INTRODUCTION

Kurukṣetra occupies an important place in the political as well as cultural history of ancient India. According to Indian tradition it was the 'seat of creation' and the 'cradle of Indian civilization'. Scholars generally agree that major part of the earliest Indian literature was composed in this valley in the lap of the sacred Sarasvatī river which has been accorded the highest importance in the Rgveda.¹

From the very remote past down to our age, Kurukṣetra had traditionally come to be regarded as the holiest land not only in India but in all the three worlds for its sacredness.² Naturally the material relating to this zone of the country is scattered in various Vedic and post-Vedic works, right from the Rgveda onward. Since however, the Mahābhārata deals with the history of the Bharatas and describes in detail the great battle fought in this land by the sons of Pāṇḍu and Dhṛtarāṣṭra, it contains many times more material on this region. Its religious sanctity earned it the adjective of Dharmakṣetra
in the opening verse of the Bhāgavadgītā.  

In the known historical period this region came under the sway of the Maurya emperors. Thereafter it passed through the hands of Greeks, Scythians, Kuśānas, Guptas and Hūṇas. At the end of the 6th century A.D. Thānesar was the capital of Prabhākaravardhana. The most glorious days of Thānesar and the Kurukṣetra region were the first half of the 7th century A.D. when it was under the benevolent rule of the great Harṣavarman's. The Chinese pilgrim Huen-tsang paid a visit to it. His travelogue makes frequent references to this zone. Under the unfavourable circumstances during the Muslim-Mughal periods, Kurukṣetra underwent a turmoil. Sultan Mahāmūd of Gaznī destroyed the shrines of the Hindu gods and goddesses of this holy place. During the medieval period the religious places of the Hindus attracted the wrath of those in power and Kurukṣetra was no exception. Nevertheless, the prominence of Kurukṣetra as a holy place for the Hindus survived. Indeed it will not be an exaggeration to say that Kurukṣetra has retained its pre-eminence in the cultural and political history of India since ages.

With all its importance, however, Kurukṣetra has not yet received enough attention from researchers. As a matter of fact we are still in want of an independent
authentic work on the history and culture of Kurukṣetra. Examination and appraisal of source material on Kurukṣetra is therefore not only desirable but necessary. An effort in this direction has been made by Sh. S. S. Parui in his doctorate thesis on 'Kurukṣetra In The Vāmana Purāṇa'.

Much of the material in the Vāmana Purāṇa is however borrowed from the Mahābhārata, especially the accounts of the tīrthas of this region. There is therefore, much more justification for a work on Kurukṣetra as revealed in the Mahābhārata. This is an attempt to meet this requirement.

According to the traditional view, the Mahābhārata was composed by the sage Kṛṣṇa Dvaipāyana Vedavyāsa in the beginning of the Kaliyuga. It is said that after Veda-vyāsa had composed the Great Epic, the sage Vaiśampāyana, acting on the latter's instance, narrated the same, dividing it into as many as one hundred sub-parvans, before Janamejaya on the occasion of the serpent sacrifice performed by him. It is further stated that later on Ugrasuraivas divided the same into eighteen main parvans and recited it before the sages assembled at Naimiśāranya.

Different scholars hold divergent views regarding the number of verses that have formed part of the Mahābhārata. There is some evidence to suggest that
there were three successive recensions of this great poem. The first recension contained twenty-four thousand verses and in support of this view can be cited the following verses of the Mahābhārata itself, i.e. Vyāsa composed the Bhārata Samhita having twenty four thousand verses. The second recension, was in the form of a conversation between Vaiśampāyana and Janamejaya and the third between Saūti and Saūnaka. It is the third recension which is presently known as the Mahābhārata. The Orthodox view is quite different from this. According to that view, the Mahābhārata originally consisted of one lakh verses and was dictated by Vyāsa to Ganeśa, the scribe, who put the same into black and white. This view is sought to be supported by the following verse again from the Mahābhārata, i.e. 'sitting constantly at work Kṛṣṇadvaipayana completed this narrative, known as the Mahābhārata, in full three years'. It is believed that if the number of verses had not been one lakh then a poet like Vyāsa with a scribe like Ganeśa, would not have taken so much time in composing the whole thing.

Pāṇini defines 'Bharata' as the battle "of the Bharatas". Hence Mahābhārata would mean the 'great narrative of the battle of the Bharatas'. In the Mahābhārata itself come across the suggestions:
It is known as Mahābhārata because of its greatness, enormous size and import, implying that the work 'outweigh the Vedas and other sacred literature of India'. This also could be interpreted in a different way, viz., महाभारत implying 'greatness and Indianness', hence Mahābhārata.

