The Mahābhārata is a very important scripture of the Hindus and it is called the fifth Veda. The Mahābhārata contains the Vedic data and outside the Vedic literature. It is the only important source which provides a good deal of information about the Vedic deities and the ancient legends connected with them. In the very beginning of the epic its celebrated author is declared to be a great Vedic savant well-versed in Vedic lore. Thus Vyāsa has included Vedic learning in the Mahābhārata. The Mahābhārata represents an important stage in the development of Indian thought and is a store-house of information for all the important aspects of Indian thought and culture including the Vedic religion. Therefore, it is imperative to analyse critically the data contained in the Mahābhārata about the Vedic deities.

The earliest record of Indian mythology is mainly contained in the RgVeda celebrating the Chief Vedic deities. The hymns represent the most important part of the worship of the gods in rituals, the great mass of the Vedic hymns are composed for the ritual of the Soma-offering which include the worship of almost the entire pantheon. The
myths, related to them, refer to physical happenings and other aspects such as origin, physical appearance, food, conveyance, weapons, spouse, offsprings, abode and mode of worship etc.

Each deity has his own characteristics and represents the powers of Nature such as fire, sun and thunderstorm etc.

An outline study has been carried out in the Mbh. by V. Fausvoll about important Vedic deities.

Some Vedic deities have also been studied by W. J. Wilkins and A. B. Keith from the Vedas to the Purāṇas.

Sukumari Bhattacharjji in Indian Theogony has studied the Vedic deities from the Vedas to the Purāṇas. But more stress is laid on the Vedic and Brāhmaṇical period. She has not critically examined the Vedic deities according to the Mahābhārata.

A critical study about Indra and Varuna has been carried out in the Vedas, Mbh. and principal Purāṇas by Arya Usha.

Hence an attempt has been made in this thesis to critically examine and analyse the information yielded by
the Mahābhārata about various aspects of important Vedic deities.

Various views are given regarding the number of gods and the classification of the Vedic deities. Generally it is said in the RgVeda and Atharva Veda that the gods are 33 or 3339 in number. In the AV., they are divided as the gods dwellers in heaven, air and earth, without specifying any number. A three-fold division is implied when the gods are connected with the heaven, earth and waters.

The Brāhmaṇas also give the number of the gods as 33. The Satapatha Brāhmaṇa and the Aitareya Brāhmaṇa agree in dividing them into three main groups of 8 Vasus, 11 Rudras, 12 Ādityas but while Satapatha Brāhmaṇa adds to these either Dyaus and Prthivī or Indra and Prajāpati. The Aitareya Brāhmaṇa adds Vasatkāra and Prajāpati, to make up the total of 33.

In the Mahābhārata, the number of gods is mentioned as 33000, 3300 and 33. They are classified as 8 Vasus, 11 Rudras, 12 Ādityas, Prajāpati and Vasatkāra.

It is noticed that certain Vedic deities at the time of Mahābhārata had faded out such as Uṣas, Parjanya, Savitṛ and Mitra.
So only those Vedic deities are treated who survived at the time of Mahābhārata such as Indra, Rudra, Ahirbudhnya, Ajaekapād, Prajāpati, Vismu, Varuna, Agni, Soma, Yama, Śūrya, Vivasvat, Savitr, Pūṣan, Maruts, Ādityas, Āsvins and Vāyu-Vāta.

All these Vedic deities are discussed in various chapters and priority has been accorded to that deity, who has been mentioned in a large number of legends contained in the Mahābhārata. Other deities are similarly discussed according to the position occupied by them in epic legends. In some chapters, some allied Vedic deities have also been discussed. For instance under the heading Sun-gods various sun-gods such as Śūrya, Vivasvat, Savitr and Pūṣan, have been dealt with.

In each chapter first of all the Vedic characteristics of a deity have been briefly outlined. Then the epic character of the deity has been discussed in detail. In this connection, we have critically examined and analysed names, origin, physical features, weapons, conveyance, abode, spouse and offspring, greatness, relationship with other gods, nature and functions of each deity. The mode of worship has also been dealt with.

It may be pointed out that the conclusions have been briefly summed up at the end of each chapter.