CHAPTER – II

MAHABHARATA: ITS STATUS AND RETELLINGS

This chapter makes a study of the origin and character of the epic *Mahabharata* of the Indian Literary Tradition. The first section of the chapter will analyse various aspects of the epic – its origin, the author, and its status as a literary and a religious/philosophical work. The second section of the chapter will look into the various retellings of the epic, giving emphasis to the modern retellings in the form of novels.

I

The *Mahabharata* is a huge monument of Hindu literature. Apart from being a national epic of India, it is also the longest poem known in world literature. Western writers along with the *Ramayana* of Valmiki have classified it as an epic. In western literary criticism, the term epic generally refers to a work that recounts heroic deeds, which *Mahabharata* certainly does. But in the Indian Literary tradition, the *Mahabharata* is recognized primarily as a religious text with the status of a scripture. This is because the *Mahabharata* portrays the behaviour of the righteous and the wicked and it contains numerous didactic passages, including the *Bhagavad Gita*, expounding religious doctrines of various types. Thus *Mahabharata* attains the name *Pancama Veda*, attributed to it for being an authoritative text of religious and didactic literature.

The *Mahabharata* in its present form consists of over one lakh *slokas*, "equal to about eight times as much as the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* put together, is by far the longest poem known to literary history" (A.A. Macdonnel 1958, 282). It is a collection of epic and didactic matter woven into each other in a loose manner. It is divided into eighteen books called *parvas* or *parva*, in
addition to a nineteenth, the Harivamca, as a supplement. The books are considerable in length; longer books are divided into subordinate parvans, which are further cut into chapters or adhyayas. Maurice Winternitz opines that the Mahabharata is not just a poetic production, but a rather a whole literature (M. Winternitz 1972, 316). It is unique and distinctive in the sense that it is an epic that has blended within it, an encyclopedia of ancient Indian religion and culture. It embodies most of the knowledge about Indian religion and mythology, law, ethics and philosophy, statecraft and art of war, history and ethnology. This encyclopedic nature of the Mahabharata is revealed in the words: "Vyasocchitam jagat sarvam” (translated as: “there is no subject under the sun which has not been touched upon by Vyasa).

The name Mahabharata is explained in the epic itself as follows: "Mahattvad bharatvad ca mahabharatam ucyate” (Cr. Ed. I.1.209). This could be translated as follows:

'This epic is called Mahabharata on account of its mahattva (enormous size) and its bharattva (weightiness)’. This accounts for it’s acquiring the status of a Paniçama Veda (Fifth Veda). The epic also describes itself as a Sastra i.e., a treatise on the principles of Purushartha – Dharma, Artha, Kama and Moksa. The epic makes a proud claim on behalf of itself in I.56.33.

"dharma carthe ca kama ca mokse ca bharatarsabha. Yad iasti tad anyatra yan nehasti na tat kvacit.”

This is translated as : “In the realm of religious and ethics (dharma), of material progress and prosperity (artha), of the enjoyment of the pleasures of personal and social life (Kama), and of spiritual emancipation (Moksa), whatever is embodied in the epic, it will be impossible to find anywhere else.” A close study of the Mahabharata would convince one that this claim is not at all exaggerated.

The story of the epic centers on the great Mahabharata war between the Kauravas and the Pandavas, the descendants of the Bharata dynasty.
Apart from the central theme of power struggle, the epic is encyclopedic in its treatment of subjects belonging to almost all branches of learning. It is a work of infinite signification. It can be viewed at the same time as a human drama, as a cornucopia of myths and legends and a well-chronicled Itihasa text. As a narrative, it is complexly structured with stories within stories, embellished with numerous legends, parables and tales linked directly to the main theme. Its appeal has been of all times, immediate and contemporary.

The Story and Outline

The story of the Mahabharata centers on a family feud, which in its later stages developed into a big war. The origin of this feud is stated to have been the desire on the part of one branch of the Kuru race to appropriate the legitimate place of the other. In the country of the Bharatas, there lived at Hastinapura, believed to be situated 57 miles northeast of the modern Delhi, two princes named Dritharashtra and Pandu belonging to the Kuru race. The two brothers Dhritarashtra and Pandu were physically handicapped. One was blind and the other was under the curse of a disease that rendered him incapable of begetting children. So Pandu retreated to the forest with his two wives Kunti and Madri, where he died. Madri ascended his funeral pyre and Kunti returned to the city of Hastinapura with their five sons. The sons of Dhritarashtra, numbering one hundred, felt jealous of the children of Pandu and started ill-treating and harassing them in several ways. Dhritarashtra could not reject the claims of the sons of Pandu to a shelter in the royal household. He had to arrange for their training that consisted mostly of the knowledge of and practice in the science of warfare. As the sons of Pandu, particularly Bhima and Arjuna excelled in their learning, the sons of Dhritarashtra feared them as a source of danger to their supremacy. This was an additional reason for the ill-treatment for the Pandavas. In this ill treatment, Duryodhana and Duhsasana, the first and the second sons of Dhritarashtra naturally took a leading part, supported by Sakuni, the maternal
uncle and Karna, a friend of Duryodhana. There were several occasions on which the *Pandavas* proved their superiority over the other side; for instance, at the time of the *Panchala* princess, Draupadi's *svayamvara*, when they won her hand under the eyes of the *Kauravas*. It appeared then quite clear that Yudhishtira would soon be the virtual king of the *Kuru-Panchala* race. This frightened Duryodhana who, in consultation with his friends, induced Yudhishtira to play a game of dice with Sakuni, the expert on his side, so that the latter would lose in the game everything and would be required to go into exile. Yudhishtira lost the game of dice and he had to go into exile; and further insults were showered upon Draupadi—the common wife of the five *Pandavas*—when she was dragged to the court-room in a scanty dress and was called *dasī*. This naturally enraged Bhima and Arjuna and forced them to vow revenge on the offenders. So, even though they had to go into long exile lasting twelve years and remain away one more year incognito, at the end of the period they demanded their share in the kingdom. When this demand was refused they prepared for war; but the great war which lasted for eighteen days brought a very costly victory to Yudhishtira, though he won back the kingdom.

*Summary of the Contents of the Mahabharata*

The epic is divided into eighteen major sections known as *parvas*, each with a title that relates approximately to its contents. Each *parva* is subdivided into chapters made up of verses composed in various meters. There are also sub-*parvas* into which the longer major *parvas* are divided. The number of chapters mentioned below pertains to the Critical Edition of the *Mahabharata*.

The *Mahabharata* begins with the *Adi Parva*, 'Adi' meaning 'beginning' or first. Its 225 chapters first present the cycle of myths leading up to King Janamejaya's snake sacrifice at which Vaisampayana, a disciple of Vyasa, first speaks the *Mahabharata*. After this introduction, it proceeds to tell of the
origins of the Pandava brothers and their cousins the Kauravas, the marriage of the Pandavas to Draupadi and of the roots of the conflict between them that is the main theme of the central narrative.

The Sabha Parva (72 chapters) takes the narrative further by recounting how the kingdom was divided between the two branches of the family and how Yudhishthira and the Pandavas performed the great Rajasuya sacrifice. It tells of the envy of Duryodhana and the Kauravas and finally of the gambling match at which Yudhishthira looses everything to the Kauravas, the Pandavas are exiled to the forest and Draupadi is insulted. The Vana Parva (299 chapters) whilst recounting numerous adventures that befall the Pandavas during their exile in the forest also contains a number of notable didactic interludes in which various teachers give religious and philosophical instruction to the main characters. The Virata Parva (73 chapters) describes how the Pandavas pass their final year of exile living incognito at the court of King Virata. Here, the drama is not punctuated by didactic passages as in the Vana Parva.

