CHAPTER — I

NARRATIVE TRADITION

The present study of the epic *Mahabharata* alongside its modern novelistic retellings of the 20th C involves an analysis of the various literary forms developed in the Indian literary tradition. This would facilitate an understanding of the epic qualities of the *Mahabharata*, the nature of retellings and also enable a classification of the modern novels as 'khandakatha'.

India has a long narrative tradition. The Indian intellectual tradition has relied heavily on the narrative (*katha*) in different forms and at different levels. The *Mahabharata* and the *Puranas* have a clear ontological status in the spheres of culture and provide socio-geographic historical knowledge about Indian civilization. At the same time they function as extended interpretive systems for the basic knowledge of the *Vedas*.

The goal of literature, according to Indian theorists, is to promote the attainment of the four ends of life—the *purusartha*. Like other worldly as well as spiritual pursuits, literature is also measured for its social and individual value by the various ends of life it promotes—*dharma, artha, kama*, and *moksa*. Literature has a very clear, affirmative, educative role in our society. *Katha*—narrative has been the preferred mode. India’s oral tradition lends itself to a wide-ranging story telling: the *upanishadic akhyanas*, the encyclopaedic *Mahabharata* with innumerable sub-narratives, the *Puranas*, the Pali-Buddhist narratives, the fables of *Pancatantra* and its recension the *Hitopadesa*, the strung narratives of *Kathasaritsagara*, the folk retellings of the legends and myths, the romantic and heroic narratives of the folk traditions in
the dialects of Indian languages. It is a vast and vital treasure house of stories.

In the Indian context, literature has always been an act of public communication, a performance. Hence all literature is classified as *sravya* (aural) or as *preksa* (visual) or as *sravya – preksa*. It is the tradition of re-counting and "hence, a considerable part of Indian literature is some form of *Katha* - narrative" (K. Kapoor 1998, 44). Indian narratives, in general, are stories of human goodness, wisdom, righteousness and social duty. This kind of narrative mode is very much prevalent in the Indian tradition and reflects the general attitude of Indian thinkers. The Indian tradition has accepted *akhyana* or narrative as a mode of constituting and transmitting right knowledge. The total experience while reading an Indian narrative should involve *cetana* (understanding), *viveka* (discriminating intellect) and *jnana* (knowledge), leading to *ananda*—a state of bliss, which is the culmination of literary experience.

In this narrative tradition—be it a poem, a play or a story—there is always changing and substitution. There is disturbance and flux and the resolution is always the creation of a new structure. "Narratives are epigrams of transience and evoke insecurity and unease because they conceptualise and articulate the fragility and instability of life" [K. Kapoor 1998, 44-45]. Hence there is always a tendency to replace them by something more stable, more typical. Hence, the special narrative in the classical literature i.e., the mythical mode eliminates the local habitation and name from the record and transforms the events into a paradigm.

The one unique nature of all narratives is their temporality. There is overwhelming instability, constant change and flux. Every moment one thing becomes another. The influence of Buddhist thought and philosophy accounts for the shift of focus from *jnana* (in Upanishads) and *bhakthi* (in epics), to
Karīṇa (action) and Nirvana takes the place of moksa. It shows a change from ritual to reason, and from the individual to the social. The substance, format and structure of story telling vary from one text to another. This is due to the various categories of the katha, enumerated by ancient Indian exegetes. These categories of narrative are defined by one or more than one of the several parameters that have been invoked by different poetsicians—language, metre, subject matter, narrator, type of major protagonist, etc. In the context of Indian theory of narratives, one can postulate the following totality of discourse, in which different narratives and kinds of narrative find their place:

Thus, there are five kinds of narratives.
1. Fictional Now
2. Fictional Non-Now
3. Romance
4. Myth / Legend (Purana)
5. Historical (Itihasa)
Through the interaction of types, new kinds of narratives emerge. The *Mahabharata*, for example, with reference to its characters is an *Itihasa*. In addition to the main story, several narratives, tales and legends of the nature of *Itihasa* or *Itihasa Samvada* has also been included. Thus the *Mahabharata* is dominantly in *Itihasa* and has the intermingling of at least three narrative categories—the fictional non-now, myth/legend and history. Again subsidiary narratives (*Upakhyana*) within a narrative may belong to any of the five kinds of narratives, resulting in a rich texture of story telling.

The Indian literary theory defines its object of study, defines the genres and sets up sub-typologies within each genre and sub-genre. Defining *Katha* (narrative), we can sub group various typologies of narrative types. At the first level, there is *Katha—Akhyayika—Akhyana*. The term *Katha* has two meanings in the tradition.

- Fictional narrative in general, and
- 'Story' which is a narrative of particular scope and size.

*Katha, Akhyayika, and Akhyana* together constitute the *Akhyana-Jati* or 'class of narratives'. *Akhyayika* is a prose tale based on tradition or history. It also could be biographical or autobiographical in form, with the protagonist himself or some protégé of his as narrator. *Katha*, on the other hand, is an imaginary prose or verse tale, or a fictitious working out of a historical fact. The Sanskrit lexicon *Amara-kosa* defines *Akhyayika*, as a tale based on recent history and cites ‘*upalabdhartha*’ (the recounts of already known events) as its synonym. *Katha* is defined as an imaginary composition (*Prabandhakalpana*). Therefore, we are able to see a clear and definable difference between *Katha* and *Akhyayika* in the terms of the source and treatment of the source of a narrative.

