

## Teaching About India: Choices and Challenges

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Among all the ancient civilisations, India stands out for its distinctive past. India has been a land of immense contrasts and diversities shifting between contours of tradition and modernity as well as change with continuity. To some, images of India are best typified with maharajahs, snake-charmers, wild elephants and holy cows. Yet, for others, India is a land of unbounded optimism brimming with a middle class of approximately 200 million and for whom the consumerism of the West knows no bounds (Said, 1978; Forster, 1924). Then, what is India? Even though I am a native Indian who has done his early education and spent his adult life in India, I still find India to be a mystifying place, and I can well understand the dilemma my students deal with while encountering the oriental mystery known as India. Other questions surface. How do students study India? How do I teach an academic course on India to a group of post-secondary students in another cultural setting? What do I include in a curriculum? What do I exclude? Is there a right way of teaching India?

I faced the challenge of answering these questions when I first taught a course on India outside my native country, India, in 1989. Over the years, I have taught at several universities and private and public liberal four-year educational institutions in the United States, and it has been truly a challenging experience. I still face the same type of undertaking today when I teach about India at Miyazaki International College (MIC) in Japan. Since each educational setting is varied with a different emphasis on curriculum objectives, an instructor must be prepared to make changes without changing the core aspects of the course he or she teaches, and in this context, formal and informal need analyses ought to be undertaken to determine what students need and want to learn in class (Tennant, 1998). In this paper, I will first briefly outline MIC's educational setting, followed by the curriculum choices that I made, and the teaching strategies that I employed to meet the college's unique objectives (i.e., active learning, critical thinking, cross-cultural study).

### Adapting to a New Educational Setting

For a fully accredited institution such as Miyazaki International College, located in Southern Kyushu in Japan, which with its emphasis on internationalization (*Kokusaika*) is a pioneer and a novel experiment in the field of higher education, one has to adopt instructional strategies in a careful manner. Although there are still many sectors of Japanese society and bureaucracy which have strongly resisted reorienting the academic curriculum and going beyond the narrow ethnocentric approach, MIC has done remarkably well in the short duration of its existence (Otsubo, 1995). Of course, MIC can not fix all the problems of the world, but at least it helps its students to think in global ways and to be able to communicate in English, the linking international language for Japan to relate to the rest of the world (Mervio and Takahasi, 1998). A course on India fits perfectly with

the MIC mission as MIC endeavors to be an international institution that seeks to promote among its students cross-cultural understanding, a sense of being citizens of the world, and respect for cultural diversity in a global society (MIC Bulletin, 2000). In addition, the new Global Studies major being offered at MIC provides the students with interdisciplinary perspectives in the study of important issues and developments in the modern world, including important cultures such as that of India.

### **Adopting a Comparative Approach**

One can develop a course curriculum on India with an integrated approach by looking at concepts, metaphors, and historical developments. For example, it is possible to talk about the Indus valley civilization with its unique features and contributions to mankind and then move to the next segment by discussing the origin of Hinduism and the coming of the Aryans into the Indian sub-continent. It is a monumental challenge to decide what to include and what to exclude. In a sense, there is an element of inter-connectedness. But also, it is possible to deal with these important historical developments as individual learning units. Along these lines, the classical Hindu dynasties of the Mauryas and the Guptas, the advent of the Muslims to the sub-continent, the Mughals, the British and the colonial phase, the struggle for India's independence, and the post-colonial period can be discussed in a series of units. I, instead, prefer a comparative approach. By using this approach, I strive to attain the following teaching objectives:

- To understand and appreciate the diverse social and cultural patterns of India and also its comparison with other oriental societies, namely, China and Japan (see Basham, 1996; Nehru, 1991; Embree, A, 1988).
- To develop the ability to think constructively about the 'other', i.e. the capacity for responsible encounters with different cultures, races, ethnic groups, beliefs, and world views.
- To gain knowledge of the legacy of the Indian civilisation, especially an awareness of its achievements and failures as seen from the writings of Indian specialists in the East and the West (see Gandhi, 1983; Wolpert, 1991).
- To understand, analyze, and evaluate the problems and challenges of Indian society in contemporary times.

