

A Synopsis of the *Mahabharata*

The *Mahabharata* is a Sanskrit epic based on an internecine struggle between two sets of cousins for the most powerful throne in North India in the late second millennium B.C.E. Around this core are strung other stories and bits of mythology, as well as philosophical and religious compendia. One such is the *Bhagavadgita*, in which Krishna, as God, addresses one of the central heroes, Arjuna, as Everyman, in regard to doing his duty without concern for the fruits of his labors—an emphasis on means over ends which was to be a hallmark of Mahatma Gandhi’s ethical philosophy in this century. Another is the Sakuntala episode, which inspired Kaladasa’s famed play in approximately the middle of the first millennium C.E., and relates the birth of India’s great ancestor, Bharata, a name (or, more accurately, its derivative) by which India is known in Indian languages (hence, *Mahabharata*, or the story of the great descendants of Bharata).

The result is a loosely tied work of almost two and a half million words (in an unabridged complete English translation). It lacks the dramatic and structural power of the *Iliad*, although it shares certain similarities with its Indo-European counterpart and its mythological background. Hence, while the *Iliad* is about the climax of a central war, the *Mahabharata* builds up to and from the war, the battle itself being but a small (albeit decisive) part of the work as a whole. And, like the *Iliad*, a woman, Draupadi, is central (but with greater character than that of Helen).

While probably lacking the degree of emotional devotion attached to the other great Sanskrit epic, the *Ramayana*, it nonetheless is a fount for much in Hindu culture, folk and classic, oral and written. It is arguably the most important, and perhaps the greatest, literary work in Indian culture.



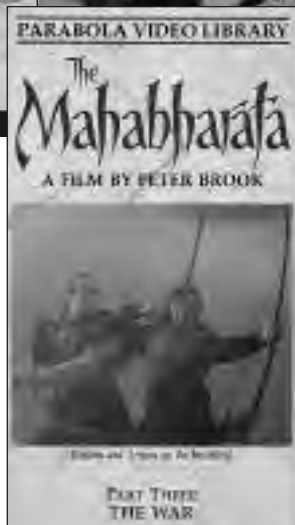
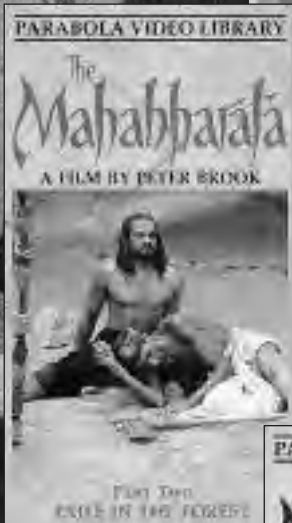
COLLAGE CREATED WITH TWO IMAGES:
PHOTO OF KARNA (JEFFREY KISSOON) AND SHAKUNI
(TUNCSEL KURTIZ) IN THE BATTLE SCENE FROM
THE FILM *THE MAHABHARATA*.
PHOTO BY GILLES ABEGG, © SYGMA, PARIS
FROM *THE MAHABHARATA*:

PETER BROOK'S *EPIC IN THE MAKING*
AND MANUSCRIPT ILLUSTRATION OF THE BATTLE OF
KURUKSHETRA. FIFTEENTH-CENTURY, TAMIL NADU, ORIENTAL
MUSEUM, DURHAM UNIVERSITY

OPTIONS IN TEACHING THE

Mahabharata

By Fritz Blackwell



THREE PART VIDEO OF
THE MAHABHARATA.
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For several years I have taught a summer course on “Civilization of Classical India,” which meets two hours a day for four weeks. I have found it advantageous to use primarily literary works, with history materials being supplemental.

The *Mahabharata* has continually been the single most important feature, and I have relied most strongly on Peter Brook’s five-hour and eighteen-minute film version.¹ There are three cassettes (97, 111, and 110 minutes respectively), each taking up a class period.

Although these videos can be used at any point in the course, they do make a grand impression in the first week. After the initial Monday's introduction to the course, the videos are used Tuesday through Thursday, with Friday intended for discussion. During the week the students have read the *Rāmāyana*² and the *Shilappadikaram*.³ Comparison of the principal female characters in the three works provides a good basis for the discussion. Since the *Shilappadikaram* is Tamil rather than Sanskrit, differences between the cultures can also be brought in for discussion.

