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**The Burden of the Forest:
Two Apocryphal *Parvans* from Vernacular *Mahābhāratas***

There are a number of vernacular versions of the *Mahābhārata* in the eastern New Indo-Aryan Languages. Two of the earliest and most interesting of them are the Oriya version of Śāraḷā (or Sāralā) Dāsa, written around 1475, and the Assamese version of Rāma Sarasvatī from the following century. Both works are of imposing size. The printed version of Śāraḷā Dāsa is two thousand six hundred pages long¹ and the Assamese version only a hundred and fifty pages less.² Śāraḷā Dāsa, known as the Śūdra Muni, was, as his name suggests, a Śākta, a devotee of the goddess Śāralā. By his own account he was a farmer and was ploughing a field when commanded by the goddess to render the *Mahābhārata* into Oriya. Śāraḷā Dāsa was not highly educated and most probably totally ignorant of Sanskrit.³ Rāma Sarasvatī, in sharp contrast, was a learned Brahman and fervent Vaiṣṇava and it was not a goddess, but a king, Naranārāyaṇa (1540–1586) who commanded him to render the *Mahābhārata* into Assamese. As the poet tells us:

Hail Naranārāyaṇa, the crest-jewel of kings,
great friend of the Vaiṣṇavas, a fire to his enemies.
With the greatest affection he gave me a command, [saying],
“Render the essence of the Bhārata into Assamese verse.
In my palace there are numerous grammars and commentaries,
I give them all to you, take them to your home.”

¹ Śāraḷā Dāsa, *Mahābhārata*, reprint, Dharmagrantha Store, Kaṭak, n.d. Henceforth abbreviated as MP.

² *Aṣṭadaś parba asamīyā Mahābhārata*, Harinārāyaṇ Dattabaruḅā (ed.), Dattabaruḅā eṇḍ ko. (1955) reprint 1993. Henceforth abbreviated as VP. In this edition the verses are numbered and it is they that are cited.

³ Mayadhar Mansinha, *History of Oriya Literature*, Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi 1962, p. 53.

When king said this, bullocks were yoked
and he had all the books sent to my place.⁴

These two versions of the *Mahābhārata* differ notably from those that followed them in a number of ways, most strikingly by the fact that each contains a lengthy extra *parvan* (*parba* in Oriya and Assamese) dealing with material not found in Vyāsa. In Śāraḷā Dāsā this *parvan* is called the *Madhya parba* and placed after the *Ādi parvan*. It is the longest *parvan* in the Oriya version of the epic. In the case of the Assamese epic, the extra *parvan* is considered a part of the *Bana parba* or *Aranyaka parvan* as it is known elsewhere. Rāma Sarasvatī divides his *Bana parba* into two: the first of which, the *Ādi bana parba*, is a very selective and highly condensed version of the Sanskrit original *Vana parvan*, while the remainder, which Rāma Sarasvatī often refers to as the *Vaiṣṇava parba*, is twenty times longer and contains not a single episode from Vyāsa. These two *parvans* primarily deal with the same theme: the confrontations of the Pāṇḍavas with various demons, none of whom are mentioned in Vyāsa's *Mahābhārata*.

The *Madhya Parba*

The *Madhya parba* is a mixture of a few stories which are from Sanskrit sources with a large number of other stories which are not. Śāraḷā Dāsā only includes a few episodes from Vyāsa: the story of the burning of the Khaṇḍava forest from the *Ādi parvan* and an account of Arjuna's confrontation with Śiva from the *Sabhā parvan*. Otherwise not much attention is paid to Vyāsa. He also takes, or seems to take, several stories from the tenth *skandha* of the *Bhāgavata purāṇa*: the story of Nārakāśura, the *Pārijāta haraṇa*. Kṛṣṇa's slaying of Śatadhanu and the story of Ūṣā and Aniruddha. Śāraḷā Dāsā deals with this material with a great deal of freedom. In the purāṇa (10.57) story Śatadhanu killed Kṛṣṇa's father-in-law, Śatajit, and stole the *śyamantaka* jewel. Enraged, Kṛṣṇa pursued Śatadhanu into the forest and decapitated him with his discus. In Śāraḷā Dāsā's version of the tale, the *Śatadhanu śaraṇa*, Śatadhanu flees into the forest where he seeks refuge (*śaraṇa*) with one king after the other but they decline with alacrity when they learn the identity of his pursuer.

⁴ *jaiya naranārāyaṇa rājā śiromaṇi |*
santara parama mitra duṣṭara agani ||
āmāka karilā ājñā parama sādare |
bhārataka pada tumi kariyok sāre ||
āmāra grhata āche bhāṣya ṭikā yata |
niyok āpona grhe diloho samasta ||
ehi buli rājā baladhi jorāi |
paṭhāilā pustaka sabe āmāsāra thāi ||; BP 3935–37.

Finally, disguised as a Kirāta, Śatadhanu meets Arjuna, also disguised as a Kirāta, and Arjuna, without asking any questions, agrees to protect him. Kṛṣṇa then appears, also in Kirāta disguise (!), offers battle and is defeated.

