

An EAA Interview with Frank Conlon



Photo taken by Professor Sanjay Joshi, Northern Arizona University.

Frank Conlon, University of Washington Professor Emeritus of History, South Asian Studies, and Comparative Religion, has enjoyed a distinguished career as both an outstanding teacher and scholar. Conlon, known to many readers of this journal as the cofounder of H-ASIA, has been widely published on a variety of India-related topics including caste, the role of women, colonialism, religion, and urban history. Given Frank's extensive experience with India, we think EAA readers will profit from his thoughts on how we, as educators, can more accurately teach about, what many believe to be, the most misunderstood major Asian country.

Lucien: *Thanks for doing this interview, Frank. Could you inform our readers a bit about yourself and how you first became interested in India?*

Frank Conlon: New friends often ask me “however did you come to study India?” An old vaudeville joke has it that “when you get older, the memory is the second thing to go,” but I trace my interest in India to my undergraduate days at Northwestern University when Professor Leften Stavrianos allowed me to take the graduate seminar on his project of rethinking world history as “global history”—this was when he was writing what became a widely used textbook that is known to many of our readers. I think India captured my attention when, while reading about the long vanished Chola and Vijayanagar empires, I realized that while in their time these states had been major theaters of human activity, now little remained save some ruins, art, and inscriptions. I realized that my studies of American history hadn’t taken me very far from home—humanity’s story was broader and deeper. Subsequently, in my graduate studies at the University of Minnesota, I was encouraged to study India by the late Professor Burton Stein—a pathway that was enabled by the then new NDEA fellowships for language and area studies.

I went to India for dissertation research in 1965 and spent nearly two years there. While my research turned to a study of the history of a brahman caste from the west coast of India—the Saraswats—I was interested in learning how “caste” had been influenced by colonial rule and modernization and how it had, in turn, influenced the experience of those processes. It was a great experience since I did archival research and field work while visiting Saraswat families and institutions. The book that grew out of this project is long out of print, and I am starting to work on a revised edition, primarily in response to requests from members of that caste. That diverse research experience was an enormous boon to my subsequent teaching career.

History provided the framework for my courses, but my interdisciplinary studies greatly aided in meeting my obligations as a teacher. My goal was to introduce students to the main events and ideas of Indian civilization and also to encourage them to critically engage with another civilization that was every bit as plausible as our own. One of the most avid audiences for that latter perspective were young people of South Asian descent who had grown up in America with a sense of uncertainty and defensiveness about their heritage. While I could not offer the perspectives of an “insider,” I emphasized my belief that the term “multi-cultural” means engaging intelligently with more than one way of perceiving and living ones life. I hoped that my students could be “comfortable” in a diverse world, not “complacent.” Accepting a perfected “shrink-wrapped” model of India was not sufficient—students should also be willing to engage in thinking about the complicated, imperfect reality of India’s evolving past and present.

Lucien: *The area that is now India has a 3,000-year history, is currently the second largest country in the world, and is the world’s largest democracy. Yet, it appears to me that India has not been afforded nearly enough time in the media or in our educational institutions, and that Americans are only beginning to think of India as important and worthy of serious study. Why has India been largely ignored? Do you agree that India seems to be garnering more attention in this country now than in the past few decades? If so, why?*

Frank Conlon: One of my friends, exasperated at the apparent lack of interest in India in the United States, quipped “for Americans, India is the biggest unimportant place in the world.” This is not to say that there has not been commercial and intellectual exchange with India during our history. New England clipper ships carried ice to India—Thoreau mused on the waters of Walden Pond mingling

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with those of the Ganges—and American Transcendentalists were interested in the philosophy of the *Upanishads*. While some Americans grew interested in Indian religions through the work of the Theosophical Society or the visit of Swami Vivekananda to the Chicago World’s Fair in 1893, more were introduced to critical views of India offered by Christian missionaries seeking support for evangelical work in the subcontinent. Various social ills in Indian society were generalized as “proof” of the inferiority of Indian religion and culture. Negative stereotypes were further spread in a best-selling book, *Mother India*, published in 1927 by the American journalist Katherine Mayo. Ms. Mayo catalogued many of India’s problems with little attention to context or explanation: I encounter echoes of her views even in contemporary conversations. Further negative impressions arose among American military personnel posted in India during WWII, especially in the vicinity of Calcutta. That this coincided with the terrible Bengal Famine of 1943—though itself a product of wartime policies—left many young visitors with a view of India as a place of despair and degradation. I think also that the cold-war mentality of the 1950s led American governments to regard India and its quest for non-aligned international politics with skepticism if not outright suspicion. Perhaps too there was alienation that grew from the fact that both America and India cloaked their clearly self-interested policies and practices in world affairs in the language of principled morality.

