



Indian Culture and Society

ANTH 2324 / ANTH 5324 / UGEC 2655

Spring 2026

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Lecture and tutorial: UCC C4
Monday 2:30pm – 5:15pm

Office: NAH 305. Office hours:
Wednesday 11:00 am – 1:00 pm
and by appointment

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Course description

This course is an anthropological exploration of contemporary India: its social life and diverse cultures. India is home to more than a billion people, who look different, speak different languages, practice different religions, and have distinct rituals, cuisines, and music. India is a country with economic, political, cultural, and intellectual influence globally. India also holds a prominent historical and cultural place in Asia: along with China, it has significantly contributed to Asian traditions of knowledge—from philosophy and religion to medicine and technology. As a former British colony and a growing modern economy, India provides rich material to learn about colonialism, nation-building, interethnic relations, and inter-Asian connections, including ties with Hong Kong. The material in this course includes the discussions of social life in South Asia broadly, including countries such as Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka.

In this course you will learn about India's place both in the world and the Asian region, developing an understanding of the country's diversity and complex social institutions such as family, community, caste, and class. We will discuss pressing issues and theoretical debates related to gender, sexuality, social movements, religious conflicts, public health, labor, and environment. We will see how these issues have been shaped by post-colonial politics and current transnational processes.

There are no pre-requisites for this course.

Course Format

This course runs weekly in an interactive 3-hour format, with no separate lecture or tutorial. Instead, the learning process will include lectures, conversations, documentaries, games, guest talks, food tasting, and a field trip. Note that some documentaries are not easily available online or in the library, so it is your responsibility to attend the class on the scheduled days.

Keep in mind that the assigned readings, class activities, and the schedule may be adjusted in the course of the semester, so make sure to consult Blackboard regularly.

Learning objectives

By the end of the course students will be able to do the following:

- name major Indian communities and social categories in terms of region, caste, class, religion, language, gender, and other sociocultural divisions
- identify various schools of philosophy and religion that originated in the Indian subcontinent and are practiced in India today
- identify some cities, states, and union territories of India on the map
- describe and give examples of the everyday life of Indian people, including women, men, and people who identify differently
- give examples of anthropological studies of India
- explain the impact of India's colonial history on its modern society
- interpret the role of popular culture, political processes, and the global economy in the lives of Indians in India and abroad

Learning material

You are welcome to purchase the textbooks and books listed below, but it is not necessary because the assigned excerpts will be posted on Blackboard. Additional articles, newspaper pieces, and videos will be also available on Blackboard.

Major books:

- *Everyday Life in South Asia*———referred to in the schedule as **Reader** by Diane P. Mines and Sarah Lamb, eds. Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press. Second Edition, 2010.
- Joseph Alter (1999) *Knowing Dil Das: Stories of a Himalayan Hunter*. The University of Pennsylvania Press.

Supplementary books:

- *A Companion to the Anthropology of India* by Isabelle Clark-Decès, ed. John Wiley & Sons, 2011
- *The Blackwell Companion to Hinduism*, edited by Gavin Flood, John Wiley & Sons, Incorporated, 2005.
- Smitha Radhakrishnan. *Appropriately Indian: Gender and Culture in a New Transnational Class*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011
- Lukose, Ritty (2009) *Liberalization's Children: Gender, Youth, and Consumer Citizenship in Globalizing India*. Durham: Duke University Press
- Dave, Naisargi (2012) *Queer Activism in India: A Story in the Anthropology of Ethics*. Durham: Duke University Press
- Pande, Amrita (2014) *Wombs in Labor: Transnational Commercial Surrogacy in India*. Columbia University Press
- Peter Berger, and Frank Heidemann, eds. *The Modern Anthropology of India: Ethnography, Themes and Theory*. Routledge, 2013. Available at University Library UL GN17.3.I4 M64 2013

