

Telugu Folk Additions to Maha Bharatha

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After the great war of Maha Bharatha, Vyasa composed a heroic ballad in eight thousand and eight hundred verses by name 'Jayam' (the victory). Later it was developed by his disciples into 'Bharatha' (one lakh verses) and afterwards into 'Maha Bharatha' consisting of 125,000 'Slokas'. Vyasa's disciples, during their recitations to the common folk, added many 'Slokas' and 'Upakhyanas' in order to make the view point of their teacher clear to the illiterate audience. Thus this great epic reached the village folk throughout India and became popular. While finding out reasons for happenings, which is the principal characteristic of the folk, they have added some more tales and incidents to Maha Bharatha. These folk additions are very interesting. They reveal the psychology of the folk and to some extent fill up the gaps created by Vyasa. The poets in the regional languages followed some of these folk additions in their translations of Vyasa Bharatha. Hari-kathakas (scholarly musicians who individually tell devotional tales by singing and dancing with the accompaniments of 'violin' and 'mridan-gam') and Burrakathakas (minstrels who sing heroic ballads in groups of three playing folk instruments) popularised these folk additions in Andhra Pradesh. I am going to narrate a few popular Telugu folk additions to Maha Bharatha:

I. Intelligence and Immortality of Sri Krishna:

The folk created a peculiar story which gives the reason for the tremendous intelligence and immortality of Sri Krishna. Pandu Raja, when he was on his death bed, ordered his sons not to burn his body but to eat it away so that they would become immortal, intelligent and be able to know the future. As soon as he died Krishna arrived on the scene

and stopped the Pandavas from eating the dead body. He ridiculed the horrible act of eating one's own father's corpse and sent them away. The Pandavas left the place keeping Sahadeva near the corpse. Then Krishna entered the dead body without the notice of Sahadeva and began eating it slowly. Meanwhile, Sahadeva was tempted and ate the little finger of the corpse. At once he could know the mischief of Sri Krishna and warned him. By that time, Krishna from within could eat all the parts of the body except the toe of the leg. He came out and cursed Sahadeva like this: "If you reveal my act to anybody, your head will break into thousand pieces!".

Thus Krishna became immortal and shrewdly intelligent knowing all the past, future and present. As he had no time to eat the toe, an ordinary hunter could kill him by piercing an arrow into his toe. Among all the Pandavas, Sahadeva was intelligent because he ate the little finger of the corpse.

II. The story of Sakuni:

Sakuni was the maternal uncle of Duryodhana. He was mainly responsible for the downfall of Duryodhana. Why did this maternal uncle spoil his own nephew by giving deadly advices? There is no reply in Vyasa Bharatha. The folk created a story as an answer to this question:

Duryodhana in his childhood, used to ridicule the Pandavas as 'Kunḍas' (=children born to a woman through others while her husband is alive). Bhima, after knowing the secret of Kauravas, retorted Duryodhana as 'Goḷaka' (=child born to a widowed woman through another person). Duryodhana, who is famous for sensibility, questioned Vyasa how he could become a Goḷaka. Then Vyasa told him the story of the marriage of Gandhari:

Astrologers predicted that young Gandhari would become a widow immediately after her marriage. So, in order to remove that bad fate, she was married to a ram first. After killing that ram, she was given to Dhritarashtra in marriage. Thus the Kauravas became Goḷakas.

After knowing his birth secret, Duryodhana got wild for the act done by Gandhara Raja, his maternal grandfather, and invaded his Kingdom. He captured his grandfather along with his hundred sons and imprisoned them in an underground dungeon. He gave them a fistful of rice daily. Sakuni, the youngest son of Gandhara Raja, was very clever. So all his brothers asked him to remain alive by eating that meagre food and take revenge on Duryodhana. Gandhara Raja, just before his death, advised his youngest son to prepare dice from his bones.

They would be very powerful and Sakuni could play with them according to his will. Sakuni did as he was ordered by his father. After one year, Duryodhana checked up the dreadful prison. His grandfather and all his uncles except Sakuni were dead. He pardoned his youngest uncle and took him to his ministry. Slowly and cleverly, Sakuni brought out the ruin of Duryodhana and his entire family.

Gambling is the chief motif in Maha Bharatha. Sakuni played a key role in this gambling. He depended upon his dice. In other words, dice are the main motif for the war of Kurukshetra. So the folk attributed a mysterious history to these dice.

III. Insects Cursed Gandhari:

Gandhari was the most piteous mother in Maha Bharatha who lost her one hundred sons at a time. No human lady could bear this torture. She was a very virtuous woman. As her husband was blind, she closed her eyes artificially with a piece of cloth. Such a chaste and dutiful queen had to suffer; why? No answer from Vyasa. Again we have to observe the folk addition:

Once Gandhari, after cooking the rice, poured the hot gruel on the earth. It entered some anthill and all the insects inside died at a time due to the hot gruel. While dying they cursed Gandhari that all her children would die a premature death at a time in the same manner.

