

Report on a Workshop on Teaching South Asian Religious Traditions, Centre for Applied South Asian Studies, University of Manchester, 18 May 2001

Jackie Suthren Hirst — *University of Manchester*

Mary Searle-Chatterjee — *University of Manchester and Manchester Metropolitan University*

Eleanor Nesbitt — *University of Warwick*

This one day workshop was attended by over 30 colleagues from institutions around the UK. Its aim was to examine the way in which South Asian religious traditions are taught within Higher Education institutions, to think about the ramifications of our practice, and to look towards the future direction of teaching such traditions in this context. The tone of the workshop was set by a series of questions sent out to participants by the organisers prior to the day. These questions included:

- Should we label the subject of our courses in terms of ‘religions’, traditions, regional traditions or cultures? What are the various advantages and disadvantages of different labelling strategies?
- If we focus on a ‘tradition’ how much emphasis should we place on diversity within it?
- How much emphasis should we place on historical and political study of the changing ways in which religious identity labels have been invoked?
- How serious a problem is the ‘world religions’ paradigm?

Bearing in mind these issues, the workshop began with a presentation by Dr. Roger Ballard entitled *Challenging Paradigms: Popular Religion in the Punjab*. Dr. Ballard’s presentation was supported by visual evidence gathered on a recent research trip to the Punjab. It problematised the appropriateness of teaching by ‘-isms’ where popular religion is concerned.

Smaller groups then considered the implications of his presentation in relation to the teaching of Hinduism, Islam, Sikhism and

Buddhism. These groups prepared posters which were discussed over lunch and presented formally to a post-lunch plenary in terms of particular analytical, pedagogical, and political issues.

In the afternoon delegates again split into smaller groups to consider issues related to teaching across religious traditions, teaching about texts, and teaching via the web, before reconvening in a plenary to discuss outcomes and models for the future.

Outcomes

- Realisation of the need to examine pedagogic practice in detail, and of the benefits of collaborative work on pedagogy
- Sharing of dilemmas and examples of good practice and suggested directions for future action
- Exploration of issues resulting from the disparities between popular religious practice and the image of religion propagated by elite institutions

Plans for future action included:

- Work towards the production of an annotated bibliography of pooled useful materials, to be made available through the CASAS website (<http://www.art.man.ac.uk/casas>)
- Work towards the production of a collection of papers on pedagogy
- Work towards the production of a book of readings with commentary for use in teaching across traditions (practice, belief, text and identity)

Unanimous agreement among participants that a second workshop should be held next year either in Manchester or elsewhere to continue work in this area. It was suggested that the next session could be based around short presentations on the merits and demerits of particular teaching approaches. For example: on thematic approaches; the use of ‘cross tradition’ devotional hymns; setting texts in a socio-economic context; case studies of incidents; fieldwork interviews; using a historical approach to show fluidity; and using biographies and autobiography

More detailed outcomes of particular sessions will be made available via the CASAS website (<http://www.art.man.ac.uk/casas>).

We are very grateful to all participants for the wealth of useful suggestions and comments made and, in particular, to Ian Harris (St. Martin's College, Lancaster), Ron Geaves (University College, Chichester) and Roger Ballard (University of Manchester) for facilitating workshops. We are also most grateful for funding from the PRS-LTSN, and from the University of Manchester.