*Akhyana* is a legendary story in the background of the *Vedas* (stories of Sunassepa, Mara, etc) or the stories of the legendary kings Bhagiratha, Raghu etc, are classed as *Akhyanas*. Even the *Ramayana*, being the tale of Rama, is
referred to as the Akhyana is the most ancient form of story telling and other kind of stories Akhyayika and Katha may have developed from, the ancient Akhyana. Thus the Akhyana serves as a more general term for the story telling, while at the same time denoting a specific kind of story. Another opposition seen at the first level is between Katha and Mahakatha—a story grand in meaning and a perennial source of pleasure and edification being a Mahakatha. It is also a fairly long and complexly structured.

The second parameter for sub classification of narratives is that of scope of and relationship to other narratives. While discussing appropriate literary language, Anandavardhana says that the appropriateness is also determined by the kind of composition prabandhabheda, and mentions three kinds of katha (among others) – Parikatha, Khandakatha and Sakalakatha.

Parikatha is a series of anecdotes, illustrative of one theme, generally related to one of the four Purusharthas—righteousness, wealth and power, desires and wishes, and salvation or liberation. Sakalakatha, on the other hand, is much larger work. It has a series of anecdotes or stories, illustrative of all the four goals of life. Upakatha is a sub story, a story that is enclosed in the main narrative. Kathanika is used as a synonym. Upakhyana is also a sub narrative within an Akhyana.
Kavya (Compositions)

Gadya (prose), or mixed  Padya (verse)

Akhyana-Jati (class of narratives)

1. Katha (fictional narrative)  Akhyayika (biographical narrative)  Akhyana (legendary narrative)

Mahakatha (grand story)  Katha (story)

2. According to source of and relation to other narratives:

Katha

Parikatha  Sakalakatha  Upakatha  Khandakatha  Brhatkatha
(string of (multi-theme Upakhyana (rewritten story) (complex and anecdotes illustrative Kathanika total narrative) related to stories) (sub-narrative) one theme)
3. According to nature of subject:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nidarsana</th>
<th>Monthuli</th>
<th>Manikulya</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(of moral purpose)</td>
<td>(humorous sarcasm)</td>
<td>(mystery story)</td>
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4. Organisation:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Anibaddha</th>
<th>Nibaddha</th>
</tr>
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<tr>
<td>(loosely organized)</td>
<td>(rigidly organized)</td>
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5. Original story:

| An吕布adya (adapted) | Utpadya (created) |

6. Significance:

| Mahat (major) | Laghu (minor) |

(Fig.2- Kapoor 1996, 89-90)

*Khandakatha* is a story based on a small part--an episode or character--of a larger work. Anandavardhana and Abinavagupta say that it is a *Prakrt* work. Theorists find that almost all categories of literary compositions were written either in *Sanskrit, Prakrt,* or mixed. From around 5th c. B.C., literary compositions in languages other than *Sanskrit* had come into being (K.Kapoor 1996, 91). The use of *Prakrt* represented an intellectual revolt against the high tradition. Thus, *Khandakathas*--the narrative category that represents the rewriting of original stories--involve reinterpretation. In the last two centuries, *Khandakathas* have been composed in the vernaculars, particularly in Marathi, Kannada and Bengali, about certain characters and episodes from *Rama* and *Mahabharata* -- Sita, Lakshmana, Karna, Draupadi, the killing of Bali, the *Chakravyuha,* the dice game etc.
There are several other parameters on which the Katha has been classified like, the nature of the subject, the basis of the organization, the classification of the story as original or adapted. According to the nature of subject/interest, the classification is as follows. A story that has a definite moral purpose is *nidarsana*. It may take the form of a fable; allegory or it may be a straightforward narrative. A humorous prose tale that makes fun of some failure, or failing of otherwise reverential subjects such as the priest, the sanyasin, the government official, is *manthuli*. They give room for irony, sarcasm and satire. A mystery story that begins with some inexplicable fact, which is gradually unraveled, is *manikulya*.

There is also a broad division of all narratives on the basis of their organization: the loosely strung compositions called *Anibaddha* and the highly structured narratives called *Nibaddha*. The narratives like *Pancatantra* and *Mahabharata* are highly structured, and on the basis of available work, theorists divide such highly structured narratives into three classes.

- *Parvabandha*: the major division of the *Mahabharata* is *parva* – a node or point where two things (themes come together).
- *Sargabandha*: this is a well known division of long poems. *Sarga* means a section/ division that does not impede the flow of the narrative.
- *Khandabandha*: this is the division followed in the *Ramayana*. Each chapter has a name, and is titled after a stage in life or some place.

The other types of divisions are *lambha* and *ucchvasa*, whose features differ according to their organizing divisions.

Finally, there is a broad classification into a story: (a) created by the writer, *Utpadya*; and (b) adapted from available sources, *Anutpadya*. In the process of definition of these categories, to separate one from the other, the theorists bring in the following criteria.
1. Language of composition: *Sanskrit, Prakrit* or *Mixed*.
2. Medium: Prose, Verse or Mixed.
3. **Scope of the Work**: *Mahat* (Major) or *Laghu* (Minor).
4. **Narrator**: The protagonist, some protégé of the protagonist, or the author himself.
5. **Type of protagonist**.
6. **Relation to Purushartha**.
7. **Subject of the story**: events original or adapted.
8. **Characters**: Gods, Legendary heroes, great kings, ordinary men and women or animals.
9. **Organisation**: Into *Parva, Sarga, Khanda, Lambha* or *Ucchvasa*.

Indian narratives were mainly in the form of oral compositions, were communicated to the audience orally and transmitted from one generation to another orally. Hence the readers do not figure predominantly. The reader is only a participant who imbibed the aural-visual experience of the literary work. This was a literature that was designed for mass participation and was experienced by people at public functions and festivals. Therefore, its themes and its concerns are general enough to interest the whole cultural community. Hence the linkage of narrative to the four ends of life enjoined in the Indian *Dharma-sastra*.