A final obstacle—not unique to the study of India—is the reality that we are engaging with a large and complex place. India is almost the size of Europe, but because it is one country, national statistics mask significant geographical and historical differences. Similarly, a “typical Indian” would be hard to describe when India’s current population is about 1.1 billion people! Just try to describe the “typical American.”

Lucien: *When I ask my students what they know about India, the words “Caste System” are invariably mentioned. What are common mistaken stereotypes about caste you’ve encountered? What do you consider the most important basic points educators should understand about the past and present role of the concept of “caste” and its influence on Indian society?*

Frank Conlon: The term “caste”—understood as a rigid, hierarchical, unchanging structure of social discrimination that promotes stagnation and fatalism—may be the most persevering stereotype that India has endured in Western minds. Like most stereotypes, there are shreds of reality bound up with a lot of misinformation.

While researching my book on the history of a caste, I never found evidence of a single “caste system” existing throughout India. Terms and patterns of relations varied among regions, with varying meanings and salience even for Indians themselves. Not much can be seen in today’s India today that supports the view that “caste” has made Indian society “immobile” or “fatalistic.”

The word “caste” comes from the Portuguese “casta,” which designated a type or kind of person, sometimes specifically referring to “purity” and status. Hierarchy and inequality were enduring elements of Indian belief and practice, distinctions drawn on lines of kinship,

learning, and/or avoidance of impure foods or unclean occupations. These distinctions are found in early religious traditions of the *Rig Veda* (x, 90) where a cosmic sacrifice of a primeval being produced four prime human categories (*varna*); each group was assigned specific duties (*dharma*), arranged in a hierarchy of status and privilege. Members of three of these *varnas* (*Brahman*, *Kshatriya*, and *Vaishya*) were suitable to be priests, rulers/warriors, and wealth producers (merchants or cultivators) respectively, and their source (the mouth, the shoulders/torso, and loins/thighs) reflected these capacities. Members of the fourth *varna* (*Shudra*), which emerged from the feet, were lower yet and had the duty to serve the rest. Only the first three were considered eligible to memorize, study, and transmit the *Vedas*. It is likely that the *shudras* may have been the indigenous population and through this category were outsiders and marginal tribal people absorbed into the Brahmanical society and culture. These four *varnas* appear in later Vedic texts including the *Upanishads*, in epic poems and the “laws of Manu,” the *dharmashastra* text, which also mentions other lower groups who were beyond the bounds of ordinary society and associated with dangerous and polluting occupations and styles of living, such as dealing with dead animals or removing human feces—these are believed to be earliest references to the persons of very low status termed “untouchables” in the last century, and, more recently, *dalits* (“the oppressed”).

The four *varnas* have existed as concepts throughout India’s history, but in actual practice, hundreds of “castes” (often called *jatis*) existed as smaller, regional groups whose boundaries and activities might alter over the centuries. A caste was a group of kin or potential kin with whom one might contract marriage alliances. This inherently limited the geographical range of a caste to a particular language region; it was a pattern reinforced in pre-modern India by Hindu (and sometimes Muslim) rulers who would recognize and enforce social discipline and order. The identification of a given caste with one of the four *varnas* reflected a rough consensus that took into account history, perceptions of purity, status, and wealth. Later, British colonial rulers were not interested in any radical interventions in Indian society, but when they sought to document the ethnographic realities of India, they often accepted the brahmanical truism that *dharma* was eternal and that the caste order had been unchanging. Certainly colonial activities such as ethnographic surveys and census operations tended to freeze or fossilize what had, until then, been a slowly evolving pattern of status and occupation. While British administrators may have sought knowledge in order to rule India, Christian missionaries perceived “caste” as a bulwark of resistance to evangelical energies as well as an icon of the India that had to be “saved.” Missionary writers and lecturers routinely informed western audiences that “caste” was a sign of India’s “backwardness” and a symbol of its social ills.