The Udyoga Parva (197 chapters) describes the preparations for war with lengthy debates in both camps over what course of action is righteous and how success is gained in life. It is in this Parva that Krishna begins to play a prominent role as a controller of events. The Bhishma Parva (117 chapters) describes the initial drawing-up of the armies at Kurukshetra and contains the Bhagavad Gita, in which Krishna convinces Arjuna that it is right for him to wage war. The battle is then described up to a point at which Arjuna shoots down Bhishma, the Kaurava General.

The Drona Parva (173 chapters) takes the story of the battle further, up to the point at which Drona is slain by Dhristadyumna. The Karma Parva (69 chapters) concentrates specifically on the conflict between Arjuna and Karna. The Salya Parva (64 chapters) tells of the final stages of the battle in which Yudhishthira kills his uncle Salya and Bhima puts an end to Duryodhana.
in a single combat. The *Sauptika Parva* (18 chapters) describes the massacre in the Pandava camp by three survivors from the Kaurava host, and the *Stri Parva* (27 chapters) describes the lamentations of women whose husbands and sons have fallen on the battlefield and the attempts of the survivors to understand philosophically the catastrophe that has taken place.

The *Santi Parva* (353 chapters) is comprised of numerous didactic treatises covering a range of religious and philosophical perspectives. It opens with the victorious Yudhishthira lamenting over the suffering he has caused and wishing to abandon the kingdom he has won to take up the life of an ascetic. There follows a lengthy debate on the proper duty of a king, before everybody returns to the battlefield where the fallen Bhishma gives more detailed instructions on the subject. This section is known as the *Raja Dharma*. Bhishma then presents the *Moksa Dharma*, teachings on the subject of salvation in the form of various loosely connected treatises based mainly on the ideas of *Samkhya* & *Yoga*. The *Parva* concludes with an exposition on devotion to the deity Narayana known as the *Nara-Narayaniya Parva*.

The *Anusasana Parva* (154 chapters) contains a passage teaching devotion to *Siva* and then returns to Bhishma instructing Yudhishthira. There the teaching takes the form of *Dharma Sastra* or social regulations, as well as describing ritual acts that bring reward in the after-life. The *Aswamedhika Parva* (96 chapters) then narrates how the *Pandavas* executed a horse sacrifice to atone for the sins incurred by killing others in the battle. Much of the *Parva* however, consists of teachings of Krishna to Arjuna similar to those of *Moksa Dharma*, including the three chapters known as *Anu Gita*.

The *Asramavasika Parva* (47 chapters) describes the final meeting of the surviving characters when the *Pandavas* go to visit the elders of the family who have now renounced the world and are practicing religious austerities in the forest. The *Mausala Parva* (9 chapters) tells of the destruction of Krishna’s own race, the *Yadus*, through civil strife, and the departure of
Krishna from this world. The *Mahaprastanika Parva* (3 chapters) describes the deaths of the *Pandavas* and of Draupadi after they have given up their kingdom and journeyed to the *Himalayas*. The final *parva*, *Swargarohana Parva* (5 chapters) depicts the major characters of the epic residing among the Gods in heaven.

Over and above the eighteen *parvas* of the *Mahabharata*, there is one *parva* called the *Harivamsa* which is a supplement of the Epic. This is divided into three *sub-parvas* – the *Harivamsa Parva*, the *Vishnu Parva* and the *Bhavisya Parva*. The first *sub-parva* is a *Purana* in itself, and, in addition to legends, it narrates several genealogies. The second one gives an account of the life of Krishna, and the third speaks of the future. The material of the *Harivamsa* seems to have been drawn from the *Vishnu, Bhagavata* and *Bhavisya* and other *Puranas*.

*The Mahabharata's View on its Own Status*

From the beginning, the *Mahabharata* states that it is to be accepted as equal to the Vedas. In 1.1.205, it calls itself 'karsnam vedam', the Veda of the 'dark one', Vyasa. In the same chapter, verses 208-209 tell how Gods once weighed the four Vedas against the *Mahabharata* and found that the latter was superior in greatness and in gravity – *mahattve ca guruttve ca dhriyamānam thathodhikam*. Verse – 1.56.15 states:

*Idam hi vedaih samitam pavitram api cottomam*

*Sravyamanam uttamam cedam puranam – rsi-samstutam*

(This work, which is equal to the Vedas, is excellent and most pure. This *purana*, praised by the *rishis* is the best of all things that may be heard). 1.56.17 again describes the *Mahabharata* as 'karsnam vedam imam' (this of Veda-Vyasa) and in verse 21, it describes itself as 'arthaśastraṃ idam punyam', (this auspicious scripture relating to personal gain), 'dharmaśastraṃ idam param' (this best of all scriptures concerning religious duties) and 'mokṣaśastraṃ idam' (this scripture that teaches the way to salvation). In the
epic's concluding words (18.5.43), it is stated that 'itihasam imam punyam mahaitham veda samhitam' (this holy narrative is of great importance and equal to the Vedas).

The Author of the Epic

According to traditional belief, Sri Veda Vyasa, with Lord Ganesa as the scribe, composed the epic. Krishna Dvaipayana Vyasa the son of Rsi Parasara and Satyavathi is traditionally credited with the arrangement of the Veda into four texts, as well as the composition of the epic Mahabharata, many puranas and other works. Krishna Dvaipayana is a proper name meaning "the dark island born". V.S. Sukhtankar, in his 'Prolegomena' in the Mahabharata (Critical Edition), has described Vyasa as 'mythical'. This is because his existence is evident only in myths and legends, and no historical proof is available of the existence of such a person. Modern Scholars consider the texts attributed to Vyasa as the product of many contributors over the course of centuries. Thus, Vyasa's authorship has been described as symbolic, since the very word 'vyasa' in Sanskrit means 'divider' or in the extended sense, an editor.

The Sage Krishna Dvaipayana Vyasa has the title of 'Vyasa' attached to his name, because he has been accredited with the arranging and dividing of the Sruti texts in four – Rg, Yagur, Sama and Atharva Vedas. He is also attributed with the credit of having composed much of the smriti literatures. Thus, Vyasa is considered foremost in the transmission of knowledge in Indian Culture.

The epic Mahabharata is a very good source of information on Vyasa. While Vyasa appears as a static expositor or interlocutor in the Puranas, his role in the Mahabharata is that of an important and active participant in the story. This is an unusual situation in which the author himself appears in his own composition. Bruce M. Sullivan point out that "Vyasa is doubly the creator of the Mahabharata, its author, for not only is he the reputed
composer of the text, but is also the creator of the Bharata family on which the story is centred“ (Sullivan 1997, 2).

Vyasa is not only the author of the epic but also the begetter of Dhritarashtra and Pandu and Vidura, and is therefore personally concerned about the fortunes of the characters in the story. He is anxious to see that they act according to the plot he has designed for his narrative. Vyasa who is both a satyavadin and a brahmavadin, does not vanish behind the tale, but enters occasionally into the story itself. J.L. Mehta notices, by “rough count, about thirty occasions when he turns up in the course of the event narrated, often out of nowhere” (Mehta 1990, 105). Alf Hiltebeitel (2001, 46), on the other hand has tracked forty-one appearances of Vyasa in the epic. Hiltebeitel writes that “Vyasa’s appearances in the Mahabharata are a problematic category. For along with the obvious cases where he drops into the main narrative, there are numerous instances where he is quoted or his actions recalled. In these, he enters his characters’ or narrators’ thoughts, with which he has a wonder-provoking relation throughout” (Hiltebeitel 2001, 46).