### **Handling Culturally-Sensitive, Cross-Cultural Topics**

While talking about the Hindu caste system, it is sometimes difficult and uncomfortable to discuss it in a comparative perspective. I find my students in Japan to be somewhat wary on this culturally-sensitive topic. While it is an accepted fact that there does exist a lower caste group, Burakumin, in Japanese society, no student wants to talk about it or even raise the subject remotely, as if it does not exist. But the same set of students is quite eager to know more about the term, Untouchables, along with its connotation in the social, political, and economic spheres, and how Mohandas K. Gandhi, the architect of independent India, sought to alleviate the conditions of this group of outcaste people by giving them an honorific title of Harijan (Children of God). My task was, however, somewhat easier when I discussed the role of Burakumin in a larger historical context of the

Tokugawa period during which Japan was undergoing a period of complete isolation from the Western world. The students also understood it quite well when the caste system in India was compared and contrasted with the class-bound societies of ancient Egypt, Greece, and Rome. It must also be remembered that in a liberal arts education, whether in Social Sciences or Humanities, it is quite common to find students wrestling with the background knowledge of specific reading texts, linguistic features in the text itself, and the employment of graphics to convey information (Sagliano, M., 1996). Add to it the cultural sensitivities, and the challenges in imparting a well-rounded instruction, integrating language and content can truly be overwhelming.

### **Teaching about India through Active Learning**

Certain aspects of India's diversity can be truly entertaining and of immense educational value provided they are done with an innovative combination of active learning and short lectures. For example, while teaching about Hindu gods and goddesses, I asked the students to put on the board whatever information they could, based on their prior knowledge and understanding of the subject matter; that is, what things came to mind when they thought of the term, Hindu, Hinduism, or god or goddess or God Ganesha or Goddess Lakshmi. As can be expected, some students did come up with certain terms and statements, with all their imperfections. It was possible then to pick up the pieces from these random generalisations and put them into some contexts. The students were then given handouts, one written by the instructor himself at the level of language proficiency understood by the students, as well as another source downloaded from the internet sites. Students were divided into four groups, and each group was assigned one specific paragraph from the reading to comprehend the word meanings and text, and to put on the board the key words and a summary. This task was then reshuffled among other groups so that each student within that group had completed reading, analyzing, and discussing the handouts in their entirety. As a visual aid, large colored posters of individual Hindu deities along with miniature statues of each were placed on the students' tables. The students were asked to find unique physical features of individual deities. Based on what they saw in the picture and also after reading and finding information about the origin, purpose, stories and festivals connected with the divine beings, at the second phase of this unit, each student was asked to come to the board again, and write the name of the deity, the gender, the physical characteristics, etc. At the end of this exercise, the students had a fair idea of looking at important gods and goddesses on a comparative basis. For a course on India, as a further supplemental activity, the students were asked to write a short two-page research paper on an individual god or goddess (see Figure 1 for a description).

Students selected a deity of their choice. A handout containing a list of comprehensive web sites on Hindu Gods was given to the students. The computer laboratory was reserved in advance in anticipation of doing this task during class time. Students were given a work sheet handout, and both the language and content teachers went through the handout, explaining exactly what the students were supposed to do and accomplish.

### Directions for Short Research Paper

1. Pick one of the Hindu Gods to write a short research report.
2. Gather material from library books and web sites. You must find material from two or more web sites on the internet and at least one source from the library.
  - a) Remember: If you use a direct quote, then you must use quotation marks.
  - b) If you are collecting any information from these sources--even in your own words--then you must cite these sources at the end of your paper in a bibliography (List of sources).
3. Things to include in your report:
  - a physical description of the god
  - specific reasons why Hindus worship this god
  - a summary of an interesting story connected with the god
  - a description and location of any festival associated with the god
  - a drawing of the god
4. This research paper must be at least two pages long.

Figure 1

Active learning tools on Hindu Gods can also be made by watching a video related to any Hindu religion with the students required to take down important points. Also, from a pedagogical point of view and keeping in mind the particular needs of an institution such as Miyazaki International College, we can experiment with different workable strategies with an eye to blend language learning, content learning, and thinking skills development (Stewart, 1996).

### Reinforcing Learned Concepts

On a broad scale, at the conclusion of the unit on religion, a compare and contrast activity was done with the students filling in information on a chart divided into various categories (such as time period, caste system, animal sacrifice ritual, god(s), founder(s), population, beliefs in re-birth and re-incarnation, holy book(s), festival(s), place(s) of worship, etc.). For each of the three major religions in India, namely, Hinduism, Islam and Buddhism, this type of chart was used. This strategy of reinforcement has worked quite well in my class in Japan as it did in the United States; that is, it was effective both in a four year liberal arts institution with an average class size of twenty-five and in a university setting with a larger student body.

