

Religion 340: Seminar in Asian Religion

Banaras:

Life and Death in a Holy City

Spring 2009, TuTh BCD*

Professor Tim Lubin, Washington and Lee University
208 Baker Hall / 463-8146 / lubint@wlu.edu

Course Description

Banaras, the famed city on the Ganges, is considered sacred to Lord Shiva by Hindus. It is center of Sanskrit learning, a place of pilgrimage, and the place where the dead are said to be able to attain release from the cycle of births. Yet 2500 years ago, the Buddha used to teach here, and many other episodes in India's religious history have taken place here. For centuries it has also been home to a large Muslim community. This interdisciplinary seminar makes a case study of religious diversity by examining the relationship between private and public piety, the interweaving of sacred times and spaces in everyday life, the ways in which religious commitments define groups and inspire movements.

Course Requirements

- a. Attendance at all class meetings and diligent preparation. Students will take turns serving as "guide" to a portion of the weekly readings. The guide will be responsible for producing a one-page outline of issues raised by the reading (10-15 mins.) in class, as a lead-in to group discussion. Over the course of the term, each student may serve as guide on 2 occasions, and will receive a grade for each. (33% of grade; active participation in class discussions will have a positive influence on the overall grade; absences and lack of preparation [without pressing cause] will lower the grade.)
- b. Two 7-page essays (each 33% of grade).

Required Books

Diana L. Eck, *Banaras: City of Light* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982).

Sandria B. Freitag, ed., *Culture and Power in Banaras: Community, Performance, and Environment, 1800-1980* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989).

Bradley R. Hertel and Cynthia Ann Humes, eds., *Living Banaras: Hindu Religion in Cultural Context* (SUNY Press, 1993).

Jonathan P. Parry, *Death in Banaras* (Cambridge University Press).

Other course readings on Blackboard

Class Schedule

Week 1: Banaras in History and Myth

4/21 Introduction: Banaras in Antiquity.
Eck, pp. 3–82.
Film: “An Indian Pilgrimage: Kashi.”

4/23 Eck, pp. 94–145; 211–251; anecdotes about ancient Banaras from the Buddhist scriptures.

What has Banaras meant to its various visitors, Western and Indian? It is at once a divine city and an earthly city. How is this dual identity marked in the city’s geography? In what ways is Banaras a “crossing place” (*tirtha*)? What makes the Ganges special? What sorts of things go on at the ghats? Why do Hindus go on pilgrimage to Banaras? How does the pilgrimage site represent the whole sacred world in miniature? Not only special places but special times are deemed to “belong” to certain deities. Why might one say that time follows different rules in Banaras? Why do people come to Banaras to die, to dispose of their dead, and to honor their ancestors?

Week 2: Yoga and Bhakti — Two Modes of Transcending *Samsara* (worldly experience)

4/28 Special Guest: Prof. Indira Somani
Readings t.b.a.

One of the things Banaras is known for is Yoga, a system of mental and physical training aimed at attaining a direct cognition of the soul and the purification of the body. Several orders of yogis have centers there, and many famous encounters happened there. Prof. Somani, a certified Yoga instructor, will give a class in Yoga practice, and will talk about being a Hindu woman and crossing between cultures. She will also introduce the themes of the film for Thursday.

4/30 Film: “Water” (directed by Deepa Mehta)
Eck, pp. 146–210.

This feature film, set in Banaras, depicts Hindu devotional and social traditions, focusing on traditional attitudes toward widows, and lives of poverty and self-abnegation that some widows are compelled to adopt. It also shows how modernizing Hindu reform movements during the Independence movement called such traditions into question.

*5/3 Special Sunday Field Trip: Shantiniketan Hindu Temple in Roanoke
Class with the temple priest, followed by Satsang (worship) and Mahaprasad (meal)

First-hand experience of how Hindus experience Bhakti (loving devotion to God) through song, offerings before images of the divine forms, and prayers, both collective and individual.

