

Azim Premji University

From the Selected Works of Vikas Kumar

Summer June, 2018

Reading the Whole in the Part (Sarala Mahabharata)

Vikas Kumar

Bibudhendra Narayan Patnaik



Available at: https://works.bepress.com/vikas_kumar/307/

ISSN 2349-5081

JOURNAL OF CENTRE FOR ASIAN STUDIES

margASIA

SUMMER 2018



- EDITORIAL : | 02
- ESSAY : **Yu Sun** | Migrant Translators and Chinese Literature in Translation | 03
Claire Blaser | A Revolutionary Journey: Frieda Hauswirth's Life | 08
Vikas Kumar and BN Patnaik | Sarala Mahabharata: Reading the Whole in the Part | 11
- POEMS : **Bibhu Padhi** | Four Poems | 13
Gili Haimovich | Two Poems | 15
Tsippy Levin Byron | Two Poems | 16
Yehuda Amichai | Three Poems and a Letter | 17
- SHORT STORY : **Japani** | Shradh | 19
- BOOK REVIEW : **Debalina Sen** | Imortal China | 22
Shaswat Panda | An Intimate History of the Freedom Struggle | 26
John Creyke | A Variety of Human Experiences | 28
Aruni Mohapatra | Ways of Being Human | 31
Shamsad Mortuza | A Cultural Bricolage | 34
Animesh Mahapatra | History of a Hallowed Institution | 37

Opinions expressed in the articles published in this journal are the authors' own. The editors are not responsible for the same.

CENTRE FOR ASIAN STUDIES

Board of Advisors:

Jitendra Nath Misra
Indian Foreign Service (Retd.)

Mark Shuttleworth
University College, London

Kaiser Haq
Professor of English, University of Liberal Arts,
Dhaka, Bangladesh

Irena Vladimirsky
University of Tel Aviv, Israel

Subha Chakravarty Dasgupta
Dept. of Modern Indian Languages, University of Delhi

Ananta Mohapatra
Theatre Activist, Bhubaneswar, Odisha, India

Kishore Kumar Basa
Professor of Anthropology, Utkal University,
Bhubaneswar, Odisha, India

margASIA

Summer 2018 Volume 6 | Issue 1

Editor in Chief
Jatindra Kumar Nayak

Editor
Sangram Jena

Art Editor
Saroj Bal

Printed and published by Sangram Jena on behalf of Centre
for Asian Studies, Bhubaneswar, Odisha, India and printed at
Print-tech Offset, Bhubaneswar, Odisha, India

Price ₹ 50.00 | \$ 5.00

Sarala Mahabharata: Reading the Whole in the Part

Vikas Kumar and BN Patnaik

Self-repetition within nested discourse is distinctive feature of the itihaasas and the puranas in Sanskrit. It is not the case that the ancients were not familiar with dense, non-repetitive discourse. The *KautiliyaArthasastra* and the early *dharmasutras* written in the sutra form exemplify this other style. Instead of repeating something already discussed or that is going to be discussed in greater detail later, Kautilya would say, “has been stated before,” “exactly as before,” “we shall explain in,” and the like. The writers of itihaasas and puranas would have known the sutra style adopted in the “scientific” discourse. Yet, they chose self-repetition, which we also find in the medieval retellings of these classical poetic texts in the modern Indian languages, including Odia.

In *Sarala Mahabharata*, several characters such as Krishna, Vyasa, Agasti (Agastya), Bhishma, Sahadeva, Gandharsena, Sakuni, and Virat’s wife Sudeshna knew the whole or a part of the story. Shikhandi and Sakuni had limited memory of their previous existences. Sahadeva knew the past as well as the future, but would not reveal anything unless asked. Agasti was the all-knowing narrator in Sarala’s version whereas Vyasa was both a character and the narrator in the canonical text. Krishna stood out

among these characters because he alone had the knowledge of Self in addition to the knowledge about others.

Some of those who knew the story told the whole or part of the story to other characters, which gives the narrative “the story-within-the story” form. The prospective tellings include Gandharsen’s dying advice to his son Sakuni (Aadi Parva), Bhishma’s foretelling of events (Bhishma Parva and elsewhere), the deliberations between Krishna and Sakuni on the necessity or otherwise of the war (Udyoga Parva), and Sudeshna’s foretelling about what would happen in it (Udyoga Parva).

Retrospective tellings include Sahadeva’s narrating the story to Yudhisthira’s Odia father-in-law Hari Sahu, who was perhaps the first person to hear the story of Mahabharata from one of the characters, in the presence of others, including Yudhisthira himself (Swargaarohana Parva). This brings to mind Rama’s children, Lava and Kusha, reciting Ramayana to the audience of Ayodhya in the presence of Rama himself.

