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 15th to 17th century are known: *Kaṇṇaśa Bhāratam* [1], *Bhāratam Pāṭṭu* of Ayyanappillā Āśan [2], *Cerusseri Bhāratam* also known as *Bhāratagātha* [3], *Bhāratamala* [4], and *Srīmahābhāratam Kilippāṭṭu* [5]. In addition, portions of an oral *Mahābhārata* have survived [6]. In the classic performance traditions, episodes from the Epic appear in Kūttu, Kathakaḷi, and Tuḷḷal. 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 Nilalkkuttu (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 Bhasa’s plays. *Dūtavākyam* [11] is an example of the many performance texts used by them. By way of explaining Bhasa, 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 Tirunilalmāḷa authored by Gövinnen (Gövindan) and dated 1200 - 1300 AD [12]. In this work, there is an invocation of Gānēśa (p. 100) which includes Viyālan moligum pāratatteyoru kompkeluṭtūṭumaven (who writes with a tusk, the Bhārata spoken by Vyāsa). Two Mahābhārata episodes mentioned in the text are the encounter of Arjuna with Śiva (kirāṭam) 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 Torram in style and content. The concluding portion describes Malayas removing the sins from Kṛṣṇa’s body. They enumerate nine sins of Kṛṣṇa, the nineth 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 Nilakkuttu (shadow piercing) episode.

**Nilakkuttu 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 Nilakkuttu is absent from the Sanskrit Mahābhārata and its well-known written retellings in Malayalam. So far, we have located this episode in (1) Nilakkuttu Pāṭṭu associated with a ritual called Pallippāna [13], (2) Kuratti Törram [14, 15] associated with the Teyyam performance of northern Kerala, (3) Nilakkuttu Pāṭṭu [6], a section of Māvaratam Pāṭṭu, a folk Mahābhārata once popular in southern Kerala and (4) Nilakkuttu 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 Nilakkuttu 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 Māvaratam Pāṭṭu and Kuratti
Torram, Kunti is also put to sleep. In the Nilalkkuttu Pāṭṭu associated with the Palippāna 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 Aṭṭakkatha, 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 Torram 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 Terukkuttu 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: Kantakari (Gandhari) 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 Hiltebeitel in the context of Barbareeka, Aravaṇ and Kūttāntavar [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 Kṛmīravadham Aṭṭakkatha
Kōṭṭayam Tanpurān (17th century) wrote the Kathakaḷi plays [20] Bakavadham, Kvrmīrvadham, Kalyāṇasaugandhikam and Nivātakavacakākālokevavadham. Simhika appears in Kvrmīrvadham. 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 Kvrmīra. Śārddūla is killed by Arjuna. To take revenge, Simhika decides to abduct Draupadī and present her to brother Kvrmīra. To achieve this goal, Simhika takes the form of Lalīta (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 Kvrmīra and Bhīma and the killing of Kvrmīra. The scene of Simhika (as Lalīta) with Draupadī is immortalized in a Rāja Ravivarma painting.

Variations in the Tullal literature by Kuṉcan Nambiar

Among the body of work [21] created by the poet Kuṉcan Nambiar (1700-1775) for the performing art of Tullal, 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 18th century. The following are two examples.

1) From Kirātam: Śakuni tells Duryodhana that they should try to stop Arjuna’s penance. Duḥśasana suggests that Mūkāṣura should be called. Duryodhana summons Mūkāṣura and orders him to proceed to Himalayas and stop Arjuna’s penance. Mūkāṣura 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 Hīdimbi. Hīdimbi shall be given the name Kaǖmaalapālika (One who maintains (or takes care of) lotuses).

In the Terukkūttu tradition [18], Hīdimbā is known as Kamalakkaṇṇī. Thus we find an intriguing connection between Hīdimbā and lotus in the Tullal literature of Kerala and the Terukkūttu literature of Tamilnadu.
The available text of *Kanṭaśabharatam*, authored by Rāma Panikkar [1] contains only episodes that belong to the beginning of *Ādī Parva* up to the abduction of Kāṣi princesses by Bhīṣma. The significant variation from Vyāsa *Mahābhārata* is the narration of the life of Kṛṣṇa from *avatāra* to *svargaṁohaṇa* immediately after the Āstīka episode. The narration combines episodes from *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* and *Harivamsa*. Notable are the mention of killings of Srīgala, Hamsa and Dīmbhaka and the Ghanātakarna 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 Ayyanappillā Āśān [2] is available in print only upto and including *Bhīṣma Parva*.

