

Institution: Lancaster University		
Unit of Assessment: 31, Theology and Religious Studies		
Title of case study: Reinvigorating and enriching the teaching of Asian religions in secondary education		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2014 to 2020		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s):	Role(s) (e.g. job title):	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:
Brian Black Chakravarthi Ram-Prasad FBA	Lecturer Distinguished Professor	January 2012 to present September 1999 to present
Period when the claimed impact occurred: January 2014 to December 2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? N		
1. Summary of the impact <p>Against a backdrop of serious decline in the teaching of Asian religions in England and Wales, Black's and Ram-Prasad's research has reinvigorated and enriched the understanding of Hinduism and Buddhism amongst teachers and students of Religious Education (RE). Black and Ram-Prasad have shared their research through annual teachers' conferences, regular school visits, and extensive capacity-building resources. These activities led to enhanced understandings and updated teaching practices, and were linked to improved student exam performance. In some cases, teaching programmes were saved. The research has also inspired teachers and students to challenge gender stereotyping about Asian religions and has supported a shift towards a more pluralistic and inclusive approach to RE, one more appropriate to today's multi-ethnic and multi-faith society.</p>		
2. Underpinning research <p>Research by Black and Ram-Prasad has brought attention to the importance of the dialogue form in the scriptures of Hinduism and Buddhism. In the process, it has demonstrated that key source texts are often more polyvocal and inclusive in relation to gender and class than has generally been assumed. The research has shown that the dialogue form invites ways of reading South Asian religious texts that are more open-ended than scholars and school syllabi have recognised. Black and Ram-Prasad have shown that, rather than approaching scripture as didactic commandments, Hindu and Buddhist texts use dialogue to convey the subtlety and complexity of key doctrines.</p> <p>In 2015, Black conceived and co-edited the first collection of academic essays to explore the uses and implications of the dialogue form across Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain texts [R1]. Both Hinduism and Buddhism have been criticised in the West for their attitudes towards gender and class. Black demonstrated however, that dialogue conveys views of gender and class that are more complex and nuanced than had widely been assumed. His chapter, which compared dialogues from 3 classical sources (2 Hindu and 1 Buddhist), showed that the form explicitly addresses issues of gender and class in ways that complicate and challenge how these identities are represented in more didactic scriptures, and that the purported views of women and members of lower classes are often represented more positively than previously recognised [R1, R2].</p> <p>In 2016, Black and Ram-Prasad secured funding to build upon this initial research [G1]. This resulted in an edited volume that further explored dialogue across Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain texts [R3]. Black's chapter [R4] compared Hindu and Buddhist dialogues to show how the form addresses religious plurality and conveys different yet overlapping understandings of <i>dharma</i> (moral order); Ram-Prasad's chapter [R5] shows the complex portrayal of Hindu theology conveyed through dialogue, while also drawing attention to subaltern contributions to Hindu conceptions of the divine.</p> <p>This was followed by Black's 2020 monograph [G1, R6], the first extensive investigation into the uses and implications of dialogue in the Hindu epic, the <i>Mahābhārata</i>. Black shows that</p>		

the *Mahābhārata*'s use of dialogue is integral to how it represents the central religious ideas and practices of Hinduism. He brings out 3 dimensions of dialogue in particular: the way it contains embedded methods of philosophical reasoning, the way it represents different perspectives, and the way it provokes readers to reflect further on the main teachings of the text.

Owing to research by Black and Ram-Prasad, there is now an improved understanding of the uses and implications of dialogue in primary Asian religious sources. Their research is particularly relevant to RE, because the changes to the GCSE and A level specifications in 2016 require teachers and students to engage more closely with primary sources. Moreover, their work is a reference point for contemporary comparative philosophical debates and has relevance to an increasingly multicultural society.

3. References to the research

[R1] Black (2015) 'Dialogue and Difference: Encountering the Other in Indian Religious and Philosophical Sources'. In *Dialogue in Early South Asian Religions: Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain Traditions*, ed. Black and Patton (Ashgate, pp. 243-257). Held at HEI. Peer-reviewed.

[R2] Ram-Prasad (2018) 'The Gendered Body: The Dialogue of Sulabhā and Janaka, *Mahābhārata*, Śāntiparvan chapter 308'. In *Human Being, Bodily Being: Phenomenology from Classical India*, by Ram-Prasad. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 58-98). Held at HEI. Peer-reviewed.

