

Mirror of the Myth (Uniqueness of Sarala Dasa as a poet)

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“Achakshyuh kabayah kechit
sampratyachakshyate pare
Akshyasanti tathebanye etihasmimam bhubi.”

(Some poets had said this history in the past, some are saying now and other poets will say this in the future.)

Introduction:

Sarala Dasa is a name, which evokes a unique response from the hearts of millions of Odia speaking people. It is a response that joins life with literature and emotion with intellect. It is a response which is at once as intimately personal as it is profoundly cosmic in its significance. It is a response, which creates beautiful imageries of countless episodes and archetypes of age-old customs in our minds carrying our cultural ethos. It is difficult to convey the spirit of this response to people who are alien to the Odia language. Yet his poetic excellence can be compared with any great epic poet of the world.

At the end of classical age, in the post-Sankar period a line of saints, Mystics and devotional poets arose in the different parts of the country who brought wisdom of the ancient Rishis to the common people. They adopted the local language in their mission. They came from all classes of the society, which in itself was the outcome of the universality and the basic oneness of men that they proclaimed.¹ One among them

Sarala Dasa was the most significant Odia saint poet living in eastern region of India during fifteenth century like Sankaradeva, Chandi Dasa, Kabir, Jnaneswar, Guru Nanak, Ekanath and Tulasi Das etc. in other places.

Background :

By that time, when the whole of North India even Bengal was under Muslim rule, Hindu Odisha was at the height of her political zenith. World famous temples at Konark, Puri and Bhubaneswar had also been completed making it an attractive place of magnificent monuments. But with these marvellous prosperity Odisha was still lacking a literature of its own. Right from the third century B.C. when Kalinga fought a war with great King Ashok and turned him to a compassionate preacher of Buddhism, it seems there was no place of literature, as war and worship taking up entire attention. In this momentous time Sarala Dasa was born in the reign of the great king Kapilendra Deva (1435-1467) of the solar dynasty. Born to such an undeveloped literature, incapable of any great creative venture Sarala Dasa, the peasant poet later on attempted and achieved like a miracle ! He had to fight against the contemptuous attitude of Sanskrit towards the regional languages of the country. No wonder, therefore he begins every chapter in his Mahabharata with profuse apologies for this unaccustomed things and attributing all that

ventures to the dictation of goddess Sarala, the celebrated local deity. The pen name of the poet Sarala Dasa which means the servitor of the goddess Sarala changed from his real name Siddheswar Parida. Sarala is an *asta bhujja* (eight armed) image of Saraswati, the goddess of muse.

What is said about Chaucer in history of English literature is justly appropriate to Sarala Dasa that he risked his whole literary fortune on his mother tongue, a living language might be poor, but left it so rich that Odia poetry could experiment any kind of poetic excellence it became fully equipped.²

(Sarala Dasa, popularly known as Sudra Muni (Sudra saint) remained essentially a peasant, but like a happy divine retribution, it seems, the genius and his achievement have been treated in a scholarly manner and adequately propagated by pundits such as Gopinath Nanda and Mrutyunjaya Ratha. Particularly Nanda, who had written a pioneering critical note on Sarala's Mahabharata declared with his critical insight and boldness that the language of Sarala as found in his Mahabharata, uninfluenced by Sanskrit or any other language, was genuine and most respectable Odia speech.³) Dr. Mayadhar Mansingh in his history of Odia literature very aptly observed, "Sarala Dasa the peasant genius, not only wrote a great book but practically created a whole literature. The whole subsequent development of Odia literature was possible just because this peasant left behind this grand composition in a language that was still contemptible in the eyes of the learned and the rulers. This Shudra's successful adventure supplied inspiration and encouragement to all his immediate successors. And its influence on poets down to modern times is also deep and expansive."⁴

Motive:

What is the motive of Sarala as a saint poet? He was living like a simple peasant, at the same time set apart from the society by his vision

and creation. His external life was simple, but his inner life was intensified with a revolution, which is exhibited in his creations. Fulfilment of four cardinal dimensions of human life namely Dharma (the religion), Artha (the means), Kama, (the desire) and Moksha (the deliverance)-were also his motive as it was in ethico- metaphysical ethos of Indian tradition. Though he was a Shakta in belief, his religion was really the religion of man or religion of an artist (as defined by Tagore in his doctrine). What is his conception of literature? It was a *sadhana* for him. The meaning of the word Sahitya, 'with-ness' was really adored by him as if the poet was talking with his audience being inspired by his goddess Sarala. And at that point of time literature had nothing to do with literacy. This reminds us the Sauta literature from which saint Vyasa compiled Mahabharata. So as a saint he got his inspiration directly from the goddess Sarala which was passionately believed by him and us. At the same time as a poet he got his inspiration from his immortal soil and mortal fellowmen.

