CHAPTER I

PATTERNS OF LIFE IN ORISSA, AS BACKGROUND TO ITS LITERATURE

A Synthetic Culture

Hemmed in on one side by the sea, on all other sides by ranges of mountains and dense forests, and intersected by innumerable rivers, Orissa, because of her geographical position, has developed a pattern of life, art and literature all of her own. Her gods, goddesses and temples, her religious and social structure, her dance and music have all developed fascinating individual variants of their own which mark them out as distinct entities in similar categories in India. Lying between North and South India across a natural highway along the eastern coast of India, Orissa also displays in and through her native individuality an interesting synthesis of both Dravidian and Aryan cultures, with delightful assimilations from the life of the tribals, who form not only a considerable portion of her population, but also an integral part of the economic and social life of the State. It may be a unique feature of Oriya literature that it is in this, of all Indian literatures, that the picturesque Adivasi not only comes in as a character in poetry and puranas from the earliest times, but has also played a glorious role as literary creator. We shall meet this pleasant feature in Oriya literature again and again in the following pages. And though the Oriyas speak a language of the Indo-Germanic group, i.e. Oriya, nearly three-fourths of their entire social life, under the thin veneer of Aryanisation, is definitely Dravidian. Many of the commonest words of daily use in an Oriya household are of Dravidian origin and the general culture and habiliments are more attuned to and have closer affinities with Southern patterns than with the Northern.

The Holy Land of India

Orissa, the home-state of Lord Jagannatha, is the holy land of India. Roads of pilgrimage, carrying millions of devotees
every year, have converged towards her from all parts of India, since the days of the Mahabharata. For peoples of every denomination of the Hindu faith there is a holy shrine of all-India renown on Orissa’s soil. From the river Vaitarani in the north, to the Chilka lake in the south, every inch of land in central Orissa is supposed to be holy according to Hindu scriptures.

The national life and culture of Orissa thus form a highly interesting amalgam, evolved out of Dravido-Aryan-Austro elements, and not as much affected by the external influences of Islam and Christianity as other parts of India. The symbol of this purely indigenous Indian cultural synthesis is the shrine of Jagannath. Originally a god of the tribal Savaras, and adopted later successively by the Aryan faiths of Jainism, Buddhism, Tantricism and Vaishnavism, Jagannath bears the indelible impress of each of these cults even today. The traditions and practices which centre in and around this famous temple are also still South Indian or Dravidian to a large extent.

Standing on Orissa’s soil, the influence of this god, the most popular god of the Hindu pantheon, has penetrated deep into the literature of Orissa. Down to the beginning of modern times almost every Oriya poet began or finished his work with prayers to this divinity. The gradual evolution of this national Deity and the reflection of that evolutionary process in the literature of Orissa will be discussed later on at appropriate places.

Art and Architecture

Out of Orissa’s holiness has also sprung her magnificent artistic heritage. The Oriyas displayed remarkable architectural creative power during a long period of history. For a little over a millenium, from the first century B.C., when Emperor Kharavela carved caves in the twin hills of Udayagiri and Khandagiri near Bhubaneswara, for his own and his queen’s pious old age, till the 13th century A.D., when king Narasimha Deva I built the magnificent Sun-temple at Konarak, the Oriyas seem to have indulged a national passion for building on a vast scale. They built bridges and embankments that have remained intact for centuries, displaying extraordinary
engineering skill. They also ornamented the whole land with innumerable temples of all types. They evolved their peculiarly graceful and elegant native styles of temple architecture, the purest Indo-Aryan form according to connoisseurs. And while they built temples like giants, they sculptured the walls of those temples like master-artists. But while to thousands of tourists from all over the world, the temples of Bhubaneswara and Konarak unveil what is, perhaps, a strange medieval world of sheer beauty, youth and existence, only the Oriyas know how deeply and significantly these mute stone structures have influenced their culture and literature.

Orissa’s dance, drama and music, too, have originated from these temples. They practically epitomise the social and cultural life of the Oriyas, including even their style of cooking. In medieval times Oriya poets wrote their ornamental Kavyas with the pattern of Orissan temples in mind. To them each Kavya was like a temple, architecturally solid, covered thickly with sculpture from start to finish.

A Harmonious Whole

The ancient Oriyas appear to have evolved a harmonious pattern of life of their own. In an Odissi dance performed to the

1 Says a British Administrator regarding the extraordinary engineering skill of the Orissan builders: ‘The number and magnificence of the remains at Bhubaneswar and elsewhere are evidence of a wealthy and highly civilised kingdom. The art of architecture and sculpture must have been well developed to enable such huge structures to be designed and constructed, and the skill and the resource both of builders and masons are clearly shown by the fact that they were able to move and lay in place, without mortar, such gigantic stone blocks and to produce the vigorous and often exquisitely carved figures, foliage and arabesque patterns, which add charm to the carvings adorning these shrines.’—L.S.S. O’Malley, i.c.s., in the District Gazetteer of Puri, p. 28

2 In respect of these temples Monmohan Ganguly observes at the very beginning of his Orissa and Her Remains: ‘I need not make an apology to my readers for taking up Orissa in preference to other provinces comprising India. It is a patent fact that it has a peculiar interest of its own, alike from an archaeological and architectural point of view, not shared in common by other Indian provinces. To a student of architecture, it is important by reason of its being the seat of Indo-Aryan style in its purest form; here we do not notice the least vestige of foreign influence. It has maintained its native purity marvellously, being nurtured and reared on the very soil where it grew, without any extraneous aid. This is really a marvel in the History of Architecture, the like of which we very rarely come across. That the Orissan sub-group of Indo-Aryan style of Architecture presents a continuous series for a period of 5 to 6 centuries lends an additional weight to its study and renders it very interesting.’

3 Thus observes E. B. Havell on the horse and charioteer of Konarak: ‘Had it by chance been labelled Roman or Greek, this magnificent work of Art would now be the pride of some great metropolitan museum in Europe and America...
accompaniment of medieval Oriya songs or in a canto from a Kavya by Upendra Bhanja recited under the shadow of the temple walls of Konarak or Lingaraja, any connoisseur or student of sociology may easily discern a deep, almost consanguinous relationship. In them all, the temple-sculpture, the medieval Oriya poetry, the Odissi dance, and Oriya music, the peculiar indigenous element distinctly different from either the Southern or the Northern varieties, can easily be perceived. The jewellery on the beautiful sculptured women of the Konarak and Bhubaneswara temples, is still worn by the unsophisticated in the rural areas of Orissa and the men and women of the district of Sambalpur and the areas round about, not completely spoiled by civilisation as yet, with their healthy figures and picturesque clothes, appear to have come right off the walls of these temples. The recitation of the ancient Oriya puranas and kavyas in the village surroundings by these people so completely fits in with the general setting, as to give the happy impression of a natural birth of the entire socio-artistic pattern of Orissa, right out of its own soil, following its own laws of growth and fulfilment.

**Socio-cultural Life**

Orissa has not a single big city worth the name. Even Cuttack and Bhubaneswara, the capital towns, are only partly urban. Orissa is still predominantly agricultural, consisting of about 50,000 villages, big and small. The Oriyas live in villages that are interestingly different in pattern from those in the neighbouring states. These are, generally, two rows of thatched houses standing shoulder to shoulder, with a street running in between, and with a temple and a tank at one end and a Bhagavataagaha or a village hall at the other. The village homes are invariably decorated with mural paintings of some sort, and have a shady garden at the back. The Bhagavata of Jagannatha Dasa and the village priest still wield considerable influence on the social and individual life of the average Oriya.

Here the Indian sculptors have shown that they can express with as much fire and passion as the greatest European artists, the pride and glory of triumphant warfare; for not even the Homeric grandeur of the Elgin marbles surpasses the magnificent movement and modelling of this Indian Achilles, and the superbly monumental war-horse in its massive strength and vigour is not unworthy of comparison with Verocchio's famous masterpiece at Venice."—*Indian Sculpture and Painting* (1928), pp. 147-8
in the villages. While the Bhagavata of Jagannatha Das is recited daily, either in the common Bhagavataghara or in families, time is reserved during the whole month of Kartika (October-November) after the cessation of the monsoons, when the expectation of the harvest soon to be brought home is cheering, generally for the complete recitation of one whole Oriya purana, a new one each year. The month of Chaitra, after the harvest is in, is given to festivals of gods and goddesses, melas, dances, palas, and yatras, in all of which poetry, songs and dramas play a predominant part in the entertainment of the people. Almost every village in Orissa has a study-group, where, during leisure hours, poems are recited, songs sung, and puranas discussed. The excellent companion organisation, the akhada or the village gymnasium, also still survives in many parts, though generally in a moribund condition at present. In olden days, every village had a library of palmleaf manuscripts in the Bhagavataghara and almost every important family had a small library of its own. That keen spontaneous desire of the people to have the pride and joy of possessing learning and literature seems to have been killed forever through an imposed system of education under the British and by the capitalist-run Press. With the simple villagers, however, the sanctity of the palm-leaf and the ancient iron stylus still remain quite effective. A printed book, or even paper for that matter, is still not acceptable in ceremonial matters.

Orissa, Utkala and Kalinga

The anglicised word ‘Oriya’ is derived from Odia, which again is a modern version of the word Odra, or Udra, which was an ancient tribe. This tribe still survives as Odos, the vast cultivating class in the central belt of present Orissa. What is Orissa now was also known in ancient times as Kalinga and Utkala. Most certainly the Kalingas and the Utkalas were also tribes like the Odras or Udras. But due to terrible struggles either for existence or for supremacy or maybe due to a process of gradual absorption and assimilation, the Kalingas and the Utkalas appear to have gone silently out of history, the latter by the 14th and the former by the 7th century A.D., leaving the entire land in the possession of the Odras, the present eponymous community of this historic state. As the land of the
Odras, this state has been known as simply Odra-Desa or Odissa (anglicised as Orissa) for the last six or seven centuries. But the present day Oriyas (Odiyas in vernacular) have a nostalgic preference for the ancient names of Kalinga and Utkala. Hence Orissa's only university at present is called the Utkala University and it is not known to many outside Orissa that the Kalinga prize awarded every year by Unesco for the popularisation of science, the Kalinga Airways and other Kalinga industries have all been organised by a patriotic Oriya industrialist, Sri Vijayānanda Patnaik.

_Military Traditions in Oriya Literature_

That these Oriyas, or the ancient Kalingas, were once a prosperous people with quite creditable traditions as conquerors and empire-builders, the pages of history provide ample evidence. The Kalinga war of Asoka has become world famous, not because of an Imperial army's conquest, but because of the stubborn resistance of a small freedom-loving people to the organised might of a vast empire. "The numbers of Kalingans who were captured, killed, or died of privations indicate the stubborn resistance of the nation to the aggression of the Northern Empire. In that little strip of country (Kalinga) extending along the Eastern coast of the Bay of Bengal, many a great battle must have been fought from the banks of the Subarnarekha to that of Krishna. The military tradition displayed in resisting the army of the Maurya Empire was maintained for about twenty centuries in Orissa. No wonder, therefore, that the Kalingans have been singled out as examples of bravery in the _Sahitya Darpana_, the famous book of Sanskrit poetics. For three centuries after the whole of Northern and Western India, including neighbouring Bengal, had been conquered and ruled by the Mussalmans, Orissa remained not only gloriously independent, but a common terror to Moslem rulers both in the North and South of India. It not only repulsed repeated Moslem invasions but carried death and defeat into the hearts of Moslem kingdoms. About Kapilendra Deva's (1435-1466) campaigns into the Bahmani Sultanate, R. D. Banerjee says, "... both Ferista and Burhan-i-Ma'asil agree in stating that the king of Orissa.

invaded the Bahmani empire and almost reached the gates of Bidar. . . . Perhaps this is the only instance in which the Indian Mussalman historian was compelled to admit the defeat of a king of his own community.”¹ Hunter also says in his Orissa (p. 5): ‘Three centuries of raids, and hollow treaties, and mutual wrong elapsed (1200-1500 A.D.) before anything like the subjugation of Orissa by the Mussalmans took place. Long before the Afgans had trodden the conspicuous Hindu dynasties of India into the dust, Orissa asserted its independence and remained the stronghold of the ancient national faith. It was not till its princes had proved false to their trust and leagued themselves with the Mussalmans against the patriot cause, that they fell.’

*Patriotism is not* an absolutely new concept in India as many try to make out. In the 14th-15th century, in the pages of the Oriya Mahabharata by the peasant-poet Sarala Dasa, we come across throbbing pride in the mother state. We shall see later on also how this poet has utilised the military exploits of his contemporary, the Oriya King Kapilendra Deva, referred to above, for describing the campaigns of the Pandavas. The Samara Taranga (Waves of War) by Brajanatha Badajena of 17th-18th century and the military ballads and books on warfare written in verse, recently brought to light, show how the military traditions of the Oriyas have left their impress on their literature.

*Asoka’s Edicts and Oriya Literature*

There are two edicts of Asoka, specifically calling for a just and benign administration of Kalinga, the newly conquered land, within the boundaries of the present Orissa State, proving without any doubt that the Kalinga of Asoka’s day was no other than the present State of Orissa. But Asoka’s conquest of Kalinga has direct bearing on the history of the literature of Orissa as well. The Imperial edicts of Asoka now happen to be the oldest extant literary records in Orissa, giving evidence of the language spoken or understood by the people in Orissa two thousand years ago. As the earliest literary expression in Orissa we shall refer to them again, with details, in the chapter on the development of the Oriya language.

¹ Op. cit., p. 297
The Sea in Oriya Literature

The Kalingas and the Utkalas, the supposed forbears of the present day Oriyas, once enjoyed an extensive maritime trade with South-Eastern Asia, and had colonial settlements in Southern Burma and the Indonesian islands. The celebrated Sailendra dynasty, the immortal builders of Borobuddur in Java, is said to have been an offshoot of the Sailodbhavas, the ruling family of the once flourishing principality of Kongoda in Central Orissa.¹ This family probably came to grief under pincer assaults from the Gangas in the South and the Bhaumas in the North. They appear to have thus left the mother country for good about the 7th century A.D., and to have settled and ruled in colonies of Kongodites in South-east Asia, already long established there. Neither the Kongoda kingdom nor the Sailodbhavas are heard of in Orissan history after the 7th century A.D. We do hear of the Sailendras across the seas in South-east Asia by about the same time, and this strongly endorses the evidence for a royal migration from Kongoda to the Indonesian lands. We shall see later on that maritime enterprises play quite an interesting part in Oriya folk-tales and poetry.

