

Concept Note

Second Annual

Dharma Studies Conference

11-13 December 2026

**Venue: School of Humanities, Social Sciences & Management
IIT Bhubaneswar**

Webpage: <https://conference.iitbbs.ac.in/dsc/>
Email: conference.dharma@gmail.com

The Second Annual Dharma Studies Conference will take place at IIT Bhubaneswar during 11-13 December 2026. It retains the broad conceptual and structural framework of the first conference that was organized in 2025 at the same institution. Thus it encourages academic dialogues between scholars who are interested in explorations of the dharmic traditions—Hindu, Buddhist, Jain and Sikh—of India and the world. It promotes multi-disciplinarity: scholars may explore dharmic traditions from a wide range of disciplinary locations, from literature and philosophy to history and sociology to neuroscience and economics. The conference positions four principal themes in the limelight and invites deliberations and reflections on them. In addition, it draws attention to a wide range of areas and themes that scholars may have an interest in.

The Second Annual Dharma Studies Conference invites papers on four principal themes—‘Food,’ ‘Environment,’ ‘The Gentle Human,’ and ‘Healing.’ ‘Food’ occupies a central position in the philosophies and practices of dharmic traditions. Consider for a moment the wide variety of contexts in which we engage with food—performance of rituals and pilgrimages; offerings of charity; organization of religious feasts; buying and selling as a source of revenue generation for spiritual establishments, so on and so forth. Not to forget the immense body of literature and discourses available on food. So, the broad question we have in mind is this—what sort of histories of food can one tell if one chooses to reflect on the dharmic traditions? ‘Environment’ is the second principal theme that we invite reflections on. Environment is at the heart of dharmic imagination and praxis. From the delineations of the Ashok Vatika and Khandava Van in the epics of Ramayana and Mahabharata to the deep evocations of the mahatmya of the Bhadrpada months of Asvina, Karttika, Margasirsa, Asadha and Sravana in bhakti literary corpus—environment is at the heart of dharmic textual imagination. So also in praxis. Ecological features are central to pilgrimage traditions. People travel on foot to Badrinath and Hemkund Sahib, circum-ambulate rivers such as Narmada and visit seascapes at Rameshwaram and Dwarka. We invite reflections on the dharmic engagement with environment. ‘The Gentle Human’ is our third principal theme. Dharmic tradition lends emphasis on proper cultivation of one’s self. It involves growing aware of one’s own flaws and then make a sincere effort to rise above them. It involves attending to and nourishing one’s virtues, or at least keep virtues as a goal worth pursuing.

What emerges through the processes of self-cultivation is the ideal figure of a polite human or a gentle human. A range of terms exist in various Indian languages to describe this person—Sajjana, Bhadra, so on and so forth. In keeping with this basic pointer, we enquire about the cultural histories of politeness or gentleness that dharmic traditions help us reconstruct. ‘Healing’ is our last principal theme for this year’s conference. To heal oneself and others is an integral part of the cultural heritage of the dharmic tradition. The Buddha was known as the Mahabhisak or the Supreme Healer. Charaka, Sushruta, and the Siddhars produced voluminous bodies of literature on healing. We invite papers on how dharmic traditions approach disease and healing.

A subfield of Religious Studies, Dharma Studies promotes critical, grounded as well as constructive enquiries into the Indic religious traditions, their histories, literatures, discursive as well material cultures, philosophies, rituals, music and dance. As we conceptualize the field, three core concerns stand out. First, the field is about the Indic life world the dharmic traditions constitute and share among themselves. Sensitive enquiries into this life world need to take into account both the long inheritances as well as evolutions. They also need to pay careful attention to the relationships between the dharmic traditions, their affinities and differences. Instead of positioning one against the other we are more interested to explore what they share, and enable dialogues between them. Second, this Indic life world acquired its modern forms and practices in the midst of other unfolding historical processes such as European colonialism as well as global capitalism. Hence, the interface between dharmic traditions, and European colonialism and global capitalism constitutes a central concern for our work. Third, we see the field particularly concerned with methods and languages. Training in standard academic methods of studying religion is essential for fruitful engagement with Indic traditions. So is competency in Indian classical and vernacular languages. Having said that, we believe, a comparative awareness of how methods and languages are employed in other sub-fields of religious studies, Jewish studies or Islamic studies for instance, helps in reflecting on their usage vis-à-vis Indic traditions. At the same time, we remain open to questions about limitations of available methods or necessity of evolving more specific theoretical models as regards the study of Indic religions.

