

M 214/7 *Religion and Society in Early India*

MA optional lecture course, Centre for Historical Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University

Course Instructor: Prof. R. Mahalakshmi

This course studies the social basis of early Indian religious traditions. What were the historical contexts in which institutionalized religions emerged, evolved and transformed over centuries, is the primary concern. In chronological terms, the developments from the early Vedic traditions of the mid-second millennium BCE to the early medieval periods will be thematically surveyed.

- I. Historiography of early Indian religious traditions: Problems and Perspectives
In this theme, we look at the ways in which scholars from different disciplinary viewpoints, including history, have understood Indian religious traditions. The recent emphases on inter-disciplinary methods to study mythologies, sacred texts and liturgy that constitute religious traditions will be discussed.
- II. Religion and society as revealed by early Vedic literature: The *Rg Veda* is a landmark for two reasons – it provides the first literary evidence for the settling of Indo-Aryan speaking communities in the sub-continent. Secondly, it allows us to study the social contexts in which Vedic religion had its roots.
- III. Religion and society on the basis of later Vedic texts: Development of ritual priesthood and caste system. The elaboration of sacrifice and its socio-economic implications will be discussed.
- IV. Religious movements of the sixth century BCE: Buddhism and Jainism, can we call them sectarian developments or sramanic movements? We look at the origins of the movements from what we know of their founders/ prominent leaders. What was the social context that led to the development of such traditions? What were the philosophical currents that these traditions were engaging, discursing and debating with?
- V. Evolution of Puranic religions: Image worship and associated rituals; the concepts of *bhakti* and *ahimsa*; the process of brahmanization of tribal cults; the concepts of acculturation, Sanskritization; the typologies of Viṣṇu, Śiva and Durgā.
- VI. Schisms within Buddhism and Jainism: evolution of institutionalized forms of both traditions. The temporal spread of the traditions, acculturation/ transformation through interactions with local traditions.
- VII. The legend of Rāma Daśarathi and the evolution of his cult. This theme explores the ways in which Rāma appears as an iconic figure in early medieval literature and seeks reasons for this conspicuous positioning of the hero/ deity and the cult that developed around him.
- VIII. Inter-cultural exchanges, syncretism and contestations

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