Sarala Mahabharata: Outlining the Tasks Ahead

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SARALA MAHABHARATA: OUTLINING THE TASKS AHEAD

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Ever since the pioneering and illuminating works by Shyam Sundar Rajguru, Mrutyunjaya Rath and Gopinath Nanda Sharma on Sarala Mahabharata, there has appeared some interesting and important research in Odia and English on this truly remarkable classic of Odia literature. But since Sarala Mahabharata is more of a research field than a topic of research, there is much scope and also a real need for many more studies of significance on it: literary, culture-oriented, linguistic, among others. Some of these have been outlined here and motivations for these have been explicitly stated or strongly suggested. Now with Odia having been accorded the status of “classical language” by the Government of India, one would legitimately expect that careful, informative and meaningful research on the relevant phase of Odia language and on the best literature belonging to that phase will receive encouragement and support in every way by the Government of Odisha (and the private funding agencies, at least in Odisha).

This paper is organized in three parts. The first outlines some possible studies on Sarala Mahabharata from the point of view of literary criticism and of the retelling of the ancient narratives written in Sanskrit, the second is concerned with the representation of cultural tensions among different communities depicted in this work and the third lists some areas in language and language use in this remarkable work that can be gainfully studied.

I

First of all, there is a need for a new edition of Sarala Mahabharata. No doubt, Artaballav Mohanty did a very commendable job when he edited this remarkable text, but there are certain problems in his edition which need to be dealt with. Mohanty compared some pothis (palm leaf manuscripts) of Sarala Mahabharata and made his choice about what to include and what to exclude in his edition and where an alternative version existed in some pothi or pothis, whether the same could be mentioned by way of footnote or in some other manner. One does not know the basis of his editorial decisions because his edition contains no introduction by him, where one would have expected some observations in this regard.

In any case there are, in his edition, some instances of lack of clarity and at times, of coherence as well. For example, after Krishna’s departure from the world, Arjuna could not protect the Yadava women from ordinary thugs. They humiliated him, taunted him and mocked at him. Was he so overpowered with grief that he had lost the will to fight them? The text does not seem to support this interpretation. Or with Krishna’s departure, had he lost his special powers which had made him invincible? The text seems to encourage this interpretation. Yet later, during Suhani’s wedding with the eldest Pandava, he tied up both his messengers and god Yama himself!
Drona and Drupad did not ever study together. Drona got to know Drupad after the latter had lost his kingdom to a tribal king. Drona was in Prayag then and was engaged with the activities worthy of a brahmin. He was almost affluent, with the gifts he received from his jajamanas (patrons). Drona and Drupad became friends and Drona gave him money to organize an army to fight the usurper of his kingdom. Later, after Drupad regained his kingdom, Drona went to him for help. He had become very poor and didn’t have the means to take care of the minimum needs of his child. What had happened that had reduced him to that state? All that one knows from the text is that his wife had died after giving birth to their son, who was subsequently named “Ashwasthama” by his father. But this is rather uninformative.

Kunti had introduced her sons to Karna when he was growing up in Hastinapura in the charioteer’s house. They were children then. The meeting turned out to be unpleasant. Very upset at his mother giving the “eldest-son” status to Yudhisthira and not to him, the child Karna had told Kunti there itself that from then on Yudhisthira was his enemy. In Sarala’s version, everyone knew the relationship between the Pandavas and Karna. Yet, later, shortly before the Kurukshetra War, when Kunti met Karna and told him that she was his mother, Karna told her that during his childhood, he had heard from people now and then about her being his mother. These are some of the not inconsiderable number of instances of such incoherence in the narrative.

Now, a living severed head, babies born immediately after sexual union, babies born without the involvement of a woman, the dead brought back to life, leaving the mortal world without passing through death, being immortal, etc. are illogical and unrealistic but these are acceptable in a puranic narrative; one can say, following the poet Coleridge, that one willingly suspends one’s disbelief when one reads such a text. It is different with regard to the instances of the former kind. There is nothing in those that can be said to belong to the domain of the alaukika (roughly, supra-natural) in principle.

