



Children dressed as Lord Krishna wait for a fancy dress competition. Credit: Ajay Verma/Reuters

Teaching Tales: Harnessing the Power of Storytelling in the Hindu Studies Classroom and Beyond

Spotlight on Teaching

Raj Balkaran, Editor

Spotlight on Teaching is a major teaching and learning initiative of the AAR and its Committee on Teaching and Learning. Over the last several years, it has become a principal venue for exploring opportunities and challenges in teaching and learning about religions. *Spotlight* appears in *Religious Studies News* twice a year as a member benefit. Each issue focuses on a particular theme, concern, or setting.

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Press, 2018). He teaches courses on Hinduism (including “Hindu Mythology”), Indian religions, and religious studies theory.

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Harnessing the Power of Storytelling in the Hindu Studies Classroom and Beyond

Raj Balkaran, University of Toronto

Once there was a king, a good and noble king,
And this king was king over the entire earth.
He treated his subjects as if they were his own children.
Although he was wise, although he was powerful,
His lands were usurped by nefarious princes,
And he was left with only his own province to rule.
That, too, fell under the sway of corrupt minsters.
Bereft of his power, baffled, demoralized,
He mounted his horse and rode into the deep dark forest...

So begins the story of the ill-fated king of the *Devī Māhātmya* (The Greatness of the Goddess), Suratha, who wanders into the forest and encounters a sage, Medhas. The forest-dwelling sage schools Suratha on the nature of suffering and mechanics of sovereign empowerment. What does Suratha's schooling look like? He is told three riveting stories of the grandeur of the Goddess, of the colossal marital feats she undertakes in the defense of dharma, protection of the gods, punishment of evil-doing demons, and restoration of heaven's throne. Enthralled by her majesty, her mystique, her extraordinary power, the king resolves to worship her for three long years whereby he earns a boon: the power to reclaim his throne.

The Goddess in fact grants two boons: sovereignty to the king and liberation (*mokṣa*) to the king's merchant companion. In doing so, she artfully expresses a dichotomy at the heart of the Hindu world: the opposing ideals of ascetics and kings, what I call Hinduism's dharmic double helix. Brāhmaṇic ideology can dispense neither with the values of the world-affirming householder, epitomized by the king, nor those of the world-abnegating renouncer, epitomized by the ascetic. The Goddess richly encodes the ambivalence between spiritual and social power, integrating these opposing ideologies through a vision a supreme power as the source of both. Decoding her greatness, then, necessarily results in decoding Hinduism, which she teaches at every turn. But just as the king is schooled by her tales, we are *doubly* schooled, learning from *his* tale *and* the tales within his tale about the Goddess's glory. The telling of tales is a powerful pedagogical tool. Such stories teach us not only about Hinduism, but also about how to teach Hinduism.

Just as this article opened with a story, so, too, have so many of my classes at the University of Toronto School of Continuing Studies where I've taught religion and mythology courses since 2010. I might tell a mythic tale from Egypt, Babylon, Greece, Rome, India, Persia, or China. Live storytelling remains a cornerstone to my particular brand of student engagement whether at the School, while teaching religion to undergrads at Ryerson University this past year, or guest lecturing at various University of Toronto undergraduate religion courses since 2012. Why live storytelling? The gist of this pedagogical strategy is to immerse learners into an impactful storied experience where they can intimately experience the religious themes encoded within the tale being told. Only then do we defer to the analytic mind to decipher the storytelling they experienced—an undertaking interspersed with lecture unpacking vital material along the way. The level of engagement and retention occasioned by this strategy has been astonishing.

Teaching a religion's favorite stories is an excellent way of teaching what that religion most values. In understanding a religious tradition's most cherished stories, we come to intimately understand that tradition even when the stories appear ancillary to the heart of the matter. For example, the story of the king relayed at the outset of this article serves merely a framing device to the acts of the Goddess themselves, a device dismissed outright over the past 150 years of scholarship on the Devī Māhātmya as a flimsy means of latching the Goddess's glories into the larger mythological fabric of the Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa in which the text is couched. However, my research demonstrates the rich utility of taking seriously the frame narrative for grappling with the Goddess's glories. These findings are forthcoming in a book to be published fall 2018, in Routledge's Hindu Studies Series and entitled *The Goddess and the King in Indian Myth*. Suffice is to say that framing stories is crucial for understanding an Indian text, even when that text is received as more philosophical than mythological in nature. An excellent example is to be found in the Upaniṣads.

In "Teaching Stories about Teaching Self: Upaniṣadic Narrative in the Classroom," (6) Steven Lindquist (Southern Methodist University) discusses an unassumingly radical pedagogical strategy: engaging Upaniṣadic narratives *as narratives*. When we assume that the Upaniṣadic stories are exclusively about classical Hindu philosophy—advancing concepts such as *ātman* and *brahman*, for example—we lose sight of salient themes encoded within the very characters, plots, and narrative cradling these concepts. Lindquist's students get to unpack narrative framing, character and characterization, foreshadowing, plot, narrative tension, looking to clues embedded in the social positioning of characters (e.g., caste, gender, and social role, such as a family member, king, god, or teacher) and speech characteristics (such as repetition, sarcasm, threats, and ways that these could be interpreted by an audience). In doing so, they come to see that Upaniṣadic narratives are much more than flimsy literary conceits deployed to anchor key concepts such as *ātman*, *karma*, renunciation, *mokṣa*. Maintaining an appreciation of such stories *as stories* is vital for understanding the various historical horizons striving to preserve the Upaniṣads as hallmarks of classical Hindu thought. Stories have served as the tissues of Hinduism from Vedic to modern times. Is it a wonder, then, that our next contributor draws heavily on narrative to introduce student to the Hindu tradition as a whole?

Hillary Rodrigues discusses some innovative narrative strategies in Hinduism textbooks he has implemented wherein he uses narrative to enhance student experience (10). Rodrigues brings a wealth

of insight, having taught introductory Hinduism for twenty-five years, and having authored Hinduism textbooks drawing from his teaching experience. He shares the journey that led him to break the mold of traditional textbooks while preparing *Hinduism – the eBook* by including “about half a dozen narrative vignettes, often at the start of certain chapters,” a strategy adopted keeping his undergraduate audience front and center in mind. *Hinduism – the eBook* was adopted and produced by Routledge in a printed version as *Introducing Hinduism*. Rodrigues reports that “the technique of narrative inclusions was unanimously lauded as highly appealing to students” as well as their professors who had used it for years in their classrooms. Moreover, his *Studying Hinduism in Practice* called contributors to step out of their academic styles and to tell the story of their raw personal experience in the field, inclusive of their own thoughts and feelings while engaging their data. The efficacy of personal accounts as a teaching tool is discussed by our next contributor.

In “Teaching Tales: Mokashi’s ‘Religious’ Narratives,” (14) Jeffrey M. Brackett speaks of his reliance upon ethnographic accounts and novels while teaching his introductory course on Hinduism. His students repeatedly rank D. B. Mokashi’s *Palkhi: An Indian Pilgrimage* among their favorite books in the course, owing to the fact that it reads like a novel on one hand, and a memoir on the other. Mokashi recounts his journey with the Warkari movement in Maharashtra, India, on its annual pilgrimage to Pandharpur. The account synthesizes several course themes as Mokashi narrates mundane aspects of his pilgrimage, for example, the selfishness of other pilgrims, charlatan teachers, broken families, thieves, rumors, ridicule of education, child labor, caste, and gender divisions. Not only do the students get to engage a story of personal experience, they get to interlace it with their own personal story: Brackett assigns a self-reflective exercise pertaining to the book. Students are thereby afforded a “relatable” learning experience that stays with them.

In addition to the formal telling and teaching of religious narratives, personal storytelling is also an extremely powerful teaching tool. I had the good fortune of serving as Ryerson University’s very first world religions instructor this past year. Ryerson is located in the downtown core of the world’s most diverse city: Toronto, Canada’s cultural capital. As such, the student body is wonderfully textured, comprised of learners hailing from a variety of religious, philosophical, and intellectual traditions. Such a student body holds within itself tremendous data for our discipline, embedded in their very practices, outlooks, lifestyles, and narratives they’ve internalized. Elizabeth Rohlman offers great insight into adopting this in her article about the Purāṇas and the ethnography in the classroom (17). Rohlman reflects on the evolution of her own teaching at the University of Calgary, where her undergraduate classes are mostly populated by South Asian students, whether fifth-generation Canadians descended from the Sikh laborers who built the Canada Pacific Railway in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries or newly immigrated Canadians. Inspired by Giorgio Bonazolli’s observation that the genre of purāṇa (Indian myth) functions dually to preserve an original essence *and* to cater to the ever-evolving religious needs of human beings on the earth, Rohlman frames her courses with an understanding of the value of both *emic* and *etic* perspectives in the study of religion. In addition to introducing students to the variety of data that scholars of religion consider in their work, she brings in ethnographic practices to her teaching to achieve an atmosphere of interactive dynamism. This strategy, as she details, has been tremendously successful in student engagement, and she proposes this approach would work

across the teaching of various religious traditions as well: all it requires is an invitation to students to be self-reflective and to tell their own stories.

