Indian Culture Through Biographies
CURE2307/UGEC2308 (2011 – First Term)

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Venue: CKB 108 (cc area)
Times: Lecture—Thurs. 4:30-6:15 pm;
Tutorial—Thurs. 12:30-1:15 pm

Course Description
This course offers students an entry into the profoundly rich and multi-layered cultural and religious life of India through the medium of hagiographical, biographical, and autobiographical writing from ancient times to the present. The central question of the course is, How do people in India negotiate self-understanding between community and individuality, between destiny and agency, between tradition and modernity, and between notions of self and other?

This basic “how-question” is answered by looking at individual lives in India. Through the lens of these narrated individual lives we are then confronted with the contexts of such lives – persistent and pressing issues in a profoundly transitional India. Partly through the lives of well-known figures ranging from Sakyamuni Buddha to Mahatma Gandhi, from Mirabai (a 16th c. woman poet-saint) to Kiran Bedi (a contemporary woman police reformer) – and partly through accounts of ‘ordinary’ Indians – this course places individuals at its center to view and begin to understand this vast and ancient land as it re-creates itself in the face of globalization.

Course Content
Some important themes and concepts in India culture and religion bearing upon the lives to be examined in this course include:

- Ideals of spiritual practice, progress, and perfection of human life:
  renunciation, austerity, divinization; ideals of the hero, the yogi, and the guru;
- Issues of ‘caste’, class, and gender – ancient and contemporary perspectives on social order and individual personhood;
- Plurality of Indian religious worldviews – in conflict and in coexistence;
- The creation of modern India, and India’s participation in globalization;
- Life-writing and personhood: What and how do hagiography, (auto)biography, and ethnographic interviews communicate and form understanding of personhood as such?

Each week (including lecture, tutorial, and reading) the instructor will foreground one individual, with one or more other individuals being considered “in light of” the foregrounded individual. Thus, for example, for the tenth week we will read William Dalrymple’s account of a contemporary Jain nun, as the basis for considering hagiography of the ancient founder of Jainism, Mahavir, for looking at some Jain stories
of multiple lives, leading to discussion of the pan-Indian notion of reincarnation and its varied ramifications in Indian society, the place of asceticism, and women’s empowerment. The sequence of life narratives from week to week runs roughly from early tradition to contemporary life. The aim is to facilitate a cumulative process of interconnection among themes, issues, and lives, as the course progresses.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Week</th>
<th>Biographical Focus &amp; Reading (for the following week)</th>
<th>Themes &amp; Issues</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Introduction &amp; Overview</td>
<td>Telling Lives in India: Approaching India through individual lives</td>
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<td>(Reading [each week have completed by tutorial time of the next week!]: Penner, chs. 3-6).</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>The “Awakened One”: Sakyamuni Buddha (hagiography)</td>
<td>Telling an ideal life: Creating community around an ideal person</td>
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<td>(Reading for next week: Prabhupada, Bhagavad-gita Chs. 4 &amp; 11 [selected verses, tba])</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>The “Descending One”: Vishnu, Rama, Krishna (sacred biography)</td>
<td>Telling a divine life: Krishna as the divine Other</td>
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<td>(Reading for next week: Dimmock: excerpts from Caitanya-caritamrita – 1.4.1-62; 1.17.117-226 [verses only, copies will be made available])</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>The “Five Features” of Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu (hagiography)</td>
<td>Telling a Krishna-bhakta’s Life: Questioning identity through devotion</td>
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<td>(Reading for next week: Nesbitt, chs. 2, 3, 4)</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>A Succession of Spirit: The Eleven Gurus of Sikhism (1469-1708) (songs of the “Scripture-Guru”)</td>
<td>Telling the life of a community: The Sikhs</td>
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<td>(Reading for next week: Eraly, Ch. 6)</td>
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<td>6</td>
<td>The “King of Kings and Shadow of God”: Emperor Akbar (1542-1605)</td>
<td>Telling an emperor’s life</td>
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<td>Week</td>
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<td>7</td>
<td>Interlude: review; guest speaker (tba) (narrating the self)</td>
<td>Reading: Gandhi, chs. 3, 4, 6, 7, 134, 163</td>
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<td>8</td>
<td>M. K. Gandhi (autobiography/biography)</td>
<td>Reading for next week: Dalrymple, Ch. 2 “The Dancer of Kannur”</td>
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<td>9</td>
<td>The Self Possessed: A Theyyam Dancer in South India (ethnography/interview)</td>
<td>Reading for next week: Dalrymple, Ch. 1 “The Nun’s Tale”</td>
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<td>10</td>
<td>Choosing Poverty: A Jain Nun’s Simple Life (ethnography/interview)</td>
<td>Reading for next week: Mother Teresa: In My Own Words [excerpts, tba]</td>
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<td>11</td>
<td>Blessed Mother Teresa of Calcutta (1910-1997) (diary/biography/interview)</td>
<td>Reading for next week: Das, Ch. 9 “Interview with Kiran Bedi”</td>
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<td>12</td>
<td>“Yes Madam, Sir”: Kiran Bedi (1949--) (interview; biography)</td>
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India;
- agency and courage in a cynical age;
- social preservation and change; women’s issues in India—ancient and modern

| 13 | Reading Indian lives & reflecting on our own lives | Review and reflections:
- Representing lives in Indian cinema
- Comparing lives;
- India’s visionaries and India’s challenges;
- life-writing; representing our own lives.

