

The Mahabharata and Modern India

Course Code: L-EA-0223, Credits: Four

Instructor:

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Course Description

What are the meanings of *dharma* in the *Mahabharata* and is it an instructive category in the modern world? Was it right, according to *dharma*, to ask for Ekalavya's thumb, burn the Khandava forest, and permit the disrobing of Draupadi? Why does Karna give up his armor and earrings? Why does he refuse to join the Pandavas? Does the Gita advocate nonviolence? Is Amba's vengeance justified? Why does Krishna advise deviations from *dharma* in the killing of Drona, Karna, and Duryodhana? Why do the Vrishnis destroy each other? In exploring these questions, this course will seek to understand the valences and workings of *dharma*, destructiveness, sacrifice (*yajna*), and justice in the epic and its modern retellings. We will examine the ways in which writers have drawn upon the epic to interpret phenomena such as caste oppression, the freedom struggle, gender relations, and ecological destruction. The course will engage with a range of sources including the critical edition of the *Mahabharata* (in English translation), poetry, scholarly writings, and Hindi cinema.

Course Requirements and Grading:

1) Class Participation (20%)

Note: Please do not use laptops, cell phones, or other electronic devices in class. Bring hard copies of the readings to class, if you intend to participate in the discussion.

2) Midterm Exam (50%)

There will be an in-class midterm exam in Week 8.

3) Final Exam (30%)

There will be an in-class final exam in Week 15.

Course Google Drive Link: TBA

Schedule

Week 1: Dharma

John D. Smith, *The Mahabharata: An Abridged Translation*, pp.xi-xxi (from “Introduction”). New York: Penguin, 2009.

Bimal Krishna Matilal, “Krsna: In Defence of a Devious Divinity.” In *Ethics and Epics: The Collected Essays of Bimal Krishna Matilal, Volume II*, ed. Jonardon Ganeri, pp.91-108. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002.

Suggested:

R. K. Narayan, *The Mahabharata: A Shortened Modern Prose Version of the Epic*. New York: Penguin, 1978.

Emily Hudson, *Disorienting Dharma: Ethics and the Aesthetics of Suffering in the Mahabharata*, pp.8-10, 35-47, 198-205 (“What Is the *Mahabharata*?” “Two Central Concepts: *Dharma* and *Dubkha*,” “Krsna the Enigmatic Deity”). New York: Oxford University Press, 2013.

Richard H. Davis, *The Bhagavad Gita: A Biography*, pp.36-42. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015.

Milinda Banerjee, “The Mahabharata and the Making of Modern India.” In *The Mahabharata in Global Political and Social Thought*, eds. Milinda Banerjee and Julian Strube, pp.13–47. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024.

Week 2: Burning the Forest

John D. Smith, *The Mahabharata: An Abridged Translation*, pp.1-23, 28-33 (Beginnings, Astika, Earliest Lineages, Ganga and Devavrata). New York: Penguin, 2009.

The Mahabharata, 1: The Book of the Beginning, trans. and ed. J. A. B. van Buitenen, pp.412-422, 430-431 (Burning the Khandava Forest). Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973.

Philip Lutgendorf, “City, Forest, and Cosmos: Ecological Perspectives from the Sanskrit Epics.” In *Hinduism and Ecology: The Intersection of Earth, Sky, and Water*, eds. Christopher Key Chapple and Mary Evelyn Tucker, pp.269-289. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000.

Suggested:

Irawati Karve, *Yuganta: The End of an Epoch*, pp.96-108 (“The Palace of Maya”). Hyderabad: Orient BlackSwan, 2007.

Arun Kolatkar, *Collected Poems in English*, ed. Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, pp.186-214 (“Sarpa Satra (2004)”). Tarsset, UK: Bloodaxe, 2010.

Alf Hiltebeitel, *Dharma: Its Early History in Law, Religion, and Narrative*, pp.345-354 (“Mother Ganga”). New York: Oxford University Press, 2011.

Girish Shahane, “As the Amazon Burns, the Mahabharata Episode of Khandava Forest Fire Serves Up an Important Reminder.” *Scroll.in*, August 29, 2019.

Week 3: Ekalavya and Karna

Film: *Bharat Ek Khoj 04: Caste Formation*. Dir. Shyam Benegal. 1988. (Ekalavya: 13:30-20:38) [\[Link\]](#)

Film: *Eklavya: The Royal Guard*. Dir. Vidhu Vinod Chopra. 2007. (Opening: 00:48-3:51) (Prime Video)

The Mahabharata, 1: The Book of the Beginning, trans. and ed. J. A. B. van Buitenen, pp.145, 270-272. (Ekalavya). Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973.

