

**Eastern and Comparative Religions: Full Journal**

## Week 2 – Varanasi

### Notes

The location is intertwined with its location. Streams and pools set against the Ganges River.

Buddha gave his first sermon about the Wheel of Life; the Deer Park Sermon.

The chosen city of the Lord Shiva (“The Destroyer”, the supreme lord who creates, protects, and transforms the universe.)

The aim of life is to grow and increase our consciousness (spiritual growth).

3.5 million people, urban and industrial wilderness. (More than 3 million tourists and visitors a year.)

*Ghat* – flights of steps leading to a river

*Moksha* – the end of the death and rebirth cycle; the end of Samsara

*Samsara* – the cycle of successive lives (reincarnation)

*Karma* – the accounting one’s soul accumulates due to good and bad deeds that influences future lives

### Cremation vs. Soap Suds

The Ganges River faces 3 immediate primary environmental problems:

- 1) Domestic waste
- 2) Heavy metals
- 3) Cremation (33,000 bodies burned every year, it is believed that the souls of bodies laid to rest or cremated on the river their souls are released from the cycle of rebirth and will go to heaven)

The religious/spiritual purity of the river conflicts with the scientific findings that the river is polluted.

Varanasi was fiercely Islamised with temples being torn down to raise mosques. There is no building older than 600 years old. Tried to change the name of Varanasi to Muhammadabad.

The holiest place on earth for Hindus, major temples number 2,000 while there are 30,000+ minor ones.

The river’s journey represents man’s own winding way through life.

City of Knowledge: music, art, literature, science, and mathematics.

A world-revered fabrics and textile tradition.

A recent scandal at the cremation ghat, betting on cremating based on anything and everything about the deceased.

All the sacred places of India and its waters originate in Varanasi.

*Mahashmashana* – The Great Cremation Ground

Varanasi is the most important of the *tirthas* or “fords” (“crossing places”) in the Indian sacred landscape.

Hindu is the oldest of the major world religions.

*Something to Consider* - Hindu is the only polytheistic religion that features and centres a female deity. Is Hinduism a patriarchal religion? Why or why not?

### My Thoughts

Varanasi is a city dedicated to the veil between life and death, symbolizing and providing everything one needs from life *except* birth. Indeed, this sacred site, encompassing the whole city, is considered a tirtha, Sanskrit for a crossing place. Varanasi's nature seems contradictory in that it is a place of transition if not transiency, while also being a place of finality. Almost all the symbolism and history (for the Hindu faith) regard Varanasi as a place of finality or otherwise "moving on." There are no beginnings here, only endings. The legend of Shiva's wandering the universe to cleanse himself of the sin of murdering Brahma, the resulting pilgrimages and tourists (which are by nature transient), and even the Hindu prince Siddhartha Gautama's sermon at Deer Park, can be viewed as effectively *leaving* the Hindu faith, attaining enlightenment, and becoming the Buddha (a symbolic birth, perhaps, but not for the Hindu faith).

That Shiva, the god to whom the city is dedicated, is "The Destroyer" should come as no surprise. The whole infrastructure of the city (such as it is) pivots around the Ganges River and the spiritual purification and release from the "damnation" of the *samsara*, the cycle of birth and rebirth. This fact is perhaps the greatest indicator of the transient nature of Varanasi. (This was particularly revelatory for me since I was under the impression that the cycle of reincarnation was a blessed journey of spiritual purification, rather than a curse to endure.) One may travel to Varanasi to gain spiritual and intellectual enlightenment via the religious and academic institutions, but mostly Varanasi's importance in the Hindu faith is as an ending point. Grieving families travel to Varanasi to lay their loved ones to rest in the waters of the Ganges or the fires of the crematory *ghats*. Widows travel to Varanasi to live the rest of their lives hoping to be cleansed of the negative karma of widowhood. And, of course, one can

achieve *moksha*, the breaking of *samsara*, by dying or being laid to rest in Varanasi and the Ganges: the ultimate finality.

The juxtaposition of the sacred purity of the Ganges and the very real pollution of the profane water of the river is a present-day concern. With thousands of years of associating the Ganges River with purifying sins, how does one convince over a billion faithful that, in fact, the sacred river is nearly toxic with the effluence from domestic life, industry which provides jobs, the very rituals that are built into the religion itself? For example, one of the tenets of the Hindu religion is to keep the cremation fires burning forever. Reconciling that fundamental aspect of the Hindu faith with the ever-increasing negative effects of tens of thousands of bodies and hundreds of thousands of tonnes of firewood a year, reduced to smoke and ash, will be a huge challenge. It would be inconceivably catastrophic to the Hindu worldview if the Ganges were to become so polluted that it was incapable of maintaining its spiritual purity and purifying associations. Also, it is poetic (if tragic) that, with the Ganges' winding through the city representing man's journey through life, the pollution crisis affecting the river is a real-world analogy to the fact that man cannot traverse this land or life without having an impact on their environment.

Varanasi stands in the Hindu religion as a crossing place; a tirtha between the sacred and profane. The barriers between life and death are transparent as are the barriers between social and economic society. That the Dalits are the only ones that can touch a dead body gives provides them with a level of prestige seldom held outside Varanasi. It is to the lowest caste that people entrust their loved ones to ensure they are properly cared for on their crossing from the living world to the realm of the dead. It is somewhat satisfying to imagine that the greatest Hindu kings of old to the modern-day prime ministers, presidents, billionaire tycoons, peasants, and everyone in between, all are eventually lovingly tended to by the lowest rung of society on the banks of the Ganges.

## Week 3 – Of Elephant Gods, Monkey Kings, and Sacred Cows

### Notes

#### *Hinduism*

##### [Why does Hinduism have so many gods?](#)

Hinduism is both monotheistic and **henotheistic**. Hinduism is not polytheistic. **Henotheism** (literally “one God”) better defines the Hindu view. It means the worship of one God without denying the existence of other Gods.

Hinduism gives the freedom to approach God in one’s own way, encouraging a multiplicity of paths, not asking for conformity to just one.

##### [Hinduism](#)

Hinduism is the world’s oldest religion, according to many scholars, with roots and customs dating back more than 4,000 years.

Today, with about 900 million followers, Hinduism is the third-largest religion behind Christianity and Islam.

One of the key thoughts of Hinduism is “atman,” or the belief in soul. This philosophy holds that living creatures have a soul, and they’re all part of the supreme soul.

The goal is to achieve “moksha,” or salvation, which ends the cycle of rebirths to become part of the absolute soul.

The *om* symbol is composed of three Sanskrit letters and represents three sounds (a, u and m), which when combined are considered a sacred sound.

Most scholars believe Hinduism started somewhere between 2300 B.C. and 1500 B.C. in the Indus Valley, near modern-day Pakistan. But many Hindus argue that their faith is timeless and has always existed.

#### *Cows*

##### [India’s Sacred Cows](#)

In the Hindu religion, if you take care of cows, your family will prosper and you will have peace, your children will have a good spiritual life, God will take care of them.

Considered sacred in Hinduism.

Favourite animal of the deity Lord Krishna, and a symbol of wealth, strength and abundance.

Cow’s milk, butter, and yogurt are important sources of protein in a vegetarian diet, by which many Hindus abide.

In rural areas, cow dung is used for fuel and even the urine is collected for use in traditional medicines.