One of the many popular versions of the *Mahabharata*⁴ can be used as a text as well; and, if one wants to stress religion and ethics, the *Bhagavadgita*.⁵ Usually I do not require a reading of the *Mahabharata*, but I do put the script of the video⁶ on reserve and provide information on the *Bhagavadgita* (which is necessarily treated succinctly in the film).

Students respond very well to the film—understandably so, for it is a work by Peter Brook, and it is extremely well-acted by a thoroughly multicultural, multinational cast. A few years ago an Indian student gave me a copy of a paper in which he stated that he found the video to be “extremely Westernized,” and yet while concerned about its ability to convey the *Mahabharata*'s spiritual depth, he nonetheless felt that it was “still a good film as it gives Westerners an insight into what Hinduism is all about,” and that Brook had done a fine job.⁷

Indeed, the fact that it is “Westernized” in part explains its appeal to American students (although I'd be surprised if American students were to consider it “Westernized”). As it is a fine work of dramatic cinematography, one might want to put on reserve a wonderfully illustrated explication of the production of the film, *The Mahabharata: Peter Brook's Epic in the Making*.⁸

There are a considerable number of aids one can use, both for instructional preparation and for in-class presentation. Indeed, there is enough supportive and peripheral material that it would be possible to have a class on the *Mahabharata* itself (that is, assuming sufficient student interest to meet minimum enrollment requirements).

The video comes with an explanatory pamphlet which could also be of interest to students. Of greater value are the long introductions to the three volumes (five of the eighteen books which constitute the epic) of the translation by J. A. B. van Buitenen; and, likewise, the introduction to P. Lal's one-volume prose version.⁹

Photos by Gilles Abegg from the book
THE MAHABHARATA
Peter Brook's Epic in the Making



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THE FILM BEGINS WITH VYASA TELLING THE BOY THE STORY OF HIS RACE. THE GOD, GANESHA OFFERS TO BE THE POET'S SCRIBE. Left to right: Robert Langdon Lloyd as Vyasa, the poet; Antonin Stahly-Vishwanadan as the Boy and Bruce Meyers as Ganesha.



Kunti uses the power of her mantra.
Miriam Goldschmidt as Kunti, mother of three of the Panavas.



Gandhari (Helene Patarot) joins her husband in his blindness by covering her eyes with a bandage which she will never remove.



THE GAME OF DICE. Yudhishtira (Andrzej Seweryn) loses everything, including his brothers and their wife, Draupadi. In a second game of dice the Pandavas are condemned to twelve years exile in the forest. The blind king Dhritrashtra (Ryszard Cielak), and his wife, Gandhari (Helene Patarot) listen to the game of dice played between their sons, the Kauravas, and their cousins, the Pandavas.



DRAUPADI IN EXILE.
Played by Mallika Sarabhai.



ARJUNA IN THE MOUNTAINS DURING EXILE.
Played by Vittorio Mezzogiorno.



KARNA TELLS BHISHMA THAT HE WANTS THE ABSOLUTE WEAPON.
Karna, Jeffrey Kissoon. Bhishma, Sotigui Kouyate.

The short introductions to many other versions are often problematic (e.g., Chakravarthi Narasimhan's contention that it is "very difficult to find a true heroine in these pages," and his rationalized belittling of Draupadi¹⁰). But such is not always the case. B. A. van Nooten's introduction to William Buck's creative translation is outstanding; even more so, however, is his succinct analysis for the Twayne World Authors Series.¹¹

Two other secondary sources are also of considerable value: Iravati Karve's *Yuganta*¹² is mostly a series of thought-provoking character studies; a short introductory essay by Barbara Stoler Miller concludes with a substantially presented list of nine "topics for discussion" (there are numerous other essays in this work which are useful for background and comparative purposes, especially Miller's "The Imaginative Universe of Indian Literature").¹³

