**ETHNIPOETICS OF SARALA MAHABHARATA AS AN ORAL EPIC**

**Mahendra Kumar Mishra**

The Ramayana and the Mahabharata written in Sanskrit are considered to be the standard texts in India. During the medieval period, the poets have composed these two epics in regional languages incorporating their social elements. While the regional poets maintained the characters of the standard texts constant, the events and functions were variable in their cultural context. The reinterpretation of standard Sanskrit texts in different and diverse contexts was maintained in the vernacular languages and cultures during the medieval period was embedded with many local imaginations connected to these epics. Surdamuni Sarala Das was the first composer of Odia Mahabharata during the 15th Century .His writing was the first of its kind to compose a complete eighteen parvas of the Mahabharata. The Sarala Mahabharata is the foundation of Odia language and has shaped the Odia identity. Surdamuni Sarala Das was an epic singer who mastered the text in his mind through his experience, knowledge, and creativity, and then he wrote the epic poetry in Odia after mastering the orthography system, which he has narrated in the event of the episode of Srikrishna and Balaràm learning language and writing in the ashram of sage *Santipani* (Sandipani). For the Sanskrit scholars, this text was full of rustic words, therefore unreadable, for which it remained unnoticed until the 19th Century.[[1]](#endnote-1) (Dash; 2011)

VARIATION:

There are two reasons for variation: One is the difference in the space, time and language of both the epics written in Sanskrit and Odia. There is a gap of about 1500 years between the writing of the Sanskrit Mahabharata (between 400 BC to 400 AD) and the Odia Mahabharata (15th Century AD). Kurukshetra was the place of the history of the Mahabharata in West India. The place where the Odia Mahabharata was written is Odisha is in Eastern India. The purpose of writing the Mahabharata in Sanskrit was to disseminate the genealogies of the Aryan heroes and establish dharma. The purpose of narrating oral Mahabharata in writing is to spread morals and virtue among the people to follow a righteous life. Any act of such a vast epic composition is not ascribed to an individual creation, but the collective memory of the society and culture was represented in the language of the singer. All these factors are contributory to create a variation of the standard Mahabharata ( Sanskrit) and unstandardized Mahabharata( Odia) in two different ages and places with different purposes.

The second one is the inclusion of local tradition prevalent in the contemporary society of the poet of the indigenous language and culture of Odisha.

VARIATION IN LANGUAGE

Vyasa Mahabharata was written in Sanskrit, but Sarala Das composed Dandi Mahabharata in Odia following the oral tradition recurrent in his time. He followed the oral formula for reconstructing the characters and events of the Mahabharata in the context of his cultural landscape and time and created an alternative discourse of the Mahabharata.

The epic composition is the representation of the time and space of the poet's socio-cultural context. Sarala Das has created an epic with the aesthetic standard by applying the linguistic resources people use in his historical context. It was not just the grammar of the poetics in the traditional sense, but the socially situated uses and meanings of words, their relations, and sequential forms of expression; and the way verbal and nonverbal signs created and revealed in the social codes of identity, relationships, emotions, place, and communication as a whole was the basis of his epic composition. While transforming the epic from oral to written, the poet must have made a conscious effort to translate in a manner he objectifies the text for the audience, and in a language the audience understands. Catherine writes,

*Ancient texts that are assumed to be written, but that have clear connections to an oral lifeworld may benefit from ethnopoetics consideration as well as writings were initially meant for oral dissemination. Most works written before the advent of printing and mass literacy would qualify for such consideration. John Miles Foley (1995) draws from oral-formulaic theory, performance studies, and ethnopoetics in a comparative analysis of the traditional oral nature of texts from three cultures (South Slavic, Ancient Greek, and Old English). (Catherine Quick: 1999:99)*

The work of an oral poet transforming into a written one is a work of ethnopoetics as opposed to the classic or hegemonic writings that were not universal to the masses. [Blommaert (2006](http://www.oxfordhandbooks.com/view/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199935345.001.0001/oxfordhb-9780199935345-e-34#oxfordhb-9780199935345-e-34-bibItem-11): 259) thinks that

*"Ethnopoetic work is one way of addressing the main issue in ethnography: to describe (and reconstruct) languages not in the sense of stable, closed and internally homogeneous units characterising mankind … however, as ordered complexes of genres, styles, registers and forms of use." Such a perspective must engage individual poets, but also the languages they use and the connections they make. He further writes “ultimately, what ethnopoetics does is to show voice, to visualise the particular ways—often deviant from hegemonic norms—in which subjects produce meaning.”*(Anthony: 2015)

It is the language of the time that determines that determine the nature of the text the elements of an oral epic or narration rest on its oral formula. It is universal in the case of the great epic singers and composers across the world. In ancient time the oral formula was necessary for the singers to memorise the episodes and create the story. Poetry is the creation of the poet’s time, and space manifested in the language of his time.

Arguing that traditional oral epic was primarily oral and then it was written in a language that was close to the community language than the classical one. Once it was written, then the others tried to standardise it.

It is the language of the time that determines the nature of the text. Since this is a classic text of the 15th century, it was an oral epic, and its characteristics were guided by the oral formulae of the epic composition. The best way is to analyse the text and its ethnolinguistics composition through which the purpose of the narrative tradition is to be interpreted. The whole epic was composed in *Dandi* *Vritta*, not following the Sanskrit prosody, is the departure of the standard metrical poetry form, to a free expressive form that changed the standard poetics into ethnopoetics.

