

Spring 2007



ANS/CPLIT 135 Living Indian Epics

T/Th 1-2:15 pm
Root 202
Office Hours:
Weds. 1-4 pm and by appointment

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Course Description

“In India and South-east Asia, no one ever reads the *Ramayana* or the *Mahabharata* for the first time. The stories are there, always already.”

- A.K. Ramanujan

This course will introduce you to two fundamental mythological pillars of Indian society – the great Hindu epics of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. Each thought to be composed almost three thousand years ago (give or take a few centuries), these two epic narratives have continued to be re-told and re-imagined in changing social and cultural contexts ever since. This course is dedicated to understanding the nature of these ancient epics as modern, “living” texts in contemporary Indian society. After developing a basic understanding of the major events and characters of each epic, we will explore them in the modern contexts of literature, comic books, film, television, and political rhetoric. We will ask whether the resonance of these epics varies in each of these modern contexts, or if their “meanings” are as immortal as the tales themselves. Therefore this course will provide you with an introduction not only to the fascinating stories of the ancient epic literature itself, but also to major issues of religion, gender, popular culture, and social politics in contemporary India.

Course Materials

RK Narayan, *The Ramayana: A Shortened Modern Prose Version of the Indian Epic* (Penguin Classics, 1998)

RK Narayan, *The Mahabharata: A Shortened Modern Prose Version of the Indian Epic* (University of Chicago Press, 2000)

Barbara Stoler-Miller, *The Bhagavad-Gita: Krishna's Counsel in a Time of War* (Bantam Classics, 1986)

Class Schedule

Week One **Introducing the Epics and Reading the Ramayana**

Jan. 16 introduction to epic literature in India

Jan. 18 getting the plot down I
- Chapters 1-4 in R.K. Narayan's *Ramayana* (p. 1-77)

Week Two **Reading The Ramayana**

Jan. 23 getting the plot down II
- finish R.K. Narayan's *The Ramayana* (p. 78-171)

Jan. 25 in class: QUIZ on characters, plotline of the *Ramayana*
- A.K. Ramanujan, "Three Hundred Ramayanas: Five Examples and Three Thoughts on Translation"

Week Three **Alternative Versions: Valmiki, Tulsidas, Banker, Nirala**

Jan. 30 Comparing episodes: the maiming of Surpanakha
- "Wilderness: Chapter Two" from Valmiki's *Ramayana* (~500 BC, trans. Arshia Sattar) (p. 242-250)
- "Surpanakha Disfigured by Lakshmana" from Tulsidas's *Ramcharitmanas* (16th century, trans. SP Bahadur) (p. 183-184) (in-class handout)
- Nirala (~1930, trans. David Rubin), "In the Forest of Panchvati" (p.51-66)
- Chapters 14-17 from Ashok Banker's *Demons of Chitrakut* (2004) (p. 535-571)

Feb. 1 Comparing episodes: Sita's Fire Trial and Descent into the Earth
- "War: Chapter Thirteen" through "Epilogue: Chapter Two" from Valmiki's *Ramayana* (~500 BC, trans. Arshia Sattar) (p. 629-679)
- "Sita Returns to Rama" and "The Ordeal by Fire" from Tulsidas's *Ramcharitmanas* (16th century, trans. SP Bahadur) (p. 306-308) (in-class handout)
- "Fire and Flood: The Testing of Sita in Kampan's *Imramavataram*," by David Shulman in Richman, ed. *Many Ramayanas* (UCLA: 1991)

Week Four **Televising the Ramayana**

Feb. 6 in class: watch episode(s)
- Philip Lutgendorf, "Ramayan: The Video"
- News Articles on the Television Ramayana (from 1987-1988):
 - "The Ramayan (Weekly Cover Story)" *Illustrated Weekly of India*
 - "Divine Sensation," *India Today*
 - "The Second Coming," *India Today*

- “The Riddle of the Sagar Ramayana,” *Economic and Political Weekly*
- “The Ramayana Syndrome” by Romila Thapar in *Seminar*
- Feb. 8 - Purnima Mankekar, “Mediating Modernities: The Ramayan and the Creation of Community and Nation” *Screening Culture, Viewing Politics* (Duke: 1999)

- Week Five **The Cinematic Sita**
- Feb. 13 The Bollywood treatment: Rajkumar Santoshi’s *Lajja* (Shame, 2001)
PAPER ONE DUE
- Feb. 15 Desiring Sita: Deepa Mehta’s *Fire* (1998)

- Week Six **The Ramayana in Modern Politics: The Ayodhya Controversy**
- Feb. 20 in class: watch documentary “Rama ke Naam”
FILM REVIEW DUE
- Feb. 22 - selections from *India Today* special issue on Ayodhya (Dec. 31, 1992)
- Sheldon Pollock, “Ramayana and Political Imagination in India”

- Week Seven **Rama, Sita, Hanuman, and Ravana in Modern Popular Imagination**
- Feb. 27 - Madhu Kishwar, “Yes to Sita, No to Ram”
- Philip Lutgendorf, “My Hanuman is Bigger than Yours”
- Mar. 1 in class: watch (short!) documentary “We Are Not Your Monkeys”
- Paula Richman, “E.V. Ramasami’s Reading of the Ramayana”

- Week Eight **The Global Ramayana**
- Mar. 6 in class: watch “Sitayana”, “Rama: Prince of Ayodhya” (Japanese anime version)
- no reading (review for midterm!)
- Mar. 8 **MIDTERM**

- SPRING BREAK**

- Week Nine **Reading the Mahabharata**
- Mar. 27 getting the plot down I
RK Narayan’s *The Mahabharata*, entire
- Mar. 29 getting the plot down II

- Week Ten **Focus on the Bhagavad-Gita**
- April 3 in class: QUIZ on characters, plotline of the *Mahabharata*
- Barbara Stoler-Miller’s *The Bhagavad-Gita: Krishna’s Counsel in a Time of War* (entire)
- April 5 - J.T.F. Jordens, “Gandhi and the Bhagavadgita”

- Week Eleven **Mahabharata on Television**
- April 10 in class: watch episode of Bhagavad- Gita/ revelation of Krishna
- April 12 in class: watch episode of Draupadi’s disrobing
- Purnima Mankekar, “Television Tales, National Narratives, and a Woman’s Rage: Multiple Interpretations of Draupadi’s”Disrobing”

Week Twelve **More Bollywood! More Literature!**

April 17 Bapu's *Hum Paanch* (We Five, 1980)

April 19 Draupadi in literature

- Mahasweta Devi, "Draupadi" (with an introduction by Gayatri Spivak)
- *Draupadi*: the comic book (Amar Chitra Katha)

FILM REVIEW DUE

Week Thirteen **Internationalising the Mahabharata**

April 24 introducing Peter Brook

- Alf Hildebeitel, "Transmitting *Mahabharatas*: Another Look at Peter Brook"

April 26 Peter Brook's *Mahabharata*

Week Fourteen **Wrapping Up**

May 1 TBA

May 3 TBA