Course information:
Copy and paste current course information from Class Search/Course Catalog.

Subject REL Number 350 Title Hinduism
Is this a cross-listed course? No
Is this a shared course? No If so, list all academic units offering this course

Requested designation: Humanities, Fine Arts and Design-HU
Note- a separate proposal is required for each designation requested

Eligibility:
Permanent numbered courses must have completed the university's review and approval process.
For the rules governing approval of omnibus courses, contact the General Studies Program Office at (480) 965-0739.

Area(s) proposed course will serve:
A single course may be proposed for more than one core or awareness area. A course may satisfy a core area requirement and more than one awareness area requirements concurrently, but may not satisfy requirements in two core areas simultaneously, even if approved for those areas. With departmental consent, an approved General Studies course may be counted toward both the General Studies requirement and the major program of study.

Checklists for general studies designations:
Complete and attach the appropriate checklist
- Literacy and Critical Inquiry core courses (L)
- Mathematics core courses (MA)
- Computer/statistics/quantitative applications core courses (CS)
- Humanities, Fine Arts and Design core courses (HU)
- Social and Behavioral Sciences core courses (SB)
- Natural Sciences core courses (SO/SG)
- Global Awareness courses (G)
- Historical Awareness courses (H)
- Cultural Diversity in the United States courses (C)

A complete proposal should include:
☒ Signed General Studies Program Course Proposal Cover Form
☒ Criteria Checklist for the area
☒ Course Catalog description
☒ Course Syllabus
☒ Table of Contents from the textbook and list of required readings/books

Contact information:
Name Cindy Baade
Phone 480-965-7183
Mail code 4503 E-mail cynthia.baade@asu.edu

Department Chair/Director approval: (Required)
Chair/Director name (Typed) Matthew J. Garcia
Chair/Director (Signature) [Signature]
Date 1/29/14

Rev. 1/94, 4/95, 7/98, 4/00, 1/02, 10/08, 11/11/12/11, 7/12
Rationale and Objectives

The humanities disciplines are concerned with questions of human existence and meaning, the nature of thinking and knowing, with moral and aesthetic experience. The humanities develop values of all kinds by making the human mind more supple, critical, and expansive. They are concerned with the study of the textual and artistic traditions of diverse cultures, including traditions in literature, philosophy, religion, ethics, history, and aesthetics. In sum, these disciplines explore the range of human thought and its application to the past and present human environment. They deepen awareness of the diversity of the human heritage and its traditions and histories and they may also promote the application of this knowledge to contemporary societies.

The study of the arts and design, like the humanities, deepens the student’s awareness of the diversity of human societies and cultures. The fine arts have as their primary purpose the creation and study of objects, installations, performances and other means of expressing or conveying aesthetic concepts and ideas. Design study concerns itself with material objects, images and spaces, their historical development, and their significance in society and culture. Disciplines in the fine arts and design employ modes of thought and communication that are often nonverbal, which means that courses in these areas tend to focus on objects, images, and structures and/or on the practical techniques and historical development of artistic and design traditions. The past and present accomplishments of artists and designers help form the student’s ability to perceive aesthetic qualities of art work and design.

The Humanities, Fine Arts and Design are an important part of the General Studies Program, for they provide an opportunity for students to study intellectual and imaginative traditions and to observe and/or learn the production of art work and design. The knowledge acquired in courses fulfilling the Humanities, Fine Arts and Design requirement may encourage students to investigate their own personal philosophies or beliefs and to understand better their own social experience. In sum, the Humanities, Fine Arts and Design core area enables students to broaden and deepen their consideration of the variety of human experience.

Revised October 2008
Proposer: Please complete the following section and attach appropriate documentation.