**II**

The bulk of the historic traditions of ancient times were incorporated in the *Itihasa* as it was an ancient practice of composing accounts of famous persons in narrative prose. Such type of *itihasa* literature continued independently and later on became a branch of *kavya* composition. Slowly *itihasa* became indistinguishable from *purana* (antiquity) which originally was only a branch of it. Thus biographies of contemporary or recently living person (*akhyayika*) became a separate category not included in *itihasa* or
purana but a part of kavya literature. A.K. Warder, in *Indian Kavya Literature* (Vol. 1) writes that according to Bhamaha, a clear contrast could be drawn between the novel as imaginary and the biography as factual or historical. Dandin is of the opinion that there is no distinction between biography and the novel. He sees them as belonging to a common class – prose kavya. Dandin has only three classification of kavya – Verse, Prose and Mixed.

The novel or *katha* is a fiction invented by the author. Bhamaha also notes that a novel is not divided into chapters unlike *akhyayika*. Nor does it contain the occasional verses, characteristic of a biography. The *katha* is normally in prose where the hero's story is narrated by a third person, whereas in an *akhyayika*, the hero himself is the narrator. Bhamaha also points out that a novel may be written either in Sanskrit or in any vernacular.

Rudrata, the author of *Kavyalamkara*, categorises *katha* into two. The first in the category is the 'mahakatha' as Rudrata calls it. It is a full-length novel, which is equivalent in scope to an epic. It usually starts with some verses of salutation to gods or teachers and further verses briefly mentioning the family of the author. The main story follows in prose, the language duly beautified with alliteration and other figures of speech. Instead of beginning with the main story, the author may start with a subsidiary narrative and later introduce the main story into it. In some novels, several pieces of narrative are emboxed one within another. This provides a structure for a whole, in place of chapter division, the reader being lead deeper into the story, learning more about the characters by going back into their pasts, until at the end the last piece of narrative falls into place and everything is understood. The second in the category is the short story—*khandakatha*. Thematically, it could be either a story of success with a glorious ending, or the events could be most disastrous for the hero, producing a compassionate experience.

The first century AD prose work *Brhatkatha* (the giant fiction), according to Warder, is the first and perhaps the greatest Indian novel,
"appropriated ... boldly in a rose fiction the entire scale and scope of the epic: the grand and leisurely manner, the rich detail, the whole range of aspirations and emotions and rasas, but with more realism ..." (Warder 1974, 116). This was a narrative fiction composed in a major Indian language – the early Maharashtrian (known as Paisachi) that was the literary vernacular of central and Southern India. *Brhatkatha* is a *Katha*, well structured with several divisions, has striking effect, including the marvellous. It has a huge theme or subject, and is composed in a 'vernacular language', making it accessible to a large public. This early narrative fiction initiated the tradition of realism and the use of vernacular medium. The third century AD *Panchatantra* (literally 'The Five Systems') is written in this mode of narrative. It is a parable or fable, which was, and still continues to be in the folk tradition, which is the popularizing communicating framework. It is an illustrative novel – *Nidarsana katha*, the subject of which is *Niti* i.e. policy, in both private and public affairs. The maxims are drawn from various treatises on law and morality. The moral comes first and forms a sort of peg on which a fable is hanged, with interspersed stories and maxims that carry on the argument. The fables themselves are in prose, the form and framework are fabulous, but their content is very down to earth and concerns major human experiences, nature and course of human relations and vagaries of human nature. The style is devoid of long descriptions or ornamental questions but is rich in suggestions and is evocative.

In the later centuries other fictional prose/verse narratives like the *Harshacharita, Kadambari, Leelavati* etc. were produced in Indian vernaculars. These are significant for the way they conceptualise and represent an important aspect of Indian world-view, and for their structural ingenuity in having 'emboxed narratives' within the main narrative. Later, as the Indian vernaculars developed, the literature also grew manifold. Prose narratives
were very common in Sanskrit, and more so in the Prakrits. All these narratives have a social origin and concern.

Each cultural community has, at one time or other, on one place or other, in one language or other produced all kinds of narratives – from the fictional to the marvellous. But each culture has a genius, a preference for one kind or some kinds of narratives over others. The Indian cultural tradition seems to express itself best in the marvellous and historical narratives. The Indian worldview has no permanent interest in the details of human experience. The individual experience is meaningful for the timeless message it may yield, for the unchanging, timeless core in the flux of time. The myth, legend and history, separately or interwoven, transcend the local and the particular and create generalised structures. Hence the preferred narrative mode of a biography would be myth, legend and history separately or interwoven – the Puranas and the Itihasas.

A.K. Warder, in *Indian Kavya Literature* (Vol. 1) surmises that Itihasa (or Tradition) has been handed down orally and “probably largely extempore” (Warder 1972, 1) for many centuries before it became fixed in the form represented by the manuscript tradition. The Puranas and numerous recensions of the oral historical record along with the Itihasas, form the records of antiquity beginning with mankind. These, along with mythology have been rewritten from time to time as convenient media for all kinds of religious doctrines and encyclopedic collections of miscellaneous information.

Maurice Winternitz sees the first traces of epic poetry in Vedic Literature—“in the dialogue-hymns of the Rg Veda as well as the Akhyanas, Itihasas and Puranas of the Brahmanas.” (M. Winternitz 1927, 311). She further analyses that the recital of such narrative poems formed a part of the religious ceremonies at the sacrificial and domestic festivals. In the later Vedic period, the Itihasa-Purana had emerged as an important branch of narrative. It generally consisted of myths and legends, legends of gods and tales of
demon, snake deities, old sages, and kings of ancient times. Professional
storytellers were very much in vogue in those times and were known as the
Aitihasikas and Pauranikas. Winternitz points out that the Itihasa-Purana
branch was a "literary public property", which was an inexhaustible storehouse
of prose and verse narratives.