Vyasa’s crucial interventions/appearances in the epic, which help the flow of events in the story, are listed out below. Vyasa sometimes appears with a piece of advice when his characters are in a tough spot, as when he takes the Pandavas, during their first exile to Ekachakra and advises them to live in a brahmana’s house until he returns after a month. He duly returns and advises them to go to Draupadi’s svayamvara and turns up again while they are on their way, to bless them. After Arjuna has won Draupadi, he appears again to settle the dispute regarding her bridal status, explaining privately to her father why she must be the common wife of all the Pandavas, relating their earlier life. At Yudhishtira’s Rajasuya sacrifice, he acts as the ‘brahma’ directing the ritual, but keeps aloof from the fateful happenings that ensue.
When the Pandavas depart on their 13-year exile, he pleads with Dhritarashtra to turn Duryodhana away from his evil designs and save the Kauravas from total disaster. He arrives again, later, to make sure that Arjuna gets all the divine weapons he will need in the coming battle and again to bless Yudhishthira on his pilgrimage during Arjuna’s sojourn at Indra’s court in heaven, and to assure him that all is well with Arjuna there. After the Pandavas have spent 11 years in exile, he arrives to exhort and encourage Yudhishthira in his despondency and forecasts his ultimate victory. It is not given to mortals, he says, to enjoy happiness without prior suffering. He is again there to bear witness to Sanjaya’s revealing to Dhritarashtra, the true divine nature of Krishna. On the eve of the 18-day war, he is there to bestow upon Sanjaya, the divine sight which will enable him to recount to his blind master the events of the battles and also to give a final warning about the coming holocaust which if Dhritarashtra really wants, can be prevented. After the assassination of Abhimanyu, he appears before the grief-ravaged Yudhishthira to explain to him the mystery and necessity of death. When Ashvathama uses the brahmastra wrongly and Arjuna counter checks it, he again turns up in the company of Narada, to find a solution to the situation with promise of help by Krishna.

Thus, it is seen that Krishna Dvaipayana Vyasa is an author who is unattached but compassionate, a supreme visionary who clearly perceives the dharma at all times and knows what should be done in all cases. He is an authoritative teacher, a seer concerned with the dissemination of knowledge.

Narrators of the Mahabharata

According to traditional belief Vyasa, after separating and arranging the Vedas and the Puranas, had taught it to his disciples Paila, Sumantu, Jaimini and Sauti Lomaharsana. Lomaharsana, who was Vyasa’s pupil for historical and legendary traditions (Itihasa and Purana) is said to have compiled the Purana from tales, anecdotes and songs and the lore coming down the ages.
Vaisampayana, himself narrates in the *Mahabharata* that Vyasa taught the four *Vedas* and the *Mahabharata*, the *Pancama Veda*, to Sumantu, Jaimini, Paila, Sukadeva and himself (Cr.Ed I.57.74).

The *Mahabharata* itself has several narrators who narrate the story to different audience at different places. The epic is artfully designed as a story about a ritual, a collective *sattrā* (sacrifice) performed by the *Rsis* of the *Naimisa* forest, in whose intervals is told the story about another *sattrā*, the snake sacrifice of King Janamejaya. In the interval of the *sarpa sattrā* of King Janamejaya is told the story of the author Vyasa and the characters he has created. The first narration in the *Naimisha Sattra* is by Sautī Ugrasravas and the second in the *sarpa sattrā* is by Vaisampayana. Other narrators like Sage Markandeya, Sage Narada and Sanjaya also narrate the story at certain points of the epic.

*Origin and Growth of the Epic*

It is believed that the epic *Mahabharata* has undergone a metamorphosis from 8,800 verses of the *Jaya*, through 24,000 verses of the *Bharata* to the present text of one-lakh verses (*Satasahasri Samhita*) over a long period of time. This means that in its earliest form the narration was a poem of triumph, and told of the victory of a particular king over his rival kinsmen.

In the epic itself the *sutas* called *pauranikās* are recognized as the re-writers and recites of the epic. The *sutas* represented the illegitimate progeny of the *kshatriyas*, and performed various functions at the court. They were counsellors, and friends of kings, charioteers and also bards. Some of them moved from place to place, wherever they knew that people were likely to assemble, and told their stories, which consisted mainly of exploits of love and adventure of ancient and ruling kings and princess. Such type of literature that was sung and propagated by the *sutas* called *Sautā* literature was perhaps largely composed by the *sutas*. The earlier versions of the epic
Mahabharata were sung by sutas, who were bards at the court of kings, and by the wandering sutas who carried the literature from place to place. These sutas probably took the epic legends and arranged them in order for the popular recitation. This dynamic expansion accounts for the huge volume of extraneous additions, containing both legends and didactic stuff in the present version of the epic. V.S.Sukthankar, however, holds that the didactic material in the epic was incorporated by the Bhrigu clan of the Learned Brahmins, in his book On the Meaning of the Mahabharata (1957). The Mahabharata itself mentions that Vyasa had composed the Epic known as Bharata and that it contained twenty-four thousand slokas — "catuvrimsatisahasrim cakre bharatasmhitam" (Cr. Ed. 1.1.61).

The European scholars call this text the Ur-Mahabharata. This simple story of the Bharata war as told by Vaisampayana was embellished by subsequent redactors with the addition of a number of episodes, legends and political, religious and philosophical discourses.

Maurice Winternitz in A History of Indian Literature-Vol.I writes that the first traces of epic poetry in India are seen in the Vedic literature (1972, 311). Thus, the origin of the Mahabharata can be traced back to the dialogue hymns of the Rg Veda as well as to the genre of literature called Akhyanas, Itihhasas Puranas of the Brahmanas. The myths and the legends primarily of gods and past heroes were called itihasa; while the narratives related to contemporary heroes were called akhyana. The cosmogenic myths and genealogical lists were known as purana. Over and above these three, the Brahmanas also had gathas (epic song verses) and narasamsis (songs in praise of heroes) – The recital of such narrative poems formed a part of the religious ceremonies at the sacrificial and domestic festivals.

Maurice Winternitz surmises that the popular epics – the Mahabharata and the Ramayana are not just old heroic songs of court-singers or travelling minstrels of Ancient India, compiled into unified poems by great poets. On
the contrary, they are accumulations of very diverse poems of unequal value, which have arisen in the course of centuries owing to continual interpolations and alterations. She continues her inferences stating that though the "ancient heroic songs do indeed form the nucleus of both these works, the more devotional Itihasa literature was included in them to so great an extent, and such long poems of a religious-didactic nature were inserted, that the Mahabharata, in particular, has almost completely lost the character of an epic" (Winternitz 1972, 316). Winternitz states that the epic nucleus assumed the present form of the Mahabharata by additions of different kinds including:

1. Legendary matter from the Bardic repertoire
2. Myths and Legends of brahmanic origin and didactic sections pertaining to brahmanic philosophy.
3. Cosmological, genealogical and geographical matter and local myths.
4. Myths of Vishnu and Siva.
5. Fables, parables, fairytales and moral stories.
6. Ascetic poetry and
7. Prose pieces and brahmanical legends and moral tales, entirely or partly in prose.

Date of Epic Mahabharata

Scholars have made several attempts to trace back the date of the composition of the epic. According to A. Holtzmann, the epic must have come into existence during the period 900-1100 AD, and holds that after this period too, the text must have undergone some changes before attaining the present form. Maurice Winternitz contradicts this in A History of Indian Literature arguing that it is proved by literary and inscriptional evidence that the Mahabharata had attained the status of a Dharma Sastra well before 500 AD. Winternitz argues that the epic might have received its earliest shape after the rise and spread of Buddhism to which the epic contains many references, and
also after the Alexander’s invasion of India because the Yavanasa (Greeks) are often alluded to in the epic. Winternitz concludes that according to these internal evidences, "the Mahabharata cannot have received its present form earlier than the 4th century BC and not later than the 4th century AD" (Winternitz 1972, 465). Therefore, further additions could not have taken place after the 4th century AD.

