

ESSAYS

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 India 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 Prince Rāma, accompanied by his wife Sita and his brother Lakshman, and of the happenings during their 14-year banishment. During their forest stay, Sita is abducted by the demon Ravana. 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. Our goal was to understand the Rāmāyana, as a tradition, as a story, as a series of popular practices even today, that provides a lens for understanding Hindu culture in India. Beginning with a focus on the story itself, in its oldest known Sanskrit rendition, we moved outwards to comparisons with other retellings of the Rāmāyana in both time and space, both as verbal art and as sculpted, painted and danced art. We also looked at the ways in which the Rāmāyana has been used over time, examining the practices 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

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Miniature painting of Rāma, his servant, Hanuman the monkey god, Sita, and Rāma's brother, Lakshmana. Victoria and Albert Museum

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 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 four performance traditions ranging from the Ram Lila in Banaras to the *kathakali* of Kerala; segments on life cycle rituals; a visual rendition of Rāma's pilgrimage across the Indian landscape, and more.

The lessons can be used as individual segments to enrich other course materials or as a focus for a unit on India. A brief fourteen page retelling of the story for American high school students introduces the book and can be copied for student readers. The lessons 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 South 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 trampled on the rights of women.
You made your wife Sita undergo the ordeal of fire
To prove her chastity.
Such were your male laws,
Oh Rāma.
Oh Rāma, you representative of the Aryans.
When Shambuka, the Untouchable,
Tried to gain knowledge,
You beheaded 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 oppressing 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 multiple voices speak, 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 Enduring Tradition*, should contact:

The American Forum for Global Education
120 Wall Street, Suite 2600, New York, NY 10005
Phone 212-742-8232

A second NEH Summer Institute for High School Teachers focusing on the Rāmāyana will be held at Syracuse University in 1997. Those interested should contact the American Forum for Global Education.

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Stories Are Not Frills: Literature about Asia in the Elementary Classroom

by Mary Hammond Bernson

Elementary teachers often ask our resource center for advice in choosing books about Asia. They know that their decisions about book purchases have a potentially lifelong impact on students' attitudes, for as Katherine Paterson so aptly points out in *The Spying Heart*, "stories are not frills in the curriculum of life." Paterson 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 offer glimpses of worlds previously unknown. They can foster open-mindedness 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 came from a place which was more than just the site of a war.

Since both pedagogical innovations and inadequate school budgets have contributed to a decrease in the use of elementary school textbooks, teachers also must consider the historical accuracy of the books they choose. Innovations such as a "whole language" approach to reading, new methods of 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 culture, uses the metric system in the art project, finds out a bit about the flora and fauna now living there, and writes a letter to a pretend pen-pal. 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.

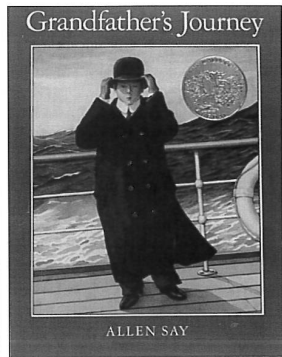
Imbedded in this curriculum is the basic fact that elementary teachers are teaching

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 "those 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 can 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—coolie hats and kimono, often wrapped right over left. Yet the best illustrations can offer a visual record of another place or time, introduce an 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, yet there are vast topics 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



©1993, illustration by Allen Say from *Grandfather's Journey*, published by Houghton Mifflin.

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 over 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 searching for the best books:

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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