[R3] Black and Ram-Prasad, ed. (2019) *In Dialogue with Classical Indian Traditions: Encounter, Transformation, and Interpretation* (Routledge). Held at HEI. Peer-reviewed and AHRC funded [G1].

[R4] Black (2019) 'Sources of Indian secularism? Dialogues on Politics and Religion in Hindu and Buddhist Traditions'. In *In Dialogue with Classical Indian Traditions: Encounter, Transformation, and Interpretation*, Black and Ram-Prasad. (Routledge, pp.23-35). Held at HEI. Peer-reviewed and AHRC funded [G1].

[R5] Ram-Prasad (2019) 'Dialogue in extremis: Valin in the Valmiki Rāmāyaṇa'. In *In Dialogue with Classical Indian Traditions: Encounter, Transformation, and Interpretation*, ed. Black and Ram-Prasad. (Routledge, pp. 228-243). Held at HEI. Peer-reviewed and AHRC funded [G1].

[R6] Black (2020) *In Dialogue with the Mahābhārata* (Routledge), 215 pages. Held at HEI. Peer-reviewed and AHRC funded [G1].

Peer-reviewed research grant

[G1] Black (PI), *In Dialogue with the Mahabharata*, AHRC: (2016 to 2018) GBP90,229.

4. Details of the impact

In an increasingly multicultural Britain, Asian religions have a growing presence. Between the 2001 and 2011 censuses, followers of Hinduism rose by 276,584 (49% increase) and numbers following Buddhism rose by 109,768 (72% increase). Despite these demographic changes, RE provision at GCSE and A level has become more focused on Abrahamic religions. This is largely a consequence of exam boards' responses to the Department for Education's (DfE's) demand for greater emphasis on primary texts. Data supplied by the OCR and AQA Exam Boards suggest that there are approximately 54,600 GCSE entries each year in England with Buddhism or Hinduism options, while approximately 2,250 A level entries feature one of these options. At all levels, the DfE has demanded much greater emphasis on the use of primary texts. However, RE teachers struggle to meet this demand for a combination of reasons. Many RE teachers are non-specialists with limited subject knowledge; a GCSE textbook, endorsed by Edquas, did not become available until spring 2020; and while there is an AS level textbook, there are no dedicated resources for final year A level students. Consequently, fewer teachers have felt confident in their subject knowledge of Asian traditions, positioning Hinduism and Buddhism as increasingly neglected topics within religious education. This predicament facing the teaching of Asian religions in schools first became apparent to Black in 2014 while carrying out student recruitment campaigns on behalf of Lancaster University.

Reversing the decline in the study of Asian religions in schools

Research by Black and Ram-Prasad has supported the continued teaching of Asian religions against a backdrop of inadequate teacher knowledge and a critical lack of resources. Since 2014, Black has worked closely with teachers to design a series of resources and activities that draw on his and Ram-Prasad's research findings [R1-6]. These include illustrated PowerPoint presentations, videos, and interactive worksheets. Resources have been shared primarily through teachers' conferences and school visits and have also been widely distributed via Black's 250-strong network of RE teachers, social media groups, the National Association for Teachers of Religious Education (NATRE) and the Online Resource Centre for Religious Education (ORCRE). Additionally, in the spring of 2020, Black created a series of 35 podcasts which became a vital resource for online teaching during the COVID-19 lockdown. These resources had been viewed 2,129 times by December 2020 [S9]. Between 2014 and 2019, the teachers' conferences had been attended by 353 different teachers and Black had visited over 25 schools. Black is recognised in the religious education community as an expert point of reference for teachers, educational bodies, and exam boards who need support with Hinduism or Buddhism to meet syllabus specifications [S1-S7]. Feedback from the 2019 teachers' conference showed that 92% of delegates teaching Buddhism, and 82% of those teaching Hinduism, planned to adopt these new teaching resources and methods [S8].

Through this series of activities and resources, Black and Ram-Prasad have been able to reverse the decline of the teaching of Asian religions in a number of ways. They have reinvigorated teachers [S1-7] and helped to bring 'a new confidence' to the teaching of Asian religions [S6]. The Chair of NATRE has indicated that the activities and resources have contributed to the preservation of Asian religion programmes in some schools, while in others they have inspired teachers to include Asian religions for the first time: *"I feel sure [Black's input] contributed towards teachers continuing to teach Asian religions, or making the leap to teaching them for the first time. Without this input, fewer teachers would have wanted to offer these subjects"* [S7]. One teacher confirmed that the support offered by Black was instrumental in encouraging her school to begin teaching Buddhism [S1]. In another example, a teacher credited Black's resources with saving the teaching of Hinduism at his school: *"Without the resources, no teacher is going to want to work on the options for Asian religions. The research and preparation time involved places a totally unrealistic load on teachers and our school would definitely have stopped teaching Hinduism without Brian's contribution"* [S3].