Even to-day, there is a custom among the women folk of Andhra Pradesh not to pour hot gruel on the ground. They keep it in a vessel until it is cooled down and then they pour it on the earth. If there is any urgency to vacate the gruel vessel, they mix it with cold water and throw it out.

IV. Duryodhana's Defeat in the Hands of Draupadi:

When the Pandavas were cheated by the cunning Sakuni in the gambling, Draupadi was molested in the open court by Duryodhana. This barbarous act of Duryodhana could not be tolerated by the folk, especially women. They composed a popular ballad by name "Dharma Raju Zoodamu" (the gambling of Dharma Raja) and changed the events written by Vyasa:

After the defeat of Dharma Raja in the hands of Sakuni, Draupadi challenged Duryodhana for playing the dice with her. Duryodhana took that challenge. But she did not like to see the face of that sinful person and ordered that a curtain should be raised in between them while playing. When Duryodhana played the dice with his hands,

Draupadi cast the dice with her left foot, won the game very easily and got the Kingdom back. Thus women folk took revenge on Duryodhana in this popular ballad. In the same manner Andhra Women composed many folk-songs and ballads adding new incidents to Maha Bharatha.

V. The Charity of Karna:

Karna was famous for his charity. He was popularly known as 'Dana Karna'. But there is only one incident in Maha Bharatha depicting his charity. Karna, knowing full well that he was committing a suicidal act, gave his natural ear-rings and armour to Indra. Folk were not satisfied with this event. They added some more incidents which give a clear cut picture of the great charity of Karna:

(a) Once Duryodhana wanted to compete with Karna in charity. He wanted to attract people by munificent charities. Indra decided to show the greatness of Karna to Duryodhana. He created heavy rains continuously for ten days. Then Indra, in the disguise of an old Brahmin, went to Duryodhana and requested ten cartfuls of dry firewood. Duryodhana pleaded his inability. Then that pseudo-Brahmin approached Karna and put forth the same request. Karna immediately demolished his beautiful palace without any hesitation, pulled out the wooden beams from the roof and gave that Brahmin all the dry firewood that he wanted. That Brahmin carried those ten cartfuls of dry firewood passing before the gate of Duryodhana's palace. Duryodhana was ashamed of the charity of Karna, his own feudatory.

(b) Once Krishna wanted to show the charity of Karna to Dharma Raja. He created a big mountain of gold and asked Dharma Raja to distribute it quickly among the poor. Dharma Raja began his charity but he could not complete it even after taking months together. Then Krishna called for Karna and asked him to give the gold in charity. Immediately Karna, showing the hill of gold to Krishna, said: "Sri Krishnarpanamastu" (=I offer the whole thing to Sri Krishna). Dharma Raja was astonished to note this.

VI. Duryodhana's Weakness in His Thighs:

According to Vyasa, Bhima killed Duryodhana by striking at his thighs in a foul manner to fulfil his oath. According to the folk, Duryodhana was very strong and this was the only way left for Bhima to kill him. Duryodhana's body was all diamond except his thighs. Folk created a curious story for this weakness in Duryodhana caused by the mischief of Sri Krishna.

Duryodhana, before starting the war, requested his mother to bless him to get victory. Gandhari ordered her son to appear before her naked. Duryodhana was going to his mother naked according to her instructions. Krishna, knowing this, accosted him on the way and chided him for approaching his mother naked. He advised him to wear at least underwear. Duryodhana followed his advice and went before his mother. Then Gandhari touched the whole body of Duryodhana with affection. Her celestial touch made his body strong like a diamond. As he had covered his loins, his thighs did not get the miraculous touch of his mother. So Bhima could kill him by striking at the weak points.

VII. The Saga of Barbareeka :

When the great Kurukshetra war was about to be started, Sri Krishna saw a young Rakshasa boy, wearing merely three arrows in his quiver, going towards the camp of the Pandavas. Krishna doubted him and approached the boy in the disguise of an old Brahmin and the conversation went on like this:

Old Brahmin: " Who are you, my dear boy? "

Boy: " I am the son the Ghatotkacha and the grandson of Bhima, the great Pandava hero. My name is Barbareeka "

Old Brahmin: " Where are you going now? "

Barbareeka: " My grandfathers are waging a terrible war against the Kauravas in Kurukshetra. I am going to help them by killing all the enemies in no time "

Old Brahmin: " How can you kill the dreadful foes with merely three arrows in your quiver? "

Barbareeka: " These three are more than enough. I can smash all the armies of the foes with one arrow. I can destroy all the valient heroes on the Kaurava side with the second one "

Old Brahmin: " Then, what for the third one? "

Barbareeka: " Surely this is an extra one! I am keeping this spare arrow with a purpose. I have come to know that there is a cunning person named Sri Krishna. I could not decide which side he would take. This third arrow is for that unpredictable person! "

Terribly afraid of this tremendous brave boy, the sagacious Sri Krishna immediately rushed to Dharma Raja and preyed on his mind by saying like this: " If you want to win the battle, you have to sacrifice a young hero of your side to the Goddess of War ". The Pandavas were struck with grief. They could not decide the scape-goat for the war. At this juncture, Barbareeka entered the scene and knew the cause for

their grief. He offered himself, without any hesitation, as a prey to the Goddess of War to achieve victory to his grandfathers. Krishna felt happy as he could kill this mighty Rakshasa boy with a clever trick. (Otherwise, he has to take another birth to kill Barbareeka).

