

# ***Mahābhārata* Variations in Malayalam**

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## **Introduction**

Kerala has a rich panorama of *Mahābhārata* retellings in written, oral, theatrical and ritual performance traditions. Among the written retellings of *Mahābhārata*, the following works from 15<sup>th</sup> to 17<sup>th</sup> century are known: *Kaṇṇaśśa Bhāratam* [1], *Bhāratam Pāṭṭu* of Ayyanappilla Āsan [2], *Ceruśśēri Bhāratam* also known as *Bhāratagātha* [3], *Bhāratamāla* [4], and *Śrīmahābhārataṁ Kilippāṭṭu* [5]. In addition, portions of an oral *Mahābhārata* have survived [6]. In the classic performance traditions, episodes from the Epic appear in Kūttu, Kathakali, and Tullal. In addition, there are centuries old little known temple traditions with *Mahābhārata* connections, which have survived to the present day. Most of these retellings contain subtle and not so subtle variations compared to Vyāsa's Epic. We shall measure variations from the Critical Edition [7] of *Mahābhārata*. We try to provide an overview of the variations, some of which are found in the southern recensions of the Epic. Some have overlaps with folk retellings from other regions of India while some others parallel puranic additions/ variations on *Mahābhārata* episodes. There is also one episode which deals with the *ābhicāra* act of *Nilalkuttu* (shadow piercing) that appears unique to Kerala.

It is worthwhile to note that the two complete translations of *Mahābhārata* in Malayalam, the verse translation [8] and the prose translation [9], appear to have followed the version known as Bombay Edition [10].

## ***Mahābhārata* in ancient traditions of Kerala and early Malayalam literature**

During the rule of Cēra kings, the ritual performance of *Cākyār Kūttu* associated with temples provided education and entertainment to the masses. Cākyārs used many of Bhāsa's plays. *Dūtavākyaṁ* [11] is an example of the many performance texts used by them. By way of explaining Bhāsa, this text contains detailed references to many *Mahābhārata* events leading up to Kṛṣṇa's mission in *Udyōga Parva*. Thus we get access to versions of *Mahābhārata* incidents prevalent in Kerala more than five hundred years ago.

One of the earliest poetic works in Malayalam literature, which contains many references

to *Mahābhārata* is *Tirunīlalmāla* authored by Gōvinnen (Gōvindan) and dated 1200 - 1300 AD [12]. In this work, there is an invocation of Gaṇeśa (p. 100) which includes *Viyātan moliyum pāratatteyoru kompkoteluttitumaven* (who writes with a tusk, the Bhārata spoken by Vyāsa). Two *Mahābhārata* episodes mentioned in the text are the encounter of Arjuna with Śiva (kirātam) and Kṛṣṇa sustaining the war as the charioteer of Arjuna. Vasiṣṭha, Vāmadeva, Vyāsa, Pulastya, Maitreya and “Vaiśampāyana who recites *Mahābhārata*” are mentioned (pages 109-110) among the *Rṣis* who arrive to witness the ritual performed by *Malayas* (one of the aboriginal sects of Kerala) at a Kṛṣṇa temple. There is a long invocation of the Goddess *Kurattittaivam* who carries a *Muram* in her hand (p. 125) (*Muram* is a tool against *ābhicāra* - commentator). The invocation has parts resembling *Kuratti Tōrram* in style and content. The concluding portion describes *Malayas* removing the sins from Kṛṣṇa’s body. They enumerate nine sins of Kṛṣṇa, the ninth one being “the sin arising from causing the Bhārata war which lead to the killing of Kuru kings” (p. 134). In some aspects, the rituals described resemble *Pallippāna* that is connected with *Nilalkkuttu* (shadow piercing) episode.