Then there are cases of retrospective telling, not for the sake of telling, but in response to a question or a situation that demands it. The story of the mango stone is an example. The Pandavas and Draupadi here revealed to Krishna, Vyasa,

Gouramukha, and other sages hitherto unknown truths about themselves (Vana Parva). Draupadi sought revenge recounting in front of Krishna every detail of her humiliation in the hands of the Kauravas (Udyoga Parva). Bhishma recounted the various doings of (Krishna-) Narayana as he argued with Krishna's detractors (Udyoga Parva). After being asked by the avatari Vishnu to end his sojourn in the land of the mortals, Krishna reflected on a few episodes of his life in which he had lived irresponsibly, raising in that process a huge family, etc. (Aswamedha and Musali Parvas).

There is a fourth category of internal retelling involving characters such as Agasti, Kiratsena, Belalsena, and Sanjay who *saw* part or whole of the story. Kiratsena's severed head requested Krishna to let it live so that it could witness the Kurukshetra war (Bhishma Parva). Krishna placed him on the top of his chariot, Nandighosha, and granted him eternal life. When the Pandavas fought among themselves about who deserved credit for the victory in the Kurukshetra war, Krishna took them to the severed head of Belalsena, who had seen all that had happened (Gadaa Parva).

Why so many retellings? Sravana is a form of bhakti that eventually leads to moksha. So, the poet does not lose any opportunity to retell the story. But this overlooks a deeper narrative significance of this mode of storytelling. There are as many *internal* perspectives in the story as there are characters who knew and told the story within the story. And, since these characters and the episodes of retelling are dispersed across the parvas, each part of *Sarala Mahabharata* contains the whole of it, in a manner of speaking.

The multiple tellings are framed by two boundaries, within which they unfold. First, there is a consciousness that the whole story will repeat itself in some form in later yugas. For example, Agni told Arjuna that he will return the latter's weapons in the next yuga. In fact, at the end of

the story, as the characters faded away to the other worlds, what was left behind was the script to be re-enacted in another yuga, another aeon. Second, the retellings unfold within Agasti's narration to Baibasuta Manu, which serves as the master frame. Once the story starts it continues at two levels – at one level it is as a story being told to the listeners and their doubts, which highlight alternatives, lead to other stories. At another level the characters start talking, with listeners interrupting with doubts. So, there is constant interaction between the two levels of the story. These two levels are nested, i.e., arranged like layers in onions. For instance, Bhishma's telling Arjuna the story of Amba is circled by a discourse between Sanjay and Dhritarashtra that in turn unfolds within the discourse of Agasti and Baibasuta Manu.

Where does Sarala fit into this crowded universe of exchanges? Sarala is not a character in the narrative and simply describes the events, while Agasti too does that but he also clarifies when required. Unlike Agasti and Vyasa, Sarala did not *see* the story or compose it. He heard it from goddess Sarala, which means he is not even the *sutradhara*. Sarala says that he played god Ganesh's role, i.e., he was a scribe to goddess Sarala, but unlike Ganesh he was not part of the story. In any case, even scribes have their own perspective. Sarala is not an exception. He intervenes by offering prayers to and singing the glories of Krishna, Shiva, Balarama, goddess Sarala, etc.

Viewing *Sarala Mahabharata* as a collection of interconnected, nested stories, each containing characters who had the knowledge of what was to come, opens up new vistas for exploration. How do people relate to the future in a world that abounds in individuals who have foreknowledge? What do the present time and the human agency mean to them? What does amnesia do to those who know the past, present, and future? What insights does *Sarala Mahabharata* offer in these respects? ● ●

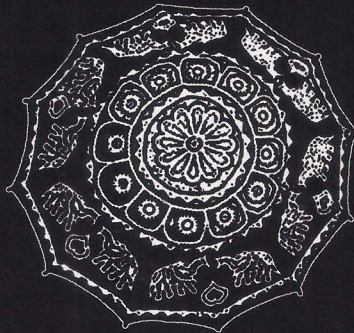
VOLUME 6 | ISSUE 1 | SUMMER 2018

ISSN 2349-5081

JOURNAL OF CENTRE FOR ASIAN STUDIES

margASIA

SUMMER 2018



Centre for Asian Studies

N-5/22, 2nd Floor, IRC Village,
Bhubaneswar-751015, Odisha, India
E-mail: margasia.india@gmail.com
Mobile: 09437886970

COVER: SAROJ BAL