

CET Syllabus of Record



Program: UW in India

Course Title: Ritual, Pilgrimage, and Pluralism: the Practice of Religion in India

Course Code: VR/RELS 310

Total Hours: 45

Recommended Credits: 3

Primary Discipline/Suggested Cross Listings: Religious Studies / Anthropology, Sociology, History

Language of Instruction: English

Prerequisites/Requirements: None

Description

In its rich and vibrant religious landscape, India—and Varanasi a center of multiple religious traditions—offers a uniquely complex and vividly multi-sensory exposure to every forms of religious ideas and practices. Through the study and observation of ritual— practices of worship in their varied modes and forms, pilgrimage— the movement of bodies to and through sacred landscapes, and pluralism— the mostly peaceful but sometimes fraught co-existence of Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists, Jains, Sikhs, Christians and others in this crowded, bustling, ancient city and everywhere in India, students learn about the things that often matter the most to people, that create meaning for them, and that define them.

Using the sacred city of Varanasi as the core classroom, and a range of primary texts in translation, as well as work by scholars of South Asia who have discussed and theorized the subject, students gain insight into the ways in which religious thought and practices inform the cultural, social and political dynamics that drive both tradition and modernity in India.

Objectives

The course is designed to expose students to the complexities of religious life in India, using Varanasi as a lens. Students are expected to complete the course with substantial knowledge of different religions, their practices and their cultural and socio-political resonances in India today.

In particular, students are expected to:

- Gain a strong, basic understanding of the histories and complex heterogeneity of religions and their practices across time and space in India
- Engage with the subject through the study of secondary as well as primary sources, in addition to extensive field explorations
- Strengthen their appreciation and understanding of their host context through discussions of their independent and group field explorations
- Gain a keen appreciation of the presence of religion in the everyday lives of the people around them through the observation of their own and their classmates' regularly maintained journal posts.

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- Develop their powers of critical thinking and analysis of the subject material by responding to selections from translated primary texts and participating in discussions about them
- Hone their independent research skills by working on focused class presentations

Course Requirements

There are no pre-requisites for this course. Students may approach it with no or varying degrees of familiarity with the course material. However, given the complex and intense nature of the material, missing even one lecture, discussion or field trip could set a student back substantially in terms of their overall learning outcomes, so attendance is strictly monitored. Apart from unavoidable absences due to illness or other emergencies, all absences could incur grade reductions.

All students – whatever their own personal religious affiliations or attitudes towards the practice of religion - are expected to approach the course material with open-mindedness, enthusiasm and willingness to learn about the ways in which faith practices across geographical and other boundaries differ and yet are fundamentally focused on very similar human, spiritual quests and aspirations.

Course completion requirements include participation in the following:

- Two weekly lecture and discussion classes
- Several intense, directed as well as independent field excursions of varying lengths that match up with specific topics covered by the syllabus
- Written responses to selected readings
- Class discussions of a range of textual, photographic, audio-visual and online resources
- A take home final exam / Short research paper

Methods of evaluation

Student performance is graded on the following criteria:

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| Five 500 written responses to readings or other resources..... | 25% |
| Six 250-word/photo/audio journal posts on site visits, observation of festivals and rituals..... | 30% |
| Test/Quiz..... | 15% |
| Class Discussions..... | 10% |
| Take-Home Research-Based Final..... | 20% |

Failure to turn in assignments on time results in penalties. For every five days of delay in turning in assignments, students lose one grade point. In other words, on submitting an assignment more than 5 days late from the date of submission, students are graded on an AB instead of an A.

Required Readings:

Ambedkar, Dr B.R. 1917:

http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealac/pritchett/00ambedkar/txt_ambedkar_castes.html

Ambedkar, Dr B.R. 1957 (published posthumously): 'The Buddha and his Dhamma', found at