### ***Nilalkkuttu* episode**

Let us consider variations on a particular *Mahābhārata* episode from oral, ritual and performance traditions of Kerala. This episode which deals with the *ābhicāra* act of *Nilalkkuttu* is absent from the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* and its well-known written retellings in Malayalam. So far, we have located this episode in (1) *Nilalkkuttu Pāṭṭu* associated with a ritual called *Pallippāna* [13], (2) *Kuratti Tōrram* [14, 15] associated with the *Teyyam* performance of northern Kerala, (3) *Nilalkkuttu Pāṭṭu* [6], a section of *Māvāratam Pāṭṭu*, a folk *Mahābhārata* once popular in southern Kerala and (4) *Nilalkkuttu Āṭṭakatha* [16], the literary text for a popular *Kathakali* play.

In a nut-shell, the summary of the episode is as follows [17]: (Note that *Kuravan* and *Kuratti* are male and female members of *Kurava*, an aboriginal sect of South India.) Kauravas order *Malankuravan* to perform *Nilalkkuttu* and put Pāṇḍavas to sleep. Under threat, reluctantly, he obliges. *Malankuratti*, wife of *Malankuravan* comes to know about it. She is enraged, performs counter *ābhicāra* and revives the Pāṇḍavas. The *ābhicāra* episode in four different contexts as summarized above have variations. In *Māvāratam Pāṭṭu* and *Kuratti*

*Tōrram*, Kunti is also put to sleep. In the *Nilalkkuttu Pāṭṭu* associated with the *Pallippāna* ritual, *Malankuravan* and *Malankuratti* are replaced by *Bhārata Malayan* and *Malayi*. In this version, along with the Pāṇḍavas, Kunti and Draupadī are put to sleep. In the *Nilalkkuttu Āṭṭakkatha*, only Pāṇḍavas are put to sleep. In this work, responding to Kunti's prayer, it is Kṛṣṇa who revives the Pāṇḍavas. A notable variation is the *absence* of Kṛṣṇa in *Kuratti Tōrram* and the two versions of *Nilalkkuttu Pāṭṭu*.

We may enquire whether this episode with local flavour, which lies outside of Vyāsa's epic has any links with other regional variations. In Ref. [18], we find that there is one *Terukkūttu* play called *Turōpatai Kuravañci*. In this play, during the stay in the forest Draupadī disguises as a *Kuratti* and goes to Hastinapura and engages in fortune telling to collect fresh grains. Thus both in Tamil Nadu and Kerala we find some connections between *Kuratti* and *Mahābhārata*.

### **The episode of Bhīma marrying a serpent maiden in *Māvāratam Pāṭṭu***

*Nilalkkuttu* episode forms a part of the oral retelling *Māvāratam Pāṭṭu*, portions of which are available in a collection of old Malayalam songs [6]. In this work, only the following sections are given: (1) Partaking in the Feast, (2) Marrying the Naga Maiden and (3) Shadow Piercing. All these three episodes are outside of Vyāsa's Epic.

Summary of the second episode is as follows: Kāntakāri (Gāndhāri) sends a flute putting a snake inside to the Pāṇḍavas. Not playing the flute would bring dishonour to them. Pīman (Bhīma) volunteers to use the flute. Immediately, the snake bites Pīman and kills him. Pīman's body is bathed, kept inside a boat and is left adrift in the sea. The boat drifts away. In the nāga city (nāgapuram), there is a nāga maiden (nāgakanni). The maiden brings the boat ashore by reciting *mantras* and discovers the body inside. She removes the poison from Pīman's body. The maiden marries Pīman and they have a son. One day the smell of his palace burning reaches Pīman and he leaves nāgapuram.

The story of the revival of Bhīma by a serpent maiden and conception afterwards is known to Ālha singers in the Bundelkhand region (cited by Hildebeitel in the context of Barbareeka, Aravāṇ and Kūttāṇṭavar [19]). It is very interesting to see the same story surfacing in both Bundelkhand and Kerala in folk *Mahābhārata* with no known written sources elsewhere.