There are also items through which one can increase students' appreciation for the influence of the *Mahabharata*, such as that on the dance-drama Kathakali.¹⁴ Kathakali portrayal of incidents from the epic, as well as some from other styles of dance, can be shown in class.¹⁵

The epics have had an influence on folk tradition through "oral epics."¹⁶ For example, Karine Schomer has noted similarities and parallels between *Alha* (a Hindi oral epic popular in North Central India) and the *Mahabharata*; while the latter marks the end of an era, so does the former, in regard to the Muslim conquest and the resulting termination of Hindu rule in North India.¹⁷

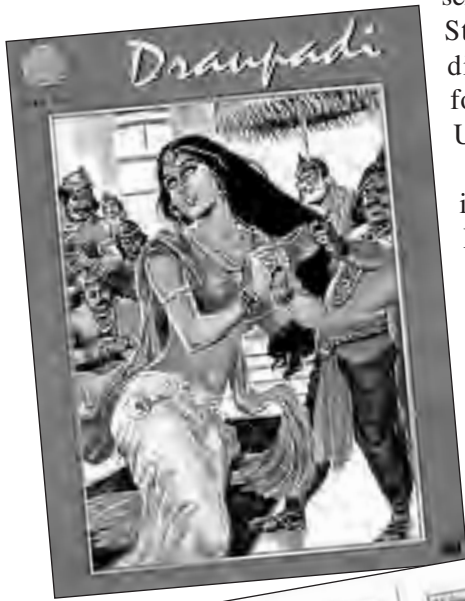
The *Mahabharata* can be demonstrated to have great hold on contemporary popular culture, from a comic book depiction to the extremely popular ninety-three episode soap opera presentation on Doordarshan (the Indian government television network) on Sunday mornings.

I have the July 1990 *Newstrack* video magazine, which shows clips from the series and has prominent figures from various fields commenting on the production.¹⁸ Shown the day after the conclusion (it is short) of Brook's series, it makes quite a contrast. Students find it rather curious.

I also use an overhead transparency of the blurb on the back of a paperback novel, which has the following quote from the book: "Mohan had managed to get the job. I never asked him how he did it. If Gandhari, who bandaged her eyes to become blind like her husband, could be called an ideal wife, I was an ideal wife too. I bandaged my eyes tightly."¹⁹

A more pertinent example from modern literature is Lakshmi Narain Lal's Hindi play *Mr. Abhimanyu*, which has also been published in English.²⁰ (The Hindi publication has five black-and-white photographs from the play which can be made into transparencies.) Like the epic *Abhimanyu*, the hero is killed by his family, but in a decidedly modern twist, the death is of his moral character rather than of his physical body. Striving to do what is right, and to fight corruption, he is felled, outnumbered and outmaneuvered, including by his father and wife, who are themselves victims of the complacency and corruption rampant in contemporary society. An in-class description of the play can place a contemporary stamp on the events and meanings of the *Mahabharata*.

If there is time in the course, Shashi Tharoor's lengthy satire *The Great Indian Novel*²¹ can add even further to the contemporary relevance of the epic. Political



AMAR CHITRA KATHA COMIC BOOK. VOL. 542.
Draupadi
RETOLD BY KAMALA CHANDRAKANT.
ARTWORK BY PRATAP MULICK
© INDIA BOOK HOUSE LIMITED, 1974
Available from the Navrang Inc. Web site:
www.navrang.com/navrang/

events and characters from the independence movement and after are caustically juxtaposed onto the epic, with the political figures barely, but effectively, disguised under the names of the epic characters. A couple of caveats are here in order: the students need an acquaintance with, and interest in, twentieth-century Indian political history; and, the one time I used the novel an older Indian student was very annoyed with it, and with me for using it. The advantage is that it presents a real-life contrast to dharma as espoused in the epic.

Yet another example of the power of the epic on literature is the poetic dialogue “Karna and Kunti” by Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore.²² Years ago I was given a nine-page off-print by the translator, Humayun Kabir, parts of which I read to the class for comparison with the very dramatic episode in the video, in which the son denies his mother, with tragic consequences.

