



THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA
COLLEGE OF HUMANITIES

HUMANITIES SEMINARS

HINDU MYTHOLOGY

SPRING 2021

JAN 27-APRIL 7 (NO CLASS MARCH 10)

WEDNESDAYS 1-4PM

Caleb Simmons, Ph.D.

Associate Professor

Religious Studies

email: calebsimmons@email.arizona.edu

COURSE DESCRIPTION AND OBJECTIVES:

Images of Hinduism and Hindu deities have been integrated into our collective imagination as part of American popular culture. From the cover of Jimi Hendrix's *Axis: Bold as Love*, photos of The Beatles seated alongside Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, the Goddess on the cover of the first issue of Gloria Steinem's Ms. magazine, or even Ganesha on the counter of Kwik-e Mart on *The Simpsons*, most Americans have a vague idea about the appearance of Hindu gods and goddesses. In this course, we will push beyond the layer of popular allusions to Hindu deities to take a deeper look into the mythology that undergirds the tradition. We will explore traditional Hindu narratives found in the Vedas, epics, and later encyclopedic mythological (puranic) literature (for more details see weekly breakdown below). Along the way, we will also look more closely at the religious beliefs and practices that shape and are shaped by these myths.

After completing this course, you should be able to:

1. Assess the role of mythology as a central component of society and the theories that have been developed to help us to understand its role in meaning-making.
2. Demonstrate a basic literacy in the mythology of the Hindu traditions covered in the seminar. Basic literacy includes explanations of basic narratives, major figures, and context of the myths covered.
3. Outline a survey of myths' historical development and the diversity of narratives.
4. Recall and analyze examples of myths' cultural expressions, including visual arts, music, film, and/or architecture.

REQUIRED TEXTS:

- Dimmett and Van Buitenen. 2012. *Classical Hindu Mythology: A Reader in Sanskrit Puranas*. University of Temple Press. Any edition. ISBN-13: 978-0877221227
- Other readings will be posted online. See "Course Schedule" below for more details.

COURSE SCHEDULE:

Week 1: The Vedas & Upanishads

This week, we will be tracing the roots of Hindu mythology from its Vedic origins through the development of the Upanishads. We will begin by exploring the earliest records of Hindu myth that are contained in the hymns (*saṃhitās*) of the Vedas. These hymns contain references to the deeds of the gods and form the basis for the later development of Hindu myth. Next, we will look at the dialogues of the Upanishads in order to see how the philosophical material that is introduced in this period provide the basis for the worldview that is promoted within later Hindu myth.

Required Reading: Selected Hymns from the Rig Veda & Upanishads (posted on D2L)

Want to read more?

Doniger, Wendy. 2005. *Rig Veda*. New York: Penguin Classics.
Olivelle, Patrick. 1998. *Upaniṣads*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Week 2: Mahabharata

In week two we will be exploring narrative of the Mahabharata that follows the exploits of the five Pandava brothers and the great war of India. We will highlight the transition from Vedic deities to the heroes of the Mahabharata. We will explore the development of the concept of dharma as it is developed for the complementary and contrasting priestly and royal social classes.

Required Reading: Selected narratives from the Mahabharata (posted on D2L)

Want to read more?

Smith, John. 2009. *Mahabharata*. New York: Penguin Classics.

Week 3: Mahabharata & the Bhagavad Gita

Central to week 3 will be a discussion of the Bhagavad Gita, a text that relates a conversation between Arjuna and Krishna that takes place in the middle of the Mahabharata. Our discussion look more deeply into the path of yoga described by Krishna.

Required Reading: Selected verses from the Bhagavad Gita (posted on D2L)

Want to read more?

Patton, Laurie. 2014. *Bhagavad Gita*. New York: Penguin Classics.

Week 4: Ramayana

For week four, we will be exploring narratives of the Ramayana that follows the exploits of Rama, his search for his wife Sita, and his epic battle with the demon Ravana. We will compare the characters of both the Mahabharata and Ramayana and their attributers. We will also look at several of the subsidiary myths that provide the basis for later narratives in Hindu mythology. Finally, we will discuss feminist interpretations of the Ramayana.

Required Reading: Selected verses from the Ramayana (posted on D2L)

Watch: *Sita Sings the Blues* <https://www.sitasingingtheblues.com>

Want to read more?

Sattar, Arshia. 2000. *Ramayana*. New York: Penguin Classics.