- Arundhati Roy. *The Doctor and the Saint: Caste, Race, and Annihilation of Caste. The Debate between B.R. Ambedkar and M.K. Gandhi*. Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2017
- Shashi Tharoor. *Why I Am a Hindu*. Scribe Publications, 2018
- Shashi Tharoor. *India: From Midnight to the Millennium*, Penguin Books India, 2000
- Tulasi Srinivas. *The Cow in the Elevator: An Anthropology of Wonder*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2018
- Sunil Khilnani. *The Idea of India*, New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 1997
- Joyce Flueckiger. *Lived Religions: Everyday Hinduism*. John Wiley & Sons, 2015
- Joseph Kitagawa, ed. *The Religious Traditions of Asia: Religion, History, and Culture*, 2013
- James Staples (2020) *Sacred Cows and Chicken Manchurian: The Everyday Politics of Eating Meat in India*. University of Washington Press

Assessment

Participation (15%)

The exchange of ideas is the foundation of learning; therefore, regular attendance and participation are part of your responsibility. The awarding of high participation points comes with good attendance and active, thoughtful, consistent class participation. This does not only mean the frequency of your contribution, but its quality: the kind that reveals your thorough preparation and engagement with class materials. I am eager to learn from you and expect that you will contribute your own ideas as well as provide constructive responses to other students' comments. Field trips will count towards the participation grade.

Class activities (30%)

Throughout the semester, there will be six graded in-class activities, counting for 5% of your grade each. Such activities are fun, brief, and simple. They may include a crossword puzzle, a historical timeline challenge, the mapping of India, a kinship diagram, an artifact analysis, a festival poster analysis, or something similar. These activities are based on lectures and class readings.

Mid-term exam (25%)

This will be an in-class, closed-book exam, focused on the main concepts and facts about the Indian society. The exam will include multiple-choice, true-or-false, and fill-the-gap questions. MA students will have 5 additional short-essay questions. The exam will last for one hour. Unless it is a medical emergency, there will be NO MAKE-UP EXAM. A study guide will be posted to Blackboard two weeks before the exam.

Ethnographic analysis (30%)

This is a final written assessment that will be conducted in class. You will be given an ethnographic excerpt (one page) from an ethnographic book about India. You will need to read it and write a brief analysis, using the concepts and ideas learned in this course. In your analysis, you will need to situate the vignette within broader anthropological themes (e.g., caste, kinship, gender, religion, globalization), identify key cultural practices and explain their social significance.

Grading scale

Grade	Participation	Midterm exam	Ethnographic analysis
A	You have participated in all classes (one absence is ok). Your comments demonstrate that you have read the assigned readings, and your questions show a nuanced understanding of the course material	(95–100%)	Your writing demonstrates a nuanced understanding of the material and all concepts; information is factually accurate; arguments are insightful and convincing
A -	You have participated in almost all classes, with two classes missed or inactive. Your comments demonstrate that you have read the assigned readings, and your questions show a good understanding of the course material	(90–94%)	Your analysis and answers demonstrate a nuanced understanding of the material and almost all concepts; information is factually accurate; arguments are convincing, even if occasionally contain minor errors
B+	You have participated in the majority of classes, with three classes missing or inactive. Your comments demonstrate that you have read most of the assigned readings, and your questions show a sufficient understanding of the course material	(85–89%)	Your analysis and answers demonstrate an overall good understanding of class material but may lack clarity, contain several minor errors
B	You have participated in the majority of classes, with four classes absent or inactive. Your comments demonstrate that you have read most of the assigned readings, and your questions show a sufficient understanding of the course material	(80–84%)	Your analysis and answers demonstrate an overall good understanding of class material but may lack clarity, contain many minor errors
B -	You have participated in the majority of classes, with five classes absent or inactive. Your comments demonstrate that you have read most of the assigned readings, and your questions show a sufficient understanding of the course material	(75–79%)	Your analysis and answers demonstrate an overall good understanding of class material but lack clarity, contain minor errors and a few major logical flaws
C +	You have participated in about half of classes, with six classes absent or inactive. Your comments demonstrate that you have read some of the assigned readings, and your questions show a partial understanding of the course material	(70–74%)	Your analysis and answers show an acceptable level of understanding of class material but it lacks clarity, contains many major factual errors and logical flaws
C	You participate in about half of classes, with seven classes missed or inactive. Your comments demonstrate that you have read	(65–69%)	Your analysis and answers show an acceptable level of understanding of class material but it lacks clarity, contains

