A Conversation with Professor B. N. Patnaik

Anand Mahanand (AM): Sir, happy to note that you have been interested in *Sarala Mahabharata*. How did you get interested in it?

B.N.Patnaik (BNP): This happened by pure accident. I had with me the volumes of *Sarala Mahabharata* (*Saaralaa Mahaabhaarata*, which reflects the way it is pronounced in Odia) and had not used them for ten years. After my retirement, I joined Central Institute of Indian Languages, Mysore, as Fellow for two years. I was to work on a project of my choice. I had already chosen to work on historical syntax of *Odia*, and *Sarala Mahabharata* of course was part of that project, because it represents 15th century *Odia*. Although it was not prose, but poetry, I still thought I could get from it something which would be of useful; I could use it as data for linguistic analysis. When I started reading *Sarala Mahabharata*, I was absolutely overwhelmed by the narrative. As there are many *Ramayans*, similarly, I guessed, there would be many *Mahabharatas*. So I expected Sarala’s story to be somewhat different. But I did not know that it would be so different. We know that there is a persuasive view that the *Gita* was not a part of the original Mahabharata, that it was an interpolation. But at the time - 15th century - when Sarala composed his *Mahabharata*, his source was certainly the version in which there was the *Gita*. Because by the 15th century, in the popular imagination, the *Gita* was already a part of the Mahabharata narrative. Therefore, when Sarala started composing his version, I can imagine that, for him the source text was not one in which there was no *Gita*, but the one in which there was the *Gita*. And yet in *Sarala Mahabharata*, there is no *Gita*. Now if there is no *Gita* in a certain version, then in that version I would not expect Arjuna to feel so greatly morally troubled while facing the Kaurava’s army. I would expect in that version that the two armies would meet and the fighting would start in the normal course. There would thus be no context for Krishna’s intervention, that is, *Gita*, in this narrative. But then, in *Sarala Mahabharata*, there indeed is a context for it. Arjuna did tell Krishna that he was not going to start the war. Krishna told him to shoot the first arrow and start the war. Arjuna refused. Arjuna said ‘I am not going to shoot the first arrow. I am not going to start the war’. Shooting the first arrow is actually symbolic; the
main thing is his refusal to start the war. “I am not going to attack first”, he said, “I will fight if only others attack me”. From here how did he end up joining the war? Krishna said nothing to Arjuna, unlike in *Vyasa Mahabharata*. Here all that Krishna did was, he got down from the chariot, went to Yudhisthira and told him, “Your brother is unwilling to fight”. Yudhisthira said “he is absolutely right; we must explore the possibility of peace even in the battlefield”. Thus, unlike *Vyasa Mahabharata*, Krishna was not the last person to go to the Kauravas for negotiation for peace. It was Yudhistir, on the battlefield itself. So, he went to Duryodhana but Duryodhana refused to give him an inch of land. While coming back from Dutyodhana, he said “those who want to fight for dharma, come and join me”. One of Duryodhana’s brothers, Durdasa by name, decided to abandon Duryodhana and fight for Pandavas but when he announced the decision, Yudhisthira, who had gone to the Kaurava side unarmed, was still on the Kaurava’s side of the battlefield, and Duryodhana was very upset and he asked his army to attack his own brother, who had decided to go over to the Pandavas’ side. So that brother of his had to give protection to Yudhisthira and protect himself, and that was how the fight started. Soon Arjuna heard the noise and asked Krishna “what is happening? Why is the commotion?” So Krishna asked Hanuman on the top of Arjuna’s chariot to see what was happening. As Hanuman said what he had seen, Arjuna told Krishna, “Take me to the place where my brother is. He must be in danger and I must fight”. Krishna said “Why you are troubled about it. Your brother has gone to his own brother’s side and you are not attacked, so why do you want to fight?” He [Arjuna] said ‘Please don’t taunt me and take me where my brother is”. This is how he joined the fight. Look at the way Arjun’s moral problem is resolved... very, very differently from the way it is in the classical text. And imagine a Mahabharata in which you have Sakuni on the Kaurava’s side and Krishna on the other side, and Krishna and Sakuni, conspiring together to destroy the Kauravas. This is what happens in Sarala’s version. Here the defining moment comes just before the war, everyone was ready for the war, the two armies were resting for the night, and everyone knew that the following morning the war would begin, for which all the necessary rituals have been performed. This was when Sakuni and Krishna meet. There is nothing like it in *Vyasa Mahabharata*. There Krishna asked Sakuni “Should this war take place?” Sakuni said “Depends on you. If you want the war to take place, the war will take place, if you want there would be peace I will bring peace to the Kaurava and Pandavas. Whatever you want will happen. You simply have to order me. But before you tell me anything, remember your own *avataric* purpose”. In Sarala’s version,
Sakuni is a devotee of Krishna. He had a personal grudge against Duryodhna and he wanted the Kauravas to be destroyed, but one individual could not fight with the might of the Kauravas. Therefore he had to resort to manipulation and treachery to destroy the Kauravas. In fact when somebody who was powerless and had decided to fight against a supremely mighty power, what could he do? He could not have played it fair. That is precisely what he did. At the same time there was another Sakuni in him, the Sakuni who believed and said to Krishna that he was there to help him in his *avataric* objectives. Thus war was Krishna’s decision, which is significant and symbolic. As far as Sarala was concerned, the war was a manifestation of the divine will; it was the fulfilment of the cosmic objective. In any case, Sarala’s narrative creativity and originality impressed me greatly and I thought I would study Sarala from this perspective first and from the linguistic point of view later.