[Cows] used to work, they pulled carts and plows. Now machines have come in and there’s much less use for them.

Cows are becoming a nuisance animal in cities.

Muslims and a growing number of Hindus poach cows from the streets which can fetch 5,000 rupees, about \$90 USD.

### [Hinduism and its complicated history with cows \(and people who eat them\)](#)

“Vigilante Hindu groups are lynching people for eating beef.”

“Modi’s government prohibited the slaughter of buffalo, thus destroying the Muslim-dominated buffalo meat industry and causing widespread economic hardship.”

Ancient Hindu texts say that eating beef is not only okay but expected in many circumstances.

Dietary restrictions are stricter for those higher in the social strata. Therefore, lower castes began to restrict beef from their diet in a way to increase their potential for social mobility.

The cow-protection movement of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century was an explicit anti-Muslim movement.

“[Gandhi’s] insistence on cow protection was a major factor in his failure to attract large-scale Muslim support.”

The Indian nationalist Hindutva movement is using the prohibition on beef consumption specifically to disenfranchise Muslim Indians in particular, but also other non-Hindu Indians and Indians of lower castes.

“Cows—innocent, docile animals—have become in India a lightning rod for human cruelty, in the name of religion.”

### [Why Is the Cow Sacred?](#)

The cow is *Aghanya*--that which may not be slaughtered.

*Elephants / Ganesha*

<http://www.indian-heritage.org/gods/ganesha.htm>

Lord Ganesha is the most widely worshipped Hindu God. He is worshipped at the start of any action or venture, for he is considered to be the Lord who removes obstacles (vignam) and hence is also called Vigneshwara.

He is considered a bachelor, but according to another school of thought, he has two Sakthis - Siddhi & Buddhi. Siddhi represents success and prosperity. Buddhi represents wisdom.

### [Ganesha: Everything You Need to Know](#)

Why do I sometimes call him Ganesha and sometimes Ganesh? In Sanskrit, every consonant has an “ah” sound attached to it automatically and that includes at the ends of words (this vowel can be modified and consonant clusters are possible also). In Hindi, the same is true except for the final syllable of a word. There is no final vowel automatically on Hindi words. So, “Ganesha” is Sanskrit and “Ganesh” is Hindi.

### [Ganesha, the Hindu God of Success](#)

One of the five primary Hindu deities, Ganesha is worshiped by all sects and his image is pervasive in Indian art.

Ganesha is also known as Ganapati, Vinayaka, and Binayak. Worshippers also regard him as the destroyer of vanity, selfishness, and pride, the personification of the material universe in all its manifestations.

Symbolism:

- Ganesha's head symbolizes the *Atman* or the soul, which is the supreme reality of human existence
- His body signifies *Maya* or mankind's earthly existence
- The elephantine head denotes wisdom
- The trunk represents *Om*, the sound symbol of cosmic reality
- In his upper right hand, Ganesha holds a goad, which helps him propel mankind forward on the eternal path and remove obstacles from the way
- The noose in Ganesha's upper left hand is a gentle implement to capture all difficulties
- The broken tusk that Ganesha holds like a pen in his lower right hand is a symbol of sacrifice, which he broke for writing the Mahabharata, one of Sanskrit's two major texts
- The rosary in his other hand suggests that the pursuit of knowledge should be continuous.
- The *laddoo* or sweet he holds in his trunk represents the sweetness of the *Atman*
- His fan-like ears convey that he will always hear the prayers of the faithful
- The snake that runs round his waist represents energy in all forms
- And he is humble enough to ride the lowest of creatures, a mouse

### [Ganesh Chaturthi](#)

In places such as Andhra Pradesh and Maharashtra (in India), the festival is celebrated for ten days and is a joyous event and regarded as a public occasion. In other places it is simply celebrated at home and hymns are sung and offerings made to Ganesh. Sweets are also distributed because in Hindu legend Ganesh liked them.

The festival falls in August/September which is in the month of Bhadra on Shukla Chaturthi in the Hindu calendar. ([https://www.calendardate.com/ganesh\\_chaturthi\\_2021.htm](https://www.calendardate.com/ganesh_chaturthi_2021.htm))

*Monkey / Hanuman*

### [Indian Heritage – Hanuman](#)

Hanuman [Anjaneya], the monkey God is considered Chiranjeevi (will live eternally). He is strong, full of valour, with various skills and powers. At the same time, he is wise, a great *gnani* [sage], a yogi, a *brahmachari* [on the path of the divine]. He had the one thought only - that of serving his Lord Rama with utmost humility and devotion. He is known as Siriya Thiruvadi. He is considered to be an *amsam* [aspect] of Lord Shiva.

He is very happy when he hears the Rama *namam* [the shloka {song/chant} recited at the end of the Vishnu Sahasranama; the Sanskrit hymn containing the 1,000 names of Vishnu]. Hence repeating the Raama *namam* is the best way to get his blessings.

Anjaneyar is worshipped with offerings of butter & *vadaimalai* (a garland of vadais). Butter is applied to the mouth & tail of Hanuman *vigrahams* in temples. Devotees pray to the Lord & apply dots of *kumkumam* to his tail from the starting point to the tip of the tail to pictures at home.

### [Lord Hanuman, the Hindu Monkey God](#)

Hanuman is worshiped as a symbol of physical strength, perseverance, and devotion.

One of Vishnu's avatars is Rama, who was created to destroy Ravana, the evil ruler of Lanka. In order to aid Rama, Lord Brahma commanded some gods and goddesses to take the avatar of 'Vanaras' or monkeys.

The character of Hanuman is used in the Hindu religion as an example of the unlimited power that lies unused within each human individual.

Hanuman perfectly exemplifies 'Dasyabhava' devotion—one of the nine types of devotions—that bonds the master and the servant.

### [Hanuman Jayanti](#)

Hanuman Jayanti is celebrated to commemorate the birth of Hanuman Ji, the monkey God.

He is the symbol of strength and energy.

Hanuman is considered the living embodiment of the Karma Yogi (one whose meditation and devotion are demonstrated through hard work or service).

On this day, the sacred text, Hanuman Chalisa, is recited - a set of prayers glorifying Hanuman, describing his past times.

In India particularly, colourful processions fill the streets. People dance, carry idols of Lord Hanuman and some people wear masks and tails to imitate the monkey God.

Every celebration is always accompanied by a period of fasting and then a big vegetarian feast.

### [May Hanuman Be with You](#)

For children, the playful God Krishna or the Monkey-God Hanuman are easy to relate to.

Hanuman in particular is a favorite protector.

A story that is told often about Hanuman relates to Lord Rama's battle against the evil king Ravana. When Rama's brother, Lakshmana, fell unconscious in the battlefield, a doctor was summoned. After examining Lakshmana, the physician asked for the Sanjeevini herb, which would instantly cure the wounded warrior. Because he was the strongest of the beings there on the battlefield, Hanuman was asked to fly to the faraway mountain and procure the herb. When Hanuman landed on the mountain, he faced a bewildering array of herbs, all of which looked alike to him. Realizing that time was of the essence, he uprooted the entire mountain and carried it back to the battlefield. The physician plucked out the herb, Lakshmana was cured, and Rama's battle against the evil king, Ravana, continued.