Scholars once expected that India’s modernization would diminish the significance of caste through education and democracy. Certainly among Indian elites, caste doesn’t always dictate marriage partners, but caste organizations offer support for their members in scholarships, cultural activities, and credit societies. Just as Ameri-

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can political parties often try to mobilize voters of ethnic groups, Indian parties often “balance the ticket” with candidates likely to appeal to voters of large, influential castes or loosely-related castes. India’s constitution provided for “protective discrimination”—akin to “affirmative action”—for India’s ex-Untouchable castes, but in recent decades, the concessions have been demanded by, and awarded to, members of “Other Backward Castes”—groups constituting large percentages of the population who seek advantages in education and government employment. These strategies have little or nothing to do with purity and pollution, and much to do with contemporary concerns for opportunity in a universe of economic scarcity. Nothing in these new features suggests a stagnant, fatalistic or unchanging society—these are people “on the make!” “Caste” has changed in many dramatic ways, yet some old attitudes persist. I suggest a parallel to “race” in America today.

Lucien: *Frank, “religion” is another subject that Americans automatically mention when India becomes a topic of conversation. Obviously, this subject is so immense we can barely touch upon it. The majority of Indians are Hindu. What are a few of the most rudimentary aspects of Hindu beliefs and practices that you think are most misunderstood here?*

Frank Conlon: Teaching about religion is never an easy task for educators. There are distinctions between “teaching about” a religion and “teaching a religion.” In the former category, it is desirable to employ both “insider” and “outsider” perspectives. I was among the first faculty of Washington’s Comparative Religion program to offer a survey of Asian religions to a diverse group of students. My goal was to describe Hinduism or Buddhism from an “outsider” viewpoint, and to interpret the beliefs and practices empathetically from the perspective of an “insider.” My view is that comparative religion need not be competitive religion. Yet good intentions may not suffice, particularly in this time of our history when most religious traditions are undergoing internal debates and reconsiderations—processes that are probably exacerbated by the development of American politics of identity.

India, the birthplace of several world religions: Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism, is as well home to a great many Muslims and quite a few Christians, as well as a small surviving community of Zoroastrians. “Hinduism” was a term coined by others to label the religious beliefs and practices of the Indian majority. Hinduism, unlike, say, Buddhism, Islam, or Christianity, does not have a historical origin or a founding teacher. The most enduring texts of Hinduism are the four Vedas from which elements of subsequent faith and practice may be said to derive, but the Vedas serve more as an abstract symbol acknowledged as a source of wisdom than it is a central feature in the everyday religious life of most Hindus. The Vedas were memorized and taught orally from generation to generation for thousands of years. The Vedic religion centered on rituals of sacrifice, and oral transmission preserved the correct sounds to be

pronounced during each ritual. Here we find the roots of the concept of *karma* (action), whereby proper sacrifice achieved rewards for the sacrificer. All action produces results. If my students left understanding that point alone, I reckoned my teaching had been worthwhile.

As Indian society grew more complex, there is a suggestion of dissatisfaction with the Vedic rituals. Gradually a radical new religious concept emerged in the final Vedic corpus, the Upanishads (conventionally dated by scholars to around 700 to 300 BCE) that addressed questions of the place of the individual in the nature of things and proclaimed a new world view. Specifically, in explaining the place of human beings in the cosmos, the Upanishads revealed that people were possessed of a soul (*atman*), which was an exiled portion of a cosmic soul (Brahman), trapped within life by the actions (*karma*) of the individual. Duty (*dharma*) determined the appropriateness (or not) of ones actions (*karma*). There was a hierarchy of behavior and of birth status that was related to *varna* (discussed above). Ones present status had been determined by actions in previous births. Future births could move up the social hierarchy, but only by completion of proper actions, that is, by following the *dharma* or duty appropriate to ones *varna* or status. This concept of the world of rebirth (*samsara*) held out the ultimate goal of salvation, understood as release or liberation (*moksha*) from rebirth—in effect, the soul leaving a perfected human to rejoin the cosmic soul—vanishing as surely as a drop of water when it rejoins the ocean. As originally conceived, salvation was distant and difficult. Remember, rebirth is not a promise of immortality or eternal youth such as is offered by our consumer culture these days, but of perpetual mortality—growing old and sick over and over again.

In subsequent centuries, both Buddhism and Hinduism evolved arduous means to attaining salvation. Theistic ideas identified the cosmic soul with a supreme deity, usually Vishnu or Shiva or the Goddess, and subsequent notions of a gracious deity willing to grant salvation to all who were truly devoted. This new emphasis on devotion (*bhakti*) was an expression of popular faith, and, while not challenging the hierarchy of India’s society, did offer an equality of the worshipper in the presence of the god. This tapped a rich vein of creative literature in the form of hymns in praise of a benevolent god or goddess, steady devotion to whom would lead to salvation, possibly even after just this one life. The stimulus of *bhakti* contributed to the growth of religious literature in all evolving regional languages of the subcontinent, shaping the linguistic map of India today.