III

In the above framework of narratives, the epic Mahabharata can be
located at various points. The Mahabharata is regarded as history or tradition
and hence is an Itihasa. Tradition is "the words of ancient sages, carrying
great authority on the account of the learning and virtue of the supposed
authors..." (A.K. Warder 1972, 1). Itihasa or tradition, as referred to by A.K.
Warder has been handed down orally and probably largely extempore for
many centuries before it became fixed in the form represented by the
manuscript tradition. Associated with this are the Puranas (Antiquities) or
universal histories of the Brahmans, numerous recensions of what was
probably originally a single but oral historical record. These records of
antiquity are believed to have begun with the origin of the mankind and they
have been rewritten from time to time as convenient media for all kinds of
religious doctrines which could be added on to them, and even as
encyclopaedic collections of miscellaneous information, secular as well as
religious.

The Mahabharata is Great Epic—a Mahakavya and also as an Itihasa. It
is a rich source of stories suitable for Kavya treatment. It exhibits the trend of
the Itihasa since it comprises of legends and old stories. The Ramayana on
the other hand is considered as a Kavya or an artificial epic. It is the work of a
single poet, "homogenous in plan and execution" (Mac Donnell 1958, 281). In
contrast to the Ramayana the Mahabharata is not one poetic production but
"rather a whole literature" (M. Winternitz 1927, 316). It is the accumulation
of very diverse poems which have arisen in the course of centuries owing to
continuous interpolations and alterations. Though ancient heroic songs form the nucleus of the epic, the more devotional Itihasa literature was included to so great an extent, and such long poems of religious, didactic nature were inserted, that the Mahabharata has almost completely lost the character of an epic.

The main story of Mahabharata could be considered as an akhyana, since it comes under the category of history. Many episodical stories in the epic also come under history and hence are akhyanas. In tradition, the extant akhyanas are mostly in narrative verse. In the Vedas, however akhyanas are mostly in prose, preserved in ritual texts. From this, one understands that the prose history was an extremely ancient form used for narration of stories believed to be true, the heroes of which are celebrated persons.

The expressions akhyana, ithihasa and purana are almost synonymous and were often interchangeable; they ordinarily signified an old tale, legend or incident. But in some contexts, they meant different kinds of narratives. Akhyana may be broadly taken to cover legends, myths and episodes in the nature of ballads. Purana, on the other hand meant old legend, old story especially cosmological myths. It is only later that the term Purana came to have the sense of a particular class of works.

In order to bring out the character of Mahabharata as Akhyana and Upakhyana, a reference may be made to the innumerable myths, legends, narratives and episodes including those of Shakuntala, Nala Damayanti, Savitri and Cyavana. As a Purana, the Mahabharata gives not only cosmogonic and cosmological myths, but also geographical lists, genealogies, Vishnu and Shiva myths and so on.

The epic is a large-scale work entirely in verse divided into cantos/ sargas. The number of cantos and the number of verses in the canto determine the length of the Kavya. Hence an epic is called a Mahakavya, the term 'Maha' being attributed to its bulk. A.K. Warder (1972) calls the Kavya of
the later period an artificial epic, as opposed to the true epic of more ancient
times. This is because later poets aim at comprehensiveness and the Kavi
displays his skill in lyric descriptions as well as in the epic narrative. The
original inspiration for such artificial epic is the Epic narrative of Tradition,
since in outline kavya is always a narrative, a story.

The manner of telling the story is also slow, descriptive and
philosophical where the kavi shows no urgent interest in unfolding the events
of the story. Bhamaha evaluates that the story of the epic is presented in
accordance with a theory that resembles the structure of drama (Warder
1972, 170). The varied episodes and incidents which abound in true epic are
here carefully subordinates to the main action, which itself is single. The rise
of a single hero, who dominates the whole poem, is narrated. The aim,
however, is to present the whole field of human experience, expressing the
four ends of life and all the aesthetic experience produced by a good epic.
The poet usually chooses a story, which is well known, taken from Tradition or
more recent history. Bhamaha stresses that the epic should be based on what
is good, giving moral as well as aesthetic pleasure and should be meaningful
(Arthya). The expression should be elegant and the approach realistic
(congruent with the nature of the world). If the manner of developing the
story is not straight forward, the story ceases to be a naïve tale of adventure.
The epic takes on a philosophical character and the action is not simply a
particular enterprise by a hero; it is a seeking and attaining of recognized
ends of human existence. viz; Dharm, Artha, Kama and Moksa. Thus the
story tends to lose its individual character and to become a general expression
of the pursuit of these ideals, a generalized symbol of human endeavour.

Dandin modifies Bhamaha’s description slightly suggesting that the epic
should be rich in content as well as significant in action and sophisticated in
language. Dandin also suggest three ways of beginning the epic – with a
benediction (asis), a salutation or invocation (namaskriya) or by plunging
straight into the story (vastunirdesa), the last being the most usual. The literary forms of the prose in Sanskrit literature are biography (akhyayika) and the novel (katha). Biography or 'little history', as A.K. Warder calls it, was better known as akhyayika. It was generally written in prose, though it may have a few introductory verses. The biography had divisions into chapters called uucchvasa, which corresponds to the division of the epic into cantos. The biography could be practically an epic in prose, sharing the usual characters other than metre. It appears to have originated as a branch of tradition or history (Itihasa) and later to have assimilated into the Kavya movement. Bhamaha regards biography as a Kavya form.

