Sarala Mahabharata in Oriya and Historical Consciousness:
A Reinterpretation

Kailash Chandra Dash

I

The Mahabharata of Sarala Das in Oriya language which was composed in the 15th-16th century A.D. was a lasting literary contribution in a phase of all India vernacularization. This voluminous text is regarded as the first written form of Oriya epic and thus serves as a paradigm for the blossoming of further epic literature in Orissa in the medieval phase. The author of the text styled himself as Sarala Das for his devotion to the goddess Sarala(a local female deity who combines Sakta and Vaishnava typology in herself) and thus he had this name after the compilation of the Mahabharata in Oriya. This Mahabharata of Sarala Das is not the correct rendering of the Sanskrit Mahabharata of Vyasa. It is only a comprehensive digest of the socio-political-cultural set-up of India as well as of Orissa in the medieval phase in the garb of the characters of the Sanskrit epic. The author calls it as Mahabharata, yet he utilizes portions of other Puranas and Upa-Puranas. He combines them with regional traditional accounts known to him. The most important aspect of the study of this regional Mahabharata in Oriya is the nature and character of the content. As it concentrates on the early and medieval phase its importance has been felt by the historians and linguists who sometimes have been tempted to use it for historical study. If one looks at the study of Michel Foucault in his The Order of Things - An Archaeology of the Human Sciences he or she must accept certain historical situation or milieu in the composition of any literary text and so the text of Sarala Das is no exception to his idea. Historical consciousness exists in the Oriya Mahabharata, but this cannot be accepted in the modern sense of the term. In Orissa this has been a debate for the last sixty years from the colonial to the post-colonial phase. Hence in this paper my emphasis is on this historical consciousness in the Sarala Mahabharata after a thorough study of the views of the literary critics and historians in Orissa.
Sarala Mahabharata was really brought to focus in the 17th-18th century A.D. by one Pitambara Das, the author of the Oriya Narasimha Purana and before that in the whole phase of the 16th-17th century A.D. in Orissa increasing emphasis was on the Bhagavata of Jagannatha Das, Ramayana of Balaram Das, Harivamsha of Achyutananda Das and on the texts of Bhakti by the followers of Chaitanya. In the 19th century we find this name in the text of W.W. Hunter on Orissa who in 1872 stated that Sarala Das Kavi lived 300 years ago; translated Mahabharata into Oriya. It was only in the 20th century A.D there was increasing study on the Oriya Mahabharata of Sarala Das in the well-known Oriya magazines like Utkala Sahitya, Mukura and Jhankara. Pandit Mrutyujaya Rath started a comprehensive study on Sarala Mahabharata in 1911 in Mukura (Oriya literary magazine) and then in 1915 Gopinath Nandasharma in Utkala Sahitya. The two literary critics actually contributed to the study on the time and nature of the Oriya Mahabharata of Sarala Das and they accepted certain historical trends and even events of the early and medieval India which were concealed in the garb of the narrative of the characters and episodes of this text. Another great critic Nilakantha Das in 1948-1953 delved deep into the Mahabharata of Sarala Das and found in it historical consciousness of the early and medieval phase of India. In the 1950s and 1960s in the literary magazines like Jhankara and Dagara there was intense debate on the nature and content of the Mahabharata of Sarala Das and the well known participants of this debate were Gopinath Mohanty (Winner of Jnanapith Award), Bishnudhar Mohanty, Achyutananda Das and Krishnachandra Panigrahi. The study was further intensified with John Boulton’s interest in it and by the critical evaluation by Satchidananda Mishra and Gaganendranath Dash and many others. It was Gaganendranath Dash who contested the view that Sarala Das intentionally used history in the compilation of his Mahabharata and he suggested that in order to understand the mind of Sarala Das in relation to his Mahabharata one must know the Cyclic Time which he was following and that one must not forget his Sakta Hindu mind. The last points deserve notice in this context for determining historical consciousness in the Oriya Mahabharata of Sarala Das.

The conception of Time was very significant for the authors of the epics in early and medieval age in India. Ancient and medieval poets and writers were conscious of Cyclic Time and Linear Time. The notion of Cyclic Time is essentially cosmological and one of its functions was to provide an imagined time context to myth. Linear Time is fundamental to a perceived historical rendering of the past that is dependent on human activity. Like all the ancient thinkers and writers of the Puranas Sarala Das had followed to a considerable extent the concept of Cyclic Time in his Mahabharata. On the other hand he was also conscious of Linear Time in his work. He followed Cyclic Time as a Brahmanical model for the legitimation of his text by the Brahmans as we find the development of events in the Yugas. He had also developed the Vamshanucharita narrative in his different Parvas and thus itihasa came to his vision. The historical consciousness that is implicit in Itihasa has a linear form and Sarala Das was aware of this conception. Different genealogical tables are plentifully available in his Mahabharata which declare his Time consciousness and this pattern was correctly followed by
the author of Madalapanji in the 17th century A.D. In the different Parvas (sections) of his Mahabharata Sarala Das had also used historical characters of the history of India and they were not present in the original Sanskrit Mahabharata. It indicates that he was aware of certain ruling families in Orissa and elsewhere. The way of presenting the narrative indicates to his historical consciousness particularly his appreciation of Linear Time.

