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) *dharma*—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**

- Course Reader, to be distributed in class.

**Schedule of Classes**

W 1/7  Intro

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

M 1/19  - King holiday.

W 1/21  Dice match & disrobing

M 1/26  Women, wives, husbands
*Purnima Mankekar on the TV portrayal of the disrobing episode, in Screening Culture, Viewing Politics: An*
Draupadi’s conversations with Satyabhama and Sudesna: VB v.2, pp 664-68 and v. 3, pp. 37-38 (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.)

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

Women, wives, husbands; revenge, forgiveness, dharma.

- Draupadi, Yudhisthira, 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 (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.)

Pandavas in disguise; another outrage on Draupadi; revenge

Gender-bending

Bhagavad Gita (1)
Read chaps. 1-8.

Bhagavad Gita (2)
Read chaps. 9-18.

Where war leads
Sauptikaparvan, “The Massacre at Night,” Johnson 1-86

Research and commentary on performance: 3 examples

Women and War

Yudhisthira answers the yaksha’s riddles: VB v. 2, pp 795-805.
Yudhisthira and his dog try to get to heaven. (Recommended: David Shulman, “The Yaksa’s Questions,” available online at http://books.google.com/books?id=ElweS_YpGTsC&pg=PA151&source=gbs_toc_r&cad=0_0 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.)
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.