Itihasa–Purana narratives satisfy both the society's need to break the strangle hold of narrative -- time and specificity, and some of them may get promoted in the common community consciousness into a primary, primitive status and serve to measure and interpret, even if symbolically, and make sense of immediate experience. This is possible because our experience is perceived as a temporal sequence. The mythical-legendary narratives achieve a pure special articulation, by taking personal and historical time up into the archetypal story; they give it a meaning, which is timeless.

Thus, the Puranas could be understood as theories, i.e., abstracted permanent structures from purely temporal and particular incidents and events. The same narratives are told and retold in the folk as well as the literary, in verse and in prose, and the narrative preponderates as a form. In all the compositions, the narratives and the dramatic interact, and the visual and the aural coexist. These oral compositions generally seek to involve the hearer/viewer emotionally, rather than inform him, since the story is generally familiar and the events do not hold the interest of the audience. It is the particular representation (reinterpretation in the case of modern retellings), which is of interest and it is successful because it reinterprets and is able to evoke the feel of experience in the viewer/reader. The familiarity of the story
decontextualises it through philosophising and it takes the audience through a whole range of emotions. Moreover, all narratives are a form of biography—a retelling of some one’s experience—which is what makes the narrative an appropriate illuminating analogy or explanation for the reader’s particular experience. While the oral/visual retellings concentrate on ‘how’ something is constructed, the modern retellings as novels are concerned with ‘what’ is being constructed and its impact on its readers.

Several later writers – Bana, Dandin and Dhanapala blend realistic narrative and character study, in varying proportions, with incursions into a fanciful, semi-divine world on the periphery of the ordinary human world, which enlarges the aspirations of the heroes, or rather materializes their dreams. The element of realism in the concept of novel is manifest in characterization, in somewhat technical outlook.

IV

The narrative system in *Mahabharata* is an embedded system, with one narration embedded in the other. The most inner circle is of narrative present, formed by the narration of Sanjaya, who is narrating contemporary events. The second circle, which is formed by the narration of Vaishampayana encompasses the first one and seals the narrative present from assimilating it in the actual present. The third is the outer circle of narration, formed by the narration of Sauti. It transfers the story in the remote past, which becomes the “absolute past”. It is because of a typical narrative posture of *Sauti*, totally cut off from the present. On this level, tradition displays its full and dominating form.

There are many narrators, different in nature from one another, and there are various levels of narration. The double introduction is a very complex structural singularity, which contributes the inner and outer frames of narration to the epic. It is known that the *Mahabharata* is recited in the
Naimisha Forest, and many other *puranas* likewise make this spot both the gathering place for story telling and the frame story for the occasion of story telling. Ugrasravas, also known as *Sauti* or *Sutaputra* Lomaharshana, makes the first beginning, and narrates the *Mahabharata* tale to *Rsi* Saunaka and his friends. He has received this tale from Krishna Dvaipayana Vyasa, through Vaishampayana, the disciple of Vyasa. He has narrated the same story to King Janamejaya, son of Parikshita and grandson of Abhimanyu. If *Sauti* is the narrator on the first level, then Vaishampayana is the narrator on the second level.

There is one more level of narration. Sanjaya is the narrator on this level. He narrates everything that has happened in the grand war. The sole listener to Sanjaya’s narration is the blind king Dhritarashtra. Chronologically, Sanjaya is nearest to the events in the *Mahabharata*. He is a participant in the war and so an eyewitness to the events. Though he narrates to the king, he never hesitates to criticize the king. This power arises from the fact that he has a “super-vision”, which is the source of his narration and authority of his narration. His power ultimately is the power of a narrator.

Vaishampayana is at a safe distance, chronologically, from actual events of the grand war. His narrator is also King Janamejaya. The latter listens to the tale told by Vaishampayana with keen interest because it is the tale of his forefathers. The authority of Vaishampayana as a narrator does not arise from his participation in the war or his being an eyewitness or his “super-vision”. It arises because Vyasa, of whom he is the disciple, originally creates the story.

*Sauti* is repeating the same story. But chronologically, he is at a farther distance away from Vaishampayana. He narrates the story to ascetics who are far removed from worldly affairs. He is a professional storyteller. The authority of the discourse of *Sauti*, the narrator, is based on the fact that he is telling a story which everybody already knows and likes to listen to. Thus on
these three levels of narration, the tone of the narrator is authoritative. But the authority of narrative has different forces in the Mahabharata. Besides these three narrators, Vyasa himself makes occasional appearances in the epic. Thus the author becomes a character as well in the epic.

Gerard Genette, in Narrative Discourse speaks about the different levels of narrations. He explains and defines these differences in levels saying “any event a narrative recounts is at a diegetic level immediately higher than the level at which the narrating act producing this narrative is placed”(Genette 1980, 228). According to him, writing of the fiction at the first level could be called ‘extradiegetic’. The events told in the narrating act are inside this first narrative and could be described as ‘diegetic’ or ‘intradiegetic’. When a narrator within a narrative speaks, it is a narrative inside the second narrative and is called ‘metadiegetic’.

Some narrators in the Mahabharata are intra-diegetic narrators. This relegates to them the status of a character, however insignificant this might be. They have proper names and bear certain marks of identity. They have particular relations with the surrounding characters. All this suggests that they are capable to narrate in the ‘First Person’ grammatical form, even though the over-all narration of the Mahabharata is in the ‘Third Person’.

Intra-diegetic narrators, who are liable to narrate in the first person, actually narrate in the ‘third person’. Every narrator narrates his tale to his specific narrator, who himself is a character in the story. This narrative posture effects into the completion of narrative circuit in the text only. The narrator does not have to reach outside the text to appeal and communicate to an unknown narrator. In this regard, the Mahabharata is a textually self-sufficient text. This again indicates the sealing off of the text from the outside world.