An interesting aspect of his historical sense was the presentation of Shasana Patras (Grant of donations) which were actually granted by the royal political power to the upper sections of the society in early and medieval India for multifarious purposes. In the Adi Parva (First Section) of Sarala Mahabharata there is a description of Bauri Shasana (A Dalit Establishment) which was sanctioned by the Brahmanic Power. The poet in this context recollected the grant of copper plate record of the kings of Orissa of the early and medieval phase by stating that a Bauri Shasana was created for one Bauri (a dalit person) by Krishna Vasudeva and he was designated as Kalindi Vipravara (a Brahmin). For that purpose (for the legitimation of the grant) a copper plate in the presence of the gods was inscribed which contained the evidence of the Bauri Shasana. Besides this the description of events in his Mahabharata contains Time on the basis of astrological calculation which also suggests his keen awareness of history.

In writing his Mahabharata the poet has followed the main outline of the story of the Sanskrit Mahabharata, but has made numerous deviations and has added to it copiously the stories of his own creation and various other matters known to him. In the final form Sarala Das’s Mahabharata is a new creation analogous to Kalidasa’s Raghuvamsha which is distinctly an original work, even though it is based on the Ramayana. K.C. Panigrahi, a great historian of Orissa, was very confident on the historical consciousness of the poet in his Mahabharata. He found several historical and geographical references in the Sarala Mahabharata which were mostly absent in the Sanskrit original. Panigrahi appreciating the views of his predecessors like Mrutyunjaya Rath, Gopinath Nandasharma and Nilakantha Das made a thorough study of the Mahabharata of Sarala Das and suggested that the poet had consciously and intentionally introduced several historical characters and events of early and medieval India. He has thoroughly studied several references and contexts of the Oriya Mahabharata to justify that the poet was really a historian. The interpretation of Panigrahi on the history of Orissa and India in the Sarala Mahabharata has been contested by G.N. Dash in an insightful focus in Oriya. The interesting debate of G.N. Dash can be stated in several points;

1. Where did Sarala Das know the political, military history of India of his period and what were his new sources?
2. The sources on the early and medieval period of India before Sarala Das were difficult to access on the part of a common man as they included in Sanskrit, Palli and sometimes in Parsi languages. Some of the sources were recorded in the copper plate grants which were
not available to the common man in those days. Hence how could he read them, decipher them and where from he could get them when such type of research was not available?

3. Some of the sources on early and medieval India used by Sarala Das in his Mahabharata are mainly based on the traditional accounts which were incomplete in their messages and were obscure on the dynastic history. How could Sarala Das know the scientific historiography in the medieval phase which was dominated by the incomplete messages of the traditional accounts?

4. The way Panigrahi interpreted Sarala Mahabharata to reconstruct the history of India indicated that the poet was aware of the historiography of the modern age. But such interpretations were not possible in those days considering the nature of the historical texts of the time. Sarala Das claimed himself as an ordinary village peasant who was ignorant of Sanskrit and so to trace the modern historiography in his Mahabharata is an artificial study and so it cannot be based on the actual history.

Thus G.N.Dash while contesting the views of Panigrahi on the historical consciousness of Sarala Das stated that the poet had a medieval Hindu mind and attitude. How could such a person direct his attention to history and how could he be able to preserve the past in such a correct manner in the different episodes of his Mahabharata? The geographical information given by Sarala Das is sometimes not correct and also incomplete and it cannot be accepted by the modern scholars. It is really difficult to discover historical sense in a proper manner in Sarala Mahabharata due to his admiration for the traditional accounts which are constructed on a historical basis. In this respect also we cannot subscribe to Panigrahi’s ideas on Sarala Mahabharata. Also several additions were made in his Mahabharata in the post-medieval phase by the different copyists of the palm leaves and so his original messages were not clearly preserved. On the basis of the similarities in names(historical names and characters) as well as on the structural similarity(similarity in the political and military events of history) Panigrahi presented the brilliant historical consciousness of Sarala Das; but G.N.Dash rejected this similarity thoery. Thus with his limited geographical knowledge and his admiration for a tradition-bound history Sarala Das presented his Mahabharata. Although we accept this view of G.N.Dash we cannot accept his theory that Sarala Dash was a simple believer of Cyclic Time and was not a supporter of the Linear Time.

