

## RE 218: Hindu Mythology

Dr. Eliza Kent  
Office: Ladd 212  
Office phone: 580-5405  
Office hours: Mon./Weds. 11-12:30  
and by appt.

Fall 2015  
MWF 10:10-11:05  
Ladd 207  
ekent@skidmore.edu

**I. COURSE DESCRIPTION:** This course is an exploration of the Hindu gods and goddesses of India through their myths. For centuries Indians have been telling stories about the gods through sacred scripture, folklore and pilgrimage traditions, and more recently in comic books, television series and films. Through close Readings of India's mythic and epic texts communicated through diverse media, we gain an introduction to Hinduism as a dynamic, living religious tradition. Anyone attempting to understand the complexities of Indian culture, politics and society will soon encounter the gods and goddesses of the Hindu tradition. Besides introducing students to these fascinating figures and their stories, the course seeks to explore broader topics in the study of religion including theories of myth, the politics of gendered visions of the divine and the effects of the medium on the transmission of religious messages.

### II. COURSE OBJECTIVES:

- to learn to interpret mythological texts and other sources critically, with precision and depth, and in relation to the historical context of both the texts and their Readers, hearers or viewers
- to learn the names, iconography, and most widely known myths of the major Hindu deities
- to acquire a historical frame of reference for the development of Hindu mythology across time
- to develop a richly nuanced conception of religion that recognizes both the social and the personal dimensions of religious belief and practice
- to examine, challenge and clarify one's own self-understanding, worldview and fundamental values

### III. COURSE REQUIREMENTS

- A. Attendance and participation
- B. Reading
- C. Writing
- D. Events

**A. Attendance and Class Participation:** This is not a "distance-learning" course. Regular attendance is a must! Attendance will be taken at each class session, either through a sign-in sheet, or by me. **Missing class more than six times will constitute grounds for failing the course.**

Participation in the classroom process is vital to your learning experience. You are expected to come to class having read the assignments so that you are prepared to offer your thoughtful questions, comments, comparisons and suggestions for further areas of exploration. This kind of participation benefits the class enormously, as does your attentive listening to the comments and questions of others. Your class participation grade will depend not only on the consistency of attendance (which is the bare minimum expected), but also on how well you contribute positively to the overall class dynamic through your comments, questions, attentive listening, prompt arrival, leadership and cooperation in small group work, etc. Generally

speaking, when an imbalance occurs in terms of who is speaking and how frequently, those who are shy need to exercise the virtue of courage and those who are loquacious need to exercise the virtue of restraint. I reserve the prerogative to call on students in order to even out the class dynamic.

Class participation may take other forms than questions or responses to in-class discussions. You are encouraged to come to my office to continue conversations begun in class (see office hours above). In addition, I welcome email with regard to issues related to the course. If you want to raise a question or pursue a line of inquiry in class but are feeling too shy to speak up, please feel free to email me and I will bring it up on your behalf. Since there is only one of me and many of you, please don't expect a lengthy response, but be assured that I will **Read** everything you send me. **Class participation will count for 10% of your grade.**

**B. Reading:** Nothing is more central to a course in the humanities than the careful, thorough, critical reading of texts, and that will certainly be the case here. I encourage you to take notes in the margins of your books or in a notebook designated for that purpose. To enhance your vocabulary, maintain word lists of new words or concepts and look up their definitions in a dictionary. Such active engagement with the reading will enhance your retention of the material and help you to think through the issues and questions raised by the texts. We will be reading a combination of primary source materials and scholarly studies that use a variety of approaches to study Hinduism and Hindu mythology.

**Books for purchase:**

- Kim Knott, *Hinduism: A Very Short Introduction*
- Eck, Diana L. *Darsan: Seeing the Divine Image in India*. Third Edition, New York: Columbia
- David Kinsley, *The Sword and the Flute—Kali and Krsna: Dark Visions of the Terrible and the Sublime in Hindu Mythology, With a New Preface*
- R.K. Narayan, *The Ramayana*
- Thomas Blurton, *Hindu Art*
- Hindu Myth Packet, to be distributed second week of course

Additional readings will be distributed via Blackboard electronic reserve (ER in syllabus).