***Dandi Vritta* as an Oral Formula**

The several episodes and events Sarala Das created in comparison to the Sanskrit Mahabharata are the evidence of his delineation of the Mahabharata in the Odia language. The first formula Sarala Das devised is its morality of epic poetry. His rendering was full of characteristically oral narration written in Odia script. The elements of an oral epic or narration rest on its oral formula, oral content and its narrative structure. The vocabulary, folk etymology, and the community language used in this epic are readily comprehensible to ordinary people. Moreover, Sarala Das has included more than 154 folktales that were recurrent in the community.

It was undoubtedly the community linguistic resources the poet borrowed from the oral tradition. It is universal in the case of the great epic singers and composers across the world. In ancient time, the oral formula was necessary for the singers to memorise the episodes and create the story. Poetry is the creation of the poet's time, and space manifested in the language of his time.

Sarala Das composed the poetry in *dandi vritta,* which is free verse, independent of the Sanskrit meter or *chhanda*; instead, it was a song of *dānda-* the village street, where the song was sung. The metaphor of using *dandi* as the meter of the song resembles that of a street that is not fashioned as an absolute path, but the zig-zag street created by the people to walk. Sarala Das's poetry was also such a creation that was asymmetrical like a village street. The first line may be of 7 syllables and the second line might be of 32 syllables, matching the phonetics of last syllables of the last words of two lines. The reason for choosing such a meter was to express the theme of the song spontaneously without waiting for the symmetrical prosody. The theme was more necessary than the meters. The purpose and meaning of describing a text were essential then to follow the grammar of the poetry. Therefore, the language of the community was a useful communicative medium to compose epic poetry. Sarala Das composed and completed the 18 parvas of the Mahabharata and modified the scheme of the Parvas suitable to the socio-religious and cultural context of Odisha. It must have been a lifetime mission to translating the oral into written form, capturing his experience and knowledge of his time and space. Blommeart[[2]](#endnote-2) Writes,

*There is always a general aesthetic organisation to the story that connects the story to the culturally embedded understandings of the logic of activities and experiences. This is the level where a story can become a captivating one, a joke a good one, a poem a beautiful one, and here, Hymes draws on insights from his second important predecessor, Kenneth Burke (e.g. 1969 [1950]). Attention to this level of structure leads to a higher level of abstraction in the ethnopoetic analysis. After the identification of lines and groups of lines, a ‘profile’ of the story needs to be drawn which brings out the intricate and delicate correlations between linguistic form, thematic development (scenes, episodes) and the general (‘cultural’) formal architecture of the story. (Jan Blommaert: 2015)*

**Epic from Oral to Written:**

It was during the 15th century of Odisha when the society was primarily oral. Sarala Das was an epic singer who initiated to write the oral poetry that he was singing in his street. The learning of a script to write the oral epic was exclusively ascribed to the sacred centres since literature was exclusively religious and was not accessible to the ordinary people, predominantly the non- Brahmins. The reading and writing of language and script was a primary source of empowerment for the people who were an authority on it. In Adiparva, the description of Balaram and Srikrishna approaching to sage *Santipani(* Sandipani*)*, to learn reading and writing could be imagined from the context of the writer’s condition of transforming from oral to written, or from knowledge to reading and writing. Balaram and Srikrishna were *Gauda*- belonged to the cowherd community. They had no scope of learning in the Ashram of a Brahmin. The request of Krishna and Balaram to Guru Santipani as narrated by poet Sarala Das could be inferred how learning a language, or a script was a dream. Consider the following verse.

Krishna and Balaram arrived in the Ashram and urged upon Guru Santipani:

*Oh, Guru, we belong to the cowherd caste from Mathura,*

*The whole town is unlettered, no idea about learning.*

*We both spent our time in the wrong places,*

*We neither knew the Veda nor listened to it.*

*We engaged in combat, and the futile quarrel,*

*Like playing music with kada and Ghumura.*

*The thing that falls in the hands of the wrong person is lost*

*Does the learned person discuss in the assembly of fools?*

*How we can be unlettered when we know,*

*We shift from one country to the other to get learning.*

*We left our parents, left our clan and village,*

*If you are kind, we will follow the principles of a disciple.*

Guru *Santipani* taught them 34 consonants and 12 vowels with their symbols.

They learnt 34 letters and 34 consonant clusters in 32 days without knowing or seeing the *sloka*. This means they learnt the language and script in the Odia language in the Āshrama. Sarala Das had written that when Srikrishna was in Brajapura, he did not learn, but when he grew up to the status of Yadu Kula, he took an interest in learning. (stanza-89,pp 684, Adi Parva).

This adoption of folk etymology by the poet in the Sarala Mahabharata is the prime reason for creating a vernacular epic text that is altogether different from the standard Sanskrit Mahabharata. Almost all the divine and human characters of the Sarala Mahabharata are differently personified regarding their function, appearance, expression of language and context of rural or tribal Odisha.

2. VARIATIONS IN CONTEXT AND CONTENT

The poet adopted the composition of epic to make it suitable to the unlettered people. The poet’s purpose was also to afford them the listening of sacred canons in Odia. The poet, therefore, reimagined the text deleted or expanded the episodes and included the identical oral tales and anecdotes learnt from his social memory. He reimagined his Odisha as Hastina or Dwaraka, or Ganga or Yamuna to situate the Mahabharata story in his epistemic world.

