

July 17, 2016

The Sarala Mahabharata as a novel 'prison-revenge' story

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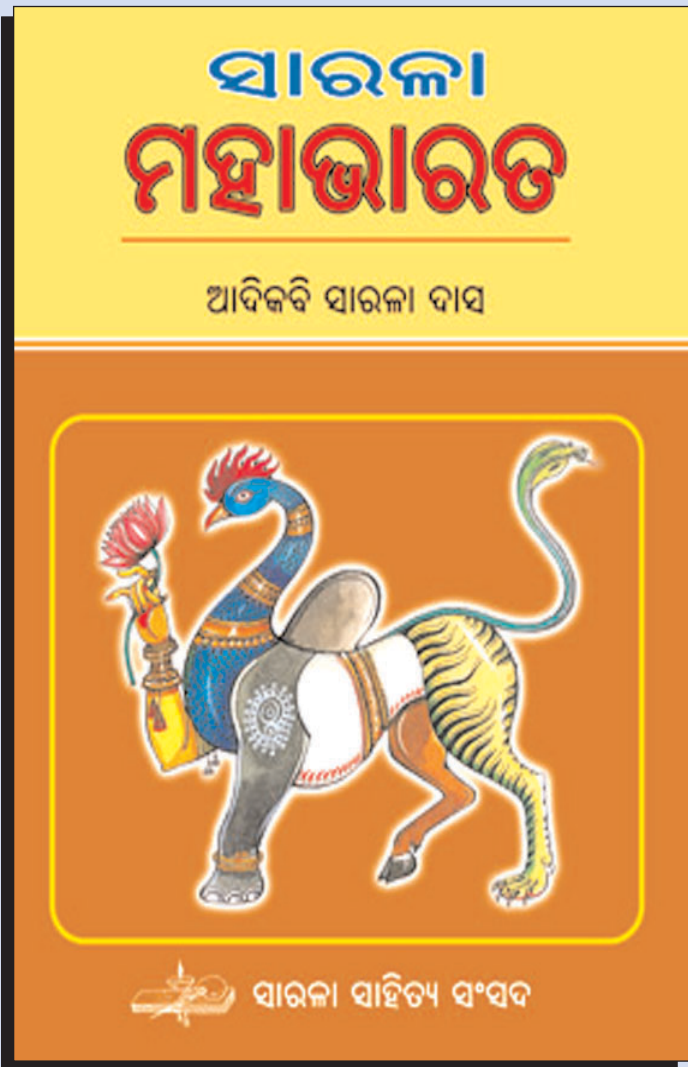
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"TRANSLATIONS" of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* into modern Indian languages are among the defining features of our regional cultures. The differences between the Sanskrit and regional versions, which are essentially creative retellings, reflect the specificity of both the regional epic and the regional culture. The use of 'Duryodhana' as a naming word in Odia, might, for instance, be explained by the humane treatment of classical villains in the *Sarala Mahabharata*.

The 15th century Odia epic differs from its Sanskrit counterpart with regard to the narrative frame, among other things. In Sarala's story, Duryodhana's annihilation of his mother's natal family was the root cause of the Kurukshetra war that was plotted by Sakuni. Sarala introduced new stories, e.g., Duryodhana's crossing of the river of blood, and new characters, e.g., Suhani and Hari Sahu. He also captured the mundane features of the characters, e.g., Duryodhana's passing urine and Parvati's removing lice from Shiva's hair. These differences, and the limited compounding possible in Odia language, partly explain why Sarala's epic is considerably longer than Vyasa's.

A number of features of the classical version made possible these differences. The context of regional retellings was far removed from that of the classical period, which necessitated innovations. Also, the *Bhakti* environment required reorientation of the entire story toward the *avatara*.



So, Sarala's retelling of the *Mahabharata*, the story of the Kurus, can be seen as a pretext to dwell upon *Krishna lila*. Indeed Sarala referred to his *Mahabharata* as *Vishnu Purana*. Innovative retelling was also enabled by the abundance of underdeveloped characters and stories as well as inconsistencies in the classical version. Moreover, innovations were not culturally unacceptable as the *Mahabharata* was not treated as a sacred text.

It is also possible that the regional versions, such as Sarala's, tapped into lesser known parallel classical traditions, which might explain the deviation from the classical version. The *Sarala Mahabharata* can indeed be read as a "Prison-revenge" story, a few examples of which are presented below.