Śāraḷā Dāsa's version of the *Subhadrā haraṇa* is so radically altered that it is not clear whether it was inspired by the version of the story in the *Ādi parvan* of the *Mahābhārata* (1.218–20) or that in the *Bhāgavata purāṇa* (10.96). According to the epic, after Arjuna saw Subhadrā and fell instantly in love with her, Kṛṣṇa suggested that he follow the *kṣatriya* custom and carry Subhadrā off, since he could not be sure how she might react at a *svayamvara*. Arjuna followed Kṛṣṇa's advice and Balarāma and other Yādavas were enraged by his high-handed action but were dissuaded from violence by Kṛṣṇa. The *purāṇa* tells a different tale; here Arjuna disguised himself as a trident-bearing ascetic and lived unrecognized in Dvārakā for a year before carrying Subhadrā off during a festival. Again, Kṛṣṇa's words calmed the angry Balarāma who had promised her hand to Duryodhana. In the retelling of Śāraḷā Dāsa, Subhadrā, who is totally passive in the Sanskrit accounts, initiates events: she sees Arjuna, falls passionately in love with him and in her attempts to woo him, too complicated to be summarized here, she resorts to love potions and even turns up in his bedroom unannounced at night. The episode concludes when Duryodhana, coming to claim his bride, is defeated by Arjuna in battle.⁵ Śāraḷā Dāsa also includes other variants on this theme entitled *Sugandhikā haraṇa*, *Nīlendrī haraṇa*, *Candravatī haraṇa*, *Surekhā haraṇa*, and *Śobhābatī haraṇa*. The *Nīlendrī haraṇa* tells the story of Nīlendrī, the daughter of Varuṇa who was promised to Kārttikeya when a child and later betrothed to Ānandānanda, the son of Balarāma as well. When the celestial busybody Nārada learned about this, he provoked a quarrel between the two which resulted in a series of battles; first Kārttikeya slew Pradyumna and Ānandānanda and carried off Nīlendrī, then Kṛṣṇa and Balarāma avenged their sons by killing Kārttikeya whereupon Śiva took revenge for his son by killing Kṛṣṇa and Balarāma; finally, distressed by their deaths, the Pāṇḍavas and Kauravas prepared to wage war on Śiva but violence was avoided through the mediation of Brahmā.⁶

Interwoven with these stories are accounts of confrontations with sinful (*pāpiṣṭha*) and arrogant (*darpiṣṭha*) demons such as Kalpāsura, Kumbhaka, Kudāla, Gosimha Daitya, Kuṇḍalī Daitya, Kuṭhārāsura, Praudhāsura and Muṛhāsura. This kind of story dominates the *parvan*. Śāraḷā Dāsa's demonic villains are often related to one another and come from illustrious lineages: Kumbhaka is the son of Kalpāsura and a descendant of Rahu; Gosimha Daitya is the grandson of Mahiṣa, the Buffalo Demon slain by Durgā, and Kuṇḍalī (or Kuṇḍala Simha) is his grandson.⁷ These villains usually fall at the

⁵ MP pp. 108–148.

⁶ MP pp. 211–212.

⁷ The poet provides a detailed genealogy on page 166.

hands of one or another of the Pāṇḍavas: Kuṇḍalī Daitya and Muṛhāsura are killed by Nakula, Gosimha Daitya is felled by Arjuna, Kumbhāsura by Bhīma, Praudhāsura by Arjuna's father Indra, and Kalāsura by the sixth Pāṇḍava brother, Karṇa. Yudhiṣṭhira here remains on the sidelines as an interested spectator and never takes part in the fighting.

These monsters plague both humans and gods. Kuṇḍala Daitya attacks the Kaurava army of Duryodhana as it is returning from Subhadrā's wedding and in the ensuing battle kills Duryodhana, his ninety-nine brothers, Droṇa, Bhīṣma, Karṇa and many others as well.⁸ The chief victims of the demons, however, are the gods, especially Indra whose heaven is stormed regularly; Praudhāsura overruns it no less than twenty one times.⁹ Even Kṛṣṇa himself is not safe from the demons. Once while he was attending the *devayajña* of Ugrasena, Gosimha Daitya attacked the Yādavas with eighty thousand demons. Thousands of the rishis attending the sacrifice fled in terror while many others were killed, roasted in the sacrificial fire pit (*agni kuṇḍa*) and eaten. Gosimha struck down both Balarāma and Kṛṣṇa and threw them into the sacrificial pit in order to cook them for his dinner. Fortunately the Fire God Agni hid their bodies and the demon assumed that they had been burnt to ashes in the fire and went his way, leaving them uneaten.¹⁰

The *Vaiṣṇava Parba*

The *Vaiṣṇava parba* of R ā m a S a r a s v a t ī is entirely devoted to accounts of battles, usually with demons. Making up half the length of the Assamese *Mahābhārata*, this *parvan* is divided into a number of sub-*parvans*. The *Maṇicandra Ghoṣa parba* tells how Bhīma overcomes the *nāgas* in *pātāla* to obtain a magic jewel; the *Sindhu yātrā* relates how four of the Pāṇḍavas are killed in fierce fight with king Sindhu; the battle comes to an end when it is revealed that Sindhu is none other than another son of Kuntī fathered by the Moon God, Candra, and thus brother to the Pāṇḍavas. The *Bijay parba* relates how Dhṛtarāṣṭra temporarily regains his eyesight and orders a *digvijaya* generated by Vidura. The other sub-*parvans*, the *Baghāsura badha*, *Khaṭāsura badha*, *Kūrmavalī badha*, *Jaṅghāsura badha*, and the *Kulācala badha*, recount, often at great length, how these demons, their relatives and generals are slain by one or another of the Pāṇḍavas. Bhīma kills Baghāsura and Aśvakarṇa, Arjuna fells Suraketu and Mahiṣa Dānava, Bhīṣma slays Kūrmavalī, Kṛṣṇa slays Kulācala and Draupadī does her part as well, eliminating Khaṭāsura. These episodes can be quite lengthy; the *Baghāsura badha*, for example, is nearly three hundred pages long.

⁸ MP pp. 156–161.

⁹ MP p. 395.

¹⁰ MP pp. 93–112.