Improving literacy and building capacity amongst teachers of Asian religions

Additionally, Black's and Ram-Prasad's research has improved teachers' literacy about Asian religions. Their research has become increasingly applicable to teachers who have had to engage more deeply with primary texts to meet new exam board specifications [S8]. As the Chair of NATRE has confirmed, resources for teaching Asian religions are especially important because these traditions demand "deep subject knowledge and the availability of contemporary research" [S7]. Their research is particularly relevant because it relates to texts that are included in the specifications [R1-6] and because it explores how, within these texts, the dialogue form plays an integral role in articulating and characterising key concepts on the specifications, such as *dharma*, *karma*, *yoga*, *bhakti*, and *varna* [R2, R4-6]. Black's and Ram-Prasad's activities and resources contribute to improving literacy by bringing attention to the dialogical form and structure of Hindu and Buddhist sources and by showing how central doctrines in the texts are articulated in ways that are far more subtle and multi-faceted than are widely recognised. Better understanding of the primary sources and of how they represent their main doctrines are of direct relevance to teachers' capacity to teach optimally in the classroom: *"Deeper knowledge and understanding has given me a much greater appreciation of the texts and their value in teaching, especially the value of using story/narrative"* [S8].

Teachers highlighted that the step up from teaching GCSE to A level under the new regulations is very large, one that they felt ill-equipped to make: *"Prior to my involvement*

with the conferences, I had only taught Hinduism at GCSE level and they were an invaluable and transformative opportunity to update my subject knowledge” [S4]. Feedback from all participants at the 2019 teachers’ conference demonstrated that the research findings made an extremely constructive and positive contribution to their teaching, aligning teacher’s knowledge and capacity with exam board expectations [S8]. The Head of the AQA Exam Board for RE stated: *“[Black] has the ability to distil high level academic expertise in a way that secondary school teachers can take forward in the classroom”* [S6]. As one teacher testified: *“Teaching via the texts was not something I had considered, and the conference has really helped me gain an insight in to how I can adapt my teaching for the benefit of my students”* [S8].

Improving educational outcomes for students of Asian religions

Black’s school visits have also contributed to improved understandings among students. Through 10 annual school visits, Black reaches approximately 500 AS/A level students each year. Considering that approximately 2,250 students take exams in Buddhism and Hinduism every year, Black’s visits reach a high percentage of students studying these religions in England and Wales. In 2017-2018, 77% of 253 students stated their understanding of Hinduism had changed and 98% stated they had learned something new [S10]. *“[Black] was able to identify and bring to life the underlying concepts in a way that the students could grasp and understand...He showed how a single story has multiple dimensions and perspectives and can be used to illustrate many different points of view. The dialogues helped to anchor learning and the lessons become a lot more memorable”* [S3]. Moreover, interaction with the research has changed behaviour on the part of students, igniting a new interest in the subject: *“To work with a real-life Hindu[ism] scholar was a much more stimulating and enriching experience for them than referring to a textbook”* [S5]. After school visits in 2017-2018, 58% of students reported that they were likely to continue with the study of Asian religions after school, either formally or informally, with many making reference to the way the research had ignited a passion for the subject [S10]. Teachers spoke of the inspirational impact of Black’s school visits, which had directly influenced some students’ subsequent higher education and career choices [S1, S5].

Furthermore, feedback from teachers pointed to an improvement in exam grades. An AQA A level examiner explained: *“Students who have used Brian’s resources can handle the exam specifications in more depth and support their arguments with a wider range of examples. Their understanding is definitely deeper and they demonstrate higher levels of ability in analysis and evaluation”* [S1]. Another teacher confirmed an improvement in exam grades: *“Our A level students have consistently achieved their best results on the Hinduism paper in recent years, which represents a third of their overall A level mark. I attribute this to the fact that I am now very confident about what I am teaching, which I can relate back to the encouragement and subject expertise that I have acquired at Brian’s conferences and through our ongoing contact”* [S4].