**1. Srikrishna as an Avatar of Lord Jagannātha**

Srikrishna in the Sarala Mahābhārata is entirely different from that of the Srikrishna of the Sanskrit Mahabharata. Srikrishna in Sarala Mahabharata is one of the avatars of Lord Jagannātha. This original adaptation was instrumental in reimagining the whole Sanskrit Mahabharata into Odia Mahabharata. Puri was one of the four sacred Centers (of 4 *Dhamas)* in India. Many saints, poets and sages were visiting Puri for gaining knowledge and disseminating knowledge centring around Lord Jagannātha. Therefore, the poet adopted Lord Jagannātha and Srikrishna and Lord Vishnu interchangeably in his work. Jagannātha was the Supreme God from whom the Avatar of Rama and Krishna emanated in different *yugas*-eras.

Srikrishna in the Sanskrit Mahabharata is different from the characters of Srikrishna in the Sarala Mahabharata. Srikrishna is a human being with all sorts of human weaknesses, with lust for women, and was indulged in the sexual act, violating the social customs and rules. One episode will substantiate the local nature of Srikrishna. It is *Khanikar-* a child bornfrom the union of the old Kuttini – an old attendant of Radha. The summary of the episode is as follows:

Srikrishna was infatuated with Radha and was strolling in the night to get her. Chandrasena was cautious in restricting Radha in his house. Krishna could not meet her due to such restriction. In the night when Krishna went to Radha’s house and hit his head on the door and blood flowed from his head, Brahma knew this and healed the wound. He also gave an iron rod to Krishna and guided him to dig the wall of Radha to enter her bedroom. Brahma also gave *anjan*( mascara), a magical object to Krishna to smear it in his eyes so that he can see everything in darkness. Krishna dug the wall with the iron rod and used the *anjan* – oil in his eyes and could see everything in darkness. Thus he entered Radha's bedroom and played the game of love. Krishna found the iron rod, very useful and thought that due to this iron rod- he could manage to reach Radha. He wished that the iron rod be known as *Lakshana* weapon.

Due to the restriction upon Radha when Krishna could not meet her, he sent a *Kuttini*- a mediator older woman named Sahaja Sundari to Sriradha sending a message for their mating. It was the day of Basant Utsav in Gopapura, and everyone was in dance and music. Sahaja Sundari came to Radha and narrated the condition of Krishna before her. Radha out of affection decorated Sahaja Sundari with her clothes and ornament and sent her to invite Srikrishna to her lonely house to have a meet. Sahaja Sundari in the dress of Radha went to the bank of Yamuna where Krishna was waiting. In the night Krishna imagined her to be Radha and passionately enjoyed her. After that, he could know that she was not Radha. In the night Sahaja Sundari taking the dress of Krishna ran away. Krishna, without any dress, strolled naked. He remorses and thought that many people would follow his path violating ethics.

An ugly looking child was born out of the union of Sahaja Sundari and Krishna. He was instrumental in digging a tunnel from the river Yamuna to the bedroom of Radha for the meeting fo Radha and Krishna.

This child was known as Khanikar–a thief expert in digging the wall and tunnel to steal. Vidura was in search of such a digger who could dig a tunnel from the Lac house to the bank of Ganga to save the life of five Pandavas from the conspiracy of the Kauravas. Being asked Khanikar narrated his identity and Vidura ordered him to dig the tunnel to save the Pandavas.

The character of Srikrishna as narrated in the Sarala Mahabharata is not found in any other epics or Puranas. Due to the sin of his extramarital amorous love, his body was half burnt even if he was cremated.[[3]](#endnote-3) His half- the burned body was thrown into the sea, and that became a wooden log, ultimately turned into the image of Lord Jagannātha. This signifies the oneness of Srikrishna and Jagannātha. In the Odia Mahābhārata, the punishment Lord Krishna has endured for his amorous character is vividly narrated.

Krishna as a universal character of the Mahabharata as portrayed in the Sarala Mahabharata is a folk imagination, revealing the truth that even the god is not free from the human weaknesses, and the sin he did was subject to punishment.

Krishna was a human being. When the time of leaving his physical body reached, he was despondent and said to *Akrura* that how he would leave his thirty-two thousand *Gopis* whom he loved. He was also not willing to leave his family. The eternal truth of a human, even though he is a god, is subject to endure the humanly pains and pleasure on the earth.

**3. Aryan- Non-Aryan dichotomy: A Cultural Conflict**

The third variation of the Sarala Mahābhārata is the narration of Aryan and Non-Aryan conflict in Odisha, followed by the victory of Aryan culture subduing the non-Aryans. Ancient Odisha was the land of Astro- Asiatic family and Dravidian tribal people known as *Sabara, Pulinda, Malhara, Kandha, Kirata, Nishada, Asura, Rakshasa*, and many others enjoying their land ownership without any external interventions. The Aryans defeated the tribal chieftains and subdued the natives. A cultural clash took place between the local tribes (Austric and Dravidian groups) and the Aryans. Therefore, when the story of Sanskrit Mahabharata is the struggle between two clans of common origin, of the Kauravas and the Pandavas, the story of the Sarala Mahabharata is the legitimisation of Aryan power in tribal territories. The history of ancient Odisha has hundreds of such stories of fight relating to the establishment of the Aryan kingdom in the tribal land by subjugating the local chieftains. Most of the tribal kings narrated in the Sarala Mahabharata were designated as *Singh* and *Asura, eg. Gosingha Asura, Kodala Singh, Biranga Singh, Kalang Singh, Balinga Singh, Jayasingh, Kundala Singh.* All these names are non-Aryan names. The territories of the tribal were also known as *Gosingha* *Daitya* *Desh* (Kalahandi).HE has mentioned the names of many local mountains (e.g.)*Aradeka* Mountain (Saora land). Sarala Das has narrated many such episodes which continued the struggle between the Pandavas and Kauravas on the one hand and between Aryans and the non-Aryans on the other. The enmity continued to sustain from one generation to the other.