In Sarala's story, Gandhari was married to a *sahada* tree (and immediately widowed) before being married to

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Dhritarashtra to shield the couple from inauspicious stars. Duryodhana perceived a widow's marriage to his father as an affront and starved his maternal grandfather, his ninety six brothers, and his hundred sons in a prison. The prisoners denied themselves food so that Sakuni, the king's eldest son, lived. (Significantly, ninety nine Kaurava brothers perished in the Kurukshetra War.) Sakuni made dice out of his father's bones, which would obey his call.

One day Duryodhana was urinating under a banyan tree, when he saw a fruit of that tree flowing away in his urine. A banyan tree is so big and strong that even the strongest wind and the heaviest rain cannot shake it. Its fruit contains the seeds of so many banyan trees, and yet it flowed away in his urine. These thoughts made him smile. A female attendant saw him smile, and she smiled too. Duryodhana asked her why she smiled. She said whatever made him smile made her smile. Duryodhana then asked her why he had smiled, and threatened to put her to death if she failed to answer him. She happened to be the attendant who carried food to Sakuni. Sakuni asked her to

tell the king that he had smiled on seeing a fruit of a banyan tree flowing away in the flow of his urine. The reply stunned Duryodhana and he appointed Sakuni his *mantri*.

S o m a d e v a ' s *Kathasaritsagara* and related texts contain a similar story. Three brahmin students - Vyaadi, Vararuchi, and Indradatta - needed a crore of rupees to pay *guru dakshina*. They decided to approach King Satyananda. He died just when they reached his camp. Indradatta entered the body of the king, who came back to life and became known as Yogananda. He ordered the payment of a crore of rupees to Vararuchi. Minister Shaktala (also known as Shaktara in some versions) wondered if the revival of the dead king and the subsequent gift to a stranger could be a mere coincidence. He feared that the person who entered the king's body would leave once his job was done. He ordered the burning of all corpses in the kingdom, including Indradatta's body. Yogananda made Vararuchi his minister and imprisoned Shaktala and his hundred sons fearing a coup. Shaktala alone survived. He took revenge with Chanakya's help and retired to a forest.

In Ravinartaka's *Chanakyakatha*, King Nanda's kshatriya wife gave birth to a lump of flesh that was cut into nine pieces that became the nine Nandas. (In Sarala, Gandhari gave birth to a lump of flesh that was cut into hundred pieces, which became the Kauravas.) Maurya, their cousin born to the King's Sudra wife, was the commander of the army. The Nandas, who reigned in rotation, were jealous of Maurya, who enjoyed his office without interruption. They imprisoned and starved Maurya and his hundred sons. Chandragupta, the youngest son, alone survived. A rival king challenged the Nandas to take a caged waxen lion out without opening the cage. The Nandas released Chandragupta after he solved the riddle by heating the waxen lion. Chandragupta in due course avenged the family.

In Anantasarman's *Mudraraksha sapurvasamkathanaka*, when King Nanda Sudhanvan died, an ascetic entered his body and distributed alms to his students. This aroused suspicion in the mind of Minister Rakshasa, who found and destroyed the ascetic's body. Rakshasa then joined the service of King Parvataka.

Prompted by a prophesy Minister Shaktara killed the possessed Nanda and installed the real heir Ugradhanvan as the king. When the latter learnt of his "father's" murder, he imprisoned and starved Shaktara and his hundred sons. Vikatara, the youngest son, survived and was released somehow. He took revenge with Chanakya's help.

The originality of Sarala's epic in the world of Prison-revenge stories lies in its novel conception of the ethical choices facing Sakuni. Sarala's Sakuni refused to return to his ancestral kingdom and gave up his life in the battlefield. Sakuni's act of revenge was simultaneously his act of virtuous suicide. Sarala gave Sakuni a second choice where he amply redeemed himself. In Sarala's eyes, Sakuni was a sufficiently moral person to make that choice. The originality of Sarala is evident only when it is compared with other inter-related tales that define the story space that is India, where shared narrative frames have circulated over a long period of time.

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B M MALHOTRA

INDIA'S Partition, which the British rulers in pursuit of their notorious "divide and rule" policy, manoeuvred to inflict on us in 1947 as a concomitant of our long-coveted and overdue Independence, still continues to revive painful memories, especially of those who were directly affected by it.

The bloody communal riots that the Partition unleashed resulted in large-scale arson, loot, killings and other atrocities perpetrated on innocent victims by frenzied mobs and bigoted individuals in certain parts of India, mainly the Punjab and Bengal.