**ASU - [HU] CRITERIA**

HUMANITIES, FINE ARTS AND DESIGN [HU] courses must meet either 1, 2, or 3 and at least one of the criteria under 4 in such a way as to make the satisfaction of these criteria A CENTRAL AND SUBSTANTIAL PORTION of the course content.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>YES</th>
<th>NO</th>
<th>Identify Documentation Submitted</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
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<td>1. Emphasize the study of values, of the development of philosophies, religions, ethics or belief systems, and/or aesthetic experience.</td>
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<td>2. Concerns the comprehension and interpretation/analysis of written, aural, or visual texts, and/or the historical development of textual traditions.</td>
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<tr>
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<td></td>
<td>3. Concerns the comprehension and interpretation/analysis of material objects, images and spaces, and/or their historical development.</td>
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<td>4. In addition, to qualify for the Humanities, Fine Arts and Design designation a course must meet one or more of the following requirements:</td>
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<tr>
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<td>a. Concerns the development of human thought, including emphasis on the analysis of philosophical and/or religious systems of thought.</td>
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<td>b. Concerns aesthetic systems and values, literary and visual arts.</td>
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<td>c. Emphasizes aesthetic experience in the visual and performing arts, including music, dance, theater, and in the applied arts, including architecture and design.</td>
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<td>d. Deepen awareness of the analysis of literature and the development of literary traditions.</td>
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**THE FOLLOWING ARE NOT ACCEPTABLE:**

- Courses devoted primarily to developing a skill in the creative or performing arts, including courses that are primarily studio classes in the Herberger College of the Arts and in the College of Design.

- Courses devoted primarily to developing skill in the use of a language – However, language courses that emphasize cultural study and the study of literature can be allowed.

- Courses which emphasize the acquisition of quantitative or experimental methods.

- Courses devoted primarily to teaching skills.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Course Prefix</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Designation</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>REL</td>
<td>350</td>
<td>Hinduism</td>
<td>Hu</td>
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Explain in detail which student activities correspond to the specific designation criteria. Please use the following organizer to explain how the criteria are being met.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criteria (from checksheet)</th>
<th>How course meets spirit (contextualize specific examples in next column)</th>
<th>Please provide detailed evidence of how course meets criteria (i.e., where in syllabus)</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hu1</td>
<td>The course as a whole provides a historical and thematic treatment of the development of a specific religious tradition, Hinduism.</td>
<td>See marked-up syllabus for some examples.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hu2</td>
<td>The primary emphasis of the course is on reading and interpreting Hindu religious texts, beginning with the Vedas and ending with medieval bhakti literature</td>
<td>See marked-up syllabus. The books by Embree, Ramanujan, and Miller are all based on English translations of Hindu religious texts. Most of the students' class work involves in-depth discussion of these texts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hu3</td>
<td>At least three points in the course (the early class on the Indus Valley Civilization and several classes after the midterm), the course makes use of visual materials -- images of Hindu gods and goddesses, temples.</td>
<td>See marked-up syllabus.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HU4a</td>
<td>The course as a whole is about religion, including thought and action (ritual and moral). The strands of thought and action are interwoven throughout the course, as in life, but at least half of the course emphasizes the development of religious (including philosophical) thought</td>
<td>This is especially true of sections I, II, III, and V of the course. See marked-up Syllabus.</td>
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<tr>
<td>HU4d</td>
<td>The basic material for most of the course is literature, and the literature to be discussed in the classes and read in the homework assignments is arranged in roughly chronological order, so that a good deal of emphasis is placed on the</td>
<td>Sections I, II, III, and V of the course comprise the sections in which students read and hear about and discuss Hindu literary texts and the development of the tradition(s).</td>
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<td>development of the literary tradition(s) of the Hindu world(s).</td>
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<td>Course</td>
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<td>REL 350</td>
<td>Hinduism</td>
<td>3</td>
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</table>

Studies diverse forms of Hinduism through its institutions, literature, folklore, art, and architecture.

