



UNION

Religious Worlds of New York • *Curriculum Development Project*

Observing *Puja* Through the Global Intimacy of YouTube

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Abstract

The goal of this one-day lesson is to harness the odd global intimacy of YouTube to familiarize students with the lived experience of Hindu laypersons, introduce them to the concept of *puja*, and reflect the diversity of practice within the tradition without leaving the classroom. To this end, students are asked to independently watch five different YouTube videos (all less than 5 minutes) featuring various Hindu practitioners discussing or demonstrating their worship. Students will jot down notes on a guided worksheet as they watch. After 25 minutes, the class will reconvene as a large group to discuss what different students learned through their observations. Finally, students will read together an academic description of *puja* and then evaluate the value of learning about a lived practice through these two diverse modalities. This project was created for use in a required, 11th grade World Religions course at an independent, Catholic all-girl's college preparatory school.

This lesson will occur without any prior introduction to *puja* but it will follow four more abstract lessons covering the Hindu worldview(s), the concepts of monism and Brahman, and the most popular gods in the pantheon. It will be followed by lessons on the major Hindu denominations, yoga, caste, and contemporary women's issues, and a trip to a local temple. Students should leave the day's class, not just with new vocabulary and conceptual understanding, but a sense of familiarity with the Hindu layperson's intimate and varied daily practice of *puja*.

Description of *Puja*

The worship of Hindu deities is typically called *puja*. *Puja* can take place in a temple, at a public shrine, or at a private shrine within one's home. A home shrine might consist of a room, a small altar, or simply pictures or statues of the deity. During *puja* a deity or some aspect of the deity is honored through a combination of images, objects, and actions. Central to Hindu worship is the image, or icon called *murti*. Bells are rung to invite the deity's attention. Lamps are lit with ghee and waved in front of the deity's image. Prayers are chanted. Water and food are offered to the deity for blessing and then are consumed by the worshipper. Images of the deity may be symbolically bathed or clothed. Incense is usually burned or flowers are used to perfume the air and decorate the display. In these rituals, the worshipper nourishes a relationship with the chosen deity or deities through all five senses.

Puja is viewed as a form of communication and communion with the gods who exist in unseen worlds. The central act of Hindu worship from the point of view of the layperson, is to stand in the

presence of the deity and behold the image with one's own eyes, to see and be seen by the deity. This is referred to as *darśan*.¹

Lesson: Observing *Puja*

Students will be instructed prior to class to bring headphones with their computers for the day. The lesson will begin immediately with only the brief instructions below.

Your task is to watch the following five videos and learn as much as you can about *puja* from the featured Hindu practitioners. You will have 25 minutes for this independent activity. Each of you may proceed at your own pace and explore the roughly 15 minutes of videos in whatever order you choose. As you watch, consider the following questions and jot down notes on the worksheet provided. Prioritize careful observation over detailed note taking. The videos might answer these questions in slightly different ways. Try to notice what is consistent and what varies.

Suggested *Puja* Videos to Watch

This list of YouTube links will be shared with students in a Google Doc

[“A Hindu Morning Ritual, Sakila's Puja”](#) (4:58)

[“How to Have a Puja at Home”](#) (3:23)

[“Hindu Puja - On Common Ground”](#) (1:30)

[“A Hindu Shrine”](#) (3:42)

[“Hinduism in a Nutshell”](#) (2:26) NOTE: *only watch from minute 15:24 to the end*

Questions to Consider

A worksheet with the following questions will be distributed to students to ensure that they take handwritten notes for themselves as they watch and do not toggle between screens.

1. What is puja?
2. Where does puja occur?
3. What objects are a part of puja? How are they used?
4. What are the components or steps of puja?
5. What else did you learn from watching these videos?
6. What questions do you still have?

¹For more on puja, see: Jeffrey Brodd. *World Religions: A Voyage of Discovery Teacher's Guide* (St. Paul: Saint Mary's Press, 2015) and Diana Eck, *Darśan: Seeing the Divine Image in India* (New York: Columbia University, 1996).