Five short plays by Bhasa (c. third century B.C.E. up to third century C.E.) deal with the end of the *Mahabharata*. Particularly effective is the *Urubhanga* or “Broken Thighs,” which presents the dying Duryodhana in a sympathetic light. After bidding farewell to his wives and children, he realizes the error of his ways and the wrongs he perpetrated on the Pandavas.²³ This is high drama, more reminiscent of ancient Greek tragedy than of standard classical Sanskrit drama (e.g., Duryodhana dies on stage).

I also use Kalidasa’s “Sakuntala” in this course, and I have the students read the episode in the epic wherein she is much tougher and the king much less sympathetic than in the play. The contrast between the two sets of characters allows the students to appreciate Kalidasa’s great dramatic abilities, as well as the great power of the epic characterizations.²⁴

Depending upon the students, comparisons with the other great Indo-European epic, the *Iliad*—including the surrounding mythology—can lead to rewarding discussion; that is, if one is fortunate enough to have students who are familiar with the *Iliad*!

I am not sure that the contrast between characters works well (e.g., Arjuna, Achilles; Yudhishthira, Agamemnon; Karna, Hector), with the exception of Helen and Draupadi. Helen, the first time she speaks, refers to herself: “Slut that I am.” Draupadi would never, never say such a thing. She would kill first (and, in a sense, given the assembly scene of the disrobing and the subsequent poetically ironic and karmic deaths of Duryodhana and Duhsasana, she does; the scene is actually more graphic in the epic than in the video). But more general comparisons can work: Both epics involve wars, with women central. The *Mahabharata* is so huge in volume as to have unwieldy structure, expressing the comprehensive nature and purpose of the work; the *Iliad* is tightly structured, mirroring Western poetic standards. In the *Iliad* death is a specter; in the *Mahabharata*, an enigma. In the *Iliad* the role of the warrior is conceived as a matter of pride; in the *Mahabharata*, as duty—dharma.

Indeed, this is an epic not only of the internecine fratricidal war among Aryan descendants for the control of North India, it is a war of dharma and adharma (hence its concern with ethics and religious values); it is not coincidental that the same prefix—with necessary linguistic adjustments—starts the name of the eldest Kaurava brothers: *duh*—as in *duhkha*—which means “difficult, very bad.”

It is necessary to stress the underlying concept to and beyond dharma: *rta*, cosmic (and thereby social) harmony. The term is cognate with the English words “right” and “straight.”

There is, by the concept of *rta* and the underlying philosophy of the *Mahabharata*, meaning and purpose to the cosmos, and to existence within it. It is one’s dharma (moral duty) to do nothing to diminish that cosmic/social harmony; indeed, it is one’s duty to do everything one can to preserve and increase it. That is what the *Mahabharata* is about.

There is nothing esoteric about this. It is what Gandhi meant by the application of *ahimsa* as a positive force; it is what Martin Luther King meant by his statement that “the universe is on the side of justice.”²⁵



SCULPTURE OF KRISHNA (RECLINING) WITH VARIOUS GODS ABOVE AND PANDAVAS WITH DRAUPADI BELOW. DAHAVATARA TEMPLE, SIXTH-CENTURY, DEOGRAH: JOHN FULLER, CAMBRIDGE.

SOURCE: *CULTURAL ATLAS OF INDIA* BY GORDON JOHNSON © 1996, ANDROMEDA OXFORD LIMITED

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THE Mahabharata



BHISHMA (SOTIGUI KOUYATE) CONTEMPLATES THE PROBLEM OF LIFE-LONG CELIBACY.
PHOTO BY GILLES ABEGG, © SYGMA, Paris
FROM *THE MAHABHARATA: PETER BROOK'S EPIC IN THE MAKING*

