

### **UNDERSTANDING ANCIENT EPICS: *MAHABHARATA***

**Coordinator:** Meera Kumar

This study group is the first in an ambitious series. We start with the *Mahabharata*, the longest epic of the world. The *Mahabharata* contains about 75,000 verses—sometimes rounded off to 100,000—or three million words, some 15 times the combined length of the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, or seven times the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* combined. It has remained central to India's culture since it was first composed—during the period from before 300 BCE to after 300 CE—and has had a formative influence on all Southeast Asian countries.

In sheer scope of literary and philosophical thinking the *Mahabharata* comprises all the conflicts and juxtapositions that people face in life. The epic contains history, drama, mythology, legends, and religious teachings and so much else that it has been said that if something is not mentioned in the *Mahabharata*, it cannot exist in the world.

We will read a considerably abridged version of the epic focusing on the many themes of love, lust, envy, jealousy, the role of self will, pyrrhic victories, duties of individuals, consequences of hubris, and much else. We devote two sessions to the Bhagavat Gita, the famed book of teachings that is at the heart of Hindu and Buddhist philosophical thinking and on which the notions of individual choice and free will rest.

**Meera** has an abiding interest in history and literature and in understanding how we humans have thought and behaved the way we do. Her knowledge is limited but she hopes her passion overcomes such limitations. Meera has coordinated several study groups ranging from Hinduism to history and literature.

**Type of Study Group:** Readings and discussions

**Readings and Other Materials:**

*The Mahabharata* by John D. Smith (Penguin Classics). Other materials from a variety of sources will be sent to participants.

# LP2 STUDY GROUP PROPOSAL for Spring 2023

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\*\*\*\*\* SYLLABUS - A WORK IN PROGRESS \*\*\*\*\*

## WEEK 1

**TOPIC:** How best to understand epics

A brief outline of the basic story of the *Mahabharata* will be discussed together with concepts, such as *dharma*, integral to the understanding of the epic

**READINGS:**

epic: definition, characteristics, examples, development ...

<https://www.britannica.com> › Literature › Poetry.

**QUESTIONS**

What are the general characteristics of epics? Why does mankind have such an abiding fascination with ancient epics? Do you have a favorite epic? Why?

## WEEK 2

**TOPIC:**

The earliest lineages; Draupadi acquires five husbands; the Pandavas acquire wealth; envy does the rest

**READINGS:**

Pages 14-23; 28-39; 47-51; 54-62; 68-72.

**QUESTIONS:**

What do these stories tell us about the society in North India where the epic is based? Understanding the caste system...Is everything pre-ordained?

## WEEK 3

**TOPIC:** The lust of men; the allure of women; the fatal trap of greed

What havoc can be rendered? The dice game; we must face evil?

**READINGS:**

Page 121-163.

**QUESTIONS:**

What is a woman's status in society? What are a woman's rights? What are the duties of a society's elders? Is a woman chattel?

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### **WEEK 4**

**TOPIC:** The role of injustice

What is our recourse when justice is not meted out? The drums of war begin to be heard.

### **WEEKS 5 AND 6**

**TOPIC:** Bhagavat Gita

Does the end justify the means? What is my duty? Is it pre-ordained? Does each man determine his role on earth?

**WEEKS 7, 8 AND 9:** The war and its machinations—even the gods stoop to any means to win.

**WEEK 10:** The aftermath—all victories are pyrrhic.

**WEEK 11:** Women of the *Mahabharata*

**WEEK 12:** What does the epic teach us?