**Ajit:** You call *Sarala Mahabharata* as subaltern Mahabharata and also you give many instances of subversion. Could you please elaborate on this?

**BNP:** One example: a Mahabharata narrative, going by what Krishna Singh said, should have an invocation. He must first invoke *Narayana*, then *Nara*, then *Saraswati* then *Vyasa*, and then proceed to tell the story of victory. That is the standard ritual invocation. But Sarala did not do that. Sarala invoked Lord Ganesh, the local deity Sarala and did not invoke Narayana or Krishna, Nara and Vyasa. By rejecting the traditional invocation, he was asserting his narrative freedom from the tradition. Besides, Sarala asserted that his Mahabharata was “Bishnu Purana”. He said so repeatedly in his *Mahabharata*. Now, when he called it a purana, he was saying that the story of the Puru clan was of interest to him only as a means to describe the *leela* of Bishnu. It is to be noted here that Odia literary tradition did not distinguish between *itihasa* and *purana*, as the Sanskrit literary tradition did, and this may be due to Sarala’s recreating an *itihasic* narrative as a *purana*. And one more point I would like to mention in this connection here, which is that in *Sarala Mahabharata*, Duryodhana does not emerge as an embodiment of evil. Many of the things which Duryodhana was did in Vyasa’s narrative, he did not do in Sarala’s, such as, manipulating the game of dice, inviting Yudhisthira to come to Hastinapura and play the game of dice and then exploiting the situation, etc. Nothing of these Duryodhan did in *Sarala Mahabharata*. In the latter, nobody asked him to play the game of dice. He himself went to Sakuni, who was sitting in a corner in the court, with no one paying any attention to him and
invited him to play with him: “Mama, shall we play dice”, he told him. It suddenly occurred to Sakuni that he could exploit the situation to fulfil his objective. Incidentally, in the *chirharan* episode, it was not Drupadi, it was god Surya’s divine consorts who clothed Draupadi. All Krishna did when Draupadi prayed to him was to ask Surya to make sure Dusssana’s attempt to dirrobe Draupadi must fail. He reminded him of his debt to Draupadi in her earlier incarnation.