The Decline and the Revival

The Oriyas lost their extensive maritime trade by about the 16th century, due to the silting up of the Orissa rivers. Round about the same time they also lost their political independence, which gradually led to the partition of the land into four parts, each tacked to a different neighbouring State. The Oriyas have been living under these twin misfortunes for the last four hundred years. This long dark political night of the Oriyas seems to have ended at last with the formation of the separate State of Orissa in 1936. They were thus enabled to live under

¹ 'I do not think there is any need for me to stress how similar they are in this respect as well as in general style and manner of execution to those of the world famous Buddhist temple at Borobuddur in Java. The resemblance is not of course coincidental, but is due to the direct implantation in Indonesia of the Mahayana Buddhist, Saivite and Vaishnavite culture of Orissa or that part of it called Kalinga by the Sailendra emperors who ruled Java from 8th to 14th centuries. They are convincingly identified as a descendant branch of the Sailodbava kings who preceded the Bhaumas in Kalinga. The fact that both the Saivareswar and Borobuddur can be dated as the 8th century makes their stylistic connection ever more certain.'—William Willetts in Illustrated Weekly of India, July 12, 1939
one administration again. With her rich and immense, but as yet untapped natural resources, Orissa began to develop gigantic hydro-electric projects like those of Hirakud and Machhkunda, the steel plant at Rourkela and the seaport at Paradwipa, which have been started as parts of a vast national plan. Orissa’s political as well as her economic prosperity is thus being restored.
CHAPTER II

GENERAL CHARACTER OF ORIYA LITERATURE

*Essentially Proletarian*

The most outstanding characteristic of the Oriya literature, when one surveys its entire panorama, appears to be the very gratifying fact that essentially it is a literature of the common people. In all other modern Indian languages literatures were ushered into existence by persons who were seasoned scholars in Sànskrit, India's great sacrosanct classical tongue. But poor Oriya cannot boast of either royal patronage or a scholastic foundation. Oriya literature was born and has developed and thrived because of the unseen but powerful urge of an isolated and neglected people who earnestly wished to see their own humble and homely thoughts, dreams, aspirations and experiences given expression to in the speech of their day-to-day life. No Maharaja ever helped her poets on the scale or with the enthusiasm that was the case with other Indian languages. Except during the medieval period, and occasionally in the modern, no great work of this literature has ever been dedicated to any crowned head. Poets in Orissa, not only in the initial pioneering stages, but all through her history, have been essentially men and women of the proletariat, ignorant not only of Sanskrit but even of any other language except their own. Oriya literature, more than any other Indian literature, is really democratic, created by the people and for the people. It has grown and still thrives not because of the encouragement of the rulers of the land, but in spite not only of their apathy and indifference, but of their positive contempt and even organised suppression during some periods. No other Indian language has had to struggle so hard for its very existence, nor has suffered such losses through the linguistic aggressiveness of neighbours.

True to the synthetic genius of the people of Orissa, Oriya literature is not only proletarian but has developed, in spite of contempt, disregard and violence from many quarters, an amazingly cosmopolitan character. It has been enriched by
the natives of the soil and also by Teluguś, Marathas, Bengalees, Rohilkhandis, Mussalmans and aborigines. This may be the only literature in the Indo-Aryan family of North Indian languages to which the Adivasi has contributed so significantly, as already said in the previous chapter. The blind Khond poet Bhima Bhoí's monotheistic bhajanás are priceless treasures of this language. The Adivasi figures in the poetry of Orissa almost from the very beginning. Bhima, a fisherman, has left behind a ballad that any erudite Sanskrit scholar would be proud of and which is, even now, lovingly recited in almost every village in Orissa. Yadumoni, the carpenter, has become legendary in the land as a wit as well as a top-ranking rhetorical poet. Innumerable also are the most valued contributions to this literature from Orissa’s genuine peasantry, the historic Odras.

And it is an additional proof of the proletarian character of this literature that, as we proceed from period to period, we find it deeply coloured by the changing religious faiths of the people under successive historic dynasties. First it is Jainism, then Buddhism, then Siva-Saktism and the last to appear in the field and the most deeply enduring of all, leaving the profoundest impression on the mind and character of the people, is Vaishnavism with its two branches, the Rama-cult and the Krishna-cult. The basic faith of the Oriya people appears to be, however, what may be called Mahayana-Vaishnavism, which, in varied forms, has, from earliest times, been reflected not only in the literature but also in their art and architecture and their national character.

The Palm-leaf Libraries in the Villages

Before the advent of the printing press in the last century, the entire literature was lying on palm leaves, inscribed with an iron stylos by the patient and pious labour of devoted scribes, a labour extending over months and years. I remember an honest hardworking peasant of my village in my childhood days, who for years spent all his middays in silent, painstaking labour, transcribing only one book, the Bhagabata of Jagannatha Dasa, the guiding star of his whole religious life. At that time printed sets of Jagannatha’s Bhagabata were already available in the market, and, I suppose, had already made their appearance
in the village. But to that innocent peasant the printed paper was still vulgar, lacking the aroma of sanctity attached to palm leaves.

Libraries of palm-leaf manuscripts are even now found in almost every village of Orissa. Every important family in a village possesses a private library of these ancient books as a proud family heirloom. Not even the fringe of this vast imprisoned literature has yet been touched by research workers. The village folk guard these books as precious, occult knowledge with fanatical zeal and pathetic ignorance.

The existence of this extensive palm-leaf library system in Orissa for so many centuries, covering almost every village and almost every important family in the land, and mostly created and maintained by the peasantry, is another proof of the basically proletarian character of Oriya literature.

*Extensive*

As Indian languages go, Oriya literature is quite extensive. There are in Oriya at least thirty well-known versions of the *Ramayana* and four or five recognised versions of the *Mahabharata*. Practically all the puranas are there, most of them related to the Sanskrit originals only in name, because of the free display of imagination by the Oriya authors. Rhetorical poetry of the medieval period is equally abundant. While puranas live on in the mass mind because of their excellent story elements, the rhetorical poetry of the medieval period is still the delight and passion of the people because of the beauty of the language, the varied associations of sense with sound, and the romantic tales it generally deals with. This entire old literature remains a world in itself, peculiarly satisfying to the psychology of the peasantry, comfortably meeting them on their own level, fulfilling their mythological, religious, moral, and above all, their aesthetic demands. Modern literature so-called has deplorably failed to reach the people in the way the old did and still does. There are definitely no greater genuine 'people's poets' than the great ancients of the Oriya literature. In spite of the printing press, the daily paper, the literary periodicals and the schools and colleges, modern literature has failed to reach village homes. The semi-literate village
reciters, the wandering minstrels, the dancers, and open-air theatrical troupes have kept the old literature alive among the masses through all the vicissitudes of the history of the land, and even the printing press has popularised the old literature more than the new. The best-sellers in Oriya are still the puranas, or the Mahabharata of Sarala Dasa, or the lyrical Ramayana of Viswanatha Khuntia.
CHAPTER III

THE ORIYA LANGUAGE

Its Character and Stages of Early Development

Like Bengali and Assamese, Oriya too is a member of the eastern or Magadhi group of the Indo-Germanic family of languages in India. Oriya is spoken by about 16 million people who are spread along the north-eastern sea-coast of India. To the north of its territory lies the region of the Bhojpuri tongues and to the south that of Telugu of the Dravidian family of languages. On the west Oriya extends quite a good distance, gradually merging into the dialects of Bhatri, Halvi and Chhatisgadi in Madhya Pradesh. There are still hundreds of thousands of Oriya-speaking people beyond the political borders of the Orissa state, such as those in the Singhbhum district of Bihar. The total area of the Oriya-speaking land may roughly be about 80,000 sq. miles.

As to the peculiarities of Oriya as a language as distinct from its sister languages like Hindi, Bengali and Assamese, the following observations by a foreigner who knew not only all these languages but also Sanskrit, both classical and Vedic, may be of interest to the readers. He says:

‘Its [Oriya language’s] grammatical construction closely resembles that of Bengali, but it has one great advantage over Bengali in the fact that, as a rule, it is pronounced as it is spelt. There are few of those slurred consonants and broken vowels which make Bengali so difficult to the foreigner and each letter in each word is clearly sounded. The Oriya verbal system is at once simple and complete. It has a long array of tenses, but the whole is so logically arranged, and built on so regular a model, that its principles are particularly noticeable for the very complete set of verbal nouns, present, past and future. When an Oriya wishes to express the idea embodied in what in Latin would be called the Infinitive, he simply takes the appropriate verbal noun and declines it in the case which the meaning requires. As every infinitive must be some oblique case of a verbal noun it follows that Oriya grammar does not
know the so-called infinitive mood at all. In this respect Oriya is in an older stage of grammatical development than even classical Sanskrit and, among Indo-European languages, can only be compared with the ancient Sanskrit as spoken in the Vedic times...

Oriya is remarkably free from dialectic variations. The well-known saying which is true all over the north of India, that the languages change every ten kos does not hold in Orissa. In what is known as the Mughalbundi, which consists of Cuttack, Puri and the southern half of Balasore, the language is one and the same.

Oriya is encumbered with the drawback of an excessively awkward and cumbersome written character. This character is, in its basis, the same as Devanagari, but is written by the local scribes with a stylus on a palm-leaf. These scratches are, in themselves, legible, but in order to make them more plain, ink is rubbed over the surface of the leaf, and fills up the furrows which form the letters. The palm-leaf is extremely fragile, and any scratch in the direction of the grain tends to make it split. As a line of writing on the long, narrow leaf is necessarily in the direction of the grain, this peculiarity prohibits the use of the straight top line or matra which is a distinguishing characteristic of the Devanagari character. The Orissa scribe is compelled to substitute a series of curves, which almost surround each letter.¹

*The Script*

The observations of the British scholar on the Oriya script refer really to the source of its peculiar character. Except for horoscopes, nobody in Orissa uses palm-leaf and the iron stylus these days. But it has to be admitted that the script of this language is really cumbersome. A legacy of the palm-leaf, the Oriya script is indeed a nightmare to printers and is definitely a handicap to the spread of Oriya literature, as compared with sister scripts in India and abroad.

But as in her total culture, in her script also Orissa presents an interesting synthesis of the north and south of India. Originating from the Brahmi script in the 3rd century B.C. it has gradually developed towards the present form. This combines the characteristics of the southern Kalinga script with those of the so-called Gupta and Proto-Bengali scripts.

¹L. S. S. O'Malley in the *District Gazetteer of Puri*, pp 75-76
Discussions on script reforms, however, have been taking place, off and on, in the Orissa press for the last sixty years or so. But an innate conservatism, coupled with a pervasive parochial nationalism, stands against any reform in the existing script or the adoption of a more efficient one.

The Beginnings of the Language

We come to know in the ancient books of India of an Odra language as well as of an Odra tribe. There is no mention anywhere of a separate language spoken by the Kalingas or the Utkalas, the other two tribes who once dominated what is now Orissa. So Odra seems to be the indigenous tongue of this region. Bharata’s Natyasastra describes the Odra language as a Vibhasha, which is a sort of dialect born out of the association of Sanskrit with an aboriginal language. Probably this referred to the linguistic corruption in ancient Orissa that Sanskrit may have undergone in this region through getting mixed up with the speech not only of the Odras but also of the Savaras, an aboriginal tribe that has left deep marks on the social and religious culture of the Oriyas. We have unfortunately no specimen of the literature of the Odra Vibhasha mentioned in Bharata’s Natyasastra other than a single couplet quoted in the Prakrita Sarvasva of Markandeya Dasa. Even this couplet, however, answers Bharata’s definition of a Vibhasha, being a localised Sanskrit—a characteristic that can be most justifiably attributed even to present-day Oriya. The Savaras are still in their aboriginal state, without even a script, not to speak of a literature. The Odras, however, are now completely Aryanised and form the vast mass of the tillers of the soil in Orissa. Being looked upon by linguists as the fountain-head of undefiled Oriya, the racy folk-speech, smelling of the rice-fields and the village street, of these Odra cultivators, unconscious of their patronymic heritage, does indeed supply acceptable proof that theirs was perhaps the original language that has stamped Orissa, the land of the Odras, with a cultural individuality of her own.

The Aryans, with their Sanskrit culture, must have arrived on the soil of Orissa in the very dim past. Even by the time of the Mahabharata, Orissa had become ‘holy’ with centres
of pilgrimage established. That could have been possible only through the prevalence of Brahmin culture in Orissa over a long period previous to the time of the Mahabharata. But we all know that the proud Brahmin in the past had nothing but contempt for the speech of the common folk. The common man, throughout ancient times, was illiterate not only in Orissa but all over India, as he is even today. It is no wonder therefore that we have no literature of the Odra Vibhasha, once the speech of the common man of Orissa, except the specimen couplet in Markandeya’s Prakrita Sarvasva. Most probably it was just a spoken medium of communication between the Aryan colonisers and the local tribes.

Asoka’s Edicts

It must be recorded, however, to the great credit of the most humane and democratic religion of Lord Buddha that the common people of India first became articulate under the warm inspiration of His Noble Dhamma. With the conquest of Kalinga by Asoka in the 3rd century B.C., we get historic utterances made on Orissa’s soil in a language that is called Magadhi Prakrit. Scholars are of the opinion that it is from this Magadhi Prakrit or just Prakrit that the entire group of Eastern-Indian languages, viz. Assamese, Bengali, and Oriya, has derived. Though in Asoka’s time this Magadhi Prakrit, as expressed in the rock edicts at Dhaulighat and the pillar edict at Jaugada, might or might not have been an alien tongue to the local people, different from the local Odra Vibhasha of Natyasastra, these imperial inscriptions of the great emperor, so deeply dyed with local and topical matters, may be taken as the earliest extant literary expression in the ancient land of the Odras and the Kalingas.

The two edicts which are still extant in Orissa, at Dhauli and Jaugada, are addressed to the local councillors and executive officers of the Empire, commanding them to treat the people of Kalinga and the tribals of the borderlands with sympathy and deference. These contain the grandest and the noblest sentence ever uttered by any head of State in the whole history of mankind, viz., ‘All human beings are my children; I wish for their good in this as well as in the other
world, as I do in respect of my own'—words that fit in so well with the character of the great king that was Asoka, on the one hand, and the cosmopolitan quality of Orissa's culture on the other. Orissa may feel deservedly proud that such noble sentiments were uttered by that great Indian emperor on her soil alone in the whole of his extensive empire. They could as well be put into the mouth of Jagannatha at Puri today, Jagannatha, within the precincts of whose temple all castes merge automatically into one humanity, alone of all places of pilgrimage in India.

Kharavela Inscription—Earliest Indigenous Literary Expression

Soon after the death of Asoka, Kalinga again became an independent kingdom and a century and half later we see the emergence of a great conqueror in Kharavela whose empire spread over about two-thirds of the Indian sub-continent. He appears to have been a patriotic Kalinga, not only for having invaded and conquered Magadha just to avenge the national insult of Asoka's Kalinga war, but also because he left a record of his retributive victories on the ceiling of the Hatigumpha in Udayagiri near Bhubaneswara, directly overlooking Asoka's edicts on the Dhauli hill four miles off, almost in a spirit of triumphant challenge.

