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LIT 319E.01: Talking to God - The Bhagavad-Gita

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Spring 2022

Talking to God: the *Bhagavad-Gita*

LIT 319E

Tuesday, Thursday 11.00-12.20

Hybrid course (mix of in-person and remote synchronous meetings)

In LA Room No. 304 and on Zoom

3 credits

Dr. Vanita, Professor of English

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Office Hours by appointment

Email: ruth.vanita@umontana.edu

This course fulfills the General Education Ethics requirement.

It also fulfills elective requirements for the English major and the South & South-East Asian Studies minor.

PLEASE READ THIS SYLLABUS CAREFULLY AND REFER TO IT WHEN YOU HAVE DOUBTS. ANSWERS TO MOST QUESTIONS WILL BE FOUND HERE.

Hybrid Course

This course will be taught as a mix of in-person meetings (in LA304) and on Zoom. There will be eight in-person meetings. Consult the class schedule (pp. 5-7 on this syllabus) for the in-person days.

The Zoom link has been sent to you by email and is also on Moodle. Please do not share it with anyone else, because this can inadvertently lead to the class getting hacked.

During a Zoom class, we will have discussion and Q&A, but also feel free to use the chat mechanism to communicate with me and/or the class. I cannot see chat while I am showing a power-point but I can see it at other times.

If you are on campus, you can, if you wish, sit in our classroom to join the Zoom class.

Office hours: by appointment. Email me and I will set up an in-person or a Zoom appointment with you at a time convenient to both of us.

Goals

This course introduces you to one of the world's great philosophical texts and also to Hindu philosophical, cultural and ethical traditions. The Gita addresses questions that people have always wrestled with, such as duty to family versus right action; necessary violence versus commitment to non-violence; war and justice; birth, death, rebirth, and immortality; the relationship between human, animal, and divine. We study the text within Hindu ethical, epistemological and ontological frameworks, comparing these with other philosophical

frameworks, such as the ancient Greek and the medieval Christian. We also consider how diverse thinkers, such as Emerson, Thoreau, Gandhi, Sri Aurobindo, Vivekananda, T. S. Eliot, Walt Whitman, Yeats and Oppenheimer, have responded to the Gita.

Learning Outcomes

Students will acquire a basic understanding of

1. the main argument of the Gita, and some major interpretations of that argument.
2. the subsidiary arguments and the ways they connect to the main argument
3. the philosophical context of the Gita, namely, the Upanishads, and the major schools of Hindu philosophy
4. the social and political contexts of the Gita's production and reception over time
5. the literary context of the Gita, as part of the epic Mahabharata, and as a dialogue
6. the way the Gita has influenced later literature, both Indian and European-American
7. the way later political and philosophical thinkers, both Indian and European-American, including adherents of diametrically opposed schools of thought, have interpreted and responded to the Gita

Texts

1. *Bhagavad Gita* translated Graham Schweig (Harper, 2007 or a later edition). This is a required text. **No other translation is to be used in its place.** You must have the text with you during every class meeting.
2. Supplementary Readings (as listed below). These short readings are required texts and are on Moodle, arranged by topic and by date. Go to my.umt.edu, click on Moodle, sign in and download these readings.

(a) Important general readings, to be referred to throughout the course:

- i. Terms and concepts
- ii. Hindu doctrines and scriptures
- iii. Dharma
- iv. The Mahabharata (the epic within which the Gita occurs)
- v. Hindu Gods and Goddesses
- vi. Schools of Hindu philosophy
- vii. Indian civilizational tendencies
- viii. "Caste"
- ix. A ridiculously short history of India
- x. Hindu concept of time

Extra reading for those interested (not required)

Time in Hinduism

(b) Readings for particular dates, as indicated in the class schedule (pp. 5-7)

- i. Hymns from the Rig Veda
- ii. Extract from the Katha Upanishad
- iii. Extract from the Mundaka Upanishad
- iv. Christopher Isherwood's commentary on Chapters 1-2