**C. Writing:** The writing assignments for this course will be of three kinds: 1) formal essays, 2) informal writing on the Blackboard discussion boards, and 3) short answers to questions for in-class quizzes.

1. Formal essays: These are called “form al” because they will be evaluated for style--grammar, spelling, punctuation--as well as content. Please note that a mandatory draft is required for the first essay. BOTH versions should be complete, well-constructed papers, consisting of the best possible work you can do at that point. If your first version is sloppy or incomplete, your grade for the paper will be reduced. See the schedule for due dates.

Since this is a writing intensive class, I urge you to visit the Writing Center for a one-on-one appointment early in the semester, to get the maximum benefit from their excellent services. They are happy to meet with students at any point in the writing process – from brainstorming ideas to refining the final argument (although they do not line-edit papers for spelling, grammatical or stylistic errors). Please do have the writing tutor send me a report of your session.

<http://www.skidmore.edu/writingcenter/>

**Note well: Late papers (exams or research paper) will not be accepted** unless you have explained ahead of time the reason for its being late, or are able to provide a documented reason after the fact. If you and I agree that you may turn a paper in late, we will then determine how many points will be taken off for tardiness.

2. Blackboard Discussion Boards: The discussion board feature of Blackboard offers an excellent way to stimulate your thinking about the reading and thus enrich our conversation in class. Posting to the Blackboard discussion boards also constitutes a form of writing for the class, but is less formal than the essays. Your contributions won't be assessed on the basis of style or grammar, but on your ability to raise the level of discourse on Blackboard in an engaging, thought-provoking, and regular way. To that end, once or twice during the semester, each student will have the responsibility of co-leading the Blackboard discussion board for the week. Minimally, each discussion facilitator should post three times in the course of the week – to initiate conversation or to keep the ball rolling with follow-up questions, etc. When it is not your turn to be discussion facilitator on Blackboard, I expect that you will read the posts and comment regularly (a “B-” effort would be once every other week).

3. Quizzes: Learning the words that people use to describe their beliefs and practices is a crucial component of learning about other people's religions. Periodically we will conduct in-class quizzes to test your understanding of the key terms, names and narratives surrounding Hindu deities, along with the basic structural features of the Hindu religious tradition. Your knowledge of key terms and the mythology or iconography of Hindu deities may be tested using multiple-choice rather than short-answer questions. **Quizzes will not be rescheduled, except in extraordinary circumstances.**

#### IV. Evaluation:

##### A. Grading Summary

Assignment	Due Date	Percentage
First paper	10/9 (draft) & 10/23	20%
Second paper	11/23	20%
Quizzes (3)	10/2, 12/11 & 1 more	15%
Blackboard discussion board	Ongoing	15%
Attendance and participation	Ongoing	10%
Final Paper	12/15 by 9 pm	20%

**B. Grading Standards:** The following is designed to help you think about the level of participation you're prepared to give to this course, and the final grade you would like to shoot for. (Obviously, there are finer gradations for each of the grades discussed below, e.g. A-, B+, C+)

1. “A” signifies outstanding. To earn that, you need to (a) maintain regular attendance and participation in discussion; (b) keep up with your Blackboard posts, demonstrating consistent care and thoughtfulness in your reflections on the issues and questions raised by the class; (c)

demonstrate a solid understanding of the key terms, names and narratives surrounding Hindu deities, along with the basic structural features of the Hindu religious tradition and the ability to articulate that understanding with clarity and precision; (d) do a thorough, analytically acute job on the formal papers and get them in on time.

In addition, to merit an “A” your writing in the formal essays must reflect the following: a thesis statement in the first paragraph of what you intend to accomplish; correct grammar and accurate spelling; depth and complexity in your engagement with the materials (readings, lectures, films, etc.); and an exceptionally creative original contribution--a new idea, a different way of thinking about the issue(s) you’re discussing--that takes you beyond the accurate presentation of someone else’s ideas.

2. “B” signifies good; it is a good, solid grade. To earn that, you need to (a) maintain regular attendance and participation in discussion; (b) keep up with your Blackboard posting and your note taking both in and outside of class; (c) demonstrate a firm grasp of the key terms, names and narratives surrounding Hindu deities, along with the basic structural features of the Hindu religious tradition; (d) do a thorough, analytically acute job on the essays and get them in on time.

