



ESSAYS

Teaching About India at the Secondary School Level

By Kelly McKee

I have been teaching a course on Asian Studies at Evanston Township High School for the past four years. As an educator I feel fortunate to have traveled to India twice, once in 1996 as a National Education Security fellow, and again in 2001 as a Fulbright-Hays scholar. Both experiences have provided me with a foundation to begin to understand the complexity of Indian culture. In my role as an educator, I have been able to transfer my travel experience into a practical teaching curriculum to be applied to my school's Asian Studies program.

When students enter my class at the beginning of the school year, they generally have little or no prior knowledge of the cul-

ture and history of India. So, on the first day of class I typically try to immediately stimulate students' interest by engaging them in some type of Indian cultural practice—for example, offering Durga puja, meditating, or chanting Vedic hymns. This year I decided to teach my students something new I learned during the summer from a yogi at the Centre for Gandhian Studies and Peace Research in New Delhi. We began class by having a mini lesson on how to practice *ahimsa prana*. This is a breathing technique used to promote nonviolent actions and to maintain a peaceful and balanced mind. At first students were a bit skeptical about holding their thumb to their nose and breathing through only one nostril. However, after a few trial runs, all students were eager to learn more. This simple and brief activity sparked the intellectual interest of students and thus began an eight-week journey to understand and appreciate the people and history of India from a non-Western perspective.

Evanston Township High School is located in an extremely diverse community that sits north of Chicago along Lake

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Windows into Contemporary, Living Hinduism:

1 Himalayan Academy Publications.
<http://store.himalayanacademy.com/> • See especially *Dancing with Siva*, "The best overview of Hinduism in English."—Napra Review.

2 Hinduism Today, full-color International quarterly magazine. News of Hindus and Hinduism from around the world, contemporary insight, wisdom and daily breaking e-mail news from Hindu Press Int'l. "One feels in each issue that one is actually entering the Hindu world." —Kusumita Pedersen, PhD, Buddhist and Hindu Studies, St. Francis College, NYC.
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Michigan. There are over 35 languages spoken within the walls of our school. Presently, Evanston serves a student body that is over 45 percent minority with 28 percent of our students receiving some kind of government assistance. The total school population is 2,900 with the racial and ethnic background as: 47 percent white; 43.4 percent black; 6.9 percent Latino; and 2.7 percent Asian. The History and Social Sciences Department at Evanston Township High School requires all students to fulfill one credit of Global Perspectives. The course work is typically taken during sophomore year, and course selections vary from a year-long Humanities course, to semester courses which offer African Studies, Asian Studies, Latin American Studies, Middle Eastern Studies, Russian Studies, and a combined Art and History class on the Pacific Rim. A major goal of the Global Perspectives program is to develop students' awareness and participation in their own culture, as well as to step outside of their comfort zone and experience the culture of others.

The Asian Studies course offered in the Global Perspectives program is unique. The course is a mixed ability class, meaning student ability levels range from roughly a sophomore college level to around the sixth grade level. Having this wide gap in ability often presents many challenges to the teacher, yet it also opens up a lot of opportunities to engage students in a wide variety of student centered lessons and projects, thus creating an environment where all students can excel at their own pace. The class is a semester course. Typically this allows for 8–9 weeks of instruction each quarter. My Asian Studies curriculum focuses on

the two major democracies of Asia: India and Japan. We spend approximately eight weeks teaching the culture, history, and current-day issues of each country.

The India component of the course is centered around specific topics and concepts. A few of the main concepts include: cultural diversity and pluralism; the historical past and how it connects to modern history; and India's role in the twenty-first century. This article will provide an overview of a few strategies I have found effective in teaching each of these concepts.

CULTURAL DIVERSITY AND PLURALISM

It is necessary for students to recognize and understand India's different ethnicities, religions, languages, cuisines, and customs, and there are endless ways to address the issue of one nation having such a complex cultural fabric. One way I approach this is to engage students in a variety of different activities, from small group religion activities, to participation in an interactive experience in Chicago's Indian ethnic neighborhood. The small group religion project introduces students to the belief systems of the major Indian religions of Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism, Islam, and Sikhism. In their groups, students research everything from historical texts, festivals and founders, to the fundamental belief system of each religion. After two days of in-class research time, students then present an introductory lesson to their classmates, sharing what they learned about their religion. Groups are asked to make their presentations engaging; many will decide to teach their classmates a Vedic chant, passages from the Gita, a lesson on how to meditate, or give a step-by-step demonstration of how Muslims pray five times a day. This activity is an excellent hands-on opportunity to introduce the many religions of India.

Two excellent resources for teaching about the religions of India are the audiocassette program and text *Passages to India* and the CD ROM *On Common Ground: World Religions in America* (see bibliography).

Another technique used to help broaden student's awareness of Indian culture is to have them visit the Indian community in Chicago to complete a scavenger hunt activity. The scavenger hunt consists of visiting a variety of different locations along Chicago's Devon Avenue neighborhood. This ethnic region of Chicago was settled in the 1960s and has become a vital part of the Indian community. For their scavenger hunt, students are asked to visit a book store, a market, a video and music store, a clothing shop, and an electronics store. The project is designed to be interactive in that students must talk to the merchants in order to answer the questions correctly.