In “Teaching Hindu Stories as Ways of Fashioning Selves and Framing Lives,” (23) Shana Sippy discusses her pedagogical goal of having students consider how Hindus draw upon religious narratives to interpret their lives, relating to key stories for the production of political ideologies, community ties, and moral bearings. Sippy details two pedagogical strategies towards this end: critical engagement with Hindu supplementary school curricula and engaging practitioners at Hindu temples, attentive to the manner in which the religious narratives impact their personal narratives. For example, she details a classroom adventure when she took her “Modern Hinduism” class to the Minnesota Hindu Milan Mandir in 2010. The temple (mandir) was housed in a one-room converted garage in the suburb of Eagan, Minnesota, at the home of Satya Balroop, its Indo-Guyanese founder. Sippy strategically prompted Balroop to share the story of her family’s migration and founding of the temple. Balroop’s story was necessarily punctuated by references to the divine presence invisible guiding her path every step of the way. She encouraged students to engage temple practitioners in a similar manner, learning how they situate their personal stories in the larger context of Hindu stories.

The emphasis on storytelling—whether mythological, ethnographic, or personal—is geared, I feel, at hearkening to the embodied nature of experience: every story pertains to an experience, and every experience can be narrated as story. One can immerse students into such a field of experience through a variety of media. I mentioned I might tell a mythic tale at the outset of my classes, but I might also share a modern mythic tale in the form of a video clip from *Chronicles of Narnia*, *Star Wars*, or *The Lord of The Rings*. In his article (29), Caleb Simmons takes emphasizing the experiential who a whole new level in what he calls “transmedia balancing,” that is, a novel pedagogical strategy entailing incorporation of various media in the classroom “that both exhibits the diverse range of sources for religious knowledge and seeks to activate in students multiple learning fluencies about the same subject matter.” His students are afforded the chance to interpret Hindu myth as expressed not only in Sanskrit and vernacular texts, but also in 3D sculptures, films, paintings, performances, and 360-degree visualizations of interiors of temples and palaces decorated with murals. This results in a more apt representation of how diversely practitioners have engaged their narratives over the ages. It also appeals to various learning styles (visual, aural, physical, as well as verbal), and fosters fluency development in multiple ways of knowing as opposed to engaging only text. Simmons’s strategy is, as he states outright, “designed to resist the hegemony of the printed word,” one particularly incongruent with the multimedia dynamism innate to South Asian religious expressions.

Stories masterfully facilitate student engagement. They accommodate different learning styles and encompass a variety of media: lecture, discussion, slides, artwork, and film. Storytelling captures attention, imparts values, and itself constitutes a living tradition. Stories create space for student processing and supply fine fodder for reflection and discussion. When you actually relay personal anecdotes or mythic tales—rather than merely talking about it—your students are afforded a level of experience which they are otherwise denied. In entering that story, the story enters them and offers a level of impact unachievable by description alone. As Hillary Rodrigues writes:

Stories connect authors and readers, or tellers and listeners far more intimately than impersonal and merely informative modes of communication. Within the receptivity and focus that is induced when one is absorbed in reading or listening to a tale, learning inevitably occurs... [indeed] we listen to stories, remember them, retell them, and may even model ourselves on their characters. (12)

Students across the board tend to greatly value storytelling as an enjoyable and impactful educational experience since stories render material memorable and relatable. We therefore invite you to teach stories, and to teach through stories, whether canonical or anecdotal, as you continue to enrich your thinking and teaching within the religious studies classroom and beyond.

Teaching Stories about Teaching Self: Upaniṣadic Narrative in the Classroom

Steven E. Lindquist, Southern Methodist University

Prior to the last couple decades, detailed discussion of Upaniṣadic narrative in scholarship was rare and even looked upon with a degree of suspicion or dismissal; linguistic and philosophical interests dominated the literature. More recently, though, such narratives have started to receive more serious treatment *as narratives*. Olivelle, Brereton, Black, Grinshpon, and I have analyzed different stories or different themes across those stories. While I can only speak anecdotally, this previous suspicion towards Upaniṣadic narrative has never held for the undergraduate religious studies classroom, though a bias towards the doctrinal or philosophical persists. The Upaniṣads, like the Bhagavad Gītā, are texts that must be approached in Hindu studies' classes, even if cursorily (generally with more consideration than the Vedas if less than the Epics or later literature). Given the fundamental place of the Upaniṣads in Hindu religious history—as our first discussions of *karma* and liberation as well as taken as the "culmination of the Vedas" by many within the tradition—Upaniṣadic narratives are commonly utilized in the classroom. But unlike the Gītā and the Epics more broadly, the norm for including Upaniṣadic narratives seems to be primarily as side examples meant to ease students into some of the difficulties of grappling with Upaniṣadic ideas. This is, at least to some degree, reasonable: the narratives can be enjoyable, even humorous, and the expository passages of the Upaniṣads are difficult to grapple with even for a specialist, let alone an undergraduate student. Moreover, the narratives in the Upaniṣads easily lend themselves to the role of examples (and they have done so often enough in the Hindu tradition itself) since the majority of the Upaniṣads' contents are explicitly portrayed as difficult to understand.

How one teaches about the Upaniṣads or approaches the narratives in any primary text, of course, depends on the type of course being taught and one's particular pedagogical goals. In one fashion or another, I teach the Upaniṣads across the spectrum: in a broad Asian religions survey, in an introductory Hinduism course, and in a more specialized course on narratives in ancient India. It is the last that I have more in mind here, if only because that lends itself to more possibilities for potential readers to glean from for their own purposes. But whatever my course-specific goals might be, a larger pedagogical goal in each of these contexts is to instill an intellectual appreciation for the Upaniṣads as primary sources or, in the context of this essay, especially the stories within them. Some of my thinking on the nature of how to teach students about the Upaniṣads, particularly how to think *with* and *through* the narratives within the Upaniṣads, has recently been published in Sarah Iles Johnston's edited *Narrating Religion* as well as in Signe Cohen's edited *The Upaniṣads: A Complete Guide*.

My primary strategy in approaching Upaniṣadic narrative in the classroom may initially appear naively commonsensical: *treat them seriously as narratives*. But as we all know, what should be "common," let alone "possessed of sense," can prove remarkably elusive. And, in fairness, there is a comparable, though not necessarily the same, tendency to sideline or dismiss narrative within certain Western classical texts (such as the works of Plato) to focus on philosophical and religious ideas.

By approaching these texts seriously as narratives, we must contend with the basics of narrative, not only as the structural elements or formalities of the text, but also in how such aspects work with—and are even part and parcel of—the philosophical or religious teachings.

When first broaching the Upaniṣads in the classroom—whether in an introductory or advanced setting (note: the majority of my department's advanced courses do not have prerequisites, so I cannot assume familiarity with Hinduism)—I begin with a broad textual history of the genre, for example, the emergence out of the Vedic ritual schools, the newly forming urban environment with which the texts are responsive, as well as certain central terms and doctrinal concepts such as *ātman*, *karma*, renunciation, and *mokṣa*. Since the Upaniṣads are composite texts and since the overwhelming majority of Upaniṣadic stories are dialogues, I always emphasize that we will look at such concepts in the texts not as reproducing doctrinal *conclusions*, but as *processes* where such "central" concepts actually may not be central or may be defined differently or contested in any given context.

The students and I discuss such basics as narrative framing, character and characterization, foreshadowing, plot, and narrative tension. We look at the social positioning of characters (e.g., caste, gender, and social role, such as a family member, king, god, or teacher), especially how the text utilizes such positioning directly and subtly both within and outside of the narrative frame. We examine speech characteristics (such as repetition, sarcasm, threats, and ways that these could be interpreted by an audience). Depending on the length of the particular unit, we compare different stories thematically. While hardly representative of the oral tradition, I also have students read aloud portions of the texts in translation to attempt, however modestly, to separate themselves from the written word. This proves particularly effective in getting them to appreciate structure and the role of repetition and verse citation.

One type of assignment that I am particularly fond of when teaching the Upaniṣads is having students graph or chart particular passages or the narrative structure of a larger text unit. While it is not possible to have undergraduate students significantly attempt to enter into the aesthetic realm of an ancient learned audience, I think it is possible to have them visually appreciate, in a limited fashion, some of the aural and hyper-textual resources that a learned audience may know by virtue of having heard or taught a particular narrative or set of texts innumerable times. Such charting depends on the particular passage (sometimes I guide the students in the means of charting, other times I let them develop their own approach). Since a leitmotif of the Upaniṣads more broadly is *bandhus* (hierarchical "connections," often between the mundane and the abstract), charting becomes an important means to map what appears to be an apparently impenetrable text passage and realize that, while penetrating its meaning may be difficult—something the Upaniṣads repeatedly emphasize—it is not impossible and brings with it an appreciation for both the ingenuity of the composers and a learned audience. For example, outside of

the narrative context, I might have students initially chart the very beginning of the Bṛhadāraṇyaka (1.1.1), where various parts of the sacrificial horse are related to cosmological bodies, the seasons, time, etc. Not only do both the teacher and students appreciate our own varied skills with drawing horses (mine are particularly awful), but the students can begin to visualize a cosmos intimately connected to a ritual offering. Within the narrative context, we might chart together individual dialogue units in Yājñavalkya's debate at Janaka's court (BĀU 3), but then chart more broadly how each unit relates to each other suggesting the progression of the larger narrative, especially in a socio-ritual context of priestly roles in a sacrifice.

