

Religion 340: Banaras: Life and Death in a Holy City

Spring 2002, TuTh hours BCD
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- => [Visual Tour of Banaras](#)
- => ["Mirror of Kashi"](#): A Historical Map of Banaras (1876)
- => [Web link on the Aghori Ascetic Sri Bhagwan Ramji of Banaras](#)
- => [Banaras Bibliography](#) (by Axel Michaels and Jörg Gengnagel)

Course Description

This interdisciplinary seminar explores the legends, the history, and the diverse social, political, and religious life of this ancient city on the Ganges River in north India: Banaras, the holy city of the god Shiva. The course begins by offering a picture of India's religious life through the lens of Banaras's legends, temples, neighborhoods, and festivals. We will consider it as a place of pilgrimage, as the home of a distinctive regional culture, as the arena in which different religious and social groups define themselves, and as a stage on which social-reform and political movements have proclaimed and enacted their programs. Themes include: the relationship between private and public piety; the interweaving of sacred times and space in everyday life; the different ways religious beliefs and practices shape who we are; and the dilemmas posed by cultural diversity in forging a harmonious society.

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 1-2 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 5-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).

John S. Hawley and Mark Juergensmeyer, *Songs of the Saints of India* (New York: Oxford University Press,

1988).

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

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

Class Schedule

Week 1: Banaras in History and Myth

4/23 Introduction: Banaras in Antiquity.

4/25 Eck, pp. xiii-xvi, 3-145; "The Lands of the Kasis and Vacchas; Benares" [from Pali sources]

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)? How is Banaras represented in early Buddhist sources?

Week 2: Sacred Places, Sacred Times

4/30 Eck, pp. 146-210;

Humes, "The Goddess of the Vindhyas in Banaras," in H&H (ch. 7);

Pathak, "Lolark Kund: Sun and Shiva Worship in the City of Light," in H&H (ch. 8).

Film: "An Indian Pilgrimage: Banaras"

The gods and goddesses of Banaras are like citizens and neighbors to the Banarsis. In what sense do deities belong to a certain place? What are the stories associated with a shrine meant to tell us? Why do Hindus regard the temple as a "center of the world"?

5/2 Eck, pp. 211-344.

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 3: Bhakti and Ritual Theater

5/7 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?

5/9 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"

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

T.B.A. Lorenzen, "The Kabir-Panth and Social Protest";
Schaller, "Sanskritization, Caste Uplift, and Social Dissidence in the Sant Ravidas Panth."

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

5/14 Lutgendorf, "Interpreting Ramraj: Reflections on the Ramayana, Bhakti, and Hindu Nationalism";
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: "Ram ke Nam / In the Name of God."

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

5/16 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

5/23 Alter, "Hanuman and the Moral Physique of the Banarsi Wrestler," in H&H (ch. 4);
Parry, ch. 7;
Gupta, "The Kina Rami";
Denton, "Varieties of Hindu Female Asceticism."

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?

5/27 Coccari, “The Bir Babas and the Deified Dead”

Mon. 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

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