

Mahābhārata in the Tribal and Folk Traditions of India

Edited by
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Introduction

About five years ago, we had planned two seminars on the Rāmāyaṇa and the Mahābhārata, described by Jawaharlal Nehru as the story of India, in the tribal and folk versions of India. The seminar on the folk and tribal versions of the Rāmāyaṇa, held at Guwahati University in collaboration with the Department of Folklore Research in February, 1988, was a great success. It represented probably the first multi-disciplinary effort of its kind by scholars from the fields such as literature, anthropology, folklore, history, linguistics, etc. to explore our continuing links with the epic traditions. There were some gaps in the material presented but the overall picture that emerged from the discussions was most satisfying. The seminar was made memorable not only by the presentation of the textual material from all parts of India but also by the demonstration of the performing arts connected with Ramlila traditions by cultural troupes from all parts of Assam, testifying to the vibrant traditions of the Ramakatha.

The present seminar on the Mahābhārata in tribal and folk traditions of India is a sequel to the one held earlier on the Rāmāyaṇa. It has been made possible with the collaboration of the Indian Institute of Advanced Study which has brought out an interesting study on *The Moral Dilemmas in the Mahābhārata* (edited by B.K. Matilal, 1989) and the Himachal Kala Sanskriti avam Bhasha Academy which through its research publications has opened up a very interesting part of the country for scholars. Himachal Pradesh is the home of the communities which link themselves to the epic traditions in a very interesting way. Therefore it is only appropriate that our three organisations should collaborate in exploring the continuing and even evergrowing linkages of our people with the Mahābhārata traditions.

I should start by clarifying that the idea of organising the seminar had nothing to do with the TV serial on the Mahābhārata called the Sagar serial nor had it any thing to do with Peter Brook's Mahābhārata (See *Economic and Political Weekly* Vol. XXIII, No. 32, August 6, 1988) which is a far more serious effort to present the Mahābhārata story at an international level.

The objective of organising this seminar was rooted in our experience as anthropologists and field workers in tribal and folk areas. We have been witness to the epic traditions being continually adapted and recreated to reflect tribals' perceptions and folk communities' aspirations as part of ongoing and developing processes in performing arts and popular literature. Many of our folk artists in recent years have won universal acclaim for their dramatic presentation of Panduvani which we in our early years witnessed as a simple folk form.

The objective of the seminar therefore was to bring together the scholars who have worked in the field of Mahābhārata in the tribal and folk traditions of India

in order to enable them to exchange notes and share their thoughts and research findings. The Director of the Academy, Dr. B.R. Sharma, as discussed between us, organised cultural performances to demonstrate the popularity of the Mahābhārata themes in this part of the country.

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K.S. Singh presents an overview of the folk and tribal versions of the Mahābhārata prevalent in different parts of the country. He also draws upon his experiences in Chotanagpur to present a selection of Munda songs on the Mahābhārata and Lord Krishna. J. Handoo sees in the Mahābhārata a clear picture of Indian avunculate society and its inherent contradictions and the conflict between the avunculate and non-avunculate societies. In fact he argues that the Mahābhārata is the epitome of sibling rivalry while the Rāmāyaṇa orders the sibling relations into positive channels. He goes on to trace the continuity of many of the traits of the Mahābhārata society into the present day Indian society and identifies a number of symbols and metaphors which have been common to Indian society over ages.

After this general introduction, the papers are presented on the Mahābhārata in the tribal and folk traditions various regions of India. R.L. Raina (Shunt) provides a historical account of the relations of Kashmir with rest of India in the Mahābhārata period, although the Kashmir valley maintained its isolation. Krishna emerged as a pan-Indian personality with a remote role in Kashmir affairs. He helped Kashmir's widow queen Yasovati to ascend the throne after her husband was killed in a war. He thus reinforced his popular image as the defender of the honour of women.

The Himalayas have been the abode of the Mahābhārata characters where today they are identified with the places they visited. They are worshipped as folk deities. Part of it is understandable because the Pandavas with their polyandry had special links with the Himalayas which is still the seat of this institution. The Himalayan communities are also unique in the sense that they worship the Kauravas, particularly Duryodhana as Samsui. Of particular interest is the incorporation of a Himalayan deity Hidimba into the Mahābhārata through the process of spousification. She was married to Bhima and gave birth to a powerful character Ghatotakach. Bali presents the folk versions of the Mahābhārata in Duggaradesh or Jammu which have a distinct bias in favour of the Pandavas as gods and heroes; the Kauravas are ignored. B.K. Sharma presents his paper on the tribal and folk traditions found in various parts of Himachal Pradesh. Neeru Nanda follows up Sharma's lead and deals with some of the interesting aspects of the Mahābhārata lore in this part of the country. H.R. Justa particularly refers to the association of the heroes of the Mahābhārata with the temples and village gods in Himachal Pradesh, even though in doing so, he treads a little of the familiar ground. The Himachal chapter also includes a piece

on the martial game called Thoda performed by the Khasha people of Himachal Pradesh. We saw a demonstration of this martial art during the seminar. Shivananda Nautiyal presented a detailed account of the metamorphosis of the Mahābhārata characters in the Garhwal region of Himachal Pradesh and illustrated his material with a number of folk songs.