The Theme

None of the stories told by the two poets is found in both poems; however the narratives and the motifs are very similar. R ā m a S a r a s v a t ī stresses the grotesque appearance of the demons: Suraketu has two heads, Triśirā three, Surajita five and Jaṅghāsura one thousand; Kulācala sports a goat's head, Gajaketu an elephant's, Mahiṣa Dānava a water-buffalo's while Kālukuñja and Ṣoṣaka have needle-shaped mouths like giant mosquitos. According to him, the demons are usually of mixed blood, the monstrous results of unnatural unions: the mother of Aśvakarṇa, for example, was a brahman widow and his father a *daitya*. More often the fathers are brahmans and the mothers ogresses (*rākṣasīs*). These inauspicious unions come about when a *rākṣasī* wandering in the forest encounters an ascetic and conceives a desire for him; she then transforms herself into a beautiful woman and seduces him.¹¹ In this way the *rākṣasī* Suramā seduces Madhu Rishi and gives birth to Jaṅghāsura after a thousand-year pregnancy, Āṣārikā seduces the sage Biriñci and becomes the mother of Baghāsura, and Māriṣā seduces Aṣṭavakra to give birth to Surajita. These are not happy events. When the last demon is born, his own mother was repelled by his grotesque appearance:

He had a terrifying form with five heads
and his ten arms were like *śāla* trees.
When Māriṣā saw him, she was filled with terror,
and overwhelmed by grief.
She pondered over the misfortune that had befallen her:
“Such a thing has been born from my womb.
When I see his ugliness, I'm afraid to give him my breast
lest when I suckle him, he gobble me up!
But if I abandon him, I will be guilty of the sin of infanticide.”¹²

Despite her misgivings, Māriṣā runs off and leaves her infant son to fend for himself.

¹¹ This means that when the Pāṇḍavas slay these demons, they incur the guilt of *brahmahatyā*, brahman-murder. When they bring this question up, they are told not to worry and that Kṛṣṇa would save (*tariba*) them (VP 9597). This is an ancient problem: Indra committed the same crime when he slew Vṛtra and Rāma when he slew Rāvaṇa.

¹² *mahābhayānaka beśa pāñca śira hay |*
daśakhāna bāhu tāra śālabṛkṣa nay ||
dekhī māriṣāra āti bhailā mahābhay |
ehimate mahādukhe tathāte āchay ||
mane mane bole kino akārya milila |
mora garbha hante hena goṭa janamila ||
dekhite kubeśa stana dibe lāge bhay |
sthanaka khāhante jāno mohoka gilay ||
erileyo putrabadha pātaka hovay ||; VP 12171–73.

The key step in the career of the demon is the boon (*bara*) which insures his initial success as well as his eventual doom. Before the demons begin their depredations, they usually seek out a deity and request the boon of immortality: Kumbhaka asks his boon of Brahmā, Prauḍhāsura from Kārttikeya, Suraketu from Caṇḍī and Muṛhāsura from Gaṇeśa. Sometimes, as in the classical accounts, the demon undergoes a rigorous course of austerities before he makes his request, but this is not always the case. Śiva, for example, gives a boon to the abandoned infant Baghāsura because he feels pity for him.¹³ Mindful of their own welfare, the deities are careful not to bestow the boon of immortality or complete invincibility the demons invariably ask for and grant instead boons which are qualified by a limitation called a *bara chidra* or *mṛtyu chidra*. Most often they specify a specific part of the demon's body as invulnerable and often the identity of the only individual capable of slaying them as well. Baghāsura gets the boon from Śiva that while his body will be diamond hard, his head will not be, so he will perish when it is crushed. The Sun God gives Kalpāsura the boon that he can only be slain by his seed (meaning Karṇa); he then smears sacred ashes on the demon's body, but deliberately neglects the area of his heart.¹⁴ A demon can also decide upon his own *mṛtyu chidra*. Kuṇḍalī Daitya performed *tapas* for many years, standing on one leg in a fire. Pleased, the goddess Kālikā appeared before him and asked him what boon he desired. The demon replied that he wanted to see the goddess in her 'real form', *nijarūpa*. When the goddess explained that only Śiva himself had seen her in this form and the *daitya* would be incapable of enduring it, Kuṇḍalī Daitya stepped back into the fire. Kālikā then relented and revealed herself in her *nijarūpa* which fills the universe and seems a *śākta* version of Viṣṇu's *viśvarūpa* or universal form. After the demon recovered from his terror at the sight, he asked for an elaborate boon:

I want my body to be three and a half *yojanas* in size.
 I want to conquer Brahmā, the gods, *asuras*,
 the sun and moon. Viṣṇu, Yama, Pavana, Varuṇa,
 the *nāgas*, the *yakṣas*, the *bhūpālas*,
 Yama (sic), Nairṛta and the other *digpālas*,
 may I not die by the hand of anyone.
 May I conquer the universe, this boon I ask of you.
 May I be immortal for fourteen *kalpas*.¹⁵

¹³ VP 9944.

¹⁴ MP p. 83.

¹⁵ *tiniyojanara arddhe hoiba mo kāye |*
ābara jñibi muhī brahmalokajāe ||
brahmā indra rudra ādi surāsuraḡaṇa |
candra sūryya biṣṇu yama pavana baruṇa ||
nāgagaṇa yakṣagaṇa ābara bhūpāla |
yama nairṛta ādi digapāla ||

Kālikā then explains that even the gods die and warns Kuṇḍalī of the ten avatars of Viṣṇu who will appear on the earth to rid it of demons, but while Kuṇḍala Daitya must die, he can choose the manner of his death (*mṛtyu mārga*). The demon then responds by choosing a most unusual method: he can only be killed when his head is bent over and the small toe of his left foot placed in his mouth.

Once the demon has been granted his boon, he assembles an army and sets about conquering the three worlds. The demon king has a minister or advisor, *mantrī*, who informs him of the situation, provides the background information about the enemies he is about to face and advises a course of action. Often the *mantrī* advises caution or retreat but the demon is usually so arrogant that he refuses to heed the advice and suffers the consequences. The descriptions of warfare which take up so many thousands of verses in these works do not differ for the most part from those in the Sanskrit epic; the changes in military techniques which had taken place during the intervening millennia do not make much of an impression. Armies are made up of the traditional fourfold components: charioteers, elephants, cavalry and foot soldiers, all of which are present in vast numbers. One difference is that the demons are often mounted on various animals such as cats, goats, buffaloes, camels, wild boars rather than on more conventional beasts of burden.