The poor boy Barbareeka, just before his death, requested Sri Krishna like this: "I have come here with a strong desire to see the great war of Kurukshetra. But I am dying even before the war starts. So I request you to keep my head alive till the war is over and place it on the peak of a mountain so that I can see the valour of my grandfathers in the battle field".

Krishna fulfilled his desire and the chivalrous Barbareeka saw the famous spectacular war for eighteen days keeping all his life and enthusiasm in his chopped head!

VIII. The Reason for the Death of Abhimanyu:

Abhimanyu was the nephew of Sri Krishna who was none other than the incarnation of Lord Vishnu. He was the son of Arjuna, the greatest hero on the earth. Even then Abhimanyu died; why? Here is a reply from the folk:

Sri Krishna captured a Rakshasa and imprisoned him in a pot in the form of a smoke. He brought the pot to his palace and kept it in a corner. His sister Subhadra, who was then pregnant, opened the lid of the pot innocently. Immediately the demon inside the pot came out and entered her womb, thus inflicting the demonic qualities on the foetus. Krishna noticed this act of the demon and made up his mind to put an end to the life of Abhimanyu along with the wicked Kauravas.

One night, after the above incident, Arjuna was narrating 'Padma Vyuh' (a type of military strategy in which the soldiers are ordered to stand in the form of a lotus flower) in detail to the pregnant Subhadra. After some time she fell asleep. But the clever foetus in her womb was attentive in hearing Arjuna telling her how to enter a Padma Vyuh. Krishna observed the mischief of the foetus and immediately called Arjuna away on some other pretext. Thus Abhimanyu could learn only how to enter a Padma Vyuh but he did not know how to come out of it. This defect was the main reason for his death in the hands of the Kauravas in Kurukshetra. If Abhimanyu was not killed in this way, Krishna had to take another birth to kill this demon in the disguise of Abhimanyu.

IX. How Could an Ordinary Hunter Kill Sri Krishna?

In Treta Yuga, Rama killed Vali by hiding himself behind a tree. Thus he committed an unpardonable sin. So Vali was born again as a tribal hunter in Dwapara Yuga to take revenge on Rama who was reborn as Sri Krishna. Krishna was lying under a tree shaking his foot. The hunter mistook the toe for the ear of an animal and shot it from behind a tree.

Further the folk say that this arrow, which was responsible for the death of Sri Krishna, was prepared from the last piece of the deadly pestle that was born to Samba by the curse of the saints to destroy the whole clan of Yadavas.

X. Who is the Greatest Hero in Maha Bharatha?

We, the educated people, generally think that Sri Krishna is the greatest hero of Maha Bharatha. Some may say Dharma Raja is the main hero of the epic and consider Bhima and Arjuna as the greatest heroes. But folk decided in a peculiar manner:

After hearing the story of Maha Bharatha for about a month, the villagers could not judge the best hero of Maha Bharatha. Then they approached a Muslim, who was regularly attending the recitation of the epic, and posed the query: "Who is the greatest hero in Maha Bharatha?" The Muslim quickly replied: "ek budḍha aur ek bacca!"—an old man and a young fellow, i.e., Bhishma and Abhimanyu. Thus the folk adjudged the best heroes of the epic correctly.

Bhasa, the eminent playwright in Sanskrit, added many interesting incidents to the famous epics of Valmiki and Vyasa. We will be surprised to note that these additions, though not authentic, glorified the beauty of Ramayana and Maha Bharatha. Bharata enquiring the safety of Rama in the forest now and then and sending armies to the help of Rama in the battle against Ravana, are very good additions pointing out the defects of the original narration. We can compare Bhasa with the illiterate folk who put forth concrete reasons for the glaring happenings in the epic narration and cleared the doubts of the audience. But the folk as well as Bhasa have respect for the main characters of the epic. Whereas, the Jains and the Buddhists, instead of adding incidents, changed the main themes of the Hindu epics according to the norms of their religions. They even went to the extent of maligning the main characters of the Ramayana and the Maha Bharatha. So we cannot

either consider their creations as authentic or enjoy their reforms that hurt the feelings of the Hindus. But in the case of folk additions, though they are fictitious, they give us immense pleasure.

I think, the first poet who recorded these folk additions was Jaimini Maharshi. But, due to our bad luck, we have only his Aswametha Parva which is full of folk additions. If we are lucky in getting all the Parvas of his Maha Bharatha, it will definitely be the first Folk Maha Bharatha in India!