in American high school classrooms that use the Rāmāyana as a tool for teaching about South Asia. These lessons are now available in a publication from the American Forum of Global Education, Spotlight on the Rāmāyana. In addition to the twenty-five units, each with one to six individual lesson plans, the Spotlight contains a video tape that provides audio-visual accompaniment to the lesson plans— including a retelling in twelve minutes of the epic story itself, examples of different performance traditions ranging from the Ram Līlā to the māhātās of Kerala; segments on life cycle rituals as a visual tradition of Rāma’s pilgrimage across the Indian landscape, and more.

The lesson plans can be used as individual segments to enrich other course materials or as a focus for a unit on India. A brief footnote page retelling of the story for American high school students introduces the book and can be copied for student readers. The lesson plans cover the Rāmāyana as a storytelling tradition (including units that compare the Rāmāyana and western heroic literature); the Rāmāyana as a way to understand India and its culture, including units on Hindu values, religion, and rituals (as well as recipes for appropriate foods); and the Rāmāyana as it changes over time and space, connecting this tradition to history and geography. Produced by high school teachers, these lessons suggest ways to invigorate our teaching with reference to one of India’s most important and oldest stories.

My favorite lessons are those that most directly challenge the ways in which we tell the story of Asia is often taught. Hence the final lesson on low caste views of the Rāmāyana presents a reality too often ignored in western treatments of Hinduism and India. The low caste folk song presented in this lesson gives a view of the Rāmāyana not commonly found in western texts. As the song states, (Oh Rāma) you transgressed on the night of women. You made your wife Śiśuka undergo the order of fire To prove her chastity. Such were your male laws, O Rāma. Oh Rāma, Oh Rāma, you representative of the Aryans. When Shambhāla, the young girl, Tried to go knowledge, You belittled him, Oh Rāma. Thus did you crush those who tried to rise above their caste. Oh Rāma, you representative of the Aryans.

This view of the Rāmāyana as opposing women and the indigenous pre-Aryan inhabitants challenges us to remember that India has never been the rigid society so often portrayed, but rather one in which a multiplicity of gods, often challenging the superiority of those at the top. And it is through the many tellings of the Rāmāyana over time, in different historical and social circumstances, that this message is conveyed so clearly.

Editor’s Note: Readers interested in obtaining the set of lesson plans, Spotlight on Rāmāyana: An Exploring Tradition, can contact the American Forum for Global Education.

Stories Are Not Frills: Literature about Asia in the Elementary Classroom
by Mary Hammond Benson

Elementary teachers often ask us for our resource center’s advice in choosing books about Asia. They know that their decisions about book purchases have a potentially lifelong impact on students’ attitudes, and so Katherine Patterson so aptly points out in her book, Stories are not Frills in the curriculum of life.” Patterson is an author with a rare gift for creating compelling children’s fiction, including five books about China and Japan, and is deeply aware of the profound power of stories. For many children, their first window on Asia comes from storybooks. Those books can entice, delight, inspire further study, and open windows of worlds previously unknown. They can foster openness, mindfulness and an awareness of the existence of other ways of thinking and leading one’s life. They can help a child understand that a classmate comes from a place which was more than just the site of a war.

Since both pedagogical ideas and instructional support materials have contributed to a decrease in the use of elementary school textbooks, teachers also need to consider the historical accuracy of the books they choose. Innovations such as a “wholenumbered” strategy, new methods for assessing student learning, the encouragement of diverse and multicultural perspectives, the application of theories of multiple intelligences, and the integration of teaching across the curriculum often mean that a student in the primary grades hears a folk tale from another country, does an art activity based on that country, reads the memoir of a student in the art project, finds out a bit about the flora and fauna now living there, and writes a letter to a peer- or pet-published book. This kind of integration across the curriculum is the opposite of closing a reading text at the stroke of 10:00 and opening up a totally unrelated social studies text. Integration puts a teacher’s choices of fiction at the crossroads of the whole curriculum.

Imbedded in this curriculum is the basic fact that elementary teachers are teaching citizenship. While scholars may ponder questions about the development of civil society in Asia, elementary teachers wrestle with citizenship issues, including the relationship of the individual to the group, every single day. A school district such as the one in which my children are enrolled teaches citizenship to children who speak 212 different languages and dialects. A book choice can send the message that “these kids” come from a weird place, or that those kids have a heritage about which we should know more. Books can stimulate empathy, compassion, and a search for solutions to problems we all face. They teach us that contacts with others generate both conflict and cooperation. Books provide a safe place to explore life’s troubling issues.

The illustrations make potent contributions to a book’s spell. Anyone who is sensitive to the exquisite interplay of word and picture in some Asian art forms, as well as anyone whose clearest memory of 4th grade is a travel poster near the window, can appreciate the power of pictures. Sometimes those pictures are nothing but clichés—cockie hats and kimono, often wrapped right over left. Yet the best illustrations can offer a visual record of another culture, another Asian art style, or simply reinforce the power of the story.

Teachers choose from an avalanche of literature, including pre-packaged multicultural or world region collections, some of them including 60-year-old classics. Wonderful books about Asia do exist, including some of the 60-year-old classics, but there are new titles for which no suitable books can be found. A teacher must wade through these options, picking out the best, and then compensate for the near-total lack of good stories about people living in contemporary Asia by using other materials.

Many sources of book recommendations are readily available, including rosters of winners of prestigious awards and the list of “Notable Children’s Trade Books” produced annually since 1972 by the National Council for the Social Studies and the Children’s Book Council. Reflecting the trend toward using fiction to teach or reinforce content once reserved for the social studies, the list now includes annotations about the social studies themes to which each book most closely pertains. The committee evaluates more than 200 books per year, weeding out those not meeting high standards for quality and accuracy in both text and illustrations.

Here is a list of questions I find useful when seeking for the best book:

1. Is the book compelling? Adults expect books to have literary qualities, or to be ‘a good read,’ and children deserve those qualities, too.
2. Is the book a folk tale, a retelling of a folk tale, “an original tale set in the ancient Orient,” or something else altogether? You may want to use any of these, and find supplementary materials to reinforce the message that those whose stories took place long ago and far away have descendants about whom we should learn.

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