Sri Krsna - Jagannath Consciousness : Vyasa -Jayadeva - Sarala Dasa

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Vyasa's original Sanskrit Mahabharata, his magnum opus, was written between 3rd and 4th Century B.C. The entire casting of this great Indian epic was done with a lot of care and craftsmanship. Among the dramatic personae Sri Krsna seems to have received the best attention and artistic favour from the master, Vyasadev. As it turns out, Sri Krsna emerges as the most glamorous, charismatic and the most sought-after character. He is not only the possessor of the unique panchajanya conch and the formidable Sudarshan Chakra; he is the omniscient, philosopher-king, rhetorician, diplomat, strategist, statesman, guide, friend, preceptor, consciencekeeper, crisis-manager, spokesperson and the ambassador of the Pandavas

Further, Vyasa's doting on the character of Sri Krsna takes the centre-stage and remains the focal-point in the entire stretch of the grandiloquent Shrimad Bhagavad Gita, a massive sub-plot, that spans quite impressive eighteen chapters, and ultimately turns out to be the quintessence of the great epic.

On this ionian highway the next conspicuous milestone after Vyasa that we stumble upon is the 12th century Sanskrit poet from Orissa, Jayadeva. While Vyasa only highlights Krsna's spiritual, intellectual and diplomatic traits and blows the character out into a larger - than - life stature; Jayadeva in his classic Gita Govinda focuses only on the sensuous, romantic inter-actions between the divine pair, Sri Krsna and Sri Radha, often bordering on sensuality and licentiousness. Jayadeva conceives the characters of Sri Krsna and Sri Radha as divine companions though, all along the classic Gita Govinda we have the feeling that the poet delicately and immaculately brings out the finer and the most elemental virtues like love, longing, ecstasy and transcendence without any conscious attempt to mystify or to portray them out into larger-than-life statures. The poet with the best of his artistic and lyrical manoeuvres keeps himself grounded in reality.

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More than three hundred years after, yet another Oriya poet, with no direct knowledge of Sanskrit or any trace of scholarship, and purely from agrarian background shows an incredible feat by composing the Mahabharata in Oriya. And thus doing he becomes the pioneer, the pathfinder. And soon others from Bengal, Assam and the Hindi belt follow the suit. He is Sarala Dasa. His Mahabharata in Oriya is not a translation of the original Sanskrit Mahabharata, nor even written in the shadow of it. It is out and out original both in structure and content though; the general schemata and the main story-line remains on the backdrop. As a western scholar John Boulton looks at it : "Sarala Dasa's Mahabharata was the first important Oriya work on the Jagannath cult. Though Sri Krsna is portrayed as the protagonist of Sarala Mahabharata, Sri Jagannath continues to be Sarala's "counter theme".



As Boulton explains :

Scattered throughout his Mahabharata, Sarala presents a number of historical, racial memories, which appear in the form of dream like, narrative sequence. In recounting them he is obviously looking back from the stand-point of a tradition... It is clear from his account that his sympathies lie with the Savaras, whose God in origin Jagannath was.

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Sarala (who proves himself every inch a poet, original and striking) breaks away from the master craftsman Vyasa in more than one ways. First, he heavily rationalizes the portrayal of the character of Sri Krsna. In a way, Sarala reacts against the Sanskritic-Hindu-Aryan pantheon of Gods and Goddesses. So we are not at all surprised to find the various Gods and Goddesses including Lord Krsna without any supernatural clout or larger-than-life portrayal in Sarala Mahabharata. As Boulton comments:

...here we come to the crux of the matter - Sarala Dasa behaves towards Krsna 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 Krsna as the philosopher-hero and Jayadeva as the divine lover. But Sarala Dasa refuses to regard Krsna/ Jagannath as anything but an equal, whose faults are to be mocked and censured.

But all the same, Sarala, who uses the Oriya lingua franca as his medium successfully creates an atmosphere of informality in dealing with Sri Krsna or Sri Jagannath that becomes the very spirit of typical Oriya devotees including the Sevayats of Puri Temple. They look upon Lord Jagannath as a member of their family - so close, so intimate, so informal. Thus the Mahabharata of Sarala Dasa is a world apart from the Mahabharata of Vyasadev. That explains why Sarala has skipped the entire Shrimad Bhagavad Gita and heavily abridged the Santi Parva of Vyasa's original. Nowhere do we find Vyasa's omniscient, philosopher-king Krsna in Sarala's epic.

Sri Jagannath Cult : A veritable melting pot : Orissa (synonymous with Sri Jagannath - a cult, a way of life, a living culture) has been a meeting ground, a melting pot of all sects and faiths since time immemorial. Brahmanya, Jaina, Buddha, Natha, Saivya, Shakta, Soura, Ganapatya, Nirguna, Saguna, Vaishnava - all streams have flooded the Orissa coast. And Sarala Mahabharata has the unique distinction of integrating, synthesizing and reflecting the myriad thoughts and faiths. At several points in Sarala Mahabharata, Jagannath is identified as Buddha, Krsna and Rama.

As Sarala writes in the Adi Parva :

Salute thee Sri Jagannath The revered One whose domain Is the Blue Hills: He sits pretty as Sri Buddha There in the Blue Cavern At another point in the Adi Parva Sarala writes: Glory be to Rama Krsna Brahmaa as Subhadra And to the great soul Buddha ...

In Madhya Parva Sarala writes : There comes Sri Jagannath As Buddha to liberate the Mankind ...

(Translation : mine)

Such instances are many where Sarala looks at Sri Jagannath as one with Sri Krsna, Sri Rama, and Buddha. A wonderful integration, a rare unification and synthesis of all faiths and paths. Sarala Mahabharata indeed is a unified voice, a sum total of the consciousness that draws its energy and vibration from one common source the Krsna - Jagannath pool...

Reference:

Boulton, John. *Essays on Oriya Literature*. ed. Ganeswar Mishra. Kolkata : Profulla, 2003.

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