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- <http://www.scribd.com/doc/16634512/Buddha-and-His-Dhamma-by-B-R-Ambedkar-Full>
- Armstrong, Karen 2000: 'The Prophet (570-632)' from 'Beginnings' in *Islam: A Short History*
- Arnold, Sir Edwin 2007: *The Song Celestial: A Poetic Version of the Bhagavad Gita*.
- Copley, Antony: 'Editorial Preface', and 'A Synoptic Approach: A Study in Religious Leadership and Cultism', in Copley, Antony, ed., *Gurus and Their Followers: New Religious Reform Movements in Colonial India*
- Eaton, Richard M. 2006: *India's Islamic Traditions*
- Fernando, Leonard and G. Gispert-Sauch 2004: *Christianity in India: Two Thousand Years of Faith*
- Flood, Gavin, ed. 2005. *The Blackwell Companion to Hinduism*.
- Flueckiger, Joyce Burkhalter. (2015) 'Families of Deities,' in *Everyday Hinduism*.
- Guha 2010: *Makers of Modern India*: Chapter Sixteen, 'The Hindu Supremacist M.S. Golwalkar'
- Knut A. Jacobsen, Mikael Aktor, Kristina Myrvold, ed. 2015. *Objects of Worship in South Asian Religions : Forms, Practices and Meanings*
- Khilnani, Sunil. 2016: *Incarnations: A History of India In 50 Lives*.
- Lewis, Bernard 2000: *Islam in History*
- Long, Jeffery D 2010: 'Jainism: An Introduction' in *Religions of India in Practice*
- Lal, Vinay and Boris van Loon 2010: *Introducing Hinduism: A Graphic Guide*.
- Lopez Jr., ed. 2010. *Religions of India in Practice; Princeton Readings in Religions*.
- Omvedt, Gail 2003: 'The Defeat of Buddhism in India' and 'After Buddhism: The Bhakti Movements', in *Buddhism in India: Challenging Brahmanism and Caste*
- Rajagopal, Arvind 2001 'Conclusion', in *Politics after Television: Hindu Nationalism and the Reshaping of the Public in India*
- Ramanujan, A.K. 1987: "[Three Hundred Ramayanas: Five Examples and Three Thoughts on Translation](#)"
- Robinson, Rowena and Joseph Marianus Kujur 2010: *Margins of Faith: Dalit and Tribal Christianity*

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in India

Rudolph, Susanne Hoeber and Lloyd I.: 'Living with Difference in India', in *Political Quarterly*, Aug 2000 Supplement 1, Vol. 71

SarDesai, D.R. 2008: *India: The Definitive History*.

Singh, Khushwant 1952: *The Sikhs*

Tayub, Abdulkader 2006: 'The Minaret: The Call of Islam', in *Islam: A Short Introduction*

Thapar, Romila 1992: *Interpreting Early India*

Thapar, Romila. 2002: *The Penguin History of Early India: from the Origins to AD 1300*.

Tully, Mark and Satish Jacob 1985: *Amritsar, Mrs Gandhi's Last Battle*

Recommended Readings:

Bacchetta, Paula 2007: 'Gendered Fractures in Hindu Nationalism: On the Subject-Members of the Rashtra Sevika Samiti', in Dalmia, Vasudha and Heinrich von Stietencron

Bakhle, Janaki. "Music as the Sound of the Secular." *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, vol. 50, no. 01, 2008,

Colas, Gérard: 'History of Vaisnavite Traditions: An Esquisse', in Flood, Gavin, ed., *The Blackwell Companion to Hinduism*

Flood, Finbarr Barry. 2002. "Between Cult and Culture: Bamiyan, Islamic, Iconoclasm and the Museum," in *the Art Bulletin*.

Kosambi, D.D. 2008. 1962: *Myth and Reality*.

Lutgendorf, Philip. 1991. "Introduction" in *Life of a Text: Performing the Ramacharitanas*.

Michaels, Axel. 2015. "Introduction" in *Homo Ritualis: Hindu Ritual and its Significance to Ritual Theory*

Mohan Guruswamy, [Of Vice And Godmen: What Explains The Popularity Of Cults In India And The World?](#)

Smith, Wilfred Cantwell 2006: *Modern Islam in India*, Part II: 6, Some Theological Groups: The Classical Theologians.

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Singh, Rana PB, Singh, Ravi S. 2008. 'Goddesses in Kashi,' in *Visualizing Space in Banaras: Images, Maps, and the Practice of Representation*.

Williams, Raymond B. 1996: 'The Holy Man as the Abode of God in the Swaminarayan Religion'

Audio-Visual Materials/Films/Resources:

Sen, Shikha 2011: Anek Ramayan (privately produced movie)

Bose, Shonali 2005: Amu (film about Sikhs during the Delhi Sikh Riots)

Recording of the [Gayatri Mantra](#)

Video from [Devdutt Patnaik's 7 Secrets of Kali](#)

[Durga Puja](#)

Selections from documentary film [Zoroastrian Rituals \(Towers of Silence\)](#)

Preview from ['Altar of Fire': A Documentary on Vedic Rituals among Nambudiri Brahmins](#)

News report on [Tibetan Buddhist Kalachakra Dance at Bodh Gaya](#)

Documentary on political projects around mythical ideas about ancient river: "[Searching for Saraswati.](#)"

Supplementary and Additional Readings and Resources:

Recommendations for supplementary texts that relate specifically to each student's particular presentation topic will be made as necessary, in consultation with the student and local experts in the chosen field.

Outline of Course Content

Every topic is supplemented by field visits to relevant locations. Each of the topics listed below is explored over the duration of 2-3 classes.

