







## The Lecture Contains:

-  Introduction
-  The Mahabharata
-  Retellings in Other Languages
-  Modern translations
-  Works Based on the Mahabharata
-  Inter-semiotic renderings
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## Introduction

Continuing our discussion of the translation of religious texts, it is not quite correct to compare the Bible or Quran with the epics in India. The texts of such religious significance for Hinduism are the Vedas which were composed in Sanskrit. There were injunctions not just against the translation, but even the recitation of Vedic mantras by lower caste people who did not know Sanskrit. Here we again see the attempt to jealously preserve scriptural knowledge without allowing it to be accessed by all. Knowledge of Sanskrit was restricted to the educated few which consisted only of upper caste men. Dash and Pattanaik note: “The *Vedas*, *Vedangas*, *Smrutis*, *Darshanas*, *Samhitas* and *Kavyas* written in Sanskrit were meant to have the function of ratifying the worldview of the ruling class and of the Brahmin clergy. The Brahmins used their knowledge of Sanskrit as an irreducible form of power, and translation was not encouraged since it would have diluted the role the texts could have played as a part of such an officially-sponsored ideology” (134). It was believed that the Vedas were of divine origin and translation into an ordinary language would have been similar to defiling it. It was as a revolt against this that we see the rise of Buddhism and Jainism with their languages of Pali and Prakrit respectively. The monopoly of Sanskrit was broken much later, and that too because of different socio-political factors.

Jealous control over scriptural knowledge refused to have translations which would have made it accessible to all.

However, the Indian epics of *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* cannot be compared to the scriptures in other religions or the Vedas, because they are not the defining texts of Hinduism. At best, they can be said to have stories of religious nature which have passed on to the general public irrespective of religious faith. They are also considered to be literary works worthy of emulation both in terms of the range and breadth of theme and characterization. Both the epics are in Sanskrit and believed to be composed by sages. Translated, retold, and rewritten countless times, these epics have passed into the Indian psyche and become distinctive components of Indian culture and literature.

## Module 9: Translating Religious

## Lecture 33: Rewritings / Retellings of Indian Epics I: Mahabharata

**The Mahabharata**

The exact date of composition of the epic is unknown, but it is said to have been composed between 300 BC and 300 AD.

The story it relates is of course from a much remoter age. It has a lakh slokas divided into 18 parvas, and is longer than any other known epic in the world. The

*Mahabharata* is considered to be a philosophical text as it also incorporates the *Bhagavad Gita*; in fact the text claims to encompass everything a human being needs to know:

“Whatever is here, is found elsewhere. But what is not here, is nowhere” (<http://mahabharata-resources.org/quotes.html>).

It is considered to contain everything that a human being would want to know; if it is not mentioned in the Mahabharata, then it is something that you can ignore. The

epic has suffused Indian life in all respects because it has been sung, recited and retold in various genres and ways. It has been translated into all major Indian languages including tribal languages. It exists outside India also, like the Indonesian text *Kakawin Bharatayuddha* which is the poetical rendering of a few parvas of the epic written by Mpu Sedah and Mpu Panuluh.



The *Mahabharata* was an inspiration and continues to be so, for writers and believers who are fascinated by the range of ethical and moral issues it raises. The range and complexity of characters have inspired a lot of creative rewrites and adaptations based on selected characters like Draupadi, Karna, Bhima etc.

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## Retellings in Other Languages

*Mahabharata* has been translated into all the Indian languages and also into English. However, the word translation is perhaps a misnomer for the texts in Indian languages that have made use of the basic Mahabharata story. Firstly, it is difficult to have a translation of a text that has such a fluid nature as this. The basic text is supposed to be the compilation by a few people and not the work of one author Vyasa. In fact, it is said that Vyasa means editor or the one who collated the work of numerous people. Since it passed on through the oral tradition, we can only guess at the numerous accretions or deletions that it went through. The *Mahabharata* was like a rolling stone which paradoxically gathered moss as it rolled from one generation to another, with the result that it has multiple versions in different parts of India. In some ways this bears out the truth of the statement in the epic: “Poets have told it before, poets are telling it now, other poets shall tell this history on earth in the future” (<http://mahabharata-resources.org/quotes.html>).