In addition, a “B” grade essay typically contains: a statement in the first paragraph of what you intend to accomplish; correct grammar and accurate spelling; solid engagement with the materials (readings, lectures, films, etc.); and an original contribution that takes you beyond the accurate presentation of someone else’s ideas.

3. “C” stands for satisfactory. To earn that, you need to (a) maintain regular attendance and participation in discussion; (b) keep up with your Blackboard posting; (c) demonstrate an adequate grasp of the key terms, historical background and basic structural features of Hinduism; (d) do a satisfactory job on the essays that meets the requirements of the assignment, and get them in on time.

In addition, “C” level essays contain no statement of intent, or a confused one at best; occasionally lapse into bad grammar or incorrect spelling; replace full sentences with fragments; misconstrue or distort key ideas; display no clear development leading to a supportable conclusion.

4. To fall below satisfactory (i.e. C-, D), you could neglect your Blackboard posting entirely, skip one of the in-class quizzes, turn in one of the formal papers several days past the deadline, and/or be more irregular in attendance and discussion.

In addition, below “C” level essays do not adequately meet the requirements of the assignment. They typically also contain no statement of intent, or a confused one at best; frequently lapse into bad grammar or incorrect spelling; replace full sentences with fragments; misconstrue or distort key ideas; display no clear development leading to a supportable conclusion.

***You must turn in all written work in order to receive a passing grade in this class.***

### **C. Guide to Instructor’s Abbreviations in Marking Papers**

Vertical line with check-mark = useful point, important idea, “yep”

Double vertical line = good, strong idea or sentence  
Exclamation point = yes! excellent point  
Wavy underline = something is wrong with these words (e.g. syntax, logic, diction)  
Circle = error (typo, spelling, punctuation)  
WW = wrong word  
SF = sentence fragment (a real bad thing)  
RO = run-on sentence (almost as bad as SF)  
Double-lined P = start a new paragraph

**D. Students with documented disabilities:** I strive to create an inclusive classroom that respects the fact that our eyes, ears, brains and bodies all work a little bit differently. If you have, or think you may have a learning disability, please work with the Office of Student Academic Services to determine what strategies and accommodations are appropriate for your situation, and then speak with me early on so that we may arrange appropriate accommodation. [http://cmsauthor.skidmore.edu/academic\\_services/accessibility/](http://cmsauthor.skidmore.edu/academic_services/accessibility/)

**E. Academic Honesty:** Making references to the work of others strengthens your own work by granting you greater authority and by showing that you are part of a discussion located within a community. When you make references (by quotation or paraphrase) to the work of others, it is essential to provide proper attribution and citation. Failing to do so is considered academically dishonest, as is copying or paraphrasing someone else's work. Please consult Appendix B for the citation format I recommend for your work in this class.

**Any confirmed instances of plagiarism or other forms of academic dishonesty (cheating, fabrication or facilitating academic dishonesty) in this course will result in the work in question receiving a zero. Assignments that receive a zero for this reason may not be rewritten or redone. As per the Skidmore College Honor Code, documentation of the infraction will be kept on file with Dean's office and may impair eligibility for honor societies, study abroad, etc.**

**Schedule of Assignments and Readings**  
(subject to change as the course progresses)

*Readings and other assignments are due by class-time on the date assigned*

Week One – Introduction to the Course

9/9 **The Power of Myth**

**Read:** “Kali Takes New York: Sign of the Times,” by Vera de Chalambert, Rebellesociety for the Creatively Maladjusted (August 7, 2015)

<http://www.rebellestociety.com/2015/08/07/kali-takes-new-york-sign-of-the-times/>

**View:** Android Jones, video projection of the Goddess Kali on the Empire State Building as part of Projecting Change project, which, on August 1, 2015, used the Empire State Building as a canvas to bring attention to the alarming rate of species extinction.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lxObW7LEEw>

**Browse:** What other web media outlets have taken an interest in this event? Browse the videos found when you search “Android Jones Kali” or “Kali Takes over Empire State Building” and, if you have the stomach for it, browse the comments as well.