Allow multiple enrollments: No

Primary course component: Lecture

Repeatable for credit: No

Grading method: Student Option

Offered by: College of Liberal Arts and Sciences – Historical, Philosophical & Religious Studies, Sch

Pre-requisites: Minimum 24 hours, ENG 102, 105 or 108 with C or better.
Instructor: Anne Feldhaus, Professor of Religious Studies

Office Location: COOR 6656
Office Hours: MW 1:15-2:45
E-mail: Anne.Feldhaus@asu.edu

Class Location: ED226
Schedule Line #: 19196
Class Day/Time: MW 3-4:30

Religious Studies
Main Office: COOR 4595, (480) 965-5778
Undergraduate Advising: COOR 3301, (480) 965-8364

Course Description:
An introduction to major texts, practices, and ideas of Hindu traditions in India.

General Studies, Knowledge and Skills Goals of the Course:
- knowledge of the history and major themes of Hindu religious traditions
- an understanding of roles of religion in individual and collective life in South Asia
- the ability to read and analyze primary and secondary texts
- the ability to discuss Hindu religious texts and practices orally and in written work

Required Reading:
Axel Michaels, Hinduism Past and Present.
Ainslie Embree, editor, Sources of Indian Tradition, volume 1.
Speaking of Śiva, translated by A. K. Ramanujan.
C. J. Fuller, The Camphor Flame.

Supplemental readings available on Blackboard and at the Alternative Copy Shop (SW corner of Mill and 10th Street, 480-829-7992, alttempe@alternativeprintandcopy.com. They advise that you call or email them first to make sure they have a copy for you to buy.)

Course Requirements
1. Regular ATTENDANCE.
2. Completion of READINGS before the class for which they are listed.
3. Informed PARTICIPATION in class discussions.
4. Writing three original PAPERS (approximately 3-5 pages each), due in hard copy IN CLASS on February 13, April 3, and April 29 AND electronically through SafeAssignment on Blackboard by 6 p.m. on the day the paper is due in class. (You must submit each paper both ways by the deadline.)
5. Making a MAP of South Asia, due in class on January 28.
6. Mid-term and final EXAMINATIONS, as listed.
SCHEDULE OF TOPICS AND ASSIGNMENTS

M. Jan. 7  Introduction to the course
W. Jan. 9  Introduction to the study of Hinduism; Indus Valley Civilization
READ Michaels, Hinduism Past and Present, pp. xvii, 3-32.

I. Vedic Religion  HU4, HU4a, HU4d
M. Jan. 14  The Vedas
READ Sources of Indian Tradition, Volume I, pp. 3-28; Michaels, pp. 33-36, 201-211.
W. Jan. 16  Vedic Hymns
REREAD Sources, pp. 7-28; READ Michaels, pp. 47-57; Thomas Hopkins, The Hindu Religious Tradition, pp. 14-30 (The book is on reserve in Hayden Library, and this chapter is included in the reading packet you can get from the Alternative Copy Shop).
M. Jan. 21  Martin Luther King Day! NO CLASS
W. Jan. 23  The Upanishads  HU4a
READ Sources, pp. 29-39; Michaels, pp. 259-264; Hopkins, pp. 36-51 (available on Blackboard and on reserve at Hayden Library)
M. Jan. 28  The Upanishads, continued
REREAD Sources, pp. 29-39; MAP DUE
W. Jan. 30  Jainism (and Buddhism)
READ Sources, pp. 43-75; Michaels, pp. 36-38

II. Dharma and Moksha  HU4 & 4a, HU4d
M. Feb. 4  The Goals of Human Life: Pleasure and Power
READ Sources, pp. 203-12, 234-44, 254-60
W. Feb. 6  The Goals of Human Life, continued: Dharma
READ Sources, pp. 213-33; Michaels, pp. 71-158
M. Feb. 11  The Goals of Human Life, continued: Moksha, Renunciation, and Yoga
READ Michaels, pp. 315-325; Patrick Olivelle, “Ascetic Withdrawal or Social Engagement” (in reading packet at the Alternative Copy Shop; also available on Blackboard)
W. Feb. 13  Introduction to Indian philosophy  HU4a
FIRST PAPER DUE (Analysis of an assigned passage from the Upanishads)
W. Feb. 18  Hindu Philosophy: Sāmkhya and Yoga
READ Sources, pp. 296-308; Michaels, 264-268
M. Feb. 20  Hindu Philosophy: Vedānta
READ Sources, pp. 308-19; Michaels, pp. 269-276