We do, however, notice details in Śāraḷā Dāsa which indicate some familiarity with contemporary military realities. Śāraḷā Dāsa writes that an army on the march is divided into different divisions: skirmishers (*hantaku baḷa*),¹⁶ an advance force (*āgvaṇi baḷa*), the main force (*pradhāna baḷa*), and a rear guard (*pacchāṇi baḷa*), and that the king and higher officers were protected by the bodyguards (*aṅga baḷa*). He also notes that after the demons complete their campaigns, their armies are dispersed and the troops sent to their home villages. When the campaigning season begins, messengers (*ḍagara*) are sent out to reassemble the army.¹⁷ Śāraḷā Dāsa notes that this is done in the month of *mārgaśīra* which brings to mind the advice of Kauṭilya who recommends that a king should march during the month of *mārgaśīra* in order to destroy the rainy-season crops of his enemy.¹⁸ Another interesting feature found in Oriya epic is that military confrontations do not invariably lead to bloody

kāhāri hātare mṛtyu naheu ye mote |
brahmāṇḍa jīṇibā bara māgīli mū tote ||
caūda kaḷapa muhī hoibi amara |; MP p. 167.

¹⁶ Baba Mishra, *Medieval Orissa and the Cult of Jagannatha*, Navrang, New Delhi 1995, p. 43. Mishra translates *hantaka baḷa* as "pioneers" but as the term is derived from the verb *hāṇibā* (Skt. *han*) it would seem to rather designate a force with tasks of a more aggressive character.

¹⁷ MP p. 374.

¹⁸ P.C. Chakravarti, *The Art of War in Ancient India*, Oriental Publishers, Delhi 1972, p. 94.

battles. When Praudhāsura proceeds on his *digvijaya*, king Kṛtakeśī and other monarchs heed the advice of their advisors and buy the demons off with tribute: king Kṛtakeśī loads one hundred elephants with goods from his warehouses, presents them to the demon and offers his submission.¹⁹ Buying off the enemy had always been a familiar military tactic, but not one often reflected in the literature.

Battle descriptions in both works run along traditional lines. When battle is joined, foot soldiers (*sainya*) are slaughtered in vast numbers while attention is focused on duels between individual heroes. The favoured weapon is the bow and arrow. There are many kinds of arrows: the *mohanā śara* renders those it strikes unconscious, the *ahi śara* stings like a snake, the *āditya śara* burns and the *varuṇa śara* quenches the flames, the *bajra śucī śara* has a sharp point, the *māyārūpī śara* assumes different shapes, the *viśvajit śara* is invincible and the *hāboṛā śara* is unerring. During arrow duels, the shafts are often destroyed in mid-flight by counter-arrows (*pratiśara*); bows can be fired at a rapid rate like automatic weapons and even a single arrow can be devastating: in Śāraḷā Dāsā Sahadeva kills two thousand demons with a single shaft.²⁰ In Rāmā Sarsvatī he does even better, slaying twenty thousand with a lone missile.²¹ Well-aimed arrows slice off heads and limbs, appendages which demons fortunately often possess in quantity. Other weapons used include the javelin (*śakti, śūla*), mallet (*mudgara*) and club (*gadā*) and only occasionally, a sword.

As the fights go on and on and on, jackals and vultures haunt the battlefield, clouds of arrows darken the sky and rivers of gore cut furrows through the ground and the blood-drenched earth is churned into mud. Not only the modern reader, but sometimes the Pāṇḍavas themselves become exhausted by the endless killing:

Bhīma said to his three brothers,
 “I have no desire to do battle any more.
 Another demon army is on its way, how many can I kill?
 I have been slaughtering warriors for days on end.
 I’m too tired to lift my arms, there’s no strength in my body.
 I am sick of death and violence.”²²

¹⁹ MP p. 372.

²⁰ MP p. 312.

²¹ VP 11420.

²² *bhīme bole bāpa āra śunā tini bhāi |*
yuddha karibāka āro mora mana nāi ||
kateka māribo āse senā rākṣasara |
māriho bīragaṇa aneka dinara ||
hāta bhari nacalay bala nāhi gāta |
marāṇa bighāta yena milila āmāta ||; VP 10582–3.

Sources

Because much of the material in these two *parvans* is non-Vyāsan, efforts have been made to identify its sources which are usually presumed to be textual. Oriya scholars have pointed out that Śāraḷā Dāsa took material from the *Bhāgavata purāṇa* and the *Raghuvamśa*,²³ and as has been seen, he sometimes alters these borrowed stories so radically, that they are barely recognizable. Baba Mishra writes that Śāraḷā Dāsa drew upon the *Ekāmra purāṇa* for many of his stories. This *purāṇa*, composed some time between the twelfth and fifteenth centuries, deals with the temples and sacred places of Ekāmraṣetra or Bhubanesvar.²⁴ Apparently he was equally free in his treatment of stories from the *purāṇa*.²⁵ Unfortunately no systematic study of his use of these sources has been made, so it is difficult to say how great the degree of his indebtedness is.

In his *Vaiṣṇava parba Rāma Sarasvatī* continually reminds his listeners that the stories, he has been telling, have been taken from respectable sources: at the very beginning of the *parvan* he announces in a *bhanitā* that he intends to compose verses “mixing [matter of] the *Haṁsa kākī* and *Yāmala saṁhitā*,”²⁶ and often mentions a third, the *Śiva rahasya*. He also claims that the *Yāmala saṁhitā* and the *Haṁsa kākī* were used by Vyāsa when he compiled his original Sanskrit *Mahābhārata*.²⁷ The *Haṁsa kākī* and *Yāmala saṁhitā* are otherwise completely unknown and while there are several Sanskrit works titled *Śiva rahasya*, none of them seems to be concerned with the kind of subject.²⁸ On the other hand, attributing the material to respectable but fictitious texts may have been a way of deflecting criticism for including apocryphal material. It may also be an Assamese poetic convention. One is reminded here of the *Śrīrāmakīrtana* of Ananta Thākura Ātā who claims his Rāma poem is based on the *Rāmāyaṇa candrikā* of Kalāpacandra, an otherwise totally unknown text, while in fact his poem follows the earlier *Rāmāyaṇa* of Mādhaḥva Kāndalī.²⁹

²³ Baba Mishra, op. cit., p. 186.

