



Vyasa the sage recites the Mahabharata to the divine scribe Ganesha

*What is found in this epic may be elsewhere;  
what is not in this epic is nowhere else.  
Mahabharata 1.56.33*

## *The Mahabharata Epic*

Winter 2009 : 1:15-3:05, Bldg 200-219  
 Instructor: Linda Hess ([lionda@stanford.edu](mailto:lionda@stanford.edu))  
 Office hours: Mon. 3:15-4:15, Thurs. 11-12, or by appt.  
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Ten times the length of the *Odyssey* and *Iliad* combined, the *Mahabharata* is massive not only in size but in cultural importance. Unlike Homer's epics, it remains vibrantly alive today, as it has been for more than 2,000 years. Its gods are worshiped, its episodes are continually reinterpreted, and its stories have a fresh life in the imagination of most Indians. Endless literary and performative forms have emerged in every region, social class and genre in the Indian subcontinent. International artists have given it new theatrical and musical life. The *Mahabharata* is packed with stories of passion, politics, war, love, loyalty, hatred. Its episodes, which include the *Bhagavad Gita*, also explore ethics and ultimate meaning.

### **Our aims in the course**

- To enjoy the *Mahabharata*, as countless listeners, viewers and readers have done over thousands of years.
- To get a grasp of the big narrative, its structure, and key concepts.
- To look particularly at these themes: (a) politics /war /violence; (b) *dharmā*—sacred order and morality; (c) women and gender; (d) spiritual liberation. We will also encounter repeatedly the ancient Indian fascination with dice and gambling.
- To consider a variety of performances, including regional folk drama, classical dance, Sanskrit theater, Indian movies and television, international interpretations.
- To engage with the *Mahabharata* with both intellect and imagination, including the option of writing and performing our own dramatizations.

### **Format of class meetings**

We will typically spend about the first half of our class time on lecture and discussion, the second half on

viewing performative versions, mostly via video (list of films at end of syllabus).

### Requirements

- Attendance and participation – very important.
- Lead one class discussion focusing on that day's reading. Average time for this activity will be 15-20 minutes, but you can go up to a half hour if part (b) requires more time. You'll do two things: (a) present for discussion interesting issue(s) in the text; (b) imagine a small performative version of any part of the text—from one line to the whole episode. Present that performative version in whatever way is fun and practical.
- Do a project that culminates in a paper of approximately 15 pages, due in the last week of the quarter. This may be a research project of the kind that you are used to in humanities courses: analysis of text(s) in terms of themes or issues; comparison of literary and performative forms. Or it may be a creative project where you compose and present your own performance/film. In the latter case, you will write up an account of your creative process. Two or more students may join together to do such a project (writing their process-accounts separately).
- Due dates:
  - propose 1-3 ideas for your main project by Jan. 23.
  - turn in a progress report by Feb. 13. This will include a short summary of your project, an outline, and a list of sources *that you have looked at*. The summary will include a tentative thesis for research papers or creative concept for performances.
  - Final project due Mar 13. We'll have presentations the last two class meetings.
- Grade percentages:
  - Attendance and participation: 35%
  - Progress report: 25%
  - Final paper/project: 40%

### Books for Purchase

C.V. Narasimhan. *The Mahabharata: An English Version Based on Selected Verses*.  
Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996.  
*The Sauptikaparvan of the Mahābhārata* (The Massacre at Night), trans. W. J. Johnson.  
Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008 (orig. 1998)  
*The Bhagavad Gita*, trans. Laurie L. Patton. New York: Penguin Classics, 2008.  
*Course Reader*, to be distributed in class.

### Schedule Of Classes

W 1/7 Intro

M 1/12 A view of the entire epic (1) Narasimhan 1-120.  
This is longer than the usual reading assignment, but it is all story, not hard reading, and there's a lot of time from start of classes to this meeting. It is a complicated story, with many new names and challenging ideas. Read actively and come back with comments and questions. What stands out as most interesting and important? What are the main movements in the plot? Characters and their issues? Structures of the narrative? What do you need to clarify in order to get what's going on? Make a list of terms and situations that need further explanation. Please send some questions and comments to our class list by Sun. 1/11.  
Note genealogical tables and extensive glossary of names and terms at the end.

W 1/14 A view of the entire epic (2) Narasimhan 121-216.  
Continue with the process described above.

M 1/19 – King holiday.  
Read: Ramanujan, “Repetition in the Mahabharata,” in Arvind Sharma, ed. *Essays on the Mahabharata*. ®

W 1/21 Dice match & disrobing  
J.A.B. van Buitenen, trans & ed. *The Mahabharata*, vol. 1. University of Chicago Press, 1973. pp. 106-55. ®  
Vedic poem on gambling. ®

M 1/26 Women, wives, husbands  
•Purnima Mankekar on the TV portrayal of the disrobing episode, in *Screening Culture, Viewing Politics: An*

*Ethnography of Television, Womanhood, and Nation in Postcolonial India*, 224-56 ⑩

• Draupadi's conversations with Satyabhama and Sudesna: VB v.2, pp 664-68 and v. 3, pp. 37-38 ⑩  
(Recommended: Laurie Patton's article on Satyabhama and Sudesna passages, "How Do You Conduct Yourself: Gender and the Construction of a Dialogical Self in the Mahabharata," pp 97-108 in Brodbeck and Black. Ask LH if you want a photocopy.)