III. Classical Hindu Theism  HU4a, HU4d
M. Feb. 25  Introduction to the Hindu Epics and Purāṇas
READ Michaels, pp. 38-42, 58-62; LEARN the broad outlines of the Rāmāyaṇa and Mahābhārata
W. Feb. 27  The Bhagavad Gītā
READ Sources, pp. 276-80; The Bhagavad-Gītā, translated by Barbara Stoler Miller (the whole book! Buy a copy, or read it online as an e-book)
PARTICIPATE knowledgeably in class discussion on the Bhagavad Gītā
M. Mar. 4  Finish discussion of Gītā; review for midterm exam
W. Mar. 6  MIDTERM EXAM
M. Mar. 18  Puranic Gods and Goddesses

W. Mar. 20  Puranic Gods and Goddesses, continued
            READ Fuller, pp. 174-197; Michaels, pp. 223-227

**IV. Hindu Ritual Life**

M. Mar. 25  Purity and Pollution; Social Hierarchy
            READ Michaels, pp. 159-200

W. Mar. 27  Society and Divinities
            READ Fuller, pp. 3-56, Michaels, 226-241.

M. Apr. 1   Pūjā and Sacrifice; Village Rituals
            H U 3
            READ Fuller, pp. 57-105, 128-154; Michaels, pp. 241-245

W. Apr. 3   Pilgrimages and Pilgrimage Festivals
            READ Fuller, pp. 204-223; Michaels, pp. 283-295; SECOND PAPER DUE

**V. Medieval Bhakti Movements**

M. Apr. 8   Bhakti as Protest
            READ A. K. Ramanujan, *Speaking of Śiva*, pp. 19-90

W. Apr. 10  Bhakti in History
            READ Michaels, pp. 62-65, 252-259

M. Apr. 15  Women and Men, Devotees and Gods
            READ Sources, pp. 365-69; Ramanujan, pp. 111-42

W. Apr. 17  Bhakti in Maharashtra: the Vārkarīs
            READ selections from *Say’s Tuka* (poems by Tukaram, translated by Dilip Chitre, in reading packet from the Alternative Copy Shop and on Blackboard)

M. Apr. 22  Muslims and Hindus in India
            READ Sources, pp. 381-391, 447-468; Michaels, pp. 43-47

W. Apr. 24  North Indian Sants and Sikhism
            READ Sources, pp. 371-78, 493-500

M. Apr. 29  Review for final exam
            THIRD PAPER DUE

**FINAL EXAMINATION** Monday, May 6, 12:10-2 p.m.

**Grading:**

**BASE GRADE:** 50% papers; 50% exams
Repeated absences (more than two) can lower your grade.
Evidence of failure to do the readings on time can lower your grade.
Thoughtful, informed participation (including good questions) can raise your grade.

**Attendance, Make-ups:**
You must attend every class. You must be on time to class.
Repeated absence or lateness will lower your grade.
Make-up exams will be available only if you have a documented health or family emergency.

**Withdrawals:** https://students.asu.edu/withdrawal

**Incompletes:** http://www.asu.edu/aad/manuals/ssm/ssm203-09.html

**Academic Honesty:** The Faculty of Religious Studies abides by ASU’s Academic Integrity Policy. See https://provost.asu.edu/index.php?q=academicintegrity.
SOURCES OF INDIAN TRADITION
SECOND EDITION
VOLUME ONE
FROM THE BEGINNING TO 1800
EDITED AND REVISED BY
AINSLIE T. EMBREE
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Earlier versions of some of the translations in the present selection were published in *Fakir*, The Ezra-Faakir Press, Bombay; *Delos*, University of Texas, Austin, Texas, USA; *Modern Poetry in Translation*, London, UK; *Translation*, Columbia University School of the Arts, New York, NY, USA; *South-Asian Digest of Literature*, South-Asian Institute, University of Heidelberg, Germany.