While the commentarial tradition on the Upaniṣads provides a wealth of resources in the teaching of the development of formal philosophy and key religious and philosophical ideas, its use in the context of narrative is more limited. While commentators may reference narrative elements, it is usually to provide a gloss rather than to discuss characters or narrative elements themselves. This is perfectly logical, of course, since their interests lie with clarifying particular passages or philosophical concepts and ultimately, the soteriological goal of liberation. And these certainly have an important place in the Hindu studies classroom. However, having students look at later tellings of Upaniṣadic stories—whether in the epics, the Purāṇas, or in modern comic book or cinematic forms—exposes them to a different form of commentary through retelling as well as gives them an appreciation for how and why stories might spread and *be made meaningful* over time especially outside of the expert philosophical traditions. I have found that such comparative interpretive endeavors work especially well for paper assignments. With regard to practical concerns in the classroom itself, however, I always have students read and grapple with the more difficult versions of the stories first (which often, but not always, means the historically earlier). More easily accessible retellings can over-influence interpretations of an earlier version in the minds of students. For example, we may study the story of Naciketas and his conversation with the god of death from the Katha Upaniṣad in detail—sometimes with snippets from the formal commentarial tradition—well before I expose them to, say, the Amar Citra Katha comic book version. In doing so in this manner, they become keenly aware of the sorts of hermeneutical and narrative moves that the author of the comic book is doing, for example, in elaborating the frame or contracting philosophical exposition. Not limited to the Upaniṣads, the students in my ancient narrative class do such comparative projects across a spectrum of possible texts and retellings in different media.

A colleague once jokingly remarked to me, "So you want to read the Upaniṣadic stories like the epics then?"

I responded, "Sure, but as long as we can also read the epics like an Upaniṣad... or a Vedic poem... or a novel."

While somewhat tongue-in-cheek, my colleague understood my intent: I want to read them first and foremost *as literature* and, as teachers of primary sources, we should be critically aware that pre-assumed genre distinctions backfill our interpretation of the texts, whether of narratives or otherwise. If we approach the Upaniṣadic stories as ultimately about philosophy, especially about the nature of *ātman* and *brahman*, then our reading of them hones in on those conclusions and the narrative, characters, and other themes disappear behind the curtain of the doctrinal. When we present a text to

students in this way, a student may develop a broad understanding of such concepts and doctrines, but they will tend to lose the interpretive instability of any text, the historical vagaries of religious change, and the processes of authority and authorization. We may, without our knowing, reassert a very particular orthodox interpretation, when our (or, at least, my) goal is to interrogate the basis and hermeneutic moves that leads to such interpretations. Moreover, I would argue, students risk losing the motivations for preservation and perpetuation of such stories *as stories*.

Further Reading

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Innovative Narrative Strategies in Hinduism Textbooks

Hillary Rodrigues, The University of Lethbridge

I wish to discuss three strategies that I have implemented utilizing narrative to enhance the textbook experience in the study of Hinduism. I have been teaching an introductory semester-long course in the Hindu tradition for about twenty-five years. By the end of each year of my first decade of teaching, my students and I were roundly disappointed with the various textbooks we had used in the course that year. Although well written and bursting with promise, the books were not well received by my students. They were often too chock-full of information, discussing dozens of minor Hindu sects and with needless references to scholars and their conflicting theories. Closer scrutiny revealed why they had initially appealed to me: they were partly written for the author's peers, namely, the professor who chooses the course texts, and not for the novice students who must slog their way through those poor choices. It is only when I accepted the offer to write a textbook of my own, *Hinduism – The eBook*, that I fully appreciated the reason why so many textbooks fail: when crafting the text, it took sustained effort to keep my intended student audience constantly front and center, because I was perennially concerned about how my peers would evaluate my competence. Such fears are healthy if they enhance the quality of one's work. However, they undoubtedly and unfortunately lead authors to include materials—such as the names of fellow academics and their cutting-edge debates, or erudite references to innumerable sectarian variations—which are largely irrelevant in the initial stages of the study of any religious tradition.

As an aside, I hesitantly jumped at the opportunity to write the eBook, but only after overcoming my initial reticence about digital books by reflecting on their potential. One must remember that this was about fifteen years ago, when anything academic produced in digital media, such as e-journals, was viewed with skepticism. Writing an introductory textbook was far more challenging than I had imagined because it required becoming familiar with the most recent scholarship in the fullest compass of the religious tradition. It is quite easy to produce an inadvertently lopsided text that emphasizes one's own areas of expertise, even as one simultaneously needs to make judgements about what topics to include or reject and the depth to which they might be covered. Finally, one has to condense that information in a manner that was both accurate and accessible. After struggling with these and other challenges, the eBook was eventually completed. A few years later, along with other eBooks in the series, it was adopted and produced by Routledge in a printed version as *Introducing Hinduism*. In rigorous, detailed reviews by numerous professors in the United Kingdom, Canada, and the United States who had used it for years in their classrooms, the technique of narrative inclusions was unanimously lauded as highly appealing to students, and second editions have recently been released. Even so, the potential that I

envisioned fifteen years ago in the construction of an eBook, with embedded audio and video, rich interactive graphics, and so on, is still far from being fully realized.

In *Hinduism – the eBook*, I broke the mold of traditional textbooks by inserting about half a dozen narrative vignettes, often at the start of certain chapters. I knew I was taking a risk in doing so, but I could not bring myself to create just another conventional textbook no matter how wonderful its content. To confess, these are stories of my experiences, but they are not framed as such, and for all intents and purposes could be fictions. I opted not to use fictional vignettes, because those might be vulnerable to the criticism that they are unrealistic. The vignettes begin with the phrase, “Imagine, if you will, this scenario,” which invites the student to enter a vicarious discovery of Hinduism as it might really unfold in one’s experience. Thus, instead of reading about the author’s experience, readers are invited into the narrative, which is written in the second, rather than the first, person. It is not “I was horseback riding . . .,” but “You have been horseback riding in the countryside of the state of Rajasthan and return late to your lodge on the outskirts . . .” Since Hinduism, as it is lived and practiced, cannot adequately be captured by generalizations, the personal vignette is effective at evoking the intrinsically situational character of religion and culture as it is experienced. In this I have been influenced by postmodern theorizing in anthropology, where self-disclosure of the ethnographer’s experience—revealing something of the encounter between the researcher and the researched’s cultures—is now normative. There is more to this technique than it simply being a strategy to gain the reader’s attention. Personal experience is vital in establishing ethnographic authority, because it assures the reader that you are not merely conveying second- or third-hand information. You were there, saw this and heard that, and these first-hand experiences have contributed to your understanding. This also constitutes part of the rationale behind the third strategic technique discussed below.

My second strategy simply draws upon the tried and true power of storytelling. Epic tales such as the *Rāmāyaṇa* and *Mahābhārata*, are far more effective at conveying moral values to the masses through the quandaries faced by their protagonists than the litany of rules listed in the Dharma Śāstras. We listen to stories, remember them, retell them, and may even model ourselves on their characters. In a dilemma of loyalty, would one act like Vibhīṣaṇa, who joined the righteous Prince Rāma against his own immoral brother Rāvaṇa, or be like the minister Mārīca, who met his demise through loyalty to the same Rāvaṇa, whom he knew was acting unrighteously? So, it is perplexing that conventional textbooks, which should be designed as pedagogic tools, do not adequately utilize narrative. Thus, instead of simply saying that the *Mahābhārata* is a popular tale of princely rivalry between cousins over rightful inheritance, I devote a few pages to summarizing that very long story. I also do this for various other Hindu myths. I contend that instead of a textbook simply saying that in Purāṇic myths Kālī was produced to destroy the demon Raktabījā, it is more appealing to read, “. . . and as the goddesses unleash their weapons on Raktabījā, Kālī laps up every drop of his blood before it touches the ground, and destroys him.”¹

The third strategy is an extension of the previous two, wherein I edit a textbook series entitled *Studying Religions in Practice*. The series plays on two connotations in the title, namely, 1) “studying religions in

¹ Hillary Rodrigues, *Hinduism – the eBook*, 2nd ed. (Journal of Buddhist Ethics Online Books, 2016), 245.

practice,” and 2) “*studying religions in practice.*” In the first connotation, books in this series strive to address situational expressions of religions as they are enacted. Certain scholars have criticized conventional Hinduism textbooks for presenting a master narrative that privileges the Brahminic, textual tradition. They press for books that convey the messy, lived, and highly varied expressions of Hinduism or Hinduisms, especially of marginalized segments of society whose voices are often ignored. The narrative vignettes in my texts, which I discuss above, go some distance to undercut the notion of a monolithic Hinduism, which is another rationale for their inclusion. However, *Studying Hinduism in Practice* addresses this concern much more effectively, and is therefore a worthwhile complement to any good textbook. It is the sort of collection that provides glimpses into a wide assortment of Hindu activities.

