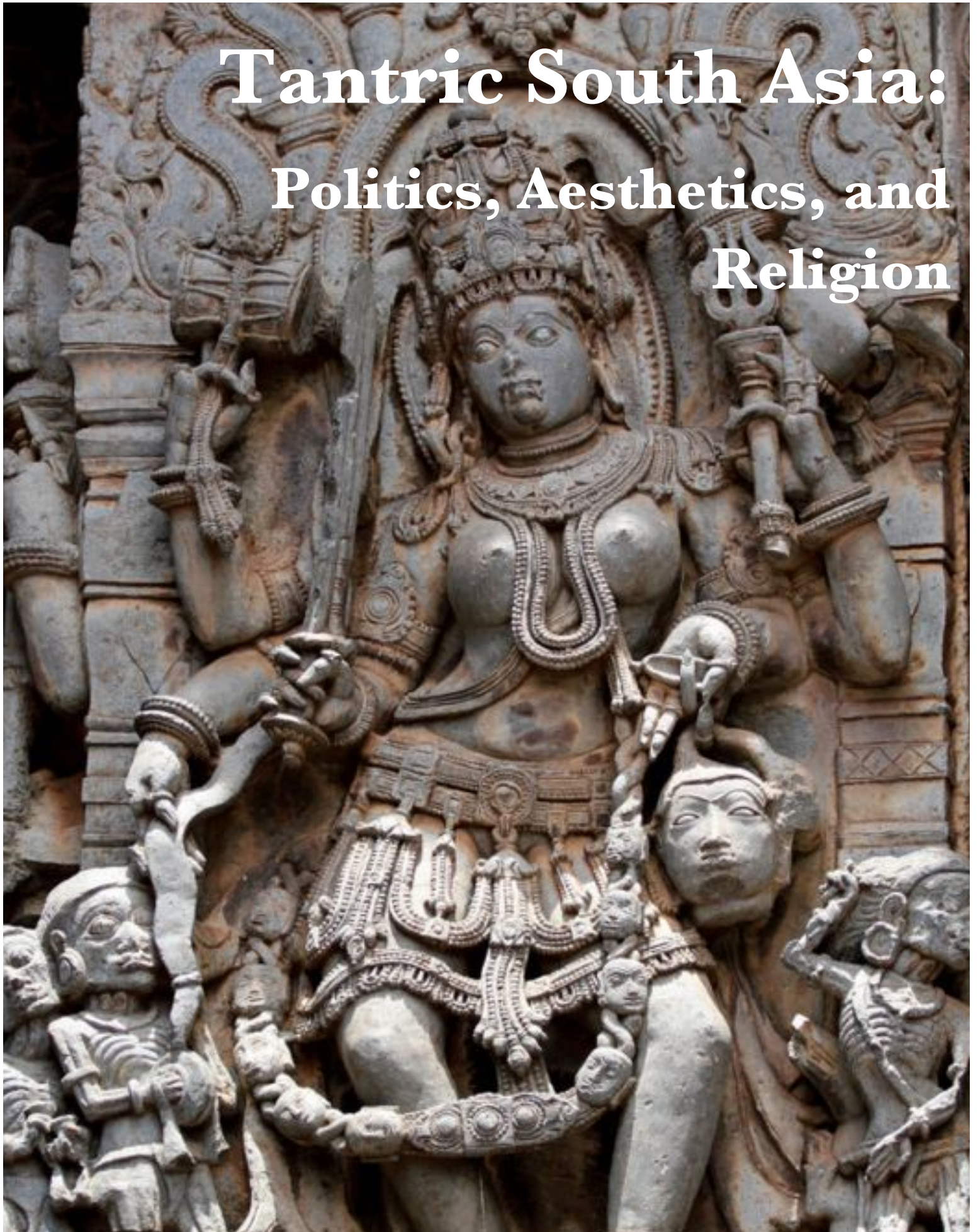


Tantric South Asia: Politics, Aesthetics, and Religion



(Sample Advanced Undergraduate Seminar Syllabus) Tantric South Asia: Politics, Aesthetics, and Religion