W 1/28. Nala & Damayanti : the epic in miniature?  
Van Buitenen, v.2, bk 3, 319-64 ⑩

M 2/2 Women, wives, husbands; revenge, forgiveness, dharma.

• Savitri episode, Van Buitenen v. 2, bk 3, pp 760-78; ⑩  
• Shakuntala episode, Van Buitenen v. 1, bk 1, pp. 155-71. ⑩  
• Draupadi, Yudhishthira, and Bhima in the forest argue about anger, patience, and dharma. Prelude is a little discourse about the relationship of brahmins and kshatriyas. Van Buitenen v. 2, bk 3, pp 272-95 ⑩  
(Recommended: Analysis of this episode by Angelika Malinar, "Arguments of a Queen: Draupadi's Views on Kingship." Brodbeck and Black, 79-92. If you want a photocopy, ask LH.)

W 2/4 Pandavas in disguise; another outrage on Draupadi; revenge  
*Virata Parvan*. Van Buitenen v. 3, bk. 4, pp. 25-63. ⑩

M 2/9 Gender-bending

• Andrea Custodi, "'Show You Are A Man!' Transsexuality and Gender Bending in the Characters of Arjuna/Brhannada and Ambā/Sikandin(i)" in *Gender and Narrative in the Mahābhārata*, ed. Simon Brodbeck and Brian Black. London: Routledge, 2007, pp. 208-27. ⑩  
• Wendy Doniger. "Bisexual Transformations," in *Splitting the Difference: Gender and Myth in Ancient Greece and India*, Univ. of Chicago, 1999, ch. 6, pp 260-92.

W 2/11 *Bhagavad Gita* (1)  
Read chaps. 1-8.

M 2/16 – Presidents holiday

W 2/18 *Bhagavad Gita* (2)  
Read chaps. 9-18.

M 2/23 Where war leads  
*Sauptikaparvan*, "The Massacre at Night," Johnson 1-86

W 2/25 Research and commentary on performance: 3 examples

• William Sax. "Ritual and Performance in the Pandavilila of Garhwal," In Arvind Sharma, *Essays on the Mahabharata*, pp. 274-94. ⑩  
• Rustom Bharucha, "A View from India," in *Peter Brook and the Mahabharata: Critical Perspectives*, ed. David Williams. London & New York: Routledge, 1991, pp. 228-51. ⑩  
• "Devotional Viewing: 'Sacred Soaps,'" in Marie Gillespie, *Television, Ethnicity and Cultural Change*. London: Routledge, 1995, 87-95. ⑩

M 3/2 Women and War

"The Book of the Women," in *The Mahābhārata Books 11-12*, trans. James Fitzgerald. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004. ⑩

W 3/4

Yudhishthira answers the yaksha's riddles: VB v. 2, pp 795-805. ⑩

Yudhishthira and his dog try to get to heaven. ⑩

(Recommended: David Shulman, "The Yaksa's Questions," available online at

[http://books.google.com/books?id=EIweS\\_YpGTsC&pg=PA151&source=gbs\\_toc\\_r&cad=o\\_o](http://books.google.com/books?id=EIweS_YpGTsC&pg=PA151&source=gbs_toc_r&cad=o_o)

From *Untying the Knot: On Riddles and Other Enigmatic Modes*, by Galit Hasan-Rokem, David Dean Shulman. New York, Oxford University Press, 1996, pp 151-67.)

M 3/9  
presentations

W 3/11  
presentations

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Films & performances from which our viewing will be selected:

Peter Brook's *Mahabharata*. 2 parts (78 + 88 min = 2.8 hrs).

*Mahabharata* serial on Indian TV, 1989-90. 94 episodes.

*A Throw of Dice*, 1927 silent feature film from India. ZDVD 16859

*Hum Panch*. ("We five"), 1980. Hindi feature film. 153 minutes. (3 hrs)

(<http://www.uiowa.edu/-incinema/humpanch.html>)

*Kalyug* ("Age of Discord") 1980 Hindi feature film, 143 minutes, dir. Shyam Benegal.

(<http://www.uiowa.edu/-incinema/kalyug.html>)

Alf Hiltebeitel's "Lady of Gingee," documentary on Draupadi worship in South India. 2 parts 35 min each.

ZVC 5188.

Philip Glass's *Satyagraha*, excerpts on youtube (2 versions)

If possible, live demo of *Mahabharata* motifs in Indian classical dance.