The second connotation, “*studying religions in practice,*” emphasizes the practice of studying and researching about religions. This feature is generally overlooked in most conventional textbooks, which are written with a dispassionate, authoritative voice. A Hinduism course in a secular university setting should not only teach about the tradition but also provide an opportunity to reveal a bit about the process of research. After all, what better time to teach about how researchers learned what they know and possibly inspire students to continue in the same vein? This too is where narrative is an extremely effective tool. In contrast to books about Hindu practice written from the perspective of polished, accomplished researchers, *Studying Hinduism in Practice* shares stories about the researcher’s raw experience “in the field.” Contributors were obliged to step out of their cultivated, and now habitual, academic styles and write a story about their experiences when studying a feature of Hinduism. The tales avoid analytic details derived from subsequent research and reflection; rather, they are simply descriptive accounts of the events, thoughts, and feelings of the researchers while they were engaged in those experiences. Yes, I did say thoughts and feelings. A holistic subjectivity is crucial for the success of a personal anecdote. Once student readers are hooked by the tale, and imaginatively join with the researchers in their experiential adventures of discovery, they are more likely to continue reading the second halves of the chapters, which are academic analyses of some facet of the researchers’ experiences. When teaching, I often ask students about their reactions to the narrative half of a pertinent piece in the collection—what they found intriguing, surprising, or perplexing about it, and what questions it elicited. Response to the narratives is quite effective at initiating classroom discussion because students do not have to demonstrate knowledge or feel that they have to ask intelligent questions. We are all affected by stories, and we all can speak easily about our reactions to them, as well as pose questions that the tales made us wonder about. Editions on Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam in this series have already been released.

In conclusion, I would encourage my colleagues and would-be instructors to revisit textbooks, especially if they have been inclined to reject them entirely in favor of an assortment of primary texts, such as the *Bhagavad Gītā*. In my experience, students feel reassured to have a reliable general resource at hand. Despite their many shortcomings, accessible and informative textbooks, particularly if they are engaging to read, can better serve as that reliable reference than Wikipedia or a half-dozen primary sources. Moreover, if instructors have been awakened to an appreciation for the effectiveness of narrative, I would further encourage them to make healthy use of anecdotes about their personal field experiences

when teaching. Having had the good fortune to travel extensively in South and Southeast Asia, I insert copious photographic imagery from my fieldwork into PowerPoint slides in my teaching. Hindu lithographs often depict deities with unusual attributes, and reliefs from temples often portray episodes from myths. A still shot of a ritual being enacted may scream out for a much longer explanation. Why is that man pouring boiling hot milk over his body on the grounds of a goddess temple while an astonished crowd of spectators looks on? Even if the images have not been obtained from one's own photographs, they may still serve as springboards for anecdotes that reveal something about Hinduism as a complex living tradition or provide opportunities to recount in more detail a myth portrayed in a sculptural relief. These stories should not be used to make sweeping generalizations about the tradition from a single piece of anecdotal evidence, but rather to enrich one's students' classroom experience. Stories connect authors and readers, or tellers and listeners, far more intimately than impersonal and merely informative modes of communication. Within the receptivity and focus that is induced when one is absorbed in reading or listening to a tale, learning inevitably occurs.

Further Reading

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Teaching Tales: Mokashi's "Religious" Narratives

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Teaching an introductory course on Hinduism presents a number of pedagogical challenges, not least of which is the selection of the course readings. This situation is not unique to instructors of Hindu traditions, as faculty across disciplinary subfields will attest. Of course, readings ought also to align with course goals and learning outcomes, and they should effectively integrate assignments appropriately scaffolded to facilitate said goals. Beyond these issues, one need also to consider one's institutional location: department, college, university, and community goals, mission, and expectations. On top of that, pedagogical choices ought also to negotiate the social locations of the students and their educational backgrounds (i.e., Is this their only course in religious studies? What is their major? How far along are they in their college experience?). Far from being an exhaustive list, these issues are intended simply to indicate the complexities facing instructors of introductory courses. I tend also to include two other elements: (1) Narratives, such as ethnographic accounts or novels; and (2) At least one assignment that is "self-referential" (more on that below), or, as many students say, "relatable." The first element tends to de-exoticize the course content, in part, by challenging Orientalism, essentialism, and sweeping metanarratives that call for historical—and other—contextualizing details.

Students continually rank D. B. Mokashi's *Palkhi: An Indian Pilgrimage* (SUNY Press, 1987) among their favorite books in my introductory course about Hinduism. Though the reasons they provide for this observation vary, the common thread is that the book reads like a novel on the one hand and like a memoir on the other. The personal element is clear, as the text records Mokashi's journey with the Warkari Sampraday ("movement") in Maharashtra, India, on its annual pilgrimage to Pandharpur. Mokashi's blunt description of the pilgrimage quickly disabuses readers of romanticized fantasies of the "spiritual nature" of such journeys. Mokashi seems more often than not to focus on the mundane, daily messiness of the pilgrimage, and the struggles—physical, social, fiscal, familial, educational, and so on—that function as a lens through which readers can have a glimpse of Indian religious life more broadly. Mokashi's integration of such stories leads to lively discussions on wide-ranging topics. Beyond the themes themselves, it is Mokashi's talent as a storyteller that keeps the reader's attention. Mokashi is, after all, counted as one among an elite group of Marathi writers who transformed, post-Independence, Marathi literature.

One need not be a Marathi literature aficionado to see how his work translates into the undergraduate classroom, even though his literature does indeed address salient issues in the study of Hindu (and other) religious practices in India. A sample of the issues that emerge from a close reading of his work include, for example, insider-outsider identity questions—Mokashi writes of how he is an insider to

Maharashtrian life, yet an outsider to the Warakari movement; the question of “authenticity,” as in, who decides for any group what counts as “authentic” and what is excluded? Mokashi calls himself a “Trip-kari,” highlighting his outsider status while on the Warkari pilgrimage. Yet Mokashi carefully shows that these binaries break down—his views of authenticity are fraught with naïve views, as are his assumptions of his outsider status. What is compelling about his account is its honest portrayal of the messiness of religious classification schemes, narrated as a daily diary that reads like a memoir. Rather than simply telling readers how to think of these and other categories, he illustrates them through his encounters with various interlocutors along the way. We hear from each person a story that complicates bookish knowledge of Hindu practice. These interactions with Warkaris and townspeople along the route provide students and instructors opportunities to discuss other topics that have shaped broader questions in the study of religion in India: relationships between “old” and “new” practices; distinctions between urban and rural settings; and the power of class, caste, education, and gender roles within (and outside of) the Warkaris. This list is a small sample of how one might connect Mokashi’s experiences (from his 1961 pilgrimage) to the Warkaris today.

When I assign *Palkhi*, we read it toward the end of the course as a way of bringing together several course topics. His matter-of-fact description of the pilgrimage humanizes a “sacred activity” by noting its thoroughly mundane aspects, told through stories of his experiences: selfish pilgrims, charlatan teachers, broken families, thieves, rumors, ridicule of education, child labor, caste and gender divisions, and much more. The most common assignment I give for this text is a reading-response essay in which I include a series of prompts. Last year, I changed this assignment into a self-reflexive essay that is paired with an art project. The goal is for students to think creatively about their own “journey/pilgrimage,” broadly conceived. Students write a short essay that connects their artwork with key moments in Mokashi’s text; that is, the project is not entirely self-referential. It is precisely the self-referential quality that leads to a conversation about ethnographic research, writing, reporting, and more. Although the artistic component was optional, most students chose to complete it.

On the assignment due date, students lined their work up in front of class and took turns explaining their art. Students made deeper and clearer connections with class materials than normal, in part because they were narrating personal stories. In subsequent classes, we address pros and cons of the art assignment and use that discussion as a reminder of the complexities of cross-cultural translation, transcreation, and self-reflexivity. Overall, the assignment challenges them to rethink all of the course materials, and it’s an assignment less easily forgotten after the course concludes. These types of assignments relate to another pedagogical question I’m asking: how do I incorporate art projects into the religious studies classroom? There is a growing number of resources to help us think through obvious questions, such as how to evaluate artwork in our courses; how our institutional location shapes how we teach; how our respective program and course goals weigh on our pedagogical choices; and how we can work toward creating better learning situations for our students.

Mokashi touches on some of the themes in *Palkhi* in other of his works, such as *Ananda Ovari* and *Farewell to the Gods* (the latter is available in English translation). Since I have translated *Ananda Ovari*, our discussion turns to the complexities of translation and transcreation. *Ananda Ovari* presents readers with a modern interpretation of Sant Tukaram (1608–1649). First, I’ll say a bit more about Sant

Tukaram—affectionately called ‘Tuka’ —, the most popular Marathi-speaking Hindu *sant* among the centuries-old Warkari movement. The cultural significance of the Warkaris, its *sants*, and its annual pilgrimage to Pandharpur is intricately woven within “Maharashtrian identity” as a whole. Though Warkaris are mainly uneducated, poor, low-class farmers, modern recollections of Tukaram often are composed by middle-class, educated, upper-caste, urbanites. Since Tuka’s biography itself vacillates between history and memory, there is a lot of room for continued artistic recreations of him. In fact, Dilip Chitre, the poet and longtime translator of Tuka’s poetry, claimed that much of what we know of Tuka’s life is folklore. Folklore or not, Tuka’s life story continues to inspire modern artistic interpretations. For example, thirty years after its initial publication, *Ananda Ovari* gained new life in 2004, when Vijay Tendulkar adapted it for the stage, a process of transcreation. Atul Pethe directed the play with Kishore Kadam as the lead actor. I’ve translated the novel, tweeted the Marathi and English, and now I’m moving into a phase of transcreation myself by setting out to transform *Ananda Ovari* into a graphic novel.