### Personalizing Instruction

Similar kinds of active learning activities can be undertaken for other world religions as well. For example, when I teach Islam, I bring personal perspectives of how it feels to be born as a Muslim in a country which is predominantly Hindu and where there are deep divisions between the followers of Hinduism and Islam, and yet the country's official policy remains secular, respecting all religious faiths in equal terms. I also bring forth to the students how Islam is being practiced in the United States and Japan. Not many students are aware that Islam is the fastest growing religion in the United States and that there are over one hundred Islamic mosques (places of worship) in Japan alone and that a number of Japanese people

have embraced Islam through conversion. Personal stories connected with certain interesting aspects of a religion does add to the level of curiosity and enthusiasm among the students. Along these lines, I have also shared with my students a video clipping and colorful pictures of the holy cities of Mecca and Medina and the Haj pilgrimage as well as telling the students how I had an enlightening experience of going to these holy places of Islam. Students have asked me numerous questions ranging from whether I wore white dress all the time to whether I had more than one wife, as the practice of polygamy does exist in the Islamic faith. Some students in the United States asked me about the meaning and relevance of Islamic Jihad and whether all Muslim people are terrorists, based upon their stereotyped images of what they see in the mass media. It is also an interesting learning experience for the students to see a prayer rug, prayer beads, a prayer cap, and also to touch and read the Islamic holy book, the Koran, when I bring these items to the class.

**Step I: Group Oral Reports:**

1. Group research: Group members are to initiate informal discussion on the subject they choose.
2. Group must do combined research.
3. Group Oral Report. (Each person in the group must speak.)
4. Group handout summarizing the position of the country/countries that your group is responsible for. Have this handout ready to give to the teacher the class meeting before your oral report.
5. Pick the best 1-3 articles to pass out to the rest of the class. Bring these articles to the class meeting before your oral report so that the teacher can make copies for the rest of the class.
6. Group decides on using the blackboard or the overhead projector or any other resources of communications that are needed.

**Figure 2**

On another occasion, I had to start a unit on nuclear proliferation in the Indian sub-continent. Just as a matter of coincidence, it so happened that both India and Pakistan had conducted tests for nuclear bombs. For my Japanese students, it was a shocking experience as they related their own fear of a real outbreak of an all-out nuclear war. It was quite understandable in view of the sensitivity of the topic as Japan is the only country in the world, so far, to have first-hand experience of the horrors of a nuclear bomb that caused widespread destruction of lives and properties in the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August, 1945. Luckily, for me, a number of useful web sites opened up on the internet on the topic. Also, in various newspapers being published from India and Pakistan as well as in other western countries including Japan, there were several days of uninterrupted special coverage on this subject. I collected as many sources as possible. Based upon these sources, I divided my class into several groups (see Figure 2 for details of the task). One group was responsible for reporting on India, while others were responsible for Pakistan, China/Japan, Russia/United States, the rest of the G-8 countries, and the issue of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) and the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). Each of the groups was given an adequate amount of background materials by the instructor.

## Developing Critical Thinking Skills

Debate format was also used as it was found to be an effective active learning tool to engage and motivate students in critical thinking a serious global issue of far reaching consequences, such as the spread of nuclear weapons. (see Figure 3 for the outline of the debate project.) Also, a debate format can address all four language skills in an integrated fashion: it stresses analytical thinking; the students can articulate the ideas in English language and judge and challenge opposing viewpoints of the issue in question (Sagliano, J., 1996).

### Step 2: Debate

1. Each group will take part in a debate.
2. The group must pretend that they are government representatives of the country they are responsible for, and they have to defend that country's official stand on this issue.
3. Groups responsible for more than one country will divide their groups so that each country has some responsibility (i.e., the group responsible for China and Japan will break into two parts, one representing China and the other, Japan. The same for the group that is responsible for Russia and the United States. The rest of the G-8 nations will represent the views of individual countries of that association. The CTBT/NPT group will do likewise.
4. First, each group will present their country's position.
5. Second, the group will take turns asking a question to other group members.
6. The debate will be scheduled after the oral reports are completed.

Figure 3

## Being Reflective

Teaching and discussing about India in a classroom setting, whether in the United States or in Japan, with divergent student bodies and academic curriculum requirements, can be an enjoyable and truly educational experience, provided it is done with care and precision. I have used the teaching strategies described above with a good deal of success, and with resilience and persistence. In the future, I think it will be possible to even venture to use bolder and more innovative methods of active learning tools. Like the rest of the world, India is also changing, and yet something remains static, as is reflected in its 5,000 years of cultural moorings and the ongoing struggle between tradition and modernity and in its artifacts that range from Boeings to bullock carts, India has come of age. As a commentary made in the *Los Angeles Times*, Oksenberg said; "In Aesop's fable of the tortoise and the hare, one finds life's repeating stories: plodding wins the race" (1994, p. M5). The author predicts that it is not China, but rather, India which will be the true giant of Asia and will be an important economic power to reckon with in the new millennium. If that prophecy becomes true, then India would have come a long way from being the Jewel of the Crown to being the master of the 21st century, and teaching India would be even more imperative.

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