

# SACRED HIMALAYA

## Pitt in the Himalaya

### Spring 2020

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Just as its great rivers carve and cleanse continents, the Himalayan landscape continues to anchor and reshape religious traditions across Asia. This course provides an introduction to the unusual and enduring relationship between these particular material mountains and an impressively diverse array of dynamic spiritual practices.

Designed as a whistlestop *yatra*, the course is a guided tour of a deliberately eclectic set of specific physical locations, including peaks, lakes, cities, roads, hill-top shrines, and street-side dargahs. With each stop we will examine the manner in which Himalayan sites have acquired, transformed, and experienced traditions of sacredness. The structure of the tour enables us to follow a roughly chronological timeline, stretching from early indigenous practices to the emerging Buddhisms and Hinduisms of Lhasa, Leh, and the now-chockful Char Dham highways. This chronological approach allows us to consider the historical connections and shared intellectual genealogies behind many of Asia's increasingly disparate religious traditions.

The locations studied vary from canonical (Lumbini) to quotidian (a small hilltop shrine just across the valley from our classroom). Particular attention is paid to sites in close proximity to where students will live and travel. The course leverages the considerable field time afforded to students by linking weekly readings and research assignments to subsequent excursions planned as part of the overall Pitt in the Himalayas program. Reading selections are taken

almost entirely from primary texts written from various positions within the religious traditions themselves.

## ASSIGNMENTS

**Reading Reflections:** One class meeting a week (your choice), you will prepare a brief written reflection on the day's assigned reading or film. Reflections should go beyond mere summary of a text. An effective reflection will demonstrate that you have thoroughly read and understood the text. It will develop connections between the reading and broader themes under discussion in the course. It may suggest questions for class discussion. Reflections should be about 500 words. Please submit the assignment via our online portal at least two hours before class. Be prepared to share and discuss each other's reflections. Reflections will be graded based on evidence of careful reading, analytic and synthetic thinking, and clarity of expression.

**Post-trip Reports:** For two of the seven field-trips listed on the schedule below, you will prepare a brief written report re-assessing our previous week's texts and discussion in light of your experience on the trip. Your report should include a discussion of perspectives presented by local stakeholders you engaged with on the trip (this can include discussions mediated by your trip leader). One of your written reports should be accompanied by a brief in-class presentation. Reports will be assessed on evidence of careful observation, critical thinking, and clarity of expression.

**Biographies and Presentations:** For the culminating project of the semester, we will each write a biography of either a person or place with a substantive connection to a religious tradition of the Himalayas. Your biography should elaborate on how a specific Himalayan setting has played a role in the development of either an individual or a community's cultural/intellectual matrix. Biographies should make use of both first-person interviews and academic research. Each of our many field trips will provide an ideal setting to begin work on a biography. If you would like your biography to take a form other than a written narrative (a short film, perhaps), please speak to the instructor. As part of this project, you will make a formal 10-min presentation of your research and overall narrative. Specific rubrics for both the presentation and the biography will be provided separately.

## GRADING

Reading Reflections (6, lowest score dropped): 30%  
Post-Trip Reports: 20%  
Final Presentation: 10%  
Biography: 30%  
Participation: 10%

## SCHEDULE

Tue, Jan 14	Week 1 – Meru and Kailash: Bön, Soma, and early Aryan encounters	Readings:
Thu, Jan 16		Puruṣa Sukta and other selected excerpts from the Ṛg Veda (Doniger, 2009)
Jan 17   Trip to Songsten Library, Rajpur		
Tue, Jan 21	Week 2 – Lumbini & Kalsi Departure and Appropriation: Buddha, Mahavira, and the rise of Dharmic Empires	Ashvagosha Dalrymple
Thu, Jan 23		Buddha's First Sermon Aśoka's Edicts (excerpts)
Jan 24 – Feb 9   Trips to Happy Valley, Majkhali, and Corbett		
Mon, Feb 10	Week 3 – The Tons, Lakhamandal, & Pari Tibba Epic and Magical Modes: The Mahabharat, Shiva, and Shakti Devi	Hawley (2011) (excerpts)
Wed, Feb 12		Devi and Spivak
Fri, Feb 14		Singh, Ch 5-6
Feb 15 – Feb 22   Trips to Surkanda Devi and Rishikesh		
Tue, Feb 25	Week 4 – Dargah Hazrat Mohd Shakil Shah Islam and Mountains	Dēd (excerpts)
Feb 27 – Feb 28   Trip to Sainji/GEMS		
Tue, Mar 3	Week 5 – Dehradun & Hemkund Nanak, Bhakti, and the Age of Reform	Nanak, Kabir, Sur excerpts from Hawley (2008) and Mehrotra
Wed, Mar 4		Watch: Had Anhad
Mar 5 – 8   Himalayan Healthcare Conference		
Tue, Mar 10	[Holi]	
Wed, Mar 11	Week 6 – Haridwar and the Char Dham Yatra Highways to a Hindu Nation	Watch: Ram ke Naam
Mar 13   Walking tour of places of worship		
Mar 16 – 23   Trip to Har ki Dun		
Wed, Mar 25	Week 7 – Leh and Lhasa Modern Buddhisms in the Shadow of India and China	Goldstein & Kapstein (excerpts)
Fri, Mar 27		Goldstein & Kapstein (excerpts)
Mar 29 – Apr 5   Trip to Ladakh		
Tue, Apr 7	Week 8 – Conclusions Student Presentations & Final Discussion	Student Presentations 1
Thu, Apr 9		Student Presentations 2

## READINGS

Ashvagosha. "The Buddha Becomes Dejected." In *Life of the Buddha*, translated by Patrick

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- Aśoka. *The Edicts of King Asoka: An English Rendering*. Translated by Shrivasti Dhammika. Kandy, Sri Lanka: Buddhist Publication Society, 1993.
- Dalrymple, William. "The Nun's Tale." In *Nine Lives: In Search of the Sacred in Modern India*. Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2010.
- Děd, Lal. *I, Lalla: The Poems of Lal Dēd*. Translated by Ranjit Hoskote. Penguin UK, 2013.
- Devi, Mahasveta, and Gayatri Spivak. "Draupadi." *Critical Inquiry* 8, no. 2 (1981): 381–402.
- Doniger, Wendy. *The Hindus: An Alternative History*. Penguin, 2009.
- Goldstein, Melvyn C., and Matthew Kapstein, eds. *Buddhism in Contemporary Tibet: Religious Revival and Cultural Identity*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998.
- Hawley, Jack. *The Bhagavad Gita*. New World Library, 2011.
- Hawley, John Stratton, and Mark Juergensmeyer. *Songs of the Saints of India*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2008.
- Horne, Charles F. (Charles Francis). "The Buddha's First Sermon." In *The Sacred Books and Early Literature of the East: With Historical Surveys of the Chief Writings of Each Nation*. New York : Parke, Austin, and Lipscomb, 1917.
- Kabir, and Wendy Doniger. *Songs of Kabir*. Translated by Arvind Mehrotra. Main edition. New York: NYRB Classics, 2011.
- Singh, Chetan. *Himalayan Histories: Economy, Polity, Religious Traditions*. SUNY Press, 2019.