In Mokashi’s modern interpretation, we see Tuka through the eyes of his younger brother Kanha. Mokashi’s story highlights the tensions between family life and renunciation, with each of the three brothers making different choices: Savji, the eldest brother, becomes a renouncer (i.e., an ascetic) at an early age, shortly after his wife dies; Tuka becomes useless to his family, as he regularly wanders off, rapt in devotion to Lord Vitthala (a form of Vishnu in Pandharpur), eventually vanishing; and Kanha toys with the *bhakti* (devotional) path on occasion, composing poetry and mimicking *kirtan* performers (storytelling, with chanting and music), only to feel as if he is doing just that—copying others and not following his own path. *Ananda Ovari* also presents Tuka becoming a *sant* (often glossed as “saint”) as the result of uncontrollable circumstances: for example, Tuka turns away from family obligations in the face of tragedy; when his parents, wife, and child die during the horrible famine, Tuka withdraws from family life and eventually vanishes. In fact, Mokashi begins *Ananda Ovari* with Tuka’s disappearance: “Tuka vanished on a Monday.” What follows is Kanha searching for Tuka, and narrating his “biography” along the way, emphasizing the difficulties his family faced as a result of Tuka’s devotion to Vitthala. Kanha is often frustrated that no one outside of the immediate family knew the *real Tuka*. The *real Tuka* caused heartache and was more of a burden than a blessing to his family. Tuka even considered suicide, so depressed was he after the famine took loved ones and led to bankruptcy for their small shop.

My engagement with *Ananda Ovari* began in 1997–98 when I read through the novel twice with my Marathi professor, Dr. Vijaya Deo, and made my initial translation; I let it sit, and then returned to it in 2008. My translation is about 36,000 words; Tendulkar’s play is around 8,000 in its English translation. About ten years after Tendulkar’s play, I returned once again to the novel, and chose Twitter as the platform for sharing my translation-in-process. Posting my work on Twitter forced me to clean up the translation, 140 characters at a time. It also helped me make translation decisions that I had relegated to footnotes, where I described various ways a word or phrase could be rendered in English. On Twitter, I would first tweet the Devanagari, followed by my translation. I kept track with a simple numbering system (3.5, for instance, meant “Chapter 3, Tweet number 5). Twitter felt like straightforward translation, in that I stuck closely to the original, unlike the stage adaptation of Tendulkar, who changed the story’s ending.

Like Tendulkar, though, I am engaging in a transcreative process as I transform *Ananda Ovari* into a graphic novel. This project raises all sorts of questions that I can bring into classroom discussions. What, for example, is my connection to the Warkari interpretive literature? Will the graphic novel read as *my Tuka*—as in, my artistic interpretation of Mokashi’s novel—to be read alongside other interpretations? If so, who is my intended audience? Why do I feel the need to engage in this project at all, given my status as an observer—and clearly not a Warkari—of Maharashtrian culture? How closely do I stick to Mokashi’s novel? What can I assume about the reader’s knowledge of the Warkaris, Tukaram, Maharashtra, and so on? If the readers have no knowledge of these topics, do I write an introduction that provides that context? If I take that route, how does that change the way the book is received? That is, graphic narratives tend not to have introductions. And if there is an introduction, do I also include the translation, making it into a larger work?

Of course, there are many other questions for me to consider. What I hope, from a pedagogical standpoint, is that students come away from these discussions with more nuanced perspectives on the complexities of transcultural studies, and the gravity of topics such as cultural appropriation, translation, interpretation, and analysis.

Concluding Remarks

Students tell me that personal stories and storytelling often make the course content “relatable”—which I translate with words like, “it makes sense to me,” or “I can learn from this example.” I’ve begun responding to students’ desire for such experiences by incorporating art projects into courses. The projects accomplish at least two important goals. First, they help students respond in nontraditional ways to the course readings. Second, students then engage in their own storytelling as they narrate *to the “story”* that is their artistic interpretation. These creative elements are an opportunity for students to reflect further on their relationship to the material, regardless of the nature of that relationship. Students remember stories from *Palkhi*, both positively and negatively, precisely because the stories are relatable. How do we as educators build upon these experiences in ways that encourage deeper learning? One approach is to have students tell their stories, which ought to encourage further questions, challenges, and more learning. It may also help them understand why some stories are more powerful than others, and why reading “those Hindu tales in ancient texts” may prove to be a worthwhile endeavor, maybe even a “relatable one.”

Further Reading

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The Dynamic Canon of the Purāṇas and the Ethnography of the Classroom

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A few years ago, there was a panel at the Annual Meeting of the AAR entitled “Teaching Eastern Religions in Western Classrooms.” The panelists included individuals whom I respect tremendously as scholars and gifted teachers, and whom I count as friends. But the commonality of the panelists was that they taught at undergraduate institutions in small “college towns” to student bodies that were, for the most part, racially and ethnically homogenous. I struggled to relate to the framing of this panel. In Calgary, my undergraduate classes are populated by roughly sixty-to-seventy percent South Asian students. These students range from fifth- or sixth-generation Canadians, descended from the Sikh labourers who built the Canada Pacific Railway in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, to students who are, like me, “New Canadians,” the rather endearing term the Canadian government uses for immigrants. I wondered, while at this panel, should the students in my classes be considered “Western” or “Eastern”? Even more precisely, I wondered whether the Hinduism, Sikhism, and Islam my students practice in their Canadian homes should be considered “Eastern” or “Western” religions. Ultimately, I wondered: how should we define this distinction? The teaching reflections that follow represent the evolution of my own teaching since arriving in Calgary a decade ago; but more broadly, they represent an attempt to reframe our pedagogical assumptions so that we might move away from the highly racialized and unnecessarily exoticized assumption that professors of Hindu studies are necessarily teaching a homogenous group of white, largely Christian, students about the non-white, mysterious “other.”

Teaching Strategy

My corrective to this pedagogical framework is based on my own research on the *purāṇas*, and specifically on an observation made by Giorgio Bonazolli in his 1978 article, “The Dynamic Canon of the *Purāṇas*.” Bonazolli observed the *purāṇas* represent a “dynamic canon,” and that the dynamism of this canon is the result of two conflicting impulses within the genre: the abstract mandate to preserve the original *rahasya*, or secret, of the *purāṇas*, and the more practical need to evolve with the changing religious needs of living humans. Based on Bonazolli’s work, my corrective question became, “how can we make our Hindu studies classrooms more like the dynamic canon of the *purāṇas*?” The foundation of my answer to this question has been to frame all of my courses with an understanding of the value of both *emic* and *etic* perspectives in the study of religion. On a theoretical level, this framing introduces students to the variety of data scholars of religion consider in their work. It also is a useful tool in fostering a sense of mutual respect and comfort amongst all students in my classrooms. But diversity and respect alone are not necessarily interactive, and thus do not make a classroom a dynamic space in

the way the purāṇic canon is dynamic. To achieve an atmosphere of interactive dynamism in the classroom, I have increasingly brought ethnographic practices into my teaching.

To be honest, I did not start out using purāṇic narratives in the classroom as a tool for interaction and classroom ethnography. In my literature-based Introduction to Hinduism course, when I would tell the stories of How Ganesh Got His Elephant Head or of Dakṣaprajāpati's Sacrifice, students would often volunteer that they had heard a different version of these stories at home. I would give the innocuous, but ultimately banal, reply that nearly all *purāṇic* narratives have many versions, and thus that my differing account did not in any way make their *dadi's* version of the story "wrong." The problem with this bland reassurance was that I was issuing no *invitation* to students.

What changed this approach was another course I teach, an ethnographic course on the anthropology and sociology of Hindu practices. This class, with its focus on the diversity of Hindu practices, naturally lends itself to incorporating students' own narratives and experiences through class discussion. A few years ago, I had a particularly transformative moment while lecturing on Geoffrey Oddie's book, *Popular Religion, Elites, and Reforms: Hook-swinging and its Prohibition in Colonial India, 1800–1894*.

Unsurprisingly, the students had loads of questions about hook-swinging, all of which essentially were asking "What does this *look* like?" I had to tell the students that I honestly do not know what hook-swinging looks like—the practice has been banned in India, and given the widespread orthodoxy of the regions of India where I conduct my research, I had never seen the practice myself. A quiet student in the back row enthusiastically raised her hand. As a Sri Lankan Tamil, she *had* seen hook-swinging in her native country, and held the class in rapt attention with her account of the sight. Watching the interaction between this student and her peers, I began to think of the possibilities that would open up if all of my classes—textual and ethnographic alike—were taught with an explicit *invitation* for students to participate in storytelling. In essence, what if the classroom space echoed the dynamic purāṇic canon described by Bonazolli?