Although the Brahmaputra valley of the north-east region is vibrant with Mahābhārata lores we had no paper on the subject from there but we had a very interesting paper by Navin Chandra Sharma on the Ojapali which is also a Mahābhārata based art form: Mahābhārata is one of the sources for the themes for this art form. From Bhojpuri region there was a paper by K.D. Upadhyay which dealt with the folk perceptions of the main characters of the Mahābhārata in the caste ridden society of Bihar. Krishna, the Yadava is presented as a person of doubtful character. This is a reflection of caste prejudices and caste rivalries. Bhishma has been raised to the status of a demi-God. Draupadi is highly spoken of as the symbol of a pious wife. The characters of the Mahābhārata as the author argues have undergone change in folk traditions. Mahendra Bhanabat presents an account of the folk traditions of the Mahābhārata in Rajasthan where it is recited by many communities which include the Muslim Jogis of Mirasi community. The tribals of Maharashtra, also like the tribals of middle India, consider Mahābhārata heroes as their gods and ancestors. This paper contains an account of the folk songs and the dances which are connected with the Mahābhārata themes. Maharashtra has been more influenced by the Rāmāyaṇa traditions than by the Mahābhārata. The Korku tribe regards itself as the decendants of the Kaurwas, and the Korkus of Nimar trace their origin to Karkotak Naga associated with the Mahābhārata and Puranas. Draupadi is recalled as the dear sister of Krishna. The Pandavas and Krishna are set up as the presiding deities at dance festivals. The Mahābhārata's heroes are regarded as ancestors together with Rāmāyaṇa heroes like Meghnath and Ravana. The masks worn by the dancers take after the Mahābhārata's heroes.

Bhima emerges as the most popular hero in tribal India. Mahendra Kumar Mishra presents the story of the adaptation of the theme of Bhima's exploits and valour in various folk traditions of South Kosala. Bhima, the most powerful of men is most closely associated with the tribals of South Kosala. He, like any tribal god is credited with having introduced the brew, agriculture, crops like paddy, a wind machine, iron implements, etc. He tamed wild buffaloes and other wild animals and made agriculture safe. He is also the rain god who is propitiated in times of drought. Above all he is the cultural hero.

However, it is the Oriya Mahābhārata of Sarala Das composed in the 15th century that presents the most interesting example of the adaptation of the Mahābhārata story to the historical situation and cultural specificities of medieval Orissa. Pathani Patnayak presents a general account of the Sarala Das's Oriya Mahābhārata. This work appears to be the most complete work of its kind compared to other regional adaptations of the Mahābhārata composed till then. He gave an identity to the Oriya people and his work is associated with the early

phase of Oriya proto-nationalism. Pravakar Swain identifies the folk tales from Orissa taken into the Sarala's Mahābhārata. One way of linking the Mahābhārata with local people was to marry the Mahābhārata heroes locally. The Oriya got even the monogamous Yudhishthira married to Suhani, an Oriya girl.

T.S. Rukmini presented a comprehensive and scholarly overview of the Mahābhārata in the South with particular reference to Tamil literature and the folk traditions of Tamil Nadu and Kerala. She writes about the tremendous popularity of the Mahābhārata in the southern region, the spontaneous, almost effortless merging of classical and folk traditions, minor variations in the stories and art forms between the four regions, etc.

There were two papers from Andhra. N. Krishna Kumari deals with the folk traditions of the Mahābhārata in Telugu, and also links up the Mahābhārata character with the presentday problems and situations faced by women. She particularly draws upon the women's own folklore about the Mahābhārata and deftly brings in the story of Subhadra and Draupadi to express the universal feelings of oppressed women against male domination. The Pandavulu are a community who trace their origin to the Mahābhārata and recite the Mahābhārata stories for their patrons. P. Subba Chary presents an ethnographic account of this community. He also describes the two stories of the Yayati and Pandavas with a great deal of local material thrown in. Chummar Choondal presents a textual interpretation of the relationship of the performing arts in Kerala based on the Mahābhārata. The Mahābhārata is a living tradition in performing arts and the communities who perform them recall the Mahābhārata story.

There were as many as seven papers on the Mahābhārata from Tamil Nadu. While appreciating the many dimensions including the classical they sought to explore it was possible to include only those papers that dealt with the folk traditions of the Mahābhārata focused by the seminar.

Saraswati Venugopal provide a very interesting account of the widespread impact of the Mahābhārata themes. Both Arjuna and Karna were locally married. There are temples of the Pandavas, particularly of Draupadi, in Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh. The Arvan festival and celebration of various events of Draupadi and Arjuna's life are closely connected. Lakshminarayanan traces the history of the influence and composition of Mahabharata in Tamil, and the influence of the Mahābhārata in the village temples and deities of Tamil Nadu. Draupadi and Pandavas are worshipped as benign village deities and Draupadi as the caste deity of the Vanniayar. Ranganayaki Mahapatra describes the impact of the Mahābhārata in Tamil literature and the presence of Dravidian elements in many of Mahābhārata themes. While the Brahmans in Tamil Nadu do not adopt the names of the Pandavas and Kaurwas, the non-Brahmans do so with zest. Draupadi is however not admired because of her arrogance and vengefulness, though Subramania Bharati in his celebrated work *Pancali Saptam* put her on a pedestal as a symbol of revolt. D. Scenisam discusses the rise of a short Tamil Mahābhārata.

Draupadi has not been a popular character in the male dominated Indian society, where she has not been accepted as an ideal of Indian womanhood. She is feared, she is full of rage, and she takes revenge. Even a woman does not wish to be like her. This is the theme which is discussed in a very interesting way by P. Usha Sundari who tries to find out why such a versatile, accomplished woman displaying a whole range of passion is not the ideal woman.

There has been no dearth of seminars and conferences held at the regional, national and international levels on the Mahābhārata, but they have been dominated by classicists or textualists. There has been no focus in such discussions on the non-textual dimensions of oral traditions. No account of the Mahābhārata will be complete without taking into account the evergrowing corpus of oral traditions. I hope and trust that this book will contribute to the understanding of the Mahābhārata in tribal and folk traditions and promote interest in this area for a better understanding of the Mahābhārata traditions as a whole.

K.S. Singh