9/11 **The Politics of Representation**

**View:** *Edward Said On Orientalism* (prod. Sut Jhally, Media Education Foundation, 1998, 40 min.). DVD available on reserve in the library. Also available on youtube at:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fVC8EYd\\_Z\\_g](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fVC8EYd_Z_g)

Week Two – Introduction to Hinduism

9/14 **Introduction to Hinduism**

**Read:** Diana Eck, *Darshan*, Preface and Chapter 1

**Homework:** Please bring in the index card with a photograph of yourself, a short explanation of why you have chosen this class, and any information you want to share that will help me get to know you a little better.

**In class:** Pronunciation guide

9/16 **Introduction to Hinduism**

**Read:** Diana Eck, *Darshan*, Chapter 2

**View:** *Vaastu Marabu* [dir. Baila Kailasam, 1991, 52 min.], documentary on the ancient science/art of making images, Vaastu. available:

<http://lucy2.skidmore.edu/vwebv/holdingsInfo?searchId=291&recCount=50&recPointer=0&bibId=713701>

9/18 **Introduction to Hinduism**

**Read:** Diana Eck, *Darshan*, Chapter 3 on tirtha

**Read:** Kim Knott, *Hinduism: A Very Short Introduction*, 12-25

**View:** UNESCO documentary film clip on Vedic chanting (2008, 5 min.)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qPcasmn0cRU>

Week Three – Vedic Hinduism

9/21 **Ancient Origins of/in Hinduism**

**Read:** Gavin Flood, *An Introduction to Hinduism*, 40-50 (ER)

**Read:** Hindu Myth Packet: Rig Veda: “Early Vedic Deities”

9/23 **Study Abroad! Visit from OCSE Representatives**

9/25 **Creation Myths in the Vedas**

**Read:** Hindu Myth Packet: “Vedic Creation myths”

**Read:** Mircea Eliade, “The Structure of Myths,” pp. 1-20 (you can skip 14-18) (ER)

Week Four – Myth and Philosophy in the Upanishads

9/28 **Yajña: Transformations through Sacrifice**

**Read:** Thomas Hopkins, “The Creative Power of the Sacrifice,” 17-35 (ER)

9/30 **Visions of Self and Eternity in the Upanishads**

**Read:** Heinrich Zimmer, “Eternity and Time,” p. 1-20 (ER)

**Read:** Hindu Myth Packet: “Prajapati Instructs Indra and Vairocana on the True Self”

10/2 **Creation in the Upanishads**

**Read:** Hindu Myth Packet: Brihadaranyaka Upanishad Creation

**Quiz:** Deity Identification and Key Terms Quiz

Week Five – Myth and Social Order

10/5 **Karma and Dharma**

**Read:** Knott, Ch. 3, “Understanding the Self”

**Read:** Hindu Myth Packet: Laws of Manu, “Creation Myth”

10/7 **Do Untouchables (Dalits) internalize the theory of karma?**

**Read:** Robert Deliege, “Untouchable Myths of Origin” (ER)

10/9 **Other People’s Myths**

**Read:** A.K. Ramanujan, “Outwitting Fate,” 81-87 (ER)

**Read:** Wendy Doniger, “Other Scholar’s Myths,” 7-24 (ER)

**DUE: FIRST DRAFT OF FIRST PAPER DUE**

Week Six – Shiva and Vishnu

10/12 **Other People’s Myths**

**Read:** Wendy Doniger, “Other Scholar’s Myths,” 7-24 (ER)

**Read:** T. Richard Blurton, “Shiva,” in *Hindu Art*, pp. 76-94

**View in class:** Shiva Nataraja sculpture

10/14 **Lord Shiva**

**Read:** Blurton, “Shiva,” *Hindu Art*, 94-110

**Read:** S.N. Balagangadhara, “Denying Experience” (ER)

<http://www.hipkapi.com/2011/02/28/denying-experience-do-hindoos-worship-do-they-do-pooja-to-a-phalluslinga-s-n-balagangadhara/>