- v. Extract from Romantic poet Wordsworth's poem "Ode on Intimations of Immortality," which draws on Hindu ideas of non-difference
- vi. Extracts from American Transcendentalist writers R.W. Emerson and H.D. Thoreau
- vii. "Food in the Upanishads"
- viii. Mystic philosopher Ramana Maharishi on death
- ix. Mahatma Gandhi's favorite song, "*Vaishnava Jan To Tene Kahiye*" (which draws on ideas from the Gita)
- x. Defence speech by Nathuram Godse, assassin of Mahatma Gandhi (based on Godse's interpretation of the Gita)
- xi. Extract from "A Prayer for My Daughter" by W.B. Yeats
- xii. Georg Feuerstein comparing the Western philosophical tradition's rationalist approach to ethics with the Gita's experiential approach (extracted from his 1974 book on the Gita)
- xiii. Extract on the concepts of karma (action) and choice from S. Radhakrishnan's book on the Gita
- xiv. Walt Whitman, "Extracts from Passage to India"
- xv. V. S. Sukthankar (editor of the critical edition of the Mahabharata) on the self, action and choice
- xvi. Extract from T. S. Eliot's poem "Four Quartets," intermingling images and concepts from the Bible, the Gita and the Upanishads
- xvii. Swami Vivekananda's speech at the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago, 1893
- xviii. Speech by Sri Aurobindo at Uttarpara, recounting the mystical experience that transformed him from an anti-British revolutionary to an internationalist philosopher
- xix. Extracts from *Saundarya Lahari*, eighth-century hymn to the Goddess, by Advaita (non-dualist) philosopher Sri Shankaracharya
- xx. Extracts from Hymn to Shiva and from *Lalita Sahasranama* (Thousand Names of the Goddess), showing how popular devotion draws on the genre of eulogy in the Gita
- xxi. Extracts from Swami Vivekananda's letter written shortly before his death, commenting on life, death, oneness and peace
- xxii. "Women Devotional Poets" and Meerabai's Songs.
- xxiii. Hinduism's influence on American Movies
- xxiv. The Cambridge Declaration on Consciousness
- xxv. "*Main Zindagi ka Saath*," a popular film song that draws concepts from the Gita
- xxvi. St. Augustine's analysis of the nature of evil, from *The Confessions*
- xxvii. *Om Jai Jagadisha Hare*, one of the most popular songs sung in Hindu congregations worldwide today. Draws on concepts in the Gita
- xxviii. *Hanuman Chalisa*, the second most popular song among Hindus today. Celebrates Hanuman as the embodiment of devotion
- xxix. Extract from Sri Aurobindo's commentary on Chapter 18 of the Gita
- xxx. "*Kurai Ondrum Illai*," Tamil hymn to Sri Krishna, by nationalist leader S. Rajagopalachari. Sung during the non-violent campaign to open temples to so-called untouchables (this was part of the movement for national independence)

Requirements

Students are required to

- (a) attend classes regularly. This is very important because the text is dense and complex (although it may appear deceptively simple), and the context is also unfamiliar to most of

you. Please inform me in advance by email if you are unable to attend a class. More than four absences not explained to my satisfaction will result in diminishing your grade for attendance and class participation, and eight or more absences will result in a zero for attendance; leaving early or coming late without explanation will be treated as an absence. If you turn off your video on Zoom without explanation, and I cannot see your face, that will count as an absence.

- (b) Email me a thoughtful one-page **typed** response every Thursday before 9.00 a.m. This should be a response to the part of the text to be discussed in class that day. This is your response **before** we have discussed the text. It helps me to identify questions that you may have. For example, on 27 January, your response should be to Chapter 1.
- (c) keep up with the assigned reading, bring the texts to class, and participate in class discussions.
- (d) complete quizzes, and other assignments
- (e) take the mid-term and the final exams.
- (f) **Check UM email and Moodle regularly**, especially the day before class. This is **very important** because I send out notifications and changes by email and also respond to some student questions by email. UM policy forbids me to write to you on any email address other than the UM one. The best way to communicate with me is by email.
- (g) Please switch off the ringer on all devices, such as mobile phones, while you are in class, whether in-person or on Zoom

The Writing and Public Speaking Center provides one-on-one tutoring to students at all levels and at any time in the writing process. <http://www.umt.edu/writingcenter>

Quizzes

Quizzes will be of the multiple-choice/true-false type, and are designed to test whether you have read the Gita and other readings carefully, and whether you remember important information imparted in class. Quizzes will usually be given at the beginning of class, so please come to class on time.

Grades

- a. **Important: Please note that I will not calculate individual grades at any time during the semester.** Intermittent grades will not be posted on Moodle. Final grades will appear on Cyberbear at the end of the semester. You can use the formula below to calculate your own grade at any time.

Assignment	Grade Percentage
Class attendance & Participation	20%
Emailed weekly responses	25% (20% for turning it in; 5% for quality)
Quizzes	20%
Mid-term exam	15%
Final exam	20%

b. Plagiarism or academic dishonesty of any kind, in any assignment, will result in your failing the class and may also result in other penalties such as expulsion from the University (for further details, refer to the section on Academic Misconduct in the Student Conduct Code).

b. If you have a condition (such as a physical or learning disability) that will make it difficult for you to complete the work as I have outlined it, please notify me in the first week of class so that we can discuss the accommodations you request. Please submit to me a letter from Disability Services in Lommasson Center 154 (406.243.2243).

Notes on Covid

1. If covid cases continue to rise, this class may move entirely to Zoom. I will keep you posted
2. Please turn off cell phones in class.
3. Mask use is required in the classroom and in my office.
4. If you feel sick and/or are exhibiting COVID-19 symptoms, please don't come to in-person classes. Notify me and contact the Curry Health Center at (406) 243-4330. If you feel well enough, you are welcome to attend Zoom classes.
5. UM recommends students get the COVID-19 vaccine. Please direct your questions or concerns about vaccines to Curry Health Center.
6. Please sit in the same seat in every class. This is required to support contact tracing efforts.
7. Please do not eat or drink in the classroom.
8. As a covid precaution, please maintain a 6-foot distance from me if you talk to me before or after an in-person class.