### **The episode of Simhika from *Kṛmīravadhāṁ Āṭṭakkatha***

Kōṭṭayam Tanpurān (17<sup>th</sup> century) wrote the Kathakali plays [20] *Bakavadham*, *Kṛmīravadham*, *Kalyāṇasaugandhikam* and *Nivātakavacakālakēyavadham*. Simhika appears in *Kṛmīravadham*. In this work, the author introduces two new characters outside of Vyāsa's Epic: A rākṣasa named Śārddūla and his wife Simhika. Simhika also happens to be the sister of Kṛmīra. Śārddūla is killed by Arjuna. To take revenge, Simhika decides to abduct Draupadī and present her to brother Kṛmīra. To achieve this goal, Simhika takes the form of Lalita (a beautiful woman) and approaches Draupadī to whom she wants to show a Durga temple in the forest. Draupadī suspects foul play and hesitates to go. Simhika resumes her original form and forcefully takes away Draupadī. Hearing Draupadī's cries, Sahadeva comes and cuts off the nose and breasts of Simhika. This is followed by the encounter between Kṛmīra and Bhīma and the killing of Kṛmīra. The scene of Simhika (as Lalita) with Draupadī is immortalized in a Rāja Ravivarma painting.

### Variations in the Tuḷḷal literature by Kuñcan Nambiar

Among the body of work [21] created by the poet Kuñcan Nambiar (1700-1775) for the performing art of Tuḷḷal, thirteen are based on *Mahābhārata*. The poet, a great scholar, utilized epic/purana stories as a mantle for criticism of his contemporary society using satire and humour. His work also provides a source for variations of Epic stories prevalent in Kerala in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The following are two examples.

1) From *Kirātam*: Śakuni tells Duryodhana that they should try to stop Arjuna's penance. Duḥśāsana suggests that Mūkāsura should be called. Duryodhana summons Mūkāsura and orders him to proceed to Himalayas and stop Arjuna's penance. Mūkāsura says he will attack Arjuna in the guise of a boar.

2) From *Bakavadham*: Vyāsa appears and tells them (Pāṇḍavas): Go to Ekacakra. That is good for you. There Bhīma can marry Hiḍimbi. Hiḍimbi shall be given the name *Kamalapālaka* (One who maintains (or takes care of) lotuses).

In the Terukkūttu tradition [18], Hiḍimbā is known as Kamalakkanni. Thus we find an intriguing connection between Hiḍimbā and lotus in the Tuḷḷal literature of Kerala and the Terukkūttu literature of Tamilnadu.

### *Kaṇṇaśśabhāratam*

The available text of *Kaṇṇaśśabhāratam*, authored by Rāma Paṇikkar [1] contains only episodes that belong to the beginning of *Ādi Parva* up to the abduction of Kāśī princesses by Bhīṣma. The significant variation from Vyāsa *Mahābhārata* is the narration of the life of Kṛṣṇa from *avatāra* to *svargārōhaṇa* immediately after the Āstika episode. The narration combines episodes from *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* and *Harivamśa*. Notable are the mention of killings of Śṛgāla, Hamsa and Āmbhaka and the Ghaṇṭākarna episode in Kṛṣṇa's life. The poet concludes the narration with the statement: *Know that this Mahābhārata is Kṛṣṇa's story.*

### ***Bhāratam Pāṭṭu***

The retelling *Bhāratam Pāṭṭu* by Ayyanappilla Āśān [2] is available in print only upto and including *Bhīṣma Parva*.

*Sambhava Parva* begins with two unique songs praising Gaṇeśa:

The first song which describes Gaṇeśa as ever present, ends by asking for a boon to enable the poet *to recite Bhārata in words*. The second song describes Gaṇeśa as *the writer of holy Bhārata using the six faced boy-god (Subrahmanya) as stylus*.

Some major variations are the following:

*Sambhava Parva*: Kunti revealed the birth of Karṇa to Pāṇḍu : *I left him in the river since I was a maiden.*

The house of lāc episode: In the night, Karṇa and Śakuni surrounded the house along with assistants and set fire to it.

Draupadī swayamvara: Dhṛṣṭadyumna described ŚrīKṛṣṇa to Draupadī (6 songs).