Out of many, two such episodes are ample to prove how the Aryan Kaurava-Pandava acquired the land of Odisha by defeating the Asuras. One is the episode of Kundali Asura. The Kauravas invaded the *Kolabati* *Patna* near *Aradeka* Mountain where the king Kundali Asura was reigning. The Kauravas saw the king Kundali Asura and asked: "Who are you?”Kundali Asura asked, "Have you gone mad? You are asking who I am in my territory." Was it not an insult to a tribal king to ask his identity entering his territory by an outsider?

When Kundali Asura countered, Duryodhana could not tolerate this and ordered all Kauravas to attack him. Kundali Asura said, “I am alone, and you all attack me? All right, let you all fight with me. There is no harm." It was not the tribal king, but the Kauravas were unrighteous against the peace-loving Asura.

Kundali Asura trounced the Kauravas. He was not unrighteous. Still, he calmly said, “If you all beg apology and take my shelter, I would allow you to go back.” Duryodhana did not listen and fought again. Kundali Asur defeated Duryodhana. The latter was senseless; Kundali took the ornaments from the senseless body of Duryodhana, also took his club and slowly went to the bank of river Yamuna. Looking at this, Nakula raced Kundali Asura. Kundali Asur advised Nakula to go back and not to follow him.

Next, the charioteer of Duryodhana came to Yudhisthira and sought his help. Bhima annoyingly said, “If Duryodhana wins the Asura, then he will come back with the club, there is no need of helping them.” Yudhisthira ordered Nakula to fight with Kundali Asura, and Nakula killed him.

Another story of such Arya -Tribal fight has occurred with Kodalasura who was the son of Kundali Asura. This indicates the enmity between the Aryans and the Non-Aryans fro generations. Kodalasur was a warrior empowered by the boon of Kalika. When the Kauravas again invaded the kingdom of Kodalasura, there was a combat of words. Kodalasura said to Karna,

*O Pamara,( weak) you are our edibles, we eat your flesh,*

*How do you dare to fight with me?*

There was a fight between Karna and Kodalasura. Kodalasura defeated Karna. Then he attacked Duryodhana. Unable to bear his blow, Duryodhana lost his sense. Kodalasur lifted Duryodhana on his chariot and said, “This is the king of Hastinapur. His meat must be tasty. These people have killed my father. So I will eat his meat by cooking tasty food. I will go to Hastina in the morning and eat the victim."

However, in the morning, the sun rays touched the body of senseless Karna, and he got back his sense. Then he fought with Kodalasur but was unable to defeat. Finally, Sahadeva killed the demon by pulling his hair. When could the warriors like Duryodhana and Karna not defeat him? How could Sahadeva kill him? The poet crafted a story. Kodalasura did penance before the goddess *Kalika*. After a long, the goddess did not listen to him, so he pulled the hair of *Kalika* and goddess gave him the boon. On this act*, Kalika* was angry and cursed him, “since you forcibly took the boon, let you die if somebody pulls your hair." Sahadeva was a fortune teller. He knows the past, present and future, but unless somebody asks him, he never reveals it. When he was assigned to kill him, he quickly killed Kodalasura by pulling his hair.

What was the purpose of weaving these two episodes, of both father and son, defeated by Nakula and Sahadeva but not by the warrior-like Duryodhana and Karna? The Sarala Mahabharata has hundreds of such stories of the Asuras defeated by the Pandavas. The local Asura kings have always defeated Kauravas, but after the support of the Pandavas, the Kauravas life was saved. In the court of Kauravas and the Pandavas, many local tribal warriors and wrestlers were coming and asking for a fight with them. Sometimes, Bhima or Arjuna was ordered by elder brother Yudhisthira to fulfil their wishes of the local tribal warrior. The local warriors were defeated, but after they were killed, they were destined to get a place in heaven. One such character was *Pradeshi* *Malla* who fought with Bhima and lost his life, but he became a *Gandharva* and happily went to heaven.

The tribal Gond, Munda, Kondh, and the Santali were the landowners of Odisha including middle India. The 15th century was the time of Aryanisation of the landlords. The Aryan kings having subdued many local tribal kings are symbolically described in the episodes of Sarala Mahabharata. The trend of showing the defeat of the tribals by the Aryans was the process of Aryanisation.

4. **Folklore in Sarala Mahabharata**

Acharya Dandi, while defining a *sargabandha* of an epic has enumerated 16 situations that constitute an epic. (Leinhard:1984).In oral epics, the situations and events regulate the speech act of the characters. Dell Hymes also viewed a narrative as a universal genre, centrally involved in the speech events in which culture is re-created and transmitted. Hymes proposed to reveal the implicit structure of traditional narratives. He writes that within speech communities, the ‘speech situations’, ‘speech events', and ‘speech acts' are socially-contextual situations like ‘ceremonies, fights, hunts, meals, lovemaking, and the like’ (Hymes, 1972b: 56). The singer classifies the narrative framework in his mind to create the structure of the implicit narrative drawing from the oral tradition.

