

**THE SPIRITUAL AND THE MATERIAL: INSIGHTS FROM SARALA'S  
MAHABHARATA**

**Professor Anand Mahanand**  
EFL University,  
Hyderabad-500007

“Cross the Stream, Bahmin, strive hard,  
Cast aside desire.  
All that consist of components parts will perish.  
Strive to know the imperishable.”

- *Dhammapada*

**Abstract**

The relationship between spiritual and the materials is a subject of discussion for long. With the advent of the thing theory, the discussion on the relationship between the two has acquired more prominence. Thing theory also studies the relationship between human and the object. When we talk about human, we don't mean only worldly aspects but also spiritual aspects of life. Hence, in this paper, I would like view human as spiritual and like to discuss the relationship between spiritual and the material by analysing three tales from Sarala's Mahabharata namely “Jhimitikhela Katha,” “Draupadi Swayambara katha” and “the Story of Mahadani Karna.”

**Keywords:** thing theory, Sarala Mahabharata, Mahadani Karna, Spirituality, Material

Indian literature has been predominantly religious and much of it has been concerned with disseminating spiritual lessons to the audience. We find traces of the relationship between the spiritual and the material in abundance, from the “apouruseya” texts to the texts created by many contemporary writers. The great epics-*The Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, the *Puranas*, *Hitopadeshas*, the texts by the Bhakti poets and those poets like Sri Aurobindo and Tagore—all exemplify this relationship.

In this paper, I will study the aforesaid consciousness raising folktales from Sarala's *Mahabharata* and discuss how the poet has attempted to spread the message of righteousness and attempted to inculcate other spiritual values that are superior to material values. This is done to elevate humans from their material attachment to the higher realms of spirituality.

As the poet pronounces:

Sree Mahabharat e amiya rasa bani

Sansara janahite banchaili ani.

Sree *Mahabharata* is the interesting word with nectar mixed

I have made it alive for the world's benefit.

The paper will explore the reasons behind the employment of such folk narratives by the poet, the ways the poet adopts in shaping them for the ordinary people and the extent these narratives have had an impact on the audience.

Sarala's *Mahabharata* was composed in Odia in the fifteenth century. The composer, poet Sarala Das is regarded as the Adikavi (first poet) of Odisha. Though there has been plenty of critical work on him, the use to which Sarala Das puts folk elements to raise consciousness and the impact on them has received little critical attention

For the sake of this paper, I will be using three stories from Sarala's *Mahabharata* namely the "Jhimitikhela katha" or the game of dice, "Draupadi Swyambara" and "Mahadani Karna." I will discuss the potentials these stories have to elevate our consciousness. I will also discuss how these stories have an influence on various folk forms such as folktales, folk sayings, performances and so on in Odisha.

**Jhimiti khela katha:** Jhimiti Khela katha appears in the Adiparba of Sarala's *Mahabharata*. Scholars opine that this is a unique episode and not found in any other *Mahabharatas*. The Pandavas are invited to play the game of dice. When they arrive at the palace court, Duryodhana calls them as son of Dharma, Son of Vayu, and so on and asks each of them to take their seat. Bheema annoyed by this insult, comes back home and asks his mother, Kunti in Lord Krishna's presence to explain the term. Lord Krishna tells him that when Duryodhan tells the same thing next time, he should call the later Golakputra. Bheema remembers this. Next day, when the Pandavas arrive the court, Duryodhan again mocks them calling names. When Duryodhan says, "take your seat, you son of Pavan," Bheema responds by saying, "Yes, you son of Golak tree. I am taking my seat." Listening to this, Duryodhan is terribly angry and he starts his evil designs to punish the Pandavas. This shows how we attach so much ego to our selves. Our obsession with the ego and non-awareness that the self is different from the worldly names and designations, we get angry and indulge in unnecessary fights. This episode is a powerful lesson that conveys social and moral messages hence it has been dramatized in many popular forms including Pala, Dasa Kathia, Geetnatya, Keertan, paintings, proverbs and Bhajans. The common folk saying "Jhimiti Khelaru Mahabharata" is a popular example how a small quarrel may lead to a large scale battle. This episode gives us the message that one should get rid of arrogance and be understanding, cordial and respectful to others. We also learn that we should not make a small issue big but resolve it at that level as it may escalate and take a larger shape that will have no end or may cause tragic end.