Vyāsa told the story of sage Maudgalya (affected by leprosy) and his wife who ate the food in which a finger of the sage had fallen into.

*Sabha Parva*: Digvijaya and Rajasūya: Sahadeva sent Ghatōtkaca to Vibhīṣana in Lanka, who in turn gave immeasurable wealth.

Disrobing of Draupadī: *Then Duḥśāsana caught her hair and dragged her. He then started removing her dress. She wore another dress. He removed that also. Then the ladies gave her dresses as loan so that the dresses do not exhaust. The ladies said: "You leave her. Return her dresses. Terrible danger will occur, great sorrow will come, because of the words people have uttered".*

*Āraṇya Parva*: On his way to perform penance, Arjuna is confronted by Aravāyan (Āravān=Irāvān) whom Arjuna fells with an arrow. When Tātaka, the wife of Aravāyan appeals to Arjuna to save her husband, Arjuna applies medicine on the wound and revives Aravāyan who promises to help Arjuna when he is in trouble.

Śiva tells Mūkāsura: *To achieve a purpose, I will shoot an arrow on you. You go to Arjuna and seek protection.*

*Udyoga Parva*: After the meeting of Kṛṣṇa with Karna, there was a meeting between Kṛṣṇa and Aśwatthāman who promised that he will not become the leader of Kaurava army.

There are some noteworthy change of names: Pāṇdu's mother is called *Ambāli*. The word *Kāntakāri* is used for Gāndhārī by Yudhiṣṭhira in his talk with Drupada. Same word is used in *Māvāratam Pāṭṭu*.

### ***Ceruśseri Bhāratam* also known as *Bhāratagātha***

*Ceruśseri Bhāratam* [3] is a book of variations compared to other retellings discussed in this article. A detailed list of variations in *Ceruśseri Bhāratam* is available in Ref. [22]. The main variations can be classified into groups having (a) close parallels in Tamil retelling and folk ritual performance of *Terukkūttu* [18], (b) possible connections with known sources from other parts of India (c) connection with *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, (d) a distinct brāhmin flavour and (e) origins yet unknown.

Major variations that belong to group (a) are the following. (1) Address of Gaṇeśa as *who wrote down this good story, which grants salvation by destroying all evil deeds, with his tusk*. (2) Karna's failure in his attempt at Draupadī swayamvara because of Kṛṣṇa's act. (3) When Kunti saw Karna, milk poured out of her breast. Recognising him to be her son, Kunti proceeded to feed him her breast milk. Since those who drank her milk do not have the fear of the God of Death, Kṛṣṇa went as a bird and dried her breast so that Pāṇḍavas may win. (4) Hearing that Duḥśāsana has fallen, Draupadī went to the battlefield and put her foot on his chest. Draupadī wore the liver as a garland. She collected the teeth of Duḥśāsana. She laughed and recalled her abuse. People who watched said: She is the Goddess Death of the sinful Kauravas! She is the VīryaLakṣmi of the Pāṇḍava heroes! (5) Karna's soul was protected by a vessel of *Amṛta* residing in his heart. Knowing this, disguised as a brāhmin,

Kṛṣṇa approached Karna for it. Karna knew it was Kṛṣṇa and obliged. (6) Duryodhana told Saṁjaya that he is going to bring back the dead kings to life. Saying this, meditating up on Varuṇa Mantra, Duryodhana entered the lake. (7) Aśwatthāman presented the heads of the sons of Pāṇḍavas and Śikhaṇḍi to Duryodhana. Duryodhana became sad because Aśwatthāman murdered the children. (Also parallels *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*).