## My Thoughts

Animals are often used to represent certain aspects of creation, life, and the gods. From the snake in the Abrahamic faiths, the raven in First Nations animism, and the dragon in Chinese and Japanese faiths, animals are often used to represent change or the epitomic version of traits (to be desired or scorned). It is no different in the Hindu faith with their plethora of sacred animals and/or animal-faced gods.

Elephants and monkeys have been known to be important figures on the Indian sub-continent for thousands of years, into prehistoric times. Cows, however, are a different matter, which I will get to. Elephants, renowned worldwide for their size, intelligence, and impressive power make it an easy analogue for attributes one would find worthy of godhood and something to strive toward. Indeed, the deity Ganesh, the elephant-headed god riding a mouse, is a conglomerate of symbolism related to elephant features and the anthropomorphic attributes assigned to them. Likewise, the cunning, strength, and speed of the monkey makes it another easily anthropomorphised god-like creature. It is my belief [further self-directed study would need to be verify] that these animals were used to describe the gods and their attributes in a relatable manner. When proselytizing a faith structure within a landscape where these animals were abundant, it makes sense to use these animals as an analogue for the gods and their abilities. It would only be a matter of time before the gods themselves take on the aspect of these creatures, like we see in Ganesh and Hanuman.

The cow, on the other hand, remains a controversial animal in India today. Re-interpretation, re-telling and re-writing of Indian historical and religious documents is making it appear that the cow has always been a sacred animal on the sub-continent. Based upon the life-giving milk, *ghee*, yoghurt (provided by the animal) and the earth mother-goddess aspect attributed to cows, Hindus are increasingly (and a-historically) viewing the cow as *aghanya*, or “prohibited from slaughter.” This ideology is another gulf in the turbid relationship between Indian Muslims (who allow the slaughter and

consumption of beef cattle) and Indian Hindus. Historical documents and even the Vedic texts speak of the many times throughout history that cows were fair game for consumption. They were often viewed as the best sacrifice to the gods, and the Brahmin priests had ritualized the slaughter and cooking of beef to best appease the gods. Nevertheless, the cow is becoming a “lightning rod” (as one journalist put it) for the anti-Muslim movement within India.

## Week 4 – Nine Lives

[Reading Response]

## Week 5 – Hinduism in the News

Article

**Opinion: Hindutva Is A Political Movement That Intends To Replace India’s Constitution**

**By Jaimine** in [History](#), [Human Rights](#), [Politics](#), [Staff Picks](#) 10th February, 2021

<https://www.youthkiawaaz.com/2021/02/the-resume-of-hindutva/>

Youth Ki Awaaz, meaning “the voice of youth” in Hindi, is a user-generated publishing site aimed at giving voice to the youth of India about social issues (Wikipedia page).

Synopsis

Jaimine attacks Hindutva as “a political movement to ‘otherise’ Muslims, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains, Dalits, women and queer people” (para 1), claiming that Modi’s election in 2014 had promised to “maximize liberties and minimise statism” but instead has created a less tolerant, less safe, less free, and a poorer India (para 3).

The BJP, or Bharatiya Janata Party, is the right-wing major political party of India. It has historically pushed Hindu nationalist ideology in the form of Hindutva, or “Hinduness.” Under Hindutva, the author claims, Modi aims to return India to a ‘golden age’ when the Vedic scriptures were held as political and societal doctrine throughout India (para 4). However, as renowned historian Professor D. N. Jha (an author Jaimine refers to often) claims, “no such time existed in India. The myth of the Golden Age had its uses during the fight for Indian independence, however, as Professor Jha states, “at no stage in history [have] the common people of India witnessed a truly golden age. The history of India, like that of any other country, has been a story of social inequities, exploitation of the common people, religious conflict, and so on” ([Us Salam](#), 2018).

Jaimine accuses Modi’s government of trying to rewrite Indian history using a selective committee which restricts non-Hindus or women from participating (para 5). The goal of this committee is to “shape the national identity [of the country] to match [Hindutva] religious views, that India is a nation of and for Hindus” (para 6). Jaimine claims that Indian history (as currently written) speaks of Brahmin kings eating and prescribing the eating of beef, and of destroying Buddhist temples to erect ones to Hindu deities instead. Under Modi’s direction these facts would presumably be erased to uphold a beefless, omnipresent Hindu faith throughout Indian history.

Though, history does not have to be already re-written by the BJP to have the desired effect. According to the Indian National Crime Records Bureau, in the six years since Modi’s election, “hate crimes against non-Hindus and women” are up 300% (para 7). Dalit women, tribal girls, and any person suspected of eating beef are being attacked or lynched, while Muslim mosques and Christian churches are being attacked (para 8).

Jaimine also claims that much of Hindutva doctrine was written and espoused by Vinayak Savarkar, an admirer of Adolf Hitler, fascist ideology, and a supporter of the British Raj. He argues that,

from the beginning, Hindutva has always been a movement in direct opposition and openly hostile to Muslim Indians.

Finally, he calls Modi's stifling of critics, the state- and privately-owned media's failure to push back against Hindutva, the silencing of reports on hate-based crimes to be leading India toward an authoritarian, fascist state.

## Week 6 – Bhagavad-Gita

### Notes

Arjuna worries that by killing his kin he will bring about the collapse of the social order (1:40-4).

"The flaw of pity" (2:7).

"The wise do not grieve for those gone or for those who are not yet gone" (2:11).

You are not killing/ending anyone, you are merely returning them to the cycle of birth and rebirth (2:22).

It is dharma (divine duty) that a warrior does battle (2:33).

It is not the result of a deed/action that is the reward, it is the deed/action itself so long as it is done for Krishna (2:47).

Do not be swayed by your passions nor dissuaded by a desire to avoid unpleasantness. Those who manage this are truly wise (2:57).

"Better to do one's duty / ineptly, than another's well" (3:35).

"As the great wind that stands in space / eternally goes everywhere, / so every being everywhere / abides in me. Reflect on this!" (9:6)

Worship of Krishna is the path to salvation (9:30-4).

There is a pattern of back-and-forth flattery kennings. For example, Arjuna calls Krishna "O Handsome-Haired One" (10:14) and when Krishna next speaks, he calls Arjuna "O Thick-Haired One" (10:20). Does this perhaps suggest a sort of divinity in Arjuna? [Yes, Arjuna was a child of Indra]

Chapter 10 lists all the best or first of many things held sacred in Hinduism with Krishna being all of them and they of him (20-41).

Krishna shows Arjuna his true form, terrifying the mortal who beseeches his god to forgive any transgression he may have committed in ignorance (11:41-2).

By seeing Krishna's true form, Arjuna saw what "even the gods are forever / desirous of seeing" (11:52). Krishna then tells Arjuna that only the most devout—not through gifts or sacrifices—can see what he did (11:53-4).

In Chapter 12, Krishna gives paths to reach him, yielding to him through worship (6), through yoga (9), and through action on his behalf (10). Failing that, you can also reach him through restraint (11).

It is odd that Krishna mentions non-violence as a virtue of “those born / to a divine fate” (16:2-3) while convincing Arjuna to adhere to his dharma as a warrior (by going into battle). Is harm done to fulfill one’s dharma not considered “violence” in a spiritual sense?

