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The long colonial engagement of Britain with the countries of South Asia, together with the presence of many immigrants from those countries in Britain, raises particular questions regarding teaching the religions of the area in British universities. In the following article, Dr. Chakravarthi Ram-Prasad, who lectures on the topic at The University of Lancaster, offers a personal perspective on these issues.

It is a truism — but a profound one — that history and its consequences massively influence the teaching of South Asian religions in Britain. To start with, “South Asian Studies” as an academic field - that strange American child of Cold War ideology and liberal academia — does not exist in Britain. The term “South Asian religions” is used here to talk commonly of the religions found in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Nepal. (Some have taken to talking about this demarcation through reference to the political association called South Asian Association of Regional Cupertino (SAARC), of which Bhutan and the Maldives are also members.) This is to speak not only of Hindu and other “Indic” religions - Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism, as well as Dalit and “tribal” religions — but also of subcontinental Islam, Zoarastrianism, and Indian Christianity.

Centuries-long political engagement with the Indian empire (now South Asia) gave an immediacy and clarity of interest to the British study of religion different from the purely intellectual empire-building of German Indology and the idiosyncratic enthusiasms of nineteenth and early twentieth century American interest in India. The teaching of South Asian religions in Britain is not, in some ways, very different from in the US. In the main, however, I want to focus on the ways those religions are taught in Britain against the context of British history and society. It is here that the contrast with the U.S. will be most apparent.

The present context arises from a shift of the study of Asian religions from Oriental studies into

religious studies. When religious studies emerged as a university discipline, Britain was still wrestling with the demands of a post-imperial paradigm. Conventional notions of British/Western objectivity, (with its consequent objectification of native Others), were being interrogated by liberal, egalitarian, and ostensibly less hegemonic approaches, themselves politically informed by the shift from Empire to Commonwealth. We cannot, however, isolate this line of intellectual and attitudinal development from a significant demographic consequence of the postimperial dispensation, namely, the rise of immigration into Britain from the countries of the subcontinent. The study of South Asian religions in Britain has been formed over the past four decades by the combination of late modern British intellectual values and the cultural dynamics of contemporary British society.

This brief history should be kept in mind when looking at the plurality of approaches to the study of South Asian religions in Britain today. Naturally, there can be no simple taxonomy of discrete approaches, easily identifiable and self-evident in syllabi, readings, or course descriptions. Rather, there are different impulses, compulsions, and concerns in the teaching of these religions, which are set out below.

Classical Indology

Although straitened financial and institutional circumstances mean that ever fewer research students are able to commit themselves to a deeply linguistic/philological training in the study of these religions, the old tradition of approaching ancient and classical religion through original texts still persists. This focuses on the teaching — where there are takers — of Sanskrit and other languages. While ideally providing students with a fundamental prerequisite for scholarly study, it must be recognised that classical Indology still carries with it associations of conventional Orientalism, disputed though this may be.

Very occasionally, language-based courses are available at the undergraduate level as well, but not in Theology/Religious Studies departments. The pressure on language-based approaches is obvious. As in the U.S., only rich and large departments or programs are able offer them. Arabic and Persian, in the case of Islam, are slightly different, and relate to issues of ethnicity and multiculturalism.

The Study of World Religions

As I argue throughout this essay, the peculiarity of the British connection with South Asia has tremendous influence on the teaching of South Asian religions. The abstract notion of religious studies as an ideally decentred approach to (semiconstructed) cultural “blocks” does indeed

exist in Britain. But perhaps because British intellectual horizons are still cluttered with the specificities of painful historical gement, there is less ease with the theoretical coherence of a notion of “world religions.” Although the pragmatic need for an introductory survey is increasingly recognised, it is rare to find a course in which a single lecturer ranges over several religions.

Liberal South Asian Studies

I use this term to capture a popular generic approach to undergraduate teaching of Hinduism or Islam in particular, although I would hesitate to call it an articulated pedagogical method. An attempt is made, when surveying various aspects of the religion concerned, to situate the apparently strange and exotic features of that religion in the unquestioned “Western” mental maps of British students. Usually implicitly, but often explicitly, ethnographic details are put in a conceptual context that promotes critical appraisal of the assumptions of folk Westernism. (By “folk Westernism” I mean an unexamined ideology that takes as normal and normative certain behaviours, values, and interpretive paradigms derived from conventional characterisations of an imagined “Western society.”) Thus, gender, social status, and the significance of religion in ordinary life are filtered — and in seminar discussions, articulated — through unexamined, selective, and ahistorical ideas about the students’ liberal Western society. The skill of concerned lecturers consists in gently drawing out these assumptions. Students embark on the study of a tradition with some initial sense of direction, but eventually grow accustomed to looking at that tradition in a situated and nuanced way. Less skilful lecturers can easily reinforce facile prejudices in their students if they never manage to identify and foreground assumptions about a common Western norm in the interpretation of other traditions.

Subaltern Studies

Especially evident in religious studies teaching informed by political and literary critical studies of the postcolonial kind, this represents an astringent and pointed response to both the obvious prejudices of subimperial conservatism and the gentle ambiguities of post-1960s liberalism. Although famous as a research area, subaltern approaches are also making their way into teaching — even into the teaching of religions. There is a ground-up effort to understand a non-Western cultural situation through the agency of the actors in it, rather than in terms of the imperial concerns of the West. This attitude has encouraged the use of micro-studies of religious communities in South Asia as part of more general courses/modules.

