In this paper I am going to argue only one main proposition; since the way which led us to this particular idea was rather long, this paper in a sense is nothing but a brief sketch of our previous and recent studies relevant to the subject.

Let us take as a starting-point Prof. Pavel Grintser's monograph "Old Indian epics: genesis and typology", published in Moscow in 1974. Unfortunately, this book has not been translated into any European language; however, many scholars outside Russia know its contents thanks to the detailed review by Prof. J. W. de Jong. After the appearance of Grintser's book on the the oral genesis of the Mahābhārata (Mbh), its origin from the oral epic tradition may be considered to be an established fact.

This fact has very important consequences for the Mahābhārata's typology. Before the idea of "oral genesis" gained general recognition, the specialists, following the Aristotelian and Hegelian definitions of the epic, assigned the Mbh to a particular typological class of literary texts, in which the Indian epic stood side by side with Homer's "Iliad" and other old written (classical) epics, but at the same time with some poems, written by known, individual authors, such as Milton's "Paradise Lost", Virgil's "Aeneid", some Indian kāvyaśas and so on. The living oral epics — e.g., of the Turks, Kazakhs, Yugoslavs, Russians — were not included in this category; scholars regarded them as folklore texts, which remained outside literature. But once we accept the oral genesis of the Mbh, the picture changes dramatically; the Mbh remains, of course, in one typological class with Homer's poems and other ancient "classical" epics, but now the category includes also the living oral epics. On the other hand, outside this class we now find the poems by Milton, Virgil, Tasso, Bhāravi, Māgha and so on — which constitute a separate class of "artificial" epic poems.

Now it happens that within this newly-established class which includes both living oral epics and old written epics of oral origin, we find certain differences and subdivisions. It is ascertained by comparative epic studies that authentic heroic ("popular") epics may be of three main types: 1. archaic, 2. classical heroic, and 3. late epic.

I should like to emphasize that the word "archaic" as it is used here, does not mean "primitive" — it means that such epics belong to the most ancient,
archaic culture in which the mythological way of thinking predominates. Epic songs of Paleoasiatic and Turkic peoples of Siberia, some of the oldest Russian bylinas, and Finnish runas represent this type. The archaic epic is characterised by a very strong involvement of the epic narrative in the system of myths and rituals. The heroes of the archaic epic (who are, as a rule, figures of divine origin, sons or incarnations of the gods) repeat, as it were, in their heroic acts, the deeds performed previously by the gods at the time of the creation of the world. Any heroic epic is a generalized reflection of history — but the archaic epic moulds the historical material on the patterns of myth and ritual. The general outlook of the archaic epic is optimistic and the myth of the first creation with its optimistic mood often serves as a background pattern for an epic narrative.

The second subdivision is the stage of the classical heroic epic. The aim of this epic poetry is clearly formulated as description of a glorious national past. The heroes become more human and their deeds acquire an importance of their own apart from their resemblance to the past deeds of the gods. The action of the epic tale does not follow the mythic and ritual patterns as closely as at the earlier stage. The mythic pattern is seen not as the prototype of the epic action, but rather as the artistic background or simply as an object of comparison. The general outlook becomes definitely pessimistic. Among the mythic background patterns the myth of the End of the World acquires great significance. Some mature classical epic traditions work out a kind of pessimistic philosophy of Fate. This classical type is represented by practically all old written epics of Europe, beginning with the “Iliad”, by the great Kazakh oral épopée “Manas”, by Serbocroatian heroic songs, and by many others.

Sometimes we can trace, in a certain epic tradition, development from archaic to classical forms, and from classical to late ones. By late epic, I mean the heroic popular epic which absorbed, at a certain stage of its development, religious, and didactic elements. Christianized parts of oral epic traditions of the Anglo-Saxons (the Caedmon cycle), of the Russians (so called “spiritual verses”, [dukhovniye stikhi]) and of the French (some chansons de geste) may serve as examples of this type.

And so the question arises: where should we place the Mbh in this sequence of archaic, classical and late epic forms? Or, in other words, what is the typological definition of the Mbh?

In the above-mentioned book, Prof. Grintser has given a definite answer to this question. The Mbh describes and glorifies significant events of the national past. Its heroes are human warriors, proud of their noble birth, prowess, and might, and for the most part the epic narrative deals with their