

Epic Civilisation

In this course we shall attempt to outline the civilisation depicted in the two Sanskrit epics, the Mahābhārata and Rāmāyaṇa. The material for this will come from a wide variety of early texts: the Vedas, *śāstra* texts such as Manusmṛti and even the Purāṇas, since their source material probably originates from a very ancient time.

Where did Sanskrit come from? Who were the people who spoke Sanskrit, or at least ‘perfected’ it? (*Samskṛta* means ‘highly wrought’ or ‘perfected.’) The society that composed the earliest Sanskrit texts called themselves ‘*ārya*’ or ‘the civilised people.’ Unlike other ancient civilisations, they did not leave behind much archaeological evidence. Thus, it is difficult to piece together what everyday life was like during that time. However, the Sanskrit texts, faithfully preserved by oral transmission throughout the millennia, provide us with a window into how these people viewed the world. This course will attempt to consolidate this worldview portrayed by the Sanskrit epics with the following five units:

1. Basic Metaphysical Teachings
2. The Cosmos
3. Important Texts
4. Divine Beings
5. Human Life and its Purpose

EPIC CIVILISATION – course overview

Key Terms for Part 1

brahman (ब्रह्मन्) The ultimate reality underlying all phenomena.

ātman (आत्मन्) The self. The one Self in all.

māyā (माया) The illusion that makes the universe seem to be here.

avidyā (अविद्या) Ignorance. The belief that the *māyā* is the true reality.

jñāna (ज्ञान) True knowledge. The knowledge that *brahman* is reality.

karman (कर्मन्) The principle that actions create an effect in the future.

saṃskāra (संस्कार) Traces, or deposits, from past actions that create conditions for rebirth.

saṃsāra (संसार) Transmigration. The process of continual rebirth.

mokṣa (मोक्ष) Liberation from bondage in *saṃsāra* (संसार.)

avyakta (अव्यक्त) Unmanifest nature.

puruṣa (पुरुष) Spirit, whose reflection is *prakṛti*.

prakṛti (प्रकृति) Primal nature, where everything is stored in seed or causal form, which can be thought of as the reflection of *puruṣa*. Also known as *avyakta* (अव्यक्त)

guṇāḥ (गुणाः) The three constituents of the universe, namely:

sattva (सत्त्व) The quality of purity, intelligence, brightness.

rajas (रजम्) The quality of activity and passion.

tamas (तमम्) The quality of dullness and inertia.

sṛṣṭi (सृष्टि) Creation. Presided over by *rajas*.

sthiti (स्थिति) Sustainance. Presided over by *sattva*.

pralaya (प्रलय) Dissolution. Presided over by *tamas*.

Key Terms for Part 2

mahābhūtāni (महाभूतानि) The five great subtle elements.

ākāśa (आकाश) Space, or ether, the first great element with its property sound *śabda* (शब्द).

vāyu (वायु) Air, the second great element with its property touch *sparsā* (स्पर्श).

agni (अग्नि) or *Tejas* (तेजस्) Fire, the third great element with its property form or beauty *rūpa* (रूप).

jala (जल) Water, the fourth great element with its property taste *rasa* (रस).

pr̥thivī (पृथिवी) or *Bhūmi* (भूमि) Earth, the fifth great element with its property smell *gandha* (गन्ध).

antahkaraṇa (अन्तःकरण) Inner organ of mind

buddhi (बुद्धि) Reason, the organ of discrimination, reflecting the light of the *ātman*

ahaṅkāra (अहङ्कार) The organ that identifies the *ātman* with something in creation.

samaṣṭi (समष्टि) The universe as a single person or whole.

vyasṭi (व्यष्टि) The individual acting as a separate unit.

manas (मनस्) Mind, the lower level that thinks and deliberates.

saṅkalpa (सङ्कल्प) Mental construction, resolve, belief.

vikalpa (विकल्प) Doubt, conflicting idea.

citta (चित्त) The part of the causal body called the heart where the deposits of actions are stored.

indriyāṇi (इन्द्रियाणि) Senses.

jñānendriyāṇi (ज्ञानेन्द्रियाणि) Senses of knowledge – seeing, hearing etc.