This implicit structure reveals much about how the narratives were embedded in social memory and are reflective in their cultural context. Sarala Das has adopted those oral formula and folk etymology depicting the implicit nature of the cultural methods of expression borrowed from the singing tradition.

The oral singers of the traditional literature of Odisha have the folk- literary criticism by classifying the epic or purāǹa into the folk etymology; Janama, (birth) Harana,(abduction), Sarana,(asylum), Marana(death). The Harana (abduction of princes Nilendri, Subhadra, Surekha and many more) stealing of a flower Parijata Harana, and picking up of Sugandhika-flower are the instances of such episodes. Sarala Mahabharata though has contained while the episode is round on this four narrative category. There are hundreds of episodes; birth, abduction, asylum and death/killing constructing the whole story of the epic in these four thematic categories.

**Use of Oral Tales**

Sarala Das was a singer and a storyteller in an oral society. He has included about more than 154 oral tales and more than 300 sub-episodes in the Mahabharata.

He was the first composer of combining traditional oral knowledge in a pan- Indian story. These stories are appropriately used to validate the central theme, events and characters of the epic vis-a-vis the local characters and events. Giving examples of universal characters to resolve a social issue is a common practice in the society, but Sarala Das has inverted the tradition of quoting the anecdotes or proverbs of the classic canons to the oral tales. The best example of this inversion is found in the dialogue of Sakuni and Yudhisthira. Sakuni has narrated a folktale to Yudhisthira to follow the morals of the tale to resolve the land dispute between the Pandavas and the Kauravas.

**The Story of a Lazy Man (*Alasua Upakhaya*)**

If a conflict arises in a family or a society, the people in India tend to resolve it by giving examples from the ideal characters of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. It is customary to adopt the values and morals as emulated in these two sacred books and people also respect the morals of the canons.

For instance, when Yudhishthira was depressed because of the sufferings caused by the Kauravas, he expressed to the sage Brihadasva that he was the most unlucky person in the world. The sage then narrated the story of King Nala*,* who had also gambled away his kingdom and lost his wife but eventually won everything back. While he listened to the tale of Nala, Yudhisthira realised that his plight was not singular and that his story was only half-finished (Ramanujan, 1991: 427).

Yudhisthira told the story of Nala and Damayanti to help heal the wounds inflicted by Duryodhana. The story was belonging to the royal and divine characters from the sacred texts. However, in the Sarala Mahabharata, this has been inverted. It is a usual convention in Indian society that examples from the mythic texts is given to resolve the conflicts. People cite examples from the Ramayana and the Mahabharata to solve the problems. In Sarala Mahabharata, poet Sarala Das has reversed it by adopting examples from the folktales to resolve the conflicts of the ideal characters of the Mahabharata. There are many such episodes where the poet has narrated local tales to resolve the problems faced by the universal characters of Mahabharata.

One such tale is the episode of Yudhisthira and Shakuni before the war started. Sri Krishna went to the court of Duryodhana and asked for five villages as the Pandava's share, but he failed to procure these; in its place, he was insulted. From the Kauravas side, Shakuni approached Yudhisthira and proposed that he should leave the country and not hope for power. Shakuni recited a story to legalise Yudhisthira's virtue and denounce the mischief caused by Duryodhana. He also said that Duryodhana may be enjoying the power now, but Yudhisthira would surely get the best of his virtue in the next birth. Shakuni has validated this through a folktale famous in Odisha. This indicates the intellect of the poet Sarala Das in putting the event in a logical manner that has been brought from the oral tradition prevailing in his time.

The story is as follows:

In the bank of Krishnaveni river, there was a village named Kampur, where lived a Shudra named Melaka. He earned his bread by selling firewood. One day he went to collect firewood and slept in the *mandap* outside the village. When he woke up, he found that it was evening. He still went to fetch firewood.

Meanwhile, there was heavy rain and storm. He took shelter in the temple and found three figures of God — Brahma, Vishnu, and Maheswara — of seven feet height and three feet breadth. He thought to cut the wooden statue of Vishnu in his axe and take the firewood to his home. Just as he raised his axe to break the structure, Lord Jagannātha appeared in front of Melaka and expressed him not to break the statue; as an alternative, he presented him the alms kept behind the image of Ganesha. Melaka became happy to get all these and unhesitatingly took the alms. Within a few days, he became exceedingly rich. A neighbour family noticed this. The wife of a Brahmin, named Ananta, the neighbour, asked the wife of the lazy man Melaka and got a clue that the lazy man got the wealth by frightening God. Poor Ananta knew this and said that since he knew it was immoral and unethical to imagine breaking the statue of the god, he could not do that. Relatively he was prepared to endure any consequences coming in his way of life. However, Ananta's wife insisted her husband go and cut the statue of the god and get the alms.

Nevertheless, Ananta hesitated went to the temple with an axe and tried to hit on the statue of Shiva. In But this time instead of appeasing, Shiva appeared before Ananta with his piercing *Trishul*- trident and wanted to kill him. Ananta could not understand why the god became so violent at him and had been kind enough to Melaka. Shiva replied that Melaka was a fool, sans ethics and conscience, whereas the latter has god-fearing ethics.

God is not afraid of people with knowledge of ethics. He said, “We are afraid of the fools, but not with those with knowledge and ethics.”

