

DINABANDHU MAHAVIDYALAYA

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Affiliated to West Bengal State University & Formerly under University of Calcutta
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Department of Philosophy Add-on-Course 2018-19 session

TITLE: 'MAHĀBHĀRATA: INDIA'S EPIC'

Course Duration: 40Hours

Teachers: Faculty of the Department of Philosophy, Dinabandhu Mahavidyalaya, Bongaon

OBJECTIVE: Help and improve the knowledge of students in the area of Philosophy of Mahābhārata.

The objectives of add-on course on the philosophy of the Mahābhārata:

1. Exploration of Ethical Dilemmas:

The Mahābhārata presents a plethora of ethical dilemmas and moral quandaries faced by its characters. The course aims to analyze these dilemmas in depth, exploring the ethical principles and philosophical underpinnings that inform the characters' decisions and actions. Through this exploration, students gain a nuanced understanding of moral reasoning and ethical complexity.

2. Study of Human Nature and Psychology:

The Mahābhārata offers a rich portrayal of human nature, psychology, and interpersonal dynamics. By examining the characters' motivations, desires, virtues, and flaws, students gain insight into the complexities of the human psyche and the intricacies of human relationships. This study fosters a deeper understanding of human nature and behavior.

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3. Exploration of Dharma:

Central to the Mahābhārata is the concept of dharma, or righteousness. The course delves into the various interpretations of dharma presented in the epic, examining the philosophical foundations of dharma and its implications for individual conduct and societal order. Students explore the complexities of dharma in different contexts and learn to discern moral obligations in ambiguous situations.

4. Examination of Cosmic Order and Destiny:

The Mahābhārata grapples with questions of fate, destiny, and the cosmic order (ṛta). Through the study of these themes, students engage with philosophical inquiries about the nature of existence, the role of divine intervention, and the concept of cosmic justice. They explore different perspectives on fate and free will, pondering the implications of these concepts for human life.

5. Exploration of Metaphysical and Spiritual Themes:

The Mahābhārata contains profound metaphysical and spiritual teachings, including discussions on the nature of reality, the self, and the ultimate goal of life (moksha). The course examines these themes, exploring philosophical concepts such as karma, rebirth, yoga, and the paths to spiritual liberation. Students reflect on the existential questions raised by the epic and contemplate their own spiritual journey.

6. Relevance to Contemporary Life:

Despite being set in ancient times, the themes and teachings of the Mahābhārata remain relevant to contemporary life. The course encourages students to reflect on the relevance of the epic, its philosophical insights and moral lessons in their own lives and in society at large. They explore how the wisdom of the Mahābhārata can inform ethical decision-making, personal growth, and social justice efforts in the modern world.

In summary, an add-on course on the philosophy of the Mahābhārata aims to guide students on a profound journey of philosophical exploration, moral reflection, and spiritual inquiry through the timeless wisdom of this ancient Indian epic. By studying its themes, characters, and teachings, students deepen their understanding of philosophy and gain valuable insights into the complexities of human existence and the pursuit of truth and righteousness.

Introduction:



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Mahābhārata is an ancient Sanskrit epic story that has played a huge role in the formation of Hinduism as we know it today. It is truly a vast work that presents an amazing story with many different strands and subplots as well as extensive passages of religious, philosophical, moral, and practical instruction. Interestingly, the *Mahābhārata* is actually an epic poem, but is often referred to as a story because of its length – it's the longest known epic poem ever written, consisting of over 200,000 individual lines.

Studying the story of *Mahābhārata* is a fantastic way to understand the formation of Hinduism with guidance from our team of expert tutors. In this course, you will learn the story and characters of *Mahābhārata*. We will also delve into the role of the divine in worldly matters and explore concepts of dharma.

You won't just learn about the content of the text, you'll also look at other points, including its importance in the context of Hinduism itself. You'll be answering crucial questions about the text: What sort of text this is? Who wrote it and when? What is it really about? What is its principal role in the religious, cultural, and social life of India?

This course is produced and presented by Dr Nick Sutton of the Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies, who has spent the past four decades studying, teaching, and writing on *Mahābhārata*.