*Saya Tuka* was originally commissioned by Adil Jussawala for the XAL, PRAXIS Foundation, Bombay.

Parts of the introduction are based on the Ajmoly Memorial Lecture which I delivered under the auspices of the South-Asia Institute of the University of Heidelberg on November 7, 1988. Personal gratitude owed to friends and benefactors, particularly to those who supported me morally and financially in lean periods throughout the last thirty-two years, cannot be explicitly mentioned: it has been like one grand and continuous grant that has made this work possible.

—Dilip Chitre

For Anne

Love,

Dilip

SAYS TUKA
Selected Poetry of Tukaram

Translated from the Marathi
with an Introduction
by

Dilip Chitre

PENGUIN BOOKS
King Khanḍobā's Hunt and His Encounter with Bāṇāi, the Shepherdess

I. THE SOMVATI AMĀVASYĀ FESTIVAL IN THE KHAṆḌOBĀ CULT: TWO STRANDS

One of the most important festivals in the Khaṇḍobā cult of Maharashtra is observed on Somvati Amāvasyā, that is, on a new moon day which falls on a Monday. The major centre of the cult is Jejurī in the Pune district and it is here that the festival is observed most conspicuously and elaborately. The festival is also observed in other places where Khaṇḍobā and similar Śaiva folk deities are worshipped, but at such places it is of only local importance.¹ There are many dimensions of this festival (see Stanley 1977), but we shall emphasize here the hunting excitement of the Lord, and the folk-religious and royal character of this day. Though outwardly there is little to show that the royal god actually goes for a hunt, this is a frequent explanation given by participants in the festival.

Before we proceed, it is necessary to point out that the festival incorporates two main religious orientations, which at times coalesce and at other times stand apart, maintaining more or less a dynamically fluctuating relationship. From the point of view of the brahmanical texts, though not one which is necessarily shared by all Brāhmans who are also devotees of Khaṇḍobā, the essence of the festival would be that it is a purifying ritual at an auspicious point of time, namely the conjunction of the sun and the moon on a Monday. Terms like śāna, śuddhi and pāpa are used in expressing this attitude. The other orientation belongs to the realm of folk religion. The god’s exit into the “forest” is dramatically performed and the devotees participate in the royal “hunt”, which culminates in a common bath of the god and his devotees in the Karkā river.

The motives of the devotees who participate in the festival are variously expressed, but can be summarized by the desire to secure “life and prosperity” (Heesterman 1985: 31), or to seek the values of “bodily existence and well-being” or “auspiciousness” or “higher quality of life” (Marriott 1976: 194). Both orientations, the brahmanical and the folk, and the rites connected with them are, of course, pervaded by the peculiar sacredness of Somvati Amāvasyā, a day on which the “fluidity of power” (Stanley 1977: 30) is “unambivalently auspicious” (Stanley 1977: 42) in the Khaṇḍobā cult. In the following article we shall also try to explore some of the dimensions of these attitudes and their mutual interaction, as they are expressed in oral folk myths, in scripture brahmanical texts, and in the dramatic performances and rituals of the festival. We shall spread our net rather wide, to draw together scattered and variegated materials which may eventually provide the background to the festival, especially the hunting excitement of the god. In passing, we should like to point out the pervasiveness and spatial spread of the incidents of the Khaṇḍobā cult and its relationships and/or indebtedness to similar cults, especially in Tamilnadu, Karnataka, and Andhra Pradesh. Future research will probably have to concentrate on parallels between similar folk cults in different regions: too often the local or regional data are taken to be unique, without comparative scrutiny to show whether this is true or not.