NOTES

1. Les Productions du 3eme Etage, in association with Channel 4 Television Co. Ltd., the Brooklyn Academy of Music (New York: Parabola Video Library, 1989).
2. R. K. Narayan's version has the advantages of being short and highly readable. (New York: Penguin, 1972).
3. For this undergraduate course, the compact translation by Alain Danielou works well. (New York: New Directions, 1965; now available from W. W. Norton and from Penguin India).
4. My favorite is the "English version based on select verses" of Chakravarthi V. Narasimhan. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1965; a new edition has just appeared). A shorter version has been "retold" by R. K. Narayan. (New Delhi: Vision Books, 1987). A longer somewhat creative rendering is that of William Buck, appearing in paperback both from the University of California Press (1981) and the New American Library (1979).
5. A recent translation has much to be commended for clarity and readability: Ashok Kumar Malhotra, *Transcreation of the Bhagavad Gita* (Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1999).
6. Jean-Claude Carriere, *The Mahabharata: A Play Based Upon the Indian Classic*, translated by Peter Brook (New York: Harper and Row, 1985).
7. Sameer Handa, for a freshman composition class. A collection of critical essays on the production has been edited by David Williams: *Peter Brook and the Mahabharata: Critical Perspectives* (New York: Routledge, 1991).
8. Garry O'Connor, *The Mahabharata: Peter Brook's Epic in the Making* (San Francisco: Mercury House, 1989).
9. J. A. B. van Buitenen, *The Mahabharata*, Volumes 1-3 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973-1978, re-released in 1990).
P. Lal, *The Mahabharata of Vyasa* (New Delhi: Vikas, 1980); P. Lal also has an on-going verse "transcreation" of slim volumes, now well over 150, dating from 1961 and published by his Writers Workshop in Calcutta.
Van Buitenen's translations were enthusiastically heralded (they even got the attention of *The New Yorker*); unfortunately, he died before completing the translations. Nevertheless, a complete and readable translation does exist and is available in four paperback volumes from South Asia Books (Columbia, Missouri): *The Mahabharata of Krishna-Dwaipayani Vyasa*, translated by Kisari Mohan Ganguli (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1970; paperback edition, 1993).
10. pp. xxiii-xxiv.
11. New York: Twayne, 1971.
12. New Delhi: Sangam Books, 1974.
13. Barbara Stoler Miller, ed. *Columbia Project on Asia in the Curriculum: Masterworks of Asian Literature in Comparative Perspective—A Guide for Teaching* (Armonk, New York: M. E. Sharpe, 1994), 123-132 and 3-14.
14. Clifford R. Jones and Betty True Jones, *Kathakali: An Introduction to the Dance-Drama of Kerala* (San Francisco: American Society for Eastern Arts; and New York: Theatre Arts Books, 1970).
15. *The JVC Video Anthology of World Music and Dance: South Asia I: India 1; and South Asia II: India 2* (produced in Tokyo by JVC, Victor Company of Japan, 1988 and distributed from Cambridge, Massachusetts, by Rounder Records, 1990).
16. Stuart H. Blackburn, et al., eds., *Oral Epics of India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989).
17. In Blackburn, et al., "Paradigms for the Kali Yuga: The Heroes of the Alha Epic and Their Fate," p. 245.
18. The comic book edition, one among many on Hindu myths and classics, is number thirty in the Amar Chitra Katha series, published out of Bombay in several languages. The video was produced, as part of a monthly series for distribution abroad, by *India Today*. The script for the television series, translated from Hindi into English, has been published in ten volumes by Writers Workshop of Calcutta, 1991, and distributed out of Allahabad by Rupa Books. Speculative discussion upon effect of such in-your-face popularization (one could say vulgarization) upon the Muslim minority in this era of *hindutva*, and implications for the future of secular democracy in India, could be of peripheral interest to some students, and might be mentioned in passing.
19. Shashi Deshpande, *That Long Silence* (London: Virago, 1988).
20. Hindi original (Delhi: National Publishing House, 1971); English translation by Suresh Kohli (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1971). The play was first staged in New Delhi, January 11, 1969.
21. New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1989.
22. *Indian Literature*, III (October 1959-March 1960).
23. Henry W. Wells, trans., *Sanskrit Plays from Epic Sources* (Baroda: The Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda Press, 1968), 98.
24. Volume I of van Buitenen's translation, pp. 155-171. I am not resorting to hyperbole. What Kalidasa achieved with this brief episode is in itself worthy of a study in dramaturgy.
25. Martin Luther King, Jr., *Stride Toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986; originally published, 1958), 106.