Topic 1: River Valley Civilizations of India and Early Origins of Religion

- Explore early signs of the origins of religion on the subcontinent through visual analysis of archeological remains (the seals and figurines of the Mohenjo-Daro and Harappan sites)
- Discussion of the values on certain objects and elements as potential precursors to later religious practice.
- Explore the implications of historical questions around Indus valley and "Aryan invasion theory" on questions of caste and race.
- Discuss contemporary debates around the elusive Saraswati river valley and imperatives for claiming the river in the construction of Hindu pasts

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Topic 2: Vedas, Puranas and Epic Narratives

- Understand the fundamental philosophical strands, concepts of cosmic time, yogas/margas, to be able to discern the importance of these concepts in shaping subsequent ideas and practices in the subcontinent.
- Explore continuity and changes in ritual practice based on the Vedas through audio-visual resources such as the recitation of the sacred Gayatri or the documentary films on agrarian rituals by Nambudiri brahmins or a visit to the Veda Pathshala in Tulsi ghat. where young men learn through hand movements the verses of the different vedas).
- Explore the gender and caste dynamics involved in Vedic ritual practice.
- Discuss early Vedic gods as precursors to the tripartite system of Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva.
- Explore different ways through which Hindus worship these gods through site visits to Assi ghat, Lolark Kund. And Adi Keshava Temple.
- Critically examine the *Vishwarupadarshanam* of the Bhagwad Gita, and the various retellings of the Ramayana.
- Delve into these epic narratives to understand concepts of avatara, circular or cyclical time, *darshan*: a practice of seeing, and narration as a mode of celebrating, understanding and experiencing the divine.
- Explore the Ramila performance at the Ramnagar fort to understand community practices and rituals around the narration of the Ramayana through a key annual ritual in Varanasi.

Topic 3: Worshipping the Mother Goddess:

- Discuss mother-goddess cult sites in ancient India and understand resonances between practices and traditions from elsewhere in the world.
- Highlight Tantrism and Shaktism as distinct traditions with their own set of practices often in contested relationship to Smarta traditions through a discussion of Bengali hymns to the goddess.
- Understand the iconographies and practices of goddess worship in contemporary Varanasi through observations of Devi worship at Durgakund/Shitala Devi Temple/ Mangala Gauri Temple and interactions with local priest.

Topic 4: Brahmanism, Sramanism and Caste

- Highlight early variations in ritual practices region along the lines of Sramanism and Brahmanism.
- Understand the implications of the concept of a monolithic community of “Hindus” in modern Indian society and politics.
- Understand the imperatives of locating the plurality of practices and contestations that historically constitute today’s Hinduism.
- Explore the concepts of Varna, Jati, and Gotra through historical scholarship. Delve into writings of Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar on the emergence of caste
- Discuss Ambedkar’s life and work to contextualize his writings.

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- Understand Ambedkar's life and contributions to Indian politics and society through his contestations with Gandhi.

Topic 5: Jainism

- Discuss the life of Mahavira Vardhamana. And political economic circumstances of Jainism and divisions in the faith after Mahavira to understand the sacred geography, Jain cosmology, institutional mechanisms, core commandments and the 'Three Jewels' of Jainism
- Observe and understand Jain worship at the Bhelupur Jain temple.
- Explore the abstract philosophical reasoning behind Jain rituals and practices through the teachings of contemporary Jain teachers
- Understand the complex, hierarchical typology of non-violence in Jainism and the implication of such intense commitment to non-violence at the physical on modern day practitioners.
- Critically reflect on self-harm and devotional extremism in the religion

Topic 6: Buddhism: Beginnings, Responses to Hinduism

- Learn about the life of the Buddha as recorded in later Buddhist writings.
- Understand Buddha's sermons; notions of desire and release from desire, karma, the Four Truths, the Middle Way, the Eightfold Path and the Ten Injunctions; the Wheel of Law and the Doctrine of Righteousness.
- Explore formation of the Sangha, and the 'Three Jewels,' and the importance of Sarnath as a pilgrimage site.
- Discuss, through museum visits in Sarnath and the Lalit Kala Bhawan, the development of objects of Buddhist veneration; the structure and meaning of Vihara and Stupa layouts, major differences in practices, narratives and iconographic representation in Theravada (or Hinayana), Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhism.
- Understand the decline of Buddhism as documented in the ruins of Sarnath as a result of struggle for the often-violent contestations between Hinduism and Buddhism in which Hinduism emerged dominant.