	some of the assigned readings, and your questions show a partial understanding of the course material		many major factual errors and logical flaws
C -	You participate in about half of the classes, with eight classes absent or inactive. Your comments demonstrate that you have read some of the assigned readings, and your questions show partial understanding of the course material	(60–64%)	Your analysis and answers show an acceptable level of understanding of class material but it lacks clarity, contains many major factual errors and logical flaws
D +	You have participated in a small number of classes, with 9-10 classes absent or inactive; or you show a low level of engagement. Your comments demonstrate that you have not read the assigned readings, and you do not quite understand what is being discussed	(55–59%)	Your analysis and answers show minimal understanding of class material. It lacks effort, hard to read and understand, contains major errors, flaws, and biased viewpoints
D	You participate in a small number of classes, with 11-12 classes absent or inactive, or you show a low level of engagement. Your comments demonstrate that you have not read the assigned readings, and you do not understand what is being discussed	(50–54%)	Your analysis and answers show minimal understanding of class material. It lacks effort, hard to read and understand, contains major errors, flaws, and biased viewpoints
F	You have never participated, or missed all the tutorials, or have always come unprepared	(49% and below)	You did not appear in class for your film analysis and/or final exam

Weekly class schedule

<p>Week One. January 5. DIVERSE CULTURES OF INDIA</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shashi Tharoor (2002) <i>A Myth and an Idea</i>. In <i>India: From Midnight to the Millennium</i>, Penguin Books India, pp. 7–21
<p>Week Two. January 12. The COLONIAL ENCOUNTER AND PARTITION</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Urvashi Butalia: <i>The Voices from the Partition</i>. In <i>Reader</i>, pp. 314–327 • Laura Ring: <i>A Day in the Life</i>. In <i>Reader</i>, pp. 328–342 • [MA READING] Cohn, Bernard. 1996. "Law and the Colonial State in India." In <i>Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India</i>. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Week Three. January 19. RELIGION AND SECULARISM

- Joyce B. Flueckiger (2015) "Festivals." In *Everyday Hinduism*, pp. 123-144
- Khan, Naveeda. "In Friendship: A Father, A Daughter, and a Jinn." In *Reader*, 275-289.
- [MA READING] Harjot Oberoi (1994) Introduction. In *The Construction of Religious Boundaries: Culture, Identity, and Diversity in the Sikh Tradition*. University of Chicago Press

Film in class: *The Roots of Love* (2014), directed by Harjant Gill, 27 mins

Week Four. January 26. SOCIAL DIVISIONS: CASTES AND TRIBES

- Seven Prevalent Misconceptions about India's Caste System. In *Reader*, pp. 153-155
- Fleuckiger, Joyce B. 2015. "A Note on Caste." In *Everyday Hinduism*. First Edition. John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.
- Joseph Alter (1999) *Knowing Dil Das*: Preface and Chapter 1, pp. Xi-9
- [MA READING] Robert Deliege: Caste, Class, and Untouchability. In *A Companion to the Anthropology of India* by Isabelle Clark-Decès, ed. John Wiley & Sons, 2011, Chapter 2