This medieval synthesis of devotion and theism may have strengthened the Hindu religion during the era of Islamic political conquest and rule from the eleventh century CE onwards. Considerable controversy surrounds the medieval period since some Indians today assert that Hinduism was under steady assault from Islam, while others emphasize a cultural synthesis between Hindu *bhakti* and Islamic mysticism (*Sufism*). Popular religious practice tended to regard all aspects of the spiritual as equally worthy of respect and worship.

If British colonial rule opened India to Christian missionaries, it also introduced printing—a technology used to publish the *Bhagavad Gita* as easily as the New Testament. Modern innovations, such as recordings, film, television, and the Internet, created further avenues for religious propagation and reinforcement. Literacy and education may also have contributed to a greater consciousness of specific religious traditions. In both Hindu and Muslim religions, there have been pronounced movements to “purify” and standardize the respective faiths, particularly seeking to root out syncretistic practices that have characterized popular religion up to now. Greater awareness of religious ideologies has led to a greater consciousness of religious difference. Unfortunately, such perceptions of difference and fear of others have been exploited by malevolent parties in India to promote acts of “inter-communal” violence between members of

European state to dominate a much larger Asian territory. The effects of British rule created new opportunities for Indians, introduced new knowledge and new forms of governance. At the same time, it denied Indians chances to evolve in their own fashion and, for much of the time, it essentially robbed them of their own initiative, preventing them from being able to look ahead to participating in the rule of their own country. It linked Indians (at least those who were educated) with a wider world of Western knowledge, but cut them off from their own ancestral heritage.

British rule produced some important centralizing forces, such as railways, the military, the courts, the postal system, and, yes, the English language, that provided raw materials upon which some Indians could discover the idea of India as a nation rather than just a very large place. Most Indians would argue that colonial rule stulti-

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the major religions. Sadly, murder and destruction in the name of religion is found in many parts of the world.

Some observers have suggested that a new style of Hinduism is emerging among educated believers—a sort of fundamentalist reply to modern incarnations of Christianity and Islam. Outside of India, within the diaspora in Britain and North America, I suspect that this new trend in Hinduism may be furthered by a natural sense of cultural vulnerability by parents—surrounded by the unnerving and unfamiliar assaults of contemporary popular culture. For teachers, the path of introducing Hinduism to students is full of snares, for we are talking about a tradition that is itself talking about tradition and undergoing changes. Any modern Hindu may have profoundly held views about what is the *REAL* Hinduism, and that fact may lead to serious controversies such as recently appeared in a dispute over the content of textbooks in California.

Lucien: *As you are aware, many readers of this journal teach some form of World History. It is almost impossible to avoid discussions of Britain’s role in the development and formulation of modern India. What general recommendations do you have for non-specialists who must discuss the positive and negative aspects of British influence on India?*

Frank Conlon: I have to confess that I am not satisfied with a “spread-sheet” of the pluses and minuses of British colonialism in India. A headline “‘Colonialism Good for India (mostly),’ expert says” leaves me feeling very unsatisfied—as would the direct opposite sentiment. If pressed, I would have to say that I regard the emergence of the British power in South Asia to be the accidental outcome of a series of historical processes, one in which applications of new technologies of conquest and administration enabled a small

fied India’s economic development, and that “economic nationalist” perception became a legacy that directed (some would say, misdirected) India’s economy during the first fifty years of independence. In any case, it is not easy to see how one could build a historical argument on a “counter-factual” model that imagines how India would have developed without the British.

On the other hand, I have some discomfort with lectures and textbooks about “modern India” or “modern South Asia” that do not give adequate attention to what had gone before the so-called British Raj. Early modern South Asian history, including the creation and institutionalization of the Mughal empire in the north, and the rise of various states and polities in the south, left significant legacies in administration, religion, society, culture, and economics, which were then subject to the actions of colonial rule. The British were “new” and their attitudes and ideas were “different,” but they gained and maintained their dominance through the agency of Indians—and often it mattered which Indians were participants in “the Raj.” Some historians have lately been much excited by what is termed a “subaltern perspective,” invoking Antonio Gramsci’s concept of people who are without a voice in history. It has been an interesting—and I might add, stylish—trend in historiography. Perhaps too many “subaltern studies” publications have more been works of textual criticism of colonial documents than they have been documentation of the lives and agency of the “subaltern” classes. Many beginning students have been more puzzled than enlightened when I asked them to read “subaltern studies” essays. The exciting perspectives offered by many of the most recent trends in historiography are far more engaging for students (and teachers!) when they have a foundational knowledge of a more conventional history of India.