Background and Theory

Since that experience, I have striven to make my literature-based courses on Hinduism function as a participatory community of storytellers. The examples of what this has led to in the classroom are endless. But I will limit my examples in this piece to a seminar I taught in fall 2017, Narrative Literatures of Hinduism. This is an upper-level undergraduate seminar, often blended with graduate students, in which I cover the genres of *kathā* (fable), *purāṇa* (myth), and *itihāsa* (epic), with one major example in English translation of each. To encourage self-reflective participation and provide a framework for analysis of narrative, I begin the seminar with two specific assignments. The first week, I provide the students with a selection of stories from *The Complete Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm*, all with the titles of the tales whited out. During seminar, students are asked to do three things: (1) identify the stories, (2) discuss the differences between these stories and the Disney versions they've seen in film, and (3) to recount a memory of one of these stories, or any other fairy tale, from their childhoods. This is always a popular exercise, and establishes an atmosphere where students are comfortable sharing their own self-reflective analysis in class. The second assignment of the class usually covers weeks two and three, and focuses on reading Umberto Eco's *Six Walks in the Fictional Woods*. This work is far more

accessible to undergraduates than Eco's other theoretical works, such as *The Role of the Reader*, and provides a strong framework for narrative analysis. Most importantly, it introduces students to Eco's of interpretive approaches of "the world of the text," "the world behind the text," and "the world in front of the text." Below, I've selected three examples of how the students in this seminar (see below for their names) approached the interpretation of Hindu narratives following these two opening assignments.

I. *The Bhāgavata Purāna* Book X, translated by Edwin Bryant:

For the first time in many years of teaching this seminar, I had students who had the courage to discuss the copious and explicit sex in the *Bhagavata Purāna*. Watching nervous twenty-somethings invite their peers to talk about the sexual responses Kṛṣṇa evokes in the Gopīs was adorable, fascinating, and enough to make a middle-aged mother of a child feel very, very old. But what was most instructive were elements of "the world in front of the text" that students brought into the discussion. Two Hindu students, both from multigenerational Canadian families, recounted that they were absolutely astonished to read this text, and to see how the Sanskrit original differed from the somewhat more sanitized stories of Kṛṣṇa's youth that they had been taught as children. Both students had asked their parents about this, and to my astonishment found that their parents, and in one case, a grandparent, were also unaware of the explicit sex in the original stories. The ensuing discussion balanced considerations of the theological purpose of eroticism with reflections on historically evolving understandings of childhood, in particular what sort of stories are appropriate for children.

II. *The Mahābhārata*, translated and adapted by John D. Smith, Example A:

John D. Smith's adaptation of the *Mahābhārata* is a lengthy and complex work, and yet I am always delighted to see how engaged and invested my students are in this narrative. Follow the week of discussing sex, one student in the class clearly came to revel in shocking her parents with information from our seminar. When we read the episode of the *Mahābhārata* in which Bhīma defeats Duṣāṣana and drinks his blood, she eagerly told the class of how she had read the rather grisly poetic verse (in which Bhīma compares the blood to mother's milk, nectar and honey, or ambrosia with which he washes his wife's hair) out loud to her mother and asked her to guess the text and the speaker of the verse. With the word blood omitted from this particular verse, her mother naturally believed this was a love poem from Kṛṣṇa to the Gopīs. When confronted with the correct attribution, the student's mother insisted that the heroic Bhīma could never behave so monstrously.

III. *The Mahābhārata*, translated and adapted by John D. Smith, Example B:

The obvious danger of making the classroom a space of self-reflective storytelling is that it can become a platform for making Hindu students into ethnographic objects of study for their non-Hindu peers. Avoiding this trap requires encouraging all students to bring their own narrative experiences into the classroom, which is often best achieved by modelling self-reflective storytelling through my own examples. Issuing this invitation and modelling the approach consistently has resulted in all students bringing their own background experiences into class: from their own varied religious backgrounds and, most of all, from popular culture examples. (In fall 2017, *The Lord of the Rings*, *Game of Thrones*, and *Harry Potter* were frequent reference points.) The most surprising example I had in class occurred when

we discussed the *Mahābhārata*'s concluding narrative of Yudhiṣṭhira's final dharmic test, in which he is invited to forsake his canine companion in exchange for entrance to heaven. One student volunteered that she had heard the story before: her Catholic grandmother had told this story as a child, with different names involved, and conveyed it as a story from the Christian Gospels. I had to admit to the class that though I was raised in a very Catholic family in which I was regularly taught liberation theology at the dinner table, I had never heard any version of Yudhiṣṭhira and his dog as being "in the Bible." As a class, we spent a great deal of time pondering the question of where the student's now-deceased grandmother had come across the story and her ideas on its provenance. Eventually, outside-of-class research led us to the parable in the Gospel of Luke of Lazarus and the Rich Man, in which a distinct and lesser-known Lazarus is shown a great deal of compassion by a group of dogs. While this discovery was perhaps less exciting than the possibility of the *Mahābhārata* infiltrating communities of Canadian Catholics, it was a strong example of how students from a wide variety of backgrounds can participate in the ethnographic classroom through storytelling.

Conclusions and Extensions

What has happened to my classroom since adopting this approach? At times during my fall 2017 seminar I worried that I may have merely created intergenerational strife in the homes of my Indo-Canadian students. But in actuality, since striving to make my classroom space a place in which students are invited to actively participate in storytelling, the transformation in my classroom atmosphere and students' level of engagement has been astounding. Most inspiring to me, as an instructor, are the ways in which a single narrative can now span many classes. Students—those who are of South Asian descent as well as those who are not—take stories from class home to their parents and grandparents, and they report to the class the variations of and correlations to those stories that they hear back at home. I like to think of the result as my own "classroom *purāṇa*": a living, oral text that both preserves traditional content and evolves over time, what Bonazoli observed about the *purāṇas* themselves. I have found that the approach works across courses of different topics and levels, and I propose that it would work across the teaching of various religious traditions as well. All it requires is issuing to students an invitation; an invitation to be self-reflective and to tell their own stories.

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Teaching Hindu Stories as Ways of Fashioning Selves and Framing Lives

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When we introduce students to sacred texts, we often begin with what scholars and historians consider the canonized version of classics. While this approach has many virtues, especially when augmented by other tellings, it commonly fails to convey how people actually receive and engage with texts in lived religious contexts.

Growing up, children are rarely first introduced to religious narratives through the “official” versions of sacred text but, rather, they imbibe them through bedtime stories, comic books, and videos. Stories are recounted during pujas (worship services) and festival celebrations, encountered in visual representations, devotional songs, visits to temples, and as part of religious instruction. In all of these cases, the ways that narratives are transmitted involve tremendous amounts of distillation. Not only do retellings reflect regional, devotional, and other cultural differences, but they also reveal religious, moral, and ethical expectations, modes of subject formation, and processes of interpolation (as sacred narratives are seen to manifest within and/or help people to interpret their lives).

In recent years, in an effort to bring more of my own research into the classroom and in response to the changing demographics of religious studies classes, I have endeavored to offer my students the opportunity to engage more with traditions as they are lived. Here I discuss some of my pedagogic goals and two of the ways I have attempted to achieve these in my classes: through site visits to temples and the exploration of Hindu supplementary school lesson plans.

Pedagogic Goals and Possibilities

On a fundamental level, exposure to the rich stories within Hindu traditions is simply a requisite part of disseminating the basic content required to approach the subject. Without any awareness of the stories of the *devas* (gods) and *devis* (goddesses), or those recounting the transmission of knowledge, students are easily lost. Narratives not only provide an important element of background information that students need to make sense of Hindu ritual customs, but they are also engaging, generally accessible, and pleasurable ways to introduce more complex concepts and philosophies. Furthermore, exposing students to a range of narrative traditions (e.g., classical and modern, Sanskrit and vernacular, Shaiva, Shakta, and Vaishnava) provides them with some insights into distinctive theological outlooks. Stories also help to elucidate how traditions evolve over time, and how caste and gender are socially constructed and conceived differently in particular times and places.

While those aspects of using narratives to teach are laudable and substantive in their own right, I wish to focus on different pedagogical goals. Along with understanding the types of descriptive, historical, and social content that I note above, I want students to ask questions about how people make meaning out of narratives, to consider how people deploy narratives, draw upon them, are moved by them, find insights in them, and use them to interpret their lives. Additionally, examining stories in these ways helps students to think about the production of knowledge and the ways that norms and ideas are inculcated, embodied, and disciplined.

Exploring Narratives as a Means of Fashioning Children as Hindu Subjects

In the classrooms and camps of the Hindu diaspora, stories form the core of many curricula. Unlike other settings in which these stories are told, in the context of diaspora classrooms and camps, they often seem to be less about the dalliances or feats of the gods themselves and more about the human beings and demons who engage with the divine and either deviate from or follow a dharmic path. Through the act of listening to and learning these sacred narratives, children are supposed to derive personally applicable life lessons and morals.