A.A. Macdonnell states that external evidence establishes that in the middle of the 5th century AD, the epic had already possessed the same character as at present i.e of a Smriti or a Dharma Sastra. He writes that "in a land grant dating from 462 AD or at the latest 532 AD, which proves incontrovertibly that the epic about 500 AD was practically of exactly the same length as it is stated to have in the survey of contents (Anukramanika) given in book I" (Macdonell 1958, 287). He concludes the argument stating that the epic must have acquired its present character by about 350 AD. E. Washburn Hopkins (Hopkins 1933, 398) surmises about the dates of the growth of the epic in different stages. The different stages being:

1. The Bharata story was composed not before 400 BC.
2. The story developed with Krishna as demi-god between 400-200 BC.
3. Remaking of the epic with Krishna as Supreme God between 200 BC-200 AD.
4. The present version 200-400 AD.
5. Occasional amplifications 400 AD.

M. Krishnamachariar records in his History of Classical Sanskrit Literature (1970) that C.M. Vaidya, a Mahabharata scholar, fixes the date of the epic around 450 BC while Weber holds that it is impossible to arrive at a specific date as to when the final redaction of the entire work in its present shape took place. Nevertheless, he concludes saying that it must have been some centuries after the commencement of the present era.
The Character of the Mahabharata

The *Mahabharata* is an epic in the sense that the story relates to high personages belonging to the hallowed race of the *Bharatas* of great antiquity. P.L. Vaidya, in *The Cultural Heritage of India* states that “the metres employed in the epic are simple, being mostly *anustubh* and *tristubh* and the language used is simple, sonorous and dignified. There are a number of racy dialogues here and there, and a large number of episodes. The moral objective of the work is propagation of the Eternal Law, covering the four human values – *dharma, artha, kama* and *moksa* (P.L. Vaidya 1962, 55). The epic thus becomes an eternal source of inspiration to the posterity. *Dharma*, being the supreme teaching of the epic, the *Mahabharata* is considered to be the fifth Veda (*Panchama Veda*).

Theories on the Origin of the Epic

Several scholars have propounded various theories regarding the origin and growth of the epic *Mahabharata*. These theories could be broadly grouped as – the analytic school, the synthetic school and the traditional view.

The Analytic school of thought argues that the great epic in its present form is the outcome of a long and continuous literary activity. This is the starting point of the theory, which aims at reaching the epic nucleus by severe dissection. The analytic school disagrees with the assumption that the *Mahabharata* conforms to Matthew Arnold’s definition of the epic, according to which the subject of the epic poem must be some great complex action. It argues that whatever is didactic, episodic and not in any way related to the epic story, did not form part of the original epic. It points out discrepancies in the *Mahabharata*, which are inexplicable on the hypothesis of unity of authorship, as maintained by the synthetic school. The theory is strengthened by the internal evidence in the *Mahabharata* that it had three different beginnings and three different forms, leading to the assumption that the epic
had different recensions. The analytic theory has found general acceptance among the European scholars, and has also been accepted to a great extent by Indian scholars.

The analytic school supporters like Larsen and Sorensen trace out the existence of a smaller, original version called the \( U\)-Mahabharata and the \( Saunaka \) recension, and argue that these versions were enlarged later by interpolations and additions. Ludwig regards the Mahabharata as an allegorical poem, based on the Nature myth hypothesis. Hopkins has dated the different stages of the development of the epic as stated earlier (ref. p. 48).

A.D. Pusaikar records in *The Mahabharata: Its History and Character* that, "in order to explain the inherent contradictions subsisting between the story and the 'moral' sought to be inculcated by the epic in its present form, as exemplified by the victory of the Pandavas supported by Krishna, through deceits and frauds practiced by them in complete disregard of the rules of righteous warfare, Adolf Holtzmann started an ingenious theory, later on styled by Hopkins as the 'inversion theory' " (A.D. Pusaikar 1962, 57). According to this theory, the Kauravas were the heroes of the original Mahabharata. The theory elaborates that as a result of several successive revisions the epic finally received its present form, which glorifies the Pandavas as its heroes. The theory was advocated by critics like Lassen, Winternitz and Mayer while critics like Jacobi, Barth, Levy and Oldenberg disagreed with it. There is no external evidence to support and the theory itself is one-sided. However, in *The Meaning of the Mahabharata*, V.S.Sukhtankar points out that the Kauravas are equally guilty, unscrupulous
and sinful, "only they are discreet and diplomatic in the extreme" (Sukhtankar 1957, 17).

There is wide dissent among scholars in accepting these theories. The analytic theory is spurned by many Indian scholars on the grounds that it results from a superficial study of the Mahabharata, insufficient understanding of its meaning, and the aim of its authors. Critics argue that ancient Indian standards of literary criticism, holding moral edification as the chief aim of any work, are to be applied to the Mahabharata, for the proper understanding or evaluation of the epic. These norms of literary criticism need not conform to the definition of an epic in English or any other foreign language. Critics believe that the advocates of the analytic school overlook the aesthetic aspect and perform an unjust dissection of the epic Mahabharata.

The Synthetic School attempts to understand the epic as a unified composition. Its supporters try to study the epic as a unified, harmonious and balanced work. According to Dahlmann, who is the main exponent of the synthetic theory,

(i) The Mahabharata is a unified work, a single organic whole, in which the didactic and epic elements have been artistically welded together by a single inspired diaskeuast keeping in view a definite plan and purpose.

(ii) The epic story was invented merely for the purpose of illustrating maxims of law and

(iii) The date of this composition or compilation was not later than the fifth century BC.

Critics, while agreeing with Dahlmann in regard to the first part of the theory about the unity of aim and plan in the work, do not accept the latter part of the theory, pertaining to the date of the composition.

The Traditional View, as given in the Mahabharata itself accepts Vyasa as its author. A close relationship is established between Vyasa and the
heroes of the epic by representing him as the procreator of Dhritarashtra and Pandu on Vichitravirya’s childless widows Amba and Ambalika by niyoga. After performing various penances, Vyasa composed the Bharata of 24,000 verses to which was appended a chapter comprising of the contents of the various parvas. Vyasa taught this Bharata to son Suka and other deserving and promising students including Vaisampayana. There is also a reference to another composition by Vyasa comprising 6 million stanzas, the portions of which were sung among the gods, gandharvas and mankind.

The Three Beginnings of the Epic

There is internal evidence in the Mahabharata itself, which speaks of its three beginnings. The Mahabharata states that the suta, called Sauti or Ugrasravas heard the epic recited at the snake sacrifice or Janamejaya by Vaisampayana who had learnt it from Vyasa. Ugrasravas in turn, related the story of the epic to the sages assembled in the Naimisa forest for the sacrifice performed by Saunaka. In the following stanza, the Mahabharata speaks of its three beginnings (I.1.50):

MANVADI BHARATAM KECHIT ASTIKADI THATHA’ PARE;
THATOPARICARADYANYE VIPRA SAMYAG ADHIYATE

These are

1. Manvadi (beginning with Manu) i.e. from the very beginning of the present Mahabharata immediately after the invocatory verse followed by the dialogue between Sauti and the sages at Saunaka’s hermitage.

2. Astikadi (beginning with Astika) i.e. from the beginning of the snake sacrifice of Janamejaya where starts the Astika Parva and

3. Uparicharadi (beginning from Uparichara) i.e. from the commencement of the actual narration of the history of the Bharatas where begins the Amsavatara Parva.
These three refer to the three beginnings of the *Mahabharata* as recited by the *suta* from Chapter 1; by Vaisampayana from Chapter 13 and by Vyasa from Chapter 54, of the Critical Edition of the *Mahabharata*. The texts recited by these sages were respectively taken to be *Jaya*, the *Bharata* and the *Mahabharata*.

