

On the Killing of Śiśupāla

A. Harindranath

nābhaviṣyadiha cejjanārdano
nāmarīṣyadathavā sa cedirāṭ
āpatiṣyatadhunātra saṁgaro
ghora ityanuśuśoca nāradaḥ

[Rājasūyam Prabandham - Melpputtūr Nārāyaṇa Bhaṭṭatiri (A.D. 1560 - 1648)]

We are in Sabhā Parva at the Rājasūya of Yudhiṣṭhira. All-knowing Nārada had this vision [1]:

*Aho! What more marvellous than this -
thought Nārada - than that
the Self-Born Svayambhū himself should take away
all these powerful Kṣatriyas! (II. 36. 19)*

The *arghya* offering to Krishna is about to take place, enraging Śiśupāla who will attempt the disruption of the Rājasūya yajña.

Let us rewind to the beginning of Sabhā Parva where Nārada pays a visit to Yudhiṣṭhira's Sabhā. Nārada has just returned from visiting the Sabhas of Indra, Yama, Kubera and Brahmā. In the Sabhā of Yama, *where all the past kings of the earth reside*, he has met Pāṇḍu. Nārada has come with a request from Pāṇḍu to Yudhiṣṭhira to conduct Rājasūya so that he (Pāṇḍu), like Hariścandra in the past, can *live blissfully in Indra's Sabhā*. After telling Yudhiṣṭhira to *act according to your father's wishes*, Nārada, who is *most knowledgeable in the happening of time cycles (purākālpaviśeṣavit)* adds:

*This maha-yajña is the most difficult of all yajñas. ...
... Say the yajña has begun -
suddenly a war breaks out,
and all Kṣatriyas are killed - the world's destroyed!
One never knows
how the slightest obstacle can magnify into a calamity.
Think deeply, therefore, O Indra-among-rājās
what is best for you. (II. 12. 31-33)*

Yudhiṣṭhira doesn't ask any questions. But the listener is too well aware that according

to Vyāsa, desire for Heaven is the gateway to Hell. After the disastrous dice game, in his tīrthayātras, Yudhiṣṭhira will be told to visit Somatīrtha where taking a ritual bath brings one the merits of Rājasūya. Yudhiṣṭhira doesn't ask why.

Towards the end of the war, in Śalya Parva, we hear about Balarāma's tīrthayātra, where he will first visit Yamunātīrtha and then Somatīrtha. We learn from Vaiśampāyana that Yamunātīrtha is where Varuṇa conducted Rājasūya and a great war took place between Devas and Asuras [2]. Somatīrtha is where Soma conducted Rājasūya and, again, a great war took place [3].

Now fast forward to the Bhaviṣya Parva (Knot of the Future), the last Parva of Harivamśa, the khila (appendix) to the Mahābhārata. Janamejaya, having listened carefully to the entire (disastrous) history of his great grandfathers, having learned about the Rājasūyas of Varuṇa and Soma and the accompanying great wars, now confronts Vyāsa. He correctly deduces that Yudhiṣṭhira's Rājasūya was the root cause of the destruction of Kurus. *Being the progenitor of his great grandfathers, being knowledgeable in both past and future, why didn't Vyāsa give them the right advice?* Vyāsa replies:

kālenādya parītāste tava vatsa pitāmahāḥ

na mām bhaviṣyam papracchurna cāpṛṣṭo bravīmyaham [4]

“Being seized by Time, your great grandfathers did not ask me about the future. Not being asked, I do not tell.”

In Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa, it is significant that Rāma, after the war, thought of conducting Rājasūya, citing the previous ones conducted by Mitra (Varuṇa) and Soma. It is Bharata who, citing the disastrous consequences of Rājasūya (rājakulakṣayam), prevents Rāma from conducting it [5].

The hells Hariścandra and the world had to suffer as a result of his conducting Rājasūya are well-documented in the Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa [6].