Large Group Discussion Questions

After 25 minutes, we will reconvene as a large group and discuss what you each learned. Everyone should be prepared to contribute to the conversation.

Let multiple students answer each question to get a range of perspectives.

1. What did you think of these videos? Do you have a sense of what puja is or are you confused?
2. What video did you like best? Why? What video did you find most informative? Why?
3. What is puja?
4. Where does puja occur?
5. What things are a part of puja? How are they used?
6. What are the components or steps of puja?
7. What else did you learn from watching these videos?
8. What questions do you still have?
9. How was watching these videos to learn about puja similar to and different from reading a text? How was watching these videos similar to and different from learning directly from watching puja in real life?

Point out to students that the videos reflect the diversity of lay Hindu practice and practitioners. While there are common elements of puja, there is also range and difference. Hindus vary in age, gender, class, nationality, preferred gods, and religious background, among other things.

In the last 5 to 10 minutes of class, read the following written, academic description of puja together (shared via Google Doc). Ask students to reflect on what they learned from the text that they did not learn from the videos and vice versa. Encourage them to discuss the value and differences of each modality.

Follow Up & Assessment

In terms of follow up, several of the practitioner's statements in the YouTube videos will be referenced in future lessons on the major Hindu dominations and contemporary women's issues to provide living examples of the concepts covered. Students will also see *puja* in person during the local temple visit, thus interesting points of contrast may be made between the *puja* of lay persons at a home shrine and the *puja* performed by clergy at a temple. Learning will be assessed in our Hinduism unit test, which is a blend of multiple-choice, short-answer and essay questions and also may come up in students' two page personal Reflection Journals responding to the open ended prompt, "How might our study of Hinduism be beneficial in the future?"

Context of the School of the Holy Child

Students at the School of the Holy Child, Rye are predominantly, white, wealthy and Catholic Christians. Financial aid is granted to 24% of students for the \$33,000 tuition. Upon admission, 30% identify as a person of color, 20% identify as members of a Christian denomination other than Catholic, and 10% identify as Jewish. Classes, which are comprised of 10 to 20 students, will typically have two or three students who identify as atheists or agnostics. In five years of teaching at Holy Child, I have had only two Buddhist students, two Hindu students and no Muslim students.

Holy Child students are required to take four full years of Religious Studies courses. We have no diocesan affiliation and do not follow the American Conference of Catholic Bishops Curriculum. Our freshmen take The Christian Bible, our sophomores take Social Justice, our juniors take Christian Theology & World Religions, and our seniors take Ethics & Faith in the Modern World. There are no honors level Religious Studies classes, so each section includes students ranging in learning levels.

The mission of the School of the Holy Child is to create “women of conscience and action who are prepared to be global citizens and meet the needs of the world.” To this end, the second semester of our year-long Christian Theology & World Religions course seeks to impart basic religious literacy in Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism and Judaism while also examining relevant contemporary social issues and emphasizing the lived experience of religious practitioners at home and abroad. Given these primary goals, significant sections in our current Hinduism unit feel too abstract and complex for our student population to be beneficial to them and the global community they are expected to serve. This lesson plan is one piece in a series of changes seeking to simplify conceptual content while amplifying the varied, lived experience of contemporary Hindus.

We are a one-to-one-laptop school so during the first 25 minutes of the 50 minute lesson students will watch the videos individually. This will give them the opportunity to proceed at their own pace, make observations independently, and learn different things from the different practitioners featured. Collectively, the strategically selected videos in this lesson introduce common *puja* concepts such as *aarti*, *murti*, *darśan* and *bhakti*, while also reflecting the variety in *puja* practice and the diversity of views, preferred gods, settings, and practitioners. Again, this particular lesson is intended to help demystify Hindu people and their regular religious practices to my particular population of students.

**For information about the Religious Worlds of New York
summer institute for teachers, and more resources to enrich your teaching
on religious diversity, see: www.religiousworldsnyc.org.**