**Draupadi Swayambara** The story of the "Swayambara" of Draupadi is another fascinating story that has captured the popular imagination. When Draupadi reaches a marriageable age, her father Rajarishi Janaka arranges for her swayambara. He invites princes from the neighbouring kingdoms to win a shooting competition and win her hand in marriage. Many young princes from different kingdoms come and take part in the competition. Karna also comes and takes part but is denied to take part due to his background as he is brought up by a charioteer and not a Kshatriya. This angers him and prompts him to side with Duryodhan, the

arch enemy of the Pandavas to fight against the Pandava brothers. This story gives the message that there should not be discrimination on the basis of caste or class. A person's talent and virtue should be valued and not one's caste or background. As Karna says:

Daivayattam kule janma  
Madaayattam tu purusham  
My birth in a family is under the control of the 'book of Fate'  
but I myself control my qualities as a human being (qtd. in Matilal 136).

He has no control over his birth but he has the ability to rise and be virtuous like any other person. Virtues like bravery, efficiency, honesty and perseverance are spiritual values that are different from worldly qualities like arrogance of birth and lineage. Ekalavya's character can also be taken as an example. He moves ahead in life because of his virtues. The poet Bhavabuti (8<sup>th</sup> C. BC) in his Uttara ramacharita says:

Gunah pujasthnam gunisu  
Na lingam na ca vayah.  
Qualities of the qualified person are worth of our adoration  
Nor their gender, nor age. (Matilal 37)

In the same manner Satyakama Jaabala mentioned in *Chandyoga Upanishad* in spite of his low born status elevates to Brahminhood through his perseverance and pursuit of prajna. Contrary to this rishi Uttanga missed amrit or immortality because he refused to accept water from a Kirata who was the Narayana himself in disguise.

Turning to the Draupadi Swayambara episode back, Arjuna's devotion to his teacher and his absolute focus on his goal are values we learn to emulate. Arjuna who was focussed in his attention, won the shooting competition and got married to Draupadi. A small section of this episode is also known as Lakha Bindha. This narrative has many folk variations. It is performed as part of Pala, Geeti Nataka, Jatra, paintings, Keertan and Bhajan.

**The Story of Mahadani Karna:** The story of Karna is another narrative found in *Sarala Mahabharata* that gives the message about superiority of spiritual values over the material. Mahadani Karna, the king of the kingdom of Anga is very generous. The news of his generosity reaches far and wide. One day, Lord Krishna wants to test his generosity and comes to his palace in disguise as a poor Brahmin. As he arrives at the palace door, Karna's people inform him about the arrival of a poor Brahmin. Karna goes and meets the Brahman and tells him, "I don't have much to offer you but please ask whatever you want. I shall give you that." The poor Brahmin says, "I am hungry. I like to have a meal in your house. Please arrange for a meal." Karna orders his people to arrange for the meal and they do arrange it. As they serve the meal, the Brahmin says that he has been eating vegetarian meal for long and is fed up with it. He likes to have non-vegetarian meal that too from the meat of Karna's only son-Bisikesana. Karna is taken aback at this request. He is confused, doesn't know what to do. His wife asks him not to succumb to the pressure and save her son. Karna doubts the identity of the Brahman. He asks, "You don't behave like a Brahman. May I know who really you are?" The Brahman says, "Well, I am from Mathura and my gotra is matsya gotra. You need not blame me. Since you had promised, I stayed back. Otherwise, I would have gone by now. I am terribly hungry and request you to arrange the meal for me." Karna has no other option. He asks his ghatik to kill his son. Then the Brahman says, "No, Oh king. You need to kill your son, cut him into pieces and cook for me. I shall not touch the food prepared by anybody else." Karna has no other way.