²⁴ Ludo Rocher, *The Purāṇas*, (A History of Indian Literature, vol. II, fasc. 3), Otto Harrassowitz, Wiesbaden 1986, p. 173.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 186. Mishra writes that, “The poet has profusely borrowed from this work to compose the stories of his own”. This seems to mean that he “retells” them with the same freedom he does the stories from the *Bhāgavata purāṇa* discussed above.

²⁶ *haṁsakākī saṁhitā yāmala miśra kari | racibo paṅyāra*; V.P. 4529.

²⁷ *byāse kathā kahe haṁsakākī purāṇara* (v. 5835): “Vyāsa recites the matter of the *Haṁsa kākī purāṇa*”; *dvaipāyana mahāmuni | karilā śāstraka jāni | yāmala saṁhitā cāi | ekatra kariya taya* || V.P. 13867: “The great sage Vyāsa, considering the *Yāmala saṁhitā*, made the *śāstra*, putting it together”; see also V.P. 10032–3.

²⁸ This is discussed in more detail in: W.L. Smith, *The Vaiṣṇava Parvan of the Assamese Mahābhārata*, in: Mariola Offredi (ed.), *The Banyan Tree: Essays on Early Literature in New Indo-Aryan Languages*, Manohar, New Delhi and Venice 2000, vol. II, pp. 343–350.

²⁹ W.L. Smith, *The Rāmāyaṇa in Eastern India: Assam, Bengal, Orissa*, 2nd revised ed., Munshiram Manoharlal, New Delhi (1988) 1995, p. 28.

Rāma Sarasvatī also mentions Jaimini and this leads S.N. Sarma to suggest that these texts might represent lost portions of Jaimini's *Mahābhārata*, according to tradition a lost *Mahābhārata* written by Vyāsa's pupil Jaimini, only one *parvan* of which has survived, the *Aśvamedhaparvan*. Sarma concludes that "it can reasonably be assumed that there existed some local versions or traditions of the *Mahābhārata* under various titles from which the Vaiṣṇavite poets borrowed their materials for their heroic *kāvya*s."³⁰

It can be safely assumed that both poets relied to some degree upon oral tradition in much the same way that *Rāmāyaṇa* poets did. However, while much research has been done on the sources of the various vernacular versions of the *Rāmāyaṇas*, the vernacular *Mahābhārata* literature has not been much investigated, so it is not easy to know which stories were in circulation. There are some exceptions. One is the *Bhīma carita* which tells how Bhīma helps a struggling Śiva to grow rice and introduce agriculture to the world of humans. This very popular Assamese tale was included by Rāma in his *Vaiṣṇava parba* but rejected by the editor of the printed version; it is, however, often printed separately.³¹ In another popular regional tale, also apparently only current in eastern India, Kṛṣṇa's foe Karṇa is transformed into a Vaiṣṇava saint under the name Dātā Karṇa. It appears in Assamese and Bengali versions and also finds a place in the *Bana parba* of Śāraḷā Dāsa and the Oriya hagiographical compendium *Dārhyatā bhakti rasāmṛta*.³² Otherwise few of the stories seem to be found elsewhere. However this is not surprising when we consider the type of story which dominates these two *parvans*. Their numerous accounts of demon slayings are, after all, simple variants on an elemental and very familiar pauranic theme and there seems no reason to presume that they were taken from unknown texts, oral literature or anywhere else than the imaginations of the poets.

The influence of other texts can be seen in details. The motif of the seductive ogress seducing the brahman hermit reminds one of the attempt of Rāvaṇa's sister Śūrpaṅakhā to woo Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa who were, it can be remembered, dressed in the costume of forest hermits. Here, as in Rāma Sarasvatī as well as in the vernacular versions of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, Śūrpaṅakhā changes herself into a beautiful woman before she attempts their seduction, rather than remaining in her demon form as in *Vālmīki*. The demon Jaṅghāsura tells a captive Draupadī that he has slain her five husbands and shows her mock

³⁰ S.N. Sarma, *Epics and Purāṇas in Early Assamese Literature*, Pratima Devi, Gauhati 1972, p. 69.

³¹ For this story see W.L. Smith, *Shiva, Lord of the Plow*, in: Rahul Peter Das (ed.), *Essays on Middle Bengali*, Firma K.L. Mukhopadhyaya, Calcutta 1999.

³² See: W.L. Smith, *The Canonization of Karṇa: the Migration of a Hagiographic Motif*, in: "Indologica Taurinensia", XVII–XVIII, 1991–1992, pp. 343–357.

heads (*maya śira*) in order to convince her, just as Rāvaṇa had showed Sītā the heads of Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa for the same reason. Gosimha carries off Kṛṣṇa's wife Satyabhāmā just as Rāvaṇa did Sītā and when he does so, his minister Japāsura reminds him of the consequences this had for the king of Laṅkā. Even Rāvaṇa himself makes an appearance in the *Vaiṣṇava parba* where he is defeated and imprisoned by Curātan Rājā, an ally of the Pāṇḍavas. Eventually he is released and captor and captive form a friendship just like Kārtavīryārjuna did with Rāvaṇa. One can also see the influence of other texts. The story of Bhīma's netherworld battles with the *nāgas* in his quest for the *sañjīvani maṇi* is very much like the story of Babhruvāhana's battle for the same jewel in the same place against the same foes in order to save his dead father Arjuna in the *Jaimini aśvamedhaparvan*.³³ Also frequently mentioned in both works are some of the more eminent pauranic demons, such as Mahiṣa, the buffalo demon.