Vyasa – single author or compiler? Is there a single text called Mahabharata?

It is difficult to keep track of the multiple Mahabharatas; in fact, most Indian languages have their version of the epic rewritten by a prominent poet of the region. Kabi Sanjay translated it into Bengali for a rural readership (15th century) and Ezhuthachchan wrote the *Mahabharatam kilippattu* in Malayalam (15th century). Sarala Das in Oriya (15th century), Nannayya, Tikanna and Yerrana in Telugu (11th, 13th, and 14th centuries respectively), Pampa in Kannada (10th century) are a few other examples. Most of them added stories of their own, while doing away with some. Sarala Das edited out the “Bhishma Parva” completely, with the result that his version does not have the *Bhagavad Gita*. Adharvana’s Telugu *Bharatamu* (12th century) was a Jain version of the epic. Pampa’s *Vikramarjunavijayam* was actually a retelling from the Jaina point of view. None of them claimed to have translated the *Mahabharata*; in fact all of them are considered to be rewritings or retellings from a different perspective. The basic storyline was the same in all the versions, but the perspective from which the story was told was different. *Mahabharatam* by Ezhuthachchan in Malayalam is presented as a story told by a parrot. It is a framed narrative as the parrot is reciting the story that was told by a suta to a group of sages in the Naimisha forest. This story which was originally recited by Vyasa and taken down by Ganesha, was told to Janamejaya. So the narrative framework makes us aware of the distancing between us and the story in general. Of tribal lore, the Bhil version of the Mahabharata is perhaps the most vibrant. The Bhils are tribals in Central India who have an epic where the women are much stronger than the men; in one story for example, Yudhishtara falls at the feet of Draupadi.

If critical editions can be thought of as interpretations/translations, the most important modern undertaking in this respect must be the BORI's (Bhandarkar Oriental Research Insitute) publication of a critical edition. A group of scholars, working between 1909 and 1966, compared the manuscripts of various Indian editions and published a comprehensive *Critical Edition of the Mahabharata* in 19 volumes. As the website of BORI says: "Had institutions had hearts, the Mahabharata would certainly be BORI's!" The volume when it was eventually published consisted of "18 Parvans; 89000+ verses in the Constituted Text, and an elaborate Critical Apparatus; 19 Volumes: No. of pages: 15000+ demi-quarto size" (<http://www.bori.ac.in/mahabharata.htm>). Of course this was not a translation in the strict sense of the term, but the elaborate exegesis can certainly be seen as a rewrite.

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## Module 9: Translating Religious

## Lecture 33: Rewritings / Retellings of Indian Epics I: Mahabharata

**Modern translations**

Other than the ancient translations which were from the Sanskrit text into Indian languages, there have been modern translations of the epic. The modern age in this context would imply post-18th century. It is again difficult to give a comprehensive and chronological list of all translations made into the different Indian languages, except to mention a few important ones. One of the most amazing and comprehensive of all is Kodungalloor Kunjikuttan Thampuran's translation of the entire epic from Sanskrit into Malayalam verse in the 19th century. His translation was very faithful, as it was rendered metre by metre and word for word. The entire exercise took only 874 days, and it earned him the title of Kerala Vyasa. Kali Prasanna Singh translated it into Bengali (19th century), Pt. Ramnarayandutt Shastri Pandey Ram into Hindi, and Manalur Rangachariar into Tamil.