**Learning Outcomes**
This course aims to address the need for students to broaden their understanding of social realities amidst complex dynamics of multiple worldviews. Being exposed to the rich and challenging culture(s) of India through life narratives, and seriously engaging with the course,…

- Students will respond to a weekly question based on each week’s reading assignment, showing both analysis and synthesis of the India-related material presented in light of their own presuppositions, personal experience, and knowledge from other courses.
- Students will (in their presentations and writing assignment) discuss and explain how and why specific key life narratives of prominent Indian figures have functioned as mirrors and makers of Indian culture and religions.
- Students will (in their presentations and writing assignment) apply their understanding of issues (such as agency versus destiny; tradition and change; 'caste'-gender-class identity complexes and otherness) noted in specific Indian 'common' life narratives, to the wider picture of Indian society today.
- Students will demonstrate awareness of life narrative issues related to distinctions made between ‘biography’, ‘hagiography’, and ‘autobiography’, and issues of historicity, community expectation and collective memory.
- Students will show competence in English language reading, writing, and speaking, as the course is conducted entirely in English.

**Required and recommended Readings**
Reading assignments from week to week (in manageable amounts!) will be drawn from books and articles listed here. Most texts will be available in the library (Chung Chi library) on Reserve; others will be made available as photocopies or electronically (on Moodle or Electronic Resources).


Additional Resources (e.g. for preparing the writing assignment)


Recommended Films

Jodhaa Akbar [videorecording] [UC DVD PN1997.2 .J625 2008]
Mahabharata [videorecording] (Peter Brook) [UC DVD PN1997 .M35 2001]

Teaching and learning activities
The course is conducted in English, through lectures, readings, discussions, writing, and images. There will be a weekly two-period lecture and one-period tutorial.

Assessment method

Participation – 15%: Students are required to participate in both lectures and tutorials, and to read the assigned readings (for which a very short weekly written response on Moodle will be expected: details to be announced).

Writing Assignment – 35% There will be a writing assignment of 2000 to 3000 words, developed out of the readings and additional research (details to be announced). Writing assignments will be submitted electronically via the VeriGuide system (see https://veriguide2.cse.cuhk.edu.hk/cuhk/ and log-in).

Tutorial Presentation – 20% Each student will give one oral tutorial presentation (15-20 minutes) based on assigned readings and a short written report based on the presentation and subsequent class discussion (15%), AND an oral response to a fellow student’s presentation (5%) (details forthcoming).

Exams – 30% There will be two short exams (15% each), based on the lectures and the readings. These will be given through the Moodle system (details forthcoming).

Feedback for Evaluation
Students will be encouraged to communicate their evaluations of the course. In the beginning of the course, students will write a brief note on their expectations and aspirations for the course, and a brief survey questionnaire toward the middle of the semester will be given to invite responses on the course’s strengths and weaknesses.

Lecturer’s and Teaching Assistant’s contact details
Dr. Kenneth Valpey
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Telephone: 2609-6622
E-mail: kvalpey@cuhk.edu.hk
Office hours: Wednesdays 11:00-12:00, or by appointment
Lecture venue: CKB 108 (cc area)
Moodle website: http://moodle.cuhk.edu.hk (starting second week), and log-in.

Teaching Assistant:
tba
E-mail:
Tutorial venue: tba

You are invited to visit the website of Dr. Valpey’s home institution, the Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies, to find out more about him and his academic interests: www.ochs.org.uk/faculty-and-staff/fellows (and scroll down to the end of the page).

Course announcements
We have a Moodle-based internet site for our use to facilitate communication: http://moodle.cuhk.edu.hk (starting second week), and log-in. Also, all students should feel free to meet with the instructor, Dr. Valpey, and/or the teaching assistant, for any questions that may arise in relation to this course during the semester, or just for a chat about course topics. Contact us for appointments or come during office hours.

Academic honesty and plagiarism
Please read and be aware of the University’s policy on academic honesty and plagiarism, available at this location: http://www.cuhk.edu.hk/policy/academichonesty/ . The general principle in academic work is that we ‘give credit where credit is due’, happily recognizing the work of others in the academic community and never claiming or implying that others’ ideas or writing are our own. As mentioned above, writing assignments will be submitted electronically via the VeriGuide system (see https://veriguide2.cse.cuhk.edu.hk/cuhk/ and log-in).

Classroom presence and etiquette
Please do NOT check/send messages on cellphones or computers in class (phones stay in backpacks, bags, or pockets, switched OFF). You will not need to bring a computer to class (there may be exceptions: discuss with the instructor). Note that surfing the web or using the computer for anything other than notetaking is extremely distracting to your classmates, and can make it not worth coming to class. There is good recent research indicating that one cannot truly multitask effectively.