Turning to a related matter, who was Parshuram whom Bhishma defeated in the Amba episode? Santanu had stopped their fight, telling Bhishma that he must not harm his brother. Surely, he was not the Parshuram who was his guru. Who, then, was he? How was he his brother? To the best of my knowledge he, that is, this brother of Bhishma, did not figure in the narrative thereafter. How was he his brother? Then is Jara whose arrow hurt Krishna mortally the same as the Jara who was entrusted with the task of making the murtis of Jagannath, Balabhadra and Subhadra? Is he the same one who was the son of the tribal king named Kiratasen? In the narrative, both were Angada in a previous existence! Such unclarieties as these and instances of incoherence mentioned earlier, can be said to be accidental gaps in the narrative, not unexpected in orally transmitted texts, but in a twenty-first century edition of Sarala Mahabharata, these need explanation in, perhaps, the form of scholarly notes.

In Artaballav Mohanty’s edition, some of the titles of the episodes are misleading. The episode entitled Arjuna’s reluctance to fight and Krishna’s advice does not contain Krishna’s advice. The one entitled Belalasena’s beheading contains nothing about the beheading and the one entitled the giving of half the kingdom to the Pandavas contains nothing about this giving. Explaining why he included the story of the severed head telling Krishna what he had seen happening in the war, Mohanty says that he did so because it is there in some Sanskrit texts. Which text was he referring to, considering that Vyasa Mahabharata does not contain the story of Belalasena. These titles need
correction. This is yet another reason why there must be a new edition of this remarkable classic of Odia literature. The new edition should be a critical edition based on as many as possible extant palm leaf manuscripts. This proposed edition will be the one that should be translated into both Indian and European languages.

Secondly, there are at least three versions of Mahabharata in Odia: Sarala Mahabharata, Krushna Singh Mahabharata and Jagannath Das Mahabharata, which, according to Suryanarayan Das (2010: 491) is a kind of summary (“sankshipta sara sangraha”, in Rath’s words) of Sarala Mahabharata composed in nabaksari vritta (couplet each line of which contains nine letters). A comparative study of these texts is in order, both because it is a worthwhile enterprise in itself and because it would throw light on the logic of the retelling in our puranic tradition, among others. Consider the Belalasena episode in this connection. It has two parts: the beheading of Belalasena and the severed head’s account of the happenings in the Great War at Kurukshetra. In Jagannath Das’s version, only the first is there and in Sarala’s narrative, only the second is there. This is interesting, considering Rath’s observation about the relationship between these two versions.

Thirdly, spelling out the differences between Sarala Mahabharata and Vyasa Mahabharata has been a major topic of research by the scholars of Sarala Mahabharata from the very beginning of Sarala studies. There are numerous other differences that seem to have gone unnoted: Sarala’s invocation, his characterization of his narrative as “Vishnu Purana”, the Kauravas not being averse to sharing their kingdom with Sahadeva because he was a Kuru, being the biological son of Pandu, Bhima’s unwillingness to join his brothers after he lived a comfortable life when he became king during their first vanavasa, Yudhisthira’s intervention in the matter of Bhima’s death, etc. Bhima did not die the way his younger brothers and Draupadi had died. He was killed with Yudhisthira’s intervention. Bhishma’s ichhamrityu (dying only when one wants to die) was not a gift from his father Santanu, it had nothing to do with him; it was the presumably unintended consequence of his mother Ganga’s dismissive words as she was leaving her husband Santanu and the baby who came to be known as Bhishma. Durdasa of Sarala Mahabharata perished, but his equivalent in Vyasa Mahabharata lived and took care of the kingdom for the boy king, Parikshita, when the Pandavas left for vanaprastha. Similarly, unlike in Sarala’s retelling, Uttara did not die because of the impact of Aswasthama’s arrow in Vyasa Mahabharata - she became the queen mother when her son Parikshita became the king.

The issue is not just why the poet chose to differ from the canonical narrative; one might never provide persuasive answers for lack of adequate independent evidence (i.e., evidence from outside of Sarala’s works) but even speculative ones would be interesting. To us, however, the text matters, not its author; so, for us the more important issue is in what way the modifications have enriched the text in terms of creativity, depth of insight and intellectual appeal.