*The Bhargava Elements in the Epic*

V.S. Sukhtankar studies the *Bhargava* material in the *Mahabharata* and evaluates the *Mahabharata* as an Epos (meaning unwritten narrative poetry celebrating incidents of heroic tradition) and Rechtbuch (a law book) combined. He finds the *Bhargava* material concentrated mostly in the *Upakhyanas*. The *Bharata* is believed to have been passed into the hands of the *Bhrgus* through the medium of the wandering minstrels. The *Bhrgus* who had specialized in *Dharma* and *Niti* developed the epic by incorporating a large mass of didactic material mostly in the *Santi* and *Anusasana Parvas*. They thus raised the *Mahabharata* to the rank of a *Smriti* and combined popular instruction and edification along with entertainment. V.S. Sukhtankar holds the view that the *Bhrgus* "have to all appearances swallowed up the epic nucleus such as it was, and digested it completely; and it would be a hazardous venture now to re-construct the lost *kshatriya* ballad of love and war" (Sukhtankar 1957, 110).

*The Commentary Tradition*

The commentary is a major form of interpretation of classical texts. It is a cumulative tradition where a long line of commentaries on a given text generally follows each other, each succeeding commentary taking into account and building on the preceding one. The *Mahabharata* has independent commentaries by individual commentators. The major commentators of the *Mahabharata* are Nilakantha, Arjunamisra, Sarvagna Narayana, Yegna
Narayana, Vaisampayana, Vadiraja, Srinandana and Vimalabodha. *Mahabharata-Tatparya-Nirnaya* by Sri Madhvacharya, the great teacher of the *Dvaita* philosophy, who flourished in the 12th century AD, also occupies a coveted place in the commentary tradition.

*The Critical Text of the Epic*

The *Mahabharata* has come down to us in two main recensions, the Northern and the Southern corresponding to the main Indian scripts. The Northern recension comprises the Kashmiri, the Nepali, the *Maithili* and the *Devanagari* versions. The Southern recension has given the Telugu, the *Grantha* and the Malayalam versions.

The critical edition of the *Mahabharata* published by the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, Pune, is based on a very large number of representative manuscripts and it fully utilizes the information drawn from commentaries, adaptations, epitomies, parallel versions, citations, early translations and the like. This is by far the purest version of the epic culled from various sources.

II

**Re-interpretation and Retellings of the *Mahabharata***

The *Mahabharata* along with the *Vedas*, the *Upanishads*, the *Ramayana* and the *Puranas* has always influenced the Indian religion, thought, culture and literature. It projects itself as a *Panchama Veda* which influences and moulds the life and character of the masses and leaves a profound and lasting impression on them.

Rewriting and re-interpretation of the *Mahabharata* have always been present in the Indian Literary Tradition. Being a classic, the epic can be read and re-read at all the stages of life where every reading reveals newer and
newer levels of meaning and planes of appreciation. Like a true classic, the *Mahabharata* influences the collective and individual consciousness of its readers. Every re-visit to this book is like a new encounter since with every reading the reader changes and the historical perspective also alters. Thus all re-readings of the epic become voyages of discovery into the meaning of the narration. The epic thus proves to be book that has never finished saying what it has to say and holds eternal fascination for its reader.

The *Mahabharata* has been read from diverse points of view and still continues to be harvested for creative purposes. There has been thematic, episodic and imagistic re-interpretation of the epic in all Indian vernaculars and many foreign languages including English. The epic has been kept alive through text renewal mechanism such as translations, abridgements, adaptations, interpretation and trans-creation. Translation of the text has been done into all Indian languages and many foreign languages. These translations are usually accompanied by prose-paraphrases and critical commentaries.

The best-known commentator of the *Mahabharata* is Nilakantha who lived at *Kurpara* to the west of *Godavari* in Maharashtra and belongs to the 16th century. The *Mahabharata* text with the critical commentary of Nilakantha is referred to as the Bombay Edition. Older than Nilakantha is Arjuna Misra whose commentary along with that of Nilakantha appears in the Calcutta edition of the *Mahabharata* (1875). The earliest extant commentator of the great epic is Sarvajna Narayāna, large fragments of whose notes have been preserved and is believed to have been written before the second half of the 14th century.

*Sanskrit:* A large number of *mahakavyas, khandakavyas* and plays based on various episodes/entire story of the *Mahabharata* have been written in classical Sanskrit from the early centuries of the Christian era. One of the earliest of such *mahakavyas* is the celebrated *Kiratarjuniya* of Bharavi (6th
century AD) based on a simple episode from the *Vana Parva* describing in 18 cantos Arjuna’s propitiation of *Siva* for divine weapons. *Sisupalavadha* of Magha (7th century AD), *Mahabharata manjari* of Kshemendra, *Bharatacampu* of Ananta Bhatta are some of the works in classical Sanskrit. Kalidasa’s *Kumarasambhava* is also based on the story found in both *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. The other famous play of Kalidas – *Abhinyana Shakuntalam* is based on *Shakuntalopakhyana* in the Epic. Innumerous plays have been written on the *Nalopakhyana – Naishadacharita* of Sriharsa, *Sahridayananda* of Krishnananda and *Nalabhyudaya* of Vamanabhatta – are some of the prominent ones. The Kerala poet Vasudeva (9th century AD) deals with the same story in his *Nalodaya*. The *Nalacampu* or *Damayantikatha* of Trivikrama has been written in the *campu* style. Bhasa (3rd century AD) has rendered several episodes of the *Mahabharata* into plays, the popular ones being *Karnabharam* and *Urubhanga*. The other dramatic renderings by Bhasa, based on the epic are *Dutavakya*, *Dutaghatotkaca* and *Pancaratra*. The *Venisamhara* of Bhattanarayana recounts the insult of Draupadi while the *Subhadradhananjaya* of Prahladanadeva reworks the romance of Arjuna and Subhadra. Two plays dealing with the exploits and adventures of Bhima are the *Nirbhayabhima* of Ramacandra that gives the story of Bhima’s slaying the demon Baka and the *Bhima-vikramavayoga* of Moksaditya. *Saughandikaharana* of Visvanatha and *Kalyanasaugandhika* of Nilakanta dramatize the encounter of Bhima with Hanuman during his adventure for fetching *saugandhika* flowers for Draupadi from a lake belonging to *Kubera*. The legend of Savitri and Satyavan has been re-worked in *Savitricarita* by *Sankaralala* (AD 1882). It may not be out of place to mention here that Madvacharya’s *Mahabharata Tatparya Nimaya* holds the view that Bhima is the true hero of the epic *Mahabharata* on whose strength all the other *Pandavas* relied.
In modern times, attempts to reinterpret the *Mahabharata* from contemporary perspectives in the form of poetry, fiction and drama have been made. Writers attempt thematic and episodic re-creations using images, symbols and illusions.

**Assamese**: In Assamese, several translations and re-interpretations of the epic have contributed to the literary scenario. The translation of the epic by Ramasarasvati (16th century AD) is almost a re-telling because of the introduction of many new incidents and episodes. He has also written other works as *Kulacalavada, Bagasuravada* and *Bhimacarita*, where the popular hero has been mostly picturesquely drawn as a big and tall glutton always carrying a club with him. *Babrubahanar Yudha* by Harihara Vipra is based on an episode on the *Asvamedha Parva* of the *Mahabharata*. Madhavadeva composed *Rajasuyayajna* and Ananta Kandali wrote the *Bharata Savitri*. Surya Khari Daivajna and Ramakanta Choudhary are 19th century writers and the former wrote *Kur mavali Vadha* and *Khatasura Vadha* and the latter the *Abhimanyu Vadha Kavya*. Plots of many modern dramas and other writings have been taken from the epic *Mahabharata*.

