
PRACTICALLY SPEAKING

TEACHING HINDU TRADITIONS

by Paula Richman

Many of us who teach Hinduism find ourselves presented with thorny issues when we examine our own pedagogical practices. Because we think that teachers should prepare students to live intelligently in what has become, increasingly, a globally conceived world, we must be clear about conceptualizing ways of teaching the diversity within Hindu traditions. In particular, we cannot teach brahmanical texts as the essence of Hindu tradition. Nor can we let ourselves slip into presenting the development of Hinduism as a unitary narrative. Teaching about the diversity of religious belief and practice within Hindu traditions turns out to be a task that can push us to the limits of our intellectual flexibility and pedagogical resourcefulness. Nonetheless, articulating the ways in which Hindu traditions encompass multiple strands helps to prepare our students for the complexity they find in Hindu communities, both in South Asia and abroad.

EDUCATING STUDENTS FOR THE FUTURE

As increasing numbers of American students of South Asian descent take courses in Hinduism, teachers realize—more than ever before—how unsatisfactory it is to present a single picture of normative Hinduism. Many of our students spend extended periods of time visiting relatives in India; their experiences there tend to be regionally distinctive and class specific. If our courses do not provide them with frameworks within which they can place the particularity of their own experiences in India, we run the risk of presenting a reified picture of Hinduism that remains uninformative to them. Furthermore, the Gandhi's India with which many Hinduism courses culminate does not explain the complexities of communalism or the caste-based religious conflicts that periodically make the headlines in Indian newspapers.

In a similar vein, many students of non-South Asian descent are learning about Hinduism through general education courses and distribution requirements. If we want these



"Religion is a thing done, not a thing 'believed.'" Ritual has increasingly come to be understood as central to religious life. Here a pilgrim on the banks of the Ganges River in Varanasi, India receives a haircut as part of his ritual ablutions and purification.

Photo by Thomas B. Coburn

students to use their knowledge in the future to interact with Hindu colleagues in the work force and on social occasions, it is unacceptable for us to equip them with Orientalized, brahmanical notions that lead them to expect all Hindus to conform to a textbook picture of Hinduism. Similarly, we have to combat the notion, created in part by the huge success of the film *Gandhi*, that Mohandas Gandhi single-handedly freed India from colonialism through his religious inclusiveness and faith, a view that reifies the notion of the Spiritual East.

Finally, when we send our students on study abroad programs, we must prepare them for the diversity and lack of categorical neatness that they actually find in India. If they go on a study-away program to Bodh Gaya, they discover Hindu worship in Buddhist holy places. If we send them to Banaras, they may meet Ayodhya partisans when they have been expecting to find textbook tolerance and orthopraxy rather than orthodoxy. If they spend time in Poona, they note the legacy of Tilak's militant Hinduism or realize the impact of Dalit activism. If they study in Madras and Madurai, they encounter Dravidian movements mounting attacks on Hindu mythology and priestly authority.

We owe it to our students to reconsider the organizing rubrics of our courses. Most explicitly, we need to balance our emphasis on brahmanical textual Hinduism with attention to the multiple ways in which modern Hindu traditions adapt, reject, transform, supplement, or subvert what has often been presented as normative Hinduism. Second, if we present Hinduism as a unitary narrative, where one theological development leads inexorably to the subsequent one, our students remain unprepared for the variety of belief and practice they find in modern India. Some textbooks present a Hinduism that culminates with the reform movements of the Brahma Samaj and Gandhianism, as if these were the logical outcomes of centuries of unified religious development. Other textbooks, with an anthropological methodology, present a generalized picture of rural Hinduism that seems to exist in a changeless present. Either way, our students do not know how to process religious practices that do not seem to fit either picture.

In the brief comments below, I consider some ways of avoiding normative presentation and unitary narrative, using as a case study a one-semester course on "The Hindu Tradition in Modern India."¹ Before I begin, let me make some of my own working assumptions clear. As a historian of religions, I assume that the teaching of religion in modern life must take into account not only texts, but ritual practice. Also, as a South Asianist, I assume that modern religious traditions must be understood as the result of both personal religious experience and historically shaped social forces.

TEACHING THE DEBATES

Recent research has illuminated the extent to which historical developments in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have deeply shaped many strands of present-day Hindu belief and practice. Articles in the fields of religious studies, history, studies of colonialism, women's history, and cultural studies have documented ways in which notions of Hinduism and what it means to be a Hindu developed in explicit ways during the colonial period. For example, the printing presses which Christian missionaries brought to India enabled them to publish tracts about Christianity. Presses also gave Hindu reformers and publicists a means by which they could also disseminate religious manuals, translations of texts, and defenses of Hinduism in response to attacks made by Christians, reaching broader audiences more quickly and more inexpensively than in preprint days.² Similarly, reformers, revivalists, missionaries, and pundits participated in inter-religious debates which helped to foster distinct kinds of sectarian self-consciousness.³ Putting what we say about Hindu traditions in the context of print culture and public debate helps explain how some views of Hindu traditions that we find in both textbooks and in practice came into currency.⁴

