

Lo(k)calizing the Epic: Integration of the Folk As a Device in Sarala's *Mahabharata*

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The context in which Sarala Das wrote the *Mahabharata* is an important subject to discuss to understand the device of localization. Before he wrote his *Mahabharata*, the Vyasa *Mahabharata* was in place. As we know, even before Vyasa wrote his Sanskrit *Mahabharata*, it was in oral form. People would recite the *Mahabharata* orally. In other words, it existed in people's memory and also in different communities. Vyasa wrote it in Sanskrit. Before Sarala Das, Vyasa *Mahabharata* was read and discussed primarily by the Brahmin class who had a monopoly over the discourse of *Mahabharata*. Sarala Das might have read /heard the Vyasa *Mahabharata*. He decided to write his *Mahabharata* as he was inspired by Devi Sarala. This was a bold step because he broke the tradition by writing the text in "other" language. He also subverted the *Mahabharata* in different ways. Critics like Satyabrata Das have already discussed this point in their scholarly works. Since Sarala Das said that he was inspired and wrote what he was directed, he was spared by the aggressive pundits. This was perhaps a strategy to defend his act of subversion: "Sree Sarala Chandinkara sada ate dasa/ Agnyare mu shasrta kichhi karichhi abhyasa/ Se jaha kahanti angya mu taha lekhai/ Apandita murkha mora sastra gyna nahi" (Virata Parba).

The free rendering of the above could be the following: "I am the servant of Sree Sarala / Following her order I have composed these verses/ Whatever she has said, I have only followed/ I don't have knowledge, education or intelligence."

Because he claimed to be a devotee of Sarala, he managed to escape the severe attack of the dominating class of the time. Yet, he faced opposition. His *Mahabharata* was not accepted in the pundit circle, it was considered to be written by a Shudra.

The time period of the poet Sarala Das is determined as fifteenth century. He came from an agricultural caste. Some have mentioned his name as Siddheswar Parida but he has called himself Siddheswar Das in the text. He was termed as Shudra muni by people. He worked as a farmer, warrior, traveller, saint and writer. The time of the composition of the text could be between 1435 and 1468. Before him, literary texts were primarily written in Sanskrit. He ushered a revolution by writing the three texts in the local language – the language of the folk. The three texts are- *Bilanka Ramayana*, *Mahabharata* and *Chandi Purana*. The language of the folk was, before Sarala Das, never used as language of literature. The Sanskrit educated pundits had a monopoly over giving discourses in *Purana*. In this sense, he took a bold step in writing the text. This was not only a bold step but also a difficult task as he had to use the palm leaves and the iron reed for the purpose. Pratibha Ray, the renowned writer rightly says: "He discarded the classical language Sanskrit of the time and chose to create a mass of literature in his Mother Tongue. It was a bold step" (Ga 2). But Sarala Das was humble enough to say that he was hardly educated: "Buddhi gyana, joga, laya, kichhi nahin/ Grantha bhedibaku shakti mora aba kahin/ . . . / Se jaha kahanti Agyan mu taha lekhai/ Apandita murkha mora sastra gyana nahi." (Birata Parba).

The above lines might be rendered in the following manner: “I lack meditation, knowledge, yoga and attention/ I have no ability to read and understand/ Whatever she has dictated do I write/ No knowledge of sastras I have as I am born Illiterate”.

Though he claimed that he lacked knowledge, yoga and education, he had knowledge of many texts written before his own. In “Ganesha Bandana” he prays to Lord Ganesha to inspire him the same way as Ganesha had inspired Vyasa. This shows his knowledge about the earlier texts. Then why did he write another *Mahabharata*?

The poet says his purpose of writing the *Mahabharat* was to benefit people as it had nectar in the form of profound lessons. Before his text, Odia literature was not that prosperous. He wanted to educate the Odia people through his writings. As he says he wrote it for the benefit of the people: “Sree Mahabharat e amiya rasa bani/ Sansara janahite banchaili ani”.

The above may mean the following: “Sree *Mahabharata* is word with nectar mixed/ I have made it alive for the world’s benefit”. The purpose of writing the text was to raise the consciousness of people and uplift them through noble values and lessons. The story of *Mahabharata* was prevalent in oral form and also in Sanskrit. But Sarala wrote in his own way to serve the people.

Sarala’s *Mahabharat* is not the story of *Mahabharata* of ancient India, but he has imagined the basic theme and given shape basing it on the outline of the *Mahabharat* story. Even the theme is not presented as a story of wars between two families, but story of the people of the time. BN Patnaik has stressed this point in his discussion in his pioneering work-*Introducing Sarala “Mahabharata.”* Sarala’s cities and capitals are different. He has made a point to include many towns of Odisha such as Puri, Cuttack, Kanark and Jajpur. In swarga Parba, Yudhistira enters Jajpur with the Pandavas and marries the goldsmith Hari Sahu’s daughter Suhani. In the same way the rivers, forests, mountains and oceans are different and drawn from the geographical landscape of Odisha.