Bhakti

Śāraḷā Dāsa wrote before the devotional movement was prevalent in Orissa. He praises many deities in his *bhaṇitās*, especially, the various manifestations of the goddess, and very often Jagannātha, just as one would expect of an Oriya poet. Devotional ideals do not affect his narrative. He tells the story, for example, of king Śūrābara, a Vaiṣṇava whose mind is constantly concentrated on the feet of Kṛṣṇa. When the army of Praudhāsura approaches his Kingdom, Śūrābara prays to Kṛṣṇa for help, but his devotion is of no avail and he is forced to submit to the demon and pay a tribute of five hundred wagons of goods in order to be quit of him.³⁴ Elsewhere, as in *Rāma Sarasvatī*, devotion invariably triumphs. Here even Kṛṣṇa himself does not always triumph. In the *Śatadhanu śaraṇa*, as noted earlier, Arjuna, disguised as a Kirāta, found himself facing Kṛṣṇa who was wearing the same disguise. Neither recognized the other and a fight took place during which Arjuna won by shooting down Kṛṣṇa with an arrow given him by Agni. Arjuna marveled at the effulgence (*teja*) emanating from the body of his fallen foe, admired his attractive features, and regretted having killed him without a reason (*binā āparādhe*). When Śatadhanu explained who it was lying on the ground, Arjuna cast away his bow, embraced Kṛṣṇa and removed the arrow. He apologized profusely and treated the stricken Kṛṣṇa to a devotional eulogy. Kṛṣṇa embraced him in turn, and provided an explanation of how Arjuna could fell him,

³³ *Śrījaiminīyāśvamedhaparvan*, ṭikākāra Rāmādhāra Śukla, Gītāpres, Gorakhpur 1998 (2052), p. 40.

³⁴ MP pp. 365–366.

Praise (*sādhū*) to you Phalguni, fortunate is your life.
 Is there anyone save you who could defeat me?
 You are my dearest friend, there is no difference between us,
 Now I have lost to you on the battlefield.³⁵

Kṛṣṇa is also overcome by the demon Gosimha Daitya. After wrecking the sacrifice of Ugrasena (a traditional demon activity), Gosimha knocked down both Kṛṣṇa and Balarāma unconscious, and threw them into the flames of the sacrificial pit. They are saved from winding up on the demon's dinner table when the Fire God Agni hides them in the flames. Kṛṣṇa and Balarāma are eventually saved by Arjuna. Arjuna, who had not been present at the sacrifice, killed the demon and returned to find the sacrificial site despoiled and Rāma and Kṛṣṇa nowhere to be seen. Distraught, he prayed to Agni who produces them:

“If you are merciful to me, Lord of the Gods,
 show me Rāma and Kṛṣṇa in their true form.”
 Vaiśnāvāra was pleased by Arjuna's words
 and he took Rāma and Kṛṣṇa from the sacrificial pit.³⁶

Rāma Sarasvatī was a Vaiṣṇava, more precisely a member of the reformist Mahāpuruṣīyā sect founded by Śaṅkaradeva whom he praises in his *bhaṇitās*. Śaṅkaradeva himself spent his final years at the court of Naranārāyaṇa who, hagiographers claim, was a follower of his. Rāma Sarasvatī refers to the Pāṇḍavas as (*parama*) Vaiṣṇavas and saints (*santa*) and call his *Bana parba* as a tale of saints, *santara caritra*. He continually reminds his listeners of the unending travail and dangers the Pāṇḍavas face in the “terrible forest” (*ghora bana*) and the suffering which they are only able to endure because of their profound faith in Kṛṣṇa. As Vaiṣṇavas they have nothing to fear, since Yama has no power over them³⁷ and anyone foolish enough to harm a Vaiṣṇava would soon suffer the consequences.³⁸

In both poems the Pāṇḍavas are only able to defeat their demon enemies with divine help and then with the greatest of difficulty. This divine aid is manifested in various ways, such as in the form of a celestial voice. When Bhīma and Arjuna find themselves unable to overcome the demon Suraketu, for

³⁵ *sādhure tu phalaguni sādhu to jībana |*
tora binā parābhava diantā ki āna | |
tuhi mora prāṇasakhā bhinnābhinna nahī |
ebe tote saṁgrāmare hārilāi muhī | |; MP, p. 365.

³⁶ *yebe moṭhāre sadaṅga tumbhe devasāmī |*
sbarūpa dekhāa mote rāmakṛṣṇa beni | |
arjjuna bākya sāmānda deba baiśnābara |
yajñakuṇḍu rāmakṛṣṇa karile bāhāra | |; MP p. 109.

³⁷ *yamo adhikāra nohe baiṣṇaba lokara |; VP 13619.*

³⁸ *baiṣṇavaka hiṁsile alpate pāi phala |; VP 16059.*

example, a disembodied voice gives them precise instructions how to slay him, Arjuna follows them and succeeds.³⁹ After Nakula fights thirteen days against Kuṇḍalī Daitya, a monster the size of a mountain, he finds himself unable to defeat him even though he has learned his *mṛtyu bheda*. Nakula then concentrates his mind on Jagannātha who sends his *nṛsimha mūrti* which enters Nakula's body and invests him with the strength of a crore of lions. He then lifts up the demon by the hair, bends him over and sticks the little toe of his left foot into his mouth, killing him.⁴⁰

The Pāṇḍavas are not only repeatedly defeated by their enemies, but are often killed by them as well. In the *Vaiṣṇava parva* Draupadī and Bhīma's four brothers are killed by a *nāga* and Bhīma enters the underworld in search of the *sañjīvani maṇi* only obtaining it after being killed himself and brought back to life by his father, the Wind God.⁴¹ Four of the brothers are slain by King Sindhu and revived by the Aśvins.⁴² When all the Kauravas are killed by Kuṇḍala Daitya, Arjuna brings them back to life with magic ashes.⁴³ The Pāṇḍavas thus not only overcome their many enemies, but repeatedly survive death itself.

The Burden of the Forest

One of the monsters slain by Arjuna is the tiger demon Nāmadevamalla. When he dies, a celestial being emerged from the corpse and addressed Arjuna:

“*Namo, namo* Dhanañjaya, son of Kuntī.
I have become liberated through your mercy.
I can see no limit to your power.
Nara and Nārāyaṇa have both come here.
Taking human form, you wander through the forests
with a mind to relieving the earth of its great burden.
Lord Kṛṣṇa was born to Daivakī
and you are incarnate as Kuntī's son.
Slaying numberless *daityas* and *dānavas*,
you will put an end to the burden of the forest.⁴⁴

³⁹ VP 9837.

