

Book Review: Bargaining with a Rising India: Lessons from the Mahabharata by Amrita Narlikar and Aruna Narlikar

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*The need to negotiate effectively with India is only growing as its power rises, and in the literature on international negotiation experimental studies point to specific behavioural characteristics of Indian negotiators. This book focuses on India's negotiating traditions through the lens of the classical Sanskrit text, the Mahabharata, and investigates the continuities and changes in India's negotiation behaviour as a rising power. A wonderful read for those interested in trade pacts, negotiation strategy, and India's foreign relations, finds **Merlin Linehan**.*



Bargaining with a Rising India: Lessons from the Mahabharata. Amrita Narlikar and Aruna Narlikar. Oxford University Press. 2014.

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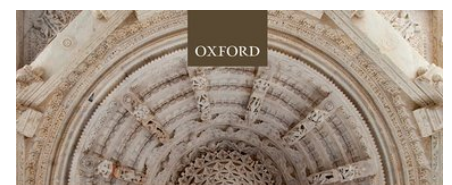
Last year the long awaited conclusion to the Doha Development Round came to a shuddering halt at the final lap, with the head of the now troubled WTO Roberto Azevêdo tearfully announcing the failure of the latest talks in Bali. It was perhaps no surprise that India was the sticking point; despite the presence of a new business-friendly government the country had refused to back down over the issue of farming subsidies. India, it seems, has turned its stubbornness in international negotiations into an art form. Many have equated this to the country's suffering under unfair trade agreements over the years, or more simply that India would not risk food security for the sake for the WTO.

However, this new text argues there is a deeper cultural root to this behaviour. Amrita and Aruna Narlikar's *Bargaining with a Rising India* builds on Amrita's previous book *New Powers*, which made occasional and playful use of literary allegories to describe the negotiating stances of China, India and Brazil.

Amrita is an academic expert on multilateral organisations, based at the University of Cambridge, and her mother Aruna is an [expert on Sanskrit](#). Together they have written this book which takes the concepts outlined in *New Powers* one step further, arguing that India's negotiation strategy should be viewed through the prism of the Mahabharata, an Indian epic and cultural fountainhead whose influence emanates through to the mind-set of those politicians and diplomats in control of India's trade policy and foreign relations.

The Mahabharata is an epic poem told in Sanskrit, with origins probably falling between the 8th and 9th centuries BCE. It is a tale of various warring royal families and deities as well as parts (like the Bhagavad Gita) that offer philosophical and spiritual guidance. While we cannot make a direct comparisons, the cultural impact of the poem can be likened to the Bible, the works of Shakespeare, or the Qur'an. The authors posit that the cultural influence of the epic provides an explanation to why modern Indian strategy in international negotiations is stubborn, moralistic, and often framed in a manner best described as zero sum. But how could the reading of an ancient text mutate into a particular negotiation style?

In the second chapter, devoted to India's negotiation strategy, the authors explain how India commonly uses the distributive bargaining technique: an all or nothing approach which is an attempt to redefine the issue space and find compromise, usually justified by a lofty moral principle, as opposed to an integrative approach. This is borne out by