Course Description

The cultures of South Asia are among the most fetishized in the Western world, and few Indian concepts lend themselves to fetishization better than *tantra*. In popular culture, *tantra* is associated not only with images of transgressive sexuality, but also antinomian violence and a glamorization of death. When Western scholars in colonial India discovered *tantra*, they were horrified to find ritual manuals detailing how one may consume the flesh of corpses, channel the goddesses of the cremation ground, and recite spells to butcher one's enemies. This course begins with a critique of colonial misconceptions and then proceeds to examine *tantra* in its original South Asian contexts. The term *tantra*, which translates roughly to "technology," or "technique," rose to prominence in medieval South Asian culture during a moment of radical historical transformation (300–1200CE). In contrast to the modern image of the state—an orderly, unified, and bureaucratized entity, in which the work ethic of the nuclear family facilitates a highly regulated economy—medieval South Asia was essentially an anarchic space. These *tantras* emerged in the world of medieval South Asia as a set of techniques for coping with, and accruing power within, a political and social reality perceived to be dystopian, chaotic, and slouching toward decay. But, it was precisely because political unification was elusive that the Indian Subcontinent was fertile ground for radical innovation. In this course, we will examine the complex ecosystem of political, economic, religious, aesthetic, and philosophical institutions of *tantric* South Asia that challenged—and even reversed—classical Indian gender, familial, caste, religious, and ritual norms. The first section of the course discusses the cultural and literary building blocks of *tantra* articulated in archaic and classical Indian culture (1000BCE–300CE), including ritual literature, court poetry, and treatises on politics, erotic desire, and warfare. We will then examine the *tantric* culture of reversals of classical Indian norms during the medieval period (300–1200CE): the Tantric Age. Finally, we will consider the enduring legacies of *tantra* in South Asian culture in the last section of the course, Tantric Afterlives (1200CE–present).

(Sample Advanced Undergraduate Seminar Syllabus) Tantric South Asia: Politics, Aesthetics, and Religion

Requirements and Expectations

Participation - 20%: You must be prepared for a discussion, which means coming to class, having thought deeply about the texts, and with thoughts to share on the texts you have read.

Weekly Online Submissions - 20%: Each week, you are to submit a 500-word response to the question assigned by the professor. You will submit the response/analysis by **6:00PM** 2 days before the class to give other students the opportunity to read through your argument.

Essay I (Primary Source Analysis) - 25%: You will submit a 2000-word essay (**due Week 8**). You will select a primary source from ancient or medieval Indian history. You will then articulate a thesis about the historical processes revealed in that primary source based on readings of contemporary scholarship. Your role will be to draw upon primary and secondary sources to **conceptualize** and **explain** the reasons for the **historical process** outlined in the argument. This essay is not a research project but, rather, a close reading of one primary source.

Essay II (Research Essay) - 35%: You will submit a 3000-word **research** essay (**due Final Week**). This project will consist of three staged parts. You will submit both a (1) research proposal/outline (500 words) and an (2) annotated bibliography (500 words) (**Week 11**) (**5%**) before you proceed to write the (3) research essay (**30%**).

(Sample Advanced Undergraduate Seminar Syllabus) Tantric South Asia: Politics, Aesthetics, and Religion

Primary Sources:

Buddhist Sutras, Selections

Poems of the First Buddhist Women, Selections

Week 4

Eros, Lineage, and Power: The Dynamism of Desire in the South Asian Political Imagination

Secondary Sources:

Ali, "Anxieties of Attachment"

Ali, "Courtly Artifice and Monastic Discipline"

Ali, "Violence, Courtly Manners and Lineage Formation in Early Medieval India"

Primary Sources:

Kāmasūtra, Introduction, Books 1 and 6

Week 5

Brahminical Hegemony and The Spread of the "Sanskrit Cosmopolis": The Creation of "Caste" (300–600CE)

Secondary Sources:

Samuel, *Origins of Yoga and Tantra*, Chapters 7 and 9

Primary Sources:

Olivelle, *Law Code of Manu*, Selections

The Curtain Rises: The Proliferation of Tantric Cultures Across Medieval South Asia (300–1200CE)

Week 6

The Cultural Imaginaire of the Kaliyuga: The Discourse of Violence, Social Disruption, and Dystopia in the Late/Post- Gupta Period (450–600CE)

Secondary Sources:

Chattopadhyaya, "'Autonomous Spaces' and the Authority of the State"

Chattopadhyaya, "Political Processes and the Structure of Polity in Early Medieval India"

(Sample Advanced Undergraduate Seminar Syllabus) Tantric South Asia: Politics, Aesthetics, and Religion

Samuel, Chapter 12, “Tantra and the State”

Primary Sources:

Translations of Epigraphical Sources in Sanderson, “Śaiva Officiants: The King’s Brahmanical Chaplain”

Week 7

The Rise of Tantric Monasteries as New Cultic, Financial, and Political Nodes in Post-Gupta Western India: Local Centers and Global Connections (600–1000CE)

Secondary Sources:

Cecil, *Mapping the Pāśupata Landscape*, “At the Crossroads, Śaiva Networks in Uparamāla”

Neelis, *Early Buddhist Transmission and Trade Networks*, “Trade Networks in Ancient South Asia”

Primary Sources:

Selected reliefs, sculptures, and epigraphy in Cecil

Tantric Reversals of Classic South Asian Culture

Week 8

The Periphery as Tantric Center: Scrambling the Brahmanical Codes in “Tribal” Assam

Secondary Sources:

Rosati, “The Cross-Cultural Kingship in Early Medieval Kāmarūpa: Blood, Desire and Magic”

Urban, “The Womb of Tantra”

Primary Sources:

Coburn, *Encountering the Goddess*, Selections

Anthropological Analogue: Elison, *The Neighborhood of Gods*, Chapter 2

Week 9

The Tantric Critique of Brahminical Social Hierarchies and the Valorization of Subaltern Bodies

Secondary Sources:

Kinsley in McDermott and Kripal, “Kālī”

Lee, “How Caste is Inscribed in Space and Sensoria”

(Sample Advanced Undergraduate Seminar Syllabus) Tantric South Asia: Politics, Aesthetics, and Religion

Zelliot, “The Early Voices of Untouchables”

Anthropological Analogue

Lorea, *Folklore, Religions and the Songs of a Bengali Madman*, Introduction and Chapter 1

Week 10

The Hypersensuality of Tantric Aesthetics

Secondary Sources:

McHugh, *Sandalwood and Carrion*, Chapter 5

Timalsina, “Body, Self and Healing in Tantric Ritual Paradigm”

Primary Sources:

Flood in White, “The Purification of the Body”

Week 11

Revolutionary Re-visioning of Women’s Roles in Society or Re-inscription of Classic Patriarchy

Secondary Sources:

Pechilis, *Female Bhakti Saint*, Chapter 1

Urban, *Power of Tantra*, “What about the Woman”

Primary Sources:

Pechilis, *Female Bhakti Saint*, Appendix # 14, 25, 51, 58, 59, 70, 99

Hudson in White, “Tantric Rites in Antal’s Poetry”

Anthropological Analogue:

McDaniel, *Offering Flowers, Feeding Skulls*, Chapters 1 and 3

Week 12

Contemporary Anthropological Interlude: Women Practitioners of Tantric Medicine

Anthropological Analogue:

Allocco, “Vernacular Practice, Gendered Tensions, and Interpretive Ambivalence in Hindu Death, Deification, and Domestication Narratives”

Tantric Afterlives

Week 13

Mughal-British Transitions

(Sample Advanced Undergraduate Seminar Syllabus) Tantric South Asia: Politics, Aesthetics, and Religion

Secondary Sources:

Pinch, *Warrior Ascetics*, Chapters 1 and 5

White, *Sinister Yogis*, “Mughal, Modern, and Postmodern Yogis”

Primary Sources:

Buchanan, *An Account of the Districts of Bihar and Patna in 1811-1812*, selections

Week 14

Tantra On the Cusp of “Modernity”

Secondary and Primary Source:

Kripal, *Kālī’s Child*, Introduction and Chapter 2

(Sample Advanced Undergraduate Seminar Syllabus) Tantric South Asia: Politics, Aesthetics, and Religion

