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Teaching any Asian religion at a large public university carries great responsibilities. Students in their first years of study often have enough trouble adjusting to life on their own and making sense of the adult world. Many, at least here in Indiana, come from small and homogeneous towns, and don't even recognize Catholicism as Christian, let alone have any awareness of other religious traditions. When they come to a class in Asian religions, their minds are boggled by the end of the first week of reading assignments. What can we do to help these students make sense of religious life in a part of the world that will always be foreign to most of them?

It is very difficult to teach any aspect of culture in isolation. One cannot teach religion without references to history, geography, politics, literature, and even language. But how can we as scholars steeped in our fields begin to give our young students, many of whom have never ventured beyond the next state, a sense of the value and richness of the legacy of so apparently distant and foreign a nation as, for example, India?

Professors spend hours picking out the best reading assignments they can find, and previewing audiovisual materials. There are now many films that were produced specially for classroom use to help give students a sense of the lives and concerns of followers of Asian religious traditions.

I suggest that we would do well to take some advice from our colleagues in modern language pedagogy who work to ensure that their students have as much authentic material” as possible to work with. “Authentic material” in the foreign language classroom is material generated by and for native speakers, for instance, movies. These media were not created for the pedagogical purposes of university foreign language instructors, but they can be very useful. Such authentic materials can be anything from a restaurant menu to a popular new movie, an article in the newspaper, or a conversation about last night’s ball game. In each case, students have a topic of immediate interest imbedded within a specific locale, style, and linguistic register. This same pedagogy is transferable to the religious studies classroom.

When we introduce students to voices originating directly from the target culture or tradition, we can direct them away from the exoticization of “foreign” religions, and the closed-minded condemnation of the “Other” as pernicious. Luckily, English is widely used in South Asia, and so it is very easy to find materials our students can read. Indian news magazines such as *India Today* help to combat this problem. I have found that integrating them into my syllabi has been rewarding for both students and myself.

I do this by presenting students with materials and ideas they will find familiar, but at the same time materials that challenge their expectations and force them out of any of stereotyped thinking. My course reader contains photographs, articles, and even advertisements clipped from relatively current Indian newspapers and magazines. This collection allows me to introduce contemporary material to counter or confirm what primary textual and religious sources seem to say.

On the first day of class, we often brainstorm the notion of religion itself. Students will naturally begin by describing their own religion, which here in Indiana is usually some variety of Protestant Christianity. But it doesn’t take much to prod them into broader patterns and more encompassing generalizations (“Do all religions involve deity?”; “Are all priests unmarried?”; etc.).

From there, I move to a detailed discussion of how to read a text. In class, working with a short hymn from the Rig Veda, for example, I model for them the critical reading skills they need to learn, and immediately ask them to practice in small groups, working through another Rig Veda hymn. My goal is for them to appreciate the emotional quality of many of the early hymns, the reciprocity of early Vedic ritual practice, and their sheer literary beauty. We finish the poems with a few verses from Mandala X, so that students see the beginning of speculative thought. We move into discussion of what life must have been like for those early Indo-Aryans, and to

the development of a formal priesthood. They learn that the Brahmins have continued in their role as religious custodians, and in some cases, sole religious authorities to the present day, though not always unchallenged.

Once students begin to use critical reading skills, I redirect their attention to contemporary materials that pertain to some of the issues that we are interested in for that class. For example, *India Today* had an article in its January 1994 issue that shatters the stereotype that only male brahmins can serve as priests. The article noted that starting with a small group of conservative Maharashtrian housewives, an increasing number of women have trained in Vedic prayer and ritual, and have been officiating at weddings and other ceremonies much to the consternation of some male priests. We then read recent scholarly research of such women, for instance, published by Laurie Patton.

India Today also recently published articles on the various waves of the yoga boom in the United States and on the search for spirituality among diaspora South Asians. Even such things as the food sections of the Sunday newspaper supplement from Kolkata during the holiday season are useful to discuss the familiar idea of preparing special food for the holidays. Reading this section makes it clear to students that some things may appear to be cross-cultural in broad general terms, but if they do closer readings, they can see how Indian holiday food differs from what they fix in their own homes. An article from the *Times of India*

on new environmental protection laws that mandate removing all decorations from puja images before immersing them in local rivers leads to a discussion of what happens to these images at the end of festivals. It helps to illustrate how the form of divine presence is first invoked and later released, and also shows how contemporary concerns about the health of the waterways has led to an adaptation in the way these festivals culminate, giving us yet another example of religion as a living, changing entity.

News stories of the squabbles over administration of the Mahabodhi Temple — the temple erected centuries ago at the reputed site of the Buddha’s enlightenment — in Bodh Gaya, a Hindu-majority town in one of the poorest states in India, can trigger discussion of who should be in charge there. A picture featuring a model of the Statue of Liberty alongside images of the goddess during Kali Puja in Kolkata helps raise questions about the figures of the goddess which are anything but fixed, and demonstrates that religious stories can adapt to take into account contemporary world events.

In addition to articles, I also like to include advertisements for their visual impact. Ads can make very strong statements, and those placed in newspapers and magazines during major religious

holidays tell us a great deal about how the devout embrace their religious beliefs. I ask students to talk about their first impressions when they encounter one of these in their course reader. What does it mean to be able to buy Krishna kitchen utensils? Can we buy, for example, something like Mother Mary bread or Jesus brand dishwashing soap here in the United States? Why does Broline, a company that manufactures antiseptic skin cream, take out half- and full-page newspaper advertisements during the Indian holiday season? The Broline ads sell nothing, but tell the story of Durga Puja or Diwali, and bear a rather sanitized depiction of a relevant demon. The name of the company appears only at the end of the ad, “Bijoya Greetings from Boroline, part of Bengal’s life and times.”

One of my favorite examples of how religion is intertwined with culture is an article from the *Hindustan Times*

of Kolkata published on March 13, 2004, just before India’s cricket match with Pakistan. It features a large photo of priests worshipping at Kalighat Temple to ensure that “Goddess Kali will help them win against their arch rivals.” Surrounded by fans holding signs wishing the team victory, the priests solemnly carry out their rituals. The reporter tells us, “Every cricket match is important but one against Pakistan calls for special prayers.” The ordinariness of the fans with their posters makes a striking juxtaposition with the bare-chested, dhoti-clad priests seated on the ground with their ritual implements.

Glossy magazines like *India Perspectives* and the *India Magazine* are also fun to use with students. I recently found a grocery bag filled with back issues of both magazines. Among other treasures was a 1987 article with beautiful photographs by Andreas Maleta called “The Holy Cow.” One of the most consistent questions we all get from students of Hinduism is some variation on why is the cow sacred. Maleta’s article was not a scholarly piece, but it answers that question by tracing the role of cattle from early Indo-European civilizations into modern India. This is the sort of accessible writing that gives students an insider’s perspective on a belief that was at first glance simply incomprehensible.

I like to de-center religion to show that it is often not a separate category from people’s everyday lives. As I read newspapers and magazines during my travels, I diligently search for pieces depicting ordinary people engaged in their own everyday religious lives. If those people happen to be young adults of about the same age as our undergraduates, so much the better.