Film in class: Inside a Lost African Tribe Still Living in India Today

Week Five. February 2. CLASS AND SOCIAL MOBILITY

- Joseph Alter (1999) *Knowing Dil Das*: Chapter 2 and 3, pp. 10-33
- Sara Dickey: Anjali's Alliance: Class Mobility in Urban India. In *Reader*, pp. 192-205
- [MA READING] McGuire, Meredith. "'How to Sit, How to Stand': Bodily Practice and the New Urban Middle Class." In *A Companion to the Anthropology of India* by Isabelle Clark-Decès, ed. John Wiley & Sons, 2011

Film in class: *The World Before Her* (2012) by Nisha Pahuja

Week Six. February 9. CONSUMPTION AND NEW SUBJECTIVITIES

- Anand Pandian: Cinema in the Countryside: popular Tamil Film and the Remaking of Rural Life. In *Reader*, pp. 406-420
- Purnima Mankekar: Dangerous Desires. In *Reader*, pp. 421-435
- [MA READING] Philip Lutgendorf: *Making Tea in India: Chai, Capitalism, Culture*. Thesis Eleven, 113(1) 11-31

February 16. Public Holiday (no class)

Week Seven. February 23. MARRIAGE AND FAMILY

Midterm exam today

- Susan Wadley: *One Straw from a Broom Cannot Sweep: The Ideology and Practice of the Joint Family in Rural North India*. In *Reader*, pp. 14-25
- Jeffry and Jeffry: *Allah Gives Both Boys and Girls*. In *Reader*, pp. 26-39
- [MA READING] Das, V. (2019), Designing Queer Connection: An Ethnography of Dating App Production in Urban India. *Ethnographic Praxis in Industry Conference Proceedings, 2019*: 384-397

Film in class: *Lovesick* (2017) by Ann Kim and Priya Giri Desai

March 2. This is a reading week, so we do not have a class but continue reading the ethnography:

- Joseph Alter (1999) *Knowing Dil Das*. Part II, pp. 37-86

Week Eight. March 9. FEMININITIES, MASCULINITIES, AND "THIRD" GENDER

- Nanda, Serena. 2010. "Life on the Margins: A Hijra's Story." In *Reader*, edited by Diane P. Mines and Sarah Lamb. Indiana University Press.
- Craig Jeffrey (2010) *Timepass: Youth, Class, and the Politics of Waiting in India*. Ch. 1, pp. 1-36
- [MA READING] Smitha Radhakrishnan (2009) Professional Women, Good Families: Respectable Femininity and the Cultural Politics of a "New" India. In *Qualitative Sociology*, 32: 195–212

Film in class: *Mardistan / Macholand* (2014) by Harjant Gill

Week Nine. March 16.

I am traveling overseas for a conference, so we will not have a class (rescheduled to April 20). Continue reading the ethnography:

- Joseph Alter (1999) *Knowing Dil Das*: Part III, pp. 89-139

Week Ten. March 23. INDIANS IN HONG KONG AND CHINA

- Vevaina, Leilah. (2022). Trusts on the monsoon winds: Parsi transnational religious philanthropy. *Ethnography*, 24(3), 316-333.
- Jan Gube & Christine Halse (2023) Precarity of belonging? Belongingness and race of ethnically diverse young people in Hong Kong, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 46:12, 2591-2611
- [MA READING] Cheuk, K. K. (2022). Diasporic convergence, sustained transience and indifferent survival: Indian traders in China. *History and Anthropology*, 33(2), 279-294

!Guest lecture today!

Week Eleven. March 30. MIGRATION AND DIASPORA

- Kathleen Hall: British Sikh Lives, Lived in Translation. In *Reader*, pp. 448-460
- Radhakrishnan, Smitha. "Examining the "Global" Indian Middle Class: Gender and Culture in the Silicon Valley/Bangalore Circuit." In *Reader*
- [MA READING] Purkayastha, Bandana (2010). Interrogating Intersectionality: Contemporary Globalisation and Racialised Gendering in the Lives of Highly Educated South Asian Americans and their Children. *Journal of Intercultural Studies*, 31(1), 29-47