Engaged Radicalism

As reflexive awareness of the academic researcher’s hegemonic-parasitic relationship with cultural realities becomes heightened, the problems and tensions within those realities seem to demand an existential response on the part of the researcher. An ethical transformation of that relationship is, in turn, reflected in teaching. Increasingly, lecturers with ethnographic knowledge

seek to convey the transformative potential of their teaching to students. Sparking enthusiasm is not only a pedagogic aim, but also a moral goal. Especially in the matter of gender and caste/class, teaching South Asian religions has become partly a matter of drawing students into issues of inequality, power, violence, exploitation, and predation. Similarly, complex and contradictory concerns over the political violence in the Punjab in the 1980s and 1990s were evident in the growth and teaching of Sikhism. (This was not the case in religious studies as such, but in political and sociological contexts like “Punjab Studies.”)

The multicultural nature of British society (if not of British religious studies students) lends immediacy to this approach, for there is a continued sense of engagement with the countries from which Britain has gained its multicultural nature.

Multiculturalism

The impact of multiculturalist attitudes on the teaching of South Asian religions is significant. Compared to the general and conceptual debates in the U.S., multiculturalism in Britain is relatively more demographically focused and, in consequence, socially clarified. Although it sometimes brings in issues of European identity, multiculturalism normally means recognising immigrant populations from major portions of former non-dominion empire: the Caribbean and South Asia. This recognition came to be called (in the late 1970s, of course — shades of another sort of empire) “the empire strikes back.” In the 1980s and 1990s, South Asians (called “Asians” in Britain) saw their shifting position in British society gradually having an impact on the teaching of their religions in Britain. Whether socioeconomically impoverished or eminently successful, South Asians have become a stable part of society. This has contributed to burgeoning debates over “Britishness” and identity. In religious studies, it has led to an appraisal of South Asian religions as, in effect, religions of Britain.

In the next section, I will pursue the most striking disciplinary consequence of this development, but here I want to point out the impact it has had on teaching South Asian religions in general. While the subcontinent must continue to be the focus of courses on Hinduism, etc. as such, it has increasingly become the practice to give an ethnographic immediacy to such studies by introducing data from British Asian communities. It is now quite common for introductory books to contain photographs and narratives from British Hindu, Muslim, or Sikh sources as representative of the religions “back home.” This has undoubted pedagogic value, but raises interesting questions about immigrant identities, authenticity, and diasporic culture.

The immediacy of which I speak here is not because of reflexivity but familiarity. That is to say, reference to British Asian communities in religious studies is not about enabling students from

those communities to think through their lives, but rather to help native white students to anchor the distant and the strange with something possibly encountered within their extended milieu. This is not because of a lack of concern amongst teachers; it is because few students of Asian origin take religious studies. I will deal with this situation when dealing with the issue of etic/emic teaching.

Ethnic, Community, and Diasporic Studies

The situating of South Asian religions in Britain has led to a convergence of interest between those interested primarily in British society and those interested in South Asian religions. While the former are important to doing British sociology and so on, the latter are of relevance here. Increasingly, religions as they are found in Britain are autonomous foci of study. It is now possible to study Hinduism or Islam in Britain by themselves. Such studies do not always require the engagement of students with the textual and historical sources of the traditions, although it is difficult to see how this might be intellectually sustainable. When properly related to the larger phenomena of those religions, attention to their British manifestations is a welcome addition to their study.

Etic and Emic Teaching

Finally, I turn to the greatest source of uncertainty over the future teaching of South Asian religions. While the presence of these religions in Britain has certainly lent immediacy to teaching them in the universities, that immediacy is not due to reflexivity. That is, it is not through being taught to members of those religious traditions themselves.

The dominant explanation for this situation with regard to Islam is that Islamic communities take teaching to be a highly committed undertaking; there is no secularized distance between existential and intellectual engagement, as with a good deal of (Western) Christianity in Britain. Although it is certainly not unknown to find Muslims teaching Islam in universities, it is also notable that several are Western converts. I suspect that the gap between the teaching of Islam as faith and as social scientific study is as marked here as in the US. It cannot be determined exactly to what extent this affects different attitudes to Islam, but the fact is that there are contradictory impulses in the teaching and learning of Islam. One seeks to work as closely as is possible to the lives of Muslims, continuing the multicultural impulse delineated above. The other accepts a certain ineradicable alienness to the nonexistential study of Islam. Apart from exceptional cases, it seems unlikely that there will be any substantial overlap between teaching Islam within the community and as a subject of Religious Studies.

Hinduism has not been as subject to course-work deconstruction in Britain as in the U.S. The

definitional challenges of Hinduism nevertheless certainly are accepted as absolutely vital to teaching it properly. Until comparatively recently, however, the much-debated plurality of Hinduism, together with other factors, meant that there was hardly any structured internal — emic — teaching. It appeared that the formal teaching of a religion was a Western academic affair, different from the transmission of tradition(s) in the community. There may be unified courses on Hinduism, but that unity is purely a bureaucratic compulsion. The plurality of Hinduism precludes any common existential teaching of it. Such teaching can only be of specific and historically real traditions. Academic consensus has been threatened by the development of an essentialist trend within Hindu groups. This is partly a matter of the exportation of political concerns from India, but partly it is a matter of a search for less debatable, more assertible identities in an ideologically uncertain world. Whatever the reasons, there is now opening up a distance between the teaching of Hinduism in the academy and the propagation of a somewhat etiolated, if psychologically appealing, notion of Hinduism amongst Hindus.

In the end, the primary reason for the distance that exists in Britain between the teaching of South Asian religions and South Asians themselves is that South Asians have rarely been students of religious studies. For reasons that lie beyond the purview of this essay, they either do not come into the ambit of tertiary education, or go into professional fields like medicine, accounting, finance, and pharmacology. It is only very recently, especially in London, that third-generation British Asians are beginning to take religious studies. Their novel engagement with their traditions may open up new directions of pedagogy.