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

The first song which describes Gaṇeṣa as ever present, ends by asking for a boon to enable the poet to recite Bhārata in words. The second song describes Gaṇeṣa as the writer of holy Bhārata using the six faced boy-god (Subrahmāṇya) 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 Śākuni surrounded the house along with assistants and set fire to it.

Draupadī swayamvara: Dhṛṣṭadyumna described SrīKṛṣṇa 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 Ghatotkaca to Vibhiṣana 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”.*
**Āranya Parva**: On his way to perform penance, Arjuna is confronted by Aravāyan (Āravān=Irāvān) whom Arjuna fells with an arrow. When Tāṭaka, 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 Mukāsura: *To achieve a purpose, I will shoot an arrow on you. You go to Arjuna and seek protection.*

**Udyoga Parva**: After the meeting of Krṣṇa with Karna, there was a meeting between Krṣṇa and Aśvatthāman 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 Kantakāri is used for Gāndhāri by Yudhīśthīra in his talk with Drupada. Same word is used in Māvāratam Pāṭṭu.

**Cerusseri Bhāratam also known as Bhāratagātha**

*Cerusseri Bhāratam* [3] is a book of variations compared to other retellings discussed in this article. A detailed list of variations in *Cerusseri 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 *Terukkuttu* [18], (b) possible connections with known sources from other parts of India (c) connection with *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, (d) a distinct brāhmīn 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 Krṣṇa’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, Krṣṇa 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 ViryaLakṣmi of the Pāṇḍava heroes! (5) Karna’s soul was protected by a vessel of Amṛta residing in his heart. Knowing this, disguised as a brāhmīn,
Krṣṇa approached Karṇa for it. Karṇa knew it was Krṣṇa and obliged. (6) Duryodhana told Saṅjīva that he is going to bring back the dead kings to life. Saying this, meditating up on Varuṇa Mantra, Duryodhana entered the lake. (7) Aśvatthāmana presented the heads of the sons of Paṇḍavas and Śīkhaṇḍi to Duryodhana. Duryodhana became sad because Aśvatthāmana 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) Parikṣit heard the Bhāgavata recited by Śuka. (2) Krṣṇa sent Akrūra to Hastinapura asking him to inform Bhīma to stop all the atrocities by Kauravas. If not, Krṣṇa 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 Yudhīṣṭhira and Bhīma told Arjuna to kill Aśvatthāmana. (4) Hearing about Krṣṇa’s departure from this world from Arjuna, Kuntī left this world.

Cerusserī Bhāratam contains some variations that exhibit a distinct brahmin flavour. The origins of these variations are not known at the present time. (1) Kuntī told Paṇḍu the story of the brahmin, Brahmarata. He has no son. At his instruction, his wife sleeps with another brahmin (who was a guest at Bramharata’s house and desired his wife) and gets a child. (2) When Droṇa wanted to go to Paṇḍāla Kingdom, there was a twelve year long famine. A story is narrated of a Kashmiri brahmin, 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 Śaṃṭanu and Satyavati: The King was afflicted with a type of cancer (Punḍarīka 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, Śaṃṭanu came to know about the maiden. The King met the maiden on the banks of Kālindī, 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 Yudhishṭhira has spoken the truth, after protecting his body through yoga, Droṇa left his body and went in search of Aśvatthāman. Meanwhile Dhṛṣṭadyumna cut his body into pieces. After verifying that Yudhishṭhira 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 _Harivamsa_. Four songs are devoted to the episode of mischiefs of child Kṛṣṇa and the complaints by Vraja women. Some examples of the reliance on _Harivamsa_ 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 Ḍīmbhaka are mentioned.

_Sambhava Parva:_ Citrāṅgada’s name is not mentioned. Instead, she is referred to as Pāṇḍya’s daughter.

_Sabha Parva:_ Sahadeva sends Ghaṭôtka as an emissary to Lanka to meet Vibhiṣaṇa. As a tribute to Yudhiṣṭhira, Vibhiṣaṇa gives great wealth to Ghaṭôtka.