II. SOMVATI AMĀVASYĀ IN THE JAYĀDRI MĀḤĀTKYA, MĀRTANDAVIJAYA AND OTHER SCRIPUTRAL SOURCES

The Jayādri Māhātyā is an unpublished Sanskrit text which describes literally “the greatness of Jejurī”. It links the Jejurī (Jayādri) cult firmly to the Māhābhārata and to purānic precedents while heavily etiologizing local events and incidents pertaining to Jejurī and to another important place of the cult, namely Naḍurg, in the Osmanabad district. The oldest ms. is dated Saka 1678 (A.D. 1756).² It was around this time, namely between A.D. 1685-1790, that increased building activity is recorded in inscriptions in the temple complex of Jejurī (Poddar 1914: 265-72, Khare 1958: 91-3). Other scriptural sources are the Mārntānavijaya (A.D. 1823)³ and the Śrīkṛṣṇa-Jejurī-Māhātyā (1925),⁴ both in Marathi.

The JY basically relates a conversation between the five Pāṇḍavas and Śiva. The Pāṇḍavas have arrived at Jejurī and Dharmarāja asks a host of questions which are mostly answered by Śiva or Vaiṣṇavīpāyana.
Ritual Pollution as an Integrator of Caste and Religion

EDWARD B. HARPER

BELIEFS about ritual purity and ritual impurity form some of the most all-pervasive themes in Hindu culture. They are the basis of orthoprax Brahmanism in that only a ritually pure individual may approach the higher gods. Brahmanic concepts concerning pollution relate the Indian system of social stratification to the Hindu religious system. These concepts are applied to matters of personal conduct, health, and justice, and are fundamental to such well-known aspects of Indian culture as untouchability, limited access to wells, and the setting apart of a priestly caste. One of the important rationales for caste separatism (their refusal to intermarry, eat with one another, or touch one another) is that some castes are more ritually pure than others, and that impurity may be transmitted from one caste to another through these acts. But on the other hand, castes are also brought together and integrated into a system of ritual interdependence by the belief that they differ in the degree to which they are ritually pure or impure. Some actions are thought to be ritually too defiling for certain castes to perform, and some castes are thought to be too impure to perform certain other activities. These beliefs are basic to the concept of a division of labor by castes and to the ideal that each caste plays a part in a larger mutually interdependent system.

The theoretical model of the system which relates ritual pollution to caste status appears to be:

1. Gods are superior to men and thus must be worshipped by men; in return, gods bestow benefits on men.
2. Gods can be directly worshipped only by those mortals of high ritual purity.
3. In order for an individual to attain and maintain a state of high ritual purity, he needs to have other people perform certain ritually defiling acts for him, or, looked at another way, in order for the community to function, many actions must be performed which cause the actor to become impure, and some of these bring about a greater amount of impurity than do others.
4. In a general sense, all members of the community derive benefit from the worship given directly to the gods by those who are ritually pure, but in a specific sense they derive benefit by worshipping those religious specialists who directly worship the gods.
5. Ritual pollution is transmitted through certain kin relationships; an individual cannot attain a higher state of ritual purity than his kinsmen. If an individual is to attain and maintain a high state of purity, he must marry only with another whose family has an equally high state of ritual purity.
6. In order for the gods to be worshipped, some castes must assume the pollution which otherwise would accrue to those castes which worship the gods; if the gods are to be pleased, it thus becomes the duty of some castes to help other castes attain sufficient purity to worship them, even at the expense of thereby becoming impure themselves.
7. In order to perform ritual cleansing actions for relatively more pure individuals or supernaturals, the actor must himself maintain an only slightly less pure status. In order to prevent those with an intermediate amount of purity from becoming less pure (and thus unable themselves to assume the lesser degrees of pollution from the most pure individuals), there must be even less pure individuals to prevent the accrual of too much ritual pollution to these intermediately pure individuals.
8. Since purity and pollution are transferred through kinship, the total society must be divided into kinship-based ritual status groups (castes) which are ranked along a purity-imprunity continuum.
9. Lower castes worship the higher castes, who in turn worship the gods. This forms the basis for a system of social differentiation in status which is based upon differences in ritual status.

Although this conceptual model is the foundation upon which the system of hierarchically ranked castes rests, it is only crudely and imperfectly implemented in the actual caste hierarchy; or, to state it another way, the “attributional theory of caste ranking” supplies the context for the “interactional theory of caste ranking” (Marriott, 1959).