Dialogue has a special and dominant place in the texture of the Mahabharata. Here, somebody is always speaking to somebody else, and we
find various forms of dialogue. Narration, description, argumentation, exposition, every type of composition is couched in the dialogue from here. On one level, the narrator speaks to the narratee. This is the all-encompassing dialogue, which usually takes the form of the omniscient, third person narration. On another level, but within the above grand dialogue, one character speaks to another character. The narrator in his dialogue recounts his communication between characters. Here the characters speak necessarily with each other and speak loudly. They never speak to themselves. Nor do they muse. They never resort to ‘Interior monologue’ in the Mahabharata. The thought process of the characters remains un plumbed. When characters start talking, the narrator becomes invisible, but as only the observed part of conversation is reproduced, he remains omnipresent in the text. Hence the Mahabharata is a text made up of various dialogues and speeches made by characters, with a perceptible thread of narration.

V

It is a general impression that the concept of novel was non-existent in India and had appeared as a form only under the impact of Western, specifically British literature. This notion is born entirely on the definition that novel is a modern western genre. It is a very recent narrative form, and is generally referred to as ‘narrative fiction’ and constitutes the principal area of investigation for studies in narrative. It is a comparatively recent narrative form and is generally referred to as narrative fiction. It constitutes the principal area of investigation for studies in narrative. The novel has, in terms of its generic identity, a history of about two hundred years, and its rise in the west is correlated to industrialization and the rise of the middle class. It is said to be distinguished from the pre-novel narratives (romances etc) by its temporal and spatial specificity, by its individual and life-like characterization. It is recognized as a mixed genre – eclectic and various. Its origin lies in a dozen different forms: essay, romance, history, biography, comic and
sentimental drama. Philip Stevick has listed a number of criteria employed to mark the province of novel – perceptual, structural, sociological, mythic, typographic, philosophical, subjective and cultural (Stevick 1967, 3-10).

The dominant features of the English novel are:

a) It is an imaginative construction, a fiction
b) It is a continuous story of an ordinary individual
c) It is a realistic narrative
d) It has specificity of time, space and detail
e) It has linear temporality
f) It explores a serious modern realism i.e. the depths of individual mind in transaction between itself and the forces of society and human nature.

This kind of novel began to be written in India only in the middle of the 19th century, under the influence of English education and reading. It represented the educated urban middle class Indian creativity. The new form was not easily developed because the Indian novelist had to overcome several constraints of tradition and culture in the process of shaping the Indian novel in Indian languages (Mukherji 1985, 7-9). The 20th century has witnessed the development of the psychological novel that gave paramount importance to the scrutiny of individual human psyche. This is due to the influence of the western literary movements like Realism, Psychoanalysis, Feminism etc., which had attained great momentum in the modern literary scenario.

The available prose fiction in the Indian tradition does not have the concerns of modern fiction. But it does not mean that Indian prose narratives do not show interest in social matters or in the ordinary individual and his dilemmas. This is because all narratives are social; even the sacred narrative. The only difference is that the social issues and concerns are different from those of today. According to Warder, the tradition of story telling in India combines two conflicting elements: realism and criticism of social evils on the
one hand and the growth of fantasy, of the acquisition of super human powers, in connection with extra-ordinary adventures, on the other (Warder 1974, 52).

The social experience of the English novel consists of love, marriage, money and sometimes belief. In Indian narratives also, love and marriage figure in a big way. On the other hand, friendship, peace, enmity and war - the subjects of *Panchtantra* – are also highly social problems. It is therefore not correct to assume that the Indian narrative is either marvellous or ethical alone.

As the Indian vernaculars developed, the literature also grew manifold. The following inferences could be made on Indian narratives, in general.

- Prose narratives were very common in Sanskrit, as well as in Prakrits.
- All prose narratives have a social origin and concern.
- Not all prose narratives are marvellous or historical—quite a few are fictions.
- Ordinary men and women and ordinary life do not constitute the themes of many narratives.
- Above all, ethics and religion are to be understood as major social formations of oriental civilizations.

The questions/problems treated in the Indian tradition of narratives are different from those in the western narrative tradition. The questions discussed are - the range, the potentiality and the reality of human nature, the generalized structure of human experience, the concept of an essential ethical order and the nature of *dharma*, both individual and collective. The other questions are that of *dharma, karma, artha* and *nirvana*. In the classical formulation, *dharma* (righteousness), *artha* (material well being), *sukha* (Happiness), *Nirvana* (eternal peace of soul) and *cikitsa* (restoration of well being) are the five themes of *Katha* (Narrative). The *Mahabharata*, in its epic
scale, expounds all the five themes. The epic describes itself as *Itihasa, Artha-Sastra, Dharma-Sastra* and *Moksa-Sastra*. Further, it is said that whatever is in the epic may occur elsewhere also, but what is not therein will not be found anywhere. Hence, the *Mahabharata* is a *Mahakatha* that incorporates in different degrees, the different kinds of narratives/narrative modes.

The retellings or *khandakatha* are in a form interpretation of *kavya* in the sense that it foregrounds the interpreter’s belief system, and also employs the general rule of interpretation which involves a judgement from the side of the writer. In the original Sanskrit *kavyas*, it is seen that the Indian mind has very little or no interest in history or biography. The Indian worldview has no sustained interest in the details of the individual or the details of the individual human experience. But the modern reinterpreter, the author of the *khandakatha*, is more interested in the individual details of his protagonist. Examples of this trend could be effectively illustrated from the novels under study. In these novels, we see a Karna who is a middle class family man, a loyal husband, and a dedicated father. The image of Draupadi is also that of a modern woman, who analyses the rights and wrongs of the deeds – both intentional and unintentional – and draws sympathy from all quarters. She is portrayed as a woman sans pride, serving her five husbands dutifully, even while loving only Arjuna, with all her heart.