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Lucien: *Frank, economic developments in India are now receiving serious attention here. What is your take on the idea that India can become a global economic superpower relatively soon? Many Americans think of India as a land eternally mired in poverty. Others now think of India as a threat to American jobs. Yet others think of India’s economic “liberalization” as irrefutable evidence of the power of free market capitalism. Your reactions?*

Frank Conlon: The image of India’s impressive economic growth needs to be qualified somewhat. Economic “liberalization” has opened up entrepreneurial energies in both old and new industries—the best known in technology and business process outsourcing. Professor Stephen Cohen, who has studied South Asian politics for nearly half a century, said to me recently, “there is a revolutionary class in India and they are the MBAs. They see India’s economy as part of the world’s and they seek to create a talent-driven engine of economic growth.” This represents a radical departure from the economic nationalism that conditioned India’s economic policies in the decades after independence. Then, India’s leaders sought industrial self-sufficiency through “import substitution”—a legacy of their sense that colonial rule had stunted India’s growth. Behind protective tariffs, Indian industry did grow, but ultimately it could not fulfill India’s domestic needs, nor survive in a globalizing market. India’s leaders had to move to new attitudes and actions. The last ten years have seen significant changes in India’s material conditions, although the rewards have been distributed unevenly in terms of geography and social status. India’s overall population growth rate since 2001 has been lowered to 1.5 percent, but it remains higher in some of the least developed states. If the state of Uttar Pradesh were a separate nation, its 170 million people would make it the world’s sixth most populous country, holding 8 percent of the entire world’s poor.

Any expectation of further growth in India will depend on further investments in infrastructure. Ports, highways, railroads, and air traffic facilities are all over-stretched. Electricity production today is 11 percent short of present requirements, not to mention further future demand. A Morgan Stanley report, quoted in *The Economist* of June 1, 2006, stated that India’s annual spending on infrastructure as a share of GDP sank in 2003 to a thirty-three-year low—just 3.5 percent of \$21 billion. That year in China, the investment was 10.6 percent of GDP or \$150 billion. Of course India, unlike China, is constrained by democratic political pressure to keep taxes low. The environment holds future problems for India where, like China, industrial development has proceeded with little concern for the environment. I think that in half a century, the most precious resource in South Asia may be water.

Unlocking the potential of the still undereducated, disadvantaged Indian majority is a daunting prospect. If it is accomplished,

India—and the world—will be very different. Certainly now India is no longer America’s “biggest unimportant place in the world.” There are new questions yet to be asked, much less answered. When someone asks me, “don’t you find all that poverty in India depressing.” “Sure,” I reply, “but while it is not pretty, I can explain it rationally in historical terms. When I come home to America, it is American poverty I find most disturbing.”

Lucien: *Frank, thank you so much for this interview and for sharing your thoughts with our readers. ■*

BOOKS RECOMMENDED BY FRANK CONLON FOR READING ABOUT INDIA, TODAY AND TOMORROW

On History

Barbara D. Metcalf and Thomas R. Metcalf, *A Concise History of India* (Cambridge University Press, 2001) ISBN 0521639743.

On Religion

Vasudha Narayanan, *Hinduism* (Oxford University Press, 2004) ISBN 0195221443.

Fred Clothey, *Religion in India* (Routledge, 2006) ISBN 0415940249.

Robin Rinehart, ed., *Contemporary Hinduism: Ritual, Culture and Practice* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2004) ISBN 1576079058.

On India Today

Sunil Khilnani, *The Idea of India* (Farrar, Straus, and Giroux 1999) ISBN 0374525919.

Gurchuran Das, *India Unbound: The Social and Economic Revolution from Independence to the Global Information Age* (Vintage Anchor, 2002) ISBN 0385720742.

Tim Dyson, Robert Casen and Leela Visaria, *Twenty-First Century India: Population, Economy, Human Development, and the Environment* (Oxford University Press, 2005) ISBN 0199283826.