Bimal Krishna Matilal, “Caste, Karma, and the Gita.” In *Ethics and Epics: The Collected Essays of Bimal Krishna Matilal, Volume II*, ed. Jonardon Ganeri, pp.136-144. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002.

John D. Smith, *The Mahabharata: An Abridged Translation*, pp.54-62 (Tournament, House of Lac). New York: Penguin, 2009.

Ramdhari Singh Dinkar, *Charioteer of Rays (Rashmirathi)*, trans. B. N. Mishra, pp.21-40 (Tournament, Parashurama-Karna). New Delhi: VL Media Solutions, 2016.

Suggested:

Chaturvedi Badrinath, *The Mahabharata: An Inquiry into the Human Condition*, pp.369-392 (from “*Varna-dharma, Social Arrangements; Loka-samgraha, toward Social Wealth*”). Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 2006.

Wendy Doniger, *On Hinduism*, pp.547-555 (“The History of Ekalavya”). New York: Oxford University Press, 2014.

Syam Cartoonist, Cartoon of Ambedkar and Ekalavya, *Savitri Magazine*, January 21, 2016.

Ruth Vanita, *The Dharma of Justice in the Sanskrit Epics: Debates on Varna, Gender, and Species*, pp.45-72 (“Varna: Defined by Birth or By Action?”). New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2022.

Week 4: The Dicing

Film: *Bharat Ek Khoj 05: Mahabharata, Part I*. Dir Shyam Benegal. 1988. (Dicing: 8:48-19:28) [\[Link\]](#)

John D. Smith, *The Mahabharata: An Abridged Translation*, pp.121-163 (“The Gambling Match,” “The Second Gambling Match”). New York: Penguin, 2009.

Uma Chakravarti, “Who Speaks for Whom? The Queen, the *Dasi* and Sexual Politics in the *Sabbaparvan*.” In *Mahabharata Now: Narration, Aesthetics, Ethics*, eds. Arindam Chakrabarti and Sibaji Bandyopadhyay, pp.132-152. New Delhi: Routledge, 2014.

Suggested:

John D. Smith, *The Mahabharata: An Abridged Translation*, pp.258-270 (“The Killing of Kicaka”). New York: Penguin, 2009.

Mukund Lath, “The Concept of *Anrsamsya* in the *Mahabharata*.” In *The Mahabharata Revisited*, ed. R. N. Dandekar, pp.113-119. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1990.

Frédérique Apffel-Marglin, “The Sacred Groves.” *Manushi* 92 (May-June 1994):22-32.

Irawati Karve, *Yuganta: The End of an Epoch*, pp.73-95 (“Draupadi”). Hyderabad: Orient BlackSwan, 2007.

Githa Hariharan, “When Bodies Speak.” *World Literature Today* 91, 2 (March-April 2017):16-20.

Kanad Sinha, “Redefining *Dharma* in a Time of Transition: *Anrsamasya* in the *Mahabharata* as an Alternative End of Human Life.” *Studies in History* 35, 2 (2019):147-161.

Week 5: Before the War

Film: *Bharat Ek Khoj 05: Mahabharata, Part I*. Dir. Shyam Benegal. 1988. (Krishna and Duryodhana: 19:28-37:47) [\[Link\]](#)

The Mahabharata, 2: The Book of the Assembly Hall 3: The Book of the Forest, trans. and ed. J. A. B. van Buitenen, pp.779-795 (“The Robbing of the Earrings”) Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975.

John D. Smith, *The Mahabharata: An Abridged Translation*, pp.293-296, 320-338 (“Perseverance,” “The Mission of the Blessed Lord”). New York: Penguin, 2009.

Suggested:

Film: *Rashmirathi: Ramdhari Singh Dinkar: Manoj Bajpeyi in Hindi Studio with Manish Gupta*. 2015. 8 min. [\[Link\]](#)

Pancaratraam: A Sanskrit Drama in Three Act Attributed to Bhasa, trans. C. R. Devadhar. Poona: Oriental Book Agency, 1957.

Karnabhara: The Trial of Karna: A One-Act Play Attributed to Bhasa, Based on Episodes of the Mahabharata, trans. Barbara Stoler Miller. In *Essays on the Mahabharata*, ed. Arvind Sharma, pp.57-67. Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1991.

Ramdhari Singh Dinkar, *Charioteer of Rays (Rashmirathi)*, trans. B. N. Mishra, pp.41-47, 62-78, 100-105 (Mission, Earrings, Exile). New Delhi: VL Media Solutions, 2016.

Week 6: Samvad

The Mahabharata, 4: The Book of Virata 5: The Book of the Effort, trans. and ed. J. A. B. van Buitenen pp.442-461 (“The Temptation of Karna”). Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978.