April 6: Public Holiday, no class

Week Twelve. April 13. HUMAN-ANIMAL LIVES AND ENVIRONMENTALISM

- Mathur, Nayanika. 2021. "The Cure Killer." In *Crooked Cats: Beastly Encounters in the Anthropocene*, 73-78. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Kavesh, Muhammad A. 2023. "Contested Flights: The Perplexity of Intruding "Spy Pigeons" at the India-Pakistan Border." *The Journal of Asian Studies* 82 (2): 125-143.
- [MA READING] Govindrajan, Radhika. 2015. "Monkey Business: Macaque Translocation and the Politics of Belonging in India's Central Himalayas." *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 35 (2).

Week Thirteen. April 20. (Make up class for March 16) CONCLUSION AND REFLECTIONS

- Joseph Alter (1999) *Knowing Dil Das*: Chapter 10, pp. 143-164
- Joseph Alter (1999) *Knowing Dil Das*: Chapter 11, pp. 165-175

- [MA READING] Chakraborty, R., C. Rampini, and P. Y. Sherpa. 2023. Mountains of inequality: encountering the politics of climate adaptation across the Himalaya. *Ecology and Society* 28(4):6

The final assessment today

Policies and Support

Contacting me

Use your CUHK email (not your personal email), when communicating about class matters. For most situations, you should write to the Teaching Assistant first—the class TA is very knowledgeable and ready to help you. But feel free to email me as well, if there is something that the TA does not know, or if you want to contact me directly. In line with the convention of academic communication, you can address me as “Dr. Khalikova.” I will do my best to answer your email within 24 hours, with an understandable exception of weekends and holidays.

Educational technology

This class relies on the use of Blackboard. All class communications, announcements, assignment guidelines, and homework submissions will be done through it. Note that it uses the email address assigned to you by the University, so it is your responsibility to have an electronic mail forwarded to your main email address.

Special accommodation

If you need special accommodations or classroom modifications, you need to notify both me and the University’s Wellness and Counselling Center (<https://www2.osa.cuhk.edu.hk/disability/en-GB>) no later than the third week of class.

Technology and Cell Phones

Although I recognize the value of technology in aiding the learning process, I also understand that it can be a major hindrance to learning, when used inappropriately. Therefore, the use of laptops and mobile phones is not permitted in class (unless it is necessary for class activities). Mobile phones must be kept in your bags, turned off, or on silent mode (NOT on vibrate) as to avoid distracting your peers. E-readers and tablets are allowed only during tutorials when we discuss assigned articles and you need the texts in front of you.

Remember, browsing Facebook or any other website during the class distracts not only you but also persons sitting next to you, and such conduct is disrespectful to me and your classmates. Therefore, disruptions caused by phone calls, texting, emailing, or the use of any other communication technologies during a class will result **in the reduction of your final grade**. If you are expecting an important call, you should talk to me before the class.

Academic Integrity

The University has recently updated its policy on Academic Integrity and the penalties for plagiarism and cheating: http://www.cuhk.edu.hk/policy/academichonesty/Eng_hm_files_%282013-14%29/p06.htm

Read it carefully: every student is expected to comply with the policy; otherwise, if you are suspected of violating these obligations you will be subject to the outlined sanctions. If you have any questions, do not hesitate to ask me or your TA about this!

Classroom Recording

Although I will record some of my or guest lectures and PowerPoint slides to be posted to Blackboard, no tutorial discussions will be recorded. To ensure the free and open discussion of ideas, **you may not record** discussions and/or activities during the class or tutorials without my permission obtained in advance, and only solely for your own private use.

Late Work and Absence

Late or incomplete assignments will be marked down: a grade will be subtracted **for each late day**. Class attendance is not required, but if you miss a class, it is your responsibility to copy class notes and go over the powerpoint presentations, otherwise, it will most likely result in poor understanding of class material and, ultimately, in a low grade. You are welcome to come to my office during office hours to go over the missed lectures!