The Creations:

There are three works available in Odia literature in the name of Sarala Dasa. The poet himself declared that by the grace of goddess Sarala he had composed at first the Ramayana (Bilanka Ramayana), then Mahabharata and at the end Devi Bhagabat, in two epics other than Mahabharata he sang the glory of the goddess. Whenever he tried to describe a heroine, it was primarily the image of goddess Sarala that emerged from his pen. In Bilanka Ramayana his choice of the plot and depiction of event was surely unique. Instead of Valmiki Ramayan Sarala Dasa had taken a plot from Sanskrit Adbhuta Ramayan and created an imaginary land called Bilanka whose ruler Ravana instead of having ten faces was given a thousand. The thousand-faced Ravana repeatedly defeated Rama and his army. Sita at last killed him through the power of her

purity and virtue. Such a conception, depicting woman's subtle power as superior to the crude physical energy of the male is certainly unique. Chandipurana (the mythology of goddess Chandi) is a story taken from Markandeya Purana, as usual depicting the victory of goddess Durga over Mahisasura. But Sarala Dasa turned it to a unique Odia epic by describing the peasantry, warfare and cultural life of Odisha.

Newness in The Mahabharata:

Sarala Dasa's magnum opus is Mahabharata, the national epic of Odia people. This is not mere faithful translation of the Sanskrit Mahabharata. But this is neither due to his ignorance of Sanskrit nor inadequacies of Odia language. John Boulton, eminent English scholar observed critically - Sarala Dasa had no desire for a faithful translation of the Sanskrit Mahabharata. Nor had his audience, the Odia general public. Sarala Dasa had the intelligence to see what his critics have failed to, namely, that Sanskrit was a foreign language; faithful translation is desirable, only when the culture in the foreign language and in the indigenous language is virtually the same. Just ask yourselves, why it is so easy and desirable to translate Premchand into Odia and why it is virtually impossible and useless to translate, say, Tennessee Williams. The answer is the difference between present day Hindi and Odia culture is slight; whereas the difference between American and Odia culture is great. Faithful translation from American English into Odia are academically possible, but unlikely to appeal to the Odia general public, to whom they will seem both alien and irrelevant.

I realize, of course that it will be painful to admit that in the days of Sarala Dasa Hindu-Aryan Sanskrit culture was largely alien to the Odia masses, but it must have been. Otherwise the allegedly distorted, inaccurate translation of Sarala Dasa would not have become so popular. So there existed in Odisha in Sarala's day, as in

yours, two cultures; one alien and the other indigenous. The alien culture was than Sanskritic, it is now English. The only difference is Odia culture has over the centuries become more and more Sanskritic. This is what has confused modern critics. But there must in Sarala's day have been as great a culture gap between the Sanskrit-educated elite and the Odia masses as between the English-educated elite and the Odia masses now. So when translating from alien Sanskrit to indigenous Odia he did not so much translate as to adopt though he did so with astonishing skill.⁵ Through the fervid imagination of that unsophisticated genius it turned out to be a real national epic of Odia people not only because the famous characters of Sanskrit original have been made into typical Odia man and woman, but because the whole epic has been thoroughly soaked with the average Odia peasant's ways of looking at things, his superstitious beliefs and rituals, his dreams and his ideals that are to be found in rural Odisha even today.

The structure of Sarala's Mahabharata can only be compared with the Sanskrit original. As it was in its inception a shorter and simpler form namely Jaya (victory) with only 8 to 10 thousand couplets preserved in the stories probably sung by the bards called *sutas*. Finally by the hands of a Brahmin clan named Bhrgu it was enlarged and when compiled by Vyasa it is said it has one lakh of couplets. Present critical edition by Bhandarkar Oriental Institute, Pune the text has 82564 couplets. Irawati Karve has given the accounts of couplets of each *parvas* in her book *Yuganta*.⁶ Following this great tradition very many attempts have been made to compose Mahabharata and other writings based on Mahabharata episodes. But out of only a few complete and copious works Sarala's Mahabharat is single and significant in its character. It has more than 80,000 couplets (Sarala Mahabharata published by Department of Culture, Govt. of Odisha in 15 volumes contains

7352 pages with 11/12 couplets in each page. A replica of whole Mahabharata is enclosed in 135 pages at last, as it is there in Sanskrit original a summary of 150 couplets. It has almost all features of a great classic as said by Mathew Arnold.

