1. Course Description

Popular representations of South Asia abound in clichés: extreme poverty and unimaginable luxury, cosmopolitan cities and rural hamlets, ascetics and call center workers – we are all familiar with these juxtapositions in images, films, and popular books about the region. In this course, we will ask: what do these clichés do to our understanding of South Asia? Do they reveal some deeper truth about the region, or are they reflections of how South Asia has been historically imagined by others? How do we get beneath or beyond these representations?

We will respond to these questions in this course by drawing, primarily, on the work of anthropologists. One of the strengths of anthropology’s methodology—ethnography—is that it captures the complexities of everyday life. In this course, we will explore how people in South Asia live on a day-to-day basis, while also attending to how major historical events, such as colonialism and the Partition of India and Pakistan, continue to shape contemporary life and politics. Although most of our course readings will be about India, we will also draw on scholarly work from Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Nepal, and Bangladesh, to develop a transnational perspective on the region.

While this course offers an in-depth engagement with a specific region of the world, South Asia has also been a key site from which scholars have thought through major themes, including social organization, everyday life, religion, nationalism, violence/conflict, and globalization. As such, this course also offers an engagement with anthropological theory, which will allow you to question and deconstruct dominant clichés about South Asia.

No prerequisites

2. Course Objectives

By the completion of the course, students will have developed:

- A working knowledge with historical and contemporary examples of how caste, gender, political violence, and religious practices shape everyday life in South Asia
- A basic understanding of key concepts, theoretical approaches, and issues of concern in the anthropology and historiography of South Asia
- Critical writing and thinking skills, including engaging and synthesizing multiple perspectives (both scholarly and popular), offering cogent and clear argumentation in written work, and putting class discussions and readings into a broader intellectual context

3. Course requirements

a. Attendance and participation – 20%
b. Short response paper – 30%
c. Final research paper – 50%

For your final research paper, you will write a book review of a contemporary, popular, nonfiction text about South Asia for an educated but popular audience, such as the London Review of Books or The New Yorker. Your book review should be a critical assessment of a popular representation of South Asia, showing what anthropological, ethnographic, or historical perspectives they use, miss, or could benefit from. Your book
review should synthesize and compare different works with each other, including readings from our course as well as secondary/outside sources (unlike those publications, you will be expected to cite other scholarly works in your book reviews). Some examples of books you could write about are:

*Eat, Pray, Love* – Elizabeth Gilbert  
*Behind the Beautiful Forevers* – Katherine Boo  
*In Spite of the Gods: The Rise of Modern India* – Edward Luce  
*Holy Cow: An Indian Adventure* - Sarah MacDonald

### 4. Course Schedule

There are two required books for this course:


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**Week 1: Introduction**

Bose, Sugata and Ayesha Jalal  

Cohn, Bernard S.  

Ghosh, Amitav  

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**Week 2: Partition and its Aftermath**

Butalia, Urvashi  

In class film viewing: *1947 Earth,* Deepa Mehta, 1998

**Possible field visit:**  
- Partition Museum Project (Amritsar) or visiting a museum in New Delhi that has a Partition exhibition

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**Week 3: Castes of Mind**

Dirks, Nicholas B.  

Mines, Diane and Sarah Lamb  
Raheja, Gloria Goodwin

Film viewing: *Ankur* (the Seedling), Shyam Benegal, 1974

**Short response paper due**

**Week 4: Representations of Caste**


**Possible field visit:**

- Visit to Amrita University projects on caste

**Week 5: Aspiration and Globalization**

Liechty, Mark

Chua, Jocelyn L.

**Possible field visits:**

- Visit to Tibetan Youth Congress office, Dharamsala