Linguistically, Kharavela's Hatigumpha inscription is definitely different from the edicts of Asoka and much closer to the present-day Oriya. This little chronicle of the Kalinga Emperor Kharavela of the 1st century B.C. may therefore be taken to be the earliest genuine indigenous literary expression in Orissa. The language of this inscription has a definite artistic flair, befitting a grandiose record of a great king's charities as well as of his military exploits. There is no doubt that the person who composed this little narrative had the making of a literary craftsman. The edicts of Asoka, in spite of their grand humanistic flavour, read definitely as Imperial directives. The Kharavela chronicle is in complete contrast. It is almost an Ode on military conquest and imperial grandeur, written in a befitting grand manner.

This Hatigumpha inscription of Kharavela has assumed unusual importance in Indian cultural history in that it is the
one historical record that gives us glimpses into the thorough and liberal training which an heir-apparent in ancient India had to undergo. The cave-chronicle says that Prince Kharavela was trained not only in the military arts, but also in literature, mathematics, the social sciences and politics. He is also said to have organised dances and dramatic performances and engaged expert performers to provide entertainment for the citizens of his own capital as well as foreign visitors. All this shows that Orissa, even twenty centuries ago, had a highly developed social culture. The rock-cut cave-palace that Kharavela is supposed to have built (as mentioned in the Hatigumpha inscription itself) for his pious first queen on the Udayagiri hill near Bhubaneswar, stands witness to this cultural ascendance of the Oriyas two thousand years ago. The sculptural frieze on the walls of the balcony of this cave palace is surprisingly excellent in its realism, naturalness and vitality and in the high level of craftsmanship displayed.

Pali—Language of Orissa?

Associated with the twin faiths of Jainism and Buddhism and also with the successive ruling dynasties, Pali-Prakrit must have been the cultural language of Orissa with, of course, local variations, for about a thousand years. What exactly the contribution of the Oriyas to Pali or Prakrit was it is not easy to say now, but it is undisputed that Markandeya Dasa, the author of the most celebrated Prakrit grammar, Prakrita Sarvasva, referred to above already, was an Oriya. This, coupled with the other equally important fact, that Kharavela’s Hatigumpha inscription happens to be the only Pali inscription in the whole of India, has given rise to the theory that Pali is the indigenous language of Kalinga or Orissa, and that it was the Kalingas who carried it to Ceylon, the present home of the vast Pali literature. This literature has left behind no trace in the entire Indian sub-continent, other than this inscription of Kharavela. This plausible theory, started by no less an authority than Oldenburg, the great German Indologist, and supported by other eminent Western Indologists, is now finding powerful advocacy in Dr Nabina Kumara Shahoo, the young Oriya historian, who has
specialised on Buddhism in Orissa. It is not for me, however, but for historians and research scholars to deliver the final verdict on such controversies.

**Oriya at the Time of Hiuen Tsang’s Visit**

We come across the next reference to the language of the region in the travelogue of Hiuen Tsang, the Chinese traveller and scholar. That was in the 7th century A.D. The great traveller says: ‘The words and language of this region [the land of the Odras] differ from the speech of central India.’ This at least proves that by that time the common speech of the Oriyas had acquired a distinct individuality of its own. Says Dr. Mahatab in his *History of Orissa* (1st edition, p. 53): ‘The beginnings of the Oriya language may be traced to this period. All the inscriptions and grants of the Bhauma Kings (6th to 8th centuries) were written in beautiful Sanskrit verse and metre, but here and there Sanskrit words with Oriya pronunciation can be clearly discerned.’

By this time the Brahminic revival that had started with the Imperial Guptas in North India, in the 4th century A.D., had firmly established itself in Orissa. Hiuen Tsang, wherever he went in Orissa, saw Buddhist viharas and Brahminic temples flourishing side by side. The prevalent Buddhism was of the Mahayana variety, and certain Mahayana shrines, like the present shrine of Jagannatha, attracted devotees of all denominations, both Buddhist and Brahminic.

The rulers of the land during this period, the Bhauma-Karas, though outwardly Buddhist, were essentially Brahminic. They issued all their grants in sonorous Sanskrit, composed certainly by Brahmins. They are the kings who started the tradition of constructing magnificent temples that culminated in the miracle of Konarak in the 13th century A.D.

But in spite of the rulers’ leanings towards Sanskrit, the people at large and the Buddhist intellectuals who were in close touch with them, still expressed themselves in a common language of their own which, by that time, as an Apabhramsa, had come much closer to modern Oriya than either the edicts of Asoka or Kharavela’s inscription. The common religion was at that time nothing but Mahayana, corrupted by Tantric elements called Vajrayana, which is supposed to have
originated in this part of India. The whole of North Orissa is still full of the ruins of Buddhist monasteries where monks of these new religious denominations carried on their spiritual disciplines. For the edification of the common people some of them wrote songs and psalms, putting in them the esoteric wisdom of their faith. The language of these was contemporary and the metaphors used were within the daily experience of the common man.

We will discuss these Buddhist songs and psalms in the next chapter.
CHAPTER IV

SOME BUDDHIST POEMS IN APABHRAMSA
ORIYA

The Buddhist poems discovered in the Nepal State Library, at the beginning of this century, throw a flood of light on the development not only of the Eastern vernaculars of India, but also on the popular faiths in those centuries. In the fine introduction to his book, *Bauddha Gan o Doha*, M.M.H.P. Sastri, the discoverer of these songs, says (p. 6): ‘I believe those who wrote in this language (i.e. that of these Buddhist songs and psalms) were of Bengal or the neighbouring countries.’ He admits again in the same introduction at page 17, that ‘one poet’s domicile happens to be Orissa, and his song also is written in the Oriya language. I have taken that to be an Oriya poem.’ But strangely enough he forgot to name this supposed Oriya poem or the poet.

But the question might naturally arise as to how just one single Oriya poem in Oriya characters could get itself squeezed into an anthology of poetry, taken entirely to be belonging to some other language? Scores of words used in these poems, historic associations, the general milieu, and the continuity of the spirit of the poems through literary traditions down to modern times, all declare in no unmistakable terms that quite a good number of these poems were composed in Orissa, if not in Oriya, as Oriya as such did not exist at that time, any more than Bengali or Assamese. These poems, as a matter of fact, are as remote from either modern Bengali or modern Oriya, as Langland’s *Piers Plowman* is from any book in modern English, though both are taken to be English. Parochial pride taken by any region in these poems can be justified only if their interpretation is found to hinge on words now current in that particular region and found nowhere else in exactly the same sense, or by direct or circumstantial evidence of history or geography of that region.

Take for instance the most romantic poem in the whole
anthology, the one that begins with ‘The high hills, where the Savari lady resides’. As generally interpreted, this poem narrates the well-decorated and ‘naturally beautiful’ (Sahaja-sundari) Savari in a forest on a high hill, beseeching the ‘mad’ Savara (her husband) to pay attention to his ‘own wife’. The Savari, decked out with peacock feathers and ear-ornaments, however roams alone in the forest and the Savara spends the night in great pleasure with Nairamoni Dari who, according to the generally accepted interpretation, is taken to be the same Savari herself, the Savara’s wife. In the sabda-suchi at the back of M.M.H.P. Sastri’s edition of these songs and psalms, the word ‘dari’ means ‘daughter’. That makes the meaning horrid.

But the whole poem gets back its true, natural, romantic colour if we understand the key-word ‘Dari’. This is a pure Oriya word, current coin even now, and means a hetaera or a courtesan, the enticer of menfolk. The poem starts with the naturally attractive (Sahaja-sundari) wife of Savara, beseeching her ‘mad’ (unmatta) husband to stay with her. But, for all her beauty and decoration, the Savari has to roam the forests alone. The mad Savara leaves Savari (the naturally attractive world) and sleeps with the Dari Nairamoni (the Buddhist soullessness). Thus the Savara (the Yogi) obtains Nirvana and disappears into the heights of mystic experience (Giribara Sihara Sandhi).

Again, the last half of the last line of this poem is interpreted as ‘How can the Savara fight?’ which makes no sense here. The word lodai is taken to mean ‘to fight’ (ladhai), but lodai in Oriya means ‘to seek to find’, and here the logical and natural sense is in accord with this. The Savara has disappeared in the mountain heights (of mystic experiences) and how will the Savari now seek and find him?

The message of this whole poem by the poet Savaripada, rests on the contrast between the naturally attractive wife (i.e. the world) and the Dari, the enticer, the hetaera, Nairamoni or Nirvana. The poet showers all his imaginative blessings on the Savari (the worldly life) to make her appear attractive, and mentions the Dari Nairamoni in the barest terms. But yet the Savara spends the night with the unattractive Dari (soullessness) leaving the apparently beautiful
and well-decorated Savari (the world) to roam the forests by herself. The Savara has so completely disappeared into the other region, that it is useless for the Savari even to try to seek (lodai) him.

There are dozens of other words like the word 'dari' and lodai in these Buddhist songs and poems, which are universally current coin in modern Oriya even today but perhaps not current in any other modern Indian language. 'Routa', as an illustration again, is a typical Oriya surname and is part of thousands of Oriya names even today. Associated with the nobility and the military castes of Orissa, Routa and Routaray are almost household words in Orissa. Even great kings of Orissa like Kapilendra Deva were proud to call themselves Routaray (C-in-C). (cf.—Sachi Routaray, the poet). Hence it is logical to suppose that the poet Bhusuku Routa of this anthology belonged to what now is Orissa. This Bhusuku is supposed to have been a person of royal blood in his worldly life, known by the name of Santi Deva. In the traditions of the ex-Keonjhar State in Orissa (the old Jhark Kingdom) the memory of a Santi Deva, a ruling king who renounced the world and turned a monk, is still alive. Indeed the cave of his meditation is still pointed out in a spot which is full of the remains of a once-flourishing and extensive Buddhist monastery and college. This area is still waiting for the spade of the archaeologist. The poems attributed to Bhusuku Routa corroborate also the author's aristocratic upbringing and some systematic academic training. His poems abound in metaphors of hunting, a royal custom, and are, of all the poems in the anthology, the most elegant and scholarly, thus indicating trained scholarship. All this linguistic, geographical and traditional evidence just cannot be ignored.

The fact that quite a good number of these poems are dialogues between a Savara and a Savari or addressed to them, again bring these songs and poems closer to Orissa than perhaps to any other part of India. The Odras (modern Oriyas) and the Savaras, as has already been pointed out, have co-existed from time immemorial. Even now, within 25 miles of Cuttack, the metropolis of Orissa, there are colonies of Savaras still living in their traditional way. Acceptance by the Odras of the Savara-god, Neelamadhaba, as their common tribal deity
has, ultimately, revolutionised Hinduism through the evolution of Jagannatha (vide Chapter VIII). And even now the Savara and Savari appear as the chief dramatis personae in many a popular play in Orissa. The entire Danda-yatra Suango, a universal mystery play of rural Orissa, rests on the events that happen in the forest to a couple, Parna-savara and Parna-savari, well-known symbolic personalities of the Tantra cult.

The Territorial Location

The latest research as to the location of Uddiyana, the motherland of Buddhist Tantra, is likely also to upset all our previous ideas of the domicile of the poets of these Tantric Buddhist poems. There are so many places in Orissa associated with the traditions of Luipa, Kanhnupa, Savaripa, Daripa and Dhenkipa. On these Dr Nabina Kumara Shahoo, the young Oriya scholar, has brought to bear convincing arguments in favour of identifying Uddiyana with Orissa. In his recently published book Buddhism in Orissa (Utkal University) he says in conclusion (pp. 152-54), refuting all the arguments of Drs Sylvain Levi and P. C. Bagchi:

‘Many of the Tantric Siddhas, like Saraha, Lui, Savaripa and others who are regarded by Tibetan and other sources as belonging to Uddiyana, have composed large numbers of religious songs and Dohas, the language of which is claimed to be the parent stock of the modern Oriya, Bengali, and Maithili tongues. We fail to understand as to why all these Siddhas, if they hailed from the Swat Valley, would not write a single piece of song in the language then prevalent in the north-west of India and express their religious and poetic sentiments in the dialects of eastern India. Evidently Uddiyana was situated in the east, not in north-west of India in the Swat Valley region. The noteworthy fact in this connection is that no Tantric images of any importance have yet been recovered from the Swat Valley…. It may be said that the goddessess, Kurukulla and Vajravarahi, who are described in Tantric literature as the presiding deities of Uddiyana, are found only in Orissa and nowhere else in India. … Thus, all the evidence, traditional, historical, literary and archaeological, point out the fact that the country of Uddiyana which is regarded as the cradle of Tantric Buddhism, may not be located far off in
the Swat Valley and that its identification with Orissa may now be accepted.'

The Congenial Milieu

The historical probability of these Buddhist poets flourishing exactly in this period in Orissa appears also to be quite overwhelming. The period contemporaneous with these songs and psalms was not only one of glory and prosperity in the history of Orissa, but an age of Buddhist supremacy (as just referred to in the previous chapter) under the Bhauma Kings, who were great patrons of art, literature and religion. Under them Orissa saw her first grand flowering of art and architecture. Says Dr Mahatab in his *History of Orissa* (p. 53):

'During the Bhauma rule, the Buddhist art and culture made their influence felt all over Utkal. Remains of Buddhist art and architecture of that period have been discovered at Khiching in Mayurbhanj, in Baud, at Chaudhwar near Cuttack and plenty of them have been found at Udayagiri and Ratnagiri. It is held by competent scholars and critics that the Orissan art of that period is the best of all that has been produced up till now.... On the whole, the Bhauma period constitutes a glorious age in the history of Orissa. In culture and civilisation, art and architecture and in learning and education, Orissa attained to unprecedented heights. The Oriya society of the modern times retains unmistakable signs of Bhauma culture. The very foundation of the Oriya nation as a separate political entity was laid under the Bhaumas.'

It is known to every student of Indian history that a Bhauma King of Orissa, Santikara Deva, sent Prajña, the great Buddhist missionary, to China with a Buddhist scripture written in his own royal hand as a present to the Chinese emperor. No wonder therefore that Buddhist poets like Kanhipada, Savarapada and Luipada must have flourished in Orissa in the congenial Buddhist regime of the Bhaumas along with great Buddhist artists and scholars who have glorified this period as described above. The poets most probably lived in Buddhist monasteries and colleges, built and maintained by the devout Bhaumas. The whole of north Orissa is dotted with the extensive ruins of these ancient institutions.
The spirit and content of these Buddhist poems keep coming up again and again, age after age, in an almost continuous process, symbolising the eternal undercurrent in the Oriya culture of the Natha-Mahayanic philosophy of life. The Charya Padas of 7th-9th centuries, the Sisu Veda of the 14th, the works of the Pancha Sakhas in the 15th, Mahimandala Gita of Arakshita Dasa in the 17th, the Bhajanias of Bhima Bhoi in the 18th and the poems of Madhusudana Rao in the 19th century make a continuous and consistent record of the manifestation of the deep, genuine religious feelings of the Oriya people. These Buddhist poems in the Eastern Indian Apabhramsa of the 7th-9th centuries are only the beginning of a genre of religious poetry that has been, in different forms, suitable to the succeeding ages, instinctively adopted by the spiritual poets of Orissa down to contemporary times.