Place in Indian Literature:

Sarala Mahabharata has a significant place in whole of Mahabharata tradition in Indian literature. It is the only work written by single poet, which is complete and copious. Historian K.C. Panigrahi, a noted scholar on Sarala Mahabharata decided the date of its composition during sixth decade of fifteenth century, later part of king Kapilendra Deva's reign. Before this only Pampa in Kanad (902 AD) and Nannaya- Tikkana in Telugu (11th-13th century) had composed Mahabharata. In ancient Sangama period perundeunnar might have written Mahabharat in Tamil. The said poets had composed only a few *parvas* of Mahabharata. Only poet Sarala Dasa had composed Mahabharata by his single effort and divine grace. All other poets compassing Mahabharat in vernacular languages like Kabindra Parameswar (16th century) and Kasiram Dasa (17th century) in Bengali, Rama Saraswati (16th century) in Assamese, Subal Singh Chauhan (17th century) and Golakanath (18th century) in Hindi, Nakar (16th century) in Gujarati, Mukteswar (17th century) in Marhati, Kumar Vyasa (16th century) in Kannada and Ramanujam Edulassan (16th century) in Malayalam were in the subsequent period after Sarala Dasa.⁷ Scholars have discussed how Sarala's Mahabharata and other writings were popular in Bengali and Telgu translation (In the introduction to 'A typical selection from Odia literature' B.C Majumdar writes, "It is very remarkable that this Odia poet acquired celebrity in Bengal and his Mahabharata was introduced in Bengali translation not later than early part of the 16th century. Babu Dines Chandra Sen informs us that only the Virata *parva* portion of what is called Sarala

Mahabharata of Odisha now survived."⁸ Kasiram Dasa was deeply influenced by Sarala Mahabharat. C.Vamana Murthy writes "In June 1900 the Odia Vichitra Ramayana was translated in Telugu and published. The author in Odia was Sarala Dasa belonging to the 15th century. His original name was Siddheswar."⁹) This remarks remind us how the work was popular in Odisha and its neighboring states. In spite of its entire Odishan elements Sarala's Mahabharata the first epic written in regional language, expounded the pan Indian cultural heritage.

Myth making:

Now we have to examine what is the newness in Sarala's Mahabharata, which can be considered as unique in Indian Literature. Eighteen *parvas* in Sarala Mahabharata are not the same as in Sanskrit original. Sarala added three new *parvas* namely 1. Madhya 2. Gada and 3. Kainsika and left 1. Sauptika 2 Anushasana and 3. Mahaprasthanika. But not the similarity but the difference from the original makes Sarala's Mahabharata unique and unparallel. Sometimes it comes to our mind (what is the main story of the great work, which is the main character ? What is the essence ? Which is more acceptable and which can be neglected? Is it a compilation of anecdotes or religious scripture or a geographical history or a historical geography, a mythological memoir or fairy tales, fables or parables ? Mystic poetry or some thing else ?) It is an encyclopaedia of human knowledge and experiences. Sarala with his extraordinary imagination and poetic acumen created such beautiful episodes out of legends, anecdotes and folktales, which are stored in our collective subconscious to please and teach us forever. This is the real uniqueness of his creations. There are two dimensions of this uniqueness. First he created proverbs and phrases by using anecdotes which became the wealth of our language and technique of our expression like 'Ganga gangi', '*unansi* bride for *sahada* groom', 'Mahabharata from *jhimiti* play', 'holding of ass's

feet by Shri Krishna', 'defeat of Bhima first time' and 'Kokua fear'. Secondly the delicate description of new and original episodes like 'putting of head of Belalasen', 'the hospitality of Karna by serving his own son's flesh', 'death of Durdhakshya by Gandhari's look', 'Duryodhana's swimming of blood river' and 'origin of Lord Jagannath from Sabari Narayana'. These are all created by Sarala to make his Mahabharata great, graceful and grandeur. By narrating some of these episodes one can prove their potentiality as the inseparable component of the epic.

Following three episodes demonstrates the cruelty and cunningness of Krishna in Sarala Mahabharata and success he achieved due to the sheer unexpectedness of his approach but remained as the Jogeswar in our heart. Creating these stories Sarala, the folk teacher, has given the clues to tackle with the situation whenever we face in our mundane life.