Now back to the impending doom and Nārada at Yudhiṣṭhira's Rājasūya. Having recalled the purpose of Krishnāvātāra, knowledgeable in both past and future, he is all excited about the immediate great war which will lead to the destruction of Kṣatriyas, thereby relieving Goddess Earth of her unbearable burden.

What follows next is the offering of *arghya* to Krishna at the advice of Bhīṣma. Śiśupāla, Krishna's cousin and the king of Cedi gets flared up. On what basis one can justify this, he wants to know [7]. Bhīṣma replies which makes Śiśupāla even angrier. Through the words

of Bhīṣma and Krishna, Śiśupāla's (and Krishna's) past and present lives unravel before the listener. With his *cakra*, Krishna cuts off Śiśupāla's head thereby preventing the disruption of Yudhiṣṭhira's *yajña*.

It is important to note that the southern recension [8] of Mahābhārata contains, prior to the killing of Śiśupāla by Krishna using *cakra*, a detailed description of portents by Nārada who is replying to a query by Yudhiṣṭhira. This is followed by a full-fledged, one-to-one war between Krishna and Śiśupāla. It is interesting that when the killing of Śiśupāla is recounted by Dhṛtarāṣṭra in Udyoga Parva [9], a one-to-one war is mentioned; but there is no mention of Krishna's use of *cakra*.

If we expected a shower of flowers from heaven to follow Krishna's act, we are in for a surprise. Vyāsa says:

anabhre pravavarṣa dyauḥ papāta jvalitāsaniḥ

krṣṇena nihate caidye cacāla ca vasum̐dharā (II. 45. 29)

On the killing of Śiśupāla by Krishna, from cloudless sky came down drenching rain, blazing Vajrāyudha struck, Earth trembled. Why three types of portents, *divyāḥ*, *antarīkṣāḥ* and *pārthivāḥ*, follow the fall of Śiśupāla? What makes Indra and (Goddess) Earth upset about this action of Krishna?

For the answer, we don't have to wait for long. In between the seemingly successful conclusion of Rājasūya and the beginning of the disastrous dice game we are told of a conversation between departing Vyāsa and Yudhiṣṭhira. Troubled by the omens following Śiśupāla's death, Yudhiṣṭhira queries Vyāsa about their meaning. Vyāsa replies:

O rājā, for thirteen years

these portents will continue;

they will end in the complete annihilation

of all the Kṣatriyas.

You will be cause ... (II. 46. 11-12)

Yudhiṣṭhira is further told that he will soon have a vision of Rudra-Śiva. Of course. We simply need to recall [10]

namaḥ sabhābhyaḥ sabhāpatibhyaśca vo namaḥ

(Salutation to Rudra in the form of members of the Sabhā!

Salutation to Rudra in the form of Lords of the Sabhā!)

The stage is set for moving from one Sabhā to another. Soon Duryodhana will experience

great shame in this Sabhā and the roles will be reversed in the next Sabhā. The great war which has to accompany Rājasūya, after all, will take place. In this war Krishna will not bear weapon, thus paving the way for total destruction.

By killing Śísupāla thereby protecting Yudhiṣṭhira's *yajña*, Krishna simply postponed the great war which was to accompany the Rājasūya as usual. Now Indra has to wait next thirteen years to welcome the slain heroes to heaven; Goddess Earth has to suffer the unbearable burden for thirteen years more. No wonder, they are greatly upset.

According to Mādhvācārya [11], Mahābhārata has three layers of languages (*samādhi*, *darśana*, and *guhya*) and delineates three subjects (*Manvādi*, *Āstikādi*, and *Uparicarādi*). So far we found the episode occupied with the first two, namely, *Manvādi* and *Āstikādi*. Nīlakaṇṭha [12] saw in the killing of Śísupāla, in addition to the story, *brahmaṇi jīvasya layam*, the dissolution of Jīva in Brahma.

[1] All Mahābhārata sloka translations quoted in this note are from the *The Mahābhārata of Vyāsa*, transcreated by P. Lal, Writers Workshop, Kolkata, (1968 - 2006).

[2] IX 49.