Some of the variations that have possible connections with sources from other parts of India are the following. (1) Vaiśampāyana visited Hastinapura and asked Janamejaya to listen to the story of his ancestors, as the cure for leprosy which was caused by the curse of the serpents. (In the first Bengali retelling of *Mahābhārata* [23], Janamejaya is afflicted with a disease as a result of a curse from a sage. Vyāsa instructs him to listen to the epic from Vaiśampāyana as the cure.) (2) Bhīma marrying a nāgakanya and having a son Babhrubāhu with her. Is there a confusion regarding the name of the son of Bhīma and the nāgakanya, Babhrubāhu with Barbareeka? See [18, 19]. (3) Śakuni made pieces of dice out of the bones of his brother who perished in a prison due to imprisonment by Kauravas. Later he used them in the dice game with an intention to destroy the Kauravas. (This episode is known to other South Indian sources [24].) (4) After the disrobing episode, no one could answer Draupadī's question. To resolve the matter, Draupadī challenged Duryodhana for a dice game, defeated him and restored freedom to her husbands. (This has some parallels with Telugu folk versions as cited in Ref. [18], page 238.)

The following variations have connection with *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*. (1) Parīkṣit heard the *Bhāgavata* recited by Śuka. (2) Kṛṣṇa sent Akrūra to Hastinapura asking him to inform Bhīṣma to stop all the atrocities by Kauravas. If not, Kṛṣṇa will feed all of them to his Cakra. (3) Seeing the son of Droṇa bound, Draupadī became sad. She told Arjuna to release Droṇa's son. But Yudhiṣṭhira and Bhīma told Arjuna to kill Aśwatthāman. (4) Hearing about Kṛṣṇa's departure from this world from Arjuna, Kunti left this world.

*Ceruśśeri Bhāratam* contains some variations that exhibit a distinct brāhmin flavour. The origins of these variations are not known at the present time. (1) Kunti told Pāṇḍu the story of the brāhmin, Brahmarata. He has no son. At his instruction, his wife sleeps with another brāhmin (who was a guest at Bramharata's house and desired his wife) and gets a child. (2) When Droṇa wanted to go to Pāñcāla Kingdom, there was a twelve year long famine. A story is narrated of a Kashmiri brāhmin, expert in astrology, who thwarted the plan of *Navagrahas* and ended the draught. (3) When Sahadeva came to the South during

Digvijaya prior to Rājasūya, and cannot conquer Trigarta who ruled Kerala at that time, he made a deal with Agni. Agni decreed that, except brāhmin women, other women in Kerala need not be chaste and brāhmins may marry the kṣatriya women.

Some of the variations whose origins are unknown at the present time are as follows. (1) Meeting of Śaṁtanu and Satyavati: The King was afflicted with a type of cancer (Puṇḍarīka Arbuda). Blessed by Parāśara, the maiden's body was producing *Kastūri* which was used for treating the King as suggested by physicians. The maiden refused to accept any payment for the *Kastūri*. The King was completely cured of disease. Thus, Śaṁtanu came to know about the maiden. The King met the maiden on the banks of Kālindi, fell in love with her. (2) Balarāma intended to make an attempt so that he can gift Draupadī to Duryodhana. At this point Kṛṣṇa intervened, informed Balarāma that Pāṇḍavas are alive and pointed them out to him. (3) Kṛṣṇa tricked Balarāma into thinking that he has killed a cow. Balarāma proceeded for pilgrimage. (4) To verify whether Yudhiṣṭhira has spoken the truth, after protecting his body through yoga, Droṇa left his body and went in search of Aśwatthāman. Meanwhile Dhr̥ṣṭadyumna cut his body into pieces. After verifying that Yudhiṣṭhira has spoken a lie, Droṇa decided to kill him and went back to reenter his body. Seeing it in pieces, he decided to put them together. At that moment Bharadvāja descended from heaven and took Droṇa with him.

### ***Bhāratamāla***

*Bhāratamāla* [4] of the poet Śankaran is a retelling of *Mahābhārata* in verse, dated from the fifteenth century, remarkable for poetic beauty, closeness to the Epic and skill in condensation. Unfortunately, the text is currently known only in academic circles.