While we deny direct and reliable historical references on the political history of early and medieval India in Sarala Mahabharata we can have abundant sources there on the socio-cultural trends of early medieval India. Sarala Das in the 15th century A.D. presented the dichotomy of Sudra-Dvija and the resurgence of the Dalits in Orissa in several sections and that constitutes a significant aspect of the social history of medieval Orissa. The undue supremacy of the Brahmanas in the social structure, sectarian rivalry and the Hinduization of the tribal centres in Orissa have been cogently presented in his Mahabharata which can be accepted as an element of historical consciousness. In fact he had appropriated several traditional accounts of
the Puranas in his Mahabharata to present messages on social harmony and even casteless society in Orissa. His study of the celebrated sacred centres in medieval Orissa-Yajpur-Viraja, Mahavinayaka, Kapilas, Konarka Arka Kshetra, Ekamraka-Bhubaneswar and above all Jagannatha-Purushottama Kshetra deserve considerable attention from the side of the historians, sociologists and anthropologists and in his approach to these sacred centres he showed newness by pointing to the tribal root of the centres which were suppressed in the Puranic accounts of his period. We can thus detect his awareness of Linear Time in this context and they are very authentic for the historians of Orissa and India.

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The Oriya Mahabharata of Sarala Das represents the beginning of a spectacular phase of vernacularization in Orissa. As we have seen in the work of Sheldon Pollock from around 1000 A.D. in India there began a phase of vernacularization by which local speech forms were newly dignified as literary languages and began to challenge Sanskrit for the work of both poetry and polity and in the end replaced it. Medieval Orissa around 14th century A.D. saw this transformation and Sarala Das was a representative of this phase. He was a contemporary of the Suryavamshi Gajapati king Kapilendra Deva(A.D.1435-1468) who issued most of his orders in the temples of Orissa-Lingaraja and Jagannatha in Oriya language. It indicates that Sarala Das wanted to popularize Oriya language by compiling Mahabharata and Ramayana in Oriya and in doing so he was well aware of the inner demand of his age which was increasing vernacularization. The vernacularization process began with Sarala Das in Orissa in the 15th century A.D. and found fuller expression in the advancing centuries as we find remarkable growth of Oriya literature in this phase which was absent in the pre-Sarala Das period in Orissa.

References


For an interesting study on the debate of the historical consciousness in Sarala Mahabharata see Dash, G.N., op.cit., 1988.


See Dash, Gaganendranath, op.cit., p.3.

Dash, Gaganendranath, op.cit., p.3-4.

For an interesting discourse on Sarala Mahabharata in Oriya see Boulton, John, “Mo Drustire Sarala Das O Tanka Mahabharata” (Sarala Das and His Mahabharata in my Study in Oriya), Saralo Samikshya, ed. Sarala Smaraka, Cuttack, 1979, p.43-76.

Dash, Gaganendranath, op.cit., p.1-25. This essay has also been included in his collection entitled Nirbachita Prabandha Sankalana in Oriya, Vidyapuri, 2005.


Panigrahi, K.C., Sarala Das, Sahitya Akademy, New Delhi, 1975

Panigrahi, K.C., Sarala Sahityara Aitihasika Chitra (Historical features of Sarala Literature in Oriya), 1976/89, Cuttack.


Thapar, Romila, op.cit., p.24.

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In early and medieval India at least from the Gupta age elaborate arrangements were made to grant lands to different social groups by the political authority and they were described as Shasana Patras. Orissa of the early and medieval phase provides an interesting example of the copper plate land grants.

19. Ibid.
20. Ibid.
22. Ibid.
25. Ibid.
26. Ibid.
27. Ibid.
28. In the different sections of the Mahabharata of Sarala Das there is a clear indication of Linear Time because he was conscious of the Vansanucharita of the kings (Royal pedigrees). Several episodes if properly interpreted can indicate that the poet had some access into regional political and socio-cultural issues.
29. The section entitled Tripurasura Badha (Killing of the demon Tripura) in *Virata Parva* of his *Mahabharata* contains the idea of dalit resurgence as well as Sudra-Brahma dichotomy in medieval Orissa. This section does not follow the account which was also incorporated in Siva Mahapurana and other Sanskrit traditional accounts. It indicates that the poet appropriated this tradition for his conception of casteless society in medieval Orissa. We can also see several other accounts in his Mahabharata for a study of dalit resurgence in Orissa. See *Virata parva*, Sarala Mahabharata, Cultural Affairs, Bhubaneswar, p.78-96; *Vana Parva*, p.142; *Adi Parva, Second Part*, p.690-705 for social protest of the time of Sarala Das.

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