Sarala Mahabharat : Tales of Subversion
(Part-II)

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Though Vyasa's original Sanskrit Mahabharata remains the raison d’être of Sarala's Mahabharata in Oriya, it is not at all a translation of the former, nor even written in the shadow of it. As it were, Sarala's epic stands out as an independent, autonomous piece of art on its own merit. Both structurally and otherwise Sarala's Oriya Mahabharata is a creative work of art with no less brilliance and endurance than the original Sanskrit one.

As we observe, Sarala not only makes it a point to break away from the Sanskrit original both in structure and spirit, he unequivocally gives out a voice of protest against the monopoly, orthodoxy and authoritarianism of the Brahmins down the ages. Mr. Gadadhar Mishra gives a comparative account of the composition of Mahabharata in different regional languages. While Sarala wrote in late 15th century, Kasiram, Rama Saraswati, Ramanujan and Mukteswar wrote Mahabharata in Bengali, Assamese, Malayalam and Marathi respectively during 16th century and Gokulnath wrote the epic in Hindi full two centuries after, during 18th century (110)(1).

A closer examination of Sarala's epic would expose marks of subversion which, in all probability, Sarala did consciously, deliberately. The theme of subversion in Sarala Mahabharata occurs at many levels and surfaces in many ways. However, they can be categorised into five broad patterns: Religious, Socio-Cultural, Ethical-intellectual-philosophical, Structural and linguistic.

Since more than three millennia passed between Vyasa and Sarala, it is quite obvious that several streams of faith and religious creed appeared and vanished in that aeonian stretch of time. Though the differences and deviations are galore between the two an attempt may be taken to pin down to certain points to exhibit the core originality of an anonymous regional talent like Sarala in his determined effort to subvert the original Sanskrit Mahabharata of the iconic Vyasa.

We may approach this theme of subversion from the religious corridor. First of all, Sarala visualizes Lord Krisna and Sri Jagannath as one and inseparable. Though Krisna as a character is invariably caught in a cross-fire of controversy (for his indulgence in debauchery, diplomacy and double-dealings on one hand, while on the other, His absoluteness as the Purna Brahman) Sarala, visualizes Him as the purest and the absolute Brahman. Hence, Sarala sees no distinction
between Sri Krisna and Sri Jagannath. They are one and indivisible. Sarala's Krisna, as Boulton, the Western Indologist and a distinguished Sarala scholar, looks at him, is drawn more in the light of Jayadeva's Gita Govinda with the accompanying sensuality and licentiousness. Thus the Krisna of Sarala is a world apart from the intellectual-philosopher-omniscient Krisna of Vyasa (23).

Next, coming to the episode of Viswarupa Darshan, the great cosmic form that Sri Krisna shows to Duryodhan (when the latter repeatedly offends him and attempts to arrest him in the Sanskrit Original Version) is changed in Sarala's. In Sarala Mahabharata Sri Krisna, when intimidated by Duryodhan, takes various forms like fish, tortoise, boar and finally Narasimha (half-lion, half-man). Analysts are of the opinion that Sarala, by showing this, proves the supreme forgiveness and compassion of the Lord who, in spite of being slighted and provoked, still had his blessings for the sinner and the arch-enemy Duryodhan.

Again, in the same sequence, the Nabagunjara form (the head of a hen, the hunch of a bull, the neck of a pea-cock, the tail of a snake, the waist of a lion; and each foot is like that of a horse, tiger, elephant and man) that Sri Krisna takes on is a unique and original display of Sarala's genius and creativity.

The next landmark along the religious corridor is the character of Draupadi. While Vyasa addresses only to the physical and external beauty/glour of Draupadi; Sarala takes a holistic view of this magnificent specimen of human character. Sarala, being truly the voice of the people of his time, culture and society, has made all possible efforts to shape and mould Draupadi's character in the best of the ethical, religious and psychological perspective. That explains the originality in Sarala's incorporation of the SATI AMBA episode in his script (Mansingh, Mayadhar. Matira Mahakabi Sarala Das,46)

Yet another critic Dr. K.C. Panigrahi, in highlighting the religious distinctions of Sarala Mahabharata, observes :

In his Mahabharata Sarala Dasa deviates from the Sanskrit original and represents Draupadi as the unseen destructive force working for the death and destruction of all the Kauravas, all the Pandavas excluding Yudhisthira and the Yadavas including Sri Krisna.

(Sarala Dasa, Sahitya Akademi, 1975, 37)

This theory of Sarala Dasa which finds a distinct motion in the Karna Parva of the Mahabharata is altogether novel- thus comments Dr. Panigrahi insightfully (37).

Further, contrasting the original Sanskrit Mahabharata with Sarala's Prof. Chittaranjan Das observes that none of the Gods and Goddesses in Sarala Mahabharata has his/her spiritual clout as in Vyasa's. Though Sarala has shown no disrespect to them, he makes them descend on the local, Oriya platform and perform their role. (A Glimpse into Oriya Literature,101-2). As a matter-of-fact Sarala made the sanctified Gods appear life-like as men in flesh and blood that 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. Boulton too asserts ;

….. and here we come to the crux of the matter. Sarala Dasa behaves towards Krisna in the
traditional manner of Oriyas towards Jagannath; he mocks and debunks him. In doing so, he breaks away from the path of both Vyasa and Jayadeva. Vyasa had exalted Krishna as the divine lover, but Sarala Dasa refuses to regard Krisna/Jagannath as anything but equal, whose faults are to be mocked and censured (23).

This is amazing! Nothing could be more subversive than this!

As regards the socio-cultural perspective in Sarala we observe innumerable digressions from the original. As a case in point, Sarala introduces a comic relief in which the old king Yudhisthira gets into a marital bond with the young daughter of a goldsmith Hari Sahu from Amaravati. Though he comes under heavy fire for incorporating such a ludicrous episode in the high serious epic Sarala, as Dr. Mansingh rightly upholds, was just and fair. Such interludes unequivocally send their powerful signals against the rigid and rampant caste-system prevalent in our society. The marriage between the highest warrior class with a Vaisya commoner was just unthinkable at that point of time. Boulton too, in powerful terms, highlights how Sarala undermines "the Caste System" and attacks the Hindu-Aryan Gods (23). Boulton points out how Sarala consistently undermines "the exalted status of aristocrats and saints" (22).

On the ethical -intellectual - philosophical front Sarala makes no pretension of putting up any rivalry with Vyasa's original. The entire stretch of the profound Bhagavad Gita (with Lord Krisna as the Philosopher King, the guide and preceptor of not Arjun alone but of the entire mankind) is so strikingly absent in Sarala Mahabharata. As Prof. B. Mohanty says The Santi Parva, the quintessence of Sanskrit Mahabharata, doesn't figure in Sarala Mahabharata. Dr. Mayadhar Mansingh insightfully observes on the very difference in the focus between the original Sanskrit and the Oriya Mahabharata of Sarala. In his analysis he takes the Santi parva as a case in point. While in the Sanskrit original, as Dr. Mansingh highlights, the entire canto rebounds with sermons, dos and donts, intellectual and philosophical fire-works; in the Sarala Mahabharata they appear rather irrelevant, out of context. Sarala has brought the sermonizings to the minimum. It was, as Dr. Mansingh believes, because Sarala wrote the Mahabharata for the illiterate peasantry, not for the elites of society as Vyasa did.

Yet another critic, Madan Mohan, in his comparative evaluation of Vyasa and Sarala (on their respective Mahabharata in Sanskrit and Oriya) highlights the Lakha Vindha episode and the following sequence, the marriage of Draupadi with the five Pandava brothers. In Vyasa's original, as Madan Mohan points out, the marriage of Draupadi with the five Pandavas is solemnized in a five day session with Vyasa himself presiding over the rituals. Whereas Sarala prefers not to do that. Sarala, if studied in-depth, consciously avoids the abruptness and the lack of respect for human dignity underlying Vyasa's schemata. Sarala, instead, speaks in the voice of Vyasa himself to Draupadi (who resents the very proposal to marry five brothers). Vyasa, in his counseling, reveals to Draupadi in a monologue the account how Indra takes birth as mortal in the "Panchu Pandavas" and Draupadi herself is none but Indra's eternal companion Sachi. The two are one and inseparable. Though the Pandavas are five externally, they are spiritually
and essentially one. That convinces Draupadi and then only she agrees to marry. Thus Sarala's approach is out and out humane and democratic; while that of Vyasa it is basically authoritative and atrocious. In the adi-parva of Vyasa's Mahabharata we find Karna being abruptly rather harshly turned down by Draupadi as Sutaputra the moment he appears on stage to try his luck with the Shiva Dhanush. Such a scene is scrupulously avoided by Sarala.

The entire arrangement of the archery competition that was so elaborately and unrealistically conceived by Vyasa is made fairly realistic and credible by Sarala.

Sarala Mahabharata, as a matter of fact, deviates from the structure of the Sanskrit Mahabharata in a major way. He has nearly changed the general schemata of the original. He has deliberately skipped the entire stretch of Srimad Bhagabad Gita by making a reference to that in two verses only. The long, profound, intellectual-ethical discourse of the grand old man Bhisma addressed to Yudhisthira in the Santi Parva is glaringly absent in Sarala Mahabharata. On the other hand, the Madhya Parva is a new addition of Sarala that runs into fifteen thousand verses. Similarly, both in the Sabha Parva and the Vana Parva Sarala makes wide departures from the original. Besides, Sarala has considered proper not to accommodate as many as forty-four narratives, mostly dialectical in nature, found in the Santi Parva and the Anusasnika Parva of Vyasa's original.

On the linguistic front, it is quite obvious that Sarala has taken all care to make his syntax as rustic and colloquial as possible. In fact he has made the best use of the Oriya lingua franca in composing a narrative of the stature of an epic without losing any of its grace and grandeur. Thus Vyasa's Sanskrit, the language of Gods and of the elites, is hammered out to the language of the peasants and the common folk of Orissa with such strong dose of imagination that maintains the flavour and the dignity of the original.

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