The main variations are as follows:

*Ādi Parva* is split into two separate Parvas, *Ādi* and *Sambhava*. In *Ādi Parva* a major variation occurs after Viṣṇu promises the devas that he will take birth as the son of Vasudeva. Out of a total of 69 songs in *Ādi Parva*, 43 songs are devoted to the story of Kṛṣṇa from *Avatāra* to the war with Bāṇa. The narration contains stories from *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* and *Harivamśa*. Four songs are devoted to the episode of mischiefs of child Kṛṣṇa and the complaints by Vraja women. Some examples of the reliance on *Harivamśa* are as follows: The number of women kept in captivity by Narakāsura is mentioned as 16,100. Kṛṣṇa's



journey to Kailāsa, obtaining boon from Śiva and the killing of Hamsa and Āmbhaka are mentioned.

*Sambhava Parva*: Citrāṅgada's name is not mentioned. Instead, she is referred to as *Pāṇḍya's daughter*.

*Sabha Parva*: Sahadeva sends Ghaṭōtkaca as an emissary to Lanka to meet Vibhīṣaṇa. As a tribute to Yudhiṣṭhira, Vibhīṣaṇa gives great wealth to Ghaṭōtkaca.

*Āraṇya Parva*: In the encounter between Arjuna and Śiva (Kīrāta episode), Mūkāsura is sent by Duryodhana. Ramāyaṇa (including Uttarakāṇḍa) is narrated in 64 songs.

*Virāṭa Parva*: When Kīcaka's death is reported in the court of Hastinapura, elders conclude that *Bhīma did it; Draupadī might be the cause*.

On reaching the battlefield, becoming afraid, Uttara tells Arjuna: *I want to see my mother; eunuch, don't delay*.

(These two incidents occur also in Refs. [2] and [5].)

*Udyōga Parva*: After the meeting of Kṛṣṇa with Karṇa, a meeting between Kṛṣṇa and Aśwatthāman is mentioned.

*Karṇa Parva*: In 2 songs, there is a beautiful description of Kṛṣṇa which is clearly poet's vision. It ends: *I see as residing in my mind*.

### ***Śrīmahābhārataṁ Kīlippāṭṭu***

It took the genius of Eḷuttacchan to create a *Mahābhārata* in Malayalam that remains “one of the greatest works in Malayalam language” [25]. The poem is written in Kīlippāṭṭu style in which a parrot maiden (*Śukataruṇi*) recites *Mahābhārata* at the poet's request.

Most of the variations in Kīlippāṭṭu up to the end of *Sauptika Parva* are documented in Ref. [26]. To provide an example of the different aspects of Eḷuttacchan's retelling, here we summarize some notable features in *Mausala Parva*.

- The Parva begins with Sahadeva's description of Kaliyuga, which ends: *It is not good to live on earth. Let's leave*.
- Kṛṣṇa thinks about some way to destroy the Yādavas. The curse of sages occurs after this.
- Arjuna meets with Kṛṣṇa before Yādavas leave for the seashore.

- There is a detailed description of Uddhava taking leave of Kṛṣṇa.
- The destruction of Yādavas is described in very few words. After the annihilation, Balabhadra (Rāma) leapt into the sea.
- Jara, the hunter tells Kṛṣṇa: *How can you wish my arrow to strike your feet, which shines in the minds of sages, on the breasts of Gopa women, on the head of Bali, in the heart of Śiva, on the palms of Brahma, in the eyes of Ahalyā?*
- Kṛṣṇa tells the hunter, Jara: *I deceived you in the previous birth. This is your revenge for that. Now you can reside in heaven without any grief. This is my liking as well.*

(The myth that Jara, the hunter is Bālī reborn to avenge his unjust death at the hands of Rāma occurs in a Sanskrit play [27].)

- Kṛṣṇa instructs Dārūka to go to Dvāraka and inform all about the incidents.
- Vyāsa tells Arjuna: *Remember that even the son of Daśaratha had to suffer the abduction of his own wife. ... These women had laughed at the sage with curved body. The Brāhmin cursed them to be abducted thus by the men of the forest.*

(This episode of the curse of the apsarās by Aṣṭāvakra which is mentioned also in Ref. [3] occurs in Viṣṇu Purāṇa [28].)