Ramdhari Singh Dinkar, *Charioteer of Rays (Rashmirathi)*, trans. B. N. Mishra, pp.47-61, 79-99 (Krishna-Karna; Kunti-Karna). New Delhi: VL Media Solutions, 2016.

Suggested:

Irawati Karve, *Yuganta: The End of an Epoch*, pp.40-58 (“Kunti”). Hyderabad: Orient BlackSwan, 2007.

Rabindranath Tagore, “Karna Kunti Samvad,” trans. Ahona Panda. *Scroll.in*, November 8, 2015.

Week 7: The Gita

Film: *Bharat Ek Khoj 05: Mahabharata, Part I*. Dir. Shyam Benegal. 1988. (Bhagavad Gita: 37:47-47:08) [\[Link\]](#)

John D. Smith, *The Mahabharata: An Abridged Translation*, pp.353-366 (“The Sermon of the Blessed Lord”). New York: Penguin, 2009.

M. K. Gandhi, *The Message of the Gita*, pp.3-21 (“The Message of the Gita,” “Gita and Nonviolence,” “*Yajna* or the Science of Sacrifice,” “Central Teaching of the Gita,” “The Place of the *Gita* in Hinduism”). Ahmedabad: Navajivan, 1959.

Ramchandra Gandhi, “Is Ahimsa Non-violence?” In *I am Thou: Meditations on the Truth of India*, pp.159-162. Pune: Indian Philosophical Quarterly Publications, 1984.

Richard H. Davis, *The Bhagavad Gita: A Biography*, pp.10-35, 115-153 (from “The *Bhagavad Gita* in the Time of Its Composition,” “Krishna, the *Gita*, and the Indian Nation”). Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015.

Suggested:

The Bhagavadgita in the Mahabharata, trans. and ed. J. A. B. van Buitenen. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981.

B. R. Ambedkar, “Krishna and His Gita.” In *The Essential Writings of B. R. Ambedkar*, ed. Valerian Rodrigues, pp.193-204. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002.

Peter Adamson and Jonardon Ganeri, “World on a String: The *Bhagavad-Gita*.” In *Classical Indian Philosophy: A History of Philosophy Without Any Gaps, Volume 5*, pp.84-90. New York: Oxford University Press, 2020.

Week 8: Midterm Exam

Week 9: Bhishma and Amba

The Mahabharata, 1: The Book of the Beginning, trans. and ed. J. A. B. van Buitenen, pp.224-237 (Bhishma, Amba, Vyasa). Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973.

The Mahabharata, 4: The Book of Virata 5: The Book of the Effort, trans. and ed. J. A. B. van Buitenen pp.496-528 (from “Amba”). Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978.

John D. Smith, *The Mahabharata: An Abridged Translation*, pp.398-412 (from “The Killing of Bhishma”). New York: Penguin, 2009.

Suggested:

The Mahabharata, 1: The Book of the Beginning, trans. and ed. J. A. B. van Buitenen, pp.405-412 (“The Abduction of Subhadra”). Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973.

John D. Smith, *The Mahabharata: An Abridged Translation*, pp.33-39 (from “Origins”). New York: Penguin, 2009.

Irawati Karve, *Yuganta: The End of an Epoch*, pp.10-28 (“The Final Effort”). Hyderabad: Orient BlackSwan, 2007.

Alf Hiltebeitel, *Dharma: Its Early History in Law, Religion, and Narrative*, pp.354-373 (“Mother Kali Satyavati”). New York: Oxford University Press, 2011.

Ramdhari Singh Dinkar, *Charioteer of Rays (Rashmirathi)*, trans. B. N. Mishra, pp.105-110 (Karna-Bhishma). New Delhi: VL Media Solutions, 2016.

Ruth Vanita, *The Dharma of Justice in the Sanskrit Epics: Debates on Varna, Gender, and Species*, pp.114-134 (“Revenge, Forgiveness, and Gender-Crossing”). New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2022.

Week 10: The Death of Karna

John D. Smith, *The Mahabharata: An Abridged Translation*, pp.497-500, 512-525 (from “The Killing of Karna”). New York: Penguin, 2009.

Ramdhari Singh Dinkar, *Charioteer of Rays (Rashmirathi)*, trans. B. N. Mishra, pp.122-150 (Killing of Karna). New Delhi: VL Media Solutions, 2016.

Suggested:

Film: *Rajneeti*. Dir. Prakash Jha. 2010. 170 min.

Ashis Nandy, *An Ambiguous Journey to the City: The Village and Other Odd Ruins of the Self in the Indian Imagination*, pp.28-41. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001.

Alf Hiltebeitel, “Krishna in the *Mahabharata*: The Death of Karna.” In *Krishna: A Sourcebook*, ed. Edwin F. Bryant, pp.23-76. New York: Oxford University Press, 2007.