In the later modern period, writers have tried to interpret the elements in a contemporary perspective. *Pitamah* of Biren Borkotoky, *Maharathi* of Candraprasad Saikia, *Yuvaraj* of Khargeswar Bhuyan and *Srikrishna* of Herembha Saikia have been analysed and written from a modern point of view. Several plays and poems with Draupadi, Arjuna, Bhima, Gandhari, Kunti and Ekalavya have been composed conforming to the changing social awareness. The novel *Jajnaseni* by Dr. Santanamayee Majumdar is a portrayal of Draupadi as a traditional and dignified Indian woman. Several translations from Oriya and Bengali *Mahabharata* have also been carried out into the Assamese language.

**Bengali**: Kavindra Parameswara wrote the earliest *Mahabharata* in Bengali in the 16th century AD under the name of *Pandava Vijaya*. Later on,
writers like Srikara Nandin wrote *Asvamedha Parva* based on *Jaimini Bharata* and the popular *Mahabharata* in Bengali was composed by Kasi Ramadasa (17th century AD). The *Mahabharata* of Kasi Rama along with the *Ramayana* of Krittivâsa are the two of the greatest works in Bengali literature. The *Nala-Damayanti Akhyana* of Pitambara Dasa and *Shakuntala* of Rajendra Dasa are two prose translations that are highly treasured in Bengali literature. Several episodic re-creations like *Abhimanyu Vadha, Pandavar Ajnatavasa* and *Pandava Gaurava* by Girish Candra Ghose and the famous lyrical drama *Chitragada* by Rabindranath Tagore find an esteemed place in Bengali literature. Tagore has also produced several narrative poems like *Kaca-o-devayâni, Ghandarir Avedhan* and *Kama-Kunti-Samvad* based on the *Mahabharata*. Navin Chandra Sen's trilogy, *Kurukshetra, Rivataka* and *Prabhâsa* has the *Mahabharata* war and later incidents in Lord Krishna's life as its background. Rajasekhar Basu's abridged Bengali version of the *Mahabharata* is another contribution to Bengali literature.

**Gujarati** : Nakara is the earliest known author in Gujarati who attempted a rendering of the *Mahabharata* into the vernacular. Premananda the author of the Gujarati *Ramayana* has also composed a complete version of the *Mahâbhârata*. His *Candrasakhyana, Draupadi-swayamvara, Nalakhyana, Draupadiharana* and *Subhadraharana* are based on the *Mahabharata* episodes. His *Nalakhyana* is the most popular of his *Akhyanas*. Bhalana who may be called the Father of the *Akhyanas* in Gujarati wrote the *Nalakhyana* and *Durvasakhyana*. Premananda's son, Vallabha wrote the *Duhsasana-Rudhira-panakhyana*, the *Kuntiprasannakhyana*, the *Yudhistir-Vrikodârakhyana* etc., and Ratnesvara, a pupil of Premananda, wrote the *Sisupalavadhâ*. Nanhalal, a modern time poet has written the epic under the title of *Kurukshetra*. Other notable works are *Rakhacarita* of Leela Munshi, which contains a fine sketch of Draupadi and *Matsyaganda and Gangeya* of Batubhai Lalbhai Umarvadiya, which were published in 19th century.
Hindi: Sabalsingh Chauhan first published the abridged Hindi version of the *Mahabharata*, in about 24,000 verses. Surdas, the famous blind Saint composed a work on the story of Nala and Damayanti in Hindi. Chatra is the author of *Vijaymuktavali*, an abstract of the *Mahabharata* in Hindi verse. Gokulnath is a renowned translator of the *Mahabharata* into Hindi. Maithili Saran Gupta's long narrative entitled *Jayadrathavadha* is also noticeable.

Kannada: Vikramarjuna Vijaya also known as *Pampa Bharata* composed by Pampa-I, is an abridgement of the epic, which gives the *Jaina* version of the story. Ranna wrote the *Sahasabhimavijaya* describing the final fight of Bhima and Duryodhana. Karnaparya introduce the stories of Krishna and the *Pandavas* in his *Neminatha Purana*, which is the history of the 22nd Thirthankara. Naranappa, better known by his pen-name, Kumaravyasa composed the Kannada version of the first ten *parvas* of the *Mahabharata*. Timman-na whose work was named *Krishnarayabharata* translated the remaining *parvas*. Lakshmanakavi and Shalva wrote two other versions of the *Mahabharata*, the *Lakshmanakavi Bharata* and the *Salva Bharata* respectively. Kanakadasa's *Nalacarita*, Laksmisa's *Jaimini Bharata* and the prose version entitled *Krishnarajavani Vilasa* composed under the patronage of Krishnaraja Wodeyar III are other notable works. The *Yaksaganas*, which are in a dramatic form suitable for recitation before rustic audiences by professional or amateur actors are based on the epics and the *Puranas*. Shantayya wrote a large number of such works in the 19th century AD. One of the noticeable modern novelistic rendering of the epic is *Parva* by Bhyrappa. Many dramatic works have also been written in Kannada, based on themes from the epic.

Kashmiri: Kashmir, after the decline of Buddhism in the 7th century AD, became the cradle of Sanskrit learning and a large number of literature on the epic including recensions of the *Mahabharata* have been produced. Kalhana’s *Rajatarangini*, while narrating the early history of Kashmir mentions that Yudhishthira was a contemporary of the Kashmiri King Gonanda I. Many
stories of the great epic have been rendered into the folk tradition and references to the events and characters of the Mahabharata abound in the later literature of Kashmir. The earliest written recension of the Mahabharata in the Kashmiri language dates back to 1446 AD authored by Avatar Bhatt under the patronage of Sultan Zainul Abidin. Sahib Kaul of the 17th century has rendered the Harivamsa into a narrative lyric. Premananda, the 18th century saint has written a large number of devotional songs in praise of Krishna, which include Radha-Swayambar and Sudama Tsaritra, the two lyrical adaptations of Harivamsa. Lakhimanjoo Bulbul has successfully adapted the Nala-Damayanti episode of the Mahabharata. The Mahabharata, though not translated or adapted in its entirety into Kashmiri remains the source of inspired literature in the 19th and 20th century.

Konkani: The National Library at Briga in Portugal has evidence of transcription of the Mahabharata in the late 15th century in Goa, which remained a Portuguese colony for more than 450 years. Stories written in lucid prose in Konkani, the language of Goa, are preserved in the library. The epic has been preserved by the tribal communities in the oral tradition. The tribal communities of Goa recite Banvad and Gudilya Kaani as collective performances on occasions. Banvad emphasizes the philosophy of life as depicted in the epic and Gudilya Kaani, the story of Gudulo glorifies Bhima as the real and the only hero of the epic. Incidentally, the medieval Guru Madhvacharya (who is revered as the spiritual guru by the Konkani-speaking Brahmins and is also considered an avatara of Hanuman of whom Bhima is also an amsa) in his Mahabharata Tatparya Nirnaya foregrounds Bhima as the mighty hero of the epic. The resonance of this idea is also found in M.T.Vasudevan Nair’s Second Turn, a Bhima-narrative in Malayalam.

Malayalam: Ezhuthachan’s Mahabharata, a condensed version of the epic is considered one of the best literary works in Malayalam. In the genre of Kathakali literature, the Nalacaritram of Unnayi Wariar and the Uttara
Svayamvaram and Kicaka Vadam of Erayamman Thambi are noted for their literary excellence. Amongst modern drama based on the Mahabharata, Subhadrarjunan by Thottakattu Ikkavamma, Karnan by N.P. Chellapan Nair, Amba by Mahakavi Uloor, Bhismar by K.M.Pannikar and the pastoral elegy Devayani by Changanpuza Krishna Pillai deserve special mention. The incomplete Kannasa Bharatam and Bharatamala written by the Niranam poets of the 14th and the 15th century AD are translations of the epic into Malayalam. The Bharatangatha ascribed to Cherruseri stands at par with the Mahabharata of Eruthachan. The Thullal poems, the Campus and the Attakathas have also drawn largely from the epic heritage. Several translations of myths and legends from the epic also constitute another important segment of Malayalam literature.