We can best teach our students by juxtaposing several required books, each of which presents ways of putting the other textbooks in context. *The Hindu Religious Tradition*, by Thomas Hopkins, gives students a rough chronological framework for the development of Hinduism. Diana Eck's *Dar'san: Seeing the Divine Image in India* focuses on a shared theme in much Hindu worship, the practice of seeing and being seen by an image of the divine. Peter Van der Veer's *Religious Nationalism: Hindus and Muslims in India* explicates the political and cultural forces that foregrounded particular facets of Hinduism, rather than competing ones, in the modern period.⁵

Rather than letting these texts define our course design, we can use them to guide our students as they create conversations between the views expressed in each book. Van der Veer's work helps readers see the gaps and disjunctures in Hopkins's unitary historical narrative, a narrative that seems (in the final chapter) to triumph in the religious reforms and Gandhianism of the independence movement. Van der Veer deals with several movements that contested Gandhi's views, including one by Ambedkar, who challenged Gandhi's right to speak for Untouchables and advocated that his followers convert to Buddhism. Conversely, Hopkins's careful discussion of Upanishadic thought and devotional sects within pre-colonial Hindu traditions shows how some of the issues discussed by Van der Veer have a long history in premodern Indian religious discourse; they were not constructed *ex nihilo* as a result of the colonial presence or nationalist rhetoric. Eck's book helps students to see that religion encompasses more than just political and social issues—it concerns ways

that people conceptualize and express their ultimate concerns. Reading all three books helps students ground Eck's insights in a historical context.

To complement such texts, we can also provide our students with issue-oriented readings that juxtapose contested views of particular religious phenomena. For example, readings could include excerpts from the writings of Dayananda Sarasvati beside examples of orthodox Hindu defenses of idol worship (performing *puja* to the icon of a deity). Or one could juxtapose Gandhi's writings on caste with those of Ambedkar and low-caste converts to Islam. We could include excerpts from influential commentaries on the Tulsidas of *Rāmcaritmānas* popular in North India as well as critiques of the *Rāmāyana* by avowed atheist E.V. Ramasami from South India. Students can read translations of songs that Tilak added to the *Ganesh Puja*, as well as Gandhi's inclusive prayers for his ashrams.⁶

Rather than presenting a smooth, clear narrative, these collections of documents enable students to confront



A man holding a flaming candelabra during an evening arati. Hardwar, Uttar Pradesh, India. Photo by Adam Clayman

the complexity and lack of neatness of what they study. Simultaneously, however, such documents help students to ground their interpretations in primary texts rooted in the particular historical period from which they emerge. These readings display the modes of argumentation by which people debated the tenets and practices of Hinduism. Such collections will help students to conceptualize the course as a selective series of recursive discussions, rather than a unitary trajectory.

These sets of essays on the Hindu tradition in India can provide a variety of views on relevant themes. These essays should employ different methodologies, disagree with each other, and use different bodies of evidence, so that students can enter into the debates and see the grounds upon which the debates are based. For example, Shahid Amin's article "Gandhi as Mahatma" and Madhu Kishwar's *Gandhi on Women* provide students with ways of understanding the impact of Gandhi's actions and writings on different groups within India.⁷

Juxtaposing such materials will help students of Hinduism integrate what they learn in our courses with wider intellectual currents in their education. If they learn in their cultural studies courses about ways in which gender is constructed in different societies, they do not find out much about this constitutive process in the unitary narratives that trace the triumph of Hindu tradition in Gandhianism. But they do learn about it in recent feminist writings about the construction of nationalism in India.⁸ If they learn in their women's studies classes that in many societies women's rituals differ from those of men, since many do not require the presence of a



Religious diorama in the Meenakshi Temple Museum, Madurai, Tamil Nadu, India. Photo by Adam Clayman

male priest and center around donations of food rather than money or land, they cannot find out much historically about how such Hindu rituals developed from the "anthropological present" texts. But they can find out about such rituals if we provide them with articles about Hindu childbirth rituals and vows many Hindu women take to protect their brothers.⁹

The approach can be grueling, frustrating, or downright confusing, especially if we are not careful—and even if we are. Organizing a course such as "Religion in Modern India" demands thoughtful selection and a set of bibliographies for further reading in order to direct the student to other resources, if desired. An attempt to take into account all the factors in the creation of modern Hindu traditions would create courses so long that they could not fit into the academic year, or so fragmented that students could not grasp the inter-relationships between topics studied. If attempted, such projects would introduce works full of names, movements, rituals, and places that most beginning students would not be able to pronounce, let alone remember. Such a course could overwhelm one new to the field of study, rather than inform her or him. Even the most careful selection cannot eliminate all the difficulties inherent in the endeavor. Nonetheless, the difficulties we encounter correspond to the ones that confront every student of religion who wants to understand religion in practice, not just religion in theory.