"I assure that after this birth, you will be the king of Kanchi and Melaka, who is a fool, will get severe punishment in his next birth. Similarly, O Yudhishthira! You are like Ananta and Duryodhana is like Melaka — a fool." (Translation is the by the author)

In the Sanskrit text, Nala and Damayanti are discussed as the ideal model for Yudhisthira whereas, in the Sarala Mahabharata, a folktale with local characters has been narrated as an ethical model for convincing Yudhisthira to withdraw the demand made to the Kauravas and tolerate so that in their next birth, the Pandavas win the virtue. The secret of the episode was ‘rebirth' which the witty Shakuni tried to place into the mind of Yudhisthira, by saying that if he endured the present, the future would be good.

Ethics of Time:

The transition of the era from Dwapara to Kali has been narrated in a story by poet Sarala Das. Yudhisthira was the king at that time. A dispute case came to his court. The case was: there was a Brahmin who had a sudra servant. He ordered the servant to plough his field. During ploughing, the Servant got two gold bangles and gave it to his Brahmin master. The Brahmin said that since the servant discovered the gold bangle, it should be his property. The Servant pleaded that he might have got the gold bangles, but the land belonged to the Brahmin, so the gold bangles belong to the latter. This dispute was unresolved, and the two people reached King Yudhisthira for a judgement. The king asked Sahadev, his brother cum minister about the event. Sahadev said the conflict would be resolved soon. This honesty is prevailing among these two since the Dwpara era is continuing on the earth. Soon after the Kali era will appear, the whole discourse will change. Let this case be given to the new king Parikshita to give a judgement. Was waiting until Yudhisthira was ruling the country. Srikrishna had retained the Kali-yuga.

After Yudhisthira, the case was trialled by the new king Parikshita when the Kali-yuga had entered. The trailing started. Now the Brahmin said that the golden bangle should be his since it had been found in his field. The Sudra servant said the land might belong to the Brahmin, but since he has located the bangles, the ownership over the gold should be his.

However, putting an end on their discussion, the king declared, and the golden bangle belongs to the state since the land also belongs to the state authority. Finally, the golden bangle was deposited in the state treasury.

What exactly poet Sarala Das has tried to speak in this story, ethics and morals guided the nature of two ages where the individual greed was not there, and the non-attachment was the ethics of the time. However, when the Kaliyuga appeared, the whole ethics and morals changed into a selfish act where not only the Brahmin and the Sudra servant but the king also was fallen to greed. He could have distributed the two bangles to Brahmin and his servant. However, instead, he disowned the property from those and took it for his treasury. This indicates the degeneration of ethics and morals in his contemporary time where social ethics was in threat and royal power and property was immoral. Change of ethics and morals from one time to another symbolises the way the state and its governance operates. Sarala Das has imagined the difference between the ideology and reality in this episode where the Yuga dharma- the ethics of the time deviated and human ethics was in a state of degeneration.

Another story of a Brahmin migrated to Dwaraka to earn his livelihood where Krishna was ruling, is weaved by Sarala Das.

*A blind Brahmin in Odisha was very poor, so he left Odisha with his wife and only son and reached five years, six months and twenty-two days. There he found that the people are wealthy and they give pearls and diamond in the golden plate to the beggars. Within a short time, the Brahmin became rich. He lived with plenty. One day his son was playing with the son of the king, Pradyumna. The latter broke the sand house built by the Brahman boy. Out of rage, the Brahman boy slapped Pradyumna. The latter went to his parents and reported it. Srikrishna came out of his place and reached to the Brahman. The Brahman earnestly begged apology for his son’s misdeed. Srikrishna said, ‘Look, O Brahmin, your son has slapped my son, and his finger sign is still in his cheek. Is this a good act? All of a sudden, the Brahmin got back his eyes and saw Srikrishna in front of him.*

The story gives a vivid picture of the quarrel between two families for children’s combat during play. The Mahabharata war was also the result of the mock fight between the Pandavas and the Kauravas during their play of *Jhimiti Khel. (*Kabaddi). In the village, it is a familiar scene that when the children of two families fight during the play, it turns in to a family rivalry. However, the narration of a blind Brahmin aspiring to go to Dwaraka within five years, six months and 22 days is the focus of which indicates that the socio-economic life of Odisha was sick and by then Gujarat (Dwaraka) was the land of plenty. Many Gujarati have donated plenty of property to Lord Jagannātha and have also opened Dharamshalas in Cuttack and Puri. Even now, about 8 million people from Odisha work in Ahmedabad in cotton mills indicate the migration of people from Odisha to Gujarat is not a myth but a reality. Mahatma Gandhi also had commented looking at the poverty of the people of Odisha. This indicates the historicity of conditions of people in Gujarat and Odisha. Maybe there is one instance of migration of a Brahmin from Odisha to Dwaraka. However, the interregional migration was continued to be there at that time also.