## Some Observations

It is difficult to date the oral *Mahābhārata*, *Māvāratam Pāṭṭu* whose author remains unknown. What is remarkable about the portions of this work that have survived, is the dominant female roles in the episodes. In the episode of Partaking in the Feast, the Kuru-Pandava rivalry is handled by the queens Gāndhārī and Kuntī and there is not even a mention of their husbands. Female assassins are employed by Gāndhārī and it is Karṇa's wife who helps Bhīma. In the episode of Marrying the Naga Maiden, it is the nāgakanya who takes charge of the course of events. In the Shadow Piercing episode, Kuratti controls the turn of events. In *Bhāratam Pāṭṭu* (1500 AD) also, we have noticed some active female roles. In addition, we have noted some other common features of *Māvāratam Pāṭṭu* and *Bhāratam Pāṭṭu*. Are there aspects of folk *Mahābhāratas* that are connected with the ancient

Goddess worship and the matriarchial structure of certain Kerala societies? As noted by Hildebeitel [19], a proper understanding of folk epics of India requires close collaboration among mythologists, folklorists, historians and scholars of Indian literature, religion and anthropology.

Authors of *Kaṇṇaśābhāratam* and *Bhāratamāla* belong to the group of poets known as *Niraṇam Poets* whose period is 1350 - 1450 AD. The poets are Mādhava Paṇikkar (author of *Bhāṣā Bhagavadgītā*), Śankaran (Śankara Paṇikkar) and Rāma Paṇikkar. According to Suranattu Kunhan Pillai [29], they brought forth a new era in Malayalam poetry in the fields of form of language, construction of literary work, choice of subject and style of narration. *Niraṇam* poets evolved a new poetic dialect, drawing the best from the Tamil as well as Sanskrit stream [30]. While there was a parallel stream of poetry with emphasis on sensuality, *Niraṇam* works inaugurated the Bhakti movement in Malayalam literature and paved way for a cultural renaissance.

*Ceruśśeri Bhāratam*, according to the author, was written by the order of the *Kōla* King Udayavarman (1446 - 1465 AD). None of the other retellings in Malayalam share this feature. According to the poet, he wrote the poem to benefit those who cannot access Vedas. Interesting question is, are the numerous variations in this retelling intentional or unintentional? Being the only retelling by a brāhmin author, it is perhaps expected that the work has an excess of brāhmin narratives. This may also partly explain the dependence on *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*. But as we already documented, a large number of variations have connections with Tamil and other regional retellings of *Mahābhārata*. Chirakkal T. Balakrishnan Nair, in his introduction to *Ceruśśeri Bhāratam* has pointed out that the metre used in the work, (*Gāthā rīti* or *Mañjari*) is also found in many ancient Tamil poetic works. The close connections between some of the variations in *Ceruśśeri Bhāratam*, *Pampa Bhāratam* in Kannada and *Villiputtūr Ālvār's Makāpāratam* in Tamil need to be studied closely. These connections may go back to the earliest known retelling of *Mahābhārata* in Tamil, that of *Peruntēvanār* [18]. To understand what prompted the author of *Ceruśśeri Bhāratam* to incorporate these variations, one may have to study the retellings in a much wider context [19].

In order to recognize and appreciate the undercurrents of Tamil and Sanskrit influences on *Mahābhārata* retellings in Malayalam, it is worthwhile to recall some history [31]. In the 9<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> centuries, Cēra kings who ruled Kerala installed educational institutions associated with temples. A major component of these institutions was called *Māvārata Paṭṭattānam*

where brāhmin Sanskrit scholars were employed to recite *Mahābhārata* and provide running commentary in Tamil for the audience. These scholars were called *Māvārata Paṭṭanmar*. This practice appears to have continued at least for half a Millenium as we find a reference to this *Mahābhārata* recital (*cāru māvāratam kēṭṭ* - hearing the beautiful *Mahābhārata*) in the Malayalam sandēśakāvya *Uṇṇunīli Sandēśam* [32].