And a poem such as the one presented below (in free rendering) from this Buddhist anthology might be a literary composition representing any Adivasi area in Orissa even today. The Taila land (newly reclaimed jungle) is still being prepared with the Adivasi axe (kuradhi) for the plantation of his favourite crops of kangoo and jahna (cheena). The whole of this poem smells of the natural set-up of any village in the hilly parts of Orissa.

'Deep forest has been turned into Taila field with the axe and always at hand is the wife Nairamoni, who uproots all undesirable new shoots. Having freed himself of the bothersome attraction of the thickets, the Savara now moves in great bliss in the company of the enchantress Sunya. . . . Beyond the Taila field rises the jahna crops like sky-flowers in darkness. With the ripe kangoo and cheena crops at hand, the Savaras and the Savaris have become drunk and the Savara refuses to rouse himself from that great bliss. The Savara has put up scarecrows all around his fields, and now as he enjoys the roasted corn, the she-jackal whines outside for want of anything to eat.'
CHAPTER V

THE INTERREGNUM OF SANSKRIT

Between the Apabhramsa Buddhist poetry of 7th-9th centuries and the Sisu Veda of an anonymous poet and the Rudrasudhanidhi of Avadhuta Narayana Swami in the 13th century, no literary work in the common language of Orissa has as yet been traced. And searches are most unlikely to succeed because, during this period of four to five centuries, Sanskrit-based Brahmanism held an almost totalitarian sway over the land. The Buddhist Bhaumakaras became, practically in no time at all, ardent devotees of all varieties of Hindu gods and goddesses. And there are distinct traditions as well as records to prove that there were systematic persecutions of the Buddhists during the reigns of the Imperial Gangas and the Solars who followed the Bhaumas. This should not surprise anybody, as this was the period of the great Hindu revivalists, such as Sankara, Ramanuja, Madhva and Nimbarka. Each of them visited Orissa and established his zonal headquarters at Puri for the propagation and establishment of his faith in the eastern zone of India.

But the pity was that the vehicle of all these revived Hindu faiths was Sanskrit, to which the common people had no access. Buddhism and its concomitant popular culture was gone. Viharas fell into decay. Entire Buddhist communities appear to have left the deltaic areas to settle in remote jungle lands, for safety from persecution. The masses got Hindu gods and goddesses in place of the Buddhist prototypes, but now they were deprived of the healthy sublimating association with the linguistic vehicle of the religion they followed. The situation was very much unlike that created by the Buddhist Sangha.

The resentment the people felt against the totalitarian domination of Sanskrit and their silent demand in favour of the common language are also clearly discernible. In the midst of the innumerable gift-records and panegyrics to kings in dignified Sanskrit, we get even by the 11th century (A.D. 1050), just within a hundred years or so of the Buddhist poems in
Apabhramsa, the inscription of Ananta Varma Vajrahasta Deva, King of Kalinga, in hesitant modern Oriya. This is supposed to be the earliest inscription so far found in any modern North Indian language. The Bhubaneswara temple inscription of the 13th century, along with other distinct literary compositions in prose and poetry, clearly display the undoubted emergence of Oriya as we know it today. It was a revolution indeed and that too absolutely total in character, perhaps a retributive challenge, in favour of the language of the people of the land.

Devoted to Sanskrit, the intellectuals of Orissa, however, produced during those four or five centuries, an enormous amount of Sanskrit literature. Families of brilliant scholars kept on producing books continuously for generations together. And even kings aspired to the glory of authorship in Sanskrit. Most of this literature lies unpublished and may remain so, being just of the stereotyped categories. But the scholars of Orissa have left behind them, composed in that language of Gods, books in all branches of human knowledge except philosophy. Commentaries on almost every well-known book in Sanskrit are plentiful. This was a dire necessity, perhaps, as an adjunct to the study of Sanskrit in schools and colleges, as well as at home in those days, for competent teachers were always in short supply. Grammars made easy appeared, perhaps, for the same reason. Books on law (smritis) are as numerous as the commentaries, indicating the tight grip of the priestly class on the whole of society.

Of these colossal literary remains of a completely bygone age in Orissa, some at least have turned out precious and important enough to cast long shadows all over India, even down to modern times. Such, for example, as the Gitagovinda of Jayadeva, the Anarha Raghava Nataka by Murari Misra, the Aryasaptavati by Govardhanacharya, Sahridayananda Mahakavya by Krishnananda Mahapatra, Bharatamrita Mahakavya by Divakara Misra, and Bhaktipaibhava Nataka of Jivadevacharya are creative works. Changu Karika by Changu Dasa, Prabandha Chandrika by Baijala Deva, Maharaja of ex-Patna State, the Sahitya Darpana by Visvanatha Mahapatra and the Jumara Darpana by Netrananda Sahityapanchanananda discuss grammar and poetics. The Sangita Prakasha by Krishna Dasa

The two books in Sanskrit that have exercised the deepest influence in the world of religion and literature of Orissa are the *Jnana-siddhi* by King Indrabhuti (7th century) of Sambalpur, the prophet of Vajrayana and the *Gitagovinda* of Jayadeva. Religion not being our field, we leave *Jnana-siddhi* out of our consideration, but the *Gitagovinda* will be discussed in Chapter VIII in its bearings on the development of Oriya poetry. That Indrabhuti, the prophet of Vajrayana, begins his book with salutations to Jagannatha, the present Hindu God, shows the happy compromise that was being made on the soil of Orissa for a synthesis of Buddhism and Brahmanism. The compromise did take place. But it was Brahmanism that triumphed in the long run, completely assimilating its rival within its catholic folds. We shall have to review this process as it has revealed itself in subsequent Oriya literature, in a forthcoming chapter.
CHAPTER VI

GLIMMERINGS OF THE DAWN

Earliest Poetry and Prose in Modern Oriya

The earliest Oriya record to be found at present, as already mentioned, is the inscription dated A.D. 1051 of Ananta Varma Vajrahasta Deva, King of Kalinga. It is supposed to be the earliest inscription in any modern Indian language of the Indo-Germanic family. The Bhubaneswara Temple inscription of the 13th century proves beyond any doubt that the Oriya language had been slowly evolving itself for quite a long time. But Oriya as we know it today appears to have clearly emerged only during the 13th-14th centuries, definitely the period of the epics of Sarala Dasa, the lyrical ballad Kesava koili by Markanda Dasa, and the prose poem Rudrasudhanidhi of Avadhuta Narayana. Carrying unmistakable signs of their antiquity, all these and many more works, now definitely assigned to this period by scholars, are interestingly archaic, without being at all unintelligible. These have also another great and vital common factor—the contemporary major religious tenets.

The Changing Religious Tenets

After the Bhaumas, who ruled Orissa up to 7th-8th centuries and under whom Buddhist poetry and Buddhist art flourished as we have already noted, came the Somas, who are supposed to have brought the traditional Brahmanic religion to Orissa in an organised manner. Yayati Kesari of this dynasty is reputed to have brought one thousand blue-blooded Brahmins from Kanyakubja (Kanauj) and settled them in his kingdom to provide a solid foundation for the Vedic and Brahmanic Church. Soon after came Saivite Sankara from the south (8th century A.D.) and established one of his four great mathas at Puri.

The Buddhism that was prevalent in Orissa for over a millennium previous to this period was mostly of the Mahayana denomination. This has left the concept and worship of the Void, Sunya, as an inherent part of the religious consciousness
of the masses in Orissa. We shall be meeting this phenomenon again and again in subsequent chapters. Mahayana Buddhism, again, by the 8th-9th centuries had become practically fused with the cult of Tantra. Innumerable Buddhist Tantric images now found among the ruins of such famous ancient Buddhist settlements as the Ratnagiri and Lalitgiri viharas in the Cuttack district of Orissa prove this fact beyond any doubt. Hence the change-over from a Mahayana Buddhism corrupted by Tantra to Tantric Siva-Saktism, must have been accomplished quite easily by the missionaries of the latter faith in Orissa.

The net result was that Orissa became dominantly a land of the Siva-Sakti cult for nearly five or six centuries, after having been Buddhist for a millenium. Like the preceding Buddhism this new faith too expressed itself both in the artistic magnificence that we find in the temple-city of Bhubaneswar, and in the literature of the land. The Siva-Sakti cult has coloured the entire contemporary literature. As a matter of fact it is this particular colour, along of course with other internal evidence, that has enabled scholars to date these works, major and minor, as belonging to this particular period.

The Nathas

But in between the Buddhists and the open avowal of the Siva-Sakti followers come the Nathas, the sect that embodied in its faith a glorious compromise of Buddhism and Saivism. As in many other modern Indian literatures, in Oriya also, the entire credit of ushering in modern literature appears now, as a result of recent discoveries and researches, to go to these humble unostentatious Nathas, who are a small but important and highly respected sect in Orissa even today, completely oblivious of the great national role they have played. For centuries these Nathas or Natha-Yogis, as they are generally called in Orissa, have been the unofficial moral preceptors of rural Orissa. They generally move about from village to village and beg alms, singing ballads and bhajanas, rich with moral and spiritual lore, to the tune of the one-stringed kendra, their own simple musical instrument. The visit of a Natha-Yogi to a village with his quaint music and ancient ballads is an unforgettable event and leaves a deep nostalgic
impression in the psychology of all Oriya adults who find themselves wrenched away from the rural environs of their childhood days. In the popular religion of Orissa, the concept of the *pinda-brahmanda-tatiya* (macrosom in microcosm) was added by the Nathas to that of the Void of the Mahayanists. Together, these form the core of the metaphysical understanding of the world and of himself possessed by the average Oriya.

The two earliest books in modern Oriya are definitely from the missionary pens of two humble anonymous Nathas. These are the *Sisu Veda* and the *Saptanga*. Gorakhanatha, on whom the latter book has been fathered, surely does not belong to Orissa. Hence that great Siddha, the celebrated founder of the Natha-cult, could not, by any stretch of imagination, be the author of this Oriya book. Most probably it was written by a Natha who, submerging his own little self in that of the Master, passed the book off in the Master's name. It has, however, no literary value whatsoever. Its archaic language alone endows it with great chronological importance. It merely deals with the astrological superstitions regarding the week days, the stars and planets and with the esoteric yogic practices for spiritual realisation.

*The Sisu Veda*

The other book, *Sisu Veda*, is a remarkable production in more ways than one. Saivite in content, it is linguistically the last lingering echo of the Buddhist Apabhramsa compositions of the 7th-9th centuries that we have already discussed. This *Sisu Veda* is the unmistakable visible link between that Apabhramsa and the modern Oriya of Sarala Dasa or Markanda Dasa, thus completing the chain that started with the chronicle of Kharavela in the 1st century B.C. and evolved slowly but steadily by a simple natural process.

Though dealing with the esoteric knowledge of Tantra, this *Sisu Veda* is written throughout in some of the liling metres of the Buddhist lyrics, and hence it is pleasant both to read and to hear. Here is a sample of its contents:

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Like a crane that does not disturb the water
Keep thou thy mind and breath calm,
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Much more remarkable than the verses are the prose commentaries following each verse in this book. This archaic prose speaks its own antiquity. It has the hesitant manner and the half-articulate character of a pioneer attempt. It undoubtedly belongs to the same category as the temple inscriptions of the 12th-13th centuries. There is no doubt that this is the earliest literary prose in Oriya. The translation of the commentary to the stanza quoted above, reads like this:

‘What is crane is the mind. What is fish is the breath. Water is the drop (bindu). If mind and breath are identified, both crane and fish shall be immobilised. This indeed is sahaja samadhi.’

The Natha cult has deeply influenced Orissa’s religious culture—so deeply that it has practically lost its own identity, and become an integral part of her common thought. But these two books, Saptanga of Gorakhanatha and the Sisu Veda, written at the inaugural period of the Natha cult, remain unmistakably sectarian in their contents. Linguistically, they are the last mile-posts of the ancient Oriya language on the road to modern Oriya. These two books stand clearly apart from all the other forerunners of Sarala Dasa.

PROSE

And of these others, the prose pieces, from all the internal evidence, appear, strangely enough, to be older than the poems attributed to this period. All the small poems assigned to this period are so definitely more polished than the lines either of Sarala’s epic or of the prose pieces that no claim of their authors to be more ancient than the anonymous prose writers can really stand. The Asokan edicts, the Kharavela chronicle, the temple inscriptions and the prose commentary of the Sisu Veda give us a clear enough picture of a long tradition of prose writing in Orissa, from ancient times. As a matter of fact, the Rudrasudhamidi, the earliest complete
prose work in Oriya, that we shall be discussing presently, appears to be a sister composition to Kharavela’s chronicle. Both are written in a magnificent kanya-style, though one is in Oriya and the other in ancient Pali.

‘Rudrasudhanidhi’ of Avadhuta Narayana Swami

The placing of this book in the 13th century A.D., as has been done by most Oriya scholars, may not really be far from the fact. And for a pioneering venture it is surprisingly excellent.

Nothing is known about the author except that he was a resident of Bhubaneswara. He appears from his book to have been a learned man carefully trained in academics. His name indicates that he had renounced the world and must have spent his life either as a wandering mendicant (avadhuta) or as a Sannyasi-teacher in a matha. The latter seems to be more probable as otherwise, as a wandering sadhu, he could not have devoted the time and attention required to a work of this nature. Without doubt he was a Saivite mendicant and this work Rudrasudhanidhi (the Treasure Casket of the Nectar of Rudra) was meant, naturally, to propagate the virtues and powers of his personal God.

The story of the book runs like this. A good king named Anangapadmakara happened to be childless. He worshipped Siva praying for a child. The lord, pleased with the king’s devotion, wished to send one of his own Ganas, or followers who were dedicated to His worship and practised in Yoga, down to earth below as King Anangapadmakara’s well-merited future heir. In order to choose one, the Lord requested Parvati to create a lovely maiden out of Her Spirit and let her move among the Lord’s followers, all noted for high asceticism. Accordingly, the maiden Trailokyamohini (the Enchantress of Three Worlds) was born. Abhinava Chaitanya, one of the Ganas, fell a victim to her charms. And he, therefore, was commanded by the Lord Siva to go down to the earth for another spell of human existence, as his Yogic consummation was still imperfect. Poor Abhinava Chaitanya, now very penitent, appealed to the Lord for mercy, begging him not to throw him into the miseries of terrestrial life again. The Lord consoled him, saying that he would be born as
the son of a good king and a devout queen and that, after living out his own life as a good king also, he would ultimately return permanently to the Kaivalyadhama, the Hindu Paradise. And so it came to pass.

Combining the qualities of prose and poetry, more of the latter than of the former, this book is quite unique in character. Its merit is not merely chronological. It is unique for its creativeness, artistic execution, and romantic imagination. It combines in itself in beautiful harmony, romance and austerity, asceticism and sensuousness, classical dignity and romantic freedom. The Sannyasi author was, essentially in his spirit, a poet and a romantic. While externally he was an svadhuta, devoted to the austere Siva, in his heart of hearts this scholar-poet was really a lover and a worshipper of sensuous beauty. Otherwise the flamboyant, colourful atmosphere that he created in his narrative, the rhythmic imaginative diction he used with such ease and the insight he has shown into human situations, would not have been possible.