Session One: Overview of the *Mahābhārata*

We begin by giving a sense of the size and scope of the *Mahābhārata*. This is truly a vast work that not only presents a complex narrative with many different strands and subplots, but also extensive passages of religious, philosophical, moral, and practical instruction. Here we provide an outline of the text by presenting a review of all of its eighteen *parvans* (limbs or sections). What *sort* of text this is? Who wrote it and when? What is it *really* about and what are its principal roles in the religious, cultural, and social life of India?

Session Two: Who's Who in the *Mahābhārata*

Mahābhārata highlights its central truths through complex characterisations: some virtuous and admirable individuals and others bereft of elevated human instincts. By placing each character in a range of situations it shows the problems, tensions, and genuine dilemmas we all face in seeking to attain the fullness of our humanity. The main characters we look at here are:

1. Arjuna
2. Bhīma
3. Nakula
4. Sahadeva



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5. Bhīṣma
6. Karṇa
7. Droṇa
8. Aśvatthāman
9. Duḥśāsana
10. Śakuni
11. Jayadratha
12. Kīcaka
13. Drupada
14. Virāṭa
15. Śalya
16. Sātyaki

Session Three: The Women of the Mahābhārata

Women have a central role in the *Mahābhārata*. We look at teachings on gender roles, specifically the *dharma* of women. We contrast the text's ideas on female *dharma* with the actions of the three principal female characters: Draupadī, Gāndhārī, and Kuntī.

Session Four: The Divine Identity

The *Mahābhārata* is a deeply spiritual account of divine intervention in the world.

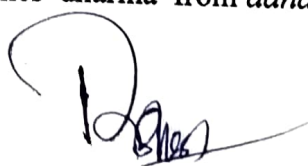
We explore how divine nature and identity are presented within the text, with the focus on Kṛṣṇa as an *avatāra* of Viṣṇu. *Mahābhārata* is one the earliest remaining works of Vaiṣṇava theism, and in this session we look at the Vaiṣṇava doctrines it presents to its readers.

We will also see the role of Śiva in the narrative and the nature of the relationship between Viṣṇu and Śiva.

We conclude with a look at monotheism, monism, and polytheism within Indian religion as a whole, as well as the understanding that liberation from rebirth is attained not just through personal enlightenment, or yogic perfection, but also as a gift of divine grace.

Session Five: Dharma in the Mahābhārata

Dharma is arguably the principal theme of the *Mahābhārata* and is discussed at length in a number of passages. In this session we develop a clear definition of the term 'dharma'. The wise say that dharma is whatever is based on love for all beings. This is the characteristic mark that distinguishes dharma from *adharma*, Yudhiṣṭhira. (*Mahābhārata*, 12.251.24)



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Session Six: Religious Philosophy in the Mahābhārata


Religious, ethical, and practical instruction collectively comprises almost half the chapters in the *Mahābhārata*. And it is after the battle is over that the *Mahābhārata* takes the form of a didactic work. Within the 353 chapters of the *Śānti-parvan* (Book 12), 185 chapters (168–353) form what is known as the *Mokṣa-dharma-parvan*. It is to this collection of religious and philosophical discourses that we will be turning our attention to.

Session Seven: The Anuśāsana

For this final session we move to the thirteenth book of the *Mahābhārata*, the *Anuśāsana-parvan*. Here we find a continuation of the extensive forms of instruction imparted by Bhīṣma to Yudhiṣṭhira that covered almost all of the *Śānti-parvan*, though here the topics considered are far more varied.

References:

1. Badrinath, C. (2006). *Mahābhārata: An Inquiry in the Human Condition*. New Delhi: Orient Blackswan.
2. Menon, R. (2010). *Mahābhārata: A Modern Rendering*. New Delhi: Rupa Publications.
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4. Narayan, R. K. (2016). *The Mahābhārata: A Shortened Modern Prose Version of the Indian Epic*. New Delhi: Penguin Books.
5. Kosambi, D. D. (1995). *Mahābhārata: A Criticism*. New Delhi: Popular Prakashan.



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