The outline of Sarala’s *Mahabharat* is different. He has omitted certain episodes from the storyline. The Bhagabat Geeta episode is omitted. This is perhaps done to give the text a different focus, perhaps to redefine the text as not a story of war but story of lessons about life and “salvation.” The birth of Drona and Karna is treated briefly.

Characters employed in Sarala’s *Mahabhata* are not grand characters of a classical text, but drawn from the cultural milieu of Odisha. They can be identified among people of villages. Yudhistira can be an elder brother of five brothers of a family. Though Dhrutarashtra is a king, he is portrayed in such a manner that people can identify him in local kings and chieftains they are familiar with. The queens are not depicted as goddesses but as ordinary Odia mothers, aunts and sisters drawn from the local set up. These characters are not godly figures but ordinary people. One can make a distinction between the characterization of Bheema too. Bheema-type of characters are not rare in Odia villages. They are found among the people.

As mentioned earlier, Sarala’s *Mahabharata* is different from the Vyasa *Mahabharata*. The former was more appealing to the elite and educated class whereas the latter was targeted at the common people or the folk. In this sense, it was a *Janapada Sahitya* and Sarala was successful in percolating the text to the masses. Even an ordinary person can quote from it for the most common occasion. It also becomes easy for them to comprehend it and they can identify their culture and customs in the text. It is worth mentioning how the poet integrates these folk elements in the text. Folk traditions include social customs, rituals, dress, food and activities which are also known as “lokachar” or folk practices. The poet has included these in abundance.

For instance, marriage rituals are described in elaborate terms. Before marriage, certain social activities like choosing the bride and grooms, examining their age, horoscope, fixing the date of marriage (subha lagna), preparing the marriage *bedi* are common practices. All these are described elaborately in Sarala's *Mahabhara*. For instance, before the marriage of Gandhari and Dhritarastra, the examining of their horoscopes is described. These are observed in the marriages of Uttara, Subhadra and so on.

Food is an important part of marriage functions. People celebrate the occasion by feasting with delicious food. Usually the Brahmans are employed to cook and serve the groom's party. Sarala's *Mahabharata* describes this as well. Sarala describes different delicacies prepared on the occasion of Draupadi's Swayambara (Adiparba). In the same Parba we find that Uma makes several dishes and waits for Shiva's return: "Pitha khirisa gotika chhena/ Tagada adi kari/ Subarna koparare samasta purai." The free rendering of the verse could be the following: "Uma has made delicacies such as Pitha, gotika, chhena and tagada/ And kept in a gold vessel". As part of the marriage ceremony of Draupadi too, guests are described as being treated with different delicious dishes.

Sarala Das has described rituals like Ekadasi brata, Harijanma brata and so on. Santanu's Ekadasi brata has been described in elaborate terms. We also come across descriptions of life cycle rituals such as birth and death. Birth of a child is celebrated and rituals are organized. Naming ceremony is another ritual which has got elaborate treatment in the work. The naming ceremony of Kaurava brothers including Duryodhan, Dushashana and others is described in Adiparba(78). There is also the description of the marriage ceremony. For instance, the marriage procession when Chitra and Bichitra Birjas get married is described. Details of rituals are mentioned in Adiparva. The marriage of Duryodhan and Bhanumati has also been narrated, along with the celebrations that the citizens of Hastinapur organise when the couple return. Death rituals are also described in elaborate terms. Gandhari mourns the death of her husband by weeping helplessly recalling past experiences. All these resemble the rituals performed in Odisha as part of the tradition of the people.

Dance and music are integral part of folk tradition. There are descriptions of dance in several places. For instance, on the occasion of Subhadra's marriage, dancers are shown singing and dancing: "Chausathi koti je amara bilasuni/ Karanti ura harasa sangita gayeni." This may be roughly translated as: "Sixty four crores danseurs/ Are engrossed in music and dances". In Birata Parba Arjuna teaches Uttara disguising himself as Bruhanari.

Sarala Das has also described the dress of the people of that time. The dresses of men, women, warriors, Brahmans, and Sabar were all different. For instance, the Pandavas dress up as Brahmans as they go on vanabas: "Brahmana besha je dhaile Panchubire/ Trikachha basana aropile katire". The free rendering of which may be the following: "The warriors, Pandu brothers wore robes of the Brahmans/ By wrapping trikachha around their waists." (Adiparba) The description of Jara Sabara is another instance of description of dress: "Mathare Majur jhali kanthe gunjara mali/ Lohita barna netra shashire rangadhuli/ Dhamana kathara dhanu kanta bayensara guna/ Dali abharana firiki naraja krona". (Adiparba). This can be roughly translated as: "On his head he wears a peacock feather/ Around his neck he puts on a *gunja* beads garland/ His eyes look red and his body is simmered with ashes/ He carries a bow of *Dhamana* wood/And arrows on his shoulders in a bamboo quiver". The above description is a typical dress usually put on by a Sabara in Odisha of that time.