Redressing assumptions around gender stereotypes in Asian religious texts

Sociological aspects of Hinduism and Buddhism, including gender and class, are heavily emphasised in GCSE and A level specifications. Unfortunately, the representation of Hindu and Buddhist views on gender and class in the most widely available textbooks and resources often perpetuate unwarranted prejudices and reinforce Western attitudes of superiority. According to INSIGHT UK’S *A report on the state of Hinduism in Religious Education in UK schools* (2021), 75% of Hindus felt that Hinduism is not taught in a positive light. In particular, respondents were dissatisfied with teaching on gender and the caste system. Research by Black and Ram-Prasad demonstrates that Hindu and Buddhist conceptualisations of gender and class (including caste) are far more complex and nuanced than has widely been assumed [R1-6]. Engagement with their research has disrupted prejudices and changed understanding among teachers and students alike. One teacher who is also an AQA examiner commented: *“There is a particular focus in the syllabus specifications on the role of women in Buddhism, but standard recommended texts based on the Theravada can be very negative in their interpretation. Through working with Brian, I*

have had access to texts written by female monastics and modern female scholars with a much more positive angle which has changed my own perspective and the way I teach” [S1]. The usefulness of Black’s contribution to re-examining representations of gender is strongly referenced in teacher feedback. One sixth of the current A level paper examines equality and discrimination and as a teacher noted “It could easily become a social issues unit, but it must be rooted in the faith. *Here [Black’s] research on the Mahabharata has been invaluable to illustrate some of the feminist principles it embodies*” [S2]. Students also stated that their understanding of the gender dimension had been enriched: “*I realised that there are a lot more debates and contradiction towards the status of women throughout scriptures*” [S10]. Black’s contribution to advancing the understanding of gender aspects within the texts is supported by the topic being the most popular choice in his series of online resources [S9].

Promoting more inclusivity and worldviews in religious education

As demonstrated by the Commission on RE’s (CoRE) recommendations in 2018, there is a movement within Religious Education to include the worldviews of practitioners, rather than focus exclusively on the institutional versions of religious doctrine. Black’s and Ram-Prasad’s research is particularly relevant to this educational development, as their exploration of dialogue brings attention to the multiple views represented within sacred literature [R1-6], as well as to the diverse ways religious teachings have been interpreted and understood by practitioners [R4, R5]. As one teacher explained: “*Through his work in schools, [Black] has also supported the shift towards ‘worldviews’, demonstrating the fluidity of Hinduism and how belief as illustrated in the scriptures can differ widely from actual practice*” [S5]. Students from Asian religious communities have greatly benefitted from their engagement with the research because it encourages them to interpret the sources of their religion within the context of their own lives, enabling them to link their faith back to their own lived experiences. The Chair of NATRE confirmed: “*This can be a very mind-opening and valuable experience*” [S7].

Although teachers recognise that “to learn effectively, young people need to be able to recognise themselves and that the experiences they are bringing to classes have intrinsic value”, teachers are also increasingly aware that students from “non-Abrahamic religious communities struggle to relate to or reconcile their own lived experience to what they are being taught in schools” [S7]. Moreover, INSIGHT UK’S report (2021) stated that many Hindu parents are concerned that the negative portrayal of Hinduism in the classroom results in an insensitivity towards Hindus. In this context, the resources provided by Black and Ram-Prasad have provided an opportunity for students from Asian communities to see their tradition represented in a positive and meaningful way that is relevant to their own lives, as well as to the lives of others. As one teacher explained: “For students who belong to Hindu or Buddhist faith communities, the teaching of Asian religions in UK schools is a very empowering experience as it demonstrates an appreciation and understanding of their faiths, which validates their place in British national life” [S5]. At a time when an understanding of Asian religions has become more vital than ever, Black and Ram-Prasad’s activities and resources have made a major contribution to this goal by reinvigorating and enriching how these traditions have been taught in schools.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

- [S1] Testimonial from AQA A level examiner and A level teacher, Winstanley College (2020)
- [S2] Testimonial from teacher at Finham Park School (2020)
- [S3] Testimonial from Head of Citizenship and A level RE teacher, Altrincham Grammar School (2020)
- [S4] Testimonial from Head of Sixth Form, Nunthorpe Academy (2020)
- [S5] Testimonial from former Head of Religious Studies, Blue Coat School (2020)
- [S6] Testimonial from Head of Curriculum, Religious Education AQA Exam Board (2020)
- [S7] Testimonial from Chair of NATRE (2020)
- [S8] Summary of teachers’ conference survey (2019)
- [S9] Summary of feedback on resources survey (2020)
- [S10] Summary of feedback on student responses from visits made to schools 2017-2018