Topic 7: Contemporary Buddhist Practices

- Discuss Ambedkarite Buddhism or Navayana and its reconstitution of Buddha's ideas about Dhamma and Nibanna to create possibility of emancipation for Dalits in modern India.
- Explore Ambedkar's implications behind his radical reinterpretations of accepted ideas about the life of the Buddha.
- Discuss some of the annual pilgrimage of Ambedkarite Buddhists to Nagpur where Ambedkar led a mass conversion in 1956 through visual resources.
- Discuss the Kalachakra ritual and its implications for identity formation among Tibetan Buddhists, many of whom live in exile in India, some of whom live in Sarnath near Varanasi.

Topic 8: Devotional Movements

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- Follow the rise of devotional movements in India in the early medieval period.
- Explore the concept of “Bhakti” and the modes through which this form of practice addresses social inequality in the form of gender and caste and religious difference through readings devotional poetry.
- Explore geographies and histories of devotional saints through a visit to Kabir Math, a site that commemorates the life and teachings of the spiritual leader.
- Understand how contemporary practitioners espouse and embrace the songs and teachings of the Varanasi-born saint.

Topic 9: The Rise of Sikhism

- Understand the historical context in which Guru Nanak emerged in the 15th Century CE.
- Discuss the Janam Sakhi traditions of writing about the life of Nanak as a syncretic tradition.
- Explore the plural traditions and texts that influenced the Sikh gurus profoundly, including the Qur’an and the teachings of Kabir.
- Understand the formation of the the Panj Pyare (The Five Beloved), the Guru Granth Sahib, and the Khalsa,
- Explore in Delhi, a site of the faith’s trials and tribulations, the trajectory this dynamic faith: the lives of different gurus, political consolidation of the Sikhs under Ranjit Singh, the effects of Partition of India on the Sikhs, and the Khalistani movement for secession in the 1970s and 1980s and the violence after Indira Gandhi’s assassination.
- Visit the Gurudwara to understand the practice of wearing the five Ks, the recitation of hymns from the holy book and the deep piety with political and social responsibilities that underscore volunteer-based commitment in the faith.

Topic 10: Islam: Past and Present

- Discuss the basic precepts of Islam, its arrival in India towards the end of Prophet Mohammad’s life to South-West India, with Arab traders its formal entry with the ‘Slave Sultans’ in the late 12th Century CE.
- Discuss the interesting early cultural syncretism of Islamic sites in India with the Delhi Sultanate through visits to Qutub Minar.
- Explore the deeper cultural syncretism among the Mughals, as evident in Mughal architecture in Delhi.
- Understand the distinction of the the mystic Sufi tradition in South Asia with its deep commonalities with the Hindu Bhakti
- Explore the blending of Sufi and Bhakti traditions in exciting ways through readings on early Hindavi Sufi narratives.
- Observe and experience the continuity of such blending of traditions in contemporary India, especially as they relate to the Chishti order through Qawalli and Sufi music.

Topic 11: Gurus and Holy Men: Cults and New Religious Reform Movements

- Explore the function and place of Gurus and Holy men in colonial and contemporary India

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- Understand a history of new Religious movements of the twentieth century, the various cultural threads that they drew upon, and the practices of yoga and meditation that they revived.
- Understand the relevance of these groups in India today through a visit to the Akshardham temple in Delhi
- Explore the global implications of spiritual movements that emerged out of India such as the Rajneeshis.
- Investigate the social and cultural implications of *melas*, processions, and pilgrimage traditions across the subcontinent.

Topic 12: Religion, Society and Politics in Modern India

- Explore the historically distinct notions of secularism in India.
- Understand the practices of the state in formulating laws relating to religious life.
- Understand the idea of “communal” laws through debates around legal cases and policy documents such Shah Bano case and the Mandal and Sachhar committee reports.
- Discuss ideas of the Hindu nation as it emerged in the twentieth century through the writings of neo-Hindu reformists, political leaders and activists.
- Understand the implications of their ideas on contemporary Hindutva politics on the lives of minorities.
- Closely following the events leading up to and after the demolition of the Babri Masjid, further delve into narratives and ideas central to contemporary Hindutva politics.
- Understand the interface between religious discourses, economic liberalization and the concomitant liberalization of the media in India through the example of the televised serialization of the Ramayana.
- The implications of globalization on Hindu and Muslim identity in India will be explored.

Topic 13: Christianity, Judaism, Zoroastrianism and Other Faiths in India/

- Explore the arrival of Christianity in India over different periods and the varied Christian practices associated with different regions and communities in India.
- Understand localized practices in Christianity in India through a visit to the catholic church in Varanasi
- Consider the interface between minority, tribal, and aboriginal communities Christianity in India.
- Understand the presence of major world religions in India.
- Discuss social, political, economic and environmental factors effecting Zoroastrians in India particularly their practice of inter-marriage and disposal of the dead in the “towers of silence.”
- Conclusion.