Fourthly, Sarala Mahabharata can be viewed as a work of art, not merely as a retelling of an ancient narrative and can be studied from that perspective. Many questions arise: how significant is it as a literary work? What are the criteria in terms of which one can assess its literary merit? Where do these criteria come from? Are these borrowed from some other literary tradition? If so, how justified is it to use these for an evaluation of Sarala’s work? Or is it the case that the canons of literary evaluation are fundamentally universal and there are culture-sensitive criteria associated with the same? What then are these? Now, looking at Sarala Mahabharata as a narrative, one can
ask questions about its structure, its plot and characters. In structural terms, one wonders if there aren’t too many narratives of fights, for example, some of which are unnecessary from the point of view of the core narrative. Are the situations always convincing – Sakuni’s release from confinement and rising to power in Duryodhana’s kingdom, for an example? As for characters, does the narrative do justice to them? For instance, Bidura’s mother, Ghatotkacha, Kiratasena’s son Jara, and of course, Ambika, Ambalika and Bhanumati, all of whom one would consider to be only partially realized characters.

Returning to the question of literary/narrative tradition in the context of Sarala’s *Mahabharata*, what is Sarala’s contribution to the tradition of puranic literature in Odia (or is it the case that he was the creator of this tradition), more specifically? More generally, what is the literary tradition to which Sarala belonged and what did he contribute to it and how significant is this contribution? These are non-trivial issues and meaningful explorations of these would surely turn out to be worthwhile.

It is well known that *Sarala Mahabharata* is not a translation of *Vyasa Mahabharata* and the poet exercised considerable freedom in his retelling. Later when Krushna Singh wrote his *Mahabharata*, he observed that since *Sarala Mahabharata* was not a faithful version of the canonical version, there was a need for a faithful retelling Vyasa’s *Mahabharata* in Odia. Pandit Nilakantha Das in his introduction to his version of Mahabharata for children made a similar observation. The question that arises is, granted that retelling need not be a mechanical rendering of the original, how much deviation is permissible in some intuitive sense? Related to this question is the general one: what is the permissible range of freedom that an author can have when he retells another’s narrative? This leads to the question as to whether there was a “translation” tradition in Odia at all, when it comes to literary works, using the term “translation” in its familiar sense of the term. If not, then is translation a borrowing from another literary tradition? Some of these issues have probably been raised in one way or the other by Sarala scholars but more direct engagement with these and surrounding themes is in order. This will no doubt enrich Sarala scholarship significantly.

Fifthly, a carefully prepared *Sarala Mahabharata* glossary will be a very valuable resource for the study of the text, both for the general readers and the researchers. It would include entries regarding the places and place names, the personal names, characters and their kinship (and other, if any) relationships, places of pilgrimage and of worship, of sacred ponds, rivers and trees and their significance, local customs, among others.

Moving on to matters concerning society and culture, many existing studies have dealt with the same in different degrees of detail. These studies have generally been about weddings and wedding feasts, celebrations of victory, religious observances, pilgrimage, dress, social hierarchies, etc. But there is scope for more.

In the world of *Sarala Mahabharata*, there lived more than one community. Ignoring the inhabitants of *devaloka* (abode of the gods) and other non-mortals such as the *gandharvas* who regularly interacted with the inhabitants of the mortal world, there were the urbanites (“Aryans” in
more familiar terminology) and the forest dwellers, to which category belonged the tribals and the rakshasas (demons). The sages, who must be classified as “urbanites” on account of their cultural practices, beliefs and values, had their ashramas in the forest. There was interaction between the urbanites and the forest dwellers, barring the rakshasas, who ordinarily had no interaction with others: urbanites or tribals. The tribals had their kingdoms like the urbanites. How did these communities relate? How did they share space? What tensions were there between them and what resolutions were arrived at? What was the power relationship between them? These are among the important issues that remain to be dealt with in a study of the social world of Sarala Mahabharata. Existing studies do not seem to have paid due attention to most of these. The episode on Ekalavya can be viewed as a representation in narrative terms of the tribal – urbanite interaction (see Patnaik (forthcoming)) from the above perspective.