Those who don’t fulfill their dharma and those who worship with empty gestures are continuously flung back into the cycle of rebirth, into “demonic wombs (16:17-9).

“In every case, faith corresponds / to one’s own essential nature. / Man is made of faith ... / and is the very faith he *has*. (17:3).

“The pure give worship to the gods, / the passionate worship demons, / and men of darkness sacrifice / to ghosts and hordes of ancient shades” (17:4).

Chapter 18 speaks of how actions, done in the proper manner (i.e., without connection or passion save for doing the action for Krishna), are pure and should not be avoided (18:6-9). In essence, it is by worship through action that “perfection is achieved by man” (18:46).

“Knowledge, the known and the knower / are the threefold prompts to action; / the means, the act, and the agent / are actions threefold components” (18:18).

There are three forms of happiness: “that which first resembles poison,” or the hard choice, which brings pure happiness, “that which first resembles nectar,” or the easy route, “but is like poison” is passionate happiness, and the “confusion of the self,” or egotism and selfishness, is dark happiness (18:37-9).

## My Thoughts

The Bhagavad Gita is a kind of handbook that spells out the “Why and How” of worshipping within the Hindu and Vedic traditions. Based upon a tale of Arjuna, a warrior struggling with his sense of duty (dharma) and not wanting to kill his kinfolk, and Krishna, an avatar of the Supreme Being in the Hindu faith. In a call-and-response style of dialogue, Arjuna asks leading questions about death, one’s duty, and faith and devotion. In response, Krishna expands on these ideas to lay out exactly how these questions matter in the social order and faith.

Some of the main take-aways are that death is meaningless and one shouldn’t dwell on it too much, since it is foolish to grieve for someone who is not yet dead, and equally foolish to grieve for someone who is dead (2:11). This is because death merely returns the *atman*, or soul, to the eternal cycle of birth and rebirth. Death, therefore, is more of a new beginning or a continuation of the natural

order rather than an ending. This lesson acknowledges that death is inevitable for everyone and, as Ecclesiastes 3 states, “there is a time for everything ... [even] a time to die.” In Hinduism, where the cycle of birth and rebirth is so foundational, this lesson perhaps is meant to take the sting out of death, loss, and, in some people’s *dharma*, killing.

Secondly, *dharma*, one’s holy duty, is caste-bound and sacred. One (such as Arjuna) should not concern themselves about whether performing their *dharma* is “ethically” right or not because, in the cosmic scheme of things, doing one’s sacred duty is not only expected of them but demanded by their *karma*, the tallying of deeds on their soul throughout their many incarnations (2:57; 16:17-9). Even killing, if one is a warrior, it is not to be avoided since it is one’s own karmic balance that is being damaged, not the person being killed. Even a person ineptly performing their *dharma* is better than a person trying to avoid their *dharma* or do someone else’s (3:35). This reinforced one’s place in society. In essence, it is stating: “You have a job to do, so do it.” Regardless of one’s own desires and ambition, one’s lot in this life has been decided for them (based on accumulated karma over ones many past lives). Therefore, there is need to dwell on the repercussions or strive for more so long as one’s dharmic duty is being fulfilled, one is on their way to *moksha*, or salvation from the cycle of birth and rebirth. This was almost certainly a social security scheme to keep the caste system in place and those that benefited the *least* from it pacified. Nevertheless, I suppose a certain degree of satisfaction and calm can come when one knows their life and fate are immutable.

Finally, Krishna teaches Arjuna that he and the universe are one; that there is no difference between all of creation and its creator (9:6; 10:24-41). Therefore, whenever one worships in Hinduism, they are walking the path toward Krishna and their salvation (9:30-4). In this revelation, Krishna informs Arjuna the path to salvation is for everything that is done, all *actions*, are to be done for him and on his behalf. Therefore, doing one’s *dharma* is—in *itself*—worship so long as the action is done with the intent, knowledge, and faith that it is a devotional act to Krishna (18:6-9). This lesson ties up the

Bhagavad Gita nicely, as it finalizes the lessons expounded on in the preceding chapters. In essence, death is meaningless because it is unavoidable, *dharma* is itself worship, and all worship is a path to salvation.

These also lessons serve to create a fissure between the iron-clad hold the Brahmin priestly caste had over the paths to salvation, instead teaching Hindus that merely performing ones *dharma*—so long as it is understood that it is a sacred duty being done for Krishna—is sufficient to attain *moksha*, bypassing the Brahmin necessity of pomp and ritual.

## Week 7 – Buddhism

The documentary *The Buddha – The Story of Siddhartha* was a fascinating introduction to the life and times of the man known as “The Buddha,” and his path to the creation of the Buddhist faith.

Born into a royal family of the warrior caste in modern-day Nepal, he was prophesied to become one of two things: a mighty king who conquers the known world, or the founder of a great religion. Fearing the end of his own lineage and desiring his son become a great ruler, Siddhartha’s father, the king, sequestered Siddhartha within the palace grounds. There the king proceeded to provide Siddhartha with anything and everything his heart desired. Siddhartha knew no want, and was oblivious to everything (i.e., the real world) outside of the “fictitious world” that was created for him.

Eventually though, at the age of 29, Siddhartha did leave the palace grounds and witnessed what have become known as the “Four Sights” which would have a profound effect on him, soon setting him on his path toward becoming the Buddha. On his first outing, he witnessed an old man. From this he realized the transiency of life; how everything that is alive and vibrant must, at some time, wither and grow frail. This was his first exposure to what he deemed “suffering.” On his second outing, he saw a man dying from illness. From this he learned that all living things could suffer from illness, disease, and

pain. On his third outing, he witnessed a funeral and saw people suffering over the loss of their loved one. This led Siddhartha to realize another form of suffering, that all living things must eventually die and leave behind all they once loved and those who loved him. On his final outing he saw a Hindu aesthetic meditating beneath a tree. Siddhartha was amazed that, amidst all the suffering of the world, this aesthetic could look serene and calm. By meditating on suffering, its causes, and eventual escape from suffering, Siddhartha realized that he had found his calling.

He set off from home, leaving the entire palace behind. He even refused to awaken his wife and newborn child, fearing that his love for them would cause him to stay. And so, he left in search of a guru to help him understand and overcome suffering. He studied under two gurus for a while, though never gaining the enlightenment he desired, eventually falling in with some aestheticians who believed that sacrificing the body—getting it as close to death as possible—would be a way of gaining freedom from suffering. Siddhartha rigorously followed the anorexic lifestyle of these aestheticians, starving himself nearly to death but never discovering the truths he sought. When a girl took pity on him and offered him something to eat, he realized that the “Middle Way,” living neither to excess nor to emaciation, was the path he needed to take.

He sat beneath a fig tree and contemplated his path and the problem of suffering. The tale of his “Awakening” is told through the story of the Hindu god Mara challenging Siddhartha for the right of being the “Enlightened Being.” Assailed by Mara’s demonic forces, Siddhartha was unmoved and eventually victorious in his serenity and composure, receiving the vote from the earth itself in his favour. From that moment on, he was “The Buddha,” or the “Awakened One.” It is during this time that he discovered the Four Noble Truths: the world is full of suffering, suffering stems from desire, you can end suffering by letting go of desire, and these truths are the path to enlightenment. He set out (at the pleading of many gods) to spread his teachings to anyone who would listen regardless of their caste, gender, or station in life.