Irawati Karve, *Yuganta: The End of an Epoch*, pp.123-140 (“Karna”). Hyderabad: Orient BlackSwan, 2007.

Emily Hudson, *Disorienting Dharma: Ethics and the Aesthetics of Suffering in the Mahabharata*, pp.178-198 (from “Heaven’s Riddles or the Hell Trick: Theodicy and Narrative Strategies”). New York: Oxford University Press, 2013.

Week 11: The Breaking of Thighs

Film: *Bharat Ek Khoj 06: Mahabharata, Part II*. Dir. Shyam Benegal. 1988. (Bhima, Dushasana, and Duryodhana: 2:08-6:56; Bhasa’s *Urubhangam* (Breaking of Thighs): 6:57-19:40) [\[Link\]](#)

John D. Smith, *The Mahabharata: An Abridged Translation*, pp.541-542, 549-562 (from “The Pilgrimage,” “The Duel with Clubs”). New York: Penguin, 2009.

Bimal Krishna Matilal, “The Throne: Was Duryodhana Wrong?” In *Ethics and Epics: The Collected Essays of Bimal Krishna Matilal, Volume II*, ed. Jonardon Ganeri, pp.109-122. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002.

Suggested:

Edwin Gerow, “*Urubhanga*: The Breaking of the Thighs: A One-Act Play Attributed to Bhasa, Based on Episodes of the *Mahabharata*.” In *Essays on the Mahabharata*, ed. Arvind Sharma, pp.68-83.

Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1991.

David Gitomer, “King Duryodhana: The Mahabharata Discourse of Sinning and Virtue in Epic and Drama.” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 112, 2 (April - June 1992):222-232.

Week 12: Ashvatthaman and Gandhari

Film: *Bharat Ek Khoj 06: Mahabharata, Part II*. Dir. Shyam Benegal. 1988. (Dharamvir Bharati’s *Andha Yug* (Age of Darkness): 19:41-34:21) [\[Link\]](#)

John D. Smith, *The Mahabharata: An Abridged Translation*, pp.563-581, 582-596 (“The Night Raid,” “The Women”). New York: Penguin, 2009.

The Mahabharata, 11: The Book of the Women 12: The Book of Peace, Part One, trans. and ed. James L. Fitzgerald, pp.70-72 (Gandhari's Curse). Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004.

Jayanti Alam, "Gandhari, the Rebel." *Economic and Political Weekly* 29, 25 (June 18, 1994):1517-1519.

Suggested:

Irawati Karve, *Yuganta: The End of an Epoch*, pp.109-122 ("Paradharmo Bhayavahah"). Hyderabad: Orient BlackSwan, 2007.

Dharamvir Bharati, *Andha Yug: The Age of Darkness*, trans. Alok Bhalla, pp.59-82 ("Act Four: Gandhari's Curse"). Honolulu: The University of Hawai'i Press, 2010. (OUP edition: pp.95-125)

Ramdhari Singh Dinkar, *Kurukshetra*, trans. B. N. Mishra. New Delhi: V L Media Solutions, 2017.

K Srilata, "Says Gandhari to Her Friend: The Life That Might Have Been Mine." In *Footnotes to the Mahabharata*. Chennai: Context, 2025.

Week 13: Exodus

John D. Smith, *The Mahabharata: An Abridged Translation*, pp.711-714, 745-750, 753-755, 756-770, 779-791 (from "The Horse Sacrifice," "The Vision of the Sons," "The Arrival of Narada," "The Clubs," "The Ascent to Heaven"). New York: Penguin, 2009.

Irawati Karve, *Yuganta: The End of an Epoch*, pp.29-39 ("Gandhari"). Hyderabad: Orient BlackSwan, 2007.

Mahasweta Devi, *After Kurukshetra: Three Stories*, trans. Anjum Katyal, pp.27-44 ("Kunti and the Nishadin"). Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2005.

Suggested:

Irawati Karve, *Yuganta: The End of an Epoch*, pp.59-72, 141-161 ("Father and Son?" "Krishna Vasudeva"). Hyderabad: Orient BlackSwan, 2007.

Dharamvir Bharati, *Andha Yug: The Age of Darkness*, trans. Alok Bhalla, pp.83-110 ("Act Five: Victory and a Series of Suicides," "Epilogue: Death of the Lord"). Honolulu: The University of Hawai'i Press, 2010. (OUP edition: pp.127-162)

Emily Hudson, *Disorienting Dharma: Ethics and the Aesthetics of Suffering in the Mahabharata*, pp.198-217 (from "Heaven's Riddles or the Hell Trick: Theodicy and Narrative Strategies"). New York: Oxford University Press, 2013.

Week 14: Concluding Thoughts

Week 15: Final Exam