As already said the Mahābhārata or the story of the Bharatas deals in detail the fierce family feud between the Kaurvas and Pāṇḍavas. In this war fare the Pāṇḍavas came out victorious, annihilating their brethren, the Kaurvas, headed by Duryodhana. The Pāṇḍavas were led by Yudhiṣṭhira. This family fight formed the nucleus of the epic Mahābhārata. It also consists of numerous more or less irrelevant, though often interesting episodes and of disquisitions on state, morals and theology and pious priestly poetry, with dissertations, which are often tedious enough, upon philosophy, religion and law, and mild ascetic poetry full of edifying wisdom and full of overflowing love towards men and beast.

In respect of its importance and sanctity we need only cite the following passages from the poem itself. 8

"There is not a story, current in this world, but doth depends upon this history, even as the body upon the food
that it taketh". In the Indian tradition it is honoured as encyclopaedic in character and remembered as the fifth Veda. The Brhad-dharma Purana also eulogises it as a holy treatise equal in status to the Vedas, saying that one who possess the Mahabharata is sure to be victorious over the whole world. It further goes on to say that as there is no end to the virtues of Narayana, to the waters in the seas and to the number of caves in the mountains so there is no end to the merit earned by a study of the Mahabharata. The Mahabharata covers every aspect of human life. It deals with Economics, Politics, History, Religion, Society, Philosophy and Theology. The reference again from the Visnu-dharmottara purana the fruit of the study of the Mahabharata is so efficacious that it can prevent a person from going to hell, unless of course, he is not a sinner to the core. According to the Epic itself those who study Bharata does an act of piety. Those who read and listen to its recitation daily are freed from all the sins, acquire a long life and renown and ascend to heaven.

'A brahmâna whatever sins he may commit during the day through his senses, is freed from them all by reading the 'Bharata' in the evening. Whatever sins he may commit also in the night by deed, words or mind, he is freed from them all by reading the 'Bharata' in the
As butter excels among curds, as the brahmana excel among Aryans, as the Aranyakas among the Vedas, the drinks of immortality among medicines, the ocean among all waters, and the cow among the quadrupeds, even so Mahabharata is the best of all narrative works (Itihāsas). The Epic also narrates that "whosoever has once heard this story, can no longer take pleasure in any other story, though it be well worth-hearing, just as he who has heard the song of Kokilās can take no pleasure in the harsh voice of the crow." "The thoughts of the poets arise from this most excellent of all narrative works, as the three realms of the universe from the five elements."

"Whosoever presents a Veda knowing and deeply learned Brāhmaṇa with a hundred cows with gilded horns, and he who bears daily the sacred stories of the Bhārata poem—These two acquire equal religious merit." Verily this narrative work is a song of victory, a king who desires victory, should hear it, and he will conquer the earth and triumph over his enemies. This is a sacred manual of morals (dharma), it is the best manual of practical life (artha) and Vyāsa of boundless
wisdom, recited it also as a manual of salvation (moksa).

In the words of Saúti Kṛṣṇadvaipāyana himself claimed this work to be a Kāvya of the highest order. With regards to language, style and meter, too, though various parts of the Mahābhārata show absolutely no uniformity, even then the poetic style of the Epic is of high literary merit. The Mahābhārata, as a whole, is a literary monster. The very fact that the Mahābhārata represents a whole literature rather than one single and unified work, and contains so many and so multifarious thoughts, makes it more precious than any other work, to afford us an insight into the deepest depths of the soul of the Indian people. There is indeed much justification for the off-quoted boards of Veda: Vyāsa about his great work that "What we find in the Mahābhārata relating to morals, relating to practical life, relating to sensual pleasure and relating to salvation may be found elsewhere, but what is not available therein, shall be found nowhere else."

To the last verse compare the Bangali saying: "Whatever is not in Mahābhārata is not be found in the Bhāratavarṣa i.e. in India." But it is important that the date of even such an important work is not finally decided.
Different scholars hold divergent view regarding the age of the Mahābhārata. According to them, single myths, Legends and poems which are included in the Mahābhārata, date back to the time of the Veda. An Epic Bhārata or Mahābhārata did not exist in the Vedic period. Many moral narratives and sayings which the Mahābhārata contains, belong to the ascetic poetry, which was drawn upon from the 6th century B.C. onwards.

If an Epic Mahābhārata already existed between the 6th and 4th centuries B.C., then it was but little known in the native land of Buddhism. There is no certain testimony for an Epic Mahābhārata before the 4th century. Between the 4th century B.C. and the 4th century A.D. the transformation of the Epic Mahābhārata into our present compilation took place, probably gradually. In the 4th century A.D. the work already had, on the whole, its present extent, contents and character. Small alterations and additions still continue to be made, however, even in later centuries. One date cannot be assigned to total Mahābhārata, but the date of every part must be determined separately.