This was during a time of civil and religious unrest in India. The Hindu faith, upheld by the Brahminic rituals based upon the ancient Vedic texts, had become stale and inaccessible to the people. There was a pervasive feeling that the religion had become more about the ritual and reinforcing one's place within the caste system, than it was about reaching spiritual fulfillment. This reminded me heavily of early Protestant accusations about the Catholic Church, how the ritual and ceremony had become more important than the actual words being spoken. Therefore, through Siddhartha's teachings, a path was being offered that transcended caste and gender boundaries since it made one look inward for their enlightenment, rather than toward a Brahmin priest or other guru aesthetic.

Buddha and his followers spread his word for decades, drawing a vast following in India, Nepal, China, and beyond. When the Buddha grew old and frail his last days were spent wasting from an illness. Here he gave his last lesson as his followers grieved. He told them that he was dying, as all things do but he was not to be their object of worship, that it was instead Dhamma and Vinaya, his teachings, that they should follow. After this, the religion flourished to hundreds of millions of followers, becoming the fourth largest religion on the planet.

## Week 9 – Lecture Notes + Buddhism in the News

"I am awake," from the Sanskrit *buddha*, to awake or to know.

World's 4<sup>th</sup> largest religion.

### The Three Jewels of Buddhism:

1. Buddha
2. The Dharma
3. The Sangha

*Interesting Question Posed:* What does it mean that we need to ask again and again whether such accepted world belief systems such as Judaism, Hinduism, Confucianism, and Buddhism are religions?

*South East Asian Axial Age* – a "pivotal age from about the 8<sup>th</sup> to the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE in which were developed Confucianism, Buddhism, the Upanishads, Zoroastrianism, Homer, Greek philosophy, and more.

The Four Sacred Locations of Buddhism:

1. Bodhi tree – the place where Buddha gained enlightenment
2. Deer Park, Sarnath – just outside of Varanasi, where he gains his first followers
  - a. His first discourse: Turning the Wheel of Dharma

Women have the same spiritual potential as men, however, there are stricter rules for their ordination and are always subordinate to male monks.

The Three Poisons:

1. Greed
2. Ignorance
3. Hatred

Mahayana (“Great Vehicle/Raft”) emphasis on laity which the Theravada (“Way of the Elders”) emphasises monks.

Theravada Scripture: Tipitaka (“The Three Baskets”)

1. Sutta Pitaka (Doctrinal Discourse)
2. Vinaya Pitaka (Rule of Discipline and Stories Illustrating Moral Practices)
3. Abhidhamma Pitaka (Systematic Analysis of Buddhist Thought)

**Tanakasempit, P. (2019, January 3). Thailand’s rebel female Buddhist monks defy tradition. *Reuters – Emerging Markets*. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-thailand-buddhism-women-idUSKCN1OX1YP>.**

**Pattaya Mail. (2021, March 16). Thai Bikkhuni strives to promulgate Buddhism for all genders. *Pattaya Mail*. <https://www.pattayamail.com/news/thai-bikkhuni-strives-to-promulgate-buddhism-for-all-genders-347304>.**

The predominant Buddhist sect in Thailand is the *Theravada* school. In 1928 a law was passed in Thailand banning the full Buddhist ordination of women. The *Theravada* Thai *Sangha* point to the Vinaya Pitaka, one of the Three Baskets, taking a very conservative and protective stance, forbidding any change to the rules contained within, especially those surrounding training for monks. In these texts, it states that *bhikkhuni* ordination can only occur when there are two monks (male), one male and one female, that have been ordained in a “legitimate ordination act.” However, since the last *bhikkhuni* order was abolished a thousand years ago, there are no female monks that can “legitimately” ordain new Thai *Bhikkhunis*. Sri Lanka (which is also Theravada), where Thailand’s first *bhikkhuni* was ordained,

got their first ordained *bhikkhuni* in 1996 in Sarnath, India by Korean monks and nuns. The law in Thailand forbidding female ordination was revoked sometime after 2002 when Chatsumarn Kabilsingh was ordained.

## Week 10 – Shinto

### Origins

“According to Shinto legend, after seeing that the [Japanese] islands needed a leader, Amaterasu, the goddess of the sun, sent her son, Ninigi, to lead the people. Ninigi’s son, Jimmu, became the first emperor of Japan. Every subsequent shogunate and emperor can trace his ancestry directly to Jimmu” (Perkins, 2020, August 29, para. 6).

“Shinto – “the way of the *kami*” – is deeply rooted in pre-historic Japanese religious and agricultural practices” (Rujivacharakul, n.d., para. 1).

### Historical Development

“Has no formal establishment date” (Perkins, 2020, August 29, para. 6).

“The roots of the religion go back to at least the 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E” (Patheos, n.d.).

“Shinto is Japan’s oldest indigenous belief system” (Perkins, 2020, August 29, para. 11).

“Buddhism arrived in Japan during the 6<sup>th</sup> century A.D. via trade along the Silk Road and integrated with the established Shinto beliefs” (Perkins, 2020, August 29, para. 7).

In 1635, the Tokugawa shogunate ... issued the Sakoku Edict, which closed the borders of Japan to eliminate foreign influence. The Edict remained in effect for 220 years. During this time, Buddhism, Shintoism, and Confucianism were state-sanctioned beliefs, though families were required to associate themselves with a Buddhist temple” (Perkins, 2020, August 29, para. 7).

“The opening of Japan and the Meiji Restoration in the 19<sup>th</sup> century saw policies forcing the separation between Buddhism and Shintoism in an attempt to rid the country of Buddhism, which the Meiji emperor saw as a link to the Tokugawa shogunate” (Perkins, 2020, August 29, para. 8).

“State Shinto was dismantled in 1945 and 1946 under the influence of the United State[s] and three official documents: The Directive for the Disestablishment of State Shinto, the Imperial Rescript renouncing Divinity, and the new Japanese constitution” (Perkins, 2020, August 29, para. 9).

### Basic Beliefs

“[Shintoism has] an intense focus on ritual and reverence for *kami* or spirits (Perkins, 2020, August 29, para. 11).

“The core of Shinto is the belief in *kami*, the spirits that animate people, natural occurrences, powerful businesses, and anything else of greatness” (Perkins, 2020, August 29, para. 12).

“Related to the *kami* is the understanding that the Shinto followers are supposed to live in harmony and peaceful coexistence with both nature and other human beings. This has enabled Shinto to exist in harmony with other religious traditions” (Patheos, n.d.).

“the deities (*kami*) Izanagi and Izanami gave birth to all things, including the Japanese islands, and also to three major Japanese gods. One of these is Amaterasu, the sun goddess. The emperors of Japan, and all of the Japanese people, are believed to be descendants of these *kami*” (Patheos, n.d.).

### Sacred/Key Persons

“Shinto has no founder in the sense that Buddhism or Christianity has a founder, nor is there an individual or group of individuals who were responsible for developing Shinto as a religion. The institution now called Shinto was initially created by the Yamato clan in their bid to assume rulership of the Japanese islands” (Patheos, n.d.).

“Every Japanese emperor and empress ... can trace their ancestry and divine right to rule directly to the deities that ... formed the islands of Japan from the murky darkness of the earth below the heavens” (Perkins, 2021, February 8, para. 1).