This piece is so surcharged with poetry that though it is undoubtedly prose, the lines somehow rhyme almost after every third sentence. Most certainly that was unintentional, and was perhaps the natural result of the rich alliterative and rhythmic prose that the author employed for his work, as the medium fit for his mythological and romantic story. While as poetry this prose-book, Rudrasudhanidhi, is one of the most effective, as prose also it is the best of the period because of its complete expressiveness and strong individuality.

This is how the Sannyasi-poet ushers the maiden Trailokyamohini into the hermitage of the Ganas for the Temptation:

‘When they (Ganas) saw her, the elephants of their minds were drowned in the ocean of forgetfulness. How wonderfully was she fashioned to drag all happily into the net of Desires! It was as though Kama with his arrows of flowers had come to life in her sly looks just in order to prevent Yogis from reaching their salvation. With Kama, the Spring too had arrived. And the moon came out in a clear sky to support her friend. The six seasons entered along with the Malayan breeze. The mind of youth began to warm. Dry trees
blossomed out. Bees kissed lotuses. The breeze from Malaya delicately fanned the breasts of the fair ones in Heaven. All refined considerations gave way. The cuckoos started singing. Birds swam in the lakes out of season. And flowers started kissing the bees in return. And so in the pleasure-forest of Rudra, both animate and inanimate were immersed in the dark dalliance of Kama.‘

Midway between verse and prose, archaic in texture and deeply romantic in spirit, allegorical and religious in purpose, this work, Rudrasudhanidhi, by Avadhuta Narayana Swami, the Saivite sannyasi, stands out as a significant landmark in the development of Oriya literature—a natural step, it seems, in the process of the evolution of Oriya from the Buddhist psalms in the Apabhramsa of the 7th-9th centuries. And apart from its chronological significance, the book and its sannyasi-author command also our reverence after these six centuries for their sterling intrinsic merits. Rudrasudhanidhi would be treated with respect as a prose masterpiece in any language.

The Brata Kathas or The Votive Tales

Next in literary importance are the Brata Kathas universally current in Orissa, nobody knows for how long. It is from linguistic evidence and the religious worship advocated in these tales, that scholars have placed these in the 13th-14th century period. And they may not be very much wrong. The authors of all these tales are still unknown.

Of these prose tales the Somanatha Brata Katha and the Nagala Chauthi (Nagachaturthi) Katha centre round Siva and his symbol, but both lack the literary grace of Rudrasudhanidhi. These are plain narrations and no attempt is made at artistic polish or effective expression. The story of Nagala Chauthi, however, is given with charming clarity of delivery, by short, clear-cut sentences, e.g.:

‘Ye fellow-humans, listen to the story of Nagala Chauthi. There was an overseas merchant. He had seven daughters-in-law. The youngest of them was neglected. After some time came the month of Aswina. And Kartika followed. Four days after the Pipaya Amabasya (the new moon day in the month of
Kartika) came the Nagala Chauthi. The mistress of the house had an early morning bath. Materials for the fast were arranged after the bath. She brought sugarcane. She brought the bunch of bananas. She brought the bunch of coconuts. She brought the bunch of areca nuts. She made rice-pops (lia) and made balls of them with treacle. She made sweet balls of sesame also, etc.

The Story of Ta'poi

But the most interesting of all these votive tales is the pathetic story of Ta’poi, advocating Sakti-worship. Due to its immense popularity in all the households of Orissa, the original prose tale has long been replaced by a simple narrative poem. But the characters, situation and the denominational worship, all indicate a very remote origin of this highly interesting story. It is certain that this story was publicised only to propagate the Sakti-cult in a popular manner among the common people, and particularly among womenfolk, without the paraphernalia of temples and priests. The lowly pathetic figure of Ta’poi in this story perhaps caught the imagination of the people, particularly of women, and thus made it universally accepted in Orissa. The story runs like this:

A merchant prince on the sea coast had seven sons and seven daughters-in-law and only one daughter, Ta’poi, the youngest in the family. The merchant’s affairs were highly prosperous. This had always excited burning jealousy in a Brahmin widow of the neighbourhood. One day she found Ta’poi playing in the street with bamboo baskets along with other boys and girls of her age. The Brahmin lady told her, ‘Ah, Ta’poi, you should be playing with a golden moon and silver baskets. What a shame for a rich man’s daughter like you to play like these common children!’ Ta’poi immediately demanded a golden moon and silver baskets from her parents. The old merchant felt such abuse of wealth preposterous. But the innocent girl was adamant in her demand. The fond parents yielded. But by the time the making of this golden moon and the silver baskets was only half-done the parents died. The sons thereafter took up their father’s oversea business and made arrangements for going abroad. Before starting on their long and uncertain
journey they definitely told their wives to see to it that Ta’poi, their darling sister, was looked after just as she had been by their late parents and that every little wish of hers should be satisfied.

The wives were acting in accordance with their husbands’ request when the Brahmin widow came on the scene again. She told the young ladies, “You are indeed fools to be busy all day to keep this girl in such comfort! It is she, when the brothers return, who will poison their ears against you and make your life hot. Beware of your sister-in-law, you silly women. She is your potential enemy!”

The picture changed immediately. Ta’poi, the darling daughter of the merchant-prince, was now told to look after the family goats. Soon she was in rags, and turned black with wandering in the jungles with a herd of goats, without food and drink. Only her youngest sister-in-law was kind to her and stealthily gave her food with which she sustained her frail body. One day in the month of Aswina, when the rivers were in flood, a male goat, the favourite of the eldest sister-in-law who was now the mistress of the house, got lost in the jungle. When Ta’poi brought the flock home that evening without the favourite animal, she was severely beaten by the eldest sister-in-law and sent back hungry and footsore into the jungle, to fetch it back. It was a dark night outside and raining. Ta’poi, poor girl, called the animal loudly and wandered about in the darkness. During that blind journey she stumbled upon the village goddess Mangala and kneeling down before her she offered her the handful of raw-rice bran (khuda) which the youngest sister-in-law had secretly tied in her apron when she was cruelly driven out of the house. There she worshipped and wept, bewailing her lot, not being conscious of the passage of time. About midnight a man approached her, attracted by the sound of her pathetic crying. After a few enquiries it was revealed that the visitor was no other than Ta’poi’s youngest brother, who, along with her other brothers, had arrived at the port. Their ships were at anchor at the river-side, not far off from there. Ta’poi was taken to the ship, given a bath and clothes and jewellery. A message was sent to the wives to come and perform the ceremony of Boita-Bandana or the ‘welcome to boats’. They came in the
morning, and when questioned, replied that Ta’poi was lying ill at home. They, except the wife of the youngest brother, were directed to go to the stern of the ship where there was a goddess to be worshipped. She was no other than Ta’poi herself in her new dress and jewellery. She sat with a sharp knife in her hand, and, as directed by her brothers, cut off the nose of each woman, one after another, as they approached her to worship her. They all fled in shame to the nearby jungle and were devoured by tigers. The brothers returned home with the wife of the youngest brother and Ta’poi, and got new wives and settled down in happiness.

Because of the khuda (rice bran) offered by Ta’poi to the goddess Mangala, this votive festival is known also in Orissa as Khudukani Upabas or the ‘fast of rice-bran’. It is generally observed by unmarried girls in the villages in emulation of Ta’poi, to obtain the sympathy of brothers.

In a large number of folk tales in Orissa, as has been observed before, oversea trade and the merchants engaged in it (called Sadhabas) occur again and again. As part of the ceremonial observations of this particular fast of Khudukani described above, the young girls actually draw sketches of sea-going vessels in white paste over which the goddess Mangala’s symbolic statue is made to stand. The story of Ta’poi represents perhaps the chaotic conditions into which families of maritime merchants fell during their long spells of absence abroad, a chaos in which the family was protected by the supposed saving grace of the goddess Mangala, for which she had to be devoutly worshipped.

Madala Panji

This is the most controversial book in prose in Oriya literature. In English it should be ‘The Drum Chronicle’, because of the drum-like shape the palm-leaf manuscripts of these records assume when bound together with strings. These are the records kept of Orissa kings, in the temple of Jagannatha, and still preserved in their ancient drum-shapes.

This prose-chronicle has two principal parts. In one part it describes the various ceremonies at the shrine of Jagannatha in all the details. These are being literally followed even today, down all these centuries. For the rights of the various
classes of employees in the temple, this Panji is still the sole authority.

In the other part it describes the ruling dynasties and the individual rulers of Orissa who traditionally, and without exception seem to have accepted Jagannatha as the Divine source of their sanction and the fountainhead of their mysterious spiritual influence on the people of Orissa, like that of the Mikado over the Japanese people. As a matter of fact the king of Orissa has generally been looked upon as the 'the Moving Vishnu'. The authors of this chronicle have pretended to trace the dynastic story of Orissa back to the beginning of creation, and naturally an otherwise excellent historical approach to men and matters in Orissa has been vitiated by lots of fantasies, untruths, exaggerations and inaccuracies.

This chronicle is supposed to have been started at the command of the first king of the Ganga dynasty, Chodaganga Deva of the 11th–12th century A.D. Three separate families of karanas (writers) have been keeping these records generation after generation, including that which is kept in the temple itself.

As the accounts of kings and dynasties as given in these panjis differ considerably in many places from available historical documents, historians have generally condemned them as unreliable. Many have even doubted that this chronicle was started so early as in the 12th century A.D. Dr. H. K. Mahatab is of the opinion that it was perhaps written in the 16th century A.D. by rival claimants to the throne of Orissa when Mansingh, Akbar's general, conquered Orissa, to prove their respective royal ancestry and titles.

This hyper-critical attitude towards the chronicle appears also rather fantastic and pretentious. Three separate persons could not have been engaged for such a purpose and even if so engaged, could not have produced almost similar narratives concerning innumerable dynasties and still more innumerable individual kings and queens. And how could all the three separate writers have recorded, for instance, a speech delivered by King Anangabhima Deva to an assembly of feudal chiefs in front of the temple of Jagannatha nearly three centuries back? Such a royal speech was not at all necessary to prove the title of the rival claimants to the throne of Orissa before
General Mansingh, in the 16th century, as is asserted by historians like Mahatab.

It is generally found also that the events recorded in this chronicle after the 12th century, i.e. after the advent of the Gangas, usually corroborate the facts given in inscriptions and other historical records. This supports the traditional belief that it originated in the time of Chodaganga Deva in the 12th century. In spite of interpolations, inaccuracies and fantasies, therefore, these prose records may be taken to have substance enough to prove their antiquity.

Written not by inspired writers but by professional employees of the state and the Temple, these records, however, have little literary value on the whole. We should concede to them merely the chronological prestige claimed for them by many. But these chronicles, like Holinshed's in English literature, have provided the raw material for excellent kavyas and natakas in Oriya through the many romantic legends found in their as yet unpublished pages. Their language is generally archaic, but uncouth and inartistic, lacking the ancient flavour. Their only worth as literature lies in the social pictures they represent (crude, fragmentary and inaccurate though these are) in the different historical periods. The speech by King Anangabhima Deva, referred to above, is one of the few excellent pieces, not only for the glimpse it gives of the feudal character of the state in the 12th-13th centuries, but also because of the nobility of the character of the speaker King Anangabhima Deva who repeatedly gave sound beatings to Moslem invaders and is also supposed to be the proud builder or renovator of the present temple of Jagannatha.

This King thus addresses his feudal chiefs and his cabinet, assembled on the occasion when the plan to rebuild the temple of Jagannatha was perhaps discussed:

'Ye future Maharajas, I appeal to you all not to violate the principles on which I have divided the State revenue to be expended. May you not think after me, "Why should we care for his arrangements?" This kingdom that the Gangas won from the Kesaris extended under the latter from the river Kansbansa (now in Midnapur district, West Bengal) in the north to the River Rishikulya in the south; and from the sea on
the east to the district of Bhimanagara in the west. The total income from this territory amounted to 7½ lakh tolas of gold. This kingdom we have won with the sword, and also through the blessings of Brahmins and mercy from the lotus feet of Lord Jagannatha. This we have extended again from Danaibudi river in the north to Rajamahendri in the south. In the west it is extended up to Baud-Sonepur. The new territories yield a revenue of 10 lakh tolas of gold. So, the total revenue of our State now comes up to 17½ lakh tolas of gold. This revenue we have divided among gods and Brahmins, among the different services, the army and the State reserve and other miscellaneous expenditure. Ye feudal chiefs, violate not these principles. The consequences of the sins of plunder and cheating are known to you through our scriptures. If you dare ever snatch away what I have given to various sections of my subjects, in the haughtiness of power, your sin will be no less than sacrilege against Lord Jagannatha Himself. Serve the Gods and Brahmins the way I have devised. Give the nobility a share of the revenue in cowries, the elephant-keepers ten months’ full pay, the infantry and the musqueteers land with pay for ten months, and other services in the same manner, so that their families may be maintained. Adjusting this gold-based revenue system to surpluses and deficits, rule your subjects well. That alone will take you to heaven and make you happy on earth. Ye Maharajas, Dharma alone is the best of all achievements. Our booty out of conquests of old feudal lords in this land comes to about 40 lakh and 88 thousand tolas of gold. This is our self-acquired wealth. A part of this we want to utilise in the service of Lord Jagannatha. The temple built by king Yayati has grown dilapidated. We now plan to pull down the old one, and build in its place, a shrine 100 cubits high.....'

So, it appears after all that the present shrine of Jagannatha, the holy of holies to the Hindus, was the unholy fruit of war loot! This is indeed strange irony for a Deity that is declared by the orthodox to be the Buddha Avatar, the God of non-violence!

POETRY

The Common Poetical Patterns

Some of the peculiar patterns of poetry to which the poets
in Orissa resorted, all through the old and medieval periods, appear to have originated and stabilised themselves during this period. These are: (i) the fourteen-lettered couplet, with its Dandivritta variety, (ii) the koili songs, and (iii) the chautisa ballads. These need some explanation for those not familiar with Oriya literature, and particularly because these come up presently for our discussion.

(i) The Fourteen-lettered Couplet

Called payar in Bengali and asabari or kalasa or just 14-lettered metre in Oriya, this simple metre has been glorified by its masterly effectiveness for narrative poetry in the hands of, first, Sarala Dasa in his Mahabharata, and then by Balarama Dasa in his Ramayana, a century later, probably in imitation of the old master. But both these masters took great liberties with the metre. Writing their epics with the anticipation of being recited and not read by the people, these genuine popular poets often adjusted the metre to the sentiments of the moment, rather than bind their muse to its strictly restrictive regularity. With the upsurge of emotions, or when the poets had more things to say than could be contained in the 14-lettered line, they felt free to sing on till they had finished their song. So, the so-called modern free verse is not new in Oriya literature. The free verse style of the 14-lettered couplet as demonstrated in the major works of both Sarala Dasa and Balarama Dasa is known in Orissa by the popular name of Dandivritta, from, perhaps, the word ‘danda’ meaning a street, a place for free movements, and may justifiably be translated as just ‘free-verse’. Scholars have discovered such inequalities in Sarala Dasa’s Mahabharata—one line may have 14 letters, and the next 34 letters. These, however, are rare instances. But these metrical variations and this unevenness not only do not present any difficulty to the general Oriya reader but definitely contribute to an excellent recitative effect of the lines. In the printed editions of these great works, however, great vandalism has been committed by ignorant printers who, imagining the uneven lines to have been the error of the scribes of the palm-leaf manuscripts, engaged pandits to regularise them. So, now, Sarala Dasa and Balarama Dasa lie in the printed books, crippled,
truncated, and twisted—though polished—shorn of much of their pristine vigour and grandeur.

