

Performance Traditions of the Mahabharata in Tamil Nadu

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Lecture 01

A BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO THE MAHABHARATA

“Whatever is found here may be found somewhere else, but what is not found here is found nowhere!”

The Mahabharata, at its core, is the narrative of a fratricidal war between the cousins the Kauravas and the Pandavas for kingship. In this Great War, though the Pandavas finally win, the victory came at a great cost as millions of lives were lost.

The Epic, says it was written by sage Vyasa, at the request of the creator of all the worlds, Brahma. Brahma could see the values and ethics crumbling in the world had asked Vyasa who had compiled the four Vedas to distil their essence and present it as a story accessible to all. People, he said, now did not either have time or erudition to understand the Vedas and it was necessary to share this knowledge in a manner accessible to all. As Vyasa understood the Vedas, he would be the correct person to transmit its knowledge in a simpler form.

That is the reason why the Mahabharata is called the Fifth Veda in these traditions.

Vyasa acceded to Brahma’s request and said that as the task he was entrusted with was monumental, he would need a scribe to write it as he was narrating. Brahma suggested that Ganapathy, the elephant headed deity, would be the perfect scribe.

Ganapathy accepted to be Vyasa’s scribe if Vyasa could narrate as fast as he could write. Vyasa accepted this, but he said that Ganapathy should also understand what was being said first before writing.

The Mahabharata as composed by Vyasa has 18 Parvas or books and starts well before the Great War.

According to medieval Indian aestheticians like Anandvardhana and Abhinavagupta the Mahabharata was an implicitly anti-war text

Abhinavagupta in his 'Locana' a commentary on Anandavardhana's Dhvanyaloka says this about the aesthetic experience

"In the course of our beginningless journey through this universe, we have experienced all emotions. Thus nobody fully aware of his own humanity can fail to be moved by another person's experiences."

The Mahabharata begins by describing itself. The Epic speaks on Dharma, Artha, Kama and Moksha and says that on these

"What is found everywhere will be found here, and what is to be not found here can be found nowhere ..."

The first question the Epic poses as to what caused this disastrous war and enumerates a list of series of probable causes which could have led to the Great War. It gives up this speculation as being finally futile as the Great War had already taken place and millions of people had been killed. The next significant detail that the epic speaks about itself is that it is a narrative which has been retold many times before. Numerous sages had heard the epic from either Vyasa the writer or his disciple Sauti and the Epic, in a much longer form had been already heard in the seven heavens. The first time the epic was narrated on earth, it says, was at the snake Yagna of King Janamejaya, the great grandson of the Pandavas. King Parikshit, due to a thoughtless action of his, was cursed to die by a snake and he was unable to avert his own death even after taking the most stringent of preventive measures. Janamejaya, to avenge his father's murder, decided to perform a Yagna, the purpose of which was to rid the world of snakes. His Yagna was doomed to fail as snakes, in Indian traditions, represent the fruits of one's actions, or its Karma. What, in effect Janamejaya wanted to do was to 'free' action so that no act can have any repercussions'. This was obviously undesirable as it would lead to an immoral/amoral universe where anybody could do anything with impunity. So Janamejaya was asked to listen to the epic to learn the ways of Karma and ruminate on what it meant to lead an ethical life. All these details are narrated in the terse first 50 verses of the epic. The first voice of a person who was directly involved with the war who speaks in the Epic is the blind King Dhritarashtra. Dhritarashtra was the father of the Kauravas whose antagonism with their cousins, the Pandavas resulted in the Great War. It is significant that in a narrative of war, the first voice that is heard is of the vanquished. Here Dhritarashtra addresses Sanjaya, his charioteer, and the raconteur of the events of the 18 days of war as they were happening to the blind king. When Dhritarashtra speaks, the war is over with all his sons killed and enormous destruction of both the opposing armies, Dhritarashtra says;

"Listen to me, O Sanjaya!, listen to all I am now about to say. You will then find that it is not worth to treat me with contempt. You are learned in the Shastras, you are intelligent and possessed of wisdom, my inclinations were never for war, nor did I feel pleasure in the destruction of my race. I felt no difference between my sons and the sons of Pandu. My own sons

were wayward, and they hated me because I was old and blind. I bore all on account of my miserable state and for paternal affection. I was foolish and thoughtless and Duryodhana grew in folly”

Dhritarashtra continues...