**Oral Proverbs from Sarala Mahabharata**

The proverbs in the Sarala Mahabharata are the most popular genre in Odisha even today. People resolve the conflict by using these proverbs and end the dispute and also learn from the situation. The proverbs related to the story of the Mahabharata are appropriately used by the community to elicit a universal truth generalising the story. Each proverb has a story of the Mahabharata. Some example will be enough to make sense of it. Hundreds of proverbs containing the episodes of the Sarala Mahābhārata are used in the everyday life of the people of Odisha. These proverbs are not merely advice, but contains a storey hidden in it representing the ‘do’s’ and ‘do not do’s’ of the social life. An individual compared with Sakuni must be a wicked, or Yudhisthira, a follower of morals, Arjuna as a successful man, Bhima, a man without applying the mind, etc., are generalised characteristics of the Sarala Mahabharata. Perhaps there is no other epic or literature in Odisha which has a collective memory of the story of the Mahabharata in the proverbs used in everyday life of the people used in the appropriate context. Next to Sarala Mahabharata, the Odia Bhagavata written by poet Jagannātha Das is also equally popular as a part of the cultural inheritance. Some of the proverbs are discussed here:

***Gandhari ki bara nai ki Dhrutarashtra ku kanya nai.***

For instance, the misfit person is compared as *Gandhari ki Bara nai ki Dhrutarashtra ku kanya nai.* There is no matching bridegroom for Gandhari, and there is no matching bride for Dhritarashtra. This proverb is used in the context for those who have failed to search for a bride or a bridegroom. The story of this episode is in the Mahabharata. Sarala Das has localised this episode. Gandhari was burned in an inauspicious time called *Brahma Asuri lagna* for which whomever she was married died. Thus 99 princes had died. Sarala Das imagined of resolving the lousy luck of Gandhari by marrying her to a Sahada tree, as a part of local belief. Soon after Gandhari married to a Sahada tree, the tree was burnt, and the bad luck also ended. Then she married to Dhritarashtra, and he could survive. A similar case had happened with Dhrutarashtra also. Now, one may use this proverb without knowing the origin of it from the Mahabharata, but the racial memory of Odia people retains these proverbs for their everyday use.

***Ganga kahile thibi, Gangi kahile jibi*:**

Ganga wanted to marry Prateepa, the father of Shantunu of Lunar dynasty. However, since Prateepa did not agree, she waited and married to Shantanu. She burns eight children, seven children in the water and left the eighth child with Shantanu, who was known as Bhishma.

In Sarala Mahabharata, the portrayal of Ganga is different. Ganga took birth in the palace of king Nirghata. She was free to play with the boys having no nature of a woman. When king Nirghata thought of having a swayambara, Ganga said, I want to marry Shiva.

Meanwhile, Shantanu went to Shiva, who was in Hatakeshwara to get rid of his sin of killing a cow. Shantanu waited for him for years together. Shantanu was also lived like Shiva, and his attire was no other than Shiva. God Shiva advised Shantunu to go back from Patala and live a free life. Shantanu riding on a bull with a beard and dressed like Shiva appeared in the kingdom of Nirghata. The king saw him and asked Ganga that Shiva has appeared in his kingdom. The marriage was instated between Shantanu and Ganga.IN the marriage altar when the clan name was asked to Shantanu, he said that he is Shantunu belong to Chandravamsa. Ganga was angry, and she would not marry Shantanu since her wish was to marry Shiva. Shantanu might be looking like Shiva, but she would not marry him. However, King Nirghata had already promised to give her in marriage with Shantanu. Ganga said that she could compromise with Shantanu, provided he would not obstruct in her freedom and whatever she would do he had to tolerate. The day he opposes, she would leave him. She said, so long Shantunu calls him Ganga, she will stay with him, ut the moment he would utter Gangi, she would leave him. Shantanu agreed, and their marriage was instituted. Ganga was not happy with the sage behaviour of Shantanu. He was spending most of the time in penance and rituals. Ganga was obstructing him in his worship, burning his wooden spoon ( shruba and srucha) in the fire, and was quarrelling with him to behaving like a raja and not as a sage. She was also not practising fasting.

However, as promised king, Shantanu was tolerating to the misbehaviours of Ganga

They lived together and gave children one after another. Ganga killed her seven children one by one. Shantanu did not oppose this inhuman act and tolerated her. When the eighth child was born Ganga was about to kill the child, Shantanu could not tolerate this act, and out of anger, he shouted, “O Gangi, are you so cruel to kill all your children. I will not allow you to kill this child. Listening to this Ganga was happy that she could be free from this worldly life. Offering the eighth child on the hand of Shantunu Ganga left his palace. The eighth child was Bhishma.

Ganga’s marriage to Shantanu

***Karna Male Panch, Arjun male panch:***

The elder brother of the five Pandavas is Karna. Kunti, the mother f five Pandavas, when was unmarried had got Karna after her union with Sun God. During the Kurukshetra war, it was told that whether Karna or Arjuna dies, the number will be five only.

***Pahile Judhhare Bhima hare: Bhima is defeated in the first war***

An episode runs why Bhima is defeated in the first war and wins the second one. The story is narrated in the Sarala Mahabharata. When Kunti gave birth to Bhima in a jungle, a tiger roared, and Kunti out of fear left his new and ran into the jungle. Bhima was alone paddling his feet. When the tiger reached near Bhimá, his feet hit the head of the tiger, and the tiger died. Again Bhīma’s feet hit the mountain Satasrunga, and it was broken into thousand pieces. The mountain cursed the child, that where ever he fights he will be defeated. When Kunti came back and found Bhima is cursed, she gave her the mountain and said that such a curse is too much to a child. Listening to her the Satasrunga said that he had cursed once, and it was not possible to revert it, but he assured that while fighting with somebody if Bhima would remember him he is sure to win. Therefore a proverb runs that, Bhima is defeated in the first fight but wins the second chance. Out of gratitude, Kunti wished the mountain Satasrunga that, since he has broken into thousand pieces, all the pieces of stones would be worshipped as the village goddess. Since then the village goddesses are worshipped in the stone of Satasrunga Mountain. The association of the mountain Satasrunga and Kunti is the creative imagination of the poet, which is logically connected to the local with the universal.