Attempts are being made, however, to resuscitate the originals as far as is possible at this late hour.

The Koili Poems

Like the Duta-poems in Sanskrit literature, a number of celebrated poems in Oriya are addressed to the koili or the cuckoo. Hence, the generic nomenclature. Pundit Banambar Acharya, however, has made out a very convincing case that these are the Oriya imitation of the 'lo-li' songs in Prakrit; 'lo-li' being merely the musical refrain at the end of a couplet or a stanza. This is the most universal pattern of folk-lyric in Orissa. For publicity of modern ideas among the masses we have now 'Gandhi koili' and many others of that sort.

The Chautisa

This is a ballad, the stanzas of which, or couplets, are arranged according to the letters of the alphabet. The four and thirty letters, from Ka to Ksha, in the serial order of which the poem glides on, gives the name to this pattern. According to this, the first letter of the first two or four lines must begin with Ka, the first consonant of the Oriya alphabet, the lines in the second couplet or stanza begin with Kha, the second letter of the alphabet and so on till we come to the last letter, Ksha.

There are innumerable chautisas in Oriya. The Prachi Samiti has collected hundreds of them and published some in four volumes. Their contents are generally the poets’ outpourings of their hearts for their loved ones or to the seasons, or meditations on the vanities of this terrestrial existence. The alphabetical order, like the restrictions of the European sonnet, gave the necessary reins to the generally unbridled effusion of the poets and at the same time gave the readers an excellent handle for memorisation. Because of this facility for easy memorisation and of the romantic nature of their content and their musical character, these chautisas were, and some still are, universally popular in Orissa. Some of them set the metrical pattern for later writers
in much bigger works. Some are lost, however, living for posterity only in the references made by later writers in their works about them.

The earliest Koili and Chautisa

The poem that is supposed to be the earliest in present Oriya, combines in itself the twin lyrical patterns of a chautisa and a koili. That is the Kesava koili of Markanda Dasa. It is the most famous of the koili songs in Oriya, in spite of being the most ancient among them. It is generally known as Kesava koili as the first line begins like this—'O Cuckoo, that Kesava has left for Mathura....'

Of its poet, Markanda Dasa, nothing has so far been discovered. Stranger still, this poet wrote this one little enchanting piece and had no inspiration for anything else. No other poet in Oriya literature is so universally celebrated with so small a contribution. But the poet richly deserves his celebrity as the little that he has left behind is indeed a 'gem of purest ray serene'.

For centuries this poem was the first text to be read in Orissa's village schools after the boys and girls became familiar with the alphabet. Village schools resounded in those days with the recitation of Kesava koili all through the afternoons. Fathers and uncles would stop at school doors to listen to their little ones' first readings of the Kesava Koili in the accepted rhythmic articulation, and mothers and aunts would lean out of windows to get a clearer audition of their darlings' first combined literary and musical performances—the recitation of this charming lyric.

This Kesava koili is indeed a charming piece. It describes mother Yasoda pouring out to the cuckoo, her feelings for her darling Krishna who left for Mathura with a promise to return soon, but decided not to, when he met his own parents there. It is this deeply pathetic sentiment of an ageing and sorrowing mother expressed in the simple, spontaneous native speech of the common man, with allusions to the common, day-to-day habits and customs of Oriya homes, that has made this little poem so popular all over Orissa, and that sends nostalgic thrills through the hearts of elderly parents when their own feelings are vicariously uttered with
all the innocence of childhood, in their little one's recitation of it in village schools. It is both for its beauty and clarity, as well as for its simplicity of expression and the pathetict purity of the sentiments depicted, that this poem had been selected to be the first reading text in Orissa's village schools for centuries.

The charm of this poem lies really in its intimate domesticity as well as the homely diction. The simple words of sorrowing Yasoda strike sympathetic chords deep in our hearts:

Ah! Cuckoo, my Kesava left for Mathura,
But alas, whose sinister influence prevents my child from returning?
Oh Cuckoo, to whom shall I give milk and sugar any more?
For the one who is so fond of them has left me for ever;
Oh Cuckoo, my darling has left and does not return!
These forests of Brindabana look desolate!
And to Nanda, my husband, O Cuckoo, this home is home no longer,

For, where is the attraction of a home without Govinda?

But the eternal taunt of a woman's tongue for the man comes out nicely when Yasoda accuses her old husband in this unkind manner:

Nanda, Oh Cuckoo, turned his own heart to stone
And enthusiastically seated the boys in the chariot, after putting kajjal on their eyes!

But her sadness submerges all other feelings and acquires unspeakable intensity in the following words of despair and jealousy. In her irredeemable suffering, Yasoda indeed gains tragic magnificence as the typical sorrowing Mother:

I nourished him with the milk of these breasts, Oh Cuckoo,
But alas! now I am deprived of the very sight of that child, now in my old age;
Fortunate indeed, Oh Cuckoo, is that woman Devaki
For the child that was mine, in strange justice, is now hers!
A century and half later, Jagannatha Dasa, the celebrated author of the Oriya Bhagavata wrote Artha koili, giving an esoteric interpretation of this charming poem. Although that was a fantastic attempt, yet it indicates the immense popularity that this poem had come to enjoy among the people of Orissa in so short a time.

Kalasa chautisa

As has been said before, Kesava koili combines in itself the twin patterns of old Oriya lyrics, the koili and also the chautisa, composed in the alphabetical order. But the chautisa proper that is recognised as the earliest is, however, the Kalasa chautisa of Bachha Dasa.

Like the Madala Panji, this book, Kalasa chautisa of Bachha Dasa, is also still a controversial issue in Oriya. The only argument in favour of putting it in this period is that it is supposed to be referred to by Sarala Dasa in his Mahabharata about a century later. It is true that Sarala Dasa mentions reciting of kalasa in a ceremony. But the word ‘kalasa’ still remains mysteriously vague. There is nothing in this poem to justify its title of kalasa, and one still wonders what exactly Sarala Dasa referred to when he spoke of ‘kalasa’ being recited. The use in this chautisa of the pure Persian-Arabic word ‘farman’—a royal command—makes its antiquity also very doubtful, for Orissa had to wait two centuries more to know the Mussalman as a ruler.

But we had better leave this controversy to the pundits and carry on the story of literature where dates and periods are not of primary importance. This Kalasa chautisa is a panegyrical to Siva, though cleverly composed as a satire. It consists of 34 stanzas, written in the alphabetical order of a chautisa. It describes old decrepit Siva’s marriage with the young and beautiful Uma, the daughter of King Himavanta of the Himalayas. When old Siva rides in as the bridegroom on a haggard bull, with a begging bowl in his hand, doubling up at times in tense asthmatic fits, Himavanta’s queen refuses to hand over her darling daughter to such a wretched-looking son-in-law. Even young Uma displays signs of revolt against her father’s wrong selection! But the old King asked both mother and daughter to have patience and forget the age
of Siva, the glory of the God of gods. In the end the marriage gets through and all are happy.

The diction of this chautisa is indeed archaic. That gives the piece the halo of supposed antiquity, but the performance is, on the whole, poor. It makes the faithful Uma’s character very commonplace and petty, in making her join her mother in her revolt against the decision to marry Siva. This shows that the author had either an imperfect knowledge of our mythology or lacked the necessary sensitiveness to appreciate the better parts of our grand puranic creations, of whom Uma is one of the loveliest and the most sublime. The author could not maintain the satire till the end and the happy ending comes with abruptness, indeed with bathos.

Absolutely nothing also is known of this writer Bachha Dasa as a man.

The koilis and chautisas will be dealt with in their totality in Chapter VIII which covers the period of their full growth.

But these marriage-poems, the koili-poems of the tender emotions of lovers and of loving mothers, the stories of fasts and festivals, do really indicate the true natural beginnings of a national literature. They are significantly small. Dealing with the small joys and sorrows of the common man, they brought into existence the incipient streams of a voluminous national literature. They became popular with the people in spite of contempt from the ruling dynasties and the upper classes, and have survived all these centuries, because of their deep social associations. Taken together, these prose and poetry pieces, however humble and unpretentious, do indeed provide a field in which a great national poet might rise and flourish and are not an inadequate background for portrayals of epic dimensions.

And so comes the towering poetic talent that was Sarala Dasa and his really unusual literary adventures.
CHAPTER VII

ORIYA MAHABHARATA AND ITS SUDRA POET

Historical Background

The Bhaumakaras and the Kesari kings in northern Orissa, the Sailodbhavas in central and the Gangas in southern Orissa, laid the foundation of what may be called the Oriya culture in the period between the 6th and 14th centuries. The building activities that Kharavela had started in the 1st century B.C. were taken up by the Bhaumakaras, expanded and glorified by the short-lived Kesaries or Somas and finalised in splendid magnificence by the Gangas. These noble kings vied with one another in filling the land with shrines of breath-taking size, and with exquisite gossamer sculptural art that would make any nation justifiably proud. They were great patrons of learning and poetry too. But unfortunately, Sanskrit remaining the language of the elite all through this period, the speech of the people remained sadly neglected and an indigenous literature, unlike the indigenous art, had yet to be born.

The Gangas became builders and rulers of empires also as they were of colossal temples. It is they who not only unified northern, western and southern Orissa, but also extended her imperialist boundaries right from the Ganga down to the Godavari and ruled this vast, sprawling State with such excellent administrative efficiency that the main outlines of their revenue, military and religious government are visible in Orissa even today. The peculiar Oriya surnames such as Patnaikas, Mahapatras, Dalais, Dalabeheras and Nayakas, etc. all representing particular jobs and responsibilities under the State administration, originated out of the novel reforms the Gangas introduced in the State and society of Orissa.

After nearly three centuries of glorious rule the Ganga dynasty came to an end in A.D. 1415 when Kapilendra Deva ushered in the still more glorious reigns of the Solar dynasty.

It was in the reign of one of the earlier Ganga kings that
Northern India was overrun by the first Muhammedan invaders. Subsequently, the Moslem conquerors of Bengal tried again and again to occupy Orissa, but were not only beaten off but also pursued right up to their own capitals more than once. This sturdy political freedom and military glory were retained by the Oriyas for about three centuries after the whole of North India had become Moslem territory. The Solar Rajas, besides facing the Moslem invaders from the North like their predecessors the Gangas, now had to give equally glorious battle to the Moslem armies of the recently founded Muhammedan powers of the Bahamani kingdom in the south whose territories touched, in those days, the southern and western boundaries of Orissa.

Sarala Dasa, the poet of the Oriya Mahabharata flourished in the reign of the founder and the greatest ruler of the Solar dynasty, Sri Kapilendra Deva, who is a legendary figure in Orissa. This king rose from the ranks and wrested the throne of Orissa from the last Ganga king whose Commander-in-Chief he had become, through sheer mental brilliance and physical vigour. This commoner-king carried the Oriya arms down to the banks of the Kaveri and to Warrangal and beyond, into the very heart of the South Indian Moslem powers of those days.

Thus, the State of Orissa enjoyed enviable political freedom and military prestige for centuries in the midst of a sub-continent overrun and ruled by foreigners. It was bejewelled with magnificent structures, reflecting the high degree of civilisation to which the people had risen. It was certainly prosperous. The sculptural panorama of the temple walls at Bhubaneswar and Konarak which were built in those spacious times reveal a people with a terrific zest for life, fighting, hunting, making love, catching elephants, marching on conquest as well as listening to the wise men and offering devotion to the Deity. The people were proud of themselves, of their king and their State and dreamed of lovely women.

Sarala Dasa was born in such political conditions and in such propitious times. True national poet that he is, we find all these happy contemporary conditions clearly reflected in the vigorous narrative of his great Mahabharata.

His precursors in Oriya prose and poetry, as described in
the previous Chapter, small though their achievements, had prepared the ground for him. They flourished under the Sanskrit loving Gangas and their literary ventures look like hesitant attempts at an as yet unaccomplished task. But the popularity of little things like the Kesava Koili and Kalasa Chautisa must have put into the heart of the semi-educated peasant that Sarala Dasa really was, or as he declares himself often to be, the necessary courage for the unprece-
dented endeavour of writing epics in a neglected tongue. The Mahabharata of Sarala Dasa in Oriya is a unique literary achievement for a peasant. But then the peasant was a genius and he was born in epic times. So the Oriya Mahabharata appears to be not an unexpected fruit of the happy combi-
nation of the times and the man.

Apart from the historical background against which we now imagine Sarala Dasa to have written his Mahabharata and other works, on the internal evidence of his own creations also, the great poet emerges as the first historic man of letters in Oriya literature. Unlike the mysterious, vague, spectral personalities of all his predecessors, and most of his succes-
sors until we reach recent times, of whom we are without any conclusive information as to their birth, age, parentage or location, in Sarala Dasa we come across, for the first time, a literary figure who very definitely lived the life of a common man, had a family and a vocation, and who in his writings makes direct as well as thinly veiled references to contem-
porary historical personalities and events. The villages, the rivers, the deities he talks about are still there, little changed through these six centuries.

Legends and Realities of His Life

Legend, corroborated by the poet’s own assertions in his works, has established that Sarala Dasa was born in the vil-
lage of Jhankada in the present District of Cuttack. His desc-
cendants are still there, scattered in the villages round about. He was a devoted worshipper of the goddess Sarala whose temple still stands in the village of Kanakapura, about a mile from his native village. Not far from this village the poet’s samadhi still stands under a spreading banyan tree, an ob-
ject of devotion and respect to people all around.
True genius that he was, Sarala Dasa appears to be the very incarnation of humility. He never talks of himself as a writer without ascribing all that he is to the grace of the goddess Sarala. Here is one of his frequent professions:

'It is through the grace of the goddess Sarala that I have been able to make the invisible visible. I make no claim to the authorship of these lines, as I write only what she dictates to me. Ignorant from birth, never having been to a school, far from being a celebrity, and not versed in japas or mantras, I write out merely that which comes to my mind, through Her grace, sitting under this green banyan tree.'—Drona Parva

The poet was perhaps a little better off than most. His elder brother, Parasurama, was the ferry-keeper at a nearby village past which flowed the river Chandrabhaga. Most probably he was indebted to his elder brother for looking after the family, leaving the unworldly poet in peace with his palm-leaf scribbling and story-telling. Otherwise he would not have mentioned this elder brother again and again in his Mahabharata whereas he is practically silent about his parents.

