

## AN EAA INTERVIEW WITH DONALD AND JEAN JOHNSON

This is our ninth interview with winners of the Franklin R. Buchanan Prize. The Association for Asian Studies awards the prize annually for the development of outstanding curriculum materials on Asia. Donald and Jean Johnson won the 2005 prize for serving as Editors-in-Chief of the teacher's guide *India: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives* (New York: Asia Society, 2004). The Johnsons have been long-time national leaders in efforts to educate American teachers and students about India. Their publications are too numerous to list in full, but include the widely used *Through Indian Eyes*, which they co-authored. In addition to



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having vast teaching experience, Don and Jean have worked as consultants for various groups involved in Asian Studies education, and have been active on national committees working to improve Americans' understanding of Asia.

**Lucien:** *Congratulations on winning the 2005 Buchanan Prize for your much-needed teacher's guide, India: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives. Both of you have done South Asia-related work with teachers for a long time. Please tell us about how you became interested in India in the first place.*

**Don:** Growing up very isolated on a hardscrabble farm in rural New Hampshire prompted a lot of daydreaming of faraway places, and India seemed sufficiently distant to stimulate my imagination. Also, living in a family that hovered near the bottom of the social ranking inspired a strong identity with marginalized people, and the way most Americans talked about "poverty-stricken India" certainly suggested that the new nation, like the Red Sox, was decidedly marginalized in many American minds. In high school I was very taken by Gandhi's non-violent philosophy. Further, the Transcendentalists, especially Emerson, had a great influence on me. Although their Hinduism was highly romanticized and strictly American, the fact that they were drawn to India impressed me. A summer Fulbright, while I was a high school teacher, sealed my commitment to study India at the graduate level.

**Jean:** Initially, I became interested in India because Don asked me to help out with an Institute on India he directed in 1968 for teachers in Westchester, NY. That led the New York State Department of Education to send us to India for a year to make materials about India for US schools. I was drawn to the Indian epics and myths and especially to the myriad images of Devi, the Mother Goddess, who was manifest in such a wide variety of forms and seemingly under worship everywhere. She provided models of the dutiful, faithful, compassionate, coy, loving, erotic, scheming, angry, ferocious, even devouring, female, and I was fascinated to see what implications Devi had

for the lives of average Indians. Later I became committed to world history as the best way to ensure that Indian history and insights would have a strong place in most students' curriculum.

**Lucien:** *Since you have a long-time interest in India, what, in your opinion, are the three or four most important reasons American students should learn more about the country?*

How can we ignore the second most populous nation in the world and one with more than a 4,500-year continuous tradition? Simply from the United States' national interest we must know about the most powerful state in South Asia. India's nuclear capability and her recent IT explosion and economic advances all suggest that India will play an important economic and political role in the future global system. When we first began studying South Asia, we never imagined that we would live to see the day that presidential candidates would be worrying about high tech competition from India. Of course, until 1750 India was a world leader in manufacturing, especially of cotton cloth, and a major center of the world trading system. In an age when the US is stressing the spread of democracy around the world, India, alone among South Asian states, has to be an important example of a formerly-colonized people successfully maintaining a democratic system.

Beyond these more material considerations, everyone should have knowledge of India's impressive and enduring civilization. India has given the world two major world religions, significant breakthroughs in math, science, and philosophy, some of the world's greatest art and literature, and original creations in cuisine and music.

**Lucien:** *As is evident from the curriculum materials review on page 58, your guide is thematically organized. Why did you take this particular approach to developing the guide?*

The single biggest obstacle to quality teaching about Asia is that

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most teachers have not had challenging academic courses in the field. Therefore, our first objective was to include scholarly essays in the guide. In the process of inviting scholars to write these essays, it was obvious that each had a disciplinary specialty that could best be expressed as a theme. We decided on these ten themes to facilitate using the material in a variety of ways, and to suit several types of courses regularly offered in the schools. The guide with its thematic organization is not offered as a curriculum, but as a sort of cafeteria where teachers can pick and choose the information or lesson ideas that fit their own curriculum requirements. Further, we wanted to include themes that lent themselves to math and literature classes to expand the presence of South Asia into the larger school curricula.

We were cognizant of the recent trend toward world history in a majority of state standards, but we also realized that many teachers present South Asia in a World Cultures or Area Studies framework. In the beginning of the guide we demonstrate how selections from the material can be used in world history, area studies, current issues, and other types of courses.