karmendriyāṇi (कर्मेन्द्रियाणि) Senses of action – speaking, grasping etc.

prāṇa (प्राण) Vital breath of life that divides into various functions: *prāṇa* (प्राण), the breath in the mouth and nose, *apāna* (अपान), the breath that excretes, *vyāna* (व्यान), the breath that permeates the whole body, *udāna* (उदान), the breath that leaves the body at death, and *samāna* (समान), the breath that digests.

yuga (युग) An age

manvantara (मन्वन्तर) 71 *mahāyugas*, supervised by one Manu (Lawgiver).

kalpa (कल्प) 14 *manvantaras* , a day of Brahmā.

mahāyuga (महायुग) One cycle of the four *yugas* – 4,320,000 years.

ṛtāyuga (ऋतयुग) / *Satyayuga* (सत्ययुग) The Golden Age: 1,728,000 years.

tretāyuga (त्रेतायुग) The Silver Age: 1,296,000 years.

dvāparayuga (द्वापरयुग) The Bronze Age: 864,000 years.

kaliyuga (कलियुग) The Iron Age: 432,000 years.

Key Terms for Part 3

śruti (श्रुति) 'What has been heard' i.e., Vedic literature. This is considered to be of the highest authority.

veda (वेद) Thought to be the oldest Sanskrit literature, the *veda* is a collection of hymns compiled into four sections. These are: *Rk* (ऋक्) *Sāman* (सामन्) *Yajus* (यजुस्) and *Atharva* (अथर्व). Traditionally, the *veda* is considered to be the eternal, non-human knowledge that shapes the creation.

vyāsa (व्यास) *Vyāsa* means 'compiler.' Traditionally, he is considered to be the sage who compiled the *veda* into sections and who also composed the *Mahābhārata*, *Purāṇas* and the *Brahmasūtra*.

āraṇyaka (आरण्यक) 'Forest discussions' of the *vedas*' inner meaning.

Upaniṣad (उपनिषद्) Philosophical discussions of the identity of the *ātman* (आत्मन्) with the *brahman* (ब्रह्मन्).

vedānta (वेदान्त) The teaching of the *Upaniṣads*, literally the 'final part' or goal of the *veda*.

smṛti (स्मृति) 'What has been remembered'. The teachings of the great sages. Secondary in authority to the *śruti*.

vedāṅga (वेदाङ्ग) 'The support of the *veda*'. Six sciences which preserve the proper understanding and recitation of the *veda*. Their subjects are: *śikṣā* (शिक्षा) pronunciation, *chandas* (छन्दस्) metre, *vyākaraṇa* (व्याकरण) grammar, *nirukta* (निरुक्त) meaning of words, *jyotiṣa* (ज्योतिष) astronomy and *kalpa* (कल्प) performance of rituals.

vyākaraṇa (व्याकरण) Science of grammar. One of the *vedāṅgas*.

sūtra (सूत्र) A very terse statement which is part of a complete system explaining a science.

Pāṇini (पाणिनि) Author of the 4000 or so *sūtras* comprising the *vyākaraṇa*. In this science all words are shown to derive from a few simple *dhātus* (seed forms) and an even simpler system of *pratyayas* (endings).

dhātu (धातु) Seed of a word. For example, 'vid' is the *dhātu* of *veda*.

pratyaya (प्रत्यय) The endings of words.

yogasūtrāṇi (योगसूत्राणि) A text outlining the principles of *yoga* (योग). Attributed to Patañjali.

Manusmṛti (मनुस्मृति) [Also called *dharmasāstra*] The Laws of Manu sets out the laws of human life according to the universal system of *dharma*.

śāstra (शास्त्र) Scripture, methodology, teaching.

Rāmāyaṇa (रामायण) The story of Rāma and his battles with the demons, by the sage Vālmiki.

Mahābhārata (महाभारत) The world's longest epic, by Vyāsa, narrating the story of the battle between the Pāṇḍavas and the Kauravas and the events leading to it.

mantra (मन्त्र) A special magic word or verse with particular powers.

Bhagavad Gītā (भगवद्गीता) The 'Song of the Lord', found in the *Mahābhārata*, records the spiritual discourse between Kṛṣṇa and the warrior Arjuna.