It is indeed remarkable that although he did not deal with it at the level of detail, Sarala articulated, in the form of “Babarapuri”, an idea of dystopia with its social, economic, political and ethical dimensions. It may be noted that a non-Aryan (“urbanite” as it is called here) society, such as the asurik (of the rakshasas) society, is not a dystopia. It is just a different society. This is the modern perspective and this is the perspective of the fifteenth century creative poet-thinker Sarala. Dystopia embodies a reversal of the values which the “civilized” society cherishes. In the existing scholarly literature, there is very little discussion on Sarala’s “Babarapuri” as a representation of a dystopic community.

It is worth noting that culture and society are not isomorphic concepts. Culture is a set of values, beliefs, artefacts and practices with which a community identifies itself or is identified or strongly associated with. Odia culture is generally associated with Jagannath dharma, works such as Sarala Mahabharata, and Jagannatha Das’s Bhagavata, etc., architectural achievements such as the great temples of Konarka, Bhubaneswar and Puri, Odishi dance, pattachitra paintings, among others (see Chatterji, S.K. 1966). Sarala Mahabharata is sometimes, quite expectedly and justifiably, considered to be an Odia cultural text. But which beliefs and practices, etc. embody Odia culture here as against the puranic culture of Hinduism or better, Sanatana dharma? Is there anything typically Odia in Yudhisthira’s actions or beliefs? Do Krishna’s holding the donkey’s foot in the episode of the killing of Jarasandha and Hari Sahu’s observation that if Yudhisthira was going to be his son-in-law, then his daughter Suhani’s death would not matter to him, represent attitudes that the Odia community would associate with as expression of its culture? Do the dishes that goddess Parvati cooked for Bhagawan Shiva represent Odia food culture, except for the linguistic aspect, namely, the names of those dishes? The inclusiveness of Jagannath worship in the form of the participation of the tribals in it is certainly something with which the community would identify itself with as its cultural symbol. The same perhaps can be said of aakaamaa bai snana (ritual dip). The important task here is to identify in a principled manner those practices, beliefs, attitudes, etc. in Sarala Mahabharata that are expressions of typically Odia culture, it being a narrative contextualized in the North-Indian setting. Every Hindu practice and value cannot be taken as typically Odia. It seems to me that further careful research is needed to extract a persuasive characterization of Odia culture from Sarala Mahabharata.
Odia traditional linguists have done some important work on the language of *Sarala Mahabharata*, but a great lot remains to be done, an expression which by now has become a cliché in this article. The concern in Sarala linguistics so far has been with primarily words and their derivations, in particular, from Sanskrit. Syntax has been barely touched upon. The same can be said of word- and sentence- semantics and pragmatics. This gap in scholarship is largely because traditional grammatical scholarship was not concerned with these. To the best of my knowledge *Sarala Mahabharata* has not been studied from modern linguistics perspective; this observation would hold for any Odia text of some length, ancient or modern.

Our first tasks must be to (i) write a comprehensive grammar of *Sarala Mahabharata* in some eclectic framework, i.e., without any strong commitment to any grammatical theory, the objective here not being theory testing, and (b) prepare a *Sarala Mahabharata* lexicon based on modern practices. The proposed grammar can incorporate some discourse features such as linking devices and ellipsis, etc. Even a third project (c) that can be undertaken, namely a stylistic study of some multi-word expressions (compound and conjunct verbs, onomatopoeic expressions, lexical doublets, echo compounds, etc.) and some indeclinable expressions with clear stylistic significance, which have been at least prominently used in *Sarala Mahabharata*.

All this will be greatly facilitated if *Sarala Mahabharata* is digitized and search mechanisms implemented. This would involve some computational linguistic research. The above tasks are necessary to prepare a critical edition of the text. Once a critical edition is ready, the Sarala scholarship can advance to the next level that would involve factual and, more importantly, conceptual comparison of different parvas of the text and of the text with the classical and other regional Mahabharatas, ancient and medieval compendia of stories, bhakti literature, sastras and niti texts.

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