In this paper I describe the ritual observances and beliefs about pollution as followed by Havik Brahmins, a “dominant caste” in the area around Sagar in the Malnad part of South India. This is an area stratified by over a dozen indigenous castes, which in native thought are grouped into a three-class system: Brahmins, Sudras, and Untouchables (cf. Harper, 1959). A fourth caste, Lingayats, occupies a position somewhat apart from these three classes.

Ritual Purity—The Three States

Haviks have three terms to denote degrees of purity and impurity. Modd translates as “ritually pure”; muttuchetti as “ritually impure.” Under ordinary circumstances, an individual is said to be moddd, a term which has been translated as “normal ritual status” (Srinivas, 1953:106). I have been tempted to translate it as “lack of ritual status,” although this is not completely accurate for a person in moddd is impure relative to a person who is in a state of ritual purity; that is, contact between the two will cause the person in moddd to become moddd, and, a person in moddd is pure relative to a person in a state of ritual impurity; that is, contact between the two will cause the person in moddd to become muttuchetti.

To make the transition from moddd to muttuchetti, a Brahmin must perform some ritually defiling act or have contact with a source of pollution. To regain a state of moddd from one of muttuchetti, he must undergo a ritual cleansing ceremony. In order to attain a state of ritual purity, moddd, a Brahmin must also engage in a voll...

Dr. Harper is Associate Professor of Anthropology at the University of Washington.

1 The term “orthoprax” was suggested to me by McKim Marriott to replace “orthodox,” which I had used in an earlier draft of this paper. Orthoprax emphasizes ritual aspects of religious behavior rather than its belief content, and more accurately reflects the lay Brahmin’s conception of the religious wan. I gratefully express my debt to Dr. Marriott for his painstaking analysis of an earlier draft, and for his numerous substantive suggestions, some of which have been incorporated into this paper without their acknowledgment.

2 This model is derived from fieldwork in the Malnad part of Mysore State, but is phrased broadly and is based on the belief that it may be generally applicable to other parts of South India.

3 In this paper I do not cite parallels in previous analyses, the most complete of which are Srinivas, 1953, and Mrs. Sinclair Stevenson, 1956; nor do I cite points at which my analysis differs from the hypothesis of H. N. G. Stevenson, 1956.
Ascetic Withdrawal or Social Engagement

Patrick Olivelle

The sixth century B.C.E. was a watershed in the history of Indian religions, a period that witnessed momentous social, economic, and political changes. A surplus economy, the establishment of cities and large kingdoms, the facility of travel, and the rise of a merchant class contributed to the emergence of several significant religious doctrines and institutions, including the new religious movements of Buddhism and Jainism. A major concept in the emerging new world was samsāra, a category that provided the framework for understanding and evaluating human life. According to this new understanding, life is ultimately and essentially suffering, subject as it is to repeated births and deaths. The goal of human existence, therefore, should be to transcend this bondage to the cycle of rebirth and to reach the realm of total freedom and bliss called mokṣa. The religious sharing this world view challenged the society-centered ritual religion of the earlier Vedic period. The result of this confluence of two opposing worlds was a deep and lasting conflict within Indian religions between the value of responsible social engagement within the context of marriage and family and the ascetic withdrawal from society that was seen as the necessary precondition for achieving liberation.

The conflict between these world views is revealed in the emerging diversity of opinion regarding dharma, that is, the proper way to act and the right doctrines to believe. In the mainstream of the Vedic tradition, dharma meant the rules for ritual and moral behavior contained in the Vedic scriptures. By the sixth century B.C.E., such a simple solution to the question, “What is dharma?” was no longer possible, especially because of the new value systems resulting from ascetic ideologies that considered society and social norms as well as the ritual religion to be part of samsāra, the world of suffering subject to rebirth. Good and intelligent people were asking serious questions about ultimate truth and proper conduct, all trying in their own way to define the “true” dharma. The Buddha himself, for example, called his new doctrine and way of life dharma. This spirit of inquiry and doubt is captured well in the following passage from the Mahābhārata