

History 186 Cultures of India



Prof. Arafaat A. Valiani
Office location: 369 McKenzie Hall
Email: valiani@uoregon.edu

Summary Course Description: In this course you will learn about one of the most important economic and geopolitical areas of the globe: the Indian subcontinent. We do this by introducing students to key topics which are applicable to both past and present in the region.

Here is how we begin: What does culture mean in the context of the Indian subcontinent (also known as South Asia)? By studying archeological artifacts of the Indus Valley Civilization, courtly culture of the Mughal Empire, British cultural domination and urban culture in contemporary Mumbai, this course introduces students to the study of culture in the Indian subcontinent from the ancient to present periods. We will examine a variety of societies, periods, and courtly cultures that have existed in the region over time however students are not expected to learn about all of the human history of the subcontinent. Instead, we will explore specific examples of cultural practice, power and resistance. In order to do so, lectures and readings are organized the concept of ‘culture’ which will be examined in relation to ten broad questions. The answers will, of course, vary across periods and contexts however students will be able to identify various important and different understandings of culture in ancient, medieval and contemporary South Asia.

Students successfully completing this course will receive four (4) credits toward the sixteen (16) credits required to satisfy the Social Science and Multicultural (International Cultures) requirements for either a BA or BS degree. History majors will also receive

credit toward their major requirement.

Full Course Description (What you will do and learn): We begin by first examining the material culture of the Indus Valley Civilization (2600-1700 BCE) which produced ancient cities and habits of social and economic life. We then study Vedic culture, which is said to have begun in 600 BCE, and we will learn how it simultaneously represented a worldview, an understanding of ethical life and a system of social organization in premodern India. We then move on to social and cultural practices of the Mughal Empire which combined sophisticated aesthetics and systems of social and political organization that were Central Asian-Turkic in their origin. In this particular iteration of cultural practice we will learn about how culture constitutes complex set of practices that accommodate diverse religious doctrines, forms of political organization and conceptions of beauty. Third, we will learn about the origin of the idea of ‘Indian culture’ which is a modern concept that arose with British colonial rule (1757-1947). Here, we will explore how the concept of ‘Indian culture’ has been used by colonial states and nationalist leaders which allows us to understand how the Indian past has become a category of social, economic and political power in the subcontinent. Lastly, we will study how culture can form a set of symbols, icons and memories to be circulated publicly. We trace how such symbols structure understandings in contemporary Mumbai.

What do you believe ‘culture’ means? By exploring these issues students will be exposed to a cross-section of perspectives in South Asian history that are tied to issues of power, culture and aesthetics. With these conceptual tools in hand students will be able to decide which definition, or which combination of perspectives, they find the most convincing. In studying cultural histories of the region students will learn of the centrality of identity in various societies and states in South Asian history and the manner in which tolerance, as well as social exclusion, has manifested in these contexts. Specifically, students will receive a thorough grounding in the origins and evolution of caste and religious status in the Indian subcontinent, from the ancient to modern periods, and thus understand how historically specific beliefs that concern race, ethnicity and gender have not only informed acts of prejudice but also practices and policies of tolerance, pluralism/multiculturalism and secularism.

Learning Outcomes:

By the end of term you should be able to:

- Historically understand how the meaning of ‘culture’ has changed over time in the Indian subcontinent, and in comparisons with other societies globally.
- Analyze and interpret “primary” source data.
- Identify an author’s argument or thesis.
- Write an analytical essay and develop your own argument supported by evidence and data.

Required Reading: *The schedule (below) directs you to read specific portions of each text. In order to keep costs of required texts for this course down, assigned readings that are not in the following book (available at the Duckstore) can be downloaded at the following website: <https://blackboard.uoregon.edu>*

1. *Mumbai Fables: A History of an Enchanted City* by Gyan Prakash

Class Format: Lecture with Discussion sections

Grading and Methods of Evaluation

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|------------------|-----|
| Participation | 10% |
| Two short papers | 30% |
| Mid-term exam | 30% |
| Final exam | 30% |

*All elements are required to receive a final grade.

Tentative Schedule (This may be adjusted as we progress, I will announce any changes in class one week in advance as well via Blackboard)

CULTURE IN ANCIENT INDIA

Week 1: Where does Indian history begin?

Monday **Map assignment distributed.**

Introduction: South Asia—What, Where and When

-Syllabus Review

-Introduction to the study of Culture in South Asian history.

Wed. **Map assignment due.**

Methods of Interpreting Early India

- Romila Thapar, 'Interpreting Early India', in *History and Beyond*, pp. 1-20

- 'Introduction by R.K. Narayan', in *The Ramayana: A Shortened Modern Prose Version of the Indian Epic*

Week 2: How did Vedic Culture Organize Social Life?

Monday

Injustice, Duty and Gender

- 'The Wedding' and 'Two Promises Revived', in *The Ramayana: A Shortened Modern Prose Version of the Indian Epic*, pp. 22-44

Wed.

Honor, Intrigue and War

- 'Encounters in Exile' and 'The Siege of Lanka', *The Ramayana: A Shortened Modern Prose Version of the Indian Epic*

CULTURE AS A COMPLEX SET OF PRACTICES

Week 3: Who were the Mughals?

Monday

Power and Architectural Culture

- *Ain-i-Akbari*, excerpt

Wed.

Power and The Mughal Court

- *Ain-i-Akbari*, excerpt

Week 4: What was cultural blending under the Mughals?

Monday

The Imperial Home, Food and Art

- *Ain-i-Akbari*, excerpt

Wed.

Marriage under the Mughals

- *Ain-i-Akbari*, excerpt

Week 5: How was the Mughal Empire Administered?

Monday

Rank, Etiquette and Procedure

- *Ain-i-Akbari*, excerpt

Wed.

Houses and Classes Within Them

- *Ain-i-Akbari*, excerpt

CONSTRUCTING INDIAN CULTURE

Week 6: Is 'Indian culture' a constructed idea?

Monday

Religion in the 'East'

- *Tree and serpent Worship, or illustrations of mythology and art in India in the 1st and 4th cent.*, excerpt

Wed.

Buddhist Architectural Culture in the Indian Subcontinent

- *Tree and serpent Worship, or illustrations of mythology and art in India in the 1st and 4th cent.*, excerpt

Week 7: Is Indian history only about religion?

Monday

Buddhist Sculpture, Ethnography and History

- *Tree and serpent Worship, or illustrations of mythology and art in India in the 1st and 4th cent.*, excerpt

Wed.

Religion and History

- *Tree and serpent Worship, or illustrations of mythology and art in India in the 1st and 4th cent.*, excerpt

CULTURE AS PUBLIC SYMBOLS

Week 8: Does Bombay possess its own culture?

Monday

Urban Myths

-*Mumbai Fables*, pp. 1-32

Wed.

A Cosmopolitan Center

-*Mumbai Fables*, pp. 34-54

Week 9: What is the difference between ‘Bombay’ and ‘Mumbai’?

Monday

Tabloid City

-*Mumbai Fables*, pp. 158-180

Wed.

Hindu Nationalism and Cultures of Violence

-*Mumbai Fables*, pp. 204-233

Week 10: How does memory shape the city?

Monday

Streets and Dream Plans

-*Mumbai Fables*, pp. 251-177

Wed.

Dreamworlds

-*Mumbai Fables*, p 302-349