The Indian epic re-tellers make use of history and myth among other resources, and explore the possibilities of fiction, through their writings. This could be considered as a new kind of interpretation. Such an interpretation no longer allows the straightforward validation of meaning of the original book. The Indian epics, especially the *Mahabharata*, develop devices by which to construct for its audiences an experience of multiple possibilities in their heroes’ lives. This is made possible by the way the authors are placed in the works, and introduce their audiences to the multiple selves of the authors and
the nature of their interventions in the text and the lives of their characters. The Indian writers exploit the factor that the heroes' and heroines' epic lives have other lives behind and before them, and multiple possibilities for different lives within the lives the epics give them. The writers try to understand not only what did happen, but also what else might have happened.

The predominant status of the marvellous and the historical does not imply the absence of social realism in such narratives or direct narratives of social realism. It is seen that the culture generates the texts and in turn, the texts constitute and define a given culture in a constant dialectic. The enterprise of rewriting stories can be quite mistaken, if it is inspired from an outside living society, from an alien framework. Such a re-writing would not be a genuine critique of the range of a culture's values and emotions. However, a genuine rewriting that springs both from the text and from the changed expectations of a living society – an intrinsic rewriting is part of the narrative dynamics and has been resorted to at the level of both literary and mass cultures of India, constituting an enrichment of experience.

VI

The narrative system of the *Mahabharata*, which is highly complex, has also been a factor for re-working by the modern writers. This complexity of structure opens the field of narrative possibility. At every point the writer is given a possibility of many stories. No story is ever the whole story. Every version has another version. Every outcome has multiple fatalities behind it. This gives rise to different perspectives on the book.

In the 20th century novelistic retellings of the *Mahabharata*, the narrative is no longer embedded, but is linear. There is a specific narrator, who is not a detached observer but a person very much involved in the course of action. All the intra-diegetic narrators, if any, are of equal status in the
modernd novelistic rendering. The narrator, being a modern man, stands on a different plane of values.

The mythical and the fantastic are completely discarded in the modern narrative. The epic, which over phases of recensions and accretions had grown from the epic-kernel *Ur-Mahabharata* to the gigantic bulk of the present version, is under going a reverse process in the modern retellings. The modern day writers discard every sub-plot, digressions, philosophical treatises, genealogies and such other narrations that add to the bulk of the epic. They select a particular character, incident or plot, and applying a linear thought process, re-interpret it, and present it before the readers, as a compact story adhering to the modern techniques of narration.

The objective of this project is to explore the possibilities of contextually re-reading the great Indian epic *Mahabharata*, through the various re-tellings of the same epic in the present age. To analyse the meaning of such re-tellings of the *Mahabharata*, I have selected six novels, the authors of which have retold in different ways some episodes or characters from the epic *Mahabharata*. The novels on which the present study is based are:

2. *Rāndamoozham* by M.T. Vasudevan Nair written originally in Malayalam and translated into English as *Second Turn* by P.K. Ravindranath.

The six novels have six different foci and six different approaches to the original.

A study of the novel *Yajnaseni* is very much relevant in this age of feminism, because the novel centers around the eponymous heroine as the title indicates. Draupadi, the most accomplished woman character in *Mahabharata* is also the most suffering, sacrificing and yet the most misunderstood character. The author makes an effort to portray the epic character on a broader and more humane canvas attempting to comprehend Draupadi’s mind from a deeper and psychological plane. “Draupadi is a challenge of womanhood, the embodied form of action, devotion and power” (Ray 1995,400), says Pratibha Ray in her ‘After word’ to the novel. The author here presents a psychological picture of Draupadi as a woman living a predicament-ridden life. Krishnaa, as the author prefers to call her, becomes our contemporary and extremely relevant to our times, while remaining firmly anchored in the epic. She portrays a fire-born Yajnaseni, who is strong enough to question the injustice thrust upon her on account of being a woman. On the other hand, she is an epitome of womanhood and motherhood full of love and sympathy for all living beings, a love that surpasses the barriers of caste, creed and species.

M.T. Vasudevan Nair in his novel *Randamoozham (Second Turn)* foregrounds Bhimasena, the second Pandava as the title indicates. Being the second son of Kunti, he is the one who enjoys only the second turn in everything including conjugal bliss with Draupadi. Bhimasena, the divine son of Vayudeva, according to the legends, is inexorable and tempestuous like his progenitor. Endowed with superhuman physical prowess, he is indeed the pulsating strength of the Pandavas. Bhima often was the butt of ridicule due to his oversized body and supposedly undersized brain. M.T. however, does
not subscribe to this picture of Bhima. To him, Bhima is a human being with all the strength and weakness natural to mankind. He uses the technique of de-mythification to sketch a human portrait of Bhima, towering tall with his innately sensitive and compassionate nature, deserving our sympathetic understanding. M.T reduces the story of Mahabharata to a strict human possibility and allows his imagination to develop according to its creative logic. The pregnant silences in the epic are used by the author to weave a story of human pathos, discarding the intervention of divinity and destiny, thereby rooting the events and actions firmly down on earth. In this process he destroys several myths that have evolved to explain away certain incidents which the moral ethics of the times had found unacceptable and unpalatable. The novelist by portraying Bhimasena in this manner confirms the view that the novel as a modern epic recaptures the totality of human life.