*... Balarāma went
to the Yamunā-tīrtha. (11)
Where, O lord of the earth,
Aditi's mahā -
fortune-favoured son,
fair-complexioned Varuṇa,
once performed
the Rājasūya sacrifice. (12)*

*Slayer-of-hosile-heroes
Varuṇa performed
that sacrifice
after he defeated
human beings and gods in a great battle. (13)*

*After the completion of
that excellent sacrifice,
a battle that terrified
the three worlds
took place between the gods
and the Dānava antigods. (14)
O Janamejaya!*

*After the completion of
the finest-of-sacrifices
the Rājasūya, fearfully
fierce battles afflicted
the kṣatriya race. (15)*

[3] IX 43.

*... he proceeded
to the mahā-meritorious
tīrthā called Soma. (46)
That is the tīrthā
where in the past
Indra-of-the-earth-lords
Soma performed
the Rājasūya yajña,
the yajña whose hotr-
priest was the finest-
of-the-twice-born
mahātmā Atri. (47)
When that yajña gave over
a horrific battle
took place between
the Gods and the Dānavas,
Daityas and Rākṣasas -
a battle that is known*

*as Tāraka in which
the antigod Tāraka
was killed by Skanda. (48)
That was the time
when the destroyer of the Daityas
Mahāsena-Skanda,
became the general
of the army of the gods.
There beneath a plakṣa-rāja
huge waved-leaf fig-tree,
Kārtikeya-Kumāra-Skanda
is present in person.
Always. (49)*

- [4] *Harivamśa being the Khila or Supplement to Mahābhārata*, edited by Parashuram Lakshman Vaidya, Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, Pune. Vol. I, Introduction, Critical Text and Notes, (1969). (115. 24).
- [5] *Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa, Uttara Kāṇḍa*, Sarga Seventy four. Available on the internet at <http://ff.mum.edu/vedicreserve/itihās.htm>.
- [6] *Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa*, Adhyāyas Eight and Nine, available on the internet at <http://ff.mum.edu/vedicreserve/puran.htm>.
- [7] “.. for many of Vyāsa’s characters who grow on our sympathies - for Duryodhana, Gāndhārī, Utaṅka, Balarāma, even Śiśupāla, and, on some strong occasions, Draupadī - the Mahābhārata is an argument with God.” Alf Hiltebeitel, in *Rethinking the Mahābhārata: A Reader’s Guide to the Education of the Dharma King*, University of Chicago Press (2001).
- [8] *The Mahābhārata, for the first time critically edited*, Sukthankar, Vishnu S. *et al.*, eds. 1933-59. 37 fascicules. Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, Pune.
Available on the internet at <http://bombay.oriental.cam.ac.uk/john/mahabharata/statement.html> thanks to Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, Muneo Tokunaga and John Smith. The variations in manuscripts consulted by the editors of the critical edition of *Mahābhārata* are available at this site.

- [9] Dhṛtarāṣṭra's narration to Saṁjaya, section 22, Udyoga Parva, Mahābhārata (Critical Edition).
- [10] *Śatarudrīyam*, with introduction and commentary in Malayalam by Swami Prakasananda, published by Sri Ramakrishna Math, Puranattukara, Thrissur, Kerala, Third Edition, (1995). (III.16)
- [11] *Mahābhārata Tātparya Nirṇaya*, Mādhvācārya, available on the internet at <http://www.dvaita.org/sources/mbtn>. English translation of the first three chapters is available in the book, *Śrī Ānandatīrthabagavatpādācāryaviracitaḥ Mahābhāratatātparyanirṇayaḥ*, translated by K. T. Pandurangi, Srīman Madhva Siddhantonnahini Sabha, Chirtanur, (Near Tirupati), (1993).
- [12] *Śrīmanmahābhāratam* with the Bhāratabhāvādīpa commentary of Nīlakaṇṭha, edited by Pandit Ramchandrashastri Kinjawadekar, reprinted by Oriental Book Reprint Corporation, New Delhi, Second Edition (1979).