Discussion Rules

We will discuss many interesting, important and potentially controversial topics. I expect you to be **polite and respectful** of your classmates' opinions, limit your statements to academic (not emotional) arguments, and not use offensive language or judgmental statements.

Grade Review

If you want to discuss and contest your grade, you can send me an email to set up an appointment during my office hours when we will go over your exam/written work and decide on a grade together. During this process, I can both mark your original grade up, if you demonstrate evidence that you know the material well, or mark it down.

Independent Learning Center

If you need help with communication and learning skills, the University has a great resource for you. You can schedule a consultation or attend workshops on various strategies for improving learning outcomes <https://www.ilc.cuhk.edu.hk/EN/mission.aspx>

Use of AI

Approach 2: The limited use is permitted in five scenarios:

1. Students are allowed to use AI tools for proofreading their written assignments or presentation slides only in a way that assists with **grammar and spell-checking**. I will not grade your grammar and spelling, but they are essential for the readability of your text.

NB: Text-generation, rewriting, and paraphrasing are NOT allowed. With the exception of spelling and grammar, generative AI tools should not be used to alter the essay's content, argumentation, or style. Your text does not need to be beautiful. It needs to be original. Moreover, writing in a non-English language and then translating it to English with the help of AI is NOT allowed. In other words, all work must be written solely by you in English.

2. Students are allowed to use AI tools to **generate images of humans** in essays and presentation slides, in cases where the images of real people cannot be displayed, and the identity of research participants must be protected. These images are not graded and should be considered approximate illustrations. The AI-generated nature of the images must be acknowledged and

verified by the student as relevant and not offensive. The student bears the responsibility for any inaccuracy or bias in representation.

NB: Students are NOT allowed to use AI tools to generate images of places or objects encountered during their research. If participant observation was required in the assignment, students must use their original photos taken by them personally. Students must include original photos in their essays and presentation slides.

3. Students are allowed to use AI tools for **translation of public material**, such as non-English newspaper articles, public blogs, public forum posts, and other public material to English in assignments where this translated material itself is ungraded and used solely as a reference or a source. For example, in some graded assignments, students are required to find a recent piece of news (in any language) and analyze this news with the use of class readings and/or concepts introduced in lectures. Here the students must read and analyze the original news in the language it was published, but should attached an English translation as a reference for the teacher if the teacher does not read that language. The translation by AI must be acknowledged and must be verified by the student as correct. The student bears the responsibility for any inaccuracy in the translation. Students must carefully review and correct any errors, as nuances and cultural context can be easily lost.
4. Students are allowed to use AI tools **for transcription of publicly available material**, for example, a publicly available speech of a celebrity, an activist, a political leader, etc. in assignments where this transcription is ungraded. For example, in some assignments, students are required to do a discourse analysis of a public text, and they can use AI to transcribe voice to text. However, students cannot ask AI to do discourse analysis for them. The AI-generated nature of the transcript must be acknowledged and verified by the student for accuracy and nuance. In other words, students must re-read the transcript and make necessary changes especially to reflect the paralinguistic features. The student bears the responsibility for any inaccuracy in the transcription. Students must carefully review and correct any errors, as nuances and cultural context can be easily lost.

NB: Students are not allowed to use AI tools for transcription of private and confidential data, including ethnographic interviews that contain sensitive information. Please, remember that there is a risk that confidential information could be exposed to unauthorized individuals or stored in systems where the information could be shared with others.

5. Students can use AI tools to assist with **the search for relevant literature**. Choose AI tools where the search is conducted exclusively within academic sources (Remember the limitations of these tools in the discipline of anthropology). While AI can help you identify sources to read, you should still read them by yourself. In other words, you are NOT allowed to rely on AI summaries of research articles. The student bears the responsibility for any misrepresentation of the original sources and arguments or for wrong citations.

NB. The product of a generative AI search cannot be quoted or relied on as a source of supporting statements and arguments made in the assessment.