### Sacred/Key Texts

“Since Shinto does not have a central doctrine, holy deity, or sacred text, it is considered by many to be a belief system, not a religion” (Perkins, 2020, August 29, para. 11).

“While regarded as histories, the *Nihonshoki* (Chronical of Japan) and *Kojiki* (Record of Ancient Matters) are texts that include records of ancient mythology and deal with religious matters. A number of esoteric texts detailing ritual and religious matters of the shrines, and discussing the relationship between Shinto and Buddhism, are also among the sacred texts of Shinto” (Patheos, n.d.).

“In the 8<sup>th</sup> century C.E., the *Nihonshoki* (Chronical of Japan) and the *Kojiki* (Record of Ancient Matters) were written to legitimate the ruler of the Yamato clan as descendants of the gods. Using elements of an earlier mythology, the Yamato rulers created a unified Japan, sanctified by their claims to divinity and supported by a system of shrines” (Patheos, n.d.).

### Sacred Places

“There are approximately 80,000 Shinto shrines in Japan, though this number does not include the small shrines found in many private homes” (Perkins, 2020, August 29, para. 12).

“Shinto shrines are built to honor individual *kami*: the essence of spirit present in natural phenomena, objects, and human beings that is worshipped by Shinto practitioners” (Perkins, 2021, February 8, para. 2).

“The Ise Grand Shrine is widely considered to be one of the most sacred spaces in Japan” (Perkins, 2021, February 8, para. 3).

“According to custom, the shrine is torn down and rebuilt every 20 years, but the complex as a whole has existed since the 3<sup>rd</sup>-century” (Perkins, 2021, February 8, para. 4).

The [Itsukushima] shrine was constructed on the water rather than on land so as to not damage the *kami* of the Itsukushima Island (Perkins, 2021, February 8, para. 5).

“The Shinto belief in purity directs that no bodies can be buried in or near shrines” (Perkins, 2021, February 8, para. 8).

“The Toshogu Shrine is distinct because of the presence of remains, an unusual occurrence considering the strong Shinto beliefs surrounding purity” (Perkins, 2021, February 8, para. 12).

“Shinto shrines were traditionally placed near unusual ‘concentrations’ of nature such as waterfalls, caves, rock formations, mountain tops, or forest glens” (Rukivacharakul, n.d., para. 2).

“The Izumo Shrine [...] is believed to be the oldest shrine in Japan. The *Kojiki* in the 8<sup>th</sup>-century describes the mythic origins of the shrine” (Rukivacharakul, n.d.)

“Shinto shrine compounds are entered by passing beneath a *torii*. A *torii* is a wooden gate without a door, often painted red. Its origin is assumed to be the simple gate of the early shrine fences. When the fences were later removed, the *torii* remained as a ceremonial entrance. The *torii* has become a symbol representing Shinto practices and a popular icon for Japan” (Rukivacharakul, n.d.).

### Important Shinto Shrines

According to Perkins, the five most important Shinto shrines (with date of completion), its location in Japan, and the *kami* for which it was built are:

Shrine	Location	<i>Kami</i>
Ise Grand Shrine (7 <sup>th</sup> -century)	Mie Prefecture	Amaterasu, sun goddess
Itsukushima Shrine (6 <sup>th</sup> -century)	Hiroshima Bay	Daughters of the storm god and sun goddess
Meiji Jingu Shrine (20 <sup>th</sup> -century)	Shibuya, Tokyo	<i>Kami</i> of the Meiji Empress Shoken
Izumo-Taisha Shrine (Unknown)	Izumo, Shimane	Okuninushi, marriage and created Japanese land
Toshogu Shrine (17 <sup>th</sup> -century)	Nikko, Tochigi	Tokugawa Ieyasu, first shōgun of Tokugawa Japan

### Rituals

“Representations of these *kami* are housed in shrines where believers practice rituals to show reverence for the *kami*. These rituals are done to keep the balance between nature and humanity” (Perkins, 2020, August 29, para. 12).

“Shinto rituals and celebrations stress harmony between deities, man, and nature – a key feature of Japanese religious life and art to the present time” (Rujivacharakul, n.d.).

### Death and The Afterlife

“There is an old saying in Japan: ‘born Shinto, die Buddhist.’ Before Buddhism, it was believed that all who died went to a vast hellish underworld from which there is no escape. Buddhism introduced the idea of rewards and punishments in the afterlife, and death and salvation in the afterlife came to be regarded as Buddhist matters” (Patheos, n.d.).

### Society and Religion

“[The] post-war constitution guarantees the right of religious freedom and prohibits and religiously affiliated group from exercising political power. All schools, with the exception of religious schools, are

secular, but students are educated in world religions as part of national education standards” (Perkins, 2020, August 29, para. 10).

“It is illegal for inmates to openly practice religion while incarcerated” (Perkins, 2020, August 29, para. 10).

### Other Information

“The main religions in Japan are Buddhism (69.8%) and Shinto (70.4%). Most Japanese people identify as members of both faiths” (Perkins, 2020, August 29, para. 2).

### Contemporary Issues and/or Historical Controversies

“Though the [Japanese] constitution prohibits any religious group from exercising political power, the legitimacy of the Japanese imperial family is rooted in divinity, which has created some historic and contemporary political tension” (Perkins, 2020, August 29, para. 2).

During the Meiji Restoration, when the emperor tried to sever the connection between Buddhism and Shintoism, “violence against Buddhists escalated, and many temples and artifacts were destroyed. Conversely, the ban on Christianity was lifted, and Protestant missionaries began arriving to proselytize” (Perkins, 2020, August 29, para. 8).

“[During the Meiji period] Shinto was established as Japan’s official religion. This State Shinto was used to justify the nationalism and militant tactics used by Japan during World War II” (Perkins, 2020, August 29, para. 8).

### Shinto Presentation Script (Society & Contemporary Issues)

From what we have learned today, it is easy to tell why Shinto is so strongly intertwined with the Japanese national identity. From the land’s creation myths to the emperor’s divine lineage with the chief Shinto *kami*, Amaterasu, the Shinto belief structure enshrines Japan and the Japanese people as “descended from the gods, [and] superior to all other races.” It is for these reasons, too, that contemporary right-wing organizations and political entities within Japan strive for a return to the Imperial Japan era of what has become known as State Shinto.

State Shinto was the official, state-sanctioned and implemented assemblage of “ideas, rituals, and institutions [...] to create belief in the divinity of the emperor and the uniqueness” of Japan’s national identity and government, or *kokutai*. This imperialistic and nationalistic dogma was taught in schools and enforced in society as Japan, under the Meiji Restoration, modernized, industrialized, and sought to claim its place within the rapidly globalizing world.

First created in 1868 from the conglomeration of disparate Shinto practices throughout the islands, it was established as governmental and religious doctrine, inseparable, and mandated and administered by the government through the Shinto Worship Bureau. Shrines, which were once independent from one another and worshipped at locally or on pilgrimage, became government institutions, priests appointed by the government, and all citizens were required to register at their local shrine. Together with this government take-over of the religious sphere of Japan was the attempt to completely sever Shinto and Buddhism in the public minds and worship practices in favour of the Indigenous, state-controlled Shinto.