In other words, from Sarala’s perspective, it is all due to one’s karma; good karma would bring good phala (result). You don’t get something just out of nothing. Grace comes only on account of karma. In any case, Duryodhana in Sarala’s version cannot be blamed for many things that brought suffering grief to the Pandavas. He never suggested that the loser in the game would go on exile, etc. It was Yudhisthira’s proposal. In sum, one would not fail to notice that in Sarala’s retelling, Duryodhana does not come out as the personification of evil. To that extent, Sarala’s story is the victim’s story. The prefix “du” is negative, so in the classical narrative, the names, Duryodhana, Dushasana, etc. have negative connotations. They were evil-natured and their names indicated it. Some believe that it was not the father, Dhritarastra, who had named his son Duryodhana, the name he had given was Suryodhana, it was the storytellers, who did. In *Sarala Mahabharata*, the name of each of the blind king’s sons began with the prefix “du”, but it did not carry any negative connotation. Durbasa was the sage who helped in the birth of the Kaurava princes. As a mark of gratitude to the great sage, Dhritarasta named his sons and daughter that way. This could be seen as Sarala not telling the Mahabharata story from the point of view of the victors. There is a good deal more to this. I have discussed this point in some detail in my *Introducing Saaralaa Mahaabhaarata*.

**Ajit:** What are the other examples of subversion that you have discussed in terms of language?

**BNP:** The language aspect is indeed very important, but I have done nothing in this regard. When I started working on Sarala, my friend, the linguist Ratha Nayak, said “In Artaballav Mohanty’s edition, you are unlikely to get the language of the original *Sarala Mahabharata*”. “Where can I find the original text?” I asked. He suggested that I read the available palm leaf manuscripts. There were many difficulties. I would not be allowed to photocopy them. I was not staying in Bhubaneshwar. I was in Mysore then. Then there was the problem of script. I knew I would not be able to read that script. I was advised to contact people who could. In that condition
I ran into another friend of mine, Prakash Pattnaik of Delhi University, folklorist, literary critic and linguist and told him my problem. He said “How do you know that the material you would find in the museum is the original one?” He said that many people surely made many copies (on palm leaf) of the text at different times and the texts they copied were not even the same. They copied from whatever text that was available to them. “So how would we know today which of these is the one that Sarala wrote?”, he said. “Instead of worrying about the original manuscript, I should study Artaballav Mohanty’s edition.”, was his advice. I went by his advice. In any case, I had already decided to work on the thematic and some discourse aspects of *Sarala Mahabharata*. One could study, for example, the strategies that Sakuni used to influence Duryodhana – his ideas, perspectives, the facts that he chose to use during an argument, the way he organized them, etc. - without worrying too much about the language factor. Turning to language, my feeling is that the language of *adi parva* of *Sarala Mahabharata* is somewhat different from that of some of the later *parvas*. If there is any substance to it, then there is need for explanation. I do not mean to say that the same person did not write all the *parvas*. One may be tempted to make this observation, but it does not necessarily follow from the facts (of language differentiation in the first and the last parvas). There are many interesting questions with respect to the language aspect. There is need for careful research in this area.