Finally, when we come to Tuñcatt Eḷuttacchan (1500 - 1600 AD), again it is essential to turn to the historical background [30, 31]. The first half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century following the arrival of Portugese was a dark period for Kerala. Faced with foreign aggression, political instability and economic and social insecurity, common people craved for a message of hope. New leaders emerged on the scene with emphasis on the doctrine of Bhakti. The most outstanding exponent of the revived Bhakti movement was Eḷuttacchan [30, 31] who retold *Adhyātma Rāmāyaṇa* and *Mahābhārata*. Almost every time the poet hears Kṛṣṇa's name, he enters into a trance and an overflow of hymns to Kṛṣṇa follows. But it will be very wrong to label Eḷuttacchan a Bhakti poet. The retelling is filled with instances of poetic excellence that portray every shade of human emotion. In addition, “the power of Eḷuttacchan's writing creates a divine ambience that has a way of leaping across the hurdles of time and translation” [33].

## Summary

There are many *Mahābhārata* related incidents and variations in the temple traditions and the folk rituals of Kerala, which need to be explored. Some *Mahābhārata* variations are found in the literatures associated with the classic theatre of Kathakali and the performing art of Tullal.

Among the retellings of *Mahābhārata* in Malayalam, *Ceruśśeri Bhāratam* stands out in the number and variety of variations. As we have indicated, some of these variations are also found in other South Indian retellings. Some are found in puranas while others have a distinct Kerala flavour.

Many of the variations that are not found in the Critical Edition but are mentioned in all or most of the Malayalam retellings fall into two sets: (1) Variations that do appear in some manuscripts of *Mahābhārata* consulted by the editors of the Critical Edition [34]. One of them, the episode of Sahadeva sending Ghaṭotkaca to Vibhiṣaṇa in Lanka appears in all

the *Mahābhārata* retellings considered in this article. It also appears in *Dūtavākyaṃ* [11]. Another is the story of the sage Maudgalya and his wife Nālāyaṇi. (2) Variations that do not appear even in the manuscripts consulted by the editors of the critical edition. The meeting of Kṛṣṇa with Aśwatthāman in *Udyoga Parva* appears to belong to this set. Another is the statement that it is Duryodhana who sends Mūkāsura to interrupt Arjuna’s penance. These two, however, are known at least to Tamil sources.

We would like to comment on what appears as a significant variation both in *Kaṇṇaśśabhāratam* and *Bhāratamāla*. A special section is devoted to the story of Kṛṣṇa which the poets declare is the content of *Mahābhārata*. Even though Eluttacchan does not summarize Kṛṣṇa’s story in a separate section, it is abundantly clear that he also holds the same view. This appears to be a position held by the Indian tradition. See Ānandavardhana in Dhvanyāloka [35]. Also note that in *Mahābhārata Tātparya Nirṇaya* [36] of Mādhvācārya, the author has integrated the story of Kṛṣṇa (collecting incidents from *Harivamśa*) and *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* with the story of Pāṇḍavas.

In this article, we have tried to provide an overview of the different aspects of *Mahābhārata* retellings in Malayalam with emphasis on variations. We find that the retellings of *Mahābhārata* in Malayalam cover a very broad spectrum. The poets who retold the Epic in Malayalam in the 15<sup>th</sup> to 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, with the exception of the author of *Ceruśśēri Bhāratam*, for the most part have remained faithful to Vyāsa’s epic. Their retellings, were partly a response to the call of the times they lived in [31]. Staying within the tradition, *Mahābhārata* was retold in a condensed form at a different time and place. The author of *Ceruśśēri Bhāratam*, on the other hand, has given us a glimpse into the folk variations prevalent in the 15<sup>th</sup> century not only in Kerala, but in the whole of South India. There are also connections with folk versions of *Mahābhārata* in North India. The variations in Malayalam retellings compared to the *Mahābhārata* manuscripts from Kerala need to be studied. There is also a need to document and investigate the possible interconnections between various retellings of *Mahābhārata* in different regions of India.

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