It is believed to have taken place in the past. However, a classic influence the present. It is more than literature, rather a philosophy of life about the establishment of Dharma on the earth, as narrated by Srikrishna. The Mahabharata is a Jaya Kāvya of the Pandavas, who were righteous and have won the Kauravas, who were unrighteous. The whole epic of the Mahabharata is to establish the dharma – as spells out by Lord Srikrishna. According to Sarala Das, the purpose of spelling out the Mahabharata in Odia language was to disseminate the epic for the wellbeing of the people of the world. (SM: p 516, Madhya Parva).

The bulk of work Sarala Das had composed in the 15th century, and its incubation, continuation, dissemination and interpretation needs a severe scholarship. Today we find that the scholars of Odisha are entangled with the time and birthplace of poet Sarala Das instead of delving into the ocean of epic creativity, which is quite unimaginable in the part of modern society. However, to see the present in the light of the past or see the past in the light of the present is a matter of concern to reconstruct the Odia knowledge system that the great Sudra poets have left behind. It would always be admirable if the poet of the past is understood in light of the present or reconstruct the history and identity of Odisha. The intellectual responsibility of the Odia scholarship is to rediscover the continuity of knowledge from the Sarala Mahabharata than to see the part of the knowledge.

1. NOTES:

   Sarala Mahabharata was really brought to focus on 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 found 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 Oriya7. It was only in the 20th century A.D there was an increasing study on the Oriya Mahabharata of Sarala Das in the popular Oriya magazines like *Utkala Sahitya*, *Mukura* and J*hankara*. 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*8. The two literary critics 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 the historical consciousness of the early and medieval phase of India9. In the 1950s and 1960s in the literary magazines like Jhankara and Dagara there was an 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), Banshidhar Mohanty, Achyutananda Das and Krishnachandra Panigrahi10. 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 others11. 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 about his Mahabharata one must know the Cyclic Time which he was following and that one must not forget his Sakta Hindu mind12. The last points deserve notice in this context for determining historical consciousness in the Oriya Mahabharata of Sarala Das [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. [Blommaert](http://www.oxfordhandbooks.com/view/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199935345.001.0001/oxfordhb-9780199935345-e-34#oxfordhb-9780199935345-e-34-bibItem-11) thinks that "ethnopoetic work is one way of addressing the main issue in ethnography: to describe (and reconstruct) languages not in the sense of stable, closed and internally homogeneous units characterising mankind … however, as ordered complexes of genres, styles, registers and forms of use." Such a perspective must engage individual poets, but also the languages they use and the connections they make. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Some of the exciting innovations of the simplified versions are: the identification of the divine tree out of which the first statues were carved with the half-burnt body of Lord Krishna (*Mahābhārata* of Såralå Dåsa) which comes floating from Dvårakå to Puri and further, the love-affair of Vidyåpati with Lalitå, the daughter of Visvåvasu, and their subsequent marriage (*Deulatolå*)

   |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
   | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
   | Works Cited  Anthony K. Webster Cultural Poetics (Ethnopoetics)2015, Linguistics, Discourse Analysis,  Language and Cognition, Sociolinguistics, Translation and Interpretation,  Documentary Linguistics, Online Publication Date: DOI: 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199935345.013.34 | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
   | Dash, Kailash Chandra, 2011, Sarala Mahabharata in Oriya and Historical Consciousness: A Reinterpretation, in LOKARATNA Vol IV, 2011 An E-journal of Folklore Foundation, ( www.folklorefoundation.org.in | | | | | |  | |  | |  | |  | |  | |  | |  |
   | Leinhard, Siegfried: 1984, A history of classical poetry: Sanskrit-Pali-Prakrit.  (A History of Indian Literature, Vol.III, Fasc. 1.) viii, 307, pp. | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
   | Lord, Albert B, 1971, Singer of the Tales, Atheneum, London | | | | | | | | | | | |  | |  | |  | |  |
   | Mansingh Mayadhar, 1958, Matira Mahakabi Sarala Das,  Mishra ,Mahendra Kumar,Mahabharata and Regional Variations:  Sarala Mahabharata in the Folklore of Odisha | | | | | | | | | | | |  | |  | |  | |  |
   | MohantySurendra,2004,OdiaSahityaraAdiparva,CuttackStudentstore,Cuttack | | |  | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |  |
   |  | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |  | |  |
   | Patnaik , BN, 2016,An Introduction to Sarala Mahabharata ,  Central Institute of Indian LAngauges, Mysore | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
   | Quick, Catherine, S: 1999, Ethnopoetics, Published by Department of Folklore and  Ethnomusicology, Indiana University | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
   | Ramanujan, A.K., 1991. "Repetition in the Mahabharata,  ” in *Essays on the Mahabharata*.Arvind Sharma ed., pp. 419-43. Leiden: E.J. Brill.  Sarala Mahabharata , Sarala Sahitya Sansad, Cuttack | | | | | | | | | |  | |  | |  | |  | |  |
   | Thapar Romila, 1998, A History of India, Vol. I, Penguin History, New Delhi | | | | | | | | | | | | | |  | |  | |  |
   |  | | | | | | | | | |  | |  | |  | |  | |
   | Turner Fredrick, 2012: EPIC, Form, Content and History. Transaction Publishers  New Brunswick and London, | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
   |  | |  |  | |  |  | |  | |  | |  | |  | |  | |

   [↑](#endnote-ref-3)