Class Schedule

This schedule is tentative. It is your responsibility to keep up with changes. Readings listed for a particular day are to be read before coming to class on that day, e.g. come to class on 27 January, having read Chapter 1 of the Gita.

Date	Assignment (to be completed on your own time, before class)	Class Plan	In-class assignments
18 January	Read syllabus carefully and bring any questions to class. Read “Hindu doctrines and scriptures”; “Dharma”	In-person class Explain syllabus; introduction to the course; background on fundamental Hindu concepts (dharma, karma, rebirth etc) and practices.	
20 January	Read the remaining General and Background Readings for Week 1 on Moodle	Q&A on readings Introduction to the epic and literary background	

25 January	Read hymns from the Rigveda; extracts from <i>Katha Upanishad</i> and <i>Mundaka Upanishad</i>	Discuss readings. Continue discussion on 20 January materials. Unique features of Hindu thought, on non-human animals; Goddesses.	
27 January	Read Gita, Chapter 1	In-person class Discuss reading	Quiz on background
1 February	Read Gita, verses 1-38 (first part of Chapter 2).	Discuss reading	
3 February	Read Gita, Chapter 2, verses 39-end and Isherwood's commentary on Chapters 1-2	Discuss readings	
8 February	Read extracts from Wordsworth's "Ode on Intimations of Immortality"; Emerson and Thoreau	Review Chapters 1 & 2, and discuss readings. Lecture on schools of ethics	
10 February	Read Gita, Chapter 3, "Food in the Upanishads," and mystic philosopher Ramana Maharishi's thoughts on death.	Discuss readings	
15 February	Read Gita, Chapter 4, Gandhi's favorite hymn "Vaishnava Jan," and defence speech by Nathuram Godse (assassin of Gandhi).	In-person class Discuss readings	Quiz on Chapters 1-3 and supplementary materials
17 February	Read Gita, Chapter 5; "Extract from 'A Prayer for My Daughter' by Irish poet W.B. Yeats; Feuerstein on ethics in the Gita.	Discuss readings	
22 February	Read Gita, Chapter 6; S. Radhakrishnan on karma; Walt Whitman, "Passage to India."	Discuss readings	
24 February	Read Gita, Chap 7 and V.S. Sukthankar on the self, action and choice	Discuss readings	
1 March		Watch the film "Awake"	
3 March	Read Gita, Chapter 8; T. S. Eliot, extract from <i>Four Quartets</i> "; Swami Vivekananda's 1893 speech in Chicago, and his letter written shortly before death.	In-person class Discuss the film and the readings	Quiz on Chapters 4-7 and supplementary materials

8 March	Read Gita, Chapter 9 and extracts from Sri Aurobindo's speech at Uttarpara.		
10 March		Review for the mid-term	
15 March		In-person class Mid-term Exam	
17 March	Read Gita, Chapter 10 (137-150) and "Extracts from <i>Saundarya Lahari</i> ,"; extracts from devotional song to Shiva; extracts from the Lalitha Sahasranamam (The 1000 Names of the Goddess)	Discuss reading	
21-25 March	SPRING BREAK	NO CLASS ON 22 & 24 MARCH	
29 March	Read Gita, Chapter 11 (pp. 151-168), a note on Women Devotional Poets, Meerabai's songs, and the essay on Hinduism's influence on American movies.	Discuss readings	
31 March	Read Gita, Chapter 12 (169-174), and the Cambridge Declaration on Consciousness	In-person class Discuss reading	Quiz on Chapters 1-11 and supplementary materials
5 April	Read Gita, Chapter 13 (175-184).	Discuss readings	
7 April	Read Gita, Chapter 14 (185-192) and " <i>Main Zindagi ka Saath</i> ," a song from the popular movie <i>Hum Donon</i> (1961) about a World War II soldier	Discuss readings	
12 April		Watch film <i>Lage Raho Munna Bhai</i> (Keep Going, Brother Munna)	
14 April		Continue watching the film and discuss it	
19 April	Read Gita, Chapter 15, and "St. Augustine on evil, from <i>The Confessions</i> ."	Discuss readings	
21 April	Read Gita Chapter 16	Discuss readings	
26 April	Read Gita, Chapter 17 (pp. 209-218), and the two Hindi devotional songs, " <i>Om Jai</i>	Discuss readings	

	<i>Jagadisha Hare</i> ” and <i>Hanuman Chalisa</i>		
28 April	Read Gita, pp. 219-232 (first half of Chapter 18), and Sri Aurobindo on Chapter 18.		
3 May	Read Gita, pp. 233-42 (second half of Chapter 18), and “ <i>Kurai Ondrum Illai</i> ”; Tamil song to Sri Krishna	In-person class Discuss reading	Quiz on Chapters 12-18 and supplementary materials
5 May		Review for final exam	
13 May 8.00-10.00 a.m.		In-person class FINAL EXAM	