**AM: How does he orient towards the folk?**

**BNP:** Everybody who works on Sarala should perhaps be interested in this aspect of *Sarala Mahabharata*. But I don’t think I would have really thought about it but for Dr Mahanand. He wanted me to talk about the folk element in *Sarala Mahabharata*. Well, the grand Mahabharata narrative in all probability is a creative fusion of a number of folk stories told in various forms: tales, songs, etc. One could think of Vyasa as a creative compiler of all such stories. One would never know who the authors of these tales were. Incidentally, I don’t very much like the word “folk” as a label for a class of literature, because the connotations are not positive, at least in the way the word is commonly used. I would prefer the term “people’s”. In Sarala’s time, *Vyasa Mahabharata* was the elite composition in Odisha; from this point of view, *Sarala Mahabharata* was “people’s Mahabharata. Having said this, let me continue to use the word “folk” in this conversation. So *Vyasa Mahabharata* was the source Mahabharata narrative for Sarala; this was the story he was trying to retell in Odia. The source text was a non-folk composition; it was a
classical text, elite text. Now, as I have said, one can think of Vyasa as the poet who creatively put together many folk narratives, and the composition came to be known as Mahabharata, almost like many rivers and mountain springs with different origins joined at a certain place and someone gave this composite flow, this great river, the name “Ganga”. In a way, Sarala did the reverse; he reconceptualised the narrative and in his hands, the classical narrative became a folk narrative - to such an extent that Krishna Singh told that Sarala freely deviated from the original Mahabharata story and put too many things (many of these, folk tales) together, and consequently his Mahabharata did not give the Odia readers / listeners the feel of Vyasa Mahabharata. In the early part of 20th century the great intellectual of Odisha, Pandit Nilakantah Das, wanted to write a Mahabharata for the children and he said that he didn’t have a proper rendering of Vyasa Mahabharata in Odia to choose his material from. In other words, he rejected both Krishna Singh’s Mahabharata and Sarala’s Mahabharata as faithful renderings of the canonical text. For our present purpose, it shows that Das thought that Sarala’s version is different. We know it is, and one thing about it is the occurrence of many folk narratives in this version, which one may say, partially but quite illuminatingly, captures its origins in the folk narratives, not just in terms of content, but in tone of the narrative as well. As Sarala transformed a classical narrative into a folk narrative, one finds Shiva resting in Parvati’s lap and Parvati taking out ukuni (lice) from his matted hair, incidentally, the sort of thing one still finds in at least rural Odisha still. Yudhisthira married an Odia girl during his vanaprastha and Sahadeva told the story of the Kuru clan – the Mahabharata story – to Yudhisthira’s new father-in-law. Thus Sahadeva becomes the first narrator of the Mahabharata story and Hari Sahu, the first listener. Shiva descends from Kailash in the Himalayas and stays in Kapilasa in Odisha. In this particular narrative context, the folk and the localization become sort of non-distinct. And about Bhishma’s ichha mrutyu boon, it came from his mother. Not his father, as in the canonical narrative. When Ganga left her almost just born Bhishma, Santanu pleaded with her not to leave the child at that time, as he needed his feed from her. To this, Ganga said, jiele jiyu male maru, and which became a boon as it is interpretable roughly as “if he so wishes, let him live, if he so wishes, let him die” – which is what ichha mrutyu is about. Now these words and the syntax of the conditional localize this boon in some sense, and this is a folk element, for what is folk if it is not non-classical? In the narrative tradition the reverse process of the classical into folk is much
less common; in fact, it is hardly to be found. And this is what Sarala’s creative imagination gave us, contributed to the narrative tradition.

Now, when he created a very persuasive story to connect Krishna with Jagannatha, he brought Jagannatha of the “small tradition” – a deity originally worshipped by the tribals - into the domain of the “great tradition”. He is certainly not the first to do this, but in certain ways, the story that he created is not exactly the same as any existing story. In many ways, his Jara is an innovation. Now, when the local becomes the universal, doesn’t then the folk become the classical? Thus in Sarala Mahabharata, one finds the reverse too of what is mentioned above about the folk and the classical and their directionality.

Let me end this discussion with a personal note, which has nothing to do with the question we are discussing. Outside of the relevant narratives, one does not know for certain which tribals worshipped who we today call Jagannath. One does not know in form he was worshipped. Tree? Which tree-neem, pippal, sandalwood or some other? One does not know what name he had, if he at all had a name! Surely, it could neither be Jagannatha nor Nila Madhaba. For all purposes, the origin of Jagannath worship one just does not know. It belongs to the realm of the mystery. It is like there being no origin, beyond knowledge what exists is not accessible to language or conceptualization. Doesn’t it make Jagannatha swayambhu, in a sense? When one assigns an origin to him, whether in the hymns of the Vedas or in the story of Bhagavan Krishna, isn’t one tying him, originless, to an origin?

AM : Thank you very much

Ajit : Thank you for the conversation!

Patnaik : Thank you very much!

(The conversation took place at the EFL University in March 2013)

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