Week 3: Ritual Theater and Musical Expression

- 5/5 Eck, pp. 83–93;
Hawley, Introduction and ch. 6;
Schechner, “Crossing the Water: Pilgrimage, Movement, and Environmental Scenography of the Ramlila of Ramnagar,” in H&H (ch. 1);
Parkhill, “What’s Taking Place: Neighborhood Ramlilas in Banaras,” in H&H (ch. 3);
Selections from Tulsidas’s *Ramacaritamanasa*.

How does Tulsi encounter his Lord? How do contemporary Hindus encounter God through Tulsi’s works? How does ritual drama differ from secular drama? How does the audience respond to it? Why does the Maharaja of Banaras take such an interest in it?

- 5/7 Hawley & Juergensmeyer, chs. 1-2;
Marcus, “The Rise of a Folk Music Genre: *Biraha*,” in Freitag (ch. 3);
Kumar, “Work and Leisure in the Formation of Identity: Muslim Weavers in a Hindu City,” in Freitag (ch. 5).
Film: “A Musical Tradition in Banaras” (directed by Roger Hartman)

What do the Ravidas and Kabir have to say about caste and religious identity? What role does religion play in defining how people think of themselves as individuals and as belonging to a community? The public dimension of religiousness can be a setting in which religious identities can both become blurred and be reasserted: how should we understand these processes? Is there a shared local culture that transcends religious differences?

First Essay Due

Week 4: Religion, Politics, and Social Identity

- 5/12 Lorenzen, “The Kabir-Panth and Social Protest”;
Schaller, “Sanskritization, Caste Uplift, and Social Dissidence in the Sant Ravidas Panth”;
Lutgendorf, “Interpreting Ramraj: Reflections on the Ramayana, Bhakti, and Hindu Nationalism.”
Film: “Ram ke nam / In the Name of God.”

How can religious ideals be made the basis for a social protest or reform movement? What has been the effect of such movements?

- 5/14 Searle-Chatterjee, “Religious Division and the Mythology of the Past,” in H&H (ch. 5);
King, “Forging a New Linguistic Identity: The Hindi Movement in Banaras, 1868-1914,” in Freitag (ch. 6).
Film: “Banaras Muharram and the Coals of Karbala”

How do the stories people tell about the past (i.e., history) make a statement about the present?

How is historiography a form of political or social action? What is the nature of the power of symbols? Why was there such contention over which script should be used to write Hindustani? How did that disagreement help to create two distinct “languages”? Why is language such a powerful factor in defining social identity? How are religious and cultural symbols in the public sphere susceptible to getting politicized?

Week 5: The Death Industry

5/19 Eck, pp. 324–344;
Parry, chs. 1-2.

This week we look at the very different things that death can mean in Banaras. Does the “real life” character of the funeral business conflict with religious or spiritual ideas about death? Note the interplay here between “timeless” ideas about Banaras, and the historical developments that helped to shape funeral practices in Banaras.

5/21 Parry, chs. 5-6.

How do the priests accomplish the transformation of a deceased spirit into an ancestor? What is the underlying logic of Hindu funeral rituals? What makes them “work”?

Week 6: Beyond Death

5/26 Alter, “Hanuman and the Moral Physique of the Banarsi Wrestler,” in H&H (ch. 4);
Parry, ch. 7;
Gupta, “The Kina Rami.”

A self-disciplined way of life has often been seen as the way to achieve both spiritual clarity while leading a “good” life. Compare the ideals and training of the wrestler and the ascetic. What does each hope to achieve? What are their respective attitudes toward the body, and how does the body serve their purposes?

5/28 Coccari, “The Bir Babas and the Deified Dead”;
Coccari, “Protection and identity : Banaras's Bir Babas as Neighborhood Guardian Deities,”
in Freitag (ch. 4).

How does a deceased person become a deity? What assumptions underlie the notion of spirit possession and exorcism? What determines whether someone will become a protective spirit or a malevolent ghost? Why do such beliefs seem to obscure the boundaries between religions in Banaras?

Second Essay Due in the Last Class