About Draupadi's dress and make-up Sarala says: "Alata dhalina sukhabati kasha/ Ange paridhapan karanti jhina basa/ Jai jui malli, mallati nageswara pakhuda/ Sugandh Pushpa dei

sanjoile kaberi bhara” (Adiparba); which when translated: “She puts on alata and dries her hair/ And thin dress she wears/ Decorates her waist with Jai, jui, malli and malathi flowers”. Throughout the epic, the poet has made descriptions of the dress of different categories of people.

Sarala uses many folk forms such as tales, sayings and so on. Certain tales are drawn from the local discourse. They are integrated into the story to explain certain points and make the story appeal to the masses. For instance, he adds the following folk saying in the mouth of Arjuna. When the Pandavas are invited by Duryodhan to live in the lac house (jatugriha) as a plot to kill them, without realizing the plot they think about the generosity of Duryodhana. Arjuna says that Duryodhana has changed and become a gentle man. Praising Duryodhan he says that he has made good arrangements for them in spite of his limitations. About him he says: “Abhabaku bhaba jebe karanti jebana prani/ Sujana sangate tahankar gani”. (190) Translated: “When a person turns his lack a prosperity or /becomes generous in spite of his lack./He is counted among the good people”. Such expressions are used by the poet a number of times in Adiparba itself: “Apara Ousadhre na bartai rogi/ Aparana khaile naasajai jogi”. Translated: “Too much medicine will harm the patient/ Just as eating too much kills even a mendicant.” Similarly, “Pandita hoi jebe nohiba upayabanta/ Mahatamanka bachane yeteka jibana bi artha”; means: “When an educated person does not have the skills/What is the use of life of that great soul?”. And “Apanara sharire padichhi angasai/ Paraku hasu kimpas nasikara hasta dei” (180); which means “There is dirt on your own body/ But you laugh at others showing on their body”.

Let us see why he uses so many folktales. In Adiparba itself, he has included stories like “Sahada bruksha katha,” “Uanshi kanya katha,” “Golak putra katha,” “Ghimini khela katha,” “Golakputra katha” and the “story of Ekalavya.” He has integrated these tales in the story line and narrated them in greater detail to teach the people as we have seen his aim was to educate people. His narrative style is such that the story sounds like emerging from local culture. Sarala also uses a lot of native words in narrating the text.

Sarala Das has also included many folk beliefs of people. For instance, the story of Uansi Kanya is one of them. It is believed that if a girl is born as unansi kanya, her husband will die if she is married. Gandhari was born as a uanisi kanya. On the advice of the saints she had to marry a ‘sahada’ tree first, and then to Dhritarashtra.

We can note that Sarala’s *Mahabharata* is not a classical one but a folk text, originating from the folk and appreciated by the folk. It has many folk elements. The theme, characters, contexts, use of tales, sayings, language and beliefs add to the folk aspects in the text. Considering all these we can safely conclude that Sarala *Mahabharata* has been infused with a lot of folk elements. The poet has beautifully blended these folk aspects into the story of *Mahabharata* and adopted the strategies of localization so well that it fits well in the context. Hence it appeals to the common people. Hara Prasad Das, the scholar and poet says, “the real beauty of *Sarala Mahabharat* lies in its localized folk practices” (ghar17). One may ask about the source of Sarala’s materials. To this, one may respond by saying that Sarala had used a lot of materials from the local and oral sources. For instance, in one context Juthisthira explains a point to Arjuna by relating a local folk saying: “Dharmaku ashre kari babu thao hrudagate/ Dharma thile papati na lage jugate” (Adi Parba); meaning: “Take shelter in dharma and keep it in your heart/ No sin can dwell the world if dharma dwells in your heart”.

Not only this, many tales from Jataka, fairy tales, fables, parables, legends, moral tales and other previous sources have been used by the poet in the text. Scholars like Lalit Kumar Lenka, who has worked on folktales found in *Sarala Mahabharat* believe that Sarala Das “might have drawn his materials from folk and oral traditions” (117).

One may ask what the purpose of Sarala's localization is. As we have stated above, he wanted to write this version for the benefit of his people. So he localized the text in order that people would understand it well. The common man can identify the characters and situations easily. *His Mahabharata* will be useful to the masses instead of remaining confined to the elites. The poet is successful in doing so as we find that even today people are deeply influenced by this *Mahabharata*. There are recitations of the text both at the community and individual levels. His verses are cited by people for more than one occasion. One would conclude by saluting the great soul who brought the great words to the common people.

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