A Sudra Saint

The poet, without any rancour and with profound humility, unashamedly speaks of himself as an ignorant 'Sudra'. In popular consciousness, therefore, the poet lives as 'Sudra-muni' the Sudra Saint. But it was a blessing to the nation and to Oriya literature that this great genius was born a peasant living close to Orissa’s soil, absorbing into and displaying in his life the very essence of the national culture in all its aspects. It was indeed good also, that he grew up, it seems, completely ignorant of Sanskrit and was not highly educated in any sense. All these apparent deficiencies have brought to his creations that strong individuality, that vital indigenous colour and that smell of the common personality of Orissa, that would have been impossible otherwise.

The legend that the poet in his young days received the direct command of the goddess Sarala to write the story of the Mahabharata in Oriya, while he was actually ploughing his
ancestral acres, is perhaps a metaphorical description of the simple fact that the peasant poet got the first urge to independent composition while he tilled the soil, an operation that naturally invites music and poetry to ease the tedium of going the monotonous round of the furrows. Perhaps the poet's younger days were divided between paddy fields and the village akhada in preparation for the military campaigns of the then independent Orissa kings. The tillers of the soil supplied the largest number of recruits for these. And his evenings were spent perhaps in listening to stories of the epics and puranas, told by the local Brahmin priests. From the over-powering zest with which Sarala Dasa describes battles, duels, military campaigns and wars, one is convinced that he personally participated in the many historic military campaigns of the contemporary Kapilendra Deva in Southern India. Places like Oda-Sivapura on the river Godavari that he directly mentions are still there, and veiled but transparent references are made in his epic, as has been proved by Dr. K. C. Panigrahi, to the historic forts of Kondavidu and Devarkonda, as well as the Bahamani and Vijayanagara kingdoms, at least parts of which king Kapilendra Deva either subdued by regular conquest or ravaged.

With all these practical experiences, though without much of formal education, and with the innate insight of a poetic genius into the heart of men and matters, Sarala Dasa has painted real life which he saw, men and women of real flesh and blood, and not demi-gods and angels such as are found in the Sanskrit epics. His world is the world of a rural peasant. The broad feet of his heroes are dirty with the common dust of the path of life; the dainty hands of his beautiful heroines are soiled with kitchen soot and roughened with daily chores. Sarala's royal heroines, irrespective of their social status, are made hilariously realistic also through the natural petty jealousies which are inseparable from feminine nature. Here are just two illustrations of the poetic metamorphosis.

Ganga and Draupadi in Sarala Mahabharata

Ganga, for instance, is not the beauteous, aristocratic, and divine romantic wife of Santanu that she is in the original
Mahabharata. She is here an impetuous, imperious, and tyrannical shrew. Not having any access to the original in Sanskrit, the poet perhaps imagined Ganga's character in consonance with the spirit of the river which she personified—a most natural conception, though a little undignified in the eyes of the average Indian who looks upon Ganga as hallowed with sanctity. On the other hand, Ganga is a psychological absurdity in the original work, killing her children as soon as born in spite of a romantic marriage. In Sarala's work her behaviour acquires psychological plausibility because hers is an arranged marriage, much against her own inclinations and she frankly tells her royal husband that she is in no mood to love him, that she agreed to be his wife only to honour her father's pledge. In a book describing earthly life, men and women must be and should be of the earth, earthy, like this Ganga of Sarala's creation. The departure, therefore, of Sarala Dasa, the rustic genius, from the olympic level of the Sanskrit epic to the lowly level of village homes and paddy fields, is quite admirable and surprising. Such daring is possible only with men of genius.

With all his peasant upbringing in an interior rural area, far from aristocracy and royal courts, this poet had also an amazingly acute and innate sensibility to beauty earthly and divine, with an unusual insight into human character in circles far above his station. Draupadi, the heroine of the epic, may serve as another example.

Young Draupadi is brought in a covered litter before the vast assembly of India's princes and kings. They are gathered at Panchala to compete for her far-famed beauty. The royal assembly was tumultuously noisy. Said Jarasandha to Dhristadyumna, Draupadi's brother—'Nobody dare speak his heart to you. You have concealed your sister inside a litter. Let her be brought into this assembly of kings and let everybody see her face. That is the only way to pacify this vast crowd.' On hearing these words, King Drupada ordered his daughter to be brought down into the presence of the kings. Stepping between two ladies-in-waiting, Kesini and Jayaseni, Draupadi appears and the kings see her for the first time. Some of them lost their composure at the very first glimpse of her body, her face and her beauty. Ganapati,
the king of Nirjhara Desa, poured out his feelings in the following manner: 'Glorious indeed is the family of this king Drupada for having been blessed with such a daughter. How lovely are her curly locks which attract bees by their sweet flowery fragrance. Thank God, she looks bashfully at the ground, for she would certainly cause many deaths in this assembly if she looked full at us but once....'

The king of Damana asked, 'Why has she not any jewellery on her person?'

Replied Duryodhana, 'Are you crazy not to understand that? It would be too great a burden for that delicate beauty.'

'Why should she,' joined in Karna, 'wear gold and jewels at all? Her body is a hundred times more precious than any gold.'

Soon this phantasm of beauty, won by Arjuna in the archery-contest, is taken to the desolate potter's workshop where the Pandavas, in the disguise of mendicant Brahmins, are living with their old mother Kunti. There, the loveliest princess on earth was asked by her old mother-in-law to sleep on charcoal and ashes as her own sons were doing. Draupadi would not have been human if she had not minded this sudden change from the luxury of a palace to a bed of ashes in a deserted potter's work-shed. And like a natural woman of flesh and blood she bewailed her lot.

Said Kunti, 'My sons live by begging. You have married them according to your fate. This is the law of Karma. Good and bad fortune is the order of this world. It comes to everybody.' Poor Draupadi, looking at the bed of ashes, said to herself in deep sorrow, 'Oh Fate, did you have this in store for me? I slept on downy quilts spread on jewelled beds, waited upon by hundreds of maids. They covered my bed with soft coloured silk and sprinkled camphor-powder over it. Accustomed to sleep like that, am I to sleep on this bed of ashes?'

Observing her hesitation, Bhima stared rudely at her and asked, 'Why don't you go to sleep, girl? What is the matter with you?' Poor little Draupadi was terrified lest the stout, rough Brahmin kill her outright. And she immediately feigned sleep, lying at the feet of the five brothers and sighing deeply.
over her fate. She, born a king's daughter, had married mendicant Brahmins!

This realistic picture is just not there in the original.

We see this frail, ethereal beauty, as yet unschooled in life's experiences, changed into a spirited, tempestuous, and righteously indignant woman at the court of Duryodhana, when she boldly mocks the manliness of each of her five husbands because they cannot protect her from the insults of the Kaurava brothers.

We see her next sitting in regal majesty by the side of her imperial husband, Yudhishtir, at the Rajasuya ceremony. But in comes Ghatotkacha, Bhima's son by Hidimbika, the forest woman, a co-wife of Draupadi. In Sarala Das's lifelike portraiture, the feminine in Draupadi springs up, breaking through the thin veneer of queenly majesty as soon as she sees her step-son. As tutored before by her own jealous mother Hidimbika, Ghatotkacha does not make his obeisance to Draupadi before the dignitaries present at the Rajasuya ceremony. Thus infuriated, Her imperial majesty questions Ghatotkacha's breeding and manners and curses him with an early death. Thereupon Hidimbika, who was waiting outside and eavesdropping on what was passing in the assembly, enters like a fury, and the two co-wives start a realistic, natural, womanly quarrel, without caring for the dignity of the place and occasion. The forest woman cries, 'Have you cursed my child, being yourself a mother? What indeed are you? How do you deserve to be respected as a woman, you who have no less than five husbands? And my son, though young, is already anointed king in his own territory. Why should he make obeisance to you? You are childless and a childless woman is inauspicious. You know that very well indeed. And if and when you have children, I curse you in return, they will all die at the age of seven each.'

This too does not occur, in the original.

The Story of True Mango

In the Bana Parva, Sarala Dasa introduces the interesting 'True Mango' story. The Pandavas were in exile for twelve years, wandering from forest to forest, and country to country. At one time it was suspected at the court of Duryodhana
that they were perhaps dead in the jungle. To ascertain the truth, a Brahmin was despatched to scout and was instructed how to distinguish the Pandavas from other people, by asking for something impossible, as for instance a ripe mango in the autumn season. The Pandavas were known never to refuse the request of a Brahmin or a holy man and they would certainly fulfil this request also and that would reveal their identity.

Accordingly, this man went out to search in the wilderness and met a group of persons in a distant forest. Suspecting them to be the Pandavas, he pretended to be hungry and expressed his desire for a ripe mango, which was completely out of season at that time. The Pandavas (they were no other) were in a quandary. Afraid of a holy man's curse, they meditated in order to obtain Krishna's help and He came to their rescue. He told them to plant a mango stone. As soon as the plant came up, he asked each to make a clear confession of his or her failings. That power of Truth, said Krishna, would produce the mango fruit even though it was not the season.

The Pandavas made confessions one by one. Space does not allow the whole story to be told. But when it came to Draupadi she admitted before Krishna, and all her five husbands, that in spite of them, she often felt a desire for the handsome and heroic Karna.¹

Such is the way this great rustic poet of Orissa has handled the epic heroes and heroines in his own deeply realistic, flesh and blood manner, with his keen peasant eyes fixed on life close to the earth he lived on, caring little for romantic idealism or philosophical ethics.

But does Draupadi's confession before the 'True Mango' plant or her co-wifely quarrel with Hidimbika or her bewailing of her fate on her first nuptial night in the potter's workshed, make her any the less great in our eyes? These are variant facets to this diamond of a woman. They bespeak the great creative powers, unusual daring and deep insight into human nature of our peasant poet. Devout as

¹ This True Mango story has got, mutatis mutandis, into the Bengali Mahabharata of Kasiram Das, who came two hundred years later and indicates the deep influence that Sarala's epic exercised over neighbouring languages. In the counterpart of this episode in the original epic, the irate sage Durvass is sent by Duryodhana, but the sage's anger is forestalled by Krishna, producing the akshaya patra which satisfies all demands of food.
he was, he would not commit sacrilege in a light-hearted spirit. He was writing the entire epic in the pervasive presence of a goddess. It must have been only the crazy dictates of his peasant genius that forced his pen to mould the epic characters in this homely way, making them walk the muddy earth, descending from olympic pedestals. And the great Sudra must be saluted for doing this.

Sarala Dasa is the one man in the whole of old Oriya literature to whom literature was life, and not philosophy or ethics or religion. He had no pretensions to any sort of idealistic preaching. He is out to tell only stories of men and women like ourselves, but a little magnified to make them interesting in the common eyes. He has scrupulously deleted from his Mahabharata all the philosophical discussions in the original. The Gita he has dashed off in a few lines, a very, very much more natural thing than the situation in the original epic where two armies are kept waiting, facing each other, till all the 18 chapters of a philosophical treatise have been recited. Sarala Dasa had no pretensions to wisdom or learning. He has again and again admitted his humble birth, lack of education, even lack of intelligence. But all unconscious of himself, he was a great literary craftsman.

The Original made topsy-turvy in Sarala Mahabharata

Sarala Dasa has not only changed the original epic characters in his own peasant way, he has played havoc even with the very order of the 18 books of the original epic. Sarala Dasa had only a vague knowledge of the division of the books of the original epic and of its main story. Keeping the starting and the final points as in the original, to give his book the necessary semblance, the poet felt free to write out the epic in his own way. In his book, while one misses many of the excellent stories and incidents of the Sanskrit Mahabharata, one also gets refreshingly pleasant surprises when one comes across new stories, situations and characters, all highly interesting and indicating the intensely practical, common-sense attitude to life that it is natural to expect in a peasant writer, out to write deliberately for the common rural folk only. Here for example is the interesting episode in the advent of Kali Yuga that is not in the original:
While the good King Yudhishthira was getting ready to leave the world, a Brahmin in a village asked his Sudra servant to uproot a tree on a mound in his fields and level the mound with the adjacent cultivated land. The servant set to work and while digging the mound discovered a pair of jewelled gold bangles underneath the tree. He brought them to his master saying that the bangles, being found in his fields, were his (master’s). Perhaps they were hidden there by some of his ancestors. But the Brahmin said that he was entitled only to harvest the crops of the land and the bangles were the servant’s as he had found them as a result of his own hard labour. The servant said that he was entitled only to his daily wages and nothing else and he would commit great sin by appropriating the bangles which were rightfully his master’s. Failing to come to any decision by themselves they came before Yudhishthira for a verdict. The good king, listening to their pious dispute, was both pleased and amazed and unable to decide either way. He turned to brother Sahadeva, the wise man of the family.

Thereupon Sahadeva revealed that this incident was possible because Satyayuga still prevailed on the earth, beyond its time, as on the advice of Sri Krishna he had tied Kali in a secret place where he was to remain till the last day of Yudhishthira’s reign on earth. Kali (discord) had descended into the world on the very day Krishna went to Duryodhana’s court as the emissary of the Pandavas and was refused his simple, well-meant request. But both Krishna and Sahadeva had seen Kali’s descent. Krishna asked Sahadeva to catch and bind him to a post till the end of Yudhishthira’s reign. But now that the great King Yudhishthira had already anointed Parikshita as his successor and was about to depart, he was going to release Kali.

Accordingly Kali was set free and the dispute between the Brahmin master and his Sudra servant immediately changed its character. The Brahmin claimed the bangles to be his as they were found in his fields. And the servant declared that the latter had title only to the harvests on the surface of his land, and not to what was underneath. He, the servant, was entitled to the fruit of his own labour.

Parikshita, the king of Kaliyuga, heard their claims and
counter-claims. He declared that the bangles belonged neither to the master nor to his servant, but to the state and ordered the precious bangles to be taken at once to the royal treasury.

Most likely the poet saw and knew many instances of rough justice in his times and his instinctive revolt against such social and political conditions has been expressed in the guise of this charming, metaphorical tale.

*Shadows of Social Conflicts*

That Sarala Dasa mostly depended upon and turned to good use, in his epic, his own day-to-day experiences as well as contemporary political and historical happenings, is seen through the many similar episodes and stories he describes. The strange battle between Brahmins and Chandals he has introduced in the Adi Parva appears to be highly intriguing, from the sociological, historical and ethnological points of view. It either symbolises the eternal Brähmin versus non-Brahmin conflict in India, or the Aryan invasion of the south, or some actual isolated happening not long before the time of the poet, such as the founding of a Brahmin dynasty in Orissa. It is difficult to say with any certainty what exactly it means. The story runs like this.

