

# *Courses and Curriculum*

---

---

## **The Hindu Perspective on Studies of Religion**

*Terence J. Lovat  
University of Newcastle*

### **Introduction**

While a member of the **Studies of Religion** syllabus committee, I became aware that little knowledge was possessed about perspectives of non-Christian religious adherents towards public curricula in Religious Studies. Of the many organisations and individuals from which feedback on the **Studies of Religion** drafts were sought, only a handful represented traditions other than Christianity; the majority of these non-Christian sources was Jewish. Knowing how various the feedback from different Christian sources tends to be on these matters, I concluded that we knew very little of the range of views held by members of the Buddhist, Hindu and Islamic populations. Granted the numerity of these groups in the total population (Bentley et al., 1991), it seemed imperative that this knowledge be gathered. My work began with the Hindus.

### **Strategy**

Ethnographic work was conducted principally with the Hindu Temple community Helensburgh, NSW, half-way between Sydney and Wollongong. The work, conducted throughout 1992, consisted of regular visits to the temple for occasional and organised interviews, as well as countless smaller encounters which served to verify my accruing knowledge. The approach to interviewing was extremely open. I avoided the 'clipboard and taperecorder' approach in favour of appearing as much as possible like a casual participant. As soon as possible after an interview, the record was committed to paper or 'notebook' computer. While this strategy placed great pressure on the powers of retentive memory, it enhanced enormously the quality of the information received.

From these encounters, a story has been constructed which I believe does jus-

tice to the Hindu perspective on the **Studies of Religion** (NSW, 1991) syllabus.

### **The Place of Religion in the School**

Virtually all the Hindus I met were only too delighted with the idea of a broad-based Religious Studies in the public school. It seemed to be important to them that mechanisms be developed by which greater knowledge and understanding of their traditions and beliefs on the part of the broader community might be achieved. It seemed apparent to all that a major way in which this could be achieved was through some form of education in the schools. Most were enthusiastic about the **Studies of Religion** syllabus, as I described the structure to them. They could see the opportunity for ‘... everyone to learn something about everyone else ... this is very Hindu in fact!’ Another response offered: ‘To the Hindu, all religions are ultimately the same’. Yet another claimed:

*‘By knowing about other religions, ... (students) will learn that all religions are but different paths to the same goal. Through this, they will realise that all people and races are interrelated. It is hoped that conflicts between various groups, on the basis of religion, will cease to exist.’*

For most Hindus, it seemed natural that religion should be dealt with in the curriculum. Indeed, it was a point of some concern that this had not been the case in public schools up to this time. For this reason, many sent their children to Catholic schools, a common practice among Hindus in India and Sri Lanka, and a growing trend now in Australia. For them, it was better to have any religion in the curriculum than no religion. There was a feeling,

however, that the religion curriculum which was being presented to their children was too narrowly Christian, even Catholic, and was not providing any opportunity for their children to learn or express their Hinduism. This was in contrast to the type of religious study that many had experienced even in Catholic schools in India or Sri Lanka. These Catholic schools catered for the largely Hindu population in all senses, including in education of religion. While the Christians were receiving their instruction, the Hindus were receiving theirs. Where opportunities were created for the Catholics to worship, similar opportunities were made for the Hindus. Some respondents implied that they saw it as the primary role of a religious school to provide such broad-based religious literacy. Because the religious schools of Australia were clearly falling down in this, then it was imperative that the state schools take it up as a primary responsibility.

While enthusiastic about the goal of broad religious literacy, all I met were also impressed with the fact that there was an opportunity in the new syllabus for a Hindu to explore the Hindu tradition in some depth. Indeed, there was a clear view that the learning of other religions and the better understanding of Hinduism were complementary, if not necessary, to each other: ‘... by learning about other religions, our children can come to appreciate their own religion better’.

### **Hinduism and the Hindu Teacher**

Some suggested quite strongly that the teacher involved in teaching the Hinduism section of the syllabus needed to be Hindu to do justice to it.

This became a central question in my research, for, clearly, it would present great problems to the mechanics of the **Studies of Religion** syllabus. It seemed that, among the majority of Hindus, it was not of great concern that the teacher of the Hinduism section be non-Hindu, so long as there was a clear understanding about what such a syllabus could hope to achieve and should be properly engaged in. Most seemed to believe that understanding about Hinduism could be achieved by anyone with sensitivity for the subject, especially if the sensitivity included religious persuasion. So long as one was religious, the essence of Hinduism, something of the spirit of Brahma, could be communicated. **'To be religious is to be Hindu', is the way one respondent put it.**

At the same time, many were keen to distinguish between the kind of religious learning which would occur in the classroom of a school and the more serious learning which might come from a complete religious search. I was reminded of the distinctions between 'education about' and 'education in' religion (Rositer, 1981), 'General' versus 'Special' Religious Education (Rawlinson, 1980) and 'Faith-forming' as against 'Interfaith' educational forms (Lovat, 1989) which have been so prominent in Western religious education theory of the past decade or so. The **Studies of Religion** course is clearly geared to 'education about' religion. For the majority of Hindus, within this context, Hinduism could be taught by a non-Hindu. If a person wished to gain 'education in' Hinduism, however, that is, to become a devotee of Hinduism, then the teacher would not only need to be Hindu, but to be what most Hindus would describe as a 'guru'. The most common way in which one becomes religious in

Hinduism is through the guidance of a 'guru'. This is not an ordinary Hindu; this is someone with special qualifications of the spiritual kind.