It is largely for these reasons that Japan's expansionist ambitions took them into China, Korea, and other Asian countries; the occupation and atrocities performed while occupiers, to this day, harbour intense nationalistic feelings from all involved nations. Embarking on their goal of creating a "Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere," Imperial Japan invaded and occupied several East Asian countries with the goal of creating a self-sufficient economic zone in the Pacific and Indian Oceans, while freeing them from Western influence (while being ruled by Japan, of course).

Here we see a propaganda poster from that time, showing how happy and peaceful the region can be with Japan's help. Notice how China and Mancukou are leaning on and holding onto Japan, while Japan stands upright without needing support (i.e., the boy's hand is in his pocket).

Japan's State Shinto ideology, that is, believing in their innate superiority and a nationalist desire to pacify the world through dominance, mirrors Nazi Germany's own expansionist aggression in the 1930s. This undoubtedly contributed to Japan officially joining World War II with the signing the Tripartite Pact with the Axis Powers in 1940. It is at that time, too, that Japan was at its historically greatest height of military power, industrial might, and regional influence.

By 1940, having been (for lack of a better word) “brainwashed” since childhood, generations of Japanese citizens had been indoctrinated into the State Shinto mindset, believing that their divine duty was to carry out the emperor’s—and thereby the gods’—wishes to the utmost of their ability (Sieg, 2020, para. 4). Horror stories of entire battalions fighting to the last man; nightmarish medical experiments on civilians; quote-unquote “comfort women;” death marches; forcing captives to work until they died of hunger and starvation; tragic stories of soldiers and civilians sacrificing themselves rather disgracing their emperor by being captured; the tragically-comic tales of soldiers being found on remote jungle islands decades after the war had ended dutifully performing their last issued command because they had never been told otherwise; all can be understood as one’s divine duty when viewed from the perspective of State Shinto.

It is this ferocious devotion to emperor and duty which played a large part in the decision to drop the atomic bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Though the decision is shrouded in controversy—even when it happened—the decision to drop the bomb was an effort to save lives, rather than end them. Illustrating this point, in preparation for the invasion of the Japanese islands, the United States ordered the production of so many Purple Hearts, a decoration awarded for being wounded or killed in combat (some half a million medals), that it was not until 1999 that they needed to order the production of more (Moore & Giangreco, 2000, para. 8).

For these reasons, after Japan’s unconditional surrender in 1945, State Shinto was systematically dismantled by the occupying Allied forces, enshrining the separation between church and state in the new Japanese constitution of 1947.

Some State Shinto elements remain, however, such as:

- Emperor as a symbol of the state
- Emperor’s divinity remains (among more devout Shintoists)



- The emperor's accession is a Shinto ritual
- Several public holidays and annual ceremonies are based on Shinto traditions
- Some Shinto shrines—such as Ise Grand—remain symbols of Japan identity
- Some Shinto shrines—such as Yasukuni—still have a role in national remembrance

Which brings us to Yasukuni Shrine. Built in 1869 by Emperor Meiji, Yasukuni, which means “peaceful country,” was purpose-built to “enshrine the souls of fighters who died in the country's civil wars” (Olsen, 2019, para. 3).

This shrine was uninvolved in controversy until 1978 when, in a secret and “solemn ceremony” to honour the nation's fallen, the war time prime minister and fourteen other convicted ‘Class A’ war criminals were “elevated to the status of gods, or *kami*,” earning domestic and international condemnation (Sieg, 2020, para. 6). Ever since, the Yasukuni Shrine has been an extremely controversial place.

Yasukuni is “sacred to nationalists” who believe “Japan has a right to honour its people who died in war just like other countries,” however, others in Japan feel the shrine “glorifies Japan's militaristic colonial past” and the enshrinement of convicted war criminals “is a stain on the memory of so many others who fought and died” (Olsen, 2019, paras. 6-8). Visits by officials and dignitaries (typically right-wing) are often met with international rebukes and a chilling of relations with China and Korea especially. Regardless of the political volatility around the Yasukuni Shrine, it remains an important—distinctly Shinto—part of Japanese history, culture, and remembrance.

While State Shinto is still revered and aspired to by the nationalist political sphere in Japan. Shinto in society, absent of state intervention, is largely found in the small rituals and ceremonies, and quiet worship that evoke the blessings and protection of the *kami*, connecting the worshipers of the present with their distant past. For example, be it a new holy shrine or a state-of-the-art space agency

building, the *jichin-sai*, a ceremony purifying the building site, is performed as ground is broken; and another after building is completed (p. 25). Airline pilots visit shrines to “obtain a charm to put in the cockpit,” and ship captains install *kamidana*, literally “god shelves,” small personal shrines or alters to *kami* (such as the one shown here), hoping for their protection (p. 27). Individual families and even businesses both large and small, including manufacturing giants like Toyota Motors, maintain *kamidana* within their homes or factories, to ensure the purity of their living and workspaces and the protection of their family and employees (p. 27). Not to mention the numerous public rituals and festivals we learned about moments ago. To provide a personal example, when I was in Tokyo, it was not uncommon to see people going about their day pausing briefly at a small shrine, performing the ritual two loud claps, then proceeding on with their day.

So, it seems that for modern-day Shinto in society, having been deliberately far removed from the right-wing, ultra-nationalistic era of the late-18<sup>th</sup> to mid-19<sup>th</sup> century Imperial Japan, it has once again resumed its former place within the larger society as a religion for and by the people.

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## Week 12a – Sikhism in the News

After reading *Sikhism: A Very Short Introduction*, I struck by the struggles Sikhism has had trying to distance itself as a religion distinct and separate from Hinduism. After reading much about the ultra-

nationalism Hindutva, driven by Prime Minister Modi, I was shocked to see [Modi extol the virtues](#) of Sikh Guru Tegh Bahadur and promise a “fitting tribute” from the Indian government on the 400<sup>th</sup> birth anniversary of the 9<sup>th</sup> guru. He encouraged everyone to visit and pay homage to Sikh shrines and called for the documenting and acknowledging of centuries of Sikh charity and public service.

“Why,” I wondered, “is Modi undermining his nationalist base by speaking so highly and promising a gift to a minority sect within India?”

I first thought it was an attempt to co-opt the religion and fold it back into the Hindu sphere of influence. I imagine that Sikhs would argue that outcome is impossible, and I would agree with them. However, I then remembered the farmer protest in Punjab by a largely Sikh population. Modi’s actions became all too clear as an attempt to placate the farmers by appealing to their religiosity. Is the tribute Modi has promised to come with strings attached? For example, for the tribute to be given in good faith, must the farmers end the protests and return home.

Also, an essential insight that Dr. Hinman-Smith provided during class, the ninth guru, Guru Tegh Bahadur, was martyred by a Mughal emperor from the Islamic dynasty that ruled over Punjab. As Modi tries to unite India against Indian Muslims, it makes sense that he would appeal to the shared animosity, history of conflict, and oppression by Muslims between Hindus and Sikhs. In this context, it is revolting that Modi would use such a holy time in the Sikh faith corrupting the government’s acknowledgment and ‘celebration’ of Sikhs with partisan nationalistic division.