He cuts his son into pieces and prepares meat, cooks and gets it ready to serve. Then he asks his wife to take out plate for the Brahman. As she sets three plates, the Brahman asks the queen to take out four plates. The queen asks him “Who is the fourth person?” Then the Brahman says, it is your son. See, he is standing there.” And really, Bisikesan is standing there. The meal turns out to be pure vegetarian sattvik meal.

A close reading of the story tells us that king Karna upholds spiritual values like truth and charity considering these superior to the worldly attachment he had with his son and wife. Keeping his promise is more important. More than that feeding a starving Brahman is more important than anything else. When he Brahman tries to bargain, he has to succumb as he had also promised and he had to keep his words. Here the emphasis is on spiritual values than the material gains. This adherence to spiritual values makes one alive and immortal. Though the king had to lose his material wealth just because of his virtues he got his son back. Spiritual virtues can defeat death. In a similar story in Kathopanishad, Nachiketa gains immortality through his devotion for self-knowledge, and respect towards his father, teacher and elders. The story of Savitri is yet another example of the victory of the spiritual over the material. The story of Harischandra, the king of solar dynasty that we find in the Markendaya Purana is also an ideal story of honouring truth in place of possession. King Harischandra gives away everything including himself to Rishi Vishwamintra as guru dakshina and is finally rewarded with many “boons and honours” (Prasad 121).

### Lessons from the three stories

Jhimiti khela is a practice satisfying our pleasure and senses. The participants are so engrossed in it that they forget everything and lose their conscience. It is this temporary madness that makes them blind. Yudhishthira cannot make a distinction between wealth or commodity and Draupadi and he does not own Draupadi as she is not his wife alone. The arrogance and pride of Duryodhan are qualities opposite to eternal values of humility, tolerance and cordiality. We also derive valuable lessons from Draupadi’s Swayambara episode. This episode consists of many small episodes. One of them is Karna’s insult. Karna is insulted by the Pandavas for the lower social status and upbringing. His virtues are not counted just because he is brought up by a charioteer. Such worldly matters are given priority over many superior things as against the spiritual belief that the Soul is one but we are divided into caste, creed and communities. As Swetaketu’s father tells Swetaketu in *Chandogya Upanishad*, “When people contact the ocean of pure consciousness, they become one with it and do not remember their individual natures. Yet they are active, they again become a teacher, farmer or a goldsmith” (Egenes and Reddy 10). We are created from the ocean of pure consciousness which is the eternal Self. Like different flowers forget their blossoms and become one when honey is made or different rivers become one forgetting their individual identities we become one with the eternal Self which unifies us. The message is That Thou art (Tat tvam asi) meaning we are part of the eternal consciousness and not low or high, superior and inferior. These are worldly creation. Worldly things also give us happiness as someone may say “objects in the external world... delight me”, but such pleasure is temporary (qtd. in Brown 2). When we discover in self that happiness is my inherent nature, it is enduring.

### Conclusion

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The above mentioned stories namely, “Jhimiti khelakatha”( the game of dice), “Draupadi Swayambara” and “Mahadani Karna” as narrated in Sarala’s *Mahabharata* serve to raise our consciousness by teaching spiritual values. They also enlighten us and make us aware of ourselves or help to discover ourselves. That’s why they are more touching, enduring and popular among people transcending boundaries and living in many genres. In all these stories emphasis has been on the spiritual over the material because spiritual knowledge helps us to seek things that are permanent but material things teach us about things that are transient. In another episode when Jayadratha comments Draupadi that she might be in distress living with the Pavandavas in the forest without proper house and food as she has been used to the palace and royal comfort. Draupadi tells him that a person may be happy without materials comfort and can be unhappy even they have all the material comforts. In our contexts, both are needed for our existence. As it has been beautifully put by someone, even though we live in the material word, our goal should be spiritual. Hence we need to have a fine balance between the both. With regard to its the reception and impact of these stories, it is to be mentioned that they have a tremendous impact on the people. Apart from their re-making in the local folk forms, they are cited by people to drive a point home, in settling disputes or making an argument. In other words , they are part and parcel of people’s life, wisdom and value education.

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