The Divide also led to an unprecedented forced displacement and migration of millions of Hindus and Sikhs from the areas constituting Pakistan to the rest of India and an almost equal number of Muslims from India to that newly created country comprising West Pakistan and East Pakistan. East Pakistan was of course liberated and transformed into a sovereign Bangladesh in 1971.

Metaphorically, the Partition turned the golden dreams of Indians for a wholesome Independence into a nightmare and they felt that though spring had arrived, it was unfortunately accompanied by a harsh autumn.

The Partition was in the news recently as an exhibition titled, *Rising From the Dust: Hidden Tales from India 1947 Refugee Camps* was organized in Delhi in May, 2016 when some Partition-related documents, photographs of tented refugees and sundry other memorabilia were displayed and some stories of aggrieved families were recalled with poignancy.

Of human interest were the instances of some Muslims helping and saving their Hindu and Sikh neighbours and friends and vice versa when parts of the country were engulfed by the mind-blowing and traumatizing happenings.

The exhibition was a precursor of a Partition Museum which is proposed to be established in Amritsar by this year end to commemorate the 70th year of that earth-shaking crucial event. The Museum is expected to showcase recorded oral narrations and the objects such as phulkari stoles and other garments which people brought with them as well as accounts of some later developments.

The attainment of Independence by India on August 15, 1947 was the result of a long-drawn freedom struggle spear-headed and sustained by a unique galaxy of outstanding Indian leaders headed by M K Gandhi. Unique it was because such a large number of leaders of high patriotic-cum-political stature - several of them barristers, educationists and social reformers - have never existed anywhere else.

The movement was by and large peaceful and marked by fasts and incarcerations of top leaders as well as other Indians. Revolutionary patriots such as Bhagat Singh, Rajguru, Sukhdev, B K Dutt, Chandra Shekhar Azad, Ashfaqulla and Ram Prasad Bismil gladly went to the gallows or embraced death otherwise for the cause of the Independence.

Unforgettable is the significant contribution of Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose, who created the Azad Hind Fauj (Indian National army), whose spirit was pepped by the song, *Qadam qadam badhaayeja/Khushi ke geet gaayeja* (Keep on marching step by step with happy songs on your lips). Netaji also gave the country its popular national slogan, JAI HIND.

Poets and prose writers too supported and supplemented the struggle through their writings and inspired people to join the movement.

Outstanding in its impact was Bismil's soul-stirring poem, *Sarfarooshi ki tamanna ab hamaare dil mein hai, / Dekhna hai zor kitna bazoo-e-quatil mein hai* (To lay down our lives for our motherland is now our ardent wish. / Let's measure the strength in the killer's arm).

During their jail term Bhagat Singh and his patriot co-prisoners spiritedly sang this as well as another song, *Mera rang de basanti chola ni Maaye* (O Mother! Dye my tunic in the colour of mustard flowers - the colour of renunciation).

Bakim Chandra's freedom song *Vande Mataram*,

The Partition: *A painful relic*



Rabindranth Tagore's, *Jana Gana Mana*, now our National Anthem and Iqbal's *Quami Taraana*, *Saare jahaan se achha Hindustan hamaara* (East or West, India is the best) also lifted the Indians' spirits and provided a strong impetus to the national movement.

Prose writers such as Munshi Premchand, Sajaad Zaheer, Rajinder Singh Bedi, Krishan Chander, S H Manto and Ismat Chughtai also produced some Partition-related works.

Though written after the Partition, Manto's story *Toba Tek Singh* deserves a special mention here as it offers a sharp satirical comment on the religion-based transfer of population (lunatics in this case) from one country to the other. Ismat's story for the film *Garam Hawa* (1973) too deserves a recall as it presented the post-Partition dilemma of an Indian Muslim of having to decide whether to continue to stay in India or move away to Pakistan.

Incidentally, a film on Manto called, *Mantostan* featuring US-trained script writer and actress Sonal Sehgal in an important role has already been made and shown recently at Cannes. Nandita Das is also making a film on Manto, as she explained at the recently organized "Rekhta" fair in Delhi.

In the 1940s, preceding the Partition, Prithviraj Kapoor through his stage plays, particularly *Deewar*, *Kathan* and *Ghaddar* had also striven to promote nationalism and unity and to ward off the then imminent Partition.

