

Myth, Religion, and Art (MRA)

(Rel 3390)

Fall Semester 2017

Instructor: Dr. R. Venkatraman

Course Design

This course gives students the opportunity to explore multifaceted religious histories and practices in South Asia, with particular reference to Tamil Nadu. Through a series of lectures and six field trips in the Thanjavur and Madurai districts, students will be able to explore the role of canonical and folk myths, religious art, and religious beliefs in shaping local cultures.

Course Objectives

The aim of this course is to highlight the following:

- a) the historical role of different ethno-linguistic groups since c.3000 BCE, in shaping the cultures of South Asia,
- b) the role of canonical and folk religions as a major driving force of Indian (and specifically Tamil) cultures,
- c) the ways in which local Myths, Art and Religion have been interacting continuously and are thus interwoven, and
- d) the importance of “metaphors” in literature, rituals, and metaphoric symbols in art and daily life.

Course Requirements

Course requirements include attendance to all scheduled classes and field trips, participation in discussions, the reading of all assigned texts, written assignments as indicated in the syllabus, an examination at the end of the term, and a term paper exploring one of the major themes of the class.

Class and Field Trip Attendance: This course integrates in-class lectures with a series of seven field trips. While the lectures will provide students with a historical and theoretical understanding of the given subject matter, the field trips will allow students to see how these themes inhere in the art, architecture, and daily practices of contemporary and historic populations. As such, it is **mandatory** that students attend all class lectures and field trips. Failure to miss a lecture or field trip will result in a penalty from your final grade. *The Resident Director can approve up to two excused absences throughout the semester.*

Participation: There will be several occasions when students will be asked to participate in class discussions and activities. Participation could include thought provoking questions and insightful commentary. It should add to the learning environment, rather than distract from it.

Reading Assignments: After each class, there will be assigned reading. The reading will relate to the previous lecture(s), providing students with more historical, sociological, and/or theoretical context to the given topic. These readings will serve as guides on how students can explore individual topics and broader themes in more depth. I can provide additional optional readings, on request.

Writing Assignments: Students will be required to **complete three writing assignments**, based on prompts listed in this syllabus. I have provided a total of 13 prompts, so students can decide which assignments to undertake. Responses should be two to three pages, double spaced. While most of the assignments are reflective in nature, students should **reference**

both lecture(s) and the reading(s) in their writing. All written assignments are due to me, in hard copy, at the beginning of the next class meeting.

Exam: The exam is a way for me to gauge your understanding of the major concepts of the class. It will take place on the last class meeting of the semester. For this exercise, students will be required to respond to a series of questions with short essays.

Final Term Paper: For the final paper, students will explore one of the primary themes or topics from the class. Specific guidelines for the paper will be provided in the final two weeks of the class.

Evaluation Components

Class and Field Trip Attendance	10%
Active Participation	20%
Written Assignments	10%
Final Exam	30%
Final Term Paper	30%

The grading scale runs:

93% - 100%	A
90% - 92%	A-
87% - 89%	B+
83% - 86%	B
80% - 82%	B-
77% - 79%	C+
73% - 76%	C
70% - 72%	C-
65% - 69%	D
Below 65%	F

Course Outline

Class 1: Introduction to the Evolution of Classical Hinduism With a Visit to the “Great Temple” in Thanjavur August 26th, 2017

Harappan – Vedic system – Sramanic challenge – role of myths (epics and Puranas) in the emergence of Hinduism – role of temples and art.

Post-Session Reading Assignment:

1. Huntington, S.L., *The Art of Ancient India: Art under the Cholas* (p.509-539).
2. Krishna Sastri, H., *South Indian images of Gods and Goddesses* (Reprint), New Delhi, 1986 : Chapter VI-Village deities (p.235-272).

Class 2: Visit to Dharuswaram and Swamimalai August 27th, 2017

Post-Session Reading Assignment:

Begin reading R.K. Narayan’s translation of *The Ramayana* (To be finished by September 4th)

Class 3: The Folk Religious Traditions of the Tamils
With a Field Trip to a “Sacred Grove”
August 28th, 2017

Ferocious gods – Blood sacrifices – Non-textual and non-brahmanical priests – “Possessions” by the spirits and gods – No concepts like heaven, hell and after life.

Post-Session Reading Assignment:

Brown, R.L. (ed.), Ganesh: Studies of an Asian God, Albany, 1991: Introduction (p.1-18)

Post-Session Writing Assignment:

Reflect on the folk traditions and beliefs we observed in our visit to the Sacred Grove. How do they differ from the canonical visions of Hinduism that we observed and read about thus far? What can these differences illustrate in regard to caste hierarchy?

Class 4: Introduction to the Epics: The Ramayana and the Mahabharata
August 31st, 2017

Post-Session Reading Assignment:

Finish reading R.K. Narayan’s Translation of the Ramayana

Post-Session Writing Assignment:

Discuss one prominent character in the Ramayana. You may answer any or all of the following questions. 1) What ideals does this character uphold? How do these ideals relate to social norms that you have witnessed in India, thus far? 2) How does this character relate to a prominent character in Greek or Roman mythology?