“When I heard that the wondrous bow had been drawn and the target had been hit and dropped to the ground, and Draupadi had been taken as all the kings looked on -then, Sanjaya, I lost hope of victory. When I heard that in Dwaraka Arjuna had forcibly carried off Subhadra of the Madhu clan and that both Krishna and Balarama had set out for Indraprastha-then, Sanjaya, I lost hope of victory. When I heard that the king of the Gods had rained forth, but was checked by Arjuna with divine arrows, and that thus the Agni had been gratified in the Khandava Forest-then, Sanjaya, I lost hope of victory.

In all performing traditions of the Epic, what is the correct or ethical action is the principal question of the epic. The Epic at one level is a compendium of multiple stories of people addressing various ethical dilemmas in their own lives, all framed against the narrative of the Great War. The epic travels back and forth in time, narrating many mirror stories, which add nuances to the ethical dilemmas of the protagonists of the Great War.

One narrative strand which the epic weaves is the genealogy of the ancestors of the warring cousins, starting from their first born ancestor Puru. The narrative of the war actually begins with King Shantanu, the great great grand descendent of King Puru

Shantanu had three sons, Devavarata from his first wife Ganga, and Chirangada and Vichitravirya from his second wife Satyawati. Satyawati wanted her children to rule the kingdom as a precondition to her getting married to Shantanu. King Shantanu’s first born son, Devavrata hence had renounced his right to rule, and had also taken a vow of celibacy so that he would have no children to contest the kingdom with his half-brothers. This was why henceforth he was known as Bhishma or “the one who had taken a terrible vow”. In Indian traditions, to die without leaving any progeny behind is the worst curse to a human being, and Bhishma voluntarily taking this upon himself, is one framing narrative to approach the epic.

On Shantanu’s demise, Vichitravirya became the king under the guardianship of his elder brother Bhishma. His elder brother, and rightful heir, Chitrangada had been killed by a Gandharva of the same name, leaving Vichitravirya as the only claimant for the throne. Vichitravirya married two sisters Ambika and Ambalika, but died too young leaving no heirs behind.

The first narrator and composer of the epic, Rishi Vyasa enters his own narrative at this point. Vyasa was the first born son of the Queen Satyawati and Rishi Parashara, and is requested by his mother to ensure that the Puru dynasty does not end with the death of her son Vichitravirya.

The storyteller, Vyasa, fathers three children with Ambika, Ambalika and their maid. These are the grandchildren of Satyawati and heir to the kingdom; Dhritarashtra, Pandu and Vidura.

As Dhritarashtra was born blind, his younger brother Pandu is crowned King. The third half-brother Vidura, has no claim to the throne due to his being the son of the maid to the two queens, Ambika and Ambalika. This inscription of the author into his text is a distinctive feature of Epic traditions and Vyasa is both the author and the progenitor of the principal characters of the Great War. Valmiki also inscribes himself into the Ramayana as a witness who watches the Epic unfold from within his sanctuary of his hermitage.

Vyasa, the author of the Mahabharata, intriguingly, keeps entering the narrative at crucial junctures, while Valmiki's hermitage becomes the sanctuary for Rama's sons Lava and Kusha, and Valmiki himself becomes the final facilitator in reuniting Rama with his two sons.

This inscription of the author into the text, immediately makes the text 'self-reflexive' and this self-reflexive quality is meticulously maintained in all narrative and performance traditions of the text. As A K Ramanujam succinctly puts it, as a listener, you are simultaneously both within and outside the epic. By a curious process which this project will explore, listening to the epics is also simultaneously, a listening to of one's own story

The other element which unites the epic traditions is that all the popular Epics are finally narratives of Vanavaasam and return. As one storyteller whom I recorded said simply, that to be a good king, a good human being, periodically, one first has to leave ones comfort zone and live in the forests. Here one has to kill the demons both within and outside oneself; only then, he sad, a 'return' is possible.

The story of the Great War, the Mahabharata, as enacted in performative traditions in India, really starts with the conflict between the great grandchildren of Satyawati, the sons of Dhritarashtra and Pandu for kingship. Dhritarashtra had a hundred children, known as the Kauravas, with the eldest Duryodhana staking a claim for kingship. Pandu, due to a curse, had abdicated the kingdom to live a life of an ascetic in the forest and his five sons the Pandavas were born in Vanavaasam, in the forest. Yudhishthira being the eldest born of all the cousins was considered the rightful claimant to the throne, and the seeds of conflict are now out in the open.