For example, in the market they are asked to prepare a shopping list for several Indian recipes, as well as to identify products such as *ghee*. In the clothing store students are asked to pick out a sari, salwar-kameez, or a *dhoti* they would like to wear to school, and in the video/music store they are asked to identify the most popular Indian movie stars and pop singers. The most valuable part of this activity is that many students have never spoken to someone from India before. They acquire a deeper sense of appreciation for the culture and break down any stereotypes or misconceptions they may have had prior to this unit of study. Also,

before the students engage in this activity, they have already received a thorough overview of Indian culture, so when a student sees a man walking along Devon Avenue wearing a Punjabi-style turban, he or she is quick to identify that individual as a Sikh. The students' newly gained knowledge from the classroom transforms their perspective—they do not view someone as being strange or odd because they are wearing a turban or a sari; instead they recognize that it is part of one's cultural make-up and they respect these individuals for sharing their culture.

THE CONNECTION OF INDIA'S HISTORICAL PAST TO MODERN HISTORY

The historical component of the course begins with a description of the debatable Aryan invasion of the subcontinent. Attention is also given to the Mauryan, Gupta, Mughal, and British Empires. Students learn about the rise and fall of each empire and the major accomplishments of each. The final portion of the chronological sequence includes an in-depth look at the events that led up to Indian Independence and Partition. Students are required to complete a DBQ, or document-based question analytical essay. The DBQ focus question for this part of the content is "Should India be partitioned to create Pakistan and India?" This specific DBQ was designed and researched by myself and Paula Rance, an Asian Studies colleague at the high school. Students are asked to read various primary source documents relating to events that have led up to independence written by Nehru, Gandhi, Jinnah, Iqbal, Azad, Mountbatten, and many more. Once students analyze the documents and make a sound argument to partition India or

MUSEUM QUALITY EXHIBITS

"MY LIFE IS MY MESSAGE"—40 panels (2' x 4') of photographs with captions on the life of Mahatma Gandhi.

"INDIA—THE PEOPLE AND THEIR LAND"—more than 100 color photographs taken over 40 years by Beatrice Pitney Lamb.

"BEAUTY IN STONE"—Hindu, Buddhist, and Islamic architecture of India, color photographs by Beatrice Pitney Lamb.

Also—smaller portable (sent by mail) exhibits, video cassettes (including biographical documentaries of Gandhi), and other resources available for loan.

Undergraduate-level CORRESPONDENCE COURSE on Gandhi (study materials from the Gujarat Vidyapith University in India founded in 1920).

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not, they then write an analytical essay sharing their point of view. This DBQ assignment is very worthwhile because it truly allows students to take a deeper look at, as well as understand the cause and effect relationship of, events such as the Sepoy Mutiny, the partition of Bengal in 1905, and the Gandhi-Jinnah talks of 1944.

To further understand how India's past connects to the present, students partake in a quarterly multimedia research project. This two-week project requires students to develop a sophisticated inquiry-based research question reflective of any aspect of Indian culture or history that shows change over time. Students are asked to write a 5–8 page research essay in addition to designing and creating a multimedia PowerPoint slide show, which they use to teach the class an interactive lesson. Student-taught lessons involve the delivery of an interactive pre- and post-lesson in addition to their multimedia slide show to engage their classmates in the content of their question. Examples of questions are:

- (a) How did the Battle of Kalinga change the Mauryan Emperor Ashoka's philosophy of nonviolence?
- (b) How and when was traditional Indian music introduced to the West, and what affect did it have on world music?
- (c) How has modern life changed the historical practice of Jainism worldwide?
- (d) What is the discrepancy between Indian culture in the past and present and the way it is portrayed in the American media in the past and present?

One of the greatest benefits of this project, beyond introducing students to advanced technological skills, is that each student is able to research a particular topic discussed in class in much greater detail. Again, students' projects are shared and taught to the rest of the class, making newly gained knowledge for individual students general knowledge for all.

ISSUES FACING INDIA IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

One of the most valuable lessons I want students to take with them at the end of this course is to understand how NGOs (non-governmental organizations) play such an important role in the development of India today. As a result of my trips to India, I was fortunate to work with NGOs in different areas of the country. By having this first-hand experience learning about the efforts and initiatives of groups such as the Society for the Promotion of Area Resources Centres (SPARC), Pratham, and the Self-Employed Women's Association (SWEA), I have been able to successfully bring the vision of each NGO back to the classroom. In the past students have researched pressing issues facing India as a democracy and then created their own NGO to share in our annual NGO fair at the high school. Over the years I have been fortunate to have NGO representatives and founders from SEWA and Pratham visit my classroom to speak with students. SEWA is based in Ahmedabad and works with self-employment initiatives for women. Pratham is an NGO based in Mumbai (Bombay) focusing on literacy issues throughout the country.

This essay provides a brief overview of the course content on Indian studies at Evanston Township High School. India, being a

nation of such visible contradictions, is not an easy region of the world to teach to high school students. As Shashi Tharoor writes in the first chapter of *India: From Midnight to Millennium*,

How can one approach this land of snow peaks and tropical jungles, with seventeen major languages and twenty-two thousand distinct dialects, inhabited in the last decade of the twentieth century by nearly 940 million individuals of every ethnic extraction known to humanity? How does one come to terms with a country whose population is 52 percent illiterate, but which has educated the world's second largest pool of trained scientists and engineers, whose teeming cities overflow while four out of five Indians scratch a living from the soil? How does one gauge a culture that elevated nonviolence to an effective moral principle, but whose freedom was born in blood and whose independence still soaks in it?

At the secondary school level these questions are nearly impossible to answer. However, I am confident that when students exit this class at the end of the semester, they have gained a great deal of knowledge and insight on a new culture and people. The limited knowledge with which students enter the course is quickly challenged by a new and insightful look at the world's largest democracy. This course has really opened the eyes of many young adolescents, and they acquire a deeper sense of compassion and respect for people from South Asia. Students' stereotypes and misconceptions dissolve, and they begin to build new cultural bridges that enable them to relate to people of other cultures from a multicultural perspective. ■

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