Bargaining with a Rising India

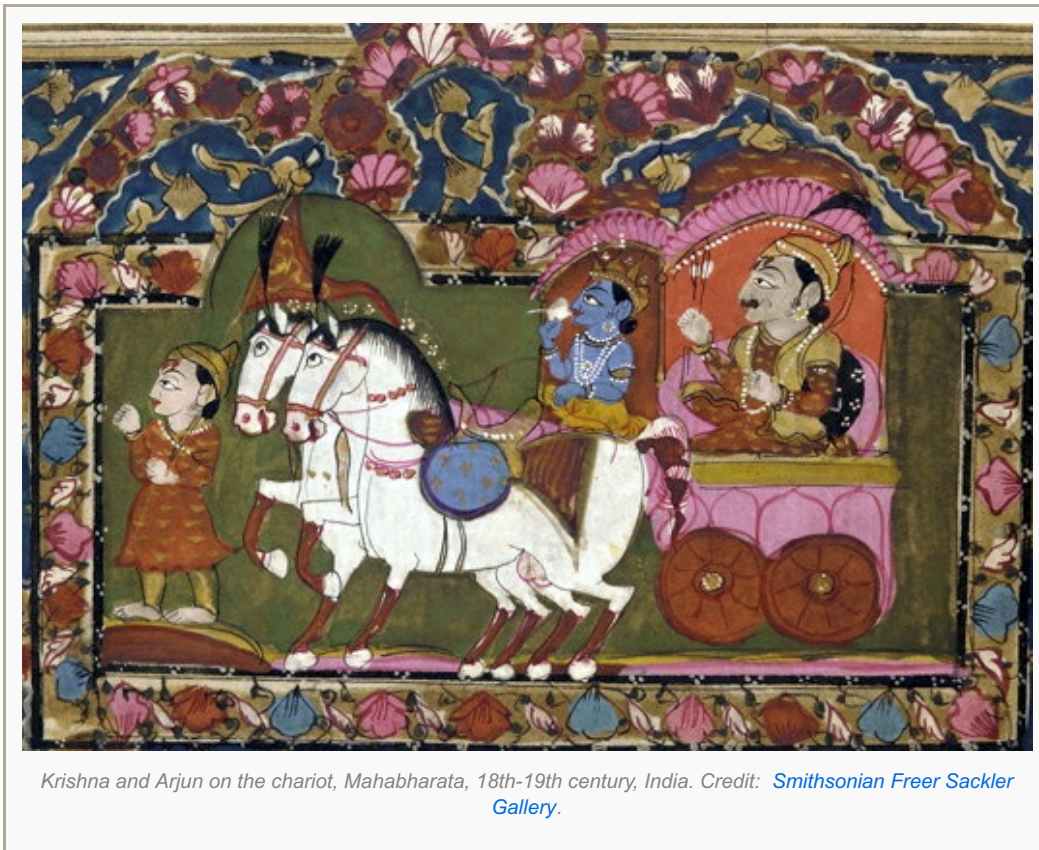
Lessons from the Mahabharata



the negotiating stances of the characters from the Mahabharata.

The epic tells of Ashwatthama, who breaks the rules of war by attacking his enemies, the Pandavas, at night while they are sleeping. Seeking revenge, the Pandavas effectively corner him thanks to their superior firepower and seek to reach a settlement through the intervention of some powerful sages. Ashwatthama is forced to give up his powerful magical jewel and he is forced to wander the uninhabited regions of the earth, reeking of pus and blood for 3000 years. His enemies achieve this end through moral framing – citing his earlier unethical behaviour and through persistence and a refusal to compromise. It might appear that Ashwatthama was at least spared his life, but he is an immortal and therefore this was the most terrible punishment imaginable.

As the Narlikars put it: “The story of Ashwatthama is an important illustration of how far even the most virtuous heroes of the Mahabharata will go in their refusal to make concessions. Ashwatthama’s actions are abhorrent but it is important to bear in mind that he stands in the company of the great and good who also resorted to devious methods and deception” (p. 50).



This approach is paralleled by India’s behaviour in negotiations around trade, nuclear weapons, and international treaties, where it consistently acts in an uncompromising manner – rebuffing deals even when they appear attractive and infuriating their counterparties by lecturing them in a moralistic tone, argue the authors. The book describes how when [India tested nuclear devices 1998](#), the government stubbornly held out against strong US and domestic opposition, taking the high moral ground and eventually riding out the sanctions and opprobrium they received.

Comparisons can be drawn with China’s behaviour in multilateral forums, which have roots in its long history as a regional hegemon. This, along with its more recent history as a victim of colonialism by Western powers, left China with a distrust of western institutions and a deceptively passive negotiating style, exemplified in the classic quote by Deng Xiaoping who, referring to participation in international forums, said: “Keep a cool head and maintain a low profile. Never take the lead”. In Martin Jacques’ book [When China Rules The World](#) he claims this approach derives from China’s cultural and philosophical outlook underpinned by Confucian ideals and nourished by its status as what he calls a “civilizational state”. Interestingly, the Narlikars utilise the same term for India in their own book.

Bargaining with a Rising India is not for a casual reader, but promises to be an intriguing read for those interested in trade pacts, negotiation strategy, and India's foreign relations. Although this is more speculative, one might suspect that students of the great epic itself would enjoy a study of how it influences critical decisions to this day. The book assumes some knowledge of international relations and negotiation theory. While readers do not need to be familiar with the Mahabharata there is a handy appendix outlining the plot, and the reader will have to be comfortable following long passages of textual analysis and description of the narrative. For readers who know little or nothing about the story it can on occasion be difficult to follow. At the same time, reading the authors' descriptions of the stories opens us up to a cornerstone of Indian culture, which is rewarding far beyond its application to international relations.

The book stands as both a tribute towards a classic text as well as an academic book combining a hybrid of disciplines, unusual perhaps but of course no different from using Machiavelli to look at modern European politics or the actions of the present Chinese government through Confucius.

Written at a time when India has reached another crossroads in its unsteady ascent to becoming a great power, when Japan and the USA are making flattering glances at the sub-continent as a hedge against a more assertive China, and the election of the new BJP government promises in theory at least a new direction in its foreign policy, this book has practical and valuable insights for those trying to understand how India frames negotiations in multilateral fora.

Merlin Linehan is currently writing a book on trade and investment between rising powers and previously worked as a financial analyst and consultant in the fields of SMEs, clean energy and donor finance for the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development. Merlin holds an MSc in Finance and Financial Law from SOAS. Merlin blogs on South –South trade at thekularingtradeblog.com and tweets [@MerlinLinehan](https://twitter.com/MerlinLinehan). [Read more reviews by Merlin](#).

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