



**UNION**

**Religious Worlds of New York • Curriculum Development Project**

## **Hinduism in Practice – And in Colonial Fantasy**

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### **Abstract**

This project introduces students to Hinduism as lived religion through the study of *puja*. Students will be asked to apply their knowledge by identifying and addressing incomplete and negative understandings of Hindu sacred images expressed by a sixteenth-century English merchant. This lesson challenges students to analyze how cultural differences contributed to conflict between Europeans and Hindus in India during the age of imperialism. Initially designed for students in a tenth-grade global history course at a Catholic independent school for girls.

### **Context**

The students will have already studied in Hinduism in the ancient world during the first year of a two-year global history sequence. This lesson will be taught as part of a unit on European imperialism and cultural contact in Asia and Africa. It will prepare students to understand the roots of later conflicts such as the Sepoy Rebellion.

### **Objectives**

- Students will gain a better understanding of Hinduism as a lived religion by examining the significance of *puja*.
- Students will identify and analyze some of the cultural misunderstandings that developed when European explorers and merchants and Hindus encountered each other in India during the sixteenth century.

### **Procedure**

- I. The students will brainstorm their prior knowledge about Hinduism.
- II. The students will use their iPads to access the “What Does ‘Hindu’ Mean?” section of the [Pluralism Project’s website](#)

Individually, they will respond to the following prompt: What are some beliefs about life that are shared by many Hindus?

- III. The class will view the [Puja: Expressions of Hindu Devotion video](#) (from the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery's 1996 exhibition):

The students will then listen to [audio clips](#) of two American Hindus explaining the significance of sacred images to them (from the Pluralism Project's "Murti: The Image of God").

- IV. After the students have watched the video from the Sackler Gallery and listened to the audio clips from the Pluralism Project, each will turn to a partner and discuss: Why do Hindus engage in *puja*? What is the significance of this practice?

## Assessment

Using the guidelines below, students will analyze and respond to an English merchant's impression of the Hindu sacred images he encountered in India.

1. Read the description written by Ralph Fitch, an English merchant who traveled to India in the late sixteenth century.
  - a. How would you characterize Fitch's attitude toward the Hindu sacred images he observed? Provide evidence for your response.
  - b. Based on your knowledge of the English Reformation, why might Fitch have reacted so strongly to the sacred images he encountered in India?
  - c. What information and/or concepts would help Fitch to develop a more complete and informed understanding of the significance of the Hindu images he observed?

***“Their chiefe idols bee blacke and evill favoured, their mouths monstrous, their eares gilded and full of jewels, their teeth and eyes of gold, silver and glasse, some having one thing in their hands and some another.”***

--Ralph Fitch (1550-1611), English trader and merchant, qtd. in Eck, 17-18

2. Drawing upon what you have learned about Hinduism, write a letter to Fitch in which you address the mistaken, incomplete, or biased perceptions of Hinduism displayed in the quotation. After explaining significance of the various aspects of the sacred images Fitch observed to Hindus, advise Fitch on how he should adjust his speech and behavior in order to avoid giving offense or provoking conflict while traveling in India. Your letter should be at least three paragraphs in length.

## Extending the Lesson

In groups of three or four, students will discuss:

- What groups in contemporary American society experience misunderstandings or ridicule regarding their religious beliefs?
- What resources and strategies could be used to correct and challenge these misperceptions?

## Bibliography

Eck, Diana L. *Darsan: Seeing the Divine Image in India*. 2<sup>nd</sup> revised and enlarged edition. New York: Columbia University Press, 1996.

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