*Kunjikuttan Thampuran*

English translations were also done after the British colonization of India. Romesh Chander Dutt's version, *Mahabharata, the Epic of Ancient India condensed into English Verse* was published in 1898. As the title indicates, this was a target-oriented translation that took into consideration the fact that the target readers were not familiar with the linguistic or cultural milieu of the source text. Kisari Mohan Ganguli did the complete translation into English in 11 volumes. P. Lal's 'transcreation' of the epic is justly famous. It is a compendious work as it meticulously includes all slokas in all the known recensions. It was a major project that took Lal years to complete, and was published fully only by 2010. Lal called his translation a 'transcreation' because he had added and made his own contributions to the epic while translating it. The Clay Sanskrit Library, which has a project of translating ancient Sanskrit texts, includes the Mahabharata in English ([http://www.claysanskritlibrary.org/CES\\_seduced\\_sanskrit.php](http://www.claysanskritlibrary.org/CES_seduced_sanskrit.php)). There have been translations into languages like Russian and French besides English.



## Works Based on the Mahabharata

The Mahabharata, perhaps because of its complexity of theme and range of characters, has deeply influenced the Indian literary ethos. This starts from the ancient period of classical literature onwards. If we consider adaptations and rewritings as forms of translation, then the translations of the epic are countless. Kalidasa's *Abhijnanasakuntalam* is derived from the Mahabharata, modified to suit the spectators of those days. We have already seen how the characters of Dushyanta and Sakuntala are transformed / transcreated by Kalidasa to become acceptable to the socio-political environment of his time (Lecture # 18: Sakuntala's Colonial and Postcolonial Versions). Bhasa too had adaptations from the Mahabharata, like *Urubhangam*, *Dutavakyam*, *Madhyamavyayogam*, *Pancharatnam* etc. All of them are Bhasa's personal interpretations of the characters and story line, thus making major departures from the basic text. *Urubhangam* is a tragedy that depicts the death of Duryodhana on the battle-field. The villain of the epic is the tragic hero in this gripping two-act play, a flawed figure that evokes respect and sympathy from spectators. In *Dutavakyam*, Duryodhana is again a figure that matches Krishna in stature. This play is an adaptation of the famous scene in the epic where Krishna arrives in the court of Duryodhana as the messenger of the Pandavas, before the war is formally declared. In the source text, Krishna outwits all attempts to insult him and comes out as the divine messenger. Bhasa, however, has made Krishna very human with all the follies and foibles that could be attributed to worldly men.

Jumping centuries, the epic became the material for an open exhortation against war and related violence in the Hindi play *Andha Yug* (1954) of Dharamvir Bharati. Peter Brook's adaptation of the story for his play of the same name, used the basic storyline, but had a cast drawn from all parts of the globe. This was a testimony to the permanence of the epic proving that it was a story that could happen to anybody anywhere in the world.



*Bhishma in Brook's Mahabharata*

The novels, short stories and poems based on the story, theme or characters of the Mahabharata are many. All of them are personalized interpretations of the respective authors, based on their personal ideology. In poetry, Ramdhari Singh Dinkar wrote *Rashmirathi* in Hindi, which was from the point of view of Karna. Novels like M. T. Vasudevan Nair's *Randamoozham* (Malayalam), Pratibha Ray's *Yajnaseni: The Story of Draupadi* (Oriya), V. S. Khandekar's *Yayati* (Marathi), Shivaji Sawant's *Mrityunjay* (Marathi), S. L. Bhyrappa's *Parva* (Kannada) are but a few examples of retellings of the source text. Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel* written in English was a take on the epic, placing it squarely in contemporary Indian politics.



