Course Description

Why study food? What can studying food tell us about religion? In the South Asian context, the question just about answers itself.

Food—what people consume, share, offer guests and gods, abstain from, and cast off—commands intense attention among practitioners of South Asian religions. It is a primary marker of how Hindus identify themselves in relation to other kinds of Hindus and to members of other communities. It mediates relations among parties occupying different stations in society and in the cosmos. It is coded with values that run along several axes: purity and pollution, auspiciousness and inauspiciousness, subtlety and grossness. And it embodies histories, not only of migration, trade, and colonialism but also of ethicized actions—karmas.

A major concern of this course will be food as it figures in classical Hindu discourses. We will move from the most ancient sources, which deal with ritual sacrifice, to debates that surrounded the emergence of a new ideal—nonviolence—and the implications of that ideal for what people can eat. We will also look into the global spread of a distinctively spicy palette of flavors as something meaningfully “Indian.” And we will explore ethnographic work that focuses on practices of commensality: whom you eat with (and whom you exclude). In American culture, it seems that it is only recently—with increasing openness to individuals’ dietary restrictions and growing interest in local and sustainable food production—that we’ve acquired a self-conscious attitude about food. By contrast, “you are what you eat” has been a truism in India for thousands of years—and with important social and political ramifications in every era.

Course Goals and Learning Objectives

This class will encourage you to develop and express your ideas in more than one way. Alongside thesis-driven written assignments, the presentation and class discussion components invite students to communicate ideas dynamically and verbally. Some of our discussion will center on questions of cultural difference—on getting inside perspectives on personal and collective identity that may provoke you to examine your own (culturally constructed?) notions of self and society.

Class sessions will be conducted in a modified seminar format, with the day’s reading assignment serving as the main source of the information and ideas on which to focus in class
discussion. Accompanying most readings from the syllabus will be a consideration of one or two short items chosen from K. T. Achaya’s *A Historical Dictionary of Indian Food*. I will usually open class with an informal, loosely structured lecture to identify, contextualize, and unpack key themes and concepts. In addition, working in pairs as student discussion leaders you yourselves will introduce some of the topics by presenting the assigned readings and defining key terms from them.

Among the assigned texts there are several Indian films. Whatever else they may have on the agenda, all have been produced with intent to entertain, and you should attend the screenings expecting to enjoy yourselves. But also be prepared to take notes; you will be required to write a short interpretive essay on the film of your choice. The most important assignments are a midterm take-home exam and a final research paper.

### Required Books and Films

Colleen Taylor Sen, *Curry: A Global History*


*Textbooks may be purchased at the Wheelock and Dartmouth bookstores. Note that the syllabus incorporates numerous reading assignments taken from sources outside of these books, which will be made accessible through Canvas.*

Dal Puri Diaspora (dir. Richard Fung, 2012)

Love Shuv Tey Chicken Khurana (dir. Sameer Sharma, 2012)

The Lunchbox (dir. Ritesh Batra, 2014)

Saivam (dir. A. L. Vijay, 2014)

*It is highly recommended that you view the films together with your classmates at the screenings scheduled for Sunday evenings. Films will also be made accessible through the library’s streaming portal.*

### Course Requirements

1. **Class Participation:** 15%
2. **Presentation (Discussion Leader Assignment):** 10%
3. **Midterm Take-Home Exam/Essay, 7+ pp.:** 25%
4. **Film Essay, 5 pp.:** 20%
5. **Final Paper, 10+ pp.:** 30%
Classroom Policies

1. **Attendance:** Attendance in class is mandatory. If you find you are unable to attend on a particular day, tell me before you miss class, preferably through e-mail. Note that attendance is an important part of your class participation grade and my grading will take evaluations of your reasons for any absences into account.

2. **Cell phones:** Off. Checking your phone for messages, etc. while class is in session is a mark of disrespect to me, your classmates, and the College and—outside of an emergency context—will incur mockery from me or worse.

3. **Food and drink:** No eating in the classroom. Liquids are fine.

   *If you require a personal exemption from any of these rules, talk to me or e-mail me about it.*

4. **A general principle concerning the syllabus:** Read the whole syllabus. No, really. Like today.

5. **Another general principle concerning the syllabus:** The syllabus is subject to change through the course of the term. As your instructor, I may revise or augment what’s on the menu for any given day through the end of the term.

6. **A general principle concerning class discussion:** The classroom is a community, and class discussion is a collective project. When you contribute, be aware that your audience is a roomful of comparably well-informed interlocutors. Don’t be shy (I will try to encourage you), and keep in mind this basic point: *It’s not about me; it’s about the ideas—and contributing to a dynamic and collective discussion about them.*

7. **Late assignment policy:** The biggest assignments in this course are take-home exams, whose due dates are fixed. *The midterm is due at 5:00 on 5 May. The final paper is due at 5:00 on 6 June, which is the Dartmouth College deadline.* As far as the other assignments (and emergencies) are concerned, there’s one cardinal rule: Don’t be a stranger. Work turned in late without my approval will incur a three-point penalty for every day it is late.

8. **My attitude towards grading:** Do the reading for each class and make informed contributions to class discussion when you see an opening. If you follow these two baseline principles, you’ll be well on the way to succeeding in this course.

   A straight-A project for me is one that exhibits excellence, and generally speaking there are two ways to do that. The first is to produce work that is letter perfect. In the case of a paper, that means the argument is tight and it discusses the material at a level of sophistication that demonstrates mastery. The second way is to take an intellectual risk—and for that risk to pay off. As a teacher, I’m never more pleased than when I recognize work from a student that surprises me and teaches me something new.
A grade in the C range or lower generally indicates that something is wrong. I don’t give out many Cs, and when I do I am sure to identify the problem. I do recognize that some students may make the call to turn in C-grade work in my class because they have placed their priorities elsewhere, and that is a decision I can respect on a personal level. In other words, no foul—so long as you’re 1) in control of the situation; and 2) not under the illusion that you’re entitled to a good grade for something you didn’t work hard on.

Academic Honesty Policy


Student Needs

Students with disabilities enrolled in this course and who may need disability-related classroom accommodations are encouraged to make an appointment to see me before the end of the first week of the term. All discussions will remain confidential, although the Student Accessibility Services office may be consulted to discuss appropriate implementation of any accommodation requested.

Student Accessibility Services: http://www.dartmouth.edu/~accessibility/facstaff/.

Additional Support for your Learning

Academic Skills Center: http://www.dartmouth.edu/~acskills/.

Research Center for Writing, and Information Technology (RWiT): http://www.dartmouth.edu/~rwit/.
Course Schedule

week 1—Introductions

March 28 (M)
introductions of: members of the class; the general scheme of the class; its goals and standards: Where is South Asia? Why study food? What do they put in curry, anyway?

30 (W)
readings: Madhur Jaffrey, *Madhur Jaffrey’s Indian Cooking*, selections; Pamela Druckerman, “Eat Up. You’ll Be Happier”
view clip from *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*

April 1 (F)
reading: A. K. Ramanujan, “Food for Thought: Towards an Anthology of Hindu Food Images”

week 2—It’s Kind of Spicy

4 (M)
Colleen Taylor Sen, *Curry: A Global History*, first half

5 (Tue)

6 (W)
Colleen Taylor Sen, *Curry: A Global History*, second half
film discussion

8 (F)
reading: Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, selections

week 3—Veg and Non-Veg

11 (M)
reading: Vasudha Narayanan, “Liberation and Lentils”
assign discussion leader teams

13 (W)
reading: Joseph Alter, “Gandhi’s Body, Gandhi’s Truth: Nonviolence and the Biomoral Imperative of Public Health”
15 (F)

**week 4—Sacrifice**

18 (M)
*readings*: Charles Malamoud, “Cooking the World”; Patrick Olivelle, trans., *The Upanisads*, selections

20 (W)

22 (F)
*reading*: Wim Van Daele, “Igniting Food Assemblages in Sri Lanka: Ritual Cooking to Regenerate the World and Interrelations”

**week 5—Nonviolence**

24 (Sun)
*screening*: Saivam (dir. A. L. Vijay, 2014)

25 (M)
*reading*: Charles Malamoud, “Paths of the Knife: Carving Up the Victim in Vedic Sacrifice”

*film discussion*

*assign midterm prompts*

27 (W)
*reading*: Wendy Doniger and Brian K. Smith, “Sacrifice and Substitution: Ritual Mystification and Mythical Demystification”

29 (F)

**week 6—Blessing**

May 2 (M)
*readings*: Charles Malamoud, “Remarks on the Brahmanic Concept of the ‘Remainder’”; Manuel Moreno, “*Panchamritam*, God’s Washings as Food”
4 (W)
readings: Andrea Pinckney, “Prasada, the Gracious Gift, in Contemporary and Classical South Asia”; Om Lata Bahadur, from The Book of Hindu Festivals and Ceremonies, “Pongal,” “Makar Sankranti,” “Basant Panchami”

5 (Thu)
midterm essay due, 5:00 pm: upload to Canvas

6 (F)
readings: Neema Caughran, “Fasts, Feasts, and the Slovenly Woman: Strategies of Resistance among North Indian Potter Women”; Om Lata Bahadur, from The Book of Hindu Festivals and Ceremonies, “Karva Chouth”
assign film essay

week 7—Commensality

8 (Sun)
screening: The Lunchbox (dir. Ritesh Batra, 2014)

9 (M)
readings: Frank Conlon, “Dining Out in Bombay”; William Elison, comments on Nissim Ezekiel’s “Irani Restaurant Instructions”
film discussion

11 (W)

13 (F)
reading: Kristin Hanssen, “Ingesting Menstrual Blood: Notions of Health and Bodily Fluids in Bengal”
discuss research paper

week 8—Gastro-Politics

16 (M)
reading: Arjun Appadurai, “Gastro-Politics in Hindu South Asia”
film essay due
18 (W)
*readings:* Jayanta Sengupta, “Nation on a Platter: The Culture and Politics of Food and Cuisine in Colonial Bengal”; Christopher P. H. Murphy, “Piety and Honor: The Meaning of Muslim Feasts in Old Delhi”

20 (F)
*reading:* Parvis Ghassem-Fachandi, “Vibrant Vegetarian Gujarat,” *from Pogrom in Gujarat*

**week 9—Global Masala**

22 (Sun)
*watch before class:* Dal Puri Diaspora (dir. Richard Fung, 2012)

23 (M)
*reading:* Aisha Khan, “‘Joshua’ in Trinidad: Food, Pollution, and Hierarchy in a Caribbean Diaspora Community”

*film discussion*

25 (W)
*reading:* Anne Vallely, “The Jain Plate: The Semiotics of the Diaspora Diet”

27 (F)
*reading:* Suhas G. Kshirsagar, The Hot Belly Diet: A Thirty-Day Ayurvedic Plan to Reset Your Metabolism, Lose Weight, and Restore Your Body’s Natural Balance to Heal Itself, *selections*

June 6 (M)
*Research Paper Due: 5:00 UPLOAD TO CANVAS*