## Week 12b – Sikhism

‘Sikh,’ a word bestowed upon the religion by outsiders but one they have taken on for themselves, means ‘learner’ or ‘disciple’ since they are considered disciples who are learning from the Guru. Sikhs also call themselves ‘Gursikhi’ or ‘Gurmat,’ the Guru’s doctrine, and refer to the whole Sikh community as the ‘Panth.’ The word Guru, from the same Sanskrit word meaning ‘weighty’ or ‘difficult’,

but understood as ‘mentor’ or ‘guide’ (as these revered people are able to discuss weighty and difficult matters with clarity), is sometimes said in Sikhism to mean ‘remover of darkness.’ The Guru refers to the 10 human Gurus around which the faith was constructed, and the last Guru, the Adi Guru Granth Sahib, the holy book to which Sikhs turn and venerate as a living entity. Sikhs believe in one god, ‘Satguru,’ or the ‘True Guru,’ called such as they were the first Guru who taught Guru Nanak, the first ‘living’ Guru. Sikhism is curious and perhaps unique in its veneration of what, to Westerners, amount to a bible. The fervent—and, at times, *violent*—protectionism that Islam holds over insulting or damaging the Qur’an seems almost relaxed compared to the attention, care, and time Sikhs afford their holiest book. However, Sikh understanding of their history and the Adi Guru Granth Sahib go much, much deeper than a mere collection of ink and vellum. Understanding Sikhism requires an outsider to understand that Guru as ‘guide’ can mean ‘either a person or a book’ (p. 31) and that the Guru Granth Sahib is the literal last Guru in a line of Gurus; from God, through ten living beings, to the Adi Guru Granth Sahib. Far from a mere book which contains teachings, the Sikh holy book is the authoritative assembly of all the teachings divinely received. One could consider it the physical manifestation of all the Guru’s memories in one place, a holy tome indeed!

What became known as Sikhism was created in the Punjab region of what is now divided by India and Pakistan; Punjab being the ‘spiritual homeland’ of the worldwide Sikh community. After the division of the sub-continent in 1947, most Sikhs left Pakistan to live on the Indian side of the border with [22 million Sikhs living there](#), mostly still residing in Punjab. On the last officially released census in Pakistan (1998) there were [fewer than 10,000](#) Sikhs living in the country down from almost 2 million [the year before partition](#). As of 2018, Canada has the world’s [second largest Sikh community](#) with the majority of Canadian Sikhs living in British Columbia, making up 1.26% of the countries population and 4% of BCs population (in 2018); meaning that nearly 1 in 20 British Columbians are Sikh!

Guru Nanak, 'criticized [the] superstition, ritual, and priestcraft,' of the Hindu majority in which he was born and raised (p. 12). As seen in earlier lessons, the Brahmin priest-class of the Hindu faith had seen push-back on many fronts throughout its long and deep history, as seen in the Buddhist split and the rise of the Jain-sect. Like Buddhism, Guru Nanak taught equality for men and women and between all peoples 'regardless of their background,' i.e., caste (p. 26), and stressed that religious teachings should be given in the vernacular, not hidden behind an ancient language known only by the elite (p. 12). During class, Inderpal mentioned that he feared that Sikhism was failing in this aspect. He, and many of his peers in class, mentioned that the language of the Adi Guru Granth Sahib was only understood by 'senior citizens' and that the younger generations only learn this difficult and old-fashioned version of Punjabi when they genuinely want to, but he worries that few actually do. As such, Inderpal warned that the language of the Granth Sahib was being forgotten. This makes me believe that soon, if Inderpal's observations hold true, the holiest book in Sikhism will soon only be accessible to the old and elite 'priestly caste' of Sikhism, who have the inclination and *luxury* of time, to learn the old script; one of the exact situations that Guru Nanak had rebelled against 500 years ago. Also, since the script is mostly the transcribed hymns of past Gurus, it is impossible to translate into any other language or vernacular and retain its rhythm, metre, and format which is critical to the recitation of the holy book and to various rituals and prayers. For example, every morning the Granth Sahib is opened to a random spot and the first hymn is recited for the morning prayer. Another example is the naming of children which, eschewing the Hindu cosmological and astrological interpretations, calls for again opening the Guru Granth Sahib to a random page and the first letter of the first page is designated as the first letter of the first name of the newborn child (p. 73). These customs and rituals would become meaningless if the book is translated into English as the transcription would certainly guarantee that there will be different interpretations, different letters beginning the page, and different ways of recitation/chanting/singing as the old-Gurmukhi script, what the Sikh and Punjabi language is written in.

Sikhism rose during the time of the Mughal Empire in India, the series of Islamic invasions and dynasties which gripped the subcontinent for 150 years, from the early 16<sup>th</sup>- to mid-18<sup>th</sup> centuries. This led for difficulties for early Sikhs as they struggled to delineate themselves from not only Hindus but Muslims as well by doing such things as changing Brahminic marriage or birth rituals to eschew that connection. Nevertheless, early *gurdwaras*, Sikh temples, often found themselves sanctioned for displaying or worshipping in distinctly Hindu or Islamic fashion. Adding to this, while beset by the mercurial loyalties and promises of their Hindu neighbors and their Islamic occupiers, Sikhism found itself with several martyrs and eventually took on a militant aspect codified in their Khalsa, the community of defenders of the faith. This Khalsa group were instrumental in Sikhism being recognized and renowned as a 'distinguished' martial people, even while their distinctness from Hinduism or Islam remained a question to the outside observer (p. 71). This martial characteristic from a people distinct from both Muslims and Hindus was capitalized upon by the British during the Raj as the English occupiers. The British Raj used Sikhs to crush a joint mutiny by Hindu and Muslim soldiers under the Raj's employ and pushed for the nationalisation of a Sikh identity (p. 67), further driving the wedge between all three religions within the sub-continent. This does not mean, however, that the Sikhs received preferential treatment when their own community pushed against British oppression, such as when Guru Ram Singh (the 12<sup>th</sup> Guru according to the Namdharis sect of Sikhism) organized boycotts aimed at harming the Raj. For the acts of civil disobedience (and violence) that resulted, Ram Singh was deported and 'about fifty of his followers were put to death' (p. 69).

The Sikh attachment to, and population within, Punjab has inevitably led to the attempt for autonomy and sovereignty of the Panth, the Sikh people. Most famous—and disastrous—of these is the violence which occurred in 1984. As Punjab farmers decried their lack of representation and self-determination in Punjab, were involved in a popular (and increasingly violent) uprising calling for the formation of Khalistan, the 'Land of the Khalsa.' Prime Minister of India, Indira Gandhi, sent soldiers and

tanks in to deal with pilgrimaging Sikhs, killing 'hundreds, and almost certainly thousands,' (p. 79). This was particularly shocking to learn as the world watches another popular uprising by Sikh farmers in Punjab demanding more and better representation and economic fairness. Today's India, led by Modi's Hindutva right-wing nationalists makes Sikhism another targeted minority in India, in essence, merely continuing their history of a fiercely proud people surrounded by those who would rather them gone. A Sikh nation straddling the India-Pakistan border is almost certainly never going to happen. The Hindu-Muslim history of antagonisms and aggressions makes the border an extremely volatile and difficult place for geostrategic security and squeezing in another country who has a famed history of militarism and who have age-old grievances with the countries on either side of them would inevitably lead to further arms-build up and destabilization of the region; truly a terrible twist of fate for a people desperate for a place to call their own while having their sacred homeland split between their ancestors' enemies.