To prompt students to think about what happens when stories become the foundation for shaping particular types of Hindu subjectivities, I bring lesson plans from Hindu supplementary schools into the classroom. Through this, students are exposed to an element of lived religion that is rarely explored and they are able to see how sacred stories are taught to American Hindu children in a didactic setting. Sometimes this involves reading through a lesson plan as one might another primary text, asking students to analyze the ways stories are framed and how activities or bodily practices are employed by educators in order to convey specific moral and theological messages. In other cases, I actually “teach” the lesson as it might be done in a classroom, asking college students to engage in the same type of games or exercises used in Hindu supplementary schools. For example, in a Chinmaya Mission curriculum, the story of the churning of the ocean, which revolves around a struggle between the *asuras* (described as demons) and the *devas* (the gods), is used to underscore how important it is for children to become wise, to discern the difference between good and bad, and to persevere and achieve their goals in moral and righteous ways. The game Red Light/Green Light is sometimes played using pictures to teach the difference between good and bad. For homework, children may be asked keep a journal of times when their *asuras* (personifying their bad deeds) prevailed over their *devas* (personifying their good deeds) and the other way around. Returning to class, they are asked share their vices and virtues, reminded that “being a good Hindu involves always standing on the side of the *devas*.” Students may confess to sneaking an iPad into their bed or fighting with a sibling or proudly share about the time they cleaned their room without being asked or helped set the table. They are given a piece of candy for all the times the *devas* won out, charged with apologizing for the times when the *asuras* got the better of them, and encouraged to think about how they will “be better” in the future. I have asked students to go home and try this exercise. I don’t have them share in class—I certainly don’t want to know what they view as their vices or virtues—but I do bring in candy and tell them they can take a piece for each “good thing” they did in the past week. I also ask them to imagine what it might be like to share the “bad things” in their journal in front of me and the entire class. Just thinking about how this type of reward- and confessional-system might work in their own lives illustrates how narratives are used to

promote Hindu values, transmit religious vocabulary, establish norms, cultivate forms of self-discipline, and fashion moral and communal subjects.

This approach achieves multiple goals beyond acquainting students with a central story in Vaishnavite tradition. For many American Hindu students, viewing these lesson plans as primary texts allows them to see their own experiences reflected in the classroom. For students who attended religious schools of other traditions, these lessons can make Hinduism seem more familiar. And at the same time, approaching lesson plans critically can illuminate the ways that knowledge is curated and narratives are interpreted to promote particular ideas about morality. Students not only become more aware of the way Hindus shape and are shaped by stories, but this prompts them to consider the sources of their own knowledge and the ways that religious ideas become naturalized and embodied through narrative forms of discipline. Lesson plans elucidate some of the ways that children are taught to situate themselves through religious stories, recognizing themselves as part of histories and communities to which they have obligations. These seemingly simple lessons become a way to introduce Foucault's ideas about power, discourse, and the production of rituals of truth, forms of knowledge, and selves.¹

The Varied Lives of Hindu Narratives and Narratives in Hindu Lives



Inside the Minnesota Hindu Milan Mandir. Credit: Religious Diversity in Minnesota Initiative

¹ I realize that lesson plans are not easy to come by. I draw upon my own fieldwork when I do these lessons. However, you can find sample lessons on the web through searching for “bala vihar lesson plan,” or “bala vihar curriculum.” However, be mindful of the source of the lesson. Different organizations have radically different agendas, and you will want to be able to contextualize the messages and modes of teaching that are used into their larger socio-political context. While I use these pedagogic techniques to teach Hindu traditions, I have used similar methods when teaching Jewish traditions as well, and I believe these can work well with a variety of religious traditions.

Visiting temples and engaging with practitioners of Hindu tradition can bring Hindu narratives to life in wholly different ways. In the winter of 2010, I took a group of students from my “Modern Hinduism” class to the Minnesota Hindu Milan Mandir. A few weeks earlier, we had visited the architecturally striking and elaborate Hindu Temple of Minnesota, with its marble, golden doors, and ornate gopuram. The Hindu Milan Mandir, in contrast, was housed in a one-room converted garage in the suburb of Eagan at the home of Satya Balroop. It was dark by the time we arrived and snow covered every inch of the ground and the branches of the trees. The backyard was illuminated by the light coming from the mandir, whose conventional garage door had been replaced by glass. The altar, replete with elaborately adorned images, and the bright green carpet were all that we could see as we drove in. After we observed the evening prayers and were fed a delicious Indo-Guyanese curry, I asked Satya to share her story and the story of the mandir with us. She questioned aloud why I would want the students to hear about those things rather than having them learn about Hinduism more generally; she didn’t think these personal narratives would interest them. I assured her they would.

She shared the story of her family’s migration, coming to Guyana from India as indentured servants in the mid-1800s, and her own migrations from Guyana to New York to Minnesota. Her account was punctuated with references to various gods and goddesses, God’s will, Mother Durga, and Guruji’s plan for her. In order to establish the mandir, she and her family purchased, at great expense to themselves, twelve marble *murtis* (sacred images) in New York. Her brother and the priest’s son packed the extremely heavy images into a rented commercial vehicle and began their drive to Minnesota. When they reached Indiana, late in the middle of the night, a deer jumped in front of the van, breaking the windshield and spinning the van around, killing the deer and totaling the truck. A series of lucky coincidences—a police officer who was patrolling the area and their fortuitous proximity to a marble dealer—made it possible for them to move the murtis to another truck and continue on their way. Satya feared that when they unpacked the crates, the murtis would all be broken. As it turned out, however, the only image that was damaged was Lord Rama, whose bow and bow-hand had cracked. For Satya, this was proof that God was guiding things all along. For just as the Ramayana recounts how Ram had to “kill a deer for Mother Sita,” so this incarnation of Ram came to kill a deer. For the devotees at the mandir, the crack in the murti is not a flaw but a sign of God’s grace, emblematic of how these stories and the gods manifest in their lives and



**Snow-covered exterior of the Minnesota Hindu Milan Mandir.
Credit: Religious Diversity in Minnesota Initiative**

guide them. For Satya, Ram's broken bow transformed the accident from an impediment into a blessing from Lord Ram himself.

The students who heard Satya's story were able to see one of the many ways that sacred narratives come to life in affirming ways, in contrast to the politically destructive and divisive examples we had discussed in class. While not everyone can offer their students the opportunity to meet Satya and hear her story personally (although everyone can hear her voice soon, through the website of the Religious Diversity in Minnesota Initiative¹), this moment changed the way I approach site visits with students. Rather than posing general questions about Hinduism, I encourage students to ask devotees if they will share something about a teaching, image of the divine, tradition, story, or ritual that they find particularly meaningful, why it resonates for them, and when/from whom they first encountered or learned it. These questions generate different answers but they almost always gesture at the ways in which people situate themselves through narrative, and how meaning, attachment, and belonging are repeatedly constituted in different ways for different people. Taking this one step further, I have developed an entire course focused on fieldwork and documenting local religion and stories, like Satya's, from people of all different backgrounds.

Even in cases when visiting Hindu sites or engaging in fieldwork are not possible, similar goals can be achieved through studying ethnographies and comparing interpretations offered by children's literature, films, television serials, queer communities, survivors of domestic violence, and through visual representations (e.g., various genres of sculpture and painting—medieval, modern, North Indian, South Indian, nationalistic, folk). Even small excerpts from these sources— when coupled with selections from primary sources in translation—can be effective ways to convey how people make stories their own, and how class, caste, gender, location, sexual orientation, and political outlook can change people's relationships to narratives and how they punctuate and animate lives.

Further Reading

I have listed only some of the many books that try to capture a sense of the wide range of interpretations of Hindu stories and their social and political implications. I have also listed some ethnographies that convey how narratives can be embodied and ritualized. Documentaries, such as In the Name of God (1992) are also incredibly effective ways to illustrate how narratives circulate, producing ideologies and political subjects. I list these few only because I have found them useful when teaching undergraduates with little background in Hindu traditions. They are far from exhaustive.

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Narrative Pedagogy and Transmedia Balancing

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Introduction: Teaching Narratives, Using Transmedia

When I arrived at the University of Arizona as a new assistant professor in the Department of Religious Studies and Classics, I was tasked with building the curriculum on South Asian religions. In fact, the only course that was on-the-books and related to my area of expertise—Hinduism—was an older holdover from the university’s “Department of Oriental Studies.” This course was titled “Hindu Mythology.” While the title seemed a bit outdated (and I worried if the title was “sexy” enough to draw in students), I was thrilled that I would be able to teach this course because it gave me a perfect opportunity to teach through narratives, and the old-fashioned title would serve to set the tone of the course in which we could problematize both the categories of “Hinduism” and “myth.” Indeed, structuring a course entirely around Hindu narratives proved to engage students and introduce them to the variety of traditions under the rubric of Hinduism, and it also helped them understand its history as it is embedded within the texts that we encounter. While the course proved to be successful with high enrollments—I guess the title was sexier than I thought—and I could see students engaging with the narratives in a way that they often don’t with textbooks, in many ways I felt like I was doing the tradition a disservice because, intentional or not, I was reifying a model of studying and teaching religion (largely based on Protestant Christian theology) that privileged textual sources over other sources of religious knowledge.