⁴⁰ MP p. 169.

⁴¹ VP 4993–5077.

⁴² VP 18693–18699.

⁴³ MP p. 171.

⁴⁴ *namo namo dhanañjaya kuntīr tanaya |*
bhailoho mukuta mai tomāra kṛpāya ||
tomāra śakati dekhi antaka napāi |
nara naranārāyaṇa dui āsilā iṭhāi ||
ṛṭhibīra mahābhāra haribāka mane |
nararūpe dhare tumi phurā bane bane ||

Thus, according to Rāma Sarasvatī, Arjuna's task is to remove the great burden of the earth, *pr̥thibīra mahābhāra*, more specifically, the burden of the forest, *banara bhāra*, this, after all, is the *Bana parba* and the forest is the traditional haunt of demons. The situation is somewhat different in the original epic. In Vyāsa's *Mahābhārata* we are told that the *daityas*, defeated in their attempts to storm heaven and overcome the gods, changed tactics and were instead born on earth in various bodies, notably those of powerful, insolent kings and oppressed brahmans and the other castes and soon became the scourge of the earth. Unable to bear their weight any longer, Mother Earth sought relief from heaven, and it was granted when the gods, *gandharvas*, *apsaras* and other celestial beings consented to be born in human bodies to remove the burden, in other words, exterminate the kings.⁴⁵ This explanation is not found in the *Ādi paravan* of either Śāraḷā Dāsa or Rāma Sarasvatī but clearly echoed in the *Bijaj parba* in a scene describing Vyāsa's visit to the blind king Dhṛtarāṣṭra:

Dvaipāyana said, "Son, listen to the reason [for my coming].
The earth has been filled up with kings.
Vasumatī cannot bear the elephants, horses and subjects on her head
and their weight is pressing her down to the netherworld."⁴⁶

This concern, however, is only peripheral, for Vyāsa abruptly changes topic and goes on to describe a much more serious problem:

There's another matter I bring before you.
There is a demon named Triśirā. [...]
He has caused great fear in the mind of Brahmā
who is afraid he plans to take away his place in heaven.⁴⁷

daivakīta bhaila prabhu nārāyṇa jāta |
kuntīra tanaiya nara jānibā sāksāta ||
asamkhyāta daitya dānavaka mārīlanta |
banara bhāra tumi karibāhā anta | |; VP 4394–4395.

⁴⁵ *The Mahābhārata*, Text as Constituted in its Critical Edition, The Bhandakar Oriental Research Institute, Poona 1971, 1.58.

⁴⁶ *dbaipāyane bole putra śuniyo kāraṇa |*
pr̥thibīta bārhi āche yata rājāgaṇa ||
gaja bājī prajā śire dharanī nasaj |
tāra bhare basumatī pātāle paśaj | |; VP 5743.

⁴⁷ *āra eka kathā kaho āgata tomāra*
triśirā nāmata āche dānava durbbāra | | (...)
brahmāra manta bara samśaija milila |
mora brahmapada iṭo laibāka khojaij |; VP 5744–5747.

Vyāsa then gives his son Dhṛtarāṣṭra a long description of the havoc the demon Trīśirā has been wreaking on both the worlds of gods and men. It is for this reason that Dhṛtarāṣṭra asks for the temporary restoration of his eyesight and Vidura undergoes a course of austerities to master the art of weaponry. The two then set out to slay demons, not to reduce the population of arrogant kings.

Descriptions of an overburdened Earth appealing to the gods for succour is a stock scene in later Sanskrit texts: threatened by a demon, Vasumatī, Mother Earth, goes to Brahmā to complain and he in his turn leads a delegation of gods to Viṣṇu (or sometimes Śiva) who promises to dispose of the demon. This scenario is given a new twist in our two texts. In the *Madhya parva* Indra worries that Kuṇḍala Daitya, having slaughtered the Kauravas, will turn his attention to the subjection of the three worlds and asks the guru of the gods, Br̥haspati, what can be done to avert this. Br̥haspati explains to the anxious Indra that Nakula is destined to slay the monster and that he will be slain in fourteen days. Then the gods go to Nakula and inform him of his task.⁴⁸ When the gods and rishis are terrified by Baghāsura, they appeal to Indra who in his turn takes them to Brahmā; Brahmā leads a delegation to Śiva. Śiva explains that they have no reason to fear, for Baghāsura is fated to be slain by the Pāṇḍavas. The gods are overjoyed at this information and the delegation then proceeds to its final stop, the camp of the Pāṇḍavas who are told what's expected of them. The gods then supply them with weapons, praise them and return to their own abode. The Pāṇḍavas become the final resort. It is to them that the gods ultimately have to turn for help. The task of the Pāṇḍavas is thus transformed; it is no longer the task of killing other Hindus, bad Hindus though they may be, but of destroying demons who are threatening the very fabric of the universe; it has become a task of cosmic significance.

Historical Background

These two apocryphal *parvans* are unique. The *Madhya parva* devotes most of fifteen thousand verses to elaborate descriptions of battles with demons and the Assamese *Mahābhārata* double that. There is no parallel to this in the other versions of the *Mahābhārata* composed in eastern India: the late 18th century Oriya *Mahābhārata* of K ṛ ṣ ṇ a s i ṃ h a⁴⁹ and the Bengali versions of K ā ś ī r ā m d ā s⁵⁰ (early 17th century) and Kabi Sañjaya⁵¹ (15th century?) do not deviate from the original in this way. We thus have to ask why Ś ā r a ḷ ā

⁴⁸ MP p. 161.

⁴⁹ Rājā K ṛ ṣ ṇ a s i ṃ h a, *Mahābhārata*, Dharmagranth Store, Katak, n.d.

⁵⁰ *Kāśīrāmdāsī Mahābhārata*, Mañilāl Bandyopādhyaya and Dhīrānanda Thākura Pāri, (ed.), Tārācād Dās & Sons, Calcutta, n.d.

⁵¹ Kabi Sañjaya, *Mahābhārata*, Munīndrakumār Ghosh (ed.), Calcutta University, Calcutta 1969.