In modern times, attempts to re-interpret the Mahabharata from the contemporary perspective have been in the form of poetry, fiction and drama. The ironic reversal of the Mahabharata legends is seen in the stories of O.V.Vijayan where he parodies the Mahabharata myth. Professor Ayyappa Panikker and Sugathakumari have produced allusive poems that articulate contemporary concerns through the medium of Mahabharata legends. Another work worth mentioning is Bharataparyatanam by Kuttikrishna Marar, a critical reading of selected legends of Mahabharata marked by its interpretive originality. Mahabharatatiluday by Vaikom Chandrasekharan Nair is another of such subjective re-interpretation. Several modern novelistic retellings have been attempted by Malayalam writers, which include Randamoozham by M.T. Vasudevan Nair and Ini Njan Urangatte by P.K. Balakrishnan. A recent prose retelling by Kesava Menon, Sahadeva's Story, focuses on Sahadeva, who the author says, has a perception of a political reporter and is also skilled to do spy work for Yudhishthira.

Marathi: The Marathi language has also produced a lot of literature based on translations, recreations and re-interpretations of the Mahabharata. Mukteswara has produced a well-known Marathi adaption of the epic in verse. The most popular Mahabharata in Marathi is the Pandava Pratapa of
Shridhara. Moropant and Subhananda are the other writers who have translate(jjadapted the Mahabharata. The Damayanti-Svayamvara or the Nalopakhyana of Raghunatha Pandita, Durvasa Yatra and Draupadi Vastraharana are some of the other noticeable works. Anna Kirloskar’s Shakuntala and Sowbhadra, Khadilkar’s Draupadi, Raghnath Pandit’s Nala-Damayanti Svayamvara and Sarnaik’s Draupadi-Svayamvara are some of the modern works based on the epic. Chiplunkar’s ‘prose translation of the complete Mahabharata is a noteworthy contribution to the Marathi literature.

The Marathi language has also produced a lot of literature based on re-creations and re-interpretations of the Mahabharata. Poets like Narendra and Vamana Pandita have borrowed heavily from the Mahabharata with regard to plot, character and style. Modern Marathi poetry, drama and novel display a deep influence of the epic. Virata Parva Hyachi Bakhar is the first Marathi novel based on the Mahabharata written by Cintaman Sastri Thatte in 1862. The other writers are S.N.Joshi, Sane Guruji, V.S.Khandekar, Shivaji Sawant and Ranjit Desai.

Oriya: The first Oriya work on the Mahabharata is the re-creation of the epic by Saraladasa, a sudra poet. The Sarala Mahabharata as it is popularly called adopted a general frame of the original Sanskrit epic but made extensive changes in the details through omissions, additions and elaborations thereby recreating the epic in its own way. Sarala’s work have influenced many subsequent poets who took episodes and stories from it and developed the into Kavyas. Some important examples are Ushabhilas by Sisusankar, Kapatpasa by Bhimadhihar and Subhadraparinaya by Upendrabhanja. Viswambharadasa wrote the Vicitra Mahabharata and Rajakrishnasimha wrote Mahabharata. Bhimadhivara’s Bharatasavitri and Kapatpasa are based on the Mahabharata. Amongst modern works based on the Mahabharata Radhanath Ray’s Duryodhanararkantanadisantarana and Banaharana and Radhamohan Rajendradev’s Pancalipattapaharana are worth
mentioning. Kalindicharan Panigrahi, Sitakant Mahapatra and Pratibha Ray are some of the post-Independence writers who drew profusely from the Mahabharata themes.

Tamil: The first available translation of the Mahabharata into Tamil is assigned to Perindevanar, a poet belonging to the Sangam Period of the Tamil literature. M.V. Ramanujacaryar had made a complete and literal prose translation of the Mahabharata in the present century. C.Rajagopalachari's adaption of the Mahabharata entitled Vyasavirindu is a popular work, which has been translated into English. Subramanya Bharatiyar's Panchaliyinsabatam is a noteworthy work since it condemns Pandavas in the incident with Kicaka.

Telugu: The first literary work on the epic is the Mahabharata of Nannayya. In the 13th century AD, Tikkanna wrote an unfinished Mahabharata, which was later, completed by Yerrapragada in the 14th century AD. Pinavirabhadrayya wrote the Telugu version of Jaimini Bharata and Sringara Shakuntalam in the 15th century AD. Tirupati Venkata Sastri and Mahamahopadyaya Krishnamurthy Sastri are the modern writers who have reworked on the Mahabharata.

English Renderings of the Epic by Indian Writers

The very first English translation of the Epic, was done by Shri Kisari Mohan Ganguly and was first serially published in 13 years (from 1883 to 1896), in one hundred fascicules. The most authoritative and exhaustive edition of the epic with critical commentary in English, is by Dr.V.S. Sukhtankar published in 19 volumes by the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute (1933-66). The other prominent translators into English are M.N. Dutt, Pratap Chandra Roy and P.Lal. Writers like Kamala Subramaniam, R.K. Narayan, and Meera Oberoi have attempted several abridgements and condensations. The most popular abridgement is by C.Rajagopalachari, who had written it with the idea of popularizing it among the children of the new
generation. Irawati Karve’s *Yuganta* (which is also translated into English from Marathi), a critical work on the *Mahabharata* is specially worth mentioning. Several creative works based on the epic have also been produced by writers, among which *The Great Indian Novel* by Shashi Tharoor stands apart for its thematic subversion.

**Mahabharata Outside India**

The *Mahabharata* occupies a unique position in the literature of Nepal. Many translations of the epic and the *Bhagavad Gita* are found in Nepali language. It is also seen that the *Mahabharata* had a great cultural influence in the literary history of Indonesia. The figure of Arjuna is very prominent and widely accepted in Java and spectrum of stories pertaining to the theme of *Mahabharata* adorns the Javanese literature. The epics and *puranas* of India figure prominently in the literature of Thailand and several translations of the epic and *Bhagavad Gita* are in vogue.

The influence of the *Mahabharata* on Cambodian culture is evident from the various inscriptions dating back as early as the 6th century AD and in the temple art of the country. *Mahabharata* survives as a visual art in the Kabuki theatre of Japan. A Mangolian resumé of the *Mahabharata* is included in the commentary of the *Subhasitaratnasiddhi* and has been a vehicle for transmitting the epic of India among Mangolians. The *Mahabharata* tradition is represented in the classical Malay literary works entitled *Hikayat Pandawa Jaya* and *Hikayat Pandawa Lima* of unknown authorship. The German and the French Scholars have produced a large amount of critical studies and translations of ancient Indian literature including the *Mahabharata*.

**Mahabharata in Buddhist Literature**

The Pali text deals with the main story of the *Mahabharata* and references to the epic characters and incidents are found in Pali works. There is also a narration about how Buddha satisfies a *Yaksa* with his wise answers.
just as Yudhishthira does in an episode in the *Mahabharata*. The *Jataka* tales include the stories of Vidura, Yudhishthira, King Sibi and Sri Krishna. The *Kunala Jataka* describes a distorted account of Draupadi who is seen committed adultery with a hunchbacked dwarf.

