The original Sanskrit Mahabharat by Vyasa was written somewhere between 3rd and 4th Century B.C. that fell mostly under the illustrious Guta Age of ancient India. This holy scripture, as the Hindus looked upon it, continued to hold its absolute sway over the vast Indian peninsula for nearly two millennia. All along, the Sanskrit Mahabharat remained the exclusive monopoly of the Brahmin pundits and received the patronage of the court and the kings.

The first attempt to subvert the iconic status of Vyasa's Mahabharat in Sanskrit came from a non-Brahmin, a commoner from the peasantry of Orissa. It is hard to believe how a man from a remote hamlet of coastal Orissa could venture such an incredible feat and took up the challenge successfully. It was Sarala Dasa, who, with no formal education or scholarly inheritance (or any literacy tradition to fall back upon), could accomplish such a stupendous work like the Mahabharat in Oriya.

Moreover, Sarala Mahabharat is in no way behind the Sanskrit Original in its endurance and brilliance. Sarala, as a non-Brahmin (and Oriya as a langue that commanded absolutely no respect or esteem at that point of time) must have encountered heavy odds to realize this mission.

As Dr. Mansingh Observes: Any composition of lyric or epic in Oriya for that matter couldn't simply be conceived of during the period of Sarala Dasa as it was being looked down upon and ridiculed by the Kings and the learned coterie of intellectuals around him. (Matira Mahakabi Sarala Dasa - 3: Translated by the writer).

Sarala not only made Oriya lingua-franca his mode of writing, but also chose to break away from the original to give a realistic Oriya flavour to it. As a matter of fact, Sarala Dasa makes numerous digressions and interpolations to accommodate the customs, culture, folk tradition and religious sentiments of 15th century Orissa. As Dr. K.C. Panigrahi asserts, "Sarala Dasa follows the bare outline of the Mahabharat Story" and omits most of Vyasa's circumlocutions, and scrupulously avoids the long, winding, philosophical discourses. For example, Sarala Dasa has omitted "the entire Bhagvad Gita by just making a reference to it in two verses" (Panigrahi, 42). A great scholar both in Sanskrit and Oriya Pandit Gopinath Nanda, who has done a very insightful comparative research work on the Mahabharat of Vyasa and Sarala Dasa, is of the opinion that Sarala Dasa has not even followed the general scheme of the original Mahabharat in eighteen cantos (Panigrahi, 41). Sarala skips the...
whole length of intellectual discourse of Bhism to Yudhistira in the Shanti Parva. Sarala's Madhya Parva of fifteen thousand verses is a new addition which is not found in the Sanskrit original. Pandit Gopinath Nanda further shows that the Vana Parva of the Sarala Mahabharat omits as many as twenty lengthy narratives of the Sanskrit original and adds twenty-four of his own (Panigrahi, 42). Pandit Nanda adds that Sarala Dasa has omitted forty-four narratives of the original Shanti Parva and the Anusasanika Parva (Panigrahi, 42).

The deviations, as such, are many and numerous. Even Sarala Dasa goes to the extent of ignoring Hastinapur (the very Capital City: the locale and the focal point of all conflicts) and drives the Pandavas down to Orissa to set out on their last journey to the Himalayas. Further, Sarala Dasa has made it a point to make the illustrious Pandavas visit Puri, Konark, Bhubaneswar, Cuttack, Kapilas, Amaravati and Jajpur (all the places are located in the coastal Orissa). The poet exhibits his imaginative flight and, may be in a bid to subvert the iconic Sanskrit Mahabharat, adds a comic relief. He arranges a marriage of the old octogenarian king Yudhisthira with a Vaisya girl, Suhani, the daughter of Hari Sahu of Amaravati (Panigrahi, 42). But, he scrupulously avoids giving her a visa to join the Pandavas on their final journey to the Himalayas. In a similar vein, Sarala Dasa, in his Mahabharat, has made the sanctified Gods appear life-like as men in flesh and blood which became a rich cultural heritage of Orissa. Thus, we find Lord Jagannath being depicted with such informality and intimacy by scores of poets and writers over centuries. Moreover, on every occasion and in case of every great hero, Sarala invariably seems to make a determined attempt to subvert the larger-than-life stature as Vyasa confers upon them. In the Lakha Bindha episode in the Adya Parva of the original Sanskrit Mahabharat, Vyasa creates a situation (for shooting the eye of the fish on continually moving wheel with yet another moving basement on which the archer has to position himself with the giant Shiva Dhanush) that seems impossible on the part of any mortal archer. It can only be feasible for a larger-than-life hero which Sarala Dasa systematically subverts. In fact Sarala Mahabharat abounds with such instances from beginning to the very end.

In view of the above discussion, we can, without involving any risk, conclude that Sarala Mahabharat is not a translation of Vyasa's original Sanskrit. Though, the original Mahabharat of Vyasa remains the raison d'être of Sarala Mahabharat, the latter makes endless imaginative flights and brings countless interpolations at his sweet free will. The question now arises whether those digressions and interpolations (that Sarala so naturally indulges in) can be treated as an act of Subversion or an artistic Sublimation !!!

References:


Note: Mr. Gadadhar Mishra gives a comparative account of the composition Mahabharat in different regional languages. While Sarala wrote in late 15th century, Kasiram, Rama Saraswati, Ramanujan and Mukteswar wrote Mahabharat in Bengali, Assamese, Malayalam and Marathi respectively during 6th century and Gokulnath wrote the epic in Hindi full two centuries after, during 18th century (110).


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