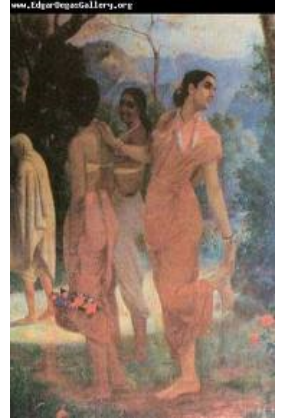


## Module 9 :Translating Religious

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**Inter-semiotic renderings**

The epic has been translated into various other art forms like dance and painting. Raja Ravi Varma, India's brilliant painter, has used the epic as source material for a lot of his paintings. The portrait of Sakuntala who pretends to have a thorn in her foot as an excuse to take a backward look at Dushyanta is one of the most famous ones. He has painted other scenes like Parashara and Satyawati, Arjuna and Chitrangada, the young Bharata playing with the lion cubs, Damayanti listening to the message from the hamsa etc. In fact, Ravi Varma's paintings were so effective that it is difficult for us to imagine other personalities for the characters in the epics.



As has been pointed out earlier, all forms of classical Indian dance are based on one or the other of the two epics. One episode is usually the base for a dance performance. Bharatanatyam and Kuchipudi usually have episodes based on the life of Krishna, and other stories from the epic. But a very popular episode is that of the Gitopadesham or Krishna's advice to Arjuna on the battlefield of Kurukshetra. Dance forms like Kathakali and Yakshagana almost entirely draw their material from Mahabharata. Most of the Indian folk art forms are also based on it.

B. R. Chopra's television serial based on the epic was immensely popular. This serial was again telecast by BBC with English subtitles where it grossed the maximum viewership. Chopra's interlingual (Sanskrit to Hindi) and intersemiotic (epic to television serial) translation was again translated into English, without losing any of its appeal. There have been animated films and other graphic adaptations (like Amar Chitra Katha). Shyam Benegal's *Kalyug* was a transcreation of the Mahabharata which tells the story of a feud between cousins over a family inheritance, and the characters are thinly disguised modern versions of the epic characters.

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**Influence on language and culture**

The *Mahabharata* was originally composed in Sanskrit and it would have remained out of bounds to the common reader if it had not been translated into the vernacular bhashas. Once translated, its reach and influence was so deep-seated that it is difficult for us to quantify it. Words and images have passed into ordinary usage and all Indians irrespective of religious faith, language or culture are able to respond to them. Expressions like “He is a Shakuni” or “A virtual Mahabharat is going on” do not need to be explained. Draupadi’s humiliation at the hands of Dushasana, the agony of an abandoned Karna, the blind Dhritrashtra’s overpowering and destructive love for his children etc are known even to the unlettered people of India. The predicament of Arjuna on the battlefield of Kurukshetra is a very common metaphor to denote any sort of moral crisis that we encounter in our daily lives. The reference to somebody as Bhishmapitamah implies the status and power of that person. The Dronacharya award given to the best coach is in direct reference to the acharya of Arjuna in the epic. The epic battle is often invoked in the Indian public memory to highlight the futility of war and the winning of a war. The battlefield of Kurukshetra where members of the same family take opposing sides is seen as the metaphor for any war, where opposing enemies can actually be thought of as part one large family.

Dramatic moments which have inspired writers and other artists:

- Kunti’s revelation to Karna regarding his birth
- Draupadi’s public humiliation in the Kaurava court
- Gandhari cursing Krishna for his inability to prevent bloodshed in war
- Eklavya, who offers his thumb as gurudakshina
- The loneliness of Bhishma as he lies dying on his bed of arrows

How did a work of such philosophical and literary magnitude manage to percolate down to the very grassroots of Indian existence? The answer lies not just in written translations, but also in the oral transmission of the epic through a language that was understood by the common reader / viewer. In other words, the epic passed from the rarefied atmosphere of religious sanctity to the more open and free environment of popular culture. This ensured it a perennial life, as it penetrated every aspect of art, culture and other domains of Indian life.

**Assignments**

1. Trace the Mahabharata through different languages at different points of time in Indian history.
2. Select a character from a rewrite of the epic in your language. Compare it with Vyasa's depiction. What assumptions can you arrive at with regard to cultural differences?

## References

Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute. <http://www.bori.ac.in/mahabharata.htm>

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Mahabarata Resources. <<http://www.mahabharata-resources.org/>>

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