10/16 **Lord Vishnu**

**Read:** Blurton, “Vishnu,” 111-153

Midterm Blackboard Discussion Grades

Week Seven – Krishna

10/19 **Krishna: The Cloud-Dark God of Love**

**Read:** David Kinsley, *The Sword and The Flute*, front matter, chap 1 (Krishna)

10/21 **Krishna: The Cloud-Dark God of Love**

**Read:** David Kinsley, *The Sword and The Flute*, chap 2 (Krishna)

10/23 **Guest Lecture**, Jesse Flower-Ambroch '06, Sound Engineer, Sound Meditation  
**FINAL DRAFT OF FIRST PAPER DUE**

Week Eight - Kali

10/26 **Kali: The Dark Goddess**

**Read:** Kinsley, *The Sword and the Flute*, ch. 3 (Kali)

10/28 **Kali: The Dark Goddess**

**Read:** Kinsley, *The Sword and the Flute*, ch. 4, conclusion (Kali)

10/30 **Read:** Rachel Fell McDermott, "Kali's New Frontiers: A Hindu Goddess on the Internet," from *Encountering Kali*, pp. 273-296 (ER)

Week Nine – Ram, Sita and the Many Ramayanas

11/2 **Ramayana – The Adventures of Lord Rama**

**Read:** R.K. Narayan, *The Ramayana*

11/4 **Ramayana – The Adventures of Lord Rama**

**Read:** R.K. Narayan, *The Ramayana*

11/6 **Many Ramayanas**

**Read:** A.K. Ramanujan, "300 Ramayanas: Five Examples and Three Thoughts on Translation" (ER)

**View:** UNESCO video on the Ramlila.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=89dtCI4oNzU>

Week Ten – Ram, Sita and the Many Ramayanas

11/9 **Human and Divine Husbands**

**Read:** Madhu Kishwar, "Yes to Sita, No to Ram!" (ER)

11/11 **Mass Media and Hindu Mythology**

**Read:** Lawrence Babb, "Introduction," *Media And The Transformation Of Religion In South Asia*, 1-20. (ER)

11/13 **Lord Rama Takes India by Storm**

**Read:** Ramachandra Guha, "Riots," *India After Gandhi*, 624-650. (ER)

Week Eleven – Mythology and Mass Media

11/16 **The Changing Iconography of Lord Ram**

**Read:** A. Kapur, "The Changing Iconography of Lord Ram," *Hindus and Others* (ER)



11/18 **Sita Sings the Blues**

**View:** *Sita Sings the Blues*, animated feature by Nina Paley,

<http://sitasingingtheblues.com/watch.html>

**Read:** <http://www.sitasingingtheblues.com/faq.html>

11/20 - PROF. KENT AT AMERICAN ACADEMY OF RELIGION CONFERENCE

**View:** Ramanand Sagar's, *Ramayana*, selections

Week Twelve

11/23 - PROF. KENT AT AAR

**SECOND PAPER DUE TODAY – SUBMIT VIA DROPBOX**

11/25 - 27 NO CLASS THANKSGIVING BREAK

Week Thirteen – Mythology and Mass Media

11/30 **Family, Politics and the Televised Ramayana**

**Read:** Lutgendorft, "All in the Raghu Family," *Hindus and Others* (ER)

12/2 **Mother India and Nationalism**

**Read:** TBA

12/4 **Amar Chitra Katha: Comic Book Gods**

**Read:** Frances Pritchett, "The World of Amar Chitra Katha" (ER)

**Read:** Thomas Coburn, "The Three-fold Vision of the Devi-Mahatmya" (ER)

Week Fourteen – Mythology and Mass Media

12/7 **Amar Chitra Katha: Comic Book Goddesses**

**Read:** Karline McLain, "Holy Superheroine: A Comic Book Interpretation of the Hindu Devi Mahatmya Scripture," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London*, Vol. 71, No. 2, (2008), pp. 297-322 (ER)

12/9 **Celluloid Goddesses**

**Read:** Jai Santoshi Ma Readings TBA

12/11 **Conclusions**

Deity Identification and Key Terms Quiz #3

**FINAL PAPER, DECEMBER 15<sup>TH</sup>, 9 PM, SUBMIT VIA DROPBOX**

## Appendix A:

### Notes on pronunciation and transliteration system for Indian languages

- 1) a, ā            a bar (macron) over a vowel indicates that it is lengthened, so that *a* is like the “a” in “woman,” but *ā* is like the “a” in “father,”  
*i* is like the “i” in “sit,” and *ī* is like the “ee” in “meet,”  
*u* is like the “u” in “put,” and *ū* is like the “u” in “rule.”