One of the guards, Krishna comes across, when out to murder Jarasandha, is an ass. Krishna at the first stifles his cries by seizing it by the throat. The ass promises however, not to raise the alarm on one condition, no doubt believing condition he would stipulate to be impossible for Krishna to accept, for in return for his silence he demanded that Krishna touch his feet. Despite the indignity inherent this, Krishna readily accepts, merely remarking this the way things are, old chap. In an emergency where is the harm? Scruples are inexpedient.

Krishna's cruelty and treachery reach their acme however in the episode of Durdhakshya, the sole-surviving son of Gandhari, who at the end of the war wished to remove her blindfold. She asked Yudhishthira to remove it for her, but learning from the omniscient Sahadeva, that once the blindfold was removed the accumulated power released from Gandhari's eyes would burn to death whomsoever her gaze first fell upon, Krishna intervened Durdhakshya

her only son is best fitted to this task. He said and affectionately called upon the boy, who had throughout served him and the Pandavas most loyally, to do this small service for his mother. When Durdhakshya had duly done so, consumed in the flames from Gandhari's eyes.

Another melancholic episode narrated in Sarala Mahabharata depicts a relation between a cruel father Duryodhana and his obedient son Lakshman Kumar who helped his father not only in his lifetime but also after his death. At the end of the Mahabharata was Duryodhana tried to escape from Bhima to save his own life and wanted to hide himself by crossing the river of blood. But he did not find any fleet, saw the dead bodies are floating and tried to pass away by their help, but in vain. Neither the dead body of Drona, Kripa or Karna nor of his ninety-eight brothers could help him. When he became quite depressed he saw a dead body of a handsome young man coming to his side, but he could not see its face because it was downwarded. Duryodhana tried at last with a little hope, and succeeded; when he reached the other side of the river he turned the body and stunned to see his own son Lakshman Kumar. The hero of all misdeeds Duryodhana expressed his last wish:

I wish, you should not get a father like me
But every generation should get a son like you.

This type of mind-storming description is rare in universal literature, which signifies the meaninglessness of wars in human history.

Sarala Dasa has displayed natural sympathy for the lowly and downtrodden. In another legend 'Sabari Narayana' about the emergence of Lord Jagannath at Puri from the un-burnt heart of Krishna, which popularly known as the Indradyumna legend, his sympathy for the tribes, five centuries back, looks unbelievable. Here he tried to combine the Aryan culture with

pre-Aryan and brought a synthesis which is prevalent in Jagannath cult all together.

It is not possible to narrate all episodes created by Sarala Dasa, but each one is significant in its own way and created a new proverb or saying which are being used to epitomize the relevant situation. This type of originality shows its difference from Sanskrit Mahabharata tracing its influence in the mind of the mass. By this way Sarala literature entered from sense to subconscious of the Odia people, which is really very rare in whole of world literature.¹⁰

Characterization:

In characterization Sarala Dasa has shown his uniqueness too. All-important characters of his Mahabharata are lively, vibrant and realistic, more human than divine. Polite, wise Yudhistira, the famous warrior and intelligent Arjuna, Sahadeava with diplomatic silence, ever proud tragic hero Duryodhana, evil minded Sakuni, who is more dangerous than Iago of Shakespeare, the symbol of motherhood Gandhari and the fire brand heroine Draupadi. The hero of Sarala Mahabharata is not the omnipresent and omnipotent Krishna like Assamese Mahabharata of Rama Saraswati or multifarious genius, great warrior Arjuna like Pampa's Kannada Mahabharata but he is Bhima a man of action who does not believe in any ritual. He has neither the wiseness of Yudhistira or intelligence and sensibility of Arjuna. He is simple and reliable-a type character, just like a peasant of any village of Odisha living at the time of Sarala Dasa. The poet created the characters by mixing up his imagination with social reality that we meet them in our real life. This shows the universality and everlasting power of Sarala literature.

Conclusion:

Thus we can conclude this discourse on 'uniqueness of Sarala Dasa' and his relevance

today by quoting the words of an erudite scholar, poet and visionary pundit Nilakantha Das, a maker of modern Odisha, Briefly this is our Sarala Dasa. He was not divine; he was human, he was not only a Sudra saint, he was the great philosopher poet of Odisha. He was the founder father of ancient Odia culture, Odia language and literature. This is the way to see and rediscover Sarala Dasa; one who will look upon in this way will understand him, his Odisha and his creation.¹¹

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