_Āraṇya Parva:_ In the encounter between Arjuna and Śiva (Kirāta episode), Mukāsura 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; Draupadi 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].)

_Udyoga Parva:_ After the meeting of Kṛṣṇa with Karna, a meeting between Kṛṣṇa and Aśvatthāمان is mentioned.

_Karna 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._

_Śrīmahābhāratam Kilippattu_

It took the genius of Eluttacchan to create a _Mahābhārata_ in Malayalam that remains “one of the greatest works in Malayalam language” [25]. The poem is written in Kilippattu style in which a parrot maiden (_Sukatarunī_) recites _Mahābhārata_ at the poet’s request.

Most of the variations in Kilippattu up to the end of _Sauptika Parva_ are documented in Ref. [26]. To provide an example of the different aspects of Eluttacchan’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 Krṣṇa.

The destruction of Yādavas is described in very few words. After the annihilation, Balabhadra (Rāma) leapt into the sea.

Jara, the hunter tells Krṣṇa: 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?

Krṣṇa 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 Bāli reborn to avenge his unjust death at the hands of Rāma occurs in a Sanskrit play [27].)

Krṣṇa instructs Dāruka 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 apsaras 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 Gāndhāri and Kunti and there is not even a mention of their husbands. Female assassins are employed by Gāndhāri and it is Karna’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, Kurṛatti 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 Mahābhāratabhāratas that are connected with the ancient
Goddess worship and the matriarchal structure of certain Kerala societies? As noted by Hiltebeitel [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 Kāṇḍāsābhārātam and Bhāratamāla belong to the group of poets known as Niraṇam Poets whose period is 1350 - 1450 AD. The poets are Madhava Paṇikkar (author of Bhāṣā Bhagavadgīta), 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.

Cerusseri 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 Ceruśseri Bhāratam has pointed out that the metre used in the work, (Gāthā rīti or Maṇji) is also found in many ancient Tamil poetic works. The close connections between some of the variations in Ceruśseri Bhāratam, Pampa Bhāratam in Kannada and Villiputtür 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 Ceruśseri 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 9th-11th 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 Millennium as we find a reference to this *Mahābhārata* recital (*cāru māvāratam kēṭṭi* - hearing the beautiful *Mahābhārata*) in the Malayalam sandēśakāvvyā *Ūṇṇunili Sandēśam* [32].

Finally, when we come to Tuṉcatt Eluttacchan (1500 - 1600 AD), again it is essential to turn to the historical background [30, 31]. The first half of the 16th 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 Eluttacchan [30, 31] who retold *Adhyāṭma 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 Eluttacchan a Bhakti poet. The retelling is filled with instances of poetic excellence that portray every shade of human emotion. In addition, “the power of Eluttacchan’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 Tuḷḷal.

Among the retellings of *Mahābhārata* in Malayalam, *Cerusseri 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 *Dūtavākyam* [11]. Another is the story of the sage Maudgalya and his wife Nālāyāni. (2) Variations that do not appear even in the manuscripts consulted by the editors of the critical edition. The meeting of Krṣṇa with Aśvatthāman in *Udyoga Parva* appears to belong to this set. Another is the statement that it is Duryodhana who sends Mūkāśura 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 *Kan. n. assabharatam* and *Bhāratamāla*. A special section is devoted to the story of Krṣṇa which the poets declare is the content of *Mahābhārata*. Even though Eluttacchan does not summarize Krṣṇa’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 *Mahaābhārata Tātparya Nirṇaya* [36] of Mādhvācārya, the author has integrated the story of Krṣṇa (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 15th to 17th centuries, with the exception of the author of *Cerusseri Bharatam*, 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 *Cerusseri Bharatam*, on the other hand, has given us a glimpse into the folk variations prevalent in the 15th 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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[10] Śrīmanmahābhāratam with the Bhāratabhāvadīpa of Nilakanṭha, (including the Harivamsa),
(Poona: Citrashala Press).


[34] The variations in manuscripts consulted by the editors of the critical edition of *Mahābhārata* are available on the internet at http://bombay.oriental.cam.ac.uk/john/mahabharata/statement.html
