REL 19.06/AMES 42.06

MODERN HINDUISM: COLONIAL AND NATIONALIST CONTEXTS

Fall 2015
Berry 277
MWF 10:00–11:05 (10 Hr.)
Dist. TMV/NW

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SRI GANESAY NAMAH

Course Description

The names “Hinduism,” a religion, and “India,” a nation, come from the same word. What's at stake in mapping one onto the other? We will begin by looking at a basic set of Hindu teachings. We then move on to trace their consolidation as a modern religion—to study how the “ism” got in the “Hinduism”—in historical context. Working from the period of British colonial rule to the present, we’ll examine the writings of such thinkers as Mahatma Gandhi, Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, and Swami Vivekananda; consider contemporary case studies; and watch several Bollywood films.

One of the most compelling things about Hinduism’s global image is its association with peace, both inner and outer. But a major concern of this course will be the development of Hindutva, or the ideology of Hindu nationalism, which recasts the religion in a militant, masculinized mode. We’ll ask a question of vital contemporary relevance: Who speaks—within the academy and outside of it—for Hinduism?

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. I will usually open class with an informal, loosely structured lecture to identify, contextualize, and unpack key themes and concepts. In addition, as student presenters you will each help introduce one class session, in which your research will provide the class with information to supplement our understanding of the text.

Among the assigned texts there are several 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. Hindi (“Bollywood”) feature films, of which there are three on the list, run between two and three hours; you will be required to write a short interpretive essay on the film of your choice. The most important assignments are the midterm exam, which will take the form of an analytic essay discussing the themes of the first half of the class; and a final research paper, on a topic of your choice to be refined through discussion with me.
Warning: Volatile Contents

For me and many other scholars, as well as adherents, of Hinduism in the United States, one of the most compelling aspects of the tradition’s image is its association with peace—both internal (Shanti!) and external (nonviolence). But it’s important to recognize that there’s another part to the story. In examining the history and contemporary development of Hindutva ideology, this course will raise questions that bear directly on contemporary politics—in India and elsewhere—and on a legacy of violence conducted in the name of Hinduism against non-Hindus, especially Muslims.

Be aware of several premises on which this course is conceived:

1. As the concert of diverse voices I’ve convened here should make immediately apparent, Hindu nationalists (despite their best efforts) do not speak for the world community of Hindus, no more than Christian fundamentalists speak for all Christians or Islamists speak for all Muslims.

2. As our study of nationalist discourse will reveal, there’s considerable diversity even within Hindutva.

3. The history of modern South Asia contains plenty of instances in which ideologues acting in the name of Islam have inflicted murderous violence against Hindus. I have no intention of suggesting that only Hindu people do bad things in South Asia. However, the problematic dimension of Islamist discourse will scarcely come as news to anyone living in this country, and if you want to study it—a move I would certainly encourage—there are courses other than this one that I can recommend.

Finally, and more broadly: You will certainly encounter perspectives in this course—as expressed by the assigned authors and also perhaps by the instructor or your fellow students—that will strike you as critical of Hinduism as a whole. Since this is an entry-level course, it will function for many of you as an introduction to the academic study of religion in general. So keep in mind this basic proposition of religious studies: No religion exists in study-able form outside of human history, or outside of representation through language and other modes of human expression. For scholars, all religions, in all historical periods, are matters of struggle over meaning—“Is that what God really said?”—by human interpreters. In this course, we will chart the modern definition of one such tradition, Hinduism, through multiple arguments at a particular place and time: India in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

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. Likewise, you will find yourself called on to consider political positions with disturbing implications. The challenge in both cases—not unfamiliar to those of you who work in the fields of religion and anthropology—will be to balance a critically rigorous attitude with sensitivity to difference.

**Prerequisites:** There are no formal course prerequisites for REL 19.06/AMES 42.06, which is an introductory level class. To get started in the study of any religion—from a religious-studies or area-studies perspective—is to encounter emphases, interpretations, and agendas that rest uneasily with each other. As secular analysts, we will participate together in contesting claims that religious thinkers typically argue from within the tradition. Claims to eternal truth, for example, will be met with historical analysis. Think about this class, then, as an introduction to specific claims and arguments that have contributed to the definition of what is known in the present day as Hinduism. (And as you’ll see, there are plenty of points on which Hindus don’t agree….)

If you enter with some prior knowledge of the religion, history, or politics of South Asia—through your personal experience, your studies, or both—the information and insights you offer will be a valuable resource. But when you contribute, take care to do so in such a way that opens up discussion for the whole classroom community. And if you enroll with little preparation, look to careful reading of the assigned material to get you up to snuff in the opening weeks, and participate with confidence.

**Required Books and Films**

Amar Chitra Katha, *Valmiki’s Ramayana* (comic book)


Arun Kolatkar, *Jejuri*

Gita Mehta, *A River Sutra*

Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, *The Hindu View of Life*

*Textbooks may be purchased at Wheelock Books. Note that the syllabus incorporates numerous reading assignments taken from sources outside of these books, which will be made accessible through Blackboard or Baker Reserves.*

*Bajrangi Bhaijaan* (dir. Kabir Khan, 2015)


*OMG—Oh My God!* (dir. Umesh Shukla, 2012)

*Ramayan* (dir. Ramanand Sagar, 1987–88)

*Sita Sings the Blues* (dir. Nina Paley, 2006)
It is highly recommended that you view the films together with your classmates at the screenings scheduled for Sunday evenings. Films and other visual media will also be made accessible through the library’s reserves and streaming services.