Dāsa and Rāma Sarasvatī devote so much attention to this kind of material. The answer may lie in the differences in the historical circumstances in which the poets wrote. Śāraḷā Dāsa and Rāma Sarasvatī lived their lives in prosperous Hindu kingdoms, the others in Muslim-ruled states. Twenty years before Śāraḷā Dāsa finished his *Mahābhārata*, an officer named Kapilendra engineered a coup against the last Gaṅgā emperor, the weak Bhānudeva IV, and founded a new dynasty. Kapilendra (1453–1469) was the most powerful and successful Hindu ruler of his day who during decades of successful warfare extended the borders of his kingdom to Bengal in the north, and to the mouth of the Kaveri river in the south. Among his more prominent enemies were Shams-ud-din, the sultan of Bengal, and Ala-ud-din II, the Bahmani sultan. Kapilendra was succeeded by his son Puruṣottama (1466–1497). Legend claims that Jagannātha himself appeared to the old king in a dream and commanded him to nominate Puruṣottama as his successor rather than his eldest son and rightful heir, Harivīra.⁵² Puruṣottama retained the position won by his father and during his reign the kingdom held firm against its many enemies and enjoyed a long period of prosperity.

The patron of Rāma Sarasvatī was the Koch king Naranārāyaṇa. The Koch kingdom had been founded around the year 1515 by Biśu, a chieftain of the Koch tribe who arranged for a Hindu ancestry to be found for himself, took the name Viśvanātha, and set about hinduizing his tribe. He was succeeded by his son Naranārāyaṇa whose armies were headed by his brother Śukladhvāj, better known under the epithet Cilārāya, “the Kite King”, because of his rapidity in movement. Cilārāya waged successful war against the Ahoms, the Kacharis, the tribal kingdoms of the Jaintia, Tippera, Manipur and various other enemies, and succeeded in extending the boundaries of his brother’s kingdom to the greater part of modern Assam. The Kochs also found themselves involved in hostilities with the sultan of Bengal, just like the kings of Orissa.

Both Hindu kingdoms were surrounded by numerous enemies, almost all of whom were non-Hindus; both kingdoms were headed by ambitious, newly established dynasties only a generation on the throne. Rulers in both kingdoms saw in religion a means for bolstering their authority, improving civilian morale and legitimizing their many wars. The enemies of Puruṣottama and Naranārāyaṇa would not simply be seen as enemies of the state, but as the enemies of god, a transference easily made since they were largely Muslim or “pagan”. The two kings thought of their conflict with these enemies like that of Kṛṣṇa and his *bhaktas* against their demon foes. Such an identification is made explicit by Kapilendra in an inscription he had set up in the Gopinātha temple where he compares his labours to those of the avatars of Viṣṇu:

⁵² Mishra, op. cit., p. 53.

When the world was sinking down under the mud and when civilization was vanishing through the atrocities of the Mlecchas, King Kapilendra appeared on the scene and saved the world like the Kalki and the boar incarnations of Vishnu.⁵³

In the case of the Assamese *Mahābhārata*, we have no reason to speculate about its relevance to the contemporary political situation, since the command for its composition was an overt political act. Naranārāyaṇa not only wanted to stress the newly acquired Hindu values of the Koch, but more specifically, the ideals of the dynamic Mahāpuruṣīyā sect of Śaṅkaradeva. The *Mahābhārata* was put to similar purposes elsewhere as well. In the 15th century kingdom of Gwalior the poet Viṣṇudās wrote a Brajbhāsā version of the *Mahābhārata*.⁵⁴ His patron, the Tomara king Ḍūṁgarsī, also faced many enemies, the most formidable of whom was the Muslim sultan of Delhi. In the beginning of his *Mahābhārata*, Viṣṇudās compares the situation of the Hindu kingdom of Gwalior to that of the gods facing a demon (*asura*) army. As Stuart McGregor points out:

As the Gods were freed from fear of their enemies, so is long embattled Gwalior freed in Ḍūṁgarsī's time from some of the pressures from Delhi and from nearer states. Ḍūṁgarsī had had increasing success during the years preceding 1435 in resisting incursions from, and perhaps in avoiding tribute to, Mubārakśāh of Delhi, to the point where in 1435 he was able to launch an attack on the fort of Bhandar and its neighbourhood.⁵⁵

The poet was telling the king that “the gods have favoured Gwalior as they did the Pāṇḍavas”.⁵⁶

In 1578, around a century after Śāraḷā Dāsā wrote his *Mahābhārata*, the independent Hindu kingdom of Orissa fell to Muslims of Bengal who in their turn were soon incorporated into the rapidly expanding Mughal empire of Akbar. Naranārāyaṇa's Koch kingdom did not even outlast him. Before he died, it had split into two parts, one ruled by a son of his and the other by a son of Cilārāya. Both rapidly faded away. When Kṛṣṇasimha made another Oriya rendering of the *Mahābhārata* centuries later, Orissa had long been under Mughal rule, and in Bengal, where Kāśīrāmdās and Kabi Sañjaya

⁵³ Cited by Mishra, op. cit., p. 76.

⁵⁴ *Mahākavi Viṣṇudās kṛta Mahābhārat (Pāṇḍav Carit)*, Vidya Mandir Prakāśan, Gvāliyar 1973.

⁵⁵ S. McGregor, *A Narrative Poet's View of his Material: Viṣṇudās's Introduction to his Brajbhāsā Pāṇḍav-carit (AD 1435)*, in: M. Offredi (ed.), *The Banyan Tree*, Manohar, New Delhi and Venice 2000, p. 340.

⁵⁶ Ibid. p. 341.

wrote, Muslims had been ruling since the beginning of the 13th century. Śāraḷā Dāsa and Rāma Sarasvatī lived in very different places, in a time when mighty Hindu warriors kept their many enemies at bay. The gods may not have granted Orissa, Kooch Bihar and Gwalior permanent respite from their enemies, but they did allow them their hour of glory, and this, perhaps, is what we see reflected in their *Mahābhāratas*.

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