On the Killing of Śiśupāla

A. Harindranath

nābhaviṣyadiha cejjanārdano
nāmarisyadathavā sa cedirāṭ
āpatīsyatadhunātra saṃgaro
ghora ityanuśūśoca nāradah

[Rājasūyaṃ Prabandham - Melpputtūr Nārāyaṇa Bhaṭṭatīrī (A.D. 1560 - 1648)]

We are in Sabha 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 Sabha Parva where Nārada pays a visit to Yudhiṣṭhira’s Sabha. Nārada has just returned from visiting the Sabhas of Indra, Yama, Kubera and Brahма. In the Sabha 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 Sabha. After telling Yudhiṣṭhira to act according to your father’s wishes, Nārada, who is most knowledgeable in the happening of time cycles (purākalpaviśeṣavit) 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 Yudhiṣṭhīra’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:

kālenādyā paramāste tava vatsa pitāmahāḥ
na māṁ bhaviṣyām papracchurna cāprṣto 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 Yudhiṣṭīra’s Rājasūya. Having recalled the purpose of Krishnāvatāra, 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. Śīśupāla, 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 Śīśupāla 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 yajñā.

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:

\[
anabhre pravaraśa dyauḥ papāta jvalitāśaniḥ
kṛṣṇaṇa nihate caidyā ca cacāla ca vasūmdhāra (II. 45. 29)
\]

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, antariksāḥ 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 Kśatriyas.*

*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]

\[
\text{namah sabhābhyaḥ sabhāpatibhyāśa vo namah}
\]

(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 Sabha and the roles will be reversed in the next Sabha. 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 Śiśupāla 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 Mādhvacārya [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. Nīlakanṭha [12] saw in the killing of Śiśupāla, in addition to the story, brahmaṇi jīvasya layam, the dissolution of Jīva in Brahma.


... 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-hostile-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)

... he proceeded to the maha-meritorious tīrtha called Soma. (46)

That is the tīrtha where in the past Indra-of-the-earth-lords Soma performed the Rājasūya yajñā, the yajñā whose hotṛ-priest was the finest-of-the-twice-born mahātmā Atri. (47)

When that yajñā gave over a horrific battle took place between the Gods and the Dānava 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)


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.