P.K. Balakrishnan’s Ini Njan Urangatte (And Now Let Me Sleep) and Shivaji Sawant’s Mrityunjaya dwell upon the question of identity, which is again a present day preoccupation. Karna, the protagonist is the most suitable figure to represent a man in search of his roots. This identity crisis initially makes him yearn for social recognition and later places him in a grave moral dilemma. P.K. Balakrishnan sketches the life of Karna through the thought stream of Draupadi, while Shivaji Sawant unfurls the story of the loving, generous and courageous Karna through the autobiographical sketches of Kunti, Vrishali, Shona, Sri Krishna and Karna himself. Both the writers do not adhere strictly to the narrative sequence of the epic. They re-create the characters and incidents independently picking them out of the epic as the story demands. While preserving the ideals of the old times—courage and pride of woman and the glory of man – the authors make an attempt to help the characters step out of the epic, thereby attributing to them human qualities instead of the superhuman attributes and demi-god images they
have in the original epic. The moral predicaments of the protagonist are also discussed of and they are viewed from an angle more acceptable to modern man. Balakrishnan also highlights the situation after the war portraying the grief and guilt of the survivors, drawing mainly on the incidents described in the *Sauptika Parva* and *Stri Parva*.

The story of *Yayati* is an interesting incident of the instantaneous mutual exchange of youth and old age. *Yayati*, a great king belonging to the *Kuru* dynasty, who unashamedly declared that his lust for pleasure was still unsatisfied and borrowed his son's youth to quench it, is the representative of modern man in pursuit of pleasure. To Khandekar, modern man, like *Yayati*, is always discontented and is blindly running after fulfillment of momentary pleasures. Carnal pleasure is mistaken for eternal happiness and modern man is groping in darkness, in a world where spiritual values have been swept off. Khandekar paints a picture of deteriorating spiritual values of human life in the modern world through the story of *Yayati*, *Devayani*, and *Sharmishta*, making changes in the situation and characters to suit his theme.

While the five afore-mentioned novels have culled certain specific characters and episodes from the original and reworked them from a realistic standpoint, Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel* is cast in a different mould. Tharoor employs the technique of subversion and parodies the general schema, the structure, and the dramatis personae of the epic. To Shashi Tharoor, the great *Mahabharata* war is only a bitter war among Indian politicians, to attain power and glory. The novel itself is an ironic representation of the pre- and post-independence Indian political scenario. It is a scathing criticism of the present Indian socio-political set-up cloaked in irony and humour. Structurally, the novel closely resembles the epic in its division of eighteen chapters corresponding to the eighteen *parva* in the epic. The story is thus dexterously woven into the narrative frame. The characters resemble those in the epic with regard to their names, social positions and
actions. According to Bruce M. Sullivan, Veda Vyasa is not only the author of *the Mahabharata* but also "an important and active participant in the story" (Sullivan 1999, 2). Tharoor reiterates this unusual situation of the author appearing in his own composition and Veda Vyasa referred to as V.V. is the narrator of the story through whose consciousness the events slowly unfurl. Thus Shashi Tharoor has exploited the meta-fictional dimensions of the epic in the novel. All forms of moral depravity—adultery, deception, treachery, pride and lust—which are depicted in the epic, acquires a new gain in this modern day novel. Tharoor also establishes obvious links between the characters in the epic and real people in Indian politics.

With an ancient epic like *Mahabharata* posing as the hinterland to any literary work, the author confronts several problems in the re-rendition. If the narrative is in the realistic mode, the author has to place the details of life in the epic in the historical situation. The geographical details, the change in terrain and climate, the way of life, food, clothing, art and architecture, weapons, warfare—everything related to the civilization of antiquity has to be followed closely so as to present an authentic picture of the times. Thus creative imagination sets the characters in a realistic mould, where they re-live a re-told version of the epic. Even in a novel of subversion like *The Great Indian Novel*, the author has to closely fit the parameters of the parallel version into the frame of the original so as to kindle the enjoyment of recognition and identification in the mind of the reader.

It is quite obvious that all the six authors see the *Mahabharata* through different perspectives. This suggests a basic difference in their attitude towards the past. Apart from this, the past itself gathers different colouring in the re-tellings. This is because the re-interpretations are governed by the immediate contexts of the writers. While Pratibha Ray and P.K. Balakrishnan re-tell the epic in such a way as to improve our own perception of the present by looking back into the past, M.T. Vasudevan Nair
follows the theme to a certain point and then abandons it totally, perhaps to indicate that the same ending which was justified in the past is no longer possible or desirable in our times. Shashi Tharoor at the same time effectively parodies the theme of the epic to achieve the desirable effect of social criticism through the medium of irony and sarcasm.

While re-interpreting a seminal text of the past, we have to understand that the knowledge of history cannot always be objective and that we can never recover the past without our present intervening and modifying what may otherwise be considered objective and stable. While analyzing the retellings much thought has to be given to how much the writers deviate from the original, in what way and why. This will give a glimpse into the kind of thinking which has governed the re-interpretation by the writers. This will involve close reading, almost a total reading of both the re-told and the original narratives. While analyzing the novelistic re-tellings of the epic, one has to look deep into the narrative employed by the authors. In other words, there is a need to employ narrative as interpretation.

**Conclusion**

In the light of the above study, it could be surmised that khandakatha in the Indian narrative tradition is a rewritten story, which borrows material from a larger work. The Mahabharata itself is viewed as an Itihasa-Purana in the narrative tradition. The modern novelistic retellings of the epic also rely on the epic for its story, characters and theme, though with necessary adaptations suitable for the modern context. Hence it could be concluded that the novels under study are khandakathas of the epic, which are rewritten stories based on a small part – an episode or a character – of a larger work, an Itihasa-Purana. Further, the retellers separate out a linear narrative from the huge corpus of the Mahabharata, discarding what is unnecessary for their narration. Thus the epic that had gathered immense material, incorporated
into the central narrative, loses its colossal character to become a diminutive rendering in the form of a novel. By eschewing the mythical content and by de-nystifying the characters, the 20th century retellings mount a different plain of fictional aesthetics.