Readings

- Ali, Daud (1998). "Technologies of the Self: Courtly Artifice and Monastic Discipline in Early India," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, 41, 2:159-184.
- Ali, Daud (2002). "Anxieties of Attachment: The Dynamics of Courtship in Medieval India," *Modern Asian Studies* 36(1), 103-139.
- Ali, Daud (2007). "Violence, Courtly Manners and Lineage Formation in Early Medieval India," *Social Scientist* 35 (9/10): 3-21.
- Allocco, Amy L. (2020). "Vernacular Practice, Gendered Tensions, and Interpretive Ambivalence in Hindu Death, Deification, and Domestication Narratives," *Journal of Hindu Studies*, 1-28.
- Buchanan, Francis (1986). *An Account of the Districts of Bihar and Patna in 1811-1812*. New Delhi.
- Cecil, Elizabeth A. (2020). *Mapping the Pāśupata Landscape: Narrative, Place, and the Śaiva Imaginary in Early Medieval North India*. Leiden: Brill.
- Cerulli, Anthony (2012). *Somatic Lessons: Narrating Patienthood and Illness in Indian Medical Literature*. Albany: SUNY Press.
- Chattopadhyaya, Brajadulal. (1997) "'Autonomous Spaces' and the Authority of the State: the Contradiction and its Resolution in Theory and Practice in Early India," In *Recht, Staat und Verwaltung im Klassischen Indien*. Berlin: DeGruyter.
- Chattopadhyaya, Brajadulal. (2012) "Political Processes and the Structure of Polity in Early Medieval India" In Chattopadhyaya (ed.), *The Making of Early Medieval India* (Second Edition). Oxford: OUP.
- Coburn, Thomas B. (1991). *Encountering the Goddess: A Translation of the Devi-mahatmya and A Study of Its Interpretation*. Albany: SUNY Press.
- Doniger, Wendy and Kakar, Sudhir (2003). *Vatsyayana Kamasutra*. Oxford University Press: New York.
- Doniger, Wendy (2009). *The Hindus: An Alternative History*. New York: Penguin.
- Doniger, Wendy (2013). *The Rig Veda*. New York: Penguin.
- Elison, William (2018). *The Neighborhood of Gods*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Glucklich, Ariel (1997). *The End of Magic*. New Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hallisey, Charles (2015). *Therīgāthā: Poems of the First Buddhist Women*. Cambridge: HUP.
- Kinsley, David R. (2003) "Kālī," In *Encountering Kālī: In the Margins, at the Center, in the West*, Rachel Fell McDermott and Jeffrey J. Kripal (eds.). Berkeley: UC Press.

(Sample Advanced Undergraduate Seminar Syllabus) Tantric South Asia: Politics, Aesthetics, and Religion

Kripal Jeffrey J. (1995), *Kālī's Child: The Mystical and the Erotic in the Life and Teachings of Ramakrishna*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Lee, Joel (2017). "Odor and Order: How Caste is Inscribed in Space and Sensoria," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East*, 37 no. 3: 470-490

Lorea, Carola (2016). *Folklore, Religions and the Songs of a Bengali Madman*. Leiden: Brill.

McHugh, James (2012). *Sandalwood and Carrion: Smell in Indian Religion and Culture*. Oxford: OUP.

Malamoud, Charles (1996). *Cooking the World: Ritual and Thought in Ancient India*, translated by David White. Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Olivelle, Patrick (1996). *Upaniṣads*. New York: Penguin.

Olivelle, Patrick (2004). *The Law Code of Manu*. New York: Penguin.

Olivelle, Patrick (2013). *King, Governance, and Law in Ancient India: Kāuṭilya's Arthaśāstra*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Pechilis, Karen (2013). *Interpreting Devotion: The Poetry and Legacy of a Female Bhakti Saint of India*. London: Routledge.

Pinch, William R. (2006). *Warrior Ascetics and Indian Empires*. Cambridge: CUP.

Pollock, Sheldon (1991). *The Rāmāyana of Vālmiki*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Rosati, Paulo (2017). "The Cross-Cultural Kingship in Early Medieval Kāmarūpa: Blood, Desire and Magic," *Religions* 8, 212: 1–18.

Samuel, Geoffrey (2010). *The Origins of Yoga and Tantra: Indic Religions to the Thirteenth Century*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Thapar, Romila (2003). *The Penguin History of Early India: From the Origins to AD 1300*. London: Penguin.

Thapar, Romila (2013). *The Past Before Us: Historical Traditions of Early North India*. Cambridge: Harvard.

Timalsina, Sthaneshwar. (2012) "Body, Self and Healing in Tantric Ritual Paradigm," *The Journal of Hindu Studies*, 5: 30-52.

Urban, Hugh B. (2009). *The Power of Tantra*. London: I.B. Tauris.

Urban, Hugh B. (2011). "The Womb of Tantra: Goddesses, Tribals, and Kings in Assam," *The Journal of Hindu Studies*, 4: 231-247.

White, David Gordon (ed.) (2000). *Tantra in Practice*. Princeton: Princeton University Practice.

White, David Gordon (2009). *Sinister Yogis*. Chicago: University of Chicago.

Wilson, Liz (1996). *Charming Cadavers*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

(Sample Advanced Undergraduate Seminar Syllabus) Tantric South Asia: Politics, Aesthetics, and Religion

Yelle, Robert (2003). *Explaining Mantras: Ritual, Rhetoric, and the Dream of a Natural Language in Hindu Tantra*. London: Routledge.

Zelliot, Eleanor (2010). "The Early Voices of Untouchables," *From Stigma to Assertion*, Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press: 64-96.

Zysk, Kenneth G. (1991). *Asceticism and Healing in Ancient India: Medicine in the Buddhist Monastery*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.