Purāṇa (पुराण) 'The ancient teachings'. Eighteen works traditionally attributed to Vyāsa that deal with creation and dissolution, kings, sages, incarnations etc.

Śrīmad Bhāgavatam (श्रीमद्भागवतम्) The most famous *Purāṇa*, dealing especially with the life and exploits of Kṛṣṇa.

Key Terms for Part 4

deva (देव) 'Shining one'. A universal power or deity.

devī (देवी) A female deity.

śakti (शक्ति) The power or force of a *deva*, considered as his consort.

brahmā (ब्रह्मा) The god responsible for creating the creation. Represents *rajas*.

viṣṇu (विष्णु) The god responsible for maintaining the creation. Maintains order by incarnating himself with *avatāras*. Represents *sattva*.

śiva (शिव) The god responsible for destroying creation. Represents *tamas*.

sarasvatī (सरस्वती) Consort of Brahmā, the power of wisdom.

lakṣmī (लक्ष्मी) Consort of Viṣṇu, the power of increase and prosperity.

pārvatī (पार्वती) Consort of Śiva, the power of law.

indra (इन्द्र) Lord of the minor gods. Universal mind, lord of the elements.

yama (यम) Death, controller and ender of all.

agni (अग्नि) God of fire.

vāyu (वायु) God of wind.

sūrya (सूर्य) God of the sun.

pr̥thivī (पृथिवी) Goddess of the Earth.

apsaras (अप्सरस्) Beautiful heavenly nymph.

gandharva (गन्धर्व) Celestial musician.

nāga (नाग) Serpent being.

yakṣa (यक्ष) Guardian spirit.

rākṣasa (राक्षस) Night wandering ogre or demon.

avatāra (अवतार) Incarnation of Viṣṇu when *dharma* is transgressed.

pitṛ (पितृ) Ancestor.

ṛṣi (ऋषि) Sage.

Key Terms for Part 5

puruṣārtha (पुरुषार्थ) The aspiration and purpose of human life. This has four aspects: *kāma*, sensual enjoyment; *artha*, wealth; *dharma*, virtue; and *mokṣa*, liberation.

kāma (काम) Desire and sensual enjoyment

artha (अर्थ) Wealth, prosperity

dharma (धर्म) Virtue. 'That which upholds', the system of duties, rewards, punishments etc. Universal justice, which ensures happiness for all who follow the law of their own nature.

mokṣa (मोक्ष) Liberation

varṇa (वर्ण) Caste, occupation. There are four main divisions:

brāhmaṇa (ब्राह्मण) The class of priests and teachers

kṣatriya (क्षत्रिय) The class of warriors, kings and statesmen

vaiśya (वैश्य) The class of merchants, producers and farmers

sūdra (शूद्र) The class of servants and labourers

āśrama (आश्रम) A stage in life. There are four main divisions:

brahmacārin (ब्रह्मचारिन्) The student stage of chastity, study and obedience

gṛhastha (गृहस्थ) The householder stage

vānaprastha (वानप्रस्थ) The forest-dweller stage

sannyāsin (सन्न्यासिन्) The stage of complete renunciation as a wandering mendicant

dhyāna (ध्यान) Meditation

yajña (यज्ञ) Sacrifice. This can be a complicated ritual or dedicated action. Five sacrifices are enumerated in Manu: *devayajña* (to the gods), *ṛṣiyajña* (to the sages), *pitryajña* (to the ancestors), *manuṣyayajña* (to human beings), and *bhūtayajña* (to the lower creatures).

tapas (तपम्) Disciplined action that purifies and enhances energy

punya (पुण्य) Merit, the essence of good deeds

pāpa (पाप) Sin, the essence of bad deeds

ahimsā (अहिमा) Harmlessness of thought, speech and action

satyam (सत्यम्) Unfailing truthfulness in speech

asteyam (अस्तेयम्) Abstention from theft

śaucam (शौचम्) Cleanliness

abhayam (अभयम्) Fearlessness

dānam (दानम्) Generosity

dama (दम) Control of mind, speech, senses and body

svādhyāya (स्वाध्याय) Regular study of the scriptures

akrodha (अक्रोध) Absence of anger

śānti (शान्ति) Peace

dayā (दया) Compassion