During their wanderings all over India, incognito, the Pandavas came to the town of Odadi-Sivapura, a town which still stands on the Godavari as a place of pilgrimage. There the Pandavas with their mother Kunti took shelter in the house of Bishnukara Panda, a typical Oriya Brahmin name. After some time Yudhishthira wanted to visit Gautami *tirtha*, as an auspicious day for a holy bath there was coming soon. Old Kunti was left in the care of Bishnukara Panda and his wife. She reasonably suggested that Yudhishthira leave Bhima behind, as he was likely to create trouble if he chanced to see Duryodhana and his brothers also there. Accordingly Bhima was left behind.

One day Bhima found the sleepy town of Odadi-Sivapura suddenly awake with activity. There were preparations for war. The citizens were shouting and getting ready for the oncomming battle. Bhima asked Bishnukara Panda the reason.

Bishnukar said: 'In bye-gone days there was a pious Brahmin
at Sivapura: He had two sons by his legally wedded Brahmin wife. Then he went on pilgrimage to the river Baitarani. As he was travelling alone close to a mountain named Budhakuta, an aggressive Chandala girl saw him and enticed the handsome Brahmin youth away with her. She kept him with her for ten years under a sort of hypnotic influence, and bore him ten sons. The Chandala and the Brahmin brothers have been fighting each another ever since. The Chandalas come from Udra Desa (Orissa). They are savage and barbaric. They loot property and kidnap pretty Brahmin girls. They regularly invade Sivapura once a year in the month of Sravana to get their usual booty. And this is the time. The war preparations are to meet them.'

The Chandalas came and made havoc. Bhima was waiting and watching along with his host, the timid-hearted Brahmin Bishnukara Panda, who was restrained with difficulty from taking to flight by his guest. And then he plunged into the fray with an uprooted tree in his hand, and put the Chandalas to rout.

Then the citizens of Sivapura assembled and made Bhima their king, as there was no king there. Bhima made Bishnukara Panda his minister and during the absence of the other brothers, brought his kingdom to a large size through conquests of the neighbouring territories. When the Pandavas ultimately left, Bishnukara Panda was made king of the newly-founded kingdom. He later on attended the court of Yudhishthira at the Rajasuya ceremony as one of India's respectable southern potentates.

The Poet's deep Sympathy for the Lowly and the Outcast

It is so significant that Sarala Dasa, in spite of the orthodox piety of a common low-caste Hindu householder, reveals strangely broad sympathies for the lowly and the outcast. He has created golden characters out of the contemptible of the land. The Sāvara Jara, in his epic, stands as a grand symbol of non-Aryan personality. It is Jara who, being refused by the Brahmin Drona the chance of military education because of his non-Aryan birth, turns into the famous Ekalavya; it is Jara again who kills Krishna, it is Jara who follows the unburnt heart of Krishna as it is washed by the
waves of the sea along India's long sea-board. He rescues it at last at Puri on the east coast. According to a highly ingenious interpretation first popularised by Sarala Dasa, if not started by him, it is the unburnt heart of Sree Krishna that has metamorphosed itself into the present day Jagannatha in order to serve humanity during Kaliyuga. This legend is and has been believed by millions in Orissa, all these centuries, without knowing who first gave it wide currency. This is the story.

When King Indradyumna of Malava sent the Brahmin Viswavasu in search of Vishnu, the latter discovered Him in the Blue-mountain at Puri, jealously guarded by the Savara, Jara. After many vicissitudes Vishnu condescended to reside in the great temple that King Indradyumna had built for His earthly residence. He told the King in a dream that the image in which he would display Himself in the temple would be revealed in the Rohini-kunda next day. And the image was there, at the bottom of the water in the cistern, in all its effulgence. Then the King wanted to lift it out of water. But, lo and behold, it was found so heavy that the King and even his entire retinue failed to move it. At last the King spent a night of vigil praying to God, who told him that He could be raised only if Jara (the Adivasi) would hold Him on one side and Viswavasu (the Brahmin) on the other.

This was accordingly done and the image moved easily. This speaks volumes indeed for the unique intuitive vision and the extraordinary mental breadth of this peasant poet who, as long ago as the 14th-15th century, rose above all the petty social and religious inhibitions, and so categorically declared through the mouth of God Himself that India's spiritual efflorescence lay in a total and integral fusion of the Aryan and non-Aryan cultures, shaking off all distinctions of caste or colour.

This story in Sarala's Mahabharata was elaborated, as we shall see later on (Chapter VIII), in ballads and yatras that have had the widest currency among the common people in Orissa.¹

¹ This story has also been taken up by Gadadhari, the younger brother of Kasiram Das, the author of Bengali Mahabharata for his Jagannatha Mangala Kavya, which, linguistically, is full of adapted Oriya idioms.
Jain and Buddhist Influences in Sarala’s Epic

The Mahabharata, as we all know, is a war poem. The entire epic is war all through, ending in the tragic devastation of war exactly as we have experienced in our own times. Sarala Dasa, influenced perhaps as much by the military traditions of his own caste as by the subject itself, describes battles and duels with a gusto that is not to be found in any other topic he handles. But in and through these wars and preparations for war, the images and voices of peace and non-violence keep emerging through his pages in sublimating contrast to the violent surroundings, just like Gandhiji in modern times. This is most probably the result of the deep impress that both Jainism and Buddhism left in the national consciousness of the Oriyas. This influence must have been much more fresh in the poet’s time than now. The Buddhist psalms and songs were not so remote. Hence the ideal of non-violence, of peace, of universal compassion and of non-enmity, comes up again and again in the Mahabharata of Sarala Dasa, with a strange beauty of its own. In the Sabha Parva, for instance, he describes a veritable Ahimsa-colony somewhere in Sindh. The Raja or the leader there had carved the kingdom out of the sea by setting up dykes. It was quite extensive. But the Raja had no quarrel with his neighbours, nor had he any territorial ambitions. He and his subjects had complete faith not only in non-violence, but even in non-possession. The Raja himself begged his food every day like a Jaina mendicant, with a bell tied to his thigh. To do good to others was the mission of his royal existence. This is indeed the Gramadana and Bhoodana and Jivandana movement of Vinobhaji, anticipated by six centuries.¹

Popularity of Sarala’s ‘Mahabharata’ in Orissa

In spite of many unique and excellent qualities, however, this epic of Sarala Dasa has, owing to his lack of any formal education and systematic training and comprehensive

¹I entirely agree with the suggestion of Sri Gopinatha Mahanty, the celebrated Oriya novelist, that the poet painted this idealistic Ahimsa state, perhaps from the tradition of the last cloistered days of Kharavela and his first queen, who became Jain mendicants. The historical proof of this is the double-storied cave named ‘Rani Hamsapur’, or the Home of Queen Hamsa still existing in Udayagiri near Bhubaneswara.
erudition, the appearance of a wild growth. It has the wildness of unschooled genius, and in it we miss the elegance of trained scholarship. But this book is popular with the people just for these very reasons. In Oriya there are now three authentic verse translations, and one authentic prose translation of the original Mahabharata. But the people care little for pedantic accuracy. They hunger for life's realities and sensations, as well as for heroic and aesthetic dreamlands, where their own little selves stand magnified a thousandfold. All these the reader gets in plenty in the grand wilderness of Sarala's Oriya Mahabharata. Combined with his strong common-sense view of life, typical of a peasant, we find in Sarala a facile proneness to exaggeration and hyperbole, which is another typical characteristic of the country folk. He never talks of an army except in terms of millions and billions. Even Hidimbika, the forest-concubine of Bhima, brings as presents, while coming with her son Ghatotkacha, to attend the Rajasuya ceremony of Yudhishthira, one hundred cart-loads of kasturi (musk), one lakh loads of fragrant amla, another lakh loads of sandalwood and camphor, and several lakh loads of mangoes. These exaggerations give vivacity to all his narrations of episodes and incidents and are most enjoyable to the common peasant folk.

A National Epic

If epics are and have to be national in character, the Mahabharata of Sarala Dasa is a national epic from many stand-points. It had to be a book of Orissa and the Oriyas, in the very nature of things, as the poet knew no other language except Oriya, and knew no other world or society except that of his own rural environment. But as in many other things Sarala Dasa was dynamic in his patriotism also. His epic is a picture gallery of Oriya social life that is true even today. To make his motherland Orissa loom large and important in the eyes of his compatriots with the holy halo of puranic sanctity, he not only linked Sri Krishna's death in Saurashtra to the rise of Jagannatha at Puri, but he brought the Pandavas to visit all the holy places of Orissa and made them live like common Oriya citizens like Bishnukara Panda and Ananta Pratihari mentioned in his epic. He even made old
Yudhishthira marries an inauspicious Oriya girl, the daughter of Hari Shahoo, an oilman, in consonance with that good king’s reputation for helping everybody in distress. He made all the Pandavas live on Orissa’s soil for 75 years.

Sarala Dasa has carefully omitted, as has been said earlier, intellectual and philosophic discussion from his epic. He believed peasant-fashion in action and example. He had the intuition also that dry-as-dust theological, ethical or metaphysical debate would make his epic unnecessarily dull to his simple rural readers and listeners. But all the same, scattered throughout his epic there is excellent advice for the common man on vital aspects of life, charged with the deep common sense of an intelligent peasant. Here are some typical pieces of advice given by Bhishma to Yudhishtira in Santi Parwa.

‘Oh King, distribute charity to the subjects at proper times and on appropriate occasions. Don’t believe things without personal surprise visits. Don’t give up hunting altogether and respect the gods and Brahmins. See that the devout in the land observe ekadasi and do not permit foreign emissaries to live in the capital. Never covet another’s wife or wealth; be satisfied with your legally wedded wives. Entrust your administration only to very trustworthy ministers, and even then don’t relinquishe to them all your powers. Distribute free food and drink at all places of pilgrimage and place commanders of the army at places where they are needed. Be liberal in the maintenance of war elephants and horses, and leave plenty of pasture land for cattle. You should have an eye for talent and honour it; never be miserly towards poets.’

This last piece of advice, so out of place here in the ordinary manner, put into the mouth of a dying soldier, and spoken to a future king for the good of his administration, seems to have been deliberately included by our peasant poet, either as a vindication of his own literary profession, eternally neglected by the state and looked down upon by the pedant and the mediocre, or as a humble testament to the personal neglect or contumely that he himself suffered, and from which he magnanimously wished to protect brother poets in future.
Influence of Sarala’s Epic on the National Life and Literature

The Oriya Mahabharata of Sarala Dasa was written two centuries before the Mahabharata came into existence in the sister language, Bengali. The Mahabharata in Telugu was written by three successive court poets and was completed in the 18th century. Perhaps in no other modern Indian language was a Mahabharata produced so early and by such a poet as Sarala Dasa—a semi-educated Sudra. And no other vernacular Mahabharata has perhaps the same hold on the common people as the Oriya Mahabharata of Sarala Dasa. Stories, characters, episodes, and lines from Sarala’s Mahabharata have gone deep into the national life of the Oriyas. If a happening becomes spectacular, growing out of a small affair, an Oriya peasant invariably says, ‘This is indeed a Mahabharata growing out of a game of Jhimitti (Hadodo).’ According to Sarala Dasa, the unquenchable animosity between the Pandavas and the Kauravas started from a friendly game of Hadodo. Any pious hypocrite in Orissa is described as ‘the tiger in the Tulsi-forest’ or ‘the stork with the cotton wool in its beak’, both characters from fables in Sarala’s Mahabharata. In the eyes of the people of Orissa this epic has assumed the sanctity and the sanctifying power of a scripture. Many an Oriya peasant ceremonially starts its recital in order to bring about the birth of a son.

The popularity of this Mahabharata caused it to be translated into old Bengali and it is heard from authoritative sources that the Mahabharata story as found in the Indonesian islands is closest, of all the versions in India, to that of Sarala Dasa. But this has yet to be verified.

Sarala Dasa, the peasant-genius, not only wrote a great book, but practically created a whole literature. The whole subsequent development of Oriya literature was possible just because this peasant left behind this grand composition in a language that was still contemptible in the eyes of the learned and the rulers. This Sudra’s successful adventure supplied inspiration and encouragement to all his immediate successors. And its influence on poets down to modern times is also deep and expansive. Many a poet, including the western-educated Radhanatha and Madhusudana of modern times, have borrowed episodes from Sarala’s storehouse for their own.
literary creations. This has happened in all the periods of Oriya literature.

Other Works of Sarala Dasa

It seems this little peasant was burdened with a restless energy, that impelled him to go from one literary adventure to another. The immense epic of the Mahabharata was not enough for him. At one point in it he narrates the entire Ramayana story, a great literary need at that time as the Oriya Ramayana had to wait a century more to get written. But the goody-goody story of the Rama and Sita of Valmiki’s creation must have appeared too tame for the vigorous mind of the soldier-peasant. So he wrote the Vilanka Ramayana in contrast to the Lanka Ramayana of Valmiki.

This Vilanka Ramayana is now traced to the Adbhuta Ramayana in Sanskrit. But the poet, because of his ignorance of Sanskrit, could not have had any direct access to it. He must have only heard the vague outlines of the story of the Adbhuta Ramayana from Brahmins, as he had heard the main stories of the Mahabharata also. But these vague hints were enough to fire the peasant-poet’s imagination because of psychological affinities, for the story of the Adbhuta Ramayana contains the seeds of extra ordinary situations calling for vigorous and unusual dramatic action.

The story of the Vilanka Ramayana of Sarala Dasa is like this. When the news of the death of the ten-headed king of Lanka at the hands of Rama reached the ears of his friend, the hundred headed Ravana, king of the land of Vilanka, the latter grew furious. He wanted to avenge the death and defeat of his friend. Rama by that time had gone back to Ayodhya and was living happily with Sita. When they heard of the emergence of this new menace to the peace of the world, first Satrughna, then Lakshmana and lastly Bharata were sent to meet the foe. But they were all killed by the hundred-headed Ravana. Even the great Hanumana was blown off to a place thousands of miles away. At last Rama himself came into the battlefield. But he too failed to hold his own against the formidable Rakshasa adversary. Then Sita came to assist her husband. Observing the situation she took the entire burden of meeting the demon in battle upon her own delicate shoulders.
Appearing as the Eternal Feminine, she completely hypnotised and enervated the crude male energy of the demon. The symbolic killing was then done by Rama.

And this led to an intriguing joke between the great husband, Rama and his greater wife, Sita, as to 'who killed the Ravana of Lanka?'

Sarala Dasa wrote also the first Chandipurana in Oriya, a story which relates again how the Feminine subdues the crudely vigorous Masculine.

These two books taken together with his Mahabharata, give a glowing picture of the peasant author's mental constitution. This great unschooled peasant had an intuitive conviction, it seems, that the quietly pervasive qualities of the Feminine are far superior to the flamboyant, demonstrative activities of the crude Masculine. His Chandi and Sita and Draupadi combine in themselves supreme material achievements with supreme feminine charms. They dwarf the men characters by their resilient vitality and by the original way they think and act as well as by their irresistible beauty.

Sarala Dasa was thus not only a great poet, but the most modern of all the poets in old Oriya literature. He may be unique in the whole of Indian vernacular literature from this standpoint. The semi-educated peasant poet deserves indeed the salutations of all discerning critics.