Week 5: Vishnu

For week 5, we will explore different narratives that relate to the deity Vishnu and his avatars. Of particular interest will be the different relationships that the avatars of Vishnu have with his parents, friends, and devotees. These relationships become some of the models for the ways that devotees can interact with the divine in the Vaishnava tradition.

Required Reading: "Vishnu" in Dimmitt and Van Buitenen. 2012. *Classical Hindu Mythology*
Selections from Bhagavata Purana (posted on D2L)

Want to read more?

Bryant, Edwin. 2000. *Krishna: The Beautiful Legend of God*. New York: Penguin Classics.

Week 6: Vishnu & Erotic Poetry

For week 6, we will extend our conversation about the different relations that devotees have with the divine to focus on the erotic mood. We will read the poetry from the *Gita Govinda*. This will lead to an exploration of gendered roles in Vaishnava theology.

Required Reading: Selections from Gita Govinda (posted on D2L)
Selections from Bhagavata Purana (posted on D2L)

Want to read more?

Bryant, Edwin. 2000. *Krishna: The Beautiful Legend of God*. New York: Penguin Classics.
Stoller Miller, Barbara. 1984. *The Gita Govinda of Jayadeva*. New Delhi: Motilal Benarsidas.

Week 7: Shiva

In this week's class, we will be introduced to the narratives of Shiva. We will pay particular attention to the ways that the Shaiva tradition constructs the devotional world and how this differs from the Vaishnava tradition. We will examine how the tradition emphasizes duality in its cosmology and how this affects its narratives. Additionally, we will explore the ways that Puranic narratives exist in multiplicity from one tradition to the next. Through this, we will begin to discuss how Puranic narratives are implicitly theological and make arguments about which deity is the supreme deity in the Hindu pantheon.

Required Reading: "Vishnu" in Dimmitt and Van Buitenen. 2012. *Classical Hindu Mythology*

Want to read more?

Menon, Ramesh. 2008. *Siva Purana Retold*. New Delhi: Rupa & Co.

Week 8: Shiva & Location Poetry

This week we will be reading two types of poetry related to Shiva. One from Tamil Nadu that focuses on the devotion to Shiva and his beauty manifested in images in local temples. The other, spoken-word poetry called *vachanas*, tackles the social worlds of hierarchy and inequality using devotion to Shiva as the great equalizer.

Required Reading: Selections of the Tevaram and *vachanas* (posted on D2L)

Want to read more?

Peterson, Indira. 2014. *Poems to Shiva: Hymns of the Tamil Saints*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Ramanuja. A.K. 2014. *Speaking of Shiva*. New York: Penguin.

Week 9: The Goddess

For our penultimate class, we will be introduced to the Puranic narratives of the Goddess, who is also known by the name Shakti. We will pay particular attention to how the Goddess narratives depict a different worldview than the Vaishnava and/or Shaiva traditions and how this is reflected in the narratives about the Goddess. We will explore how the Goddess tradition emphasizes not only soteriological ends but how the goals of Goddess devotion are extended to include material concerns as well.

Required Reading: “Shakti” in Dimmitt and Van Buitenen. 2012. *Classical Hindu Mythology*
Selections from the Devi Mahatmya (posted on D2L)

Want to read more?

Coburn, Thomas. 1991. *Encountering the Goddess: A Translation of the Devi Mahatmya*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.

Week 10: The Goddess & Social Issues

In our concluding class, we will discuss goddess poetry that reflects her devotees’ social worlds. We will read poetry from Bengal and Karnataka that demonstrate how the goddess’s traditions incorporate everyday life into its mythology.

Required Reading: Selections of Bengali goddess poetry
Chamundi of the Hill from Simmons, Caleb unpublished manuscript *Singing the Goddess into Place* (in peer review).

Want to read more?

McDermott, Rachel Fell. 2001. *Singing to the Goddess: Poems to Kali and Uma from Bengal*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Hiltebeitel, Alf & Kathleen M. Erndl. 2002. *Is the Goddess a Feminist? The Politics of South Asian Goddesses*. New York: NYU Press.

CALEB SIMMONS is Associate Professor of Religious Studies and Classics. He has published on religion in South Asia, especially Hinduism: *Devotional Sovereignty: Kingship and Religion in India*, *The Navarātri Festival in South Asia*, and *Nine Nights of the Goddess* (coeditor and contributor). He is currently working on ecological issues and sacred geography in India, South Asian diaspora communities, and material and popular cultures stemming from globalization.