WHAT OUR TEACHING CAN ACCOMPLISH

Such a course can provide students with models of how different groups in the modern period redefined and reappropriated—in selective and diverse ways—key aspects of their religious identities: definitions of asceticism in renunciation and in society, understandings of the roles of texts in their personal and social lives, relationships between gender and ritual authority, and conceptions of their religious community in relation to/over against other communities. The approach proposed above helps students who have some familiarity with Hinduism from their family background to see their particularity within a wider framework. It also helps those who come to the class with a non-Hindu religious upbringing become more aware of the complexity and historical changes in Hindu tradition, and may encourage them to consider similar issues in their own religion's history as well. And for us, as teachers, it will foster a more discussion-oriented, historically nuanced, and comprehensive way of looking at South Asian culture.

If we transform our teaching materials to present Hinduism as a series of debates about the nature of people's ultimate concerns, instead of a set of limited and static beliefs, we could advance our pedagogical goals in several ways. First, by presenting students with the debates within the Hindu tradition, we demonstrate how such disagreements

helped to shape Hinduism as we now know it. For example, we could show how the tradition constitutes and contests gender and *jati* hierarchy, the relationships between renunciation and householders, and the boundaries between personal and communal religious practice. Second, by showing how the Hindu tradition encompasses regional differences and complexity, we would prepare visitors, work colleagues, and study-abroaders for the diversity they find in their encounters with Hindus on an everyday basis.

Finally, by placing the development of current Hindu practice and community within the context of nineteenth and twentieth century historical developments, we could give our students some sense of both how Hinduism came to possess some of its complexity and how it came to be reified by Indological analysis so popular until recently. Such techniques would also help students who wanted to enter graduate study and join the discourse community of those who teach religious studies as an academic subject. In so teaching, we would do a service to our students and to our field of study, for future scholars in our field will be drawn from the students whom we teach. ▢

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NOTES

1. I am grateful for the suggestions of a decade of students enrolled in my "Religion in Modern India" course at Oberlin College, who experienced the initial confusion of studying the diversity of Hindu tradition. An earlier version of this piece was presented at the Conference on the Future of Asian Studies in Madison, Wisconsin in November, 1993. I thank Thomas Coburn and an anonymous reviewer for trenchant comments on an earlier version of this essay.
2. See David Kopf, *The Brahmo Samaj and the Shaping of the Modern Indian Mind*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979, 40-48.
3. See Kenneth W. Jones, ed., *Religious Controversy in British India: Dialogues in South Asian Languages*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992.
4. For a discussion of print culture and nationalist movements, see Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*. London: Verso Press, 1991. For an example of public debate on religious authority in India, see Paula Richman, "Epic and State: Contesting Interpretations of the *Rāmāyana*," *Public Culture* 7:3 (1995), 631-654.
5. Thomas Hopkins, *The Hindu Religious Tradition*. Encino: Dickenson Publishing Company, 1971, Diana L. Eck, *Darśan: Seeing the Divine Image in India*, 2nd. ed.. New York: Columbia University Press, 1981, and Peter Van der Veer, *Religious Nationalism: Hindus and Muslims in India*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995.
6. For Dayananda Sarasvati, see J.T.F. Jordens, *Dayananda Sarasvati: His Life and Ideas*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1978 and Stephen Hay, *Sources of Indian Tradition*, vol. 2. New York: Columbia University Press, 1988, 52-62. For Ambedkar, see Eleanor Zelliot, *From Untouchable to Dalit: Essays on the Ambedkar Movement*. New Delhi:



Wall painting depicting scenes from the *Rāmāyana*.
Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh, India. Photo by Adam Clayman

- Oxford University Press, 1992. For a discussion of the various commentaries on the *Rāmcaritmānas* by Tulsidas, especially the influential editions published by Gita Press and the politics surrounding those mass market publications, see Philip Lutgendorf, *The Life of a Text: Performing the Rāmcaritmānas of Tulsidas*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991. For the critique of the *Rāmāyana* from the Tamil Dravidian movement see Paula Richman, "E.V. Ramasami's Reading of the *Rāmāyana*" in *Many Rāmāyanas: The Diversity of a Religious Narrative in South Asia*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991, 175-201. For Tilak, see Richard Cashman's chapter titled "The Religious Recruitment of God Ganapati" in his *The Myth of the Lokamanya: Tilak and Mass Politics in Maharashtra*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975, 75-97.
7. Shahid Amin, "Gandhi as Mahatma," in *Selected Subaltern Studies*, edited by Ranjit Guha and Gayatri Spivak. New York: Oxford University Press, 1988, 427-434 and Madhu Kishwar, *Gandhi and Women*. Delhi: Manushi Prakashan, 1986.
8. See Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid, *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History*. Newark: Rutgers University Press, 1990.
9. See, for example, Doranne Jacobson, "Golden Handprints and Red-Painted Feet: Hindu Childbirth Rituals in Central India," and Susan S. Wadley, "Hindu Women's Family and Household Rites in a North Indian Village," 73-93 and 94-109 respectively, in Nancy A. Falk and Rita M. Gross, *Unspoken Worlds: Women's Religious Lives in Non-Western Cultures*. San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1980.