Class 5: The Art Under Asoka the Great
September 4th, 2017

Depiction of the life of Buddha through symbols – *chaitya*, *stupa* and *stambhas* (pillars), Contribution by the king Asoka. Introduction to Theravada Buddhism

Post-Session Reading Assignment:

Huntington, S.L., The Art of Ancient India : The Mauryan period (p.41-55)

Post-Session Writing Assignment:

Explain the foundation laid by Buddhism to the symbolism grammar and vocabulary of Indian art (sculpture and architecture).

Class 6: An Introduction to Jainism
With a visit to the Jain Hill
September 6th, 2017

History and philosophy of Jainism – Its rise and fall due to persecution in Madurai – A history of conflict between Jainism and Hinduism

Post-Session Reading Assignment:

Paniker, A., *Jainism: History, Society, Philosophy and Practice*, Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, New Delhi, 2010. Part IV-Mahavira (p.127-158).

Post-Session Writing Assignment:

Write about how Jainism viewed women. Explain their concepts of *samsara*, *karma*, *Sallekhana* (religious suicide) and *Samavacarana* (Sermon of Tirthankara).

**Class 7: The Sacred Geography of Madurai
With a Visit to the Meenakshi Temple
September 9th, 2017**

The myths of Minakshi and Siva (64 “Divine sports”) – Her victories and wedding!

Post-Session Reading Assignment:

Fuller, C.J., *Servants of the Goddess*, OUP, Delhi, 1991: Chapter 1-Minakshi, Sundaesvara and their temple in Madurai (p.1-60).

Post-Session Writing Assignment:

Compare/contrast the three religious sites we’ve seen thus far (i.e. The “Great Temple” in Thanjavur, The Sacred Grove, The Meenakshi Temple). Focus on either the art/architecture of the sites, their respective histories, or the religious practices you witnessed at each.

**Class 8: The Buddhist Art Under Kanishka
September 18th, 2017**

Contribution by the king Kanishka. Introduction to Mahayana Buddhism.

Post-Session Reading Assignment:

To be provided in the previous class

Post-Session Writing Assignment:

To be provided.

**Class 9: Bhakti Movement in Tamil Country
September 21st, 2017**

Evolution of Siva through myths and of Saivism through royal patronage and saint poets like Lakulisa in North and Nayanmars in the South.

Post-Session Reading Assignment:

1. Hildebeitel, A. (ed.), *Criminal gods and demon devotees: Essays on the guardians of popular Hinduism*, State University of New York Press, Albany, 1989: Essay No.13 by Hudson, D.D., “Violent and fanatical devotion among Nayanmars” (P.373-404).
2. Klostermaier, K.K. *A Survey of Hinduism* (3rd edition), State University of New York Press, 2007: Chapter 4 –*Itihāsa, Purāṇa*: The Heart of Hinduism (p.59-73).

Post-Session Writing Assignment:

Write about the role of myths and art in the evolution of Saivism. Mention at least five forms of Siva you have seen, with their names.

**Class 10: Concept of Prakṛti and Puruṣa of Sāṃkhya Philosophy
September 25th, 2017**

Evolution of Sakti (Mother Goddess) through Puranas and art – Art under the Guptas, Chalukyas, Pallavas, Pandyas and Cholas and Festivals (e.g. *Navaratri*).

Post-Session Reading Assignment:

Harman, W.P., Sacred Marriage of a Hindu Goddess, Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, Delhi, 1992: The Goddess weds Shiva (p.44-51).

Post-Session Writing Assignment:

Compare Pidari, Kali, Durga, Parvati, Lalita, etc. as the manifestation of ONE Sakti (Great Mother) OR The symbolism of a ‘female consort’ as common one in all Indian religions (Hinduism, Jainism and Buddhism) as a ‘tamer’ and ‘tamed’ ferocious spouse.

**Class 11: Festivals and pilgrimages in the Indian Religious Tradition
With a Visit to Alagarkoil
September 29th, 2017**

The concept of “108 Divyadesam” in Tamil Vaishnavism.

Post-Session Writing Assignment:

Write about the different forms of Vishnu (as benign and ferocious) in the Alagarkoil temple, underlining the symbolic metaphor behind them.

**Class 12: Concepts of Eternity and Time
October 2nd, 2017**

Cyclic yugas” ad infinitum. Concept of sacred and profane time (auspicious and inauspicious time) – Role of Astrology.

Post-Session Reading Assignment:

Zimmer, H., Myths and Symbols in Indian Art and Civilization (The Bollinger Series VI), Pantheon Books Inc., Washington DC, 1946: In Chapter 1 - The parade of ants (p.3-11).

Post-Session Writing Assignment:

What is the significance of *Kumbhabishekam* (‘Sacred Renovation’) of a Hindu temple once in 12 years?

**Class 13: Hindu Iconography and Iconometry and their Symbolism
With a Visit to the *Then-param-kunram* cave temple
October 4th, 2017**

Icons of Saivism (Ganesh, Bhairava, Bhikshatana, Parvati, Somaskanda, Nataraja)
Icons of Vaishnavism (Narasimha, Krishna, Rama) – Icons of Saktism (Kali, Durga, Minakshi)

Post-Session Reading Assignment:

Krishna Sastri, H., South Indian images of Gods and Goddesses
(Reprint), New Delhi, 1986: Chapter IV-Siva (p.72-183).

Post-Session Writing Assignment:

Explain the symbolic value of Hindu iconography based on your visits to
Temples and interaction with devotees.

**Class 14: Final Test
October 11th, 2017**

Final Papers are due on October 19th at noon.