The most significant aspect of the organization of the guide, however, is the collection of scholarly essays that introduce each theme. From the earliest planning, we insisted that the core of the guide be essays written by leaders in the field who could sum up complex ideas in readable articles. These essays, three of which were written by Indian scholars, provide in-depth information and ways of organizing the content.

The guide also balances these scholarly analyses with seemingly more mundane issues such as a discussion of Bollywood, Indian influences on the Beatles, or the everyday lives of members of the Indian diaspora. Clothing might seem like an unlikely scholarly topic, but Susan Wadley's essay traces the history of the subcontinent through changes in clothing styles and examines the important role cloth has played in Indian history. Whatever the topic, over the years we have found that students respond enthusiastically to Indian insights when their teachers have a sound understanding of what they are teaching. That is why the essays are the critical part of the guide.

**Lucien:** *Many Americans seem to bring up the caste system when India becomes a topic of conversation. Please share with our readers how you addressed teaching about caste in theme four, Social Structure.*

The Indian caste system is both one of the most misunderstood institutions and one of the most fascinating to Americans. Indian sociologists, such as Andre Beteille, often rightly point out that a large group of American scholars have, since the 1950s, concentrated mainly on caste and have perhaps overemphasized this institution.

In her excellent essay Doranne Jacobson stresses the importance of hierarchy in Indian society and nicely fits caste into the larger social context, treating the institution as one among many social systems that served, and in many ways, still serves, important social functions. Caste is also intimately connected with social interdependence, and Jacobson asserts that social ties are a key factor in success or failure. In many Indian villages, individuals in the various castes serve one another for generations, and even gods and goddesses are involved in the interdependent social fabric.

In the lessons following the essay we tried to present several aspects and perspectives on caste and separate the textual ideal pre-

sentation of the institution from the actual stratification of castes in one north Indian village. Like all institutions, caste has changed over time and is rapidly changing now, as illustrated by its contemporary role in political mobilization and the relatively recent upsurge of lower-caste parties in Indian politics.

**Lucien:** *Have you received any specific feedback from educators or students who are using the guide? If so, please share some anecdotes with our readers. Were there any uses of the guide in particular classes that surprised you?*

First, let us note that several very skilled teachers, including Susan Meeker (Hunter College High School), Gwen Johnson (Scarsdale High School), and Yvonne Tsang (Scarsdale High School), were intimately involved in the creation of the guide. Their insights greatly improved the process and the final product.

With the growing number of states that now require world history, many teachers are using parts of the guide to infuse Indian history into numerous phases of the world history survey. They use the Indus Valley lessons as part of the study of the first urban civilizations, and the Indo-European migrations into the subcontinent offer one case study of the impressive Indo-European migrations all across Eurasia. Teachers include the Mauryas and Guptas in the study of world empires, Hinduism and Buddhism within the more general spread of the universal religions, and South Asian economic development and trading patterns as part of the larger topic of contacts and exchanges. In the modern period the sections on colonialism and nationalism serve as important examples in the more generalized study of these topics.

Some teachers select from among contemporary issues, such as the ongoing tensions between Hindus and Muslim—as manifested in the recent destruction of the Babri mosque and communal riots in Gujarat—and in environmental issues such as the advisability of constructing large dams. Both India and the United States face the challenge of integrating many diverse people into their respective nations. After viewing the Indian government's "We Are All One" poster with Gandhi in the center, students, trying to create their own American "We Are All One" poster, have debated what individual belongs in the center of their posters. We have seen student posters that feature Martin Luther King, Abraham Lincoln, and Eleanor Roosevelt, as well as various sports heroes as the prototypical unifying American.

Teachers of world cultures and/or area studies find helpful information and ideas in the guide. Some teachers have had good success using the lessons on the role and importance of cloth, the blending of geography with religion and myth, the lesson on "Why I am a Hindu," and comparing Gandhi's principles of ahimsa (non-violence) with Chipco strategies for preserving the forests by hugging the trees. Above all, teachers report that they rely heavily on the scholarly essays as reliable guides for their own presentations, and these essays are proving particularly helpful for beginning teachers.

**Lucien:** *Thank you for this interview and for sharing your experiences with our readers!* ■