

CULTURAL MEMORY AND POSTMODERNISM:

Traditional historical approaches to the study of Asia, or to parts of Asia, have become increasingly problematical.¹ To the long-standing questions that all Asianists face—How can I bring to life what are often for students quite alien cultural forms?—has been added a cluster of new ones. How can I help students begin to understand the constructed nature of all knowledge, including that of Asia? How can I get the important but often abstruse matters of power, gender, and class into the already congested introductory syllabus? Can I make the important and contemporary, but dense and self-referential, postmodern work in my scholarly field broadly accessible to undergraduates? Recent experience in teaching introductory survey courses on Asian religion begins to provide possible answers to these questions. The courses are “The Religious Life of India” and “The Islamic Religious Tradition,” both 200-level courses, fourteen weeks in length, that assume no background in the study of Asia or in the study of religion.² Enrollment consists chiefly of sophomores, though all classes are usually represented. Since fellow Asianists share my concerns for making Asian cultural forms intelligible to undergraduates and perhaps also for infusing postmodern scholarship into the curriculum, analysis of that experience may be useful to others.

The crucial shift has been to keep a textual-historical approach to the subject matter self-consciously in the foreground for most of the course—for approximately eleven of the fourteen weeks—but also to explore implicit or explicit criticisms of that conventional approach. Selected views of both *insiders* (emic perspectives) and *outsiders* (etic perspectives) are presented as alternatives to the dominant understanding of Asia that the course



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About the photo:

Pilgrims at the Dashashwamedha Ghat in Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh, India 1992

offers. Specifically, my courses now juxtapose a predominantly chronological orientation with three weeks of what I call “Contemporary Counterpoint.” These weeks come at roughly one-month intervals after a 3-4 week unit on historical developments. During these weeks, history stops. I no longer lecture. Rather, I assign students to lead discussion of common reading.³

The books that we read during Contemporary Counterpoint weeks are carefully selected to do one of two things. First, they should help students see that Asian cultural history and cultural memory are not something mired in the hoary past, of

interest only to specialists. Rather, they continue to have a bearing, sometimes direct, often oblique, on the life of contemporary Asia and Asians. A Buddhist meditation teacher once put the simple point elegantly: “What are we if not our memories?” In a very different Asian context, a contemporary Muslim puts the point this way: “Europeans, who are seldom emotionally involved in their own past history, and Americans who have little history in which to be involved, find it difficult to comprehend the immediacy—the timelessness—of certain events in Islamic history so far as Muslims are concerned.”⁴ These readings serve to bring the past into the present and to counteract the tendency to reify the record of past events, as students are often inclined to do in reading textbooks.

Second, these readings should help students become self-conscious about the assumptions and perspectives of the sources they are encountering during the historical survey by exposing them to dramatic alternatives. Since most textbooks and the primary sources in existing anthologies still usually

A PEDAGOGICAL NOTE ON ASIAN STUDIES

BY THOMAS B. COBURN

favor “high history” or the male-dominated Great Tradition, here is a wonderful opportunity to introduce students to important and powerful alternatives. In my course on Indian religion, for instance, Sara Mitter’s *Dharma’s Daughters: Contemporary Indian Women and Hindu Culture* juxtaposes vignettes of contemporary women with the varied models of classical mythology; Kathleen Erndl’s *Victory to the Mother: The Hindu Goddess of Northwest India in Myth, Ritual, and Symbol* brings both textual and anthropological sensibilities to bear on modern practice; the studies and translations by J. S. Hawley and M. Juergensmeyer, *Songs of the Saints of India*, show how subalterns’ views are woven into and institutionalized around popular poetry; and C. Rajagopalachari’s retelling of the *Rāmāyana* shows how that epic can be recast in light of modern ethical and political concerns. In my Islamic survey, where there is even greater risk of reifying the past and accounts of the past, I have had comparable success with Leila Ahmed’s revisionist *Women and Gender in Islam*, C. H. Kane’s novel, *Ambiguous Adventure*, Reinhold Loeffler’s grassroots view of Iran, *Islam in Practice*, A. Mujahid’s *Conversion to Islam: Untouchables’ Strategy for Protest in India* and Sayyed Nasr’s mystical *Islamic Art and Spirituality*.

What these two goals for Contemporary Counterpoint have in common is the effort to deconstruct—but only in part—our received ways of conceiving Asia and its traditions. I introduce students to specific studies that postmodern sensibilities have produced, but without wading into the complexities of postmodern theory. The dominant approach in each course thus provides students with a solid body



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About the photo:

Religious statue erected at the Ganga Sagar Mela, West Bengal, India 1994

of consensual information about the subject matter, but the Contemporary Counterpoints suggest how that consensus is reworked in the texture of daily life and is open to challenge from alternative perspectives. The final examination consists of a pre-announced question that asks students to reflect on what happens to their understanding of Asia as they employ this “binocular” approach, moving in and out of an historical perspective. They must show familiarity with the substance of the books read during the Contemporary Counterpoints as well as with the material covered in the historical survey.

There is no doubt that this syllabus places increased demands on the faculty member. By laying out, but then deliberately calling into question, conventional ways of ordering subject matter, one has, in effect, put a number of new balls in the air. One is never quite sure which ones students will take a fancy to, nor how they will bounce them off one another and invite the faculty member to re-examine his or her own assumptions. We are partially forced to abdicate our position as omniscient authorities.

But it is precisely at this point that we and our students have the opportunity to discover the distinctive contribution that Asian Studies can make to the contemporary curriculum. We, as faculty members, are forced to model for students how thoughtful consideration of multiple perspectives is required to do justice to contemporary knowledge of the cultures and peoples of Asia—even if we are not precisely sure in advance where such thoughtful consideration will end up. We must draw on the very best thinking of which we are capable, narrowing the gap between scholarship and teaching in our exploration of the issues, and building on

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ADAM CLAYMAN

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students' increased exposure to "alternative voices" elsewhere in the curriculum. Student answers to the final examination question often show not just knowledge of Asia, but excitement at discovering that part of the study of Asia today is reconceiving what "Asian Studies" means. The pedagogy of Contemporary Counterpoints has the potential to show students how Asian Studies, far from being the inquiry into oriental esoterica, is an essential part of thinking our way into a diverse and increasingly interconnected single world. ■



- Enrollment in these courses is limited to about 30 students, so student-led discussion is feasible, albeit not always easy to generate. While substitution of discussion for lecture dramatizes the shift of epistemological perspective and is helpful in bringing students to engage with the issues, it is not the heart of the pedagogy. I believe the essential principle—the juxtaposition of an historical approach with moments of "Contemporary Counterpoint" is adaptable to much larger classes, where discussion is impossible.
- Charles Le Gai Eaton, *Islam and the Destiny of Man* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1985), 146-47.

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NOTES

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- It will be apparent below that the approach to Indian and Islamic religions described here is clearly applicable to other Asian religious traditions. Whether it is also applicable to religious traditions outside of Asia makes for lively debate. One of my departmental colleagues, for instance, calls his parallel introduction to Judaism, "The Religious Traditions [sic] of Judaism." Such debate involves discussion of the very nature of our discipline and of the validity and goals of cross-cultural comparison. It is invigorating and salutary. It clearly has parallels in other disciplines.

About the photo:

Fruit and vegetable market, Madurai, Tamil Nadu, India 1994

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