Cinema, which mirrors life and often interprets contemporary developments did not lack in presenting films and film songs, though covertly, in view of the strict British censor laws, to support the freedom struggle. *Door hato, ai duniyavaalo, Hindustan hamaara hai* (Keep off you foreigners, India is ours) from *Kismet* (1943) and *Nagri meri kab tak yunhi barbaad rahegi?* (Till when will my moth-

erland remain in ruins?) in *Man Ki Jeet* (1944), were the most popular patriotic numbers of their time.

Kidar Sharma's *Bhanwara* (1944) had the K L Saigal-led chorus, *Thukra rahi hai duniya, hum hain keh so rahe hain!* ... *Yeh waqt qeemati hum jhagdon mein kho rahe hain* (The world is kicking us and yet we are asleep/ ... This precious time we are wasting in our quarrels). K A Abbas's *Naya Sansar* (1940) had an explicit and inspirational duet, *Ek naya sansar bana lein, ek naya sansar! Dharti ho azaad jismein, jeevan ho azaad! Janta ka ho raj jagat mein janta ki sarkar* (Let's create a world in which land and life will be free and people's rule will prevail).

While V Shantaram's *Padosi* (1941) and P L Santoshi's *Hum Ek Hain* (1946) aimed at promoting communal amity, Chetan Anand's *Neecha Nagar* (1946) and Abbas's *Dharti Ke Lal* (1946) carried a plea for national integration and suggested protest against injustice.

Included in film *Garam Hawa* was a remorsecausing poem of Kaifi Azmi which opened with the words, *Tagseem hua mulk to dil ho gaya tukde. /Har seene mein toofaan wahaan bhi tha yahaan bhi* (When the Partition occurred, hearts were shattered both there and here). The poem went on to condemn people who paid no heed to their religious instructions and indulged in extreme violence with horrible results on both sides of the dividing lines.

TV drama *Tamas* (1987), based on Bhisham Sahni's book with the same title showed some graphic details of the Partition, as did indirectly another serial, *Buniyad* (also 1987). A number of literature-inspired films relating to the Partition and Indo-Pak relations have been made such as *Earth 1947* (1988), based on Bapsi Sidhwa's novel, *Ice Candy Man*; *Train To Pakistan* (1988), adopted from Khushwant Singh's novel with the same title and *Pinjar* (2003), based on

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Amrita Pritam's eponymous novel.

Ritwik Ghatak's Bangla films, *Megha Dhaka Tara* (1960), *Komal Gandhar* (1961) and *Subarnalekha* (1961) questioned the rationale of the Partition; condemned the suffering caused by it, yet highlighted the affected people's strong wish for reunification of the sundered part of the country with its parent body.

Henna (1991), *Border* (1997), *Sarfaroosh* (1999), *Fiza*, *Mission Kashmir* and *Refugee* (all 2000), *Gadar - Ek Prem Katha*, *LOC-Kargil*, *Lakshya* and *Veer Zara* (all 2003) are some of the films with themes concerning Indo-Pak relations. *Sarabjit* (2016) is the latest film of this sub genre. Mahesh Bhatt is now making a movie specifically on the Partition with Vidya Balan in a central role.

Unsurprisingly, there are still some very senior persons in both India and Pakistan who experienced firsthand the onset of the Partition and its aftermath and who nevertheless cherish fond memories of the halcyon peaceful ambience and brotherhood that prevailed among different communities before the Partition.

A senior Indian Hindu journalist and author, now in almost his mid-nineties, feels deceived by the British rulers and the Indian leaders of the time who allowed or acquiesced in the bifurcation of India. Hoping against hope, he continues to nurse the possibility of India and Pakistan reuniting, even as a confederation of sorts, a few decades hence. This experienced gentleman who interacted with all the important leaders of pre and post-Partition vintage may be in the minority of one but he is unshaken in his conviction.

His seems to be a simplistic and an overoptimistic wish, but who knows? As more time passes, the relevance and rigidity of untenable aspects of religion and unethical old beliefs are likely to diminish considerably, while further advance in science and technology and modernism is expected to bring about an improvement in peoples' attitude and thinking and promote tolerance.

The all-important peace will then be the common aim of individuals and nations. Hopefully, that peace will be free from bigotry, enmity and terrorism and usher in an era of prosperity with improvement in economy, trade, availability of jobs and circumstances conducive for peoples' other preferred pursuits.

However, taking into account the actual uncertain state of relations between our two countries, all this appears only as a vague dream far removed from the realm of reality and beyond the scope of achievement at least in the foreseeable future.