**Mahabharata in Jaina Literature**

The Jaina version of the *Mahabharata* has its own characteristics and is termed *Harivamsa* where Krishna is the major figure, Balarama the second important figure and Jarasandha is the chief villain. The fight between the *Kauravas* and the *Pandavas* is almost omitted in the *Svetambara* version while the *Digambaras* closely follow the *Brahmanic* version. Almost all the characters are converted into Jainism and Jaina doctrines and sermons are frequently inserted. The earliest extant work, the *Harivamsa Purana* by Jinasena belongs to the *Digambara* sect. The *Uttara Purana* of Gunabhadra, *Trisastilaksana Mahapurana*, and the *Pandava Purana* of Subhacandra and the *Shatrunjayamahatmya* deal with the *Mahabharata* story. The other notable works on *Mahabharata* are *Pandavacarita* of Maladarin Devaprabha Suri, *Pandavapurana* in Sanskrit by Asaga and *Mahapurana* in *Apabramsa* by Pushpadanta. The Nala episode has been reiterated in *Kathakosa, Kumarapalapratibodha* and Draupadi is highlighted in *Naya-dhammakahao* and *Pancasati-prabodha-sambandha*. The Jains have incorporated the Krishna cult into their religion and *Vasudeva-hindi* of Sanghadasa Ganin and Jinadasa deals with the story of Vasudeva Krishna. The eighth *Anga* *Amsagadasao* gives a corrupted Jaina version of the Krishna legend where Krishna appears as a pious Jina.

**Influence of Epics in Indian Art and Culture**

The epic has exercised a profound influence on the art, culture and the general texture of social life, besides literature. The Indian epics contain a portrait gallery of ideal types of men and women who are the highest example
of moral conduct. The *Mahabharata* has been propagated through oral, literary, visual and pictorial media like ballads, adaptations, retellings, stage performances and paintings, sculpture etc.

The earliest specimens of the epic on Indian Art and Sculpture date from the Gupta period. The Gupta pillars from Chandimau have scenes from the *Kirataarjuna* of the *Mahabharata*. The most famous representation of the *Mahabharata* scene is to be found in the rock sculpture at *Mahabalipuram* in Southern India. The legend of the churning of the ocean by the Gods and the *asuras* has been a favorite subject with Indian sculptors and painters. Various medieval schools of Indian paintings – Rajput, Kangra etc. have pictures depicting Arjuna’s adventures, the legend of Nala and Damayanti and other *Mahabharata* scenes. The Persian version of the *Mahabharata* entitled *Razm Nama* has a set of 169 beautiful miniatures depicting *Mahabharata* scenes. Among the famous modern artists Ravi Verma, Abanindranath Tagore and Nandalal Basu have illustrated many scenes from the *Mahabharata*.

The performing tradition is as old as the epic itself and began with the recitation of the epic. It is also the richest and the most varied aspect of the Vedic tradition. It often deviates from the literary tradition and presents many episodes in many versions, bringing in newer concepts and varied interpretation of the epic characters. The performing tradition acts as a bridge between the oral and the literary tradition utilizing the thematic and textual material of the epic. Performance forms are flexible and freely incorporate elements from the social, religious and the artistic aspects of life.

In presentation, the performers show a keen sense of drama by suitably changing the pitch and tempo of their voice and using a series of stock gestures. The reciters also use musical instruments accompanied by dancing and gesticulating, which enhance the impression produced on the spectators’ imagination. The *Mahabharata* continues to be performed in the traditional theatre of the *Kathakali* of Kerala, *Yaksa Gana* of Karnataka,
Therrikuthu of Tamilnadu, Yatra of West Bengal and Nautanki of Uttar Pradesh.

The oral tradition of the Mahabharata precedes the written tradition by several centuries. There is a great variation in theme and conception of characters as a result of the incorporating of indigenous legendary materials and motifs. All branches of folkloric literature - the song, the ballad, the tale and the myth are incorporated into the epic as a part of the localization. The oral traditions prevalent in the country are Waree Leeba of Manipur, Ojhaphali of Assam, Pala of Orissa, Pandavani of Madhya Pradesh, Akhyana of Gujarat and Harikatha of Maharashtra and the southern States.

The theatre - both modern and folk, has adapted many popular episodes in the epic, Abhimanyuva, Kicakavada and Jayadratavada. Apart from the human theatre, the puppet theatre has also drawn largely from the epic. Puppeteers, who are verifiers and songsters themselves, keep adding new textual material and create a new floating text giving new shape and meaning to the epic. The Rajasthani string puppets, the shadow puppet theatre of Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka and the glove puppets of Kerala have contributed to the growth of the epic through the performing tradition.

The modern theatre has produced a number of plays dealing with the epic. The theme of the epic dealing with the issues of right and wrong and war and peace have been found relevant to the contemporary theatre. Bhasa’s plays based on the Mahabharata themes have been adapted by directors like K.N. Pannikar of Kerala and Ratan Thiyam of Manipur. The experimental theatre group, Board theatre in Tokyo has produced a play on the Abhimnayu episode. The reputed director Peter Brooke has produced a play on the entire Mahabharata lasting for nine hours.

Several films based on the characters and the episodes of the epic have been produced in the various vernaculars of India. The recent trans-creation of the epic into a tele serial is worth mentioning in this context.
Conclusion

Thus, the *Mahabharata* which began as a war poem gradually expanded absorbing many digressions and grew into an encyclopedic epic. The epic dominated by the deeds of Sri Krishna and Arjuna is accepted as a religious text, a *Dharma Sastra* and a treasure house embodying India's hoary tradition and past civilization. Nevertheless, *Mahabharata* is primarily regarded as a work of art. As Nilmadhav Sen writes "the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* should better be regarded as the *true history of India*, history not of events, but of the urges and aspirations, strivings and purposes of the Nation. Encyclopedic in nature, together they form 'the content of the our collective unconscious' wherein breathe 'the united soul of India and the individual souls of her people'" (Sen 1962, 117). The epic reflects the modern and the intellectual mood of our civilization and demands a thorough and intelligent understanding of the spirit and the meaning conveyed through it. The *Mahabharata* thus proves itself as a work that has been instrumental in moulding the character and civilization of the whole of India (and often transcending the geographical limits), over a long period of time. Tracing of the influence of the epic *Mahabharata* on the civilization and culture of India is as good as comprehending the real history of the people during a period of over two thousand years. The epic has always provided an inner strength to the readers and has inspired them to understand the spirit of Indian culture.

The epic has been adorned by Vedic and secular meanings as well. The *Bhagavad Gita*, which forms a part of the epic with its passages of philosophical poetry enhances the spiritual status of the epic. The epic itself emphasizes the concept of Dharma as the path to success and salvation and exhorts in the *Swargarohana Parva* that *Dharma* is the sure way to the other three *Purusharthas* — *Artha*, *Kama* and *Moksa* (Cr. Ed. 18.5.49).

\[ \text{urdhvabahuviraumesah na ca kaschid srunoti mam} \\
\text{dharmad arthas ca kamasca sa kirmartham na sevyethe} \]
(With uplifted arm I shout, but none hears me; from Dharma result Artha and Kama, why then is Dharma not observed?).

The influence of the western literary studies has changed the attitude of the Indian reader towards the epic Mahabharata. The modern creative writers regard the epic as a text to be read without personal involvement. They analyze and interpret the text viewing it objectively, thereby understanding it from a different perspective. The changed social and cultural climates have thus produced retellings of the epic, where new questions are posed to the present day reader and new explanations are offered by the writers. These retellings view the theme and the characters of the epic in a different light, which necessitates a new reading of the original text.

The six novels that have been selected for the present study also foreground certain aspects of the epic. While Pratibha Ray’s Yajnaseni, M.T.Vasudevan Nair’s Second Turn, and Shivaji Sawant’s Mrityunjaya foreground the epic characters, P.K.Balakrishnan’s And Now Let Me Sleep and V.S.Khandekar’s Yayati re-interpret epic situations. Shashi Tharoor’s prose fiction The Great Indian Novel stands apart from the above-mentioned novels for the technique of subversion employed by the author, which renders it a political satire. The novels are thus reworking of epic themes in the modern context. The English translations of the novels written in the vernaculars and the verse rendering of the Mahabharata into English by M. N. Dutt, will be made use of in the study.