Irrespective of the antiquity of its various portions the Mahābhārata as a whole frequently speaks of the high sanctifying virtues of Kurukṣetra. It mentions that the
territory to the south of Sarasvatī and to the north of Drṣadvatī was included in Kurukṣetra and those who reside there in are the residents of paradise. The Epic is in fact the only account of its size which gives a vivid picture of Kurukṣetra and its holy spots. There are, of course, other texts which contain brief accounts of its important places. Of these the Vamanā Purāṇa probably a procreation of this region, comes next but as already pointed out much of its account is borrowed from the epic. Of the rest, Kurukṣetra is described in three verses in Agni Purāṇa, two chapters in Nāradīya, two chapters in the Padma-Purāṇa, ten verses in the Varāha, thirty eight verses in Brahmāṇḍa, nine verses in the Brahamā and a few chapters in Skanda.

According to the ancient Indian literary sources Kurukṣetra was the land where gods had the good fortune of kindling the sacred fire in a very remote period. Kurukṣetra was the "centre from which Indo-Aryan culture spread first throughout the Hindustāna and eventually throughout the whole sub-continent. As mentioned in the Purāṇas the first ever political kingdom was founded by Manu Svāyambhuva with his capital at Brahiśāmatī on the bank of the Sarasvatī. With a glorious past, prospering present and bright future, Kurukṣetra is a land where history and Myth meet. The history of this
land of Sarasvatī and Kurudeśa is as old as of mankind. Hallowed by the sacred memories of great saints, sages and seers Kurukṣetra has been a cradle of the great Indian culture and civilisation. It was on this sacred land that Lord Kṛṣṇa imparted his immortal message of selfless action to the entire-humanity through his great discourse to the confused and wavering Arjuna. His sermon as embodied in the holy Gītā forms a 'Song Celestial' for the Hindus and has acquired an honoured place in the religious literature of the world.

The Mahābhārata was most probably written in the region of Kurukṣetra as the Epic battle was fought here. The detailed information contained in the work on this region also points in the same direction. The Mahābhārata thus becomes a primary source for the study of various aspects of Kurukṣetra region. I have dealt with 'Kurukṣetra In The Mahābhārata' in three parts. The present chapter of this part begins with aforesaid Introduction. Chapter-II is 'Kurukṣetra in Sanskrit Literature'. It deals with the notices of Kurukṣetra in the whole Sanskrit literature from the Vedic times up to the classical age.

In Part II, the major characteristics of the region of Kurukṣetra have been discussed. This part deals with the geographical position of Kurukṣetra region during
the Epic age. Chapter third, 'Kurukṣetra as a region' deals with the geography of the area and its boundaries and location as found in earlier sources. It is mentioned that the shape and prosperity of land has not suffered any noticeable changes since the age of the Mahābhārata.

In chapter fourth I have discussed the lakes of the area with their identification.

In chapter fifth relating to 'Forests' I have undertaken a description of the different forests like the Kāmyaka, Aditi, Vyāsa, Phalki, Śītā, Sūrya and Dvaita etc. with a view to settling their location according to the Epic and other sources.

Chapter sixth describes the rivers of the Kurukṣetra and examines their identification by earlier scholars in the light of the latest researches. The position of two most important river, viz., the Sarasvatī and the Drśadvatī has been particularly examined.

Chapter seventh takes a study of the 'Tīrthas', primarily with a reference to Chapters (82 to 83) of the Vanaparva and the Chapters (35 to 40) of the Śalyaparva which contains a wealth of information on the sacred places of the area.

Next Part-III deals with the Political, Social, and Religious history of the people of Kurukṣetra.
Chapter- eighth 'An outline of Political History of Kurukṣetra' presents a brief political history of the region of Kurukṣetra mainly on the basis of the Great Epic. Although other sources have also been tapped for filling in the gaps whenever necessary.

Chapter- nineth and tenth attempts an account of the social system and religious beliefs as reflected in the Mahābhārata and their evaluation during the long span of time taken by its first composition to reach the final form.

Chapter eleventh describes the concluding ideas of all the chapters.

I have thus tried to undertake almost all major points connected with the study of Kurukṣetra. How far this humble effort of mine has been successful is for the learned scholars to judge.
REFERENCES

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17. Mbh. I.2.383(GP ed.).

18. Mbh. I.2.385(GP ed.).


25. Mbh. III.81.175 (Cr. ed.).
27. Nār. Pu., II. 64, I-65, 135,
30. Braj. Pu. 25.35-44.
32. CHI. Vol. I, P.47.