### **The Effect of Studies of Religion on Change**

I found among the Hindus I met, a generally strong affirmation that religion is central to personal and cultural life, unable to be separated. I found, also, among even the most highly educated and professional Hindus that, though quite capable of critical thought generally, they were, by and large, accepting of the tenets and even the structural shape, form and regulations of their religion. The question of whether it is just for women to be excluded from the temple when 'unclean' had no more currency than the apparently outrageous question of whether they might be priests. Similarly, while most seemed accepting of present Indian Government policy of positive discrimination for the lower castes, there seemed to be no thought that this might extend to religious regulations which, among other things, exclude all but the brahmin caste from priesthood. This rather docile perspective on religion appeared to carry over into attitudes to the Religious Studies curriculum: **'... if it promotes religious awareness, it must be a good thing!'**

While the above represented the consensus view with regard to the Religious Studies venture, I did meet a small number who put an alternative view. This group could envisage change in the community, first, because more and more Hindus will inter-marry with other Australians, and, second, because of the effects of education. Of the elements of

education most likely to achieve this change, each member of this small group highlighted a subject like **Studies of Religion**. In particular, this would make Hindu students aware of the critical trends which are so much part of contemporary Christianity. A couple highlighted the Anglican fight for women's ordination as a critical religious trend which, to this point, has been foreign to Hinduism.

One member of this small group, who was most critical of all organised religion, suggested that the upcoming generation of Hindus would be more Australian than anything else and would not accept what he characterised as the "injustices and meaningless superstitions" of the old culture. The great value of an open-ended Religious Studies for him was that it could help to open up what he saw as a much-needed critical scrutiny of religion in general. This could have long-term positive effects for the Hindu community.

Another member of this small group saw the great value of a **Studies of Religion** being in its making Hindu students aware of what he described as 'a lack of tradition'. By this, he meant that the old vedic religion, the heart of Hinduism, had no dogmas or prescriptions, not even belief in a god. While this had often been the cause of criticism among Hindus, namely, that the religion is too devoid of dogmas and firm directions, for this member it was actually a strength. Because many of the legalistic ways of rituals, customs and procedures are the result of the accretions of time, rather than being rooted in doctrine or encased in sacred text (as is so often the case in other religions), Hindus could actually be freer to effect change than followers of other religions. While, according to this member, most Hindus still do not understand the difference, education would enlighten

them about this. Again, this member pinpointed **Studies of Religion** as being particularly valuable in this regard.

The live instance of the above which was offered again related to the question of gender. This same member asserted that there are no grounds in Hinduism for any kind of gender inequity. In Judaism, Christianity and Islam, 'sacred words' can be found in a 'sacred text' to justify such discrimination. In Hinduism, there is no such. If anything, he believed, the theology of Hinduism promoted gender equity. For every god, there was a goddess, and, in some cases, the goddess actually had power which the god did not. Points like this, which could be highlighted by a syllabus like **Studies of Religion**, could help to make Hinduism what this member believed it should be: namely, a critical and proactive force in breaking down gender inequities and other forms of social injustice.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, it would seem that it is beyond question that innovations like the **Studies of Religion** syllabus are warmly welcomed within the Hindu community, though not always for the same reasons. There are clearly those who see it as something which fits very well with the current shape and form of Hinduism. From these, I sensed almost an ownership of the types of perspectives to be found in such a syllabus. I experienced numbers of wry smiles which seemed to say: 'Well, we Hindus have known about such things for a long time. The value of learning broadly about the world of religion may be new to you but it is not to us. This is all very Hindu'. For others, the value of the syllabus would be in the

challenge it would present to Hinduism in its present shape and form. For them, the change this might bring would in no way change the essentials of Hinduism. On the contrary, it would serve to bring greater understanding to the Hindu community itself of what is essential, and perhaps not so essential.

**References**

Bentley, P., Blombery, 'T. & Hughes, P.  
1991. *A Yearbook for Australian Churches*

1992. Melbourne: Christian Research Association

Lovat, T. 1989. *What is This Thing Called Religious Education*. Sydney: Social Science Press

NSW (1991) *Studies of Religion* Sydney: NSW Board of Studies

Rawlinson, R. 1980 *Religious Education in New South Wales Government Schools*. Sydney: NSWGPS

Rossiter, G. 1981. *Religious Education in Australian Schools*. Canberra: CDC