Unknown to the Pandavas, they have an elder brother Karna, who is actually the rightful heir to the throne, by being the eldest son of their mother Kunti. Karna, by a curious turn of events, becomes the closest friend of Duryodhana and also one of his main warriors in the Great battle, fighting against his own younger brothers.

On their father Pandu's death in his self-imposed life in the forest, the Pandavas make their first visit to Hastinapura. Here they live with their cousins the Kauravas, under the guardianship of their grandfather Bhishma.

With two strong claimants to the throne, a decision is taken to divide the kingdom letting both Duryodhana and Yudhisthira rule half the kingdom. Duryodhana, having no intention of sharing the kingdom, has deceitfully built a palace of combustible materials for his cousins and requests them to stay there till the kingdom could be divided properly. Duryodhana, actually, intends to burn the palace with his cousins inside, when they were asleep.

Bhima, the strongest brother of the Pandavas, comes to know of this and escapes the burning palace carrying his mother and brothers on his shoulders. This begins the second Vanavaasam or period of living in the forests for the Pandavas.

The Pandavas are now forced to live incognito, still under threat of death from their cousin Duryodhana. Their fortunes change when Arjuna, in his disguise of a poor Brahmin, wins the hand of Draupadi, the Panchala princess in marriage. By this alliance, the Pandavas find their first strong ally in Drupada, the king of Panchala. With the support of the Panchala kingdom and Krishna, other kings also pledge allegiance to Yudhisthira and the prospect of a fratricidal war between the cousins, now becomes a distinct possibility.

Duryodhana, to avert an inevitable war, is forced to concede land to the Pandavas. Reluctantly, Duryodhana gives them an inhospitable forest land as their share of the kingdom. The Pandavas turn this inhospitable land into a fertile kingdom and establish their capital Indraprastha.

The deity of fire, Agni, now enters the narrative and requests the help of Arjuna and Krishna in burning the Khandava forest which was part of their kingdom. In the epic, this is another crucial episode, the repercussions of which finally threaten future of the Pandavas itself.

The forest is ruled by a King of snakes Takshaka, who fights Arjuna and Krishna when they try to burn the forest, in order to protect his own family and kingdom. Takshaka escapes the forest fire, but loses his entire family and makes a vow of killing the Pandava progeny in retaliation. This he fulfills when he kills Parikshit, the grandson of the Pandavas, accentuating the inherent self-reflexivity of the Epic. The killing of Parikshit is the primary cause for the Epic to be narrated first on earth, to Janamejaya the son of Parikshit.

Yudhisthira on establishing his kingdom at Hastinapura, has become a powerful monarch with all the kings of the land declaring their allegiance to him. Krishna advises him to consolidate his power by performing the Rajasuya Yagna, in effect, declaring himself the Chakravathi or Emperor of all the lands in his domain.

Yudhishtra's palace is built by a Gandharva architect, Mayin and the palace of illusions he built, becomes the next narrative element, impelling the Epic to the fateful war. All the kings of the

land are invited to this ceremony with pride of place being given to the Kauravas, as they were finally speaking, a part of the family. Yudhisthira as a courteous person offers to show around the palace to his cousin Duryodhana, but he refuses this offer preferring to explore the palace of illusions on his own. Duryodhana has to confront his own jealousy and anger at the prosperity of his cousins, in his walk through this magical palace. The palace, in its own way, undermines Duryodhana's pride on his own might. A befuddled Duryodhana, trips and falls on his journey, through the labyrinthine palace. His sense of humiliation is compounded as he sees that Draupadi, the wife of the Pandavas, has witnessed his fall. His anger is intensified when he hears Draupadi laughing merrily at his discomfiture. To humiliate the Pandavas and Draupadi, as he himself felt humiliated, becomes the primary desire of Duryodhana from this point of the narrative.