Examples: *pūjā* (ritual worship) *saṃsāra* (cycle of death and rebirth)

- 2)                    s with a dot underneath means it is pronounced as “sh” and is retroflex (farther back in the mouth than palatal s)

Examples: *Viṣṇu* (one of the supreme deities of the Hindu pantheon)

- 3) ś                    s with a slash above is also pronounced as “sh” and is palatal (closer to the front of the mouth than retroflex s)

Examples: *śīla* (charitable action, virtuous conduct), *Śiva* (another supreme deity)

- 4)                    a dot under an r indicates a vocalic r, which is pronounced “ri” with a short i, as in the English “sit”

Examples: *Ṛg Veda* (a Hindu scripture), *smṛti* (“that which is remembered,” a category of Hindu scriptures less authoritative than *śruti*, “that which is heard”)

- 6) dh, th, bh        an “h” directly after a consonant means that it is aspirated; that is, a small breath is exhaled while it is pronounced. “Th” is never pronounced as in the English “the” or “theory.”

Examples: *dharma* (Hindu usage: religious duty or action in accordance with the order of the world), *bhakti* (devotional worship), *Mahābhārata* (Hindu epic).

## Appendix B Citation Format

For this class, please use the MLA in-text citation system for citing quotations and ideas that you have arrived at from reading other authors. See Purdue University's OWL guide to citations, for a complete discussion of this system [<https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/747/02/>].

Briefly, in this method of citation, one introduces the source in a signal phrase that gives the author's name (first and last at first mention, last name only thereafter). Parenthetical references following the cited material supply the page number or numbers. No abbreviations like p. or pp. precede the page number, unless the absence of them would cause confusion for the reader. These parenthetical references are keyed to a list of works cited, which is placed at the end of the paper. This list is arranged alphabetically and may bear the title "Works Cited," or "Bibliography."

If you want to comment on a citation but do not want to do so in the body of the paper, you may add a footnote, which is easily done with the footnote function of your word processing software.

### CITATION EXAMPLE

In *Shamans, Mystics and Doctors*, Sudhir Kakar argues that Indian medical systems depend on a distinctive sense of "freedom." He writes, "Human freedom in the traditional Indian context, then, seems to imply an increase in the potential to experience different inner states while limiting action in the outer world" (272). This notion of freedom inhering in mental states rather than external conditions is corroborated by the philosophy of Yoga. Barbara Stoler Miller emphasizes this by titling the fourth section of Patanjali's *Yoga-Sutras*, "Absolute Freedom" (74). This is not to say that India lacks this-worldly thinkers who have worked hard to win political and social freedom by changing external conditions; rather, it is to emphasize the role that ascetic other-worldly thinkers have had in defining and shaping core Indian values.

[Note: It seems odd at first, but the concluding period or other punctuation mark must go outside the final quotation mark, and *after* the closing parenthesis].

### Works Cited

Dinnage, Rosemary. Review of *Shamans, Mystics and Doctors*, by Sudhir Kakar. *The New York Review of Books* 17 February 1983: 15.

Heesterman, J.C. *The Inner Conflict of Tradition: Essays in Indian Ritual, Kingship and Society*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1985.

"Hinduism." Encyclopædia Britannica. 2010. Encyclopædia Britannica Online, 2010. Web. 25 Aug. 2010. <<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/266312/Hinduism>>.

Kakar, Sudhir. *Shamans, Mystics and Doctors: A Psychological Inquiry into India and Its Healing Traditions*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982.

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Miller, Barbara Stoler. *Yoga: Discipline of Freedom*. New York: Bantam Books, 1986.

Smart, Ninian. "Soteriology: An Overview." *Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. by Mircea Eliade. New York: McMillan, 1987.