Moving beyond the four principal ‘Themes in Focus,’ the conference invites papers in a wide range of areas including but not confined to:

Bhakti Literatures and Thought
Indian Epics and Their Retellings
Visual Media and Dharmic Traditions
Dharma and Ecology
Music and Dance in Dharmic Traditions
Life Histories of Katha Vachaks
Dharmic Periodicals and Their Publics
Dharma and Digital Communities
Histories of Family Worship
Deities and Temples
Animals and Dharmic Traditions
Disability and Dharmic Narratives
Dharma-economics
Ethical Self-cultivation

Charity
Dharma and the Market
Manuscript Cultures
Pilgrimage Narratives
Dharma and Aesthetics
Dharma and Medical Humanities
Archaeology of Dharmic Sites
Economic Histories of Dharmic Institutions
Dharma, Ayurveda and Healing
Dharma in the Age of AI
Dharma and Intellectual Property Rights
Dharma and Legal Studies
Interfaith Dialogues
Dharmic Traditions and the Diaspora
Transnational Dharmic Traditions

Please submit your abstracts using the following link: <https://forms.gle/k7B6FpAk8gb8Agku9>. The conference is particularly interested in early career faculty members and Ph.D. scholars in Indian academia. Exceptional proposals from MA students will also be considered. The last date for the submission of abstracts and bio-note is 31 August 2026. Intimations will be sent to selected participants by 10 September 2026. The decision of the Organizing Committee will be final as regards the selection of abstracts.

Panel proposals are also welcome. Proposers of panels may email us directly. We invite panels that bring together 4-5 scholars from different disciplines and methodological orientations to explore shared concerns within and across dharmic traditions. Proposals may focus on textual, visual, performative, digital, or ethnographic dimensions of dharma and are encouraged to critically reflect on both historical inheritances and contemporary cultural practices. Each panel should aim to generate dialogue between traditions, challenge dominant narratives, and contribute to evolving models of critical inquiry in Dharma Studies.

Important Dates:

Deadline for submission of abstracts: 31 August 2026

Intimation of acceptance: 10 September 2026

Deadline for registration: 20 September 2026

Awards:

Whabiz Merchant Best Essay Prize instituted by Professor Hoshang Merchant. INR 10,000/ and Citation. Open to all.

AC Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupad Award instituted by Bhaktivedanta Research Centre. INR 10,000/ and Citation. This award will go to a selected paper on Vaishnavism/Vaishnava Archives.

Note: To be considered for the above awards, scholars have to send their full papers by 30 November 2026. After review by an expert team, three selected papers for each award will be invited for presentation in two special sessions during the conference. We discourage virtual presentation in this category.

Registration Fees and Accommodation:

Delegates without accommodation: INR 3000/ OR USD 75

Delegates with in-campus hostel accommodation (research scholars and students): INR 5000/ or USD 80 [This will include accommodation on a sharing basis at IITBBS hostel rooms, hostel guest rooms or NISER guest houses for three nights, conference kits, coffee and snacks at conference venue, conference lunch and special dinner.]

Delegates with in-campus guesthouse accommodation (faculty and senior scholars):
INR 6500/ or USD 100 [This will include accommodation on a sharing basis at IITBBS/NISER guest house or hall guest-rooms for three nights, conference kits, coffee and snacks at conference venue, conference lunch and special dinner.]

[Since guest house accommodation is limited, we won't be in a position to accommodate guests accompanied by delegates. Please note that the registration fee is non-refundable under any circumstances.]

Delegates presenting online: INR 3000/ or USD 75

Conveners:

Akshaya K. Rath, IIT Bhubaneswar
Naresh Chandra Sahu, IIT Bhubaneswar
Siddharth Satpathy, University of Hyderabad

Scan the QR to send your abstract