Duryodhana confers with his principal advisor, his maternal uncle Shakuni, to plot the Pandavas downfall. Shakuni has magical dice and with this dice, he is unbeatable in gambling as his dice would fall on whatever number he desired. Shakuni and Duryodhana decide that to totally humiliate the Pandavas, they have to be first stripped of all the wealth they have acquired. War against them at this point was not an option as they were far stronger than the Kauravas. Deceit, it is decided, is the only way their ambition could be achieved. Shakuni points out the only weakness in Yudhisthira which was his love of gambling. The plotters build a palace for Duryodhana and invite their cousins, as a reciprocal gesture, to stay at Duryodhana's palace. A friendly game of dice is also included in this invitation. Yudhisthira against the advice of Draupadi and his brothers accepts this invitation.

Yudhisthira and Bhima dialogue

He first gambles and loses his kingdom; then he loses his brothers, himself and finally when he has nothing left, he pledges and loses their wife Draupadi to the invincible gambler, Shakuni. Duryodhana, now decides to gloat over his victory by demanding Draupadi be present in the royal assembly, to be the slave of the Kaurava wives. Draupadi refuses to come quoting a legal objection to this request. She says that Yudhisthira's pledging her as a wager was illegal as by then he had lost himself in the game of dice. Her question being as to how a person, who had lost himself, could pledge another person?

A furious Duryodhana sends his brother Ducchasana to forcibly drag Draupadi to his court. To further humiliate her, he asks Ducchasana to publicly disrobe her in open court. The attempt of Ducchasana to molest Draupadi is foiled by the magical intervention of her brother Krishna, and Draupadi pledges that she would not be satisfied until the entire Kaurava clan is decimated.

The elders of the warring cousins intervene at this point in an attempt to resolve the conflict. They say that Yudhisthira has legally lost his kingdom and try to work out a compromise so that war can be avoided. It is decided that the Pandavas with their wife Draupadi, have to live in open exile for twelve years and one year incognito. If their whereabouts is discovered in the one year

period of living incognito, then the Pandavas have to live in the forests for another 13 years. Once the Pandavas have successfully completed their period of Vanavaasam, Duryodhana would return their kingdom to Yudhishtira.

The Pandavas could have easily routed their cousins in battle and reclaimed their kingdom, but Yudhishtira is bound by his code of ethics and chooses to accept the verdict of the elders. The cousins, both the Kauravas and the Pandavas, accept this compromise and the Pandavas begin their third phase of living in the forests. This period of Vanavaasam is where the Pandavas listen to the stories of their ancestors and also mirror narratives of all kings who found themselves in similar predicaments that they were facing. The stories which are narrated at this juncture are in a sense, the crux of the epic and encapsulate a notion of what 'being in the world', in the cultural context of the milieu means.

The Pandavas, with Draupadi, successfully complete their 13 years of Vanavaasam, but Duryodhana reneges on his word and refuses to return their kingdom. The inevitable war is fought and good people from both armies lose their lives. The Pandavas discover too late that Karna was their eldest brother and he too dies a meaningless death.

After the tragedy of Karna's death, and the death of Salya and Shakuni, Duryodhana is left the last warrior standing. Finally even he is killed by his arch enemy Bhima and Yudhishtira is set to be crowned king. A grief stricken Yudhishtira is reluctant to be crowned king at the expense of so many lives and so much human suffering. Krishna takes him to the dying Bhishma resting on his bed of arrows requesting Bhishma to expound on Dharma to Yudhishtira. Yudhishtira is convinced by Bhishma's discourse on Dharma and consents to be crowned the king.

In performance traditions, four discourses on Dharma, the first by an Yaksha who is actually Yama the deity of Dharma and death, the second Vidura Needhi or Vidura's discourse on Dharma, Gita Upadesham or Krishna's discourse on Dharma To Arjuna and finally Bhishma Upadesham, or Bhishma's discourse on Dharma to Dharmaraja are the four pillars on which the Epic rests. To truly understand the import of the text, it is said that one has to read these four discourses carefully.

The Epic continues after the coronation and Yudhishtira performs the Ashwamedha Yaga which formally makes him the Emperor of all the 56 kingdoms of world. Now Dwapara Yuga has ended and is the age of Kali Yuga, the age of Adharma. Yudhishtira crowns Arjuna's grandson Parikshit as the king and the Pandavas with Draupadi choose to begin their final journey. Krishna also departs to his abode in Vaikunta, felled by an arrow of a hunter. The Epic narrates the final demise and fate of each of the surviving warriors.

Performance traditions of the epic generally conclude with the coronation of Yudhishtira, and the narrative of what happened later is really the concern of another journey