Not willing to give up on the immense benefits of using narrative to teach religion, I began implementing what I call *transmedia balancing* in my courses. By “transmedia balancing,” I refer to the incorporation of various media in the classroom that both exhibits the diverse range of sources for religious knowledge and seeks to activate in students multiple learning fluencies about the same subject matter. When learning about any given narrative, I introduce various iterations of the story in a variety of media simultaneously, and the students are asked to “read” and interpret Hindu myth through 3D sculptures, paintings, performances (dance, theatrical, and folk), films, and 360-degree visualization of interiors of temples and palaces that are decorated with murals, in addition to Sanskrit and vernacular texts. The benefits are three-fold. First, by balancing the sources of knowledge, I am confident that I am more accurately representing the variety that exists within the Hindu traditions and the ways that practitioners have engaged with their tradition and their narratives throughout its long history. Second, the use of various media engages various learning styles, targeting visual, aural, physical, as well as verbal, learners. Third, this method works to unsettle many of the students’ underlying assumptions about the primacy of textual knowledge and requires them to develop fluencies in multiple ways of knowing. By learning to stack and integrate multiple fluencies, learners can expand their understandings

of a subject well beyond what is typically possible in a conventional classroom. In this way, this pedagogical technique can provide a classroom atmosphere that is more holistic in form and function, that makes use of the tools at our fingertips during this New Media Age, **and** that more closely reflects that broad spectrum of media through which knowledge has been produced and transferred since antiquity.

Transmedia Balancing and the Pedagogical Value of Multiple Narratives

As many of the essays in this issue demonstrate, there are immense benefits to using narrative to foster greater student engagement. From the dynamic nature of Purāṇic narratives to devotional storytelling's function in crafting and shaping subjectivities, narrative multiplicity in the Hindu traditions allows learners to move beyond rote memorization of details and to mine narratives for beliefs and practices embedded within. It allows them to investigate the messy intersections of narrative difference and the many disparate contexts that influence negotiations of narrative details. The insight into the tradition that this affords is invaluable and gives learners an opportunity to activate their knowledge of historical development and sectarian difference by interpolating these factors alongside narrative change. It teaches students to become close readers and forces them to activate the core concepts that they are learning by seeing them within the text. For my transmedia assignments, I expand the narrative pedagogical model to include nontextual iterations of narratives to add another level of dynamism to the discussion. Incorporating new media such as 3D sculptures and 360-degree visualizations draw students into a world in which they have to interact with the object of study by manipulating their point of view (using software like Adobe Flash or websites/apps such as Facebook360 or SketchFab). With simple tools readily available, we can introduce these various media into our courses, using websites and apps where the content is already available **and** free.

One of my favorite narratives to teach in "Hindu Mythology" is the story of Śiva as Bhikṣāṭana (the mendicant beggar), the ṛṣis of the Pine Forest, and their wives. This story is rife with interesting topics for discussion, from renouncer traditions and asceticism to the concepts of devotion and sexuality, in addition to providing an opportunity to discuss how different North and South Indian Hinduism can often be from each other. I begin this assignment as I do all the others by providing a brief skeletal outline of the narrative orally in-class and a printed version for students to refer to, giving everyone a baseline to understand the particular version of the narrative that they are about to examine.

Bhikṣāṭana is a deity [I leave it vague so they can use the clues in the narratives to figure out which deity it is] who goes to the forest to see his devotees who are practicing austerities and show them the virtues of the dharmic householder life. Using this as your guide, examine the fuller narrative in the medium assigned to your group. Be sure to look for elements that point to sectarian and devotional traditions, ritual practice, and asceticism v. householder life.

With prompt in hand, the class divides into prearranged, semester-long groups, and each group is given the narrative (here: Bhikṣāṭana) in a different medium. It looks something like this:

Group A: 3D rendering of relief sculpture from Kailāsanātha temple in Kañcipuram, Tamil Nadu.¹ (Note: the students have been prepped for reading images within the South Asian context through a series of Hindu iconography lectures in which I discuss major themes, such as *mudrās* or hand gestures, sectarian symbols, weapons, hair styles, etc.)

Group B: image of ceiling mural at Chidambaram (see Figure 1)



Figure 1: Bhikṣāṭana and the ṛṣis' wives on the ceiling of Śivakāmasundari Temple in Chidambaram

Group C: Translation of selections from *Tēvaram* (Tamil devotional poetry) about Bhikṣāṭana from Indira Viswanathan Peterson's *Poems to Śiva* (Princeton University Press, 1989).

Group D: Translation of selections from *Śivakoṭirudra Saṃhita* of the *Śiva Purāṇa* (Sanskrit Purāṇaic narrative) about Bhikṣāṭana from Cornelia Dimmit and JAB van Buitenen's *Classical Hindu Mythology* (Temple University Press, 1978).

Each group is then required to work together to flesh-out the fuller Bhikṣāṭana narrative paying particular attention to the clues contained in their group's rendering of the story. The groups use the information that they glean from their medium to create a presentation in which they relate the full narrative of Bhikṣāṭana and the ṛṣis' wives, highlighting the emphases found in their version of the story.

Throughout the semester, the groups are given different narrative media in order to help them develop a broader range of interpretative tools. Other media include videos on YouTube and Vimeo, 360-degree visualizations that I have created of various muraled temples, and even recordings of local Hindus telling mythic narratives from their own recollection (this has proved to be both a class favorite and a very effective tool for audible learners). The goal is to introduce students to the widest possible range of

¹ Available for free at <https://skfb.ly/KRMI>

sources throughout the entire semester; thereby debunking any pre-existing notion that there is one authoritative version of these narratives, and forcing students out of a text-first mentality. Additionally, it aids the students in a fuller understanding of the material as they are forced to encounter it through a variety of perspectives.

Multiple Stories, Multiple Media, and Multiple Fluencies

As you have probably already picked-up on, my approach of balancing transmedia in narrative pedagogy is designed to resist the hegemony of the printed word—an understandable development given the democratizing impact of the printing press, but one that also ultimately determined an economic and ideological course for education that strongly favored the printed word over other media. Today, this bias is felt more sharply than ever before by both teachers and students, largely because alternative modes of information conveyance—from photography and videography to 3D-modeling and virtual reality—become more accessible to more kinds of people every day. Indeed, despite the fact that text's primacy in teaching and learning contexts is a near certainty for decades to come, studies increasingly indicate that the greater variety of media used in instructional materials directly corresponds to increased learning outcomes and proficiencies among students across all academic disciplines (Stelzer *et al.*, 2009; Rolfe and Gray, 2011; Gu *et al.*, 2015). As university curricula become ever more invested in teaching students to become transdisciplinary, a new instructional challenge emerges: how can we leverage the wide range of emerging educational tools to make learning more engaging, adaptive, and agile?

I believe that the answer lies in linking our pedagogy with both premodern and state-of-the-art ways of learning. As a scholar of religion, history, and art, it is clear to me that there exists a large variety of ways through which people created and disseminated knowledge in both textual and nontextual contexts, and more often than not—especially in the context of South Asia—the method of conveyance was through stories. Indeed, the Hindu traditions have a long and rich literary and nonliterary history, wherein we can see how varieties of textual, oral, visual, and tangible media were, and continue to be, used to disseminate information through the stories they tell. By mimicking the variety of ways that knowledge was disseminated in and through text, image, and performance, and applying this methodology within the context of contemporary education, we can develop more well-rounded students who are proficient in a variety of learning techniques. Starting with the idea that different media enable different modes of information transfer and thus different ways of knowing, I believe that the use of transmedia balancing within modern educational contexts can make a meaningful difference creating a dynamic atmosphere of learning that reflects both premodern and contemporary concerns. The variety and longevity of narrative dramatically illustrates how the balancing of textual and nontextual fluencies has the potential to serve modern learners even more than it did their premodern counterparts, especially given the technological tools at our disposal.

Transmedia Balancing beyond the Hindu Studies Classroom

While the sample assignment and the overall pedagogical method that I argue for in this essay clearly result from the context of my research and the subject matter I teach—and is therefore designed to

speak to that specific milieu—the use of a variety of media in religious studies classrooms is hardly a novel idea, and I learned many of the strategies that I implement from other scholars within the discipline across a range of topics. I, however, think that there is additional value in the practice of transmedia balancing for those of us who teach with and about narratives (it is also worth bringing up for those who aren't aware of some of the tools available). I believe that this would be an extremely worthwhile teaching practice (maybe even more effective) for scholars of religions that focus on textual authority because the introduction of different traditional media can help shoulder some of the theoretical work that goes into questions of authority, canon, and the multiplicities that always exist in any religious tradition. I could see it also having immense benefits for subject matter relating to nontextual traditions: I've always found it odd that we often learn about oral traditions through texts. Beyond content, it is increasingly important that we adapt to the changing environment in which we find ourselves. Our students have a variety of different skills and learning styles, and it is up to us to engage them using all the tools at our disposal and help all students acquire fluency in a variety of transmedia applications.

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