Introduction for Faculty Colleagues

The course is REL 202: Hindu Traditions, an introductory course on Hinduism.

This assignment will be given post-midterm, soon after the students have been introduced to and learned about devotional Hinduism and the ways in which gender may shape Hindu lives. This is the point in the course when they will have completed their Site Visit assignments, which require them to visit a Hindu temple, engage in participant-observation (i.e., an ethnographic field visit), and complete a Site Visit Paper.

My aims for the paper include giving students the opportunity to view a single ritual performance from several perspectives in an effort to determine how gender, social location, and historical developments in Hindu traditions might shape how an individual would interpret a religious practice. Their papers will enable me to assess how well (i.e., with what degree of accuracy, sophistication, and level of detail) they are able to represent these four worldviews and orientations.

Important features of the assignment are that it draws on a case study (lived Hinduism/contemporary religion in practice) and requires students to interpret it by applying the information and tools they have acquired in our course. It pushes them to be attentive to historical context, something that is sometimes a challenge, and to hold several orientations in tension simultaneously. Important features of the way I have written it are, I hope, the creative and engaging nature of the assignment, and that it offers them significant flexibility in terms of how to approach it.

This assignment is new.
The Assignment I Distribute to Students

REL 202 – Hindu Traditions

Four Hindu Perspectives on a Ritual Performance

Purpose

Through this assignment you will demonstrate your ability to interpret a single ritual performance using four different Hindu perspectives as lenses. In crafting your four responses to the ritual description you will apply what you have learned thus far in the course to synthesize particular orientations and articulate particular worldviews that emerge from specific identities, historical contexts, and social locations.

This assignment aligns with several of the course goals that are included on our syllabus, including:

- Students will demonstrate familiarity with the historical trajectory of Hindu traditions, from the Indus Valley Civilization to modern movements;
- Students will recognize and identify Hindu deities and be acquainted with the characteristic elements of Hindu worship;
- Students will discuss with accuracy and sophistication the principal features of Hindu religious traditions, including Hindu values, beliefs, worldviews and social practices;
- Students will be able to explain how and why many deeply held Hindu beliefs, rituals, and systems are transforming in contemporary contexts;
- Students will be conversant with the diversity of Hindu religious traditions, both within and beyond India.

Process

Read the description of the ritual performance, which is drawn from fieldwork that I conducted in South India in 2007, that is included below. Then craft a response to the ritual from each of the four points of view listed, writing in the “voice” that embodies those perspectives. These interpretive pieces should engage with specific aspects of the ritual description and respond to them from the viewpoint of that particular individual. While you should be imaginative and employ a certain degree of creativity in crafting this essay, you are also expected to draw on course material related to gender, textual authority, historical developments, and the ways that religious practices may be context-specific. Strive to be both concrete and
Logistics
Each of your four responses (~250 words each for a total submission of ~1000 words) should be a first-person narrative written in the “voice” of/from the perspective of one of these four individuals. The audience for this assignment is your colleagues in this course, which means that you can assume they are knowledgeable about Hindu traditions. Feel free to look back at your textbook and other course materials to remind yourself of key ideas and relevant terms, but do not draw directly on course materials such that a citation would be required. Bring two hard copies of the response to class so that you can hand one in to me and share the other with a colleague as part of an in-class exercise.

The Ritual Performance
This Friday morning Susheela, a highly educated scientist from the Madhva Brāhmin community who lives just up the street from the temple and is one of the goddess’s most committed devotees, comes to her local Hindu goddess temple with offerings overflowing a sterling silver basket. She stops at one of the stalls flanking the temple to purchase fresh flowers, and selects several varieties of roses, large marigolds and a creamy string of fragrant jasmine blossoms. Upon entering the temple she stands on her tiptoes to see and be seen by the goddess (to have darśan) installed in the inner sanctum before joining the crowd of women assembled in front of the stone nāgas. Susheela finds a spot in front of an image depicting two snakes intertwined, sets down her basket full of pūjā supplies, and begins her worship. She slowly pours clear golden honey over the image, washes it with water, and then sends a cascade of milk down over the black stone surface. This ritual bathing is a gesture of respect and devotion, and is an abbreviated version of a ceremony that is performed using a number of substances for enlivened divine images at many temples in India every day.

After dressing the nāga with a piece of silk brocade, Susheela adorns the image with the flower blossoms she has brought, nestling them in the folds of the gold-bordered fabric and in the sinuous curves of the two snakes. She balances a small bundle of sacred grass atop the snake stone, drapes a strand of jasmine along its edge, and lights some incense sticks, waving them in front of the nāga and fanning the perfumed smoke towards the image before inserting the sticks into a small banana at its base. Next to the banana she places some shiny green betel leaves with a silver rupee coin on top and a chunk of white camphor, which she lights. Murmuring prayers, Susheela bows before the camphor flame and touches it quickly three times, each time bringing its essence (warmth and light) to her eyes.

Next to her, a woman deftly coats a single coiled nāga with bright yellow turmeric powder before daubing its surface with vermilion dots. She, too, adorns the image with flowers and lights a camphor flame on a small brass plate, which she circles before the decorated stone snake. Susheela falls in behind this woman as they circumambulate the grouping of nāga stones three times, ducking down to pass
beneath a large branch of the sacred peepal tree that towers above the assembled images. This low-hanging branch is laden with dozens of miniature wooden cradles, left as votive offerings by women who desire to be blessed with children, and is wrapped in yellow threads and cords tied there by women who wish to get married.


The Four Perspectives
1. a priest from the Vedic period
2. a Hindu woman after the rise of bhakti
3. a contemporary male Krishna devotee who reads the Bhagavad-Gita daily
4. a practitioner at a Hindu temple in North America

Evaluation
Your four responses will be graded individually, and are worth 25 points each for a possible total of 100 points. The specific elements that I will be reading for in your portrayals of these four worldviews and perspectives are enumerated on the rubric below. As with all of our writing assignments, mechanics also count: I will be attentive to your grammar, syntax, punctuation, and spelling. Toward that end, please remember to proofread your work before submitting.
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response Rubric</th>
<th>A priest from the Vedic period</th>
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<td>The perspective is feasible and convincingly presented.</td>
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<td>The response indexes Hindu worldviews to identity (incl. gender) and social location.</td>
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<td>The response references key historical events and developments.</td>
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<td>The response links geographical context to particular perspectives.</td>
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<td>The response is focused, coherent, and organized.</td>
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<td>The response employs correct grammar, syntax, punctuation, and spelling.</td>
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