Course Requirements

1. **Class Participation:** 15%

2. **Class presentation (oral, written, and visual components):** 10%

3. **Midterm exam, 5–6 pp. take-home:** 25%

4. **Film essay, 5 pp.:** 20%

5. **Final research paper, 10+ pp.:** 30%

Boilerplate

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 factored into your class participation grade and more than two absences will incur penalties.

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 it were up to me you could smoke in class too, but if you took me up on that I suspect we could both get in hot water with the College.

*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**: Note that the due dates for the two biggest assignments are fixed. *The midterm exam is due on Sunday, 19 October, at twelve noon.* Midterms turned in after that will incur a three-point penalty for every day they are late. I will announce the prompts to all of you at the same time and so fairness requires that you have the same amount of time to complete the assignment. *The final paper is due at five on 25 November, 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. I promise to be accessible, by e-mail and in person before and after class and at the office. If you need help with the assignments—whether your concerns are time-related, text-related, or anything else—consider me your first stop.

8. **Punctuality, yours and mine**: I will do my best to start class on time, and I really don’t like to deprive latecomers of important information, so I hope you also do your best to arrive on time. I confess to the bad habit of allowing class discussions to run overtime. Consider yourself notified: Class ends at 11:05 sharp. If we’re still talking, you may choose to stick around in the classroom out of interest or courtesy, but you are under no obligation to do so.

9. **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**

*For academic honesty–related questions, refer to the Dartmouth Honor Code:*
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 second 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/](http://www.dartmouth.edu/~accessibility/facstaff/).

Additional Support for your Learning

Academic Skills Center: [http://www.dartmouth.edu/~acskills/](http://www.dartmouth.edu/~acskills/).

Course Schedule

week 1—Introductions

Sept. 16 (W)
introductions of: members of the class; the general scheme of the class; its goals and standards; some basic terms and concepts: Where is India? What is nationalism? Who is a Hindu? When is modernity?

18 (F)
open discussion, India’s 2014 elections, contemporary political landscape

week 2—The Soul of a Nation

21 (M)
reading: Mehta, A River Sutra, first half
introduce “Facts about Hinduism” assignment (to be factored into class participation grade)

23 (W)
reading: Mehta, A River Sutra, second half
select presentation topics

25 (F)

week 3—Who Speaks for Hinduism?

27 (Sun)
7:00, Rockefeller 003

28 (M)
reading: Radhakrishnan, “Hindu Dharma: I”
film discussion: Guide
“Facts about Hinduism” assignment due

30 (W)
Oct 2 (F)


“Facts about Hinduism” discussion

week 4—Masculine Hinduism

5 (M)
reading: Peter van der Veer, Imperial Encounters, selections

7 (W)

9 (F)

introduce midterm prompts

week 5—Ramayana: A National Epic?

11 (Sun)
7:00, Rockefeller 003

12 (M)

film discussion: OMG—Oh My God!

14 (W)
readings: Valmiki’s Ramayana (entire); Richard H. Davis, “The Iconography of Rama’s Chariot”

16 (F)
reading: Philip Lutgendorf, “Monkey in the Middle: Hanuman and His Kin in Transcultural Discourse”

week 6—Many Ramayanas

18 (Sun)

midterm essay due: UPLOAD TO CANVAS BY 12 NOON
19 (M)  
readings: A. K. Ramanujan, “‘Three Hundred Ramayanas: Five Examples and Three Thoughts on Translation’”  
in-class reading exercise: Indian journalism on Ramanujan controversy at Delhi University  
introduce film essay assignment

21 (W)  
reading: Arvind Rajagopal, “Prime Time Religion”  
view in preparation for class discussion: one episode of Ramayan

23 (F)  
reading: Joseph Alter, “Hanuman: Shakti, Bhakti, and Brahmacharya,” “Utopian Somatics and Nationalist Discourse”

week 7—Mother India

25 (Sun)  
7:00, Rockefeller 003

26 (M)  
reading: Lise McKean, “Bharat Mata and Her Militant Matriots”  
film discussion: Bajrangi Bhaijaan

28 (W)  
reading: Sumathi Ramaswamy, The Goddess and the Nation: Mapping Mother India, selections

30 (F)  
reading: Lata Mani, “Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati in Colonial India”

week 8—Two Little Pamphlets

Nov. 2 (M)  
reading: M. K. Gandhi, Hind Swaraj, Introduction–Chap. 8  
film essay due  
introduce research paper assignment

4 (W)  
reading: M. K. Gandhi, Hind Swaraj, Chaps. 9–20

6 (F)  
reading: V. D. Savarkar, Hindutva—Who Is a Hindu?
week 9—“I Went to India to Find Myself”

9 (M)  

11 (W)  

13 (F)  
*reading*: Arun Kolatkar, *Jejuri* (entire)

week 10—Epic Conclusions

15 (Sun)  
*screening*: Sita Sings the Blues (dir. Nina Paley, 2006)  
7:00, Rockefeller 003

16 (M)  
*film discussion*: Sita Sings the Blues

25 (W)  
*research paper due*: **UPLOAD TO CANVAS BY 5 PM**