

Performance Traditions of the Mahabharata in Tamil Nadu

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Lecture 10

Draupadi Kalayanam or The Marriage ritual of Draupadi

Dhritarashtra says

"When I heard that Krishna and Arjuna were Nara and Narayana according to Narada's word, who said Dhritirashtra, 'In Brahma's world I am always the witness' then, Sanjaya, I lost hope of victory"

After the enactment of the Koothu, Vil Valaippu, or the Bending of the Bow, the festival moves on to its next stage with the festival village set to celebrate the marriage of Draupadi as a marriage in their own village. The festival village undergoes its first major transformation; it becomes Panchala, the kingdom of Drupada. The movement which began with the ritual 'The Killing of Bakasura' where the entire village becomes characters of the Epic themselves by cooking food for Bhima to take to Bakasura reaches its next level of immersive experience with this ritual

The storytelling of this marriage ritual begins with Drupada's doubts. He had seen the Pandavas leaving the Swayamvaram hall with Draupadi on a chariot meant for Shatriyas and he thinks that maybe the person who won his daughter's hand in marriage was actually a Shatriya and not a Brahmin. But Drupada has no way of being sure.

Yesterday, Arjuna, in the disguise of a Brahmin, bent the bow which no one else could bend and left with Draupadi after garlanding her. Duryodhana was boiling with rage. All the Kauravas got beaten up, and left for their cities. .

That night the Pandavas stayed at the potter's house. Next morning Drupada went with all the gifts, for the wedding reception for the bride. He had sent four kinds of chariots for the four different Varnas- Chariots meant for Shatriyas, chariots meant for Brahmins, chariots meant for Shudras and chariots meant for Vaishyas. Even though the Pandavas were in the guise of Brahmins, they chose to leave on the chariot meant for Shatriyas. That removed a bit of suspicion immediately for Drupada that they were not Brahmins. He goes to welcome them bearing a lot of gifts. The procession carrying Drupada's dowry started from the Mudhaliyar's house who was one of the major sponsors of this event rather than as usual, from the house of a potter.

Both in the Mahabharata and the Tamil renditions of the Epic, the Pandavas choose to stay in a potter's house rather than in the house of a Brahmin as befitting their disguise or in a house of a Shatriya as they were really Shatriyas. The Mahabharata does not give any reasons for this choice, other than that they did not want to reveal their identity as yet. Villibharatham has a beautiful verse describing the potter as another Brahma implying that the second birth of the Pandavas took place in the potter's house in the kingdom of Panchala. In a lot of villages, the marriage procession of Draupadi would start from a potter's house.

(Announcement on the loud speaker from the temple) This year in our Kazhiyur village, at the Draupadambiga temple, on this eleventh day of the festival the divine marriage of Draupadi is going to be performed. The sponsors of the ritual are arriving with dowry the divine wedding will start with the rituals. All the devotees are invited to participate and seek the blessings of the Goddess. This divine sight cannot be seen tomorrow [Marriage songs played on the traditional instrument, the Nadaswaram]

Drupada now knows that the five men, one among who won his daughters hand in marriage were not Brahmins. But he is still not sure whether they were the Pandavas and among the gifts that he has brought for the wedding are weapons like the bow, the sword and the mace. Dharmaraja is amused at Drupada's doubts as to their identity, but chooses to remain silent.

All the jewels and precious ornaments and weapons were placed before the Pandavas and they picked up nothing but the weapons, which was an act that proved they were not Vedic scholars. Yajnaesna confident that they were indeed scions of the Kuru clan adorned with strung garlands, showered rich gifts, offered them seats studded with coloured gems. Silk garments, gems, gifts were spread on platters, and weapons were also laid out. Bhimasenan picked up the mace, and

Arjuna the bow. Dharmaraja laughed. Bhima asked “Elder brother why are you laughing?” Dharma said “Panchala still has lingering doubts whether we were indeed the Pandavas, that is why he placed the weapons before us. Now he would know that you who picked up the mace is Bhima, and the one who picked up the bow is Arjuna, that made me laugh” said Dharmaraja.

The Brahmin priests to officiate in the wedding ceremony of Draupadi were hired from another village as the Brahmins of Kazhiyur either had migrated or had taken up some other profession. One of the officiating priests was originally from Chennai employed in some other profession who had learnt a few years back to officiate in a wedding ritual and shifted to a residence in a nearby village. The wedding rituals he described were a truncated version of a normal wedding ceremony as the entire wedding had to be completed within three hours of time, before the afternoon storytelling session

Marriage rituals being performed- For the wedding of the Goddess, first Ganesha puja has to be done. After invoking Ganesha, the sacred pot, the Kalasha is installed. Perform pujas to Kalasha, and then perform Punyavachana (invoking auspiciousness or ritual purification)

When Drupada says that he had come to arrange the wedding of his daughter to the man who had won her hand in marriage. Dharmaraja throws a bombshell by declaring that it will be all five of them who will get married to Draupadi. Villibharatham describes Dharmaraja as being ‘Asaivila Aratthin Maindhan’, or a person who ‘unwaveringly stands by what is right’ Villibharatham describes Dharmaraja as being ‘Asaivila Aratthin Maindhan’ or a person who ‘unwaveringly stands by what is right’ implying that what Dharmaraja was proposing, of five men getting married to Draupadi, did not deviate from Dharma. Drupada is shocked at Dharmaraja’s statement and only Vyasa can again resolve his doubts.

When Drupada says “We will get the kohl eyed lady married to the one who won her hand by lifting the bow, with his skills as an ace archer” Dharmaraja, the son of unwavering Dharma told the King, the holder of a sharp spear with edge dipped in ghee “All five of us will get married to Draupadi.” Said the one who was always unwavering from what was the correct path. When Panchala said he will get his daughter married to the one who bent the bow, Dharmaraja said, “Arjunan alone will not marry your daughter, but all five of us will get married to her.” Drupada was shocked. Who was the one who saying this? “Asaivila arathin maindhan”, the one who never wavers an inch from Aram (dharma), Dharmarajan. There are records of one man marrying

many women, but there is no history of one woman marrying many men. Drupada asked “How can I accept this?”

This is one ritual in the festival where the women play a huge part. In some villages the marriage of Arjuna to Krishna’s sister Subhadra, would be celebrated with the same amount of zeal, but in Kazhiyur, it was only narrated as a story and performed as a Koothu. The main audiences for the storytelling sessions and the rituals were only women and older men. The younger men could only be seen in the side-lines in these sessions. Marriage Rituals- The placement of the ‘Arasani Kaal’ the first ritual of any wedding

Vyasa, in the Mahabharata narrates two stories to Drupada explaining as to who the Pandavas and Draupadi really were to reassure him of the sanctity of Draupadi’s marriage to five men.

The first narrative is set in a Yuga when Yama is immersed in a Yagam and the human population grows manifold without the fear of death. The first narrative deals with five Indra’s of previous epochs of time who because of the power they wielded, thought that they were invincible and hence became arrogant. These five Indras were cursed by Shiva to being born on the earth as Pandavas. The repentant Indra’s wanted a boon from Shiva that though they would be born to a human woman, their fathers should be the five Devas- Yama, Vayu, Indra and the Asvini twins. Shiva grants them this boon and says that they would reclaim their places in Indraloka after accomplishing valorous deeds on earth.

Explaining as to who Draupadi was to Drupada, Vyasa says that she was the beautiful daughter of a powerful rishi who had remained unmarried. She performed intense austerities to Shiva who appeared before her pleased with her Tapas. The woman wanted as her boon, a husband who was the epitome of Justice, strong, handsome and knowledgeable of the Shastras. Shiva smiled and granted her request and said that as she had mentioned the word ‘husband’ five times in her request she would have five husbands in her next birth.

The Tamil rendition qualifies who Draupadi was in her previous birth and names her as Nalayini. Nalayini, in this version, was a beautiful, arrogant princess who had made impossible conditions for any probable suitor claiming her hand in marriage, failing which they would have to forfeit their lives. Nalayini says that she will only get married to the wisest, the bravest and handsomest man on earth; a set of virtues which was impossible to find in one single human being.

Rishi Maudgalya, when he hears this, gets angry and decides to teach Nalayini a lesson. He assumes the form of a handsome young man who meets all her expectations of ideal manhood, and gets married to her. After marriage, he assumes the form of an old, decrepit man. But Nalayini accepts this as her fate and remains a loyal wife to the old sage. This play, called Nalayini Charithiram, is performed as a 'modern' drama and not as a Koothu by the Koothu actors. The modern drama form is just over a hundred years old, indicating that this play reflects the morality of the early twentieth century when this play was written. In the potter's house, Veda Vyasa appeared as a rising flame of fire! Wherever there was confusion, at that time either Narada or Vyasa used to appear. Narada creates confusion and clears them, but Veda Vyasa was not like that! He would come to clear confusion

There are many versions of this story, ranging from the extremely melodramatic to the beautiful all of which cite a curse and a boon to explain why Draupadi had to marry five men

Veda Vyasa told Panchala not to worry. Vyasa says "Your daughter in this birth, she was Nalayini, a virtuous wife in the previous birth. She asked for a boon from Shiva in her previous birth that she has to live with five husbands. Because of that, Nalayini herself is born as your daughter. Even if she lives with five husbands, she would live forever as a virtuous wife. Do not worry about it," Veda Vyasa narrated the story of Nalayini to Panchala to clear his doubts. Even then Panchala was not convinced. Vyasa gives him the vision to see beyond the real and Panchala sees the five Pandavas as Devas themselves and sees Nalayini in Panchali. With his mind cleared of confusion, he agrees for the