

# The Great Indian Epic : Mahabharat in Orissa, Assam and Bengal (Part-I)

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Our ancient literature was essentially pan-Indian in Character. As such, all Indian languages descend from only two sources : the Indo-Aryan and the Dravidian. Obviously, both Oriya and Assamese share their common origin from the Indo-Aryan stream. Further, as Dr. Grierson argues, Oriya, Bengali and Assamese are the three languages those have emerged from one common source: the Magadhan element, called Magadhi Apabhramsa. As Grierson asserts:

Each of the three descendants of Magadhi Apabhramsa (Oriya, Modern Bengali and Assamese) is equally and directly connected with the common immediate parent. (Linguistic Survey of India, Vol. I, Part-I, quoted by B. Barua, 56).

If we examine, we find "the vocabulary of Assamese is largely derived from that of Sanskrit and its morphological structure is also based on Sanskrit grammar". (Biranchi Barua, 8) Further, Assamese, being a living and growing language, has borrowed a great number of words from other new Indo - Aryan Languages.

While Oriya language begins taking shape, sense and vigour in 14th century, Assamese begins more than a century earlier. The entire credit goes to a progressive, highly sensible king called Durlabhanarayana who ruled towards the end of the 13th and the beginning of the 14th century.

During his reign a celebrated Assamese poet Madhava Kandali translated Valmiki's Ramayana into Assamese while the versions of Ramayana in Hindi, Bengali and Oriya appeared about a century and a half later.

But as far as the regionalization of Vyasa's magnum opus, the Mahabharata, is concerned, the scenario changes sharply. While Sarala Dasa renders the original Mahabharata in Sanskrit into Oriya in 15th Century; Rama Saraswati, the earliest and the foremost Vaisnavite poet in Assam, translated the major portion (not complete) of the Mahabharata a full century later i.e. in 16th Century. Both the Oriya and the Assamese version of the Mahabharata by Sarala Dasa and Rama Saraswati show brilliant parallels at multiple levels. The study of those parallels, therefore, appears fascinating and meaningful.

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, Ramanujam 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, i.e. 18th century (110).

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.

It is worth-noting that the Assamese Mahabharata of Kavi Rama Saraswati is not a literal rendering of the original epic. As a sensible critic B. Barua comments:

Through compression, Omission, alteration, innovation and adaptation, the Assamese version emerged as an epic of the soil. (55)

It is interesting to note that Sarala Dasa while writing the Mahabharata not only made Oriya lingua-franca his own mode of writing; he gave a touch of realism to it. Hence we find numerous instances of this mix up in Oriya Mahabharata; the anecdotes are drawn extensively from Oriya tradition, custom and folklore.

An interesting pattern emerges from here. Sarala Mahabharata being the pioneering work in the process of regionalization of the great Indian epic becomes a trend-setter, a path-finder for

both the Assamese Mahabharata composer Kavi Rama Saraswati and the Bengali Mahabharata composer Kasiram who wrote in 16th Century. And, of course, Gokulnath followed these two in his rendering of the epic into Hindi in 18th century.

The noted historian Suniti Chatterjee is of the opinion that both the Bengali and the Assamese Mahabharata were heavily influenced and inspired by Sarala Dasa's. Yet another historian B.C. Majumdar asserts :

It is very remarkable that this Oriya poet acquired celebrity in Bengal and Assam as well where the Mahabharata was introduced not later than the early part of the 16th Century. (A Typical Selection from Oriya Literature, Vol. I quoted by Mishra Gadadhar, 108).

Highlighting the originality and profundity of Sarala Mahabharata Winternitz, an internationally famous Indologist, believes that to call Sarala Mahabharata an epic is an understatement. In his opinion it is not simply an epic but it "represents more of an entire literature than a single and unitary work and contains so much and so many kinds of things" (History of Indian Literature Vol. I & II, 305)

All the three great poets (Sarala, Rama Saraswati and Kasiram), however, maintain the external structure of the original Sanskrit Mahabharata of Vyasa. But they skipped and added within the structure to give free play to their imagination and local flavor. Among them, of course, Sarala Dasa was the most prolific and versatile who created a world of his own against the backdrop of the original epic's broad story and structural outline. He remains faithful to the tragi-comic plot of Vyasa and maintains the eighteen cantos of the original. But once one gets into Sarala's edifice one just can't help being shocked and surprised to see the magnificence

of his imaginative tapestry and the originality of his digressions and interpolations that are countless, incredible. An insightful critic, in his attempt to highlight Sarala's deviations from the original schemata, notes :

He has disposed of the entire Srimad Bhagavad Gita by only making a reference to it in two verses. He has omitted the long discourse delivered to Yudhishthira by Bhishma in the Santi Parva.... His Madhya Parva containing about fifteen thousand verses is in reality a new Parva, though it contains some topics of the Adi Parva of the Sanskrit original. In the original Sabha Parva the conquests (Digvijaya) of the Pandavas on the occasion of their Rajasuya Sacrifice have been described in 218 verses, but Sarala Dasa's Sabha Parva devotes the major part of the thirteen thousand verses to the description of their exploits on the same occasion. Pandit Nanda Sarma has shown that the Vana Parva of the Sarala Mahabharata omits twenty long narratives of the original and adds twenty- four new ones of the poet's own creation. He has also shown that Sarala Dasa has omitted 44 narratives, mostly dialectical, to be found in the Santi Parva and Anusasanika Parva of the original (42).

Kavi Rama Saraswati (more or less like Sarala, his role-model) maintains a semblance of the original structure of 18 cantos though, he too has some major deviations. For example, in his Assamese version of the Vana Parva there are a number of Vadha (Killing) episodes such as Kulachala Vadha, Vaghasura Vadha, Khatasura Vadha, Karmavali Vadha, Asvakarna Vadha, Janghasura Vadha and Bhoja-Kata Vadha. In this context the literary historian B. Barua comments:

Each of these sections styled as Vadha Kavya is of prodigious length and is independent in conception and execution (54).

*Elaborating further, Barua maintains :*

The Vadha Kavyas are mainly made up of superior - human feats and exploits of the Pandavas mingled with various myths, legends and fables about gnomes, demons, deities, sages and kings of antiquity (54).

Such parallels are galore that we run into almost at every step of both the Oriya and the Assamese Mahabharata. It calls for a longer and more comprehensive study which would be undertaken in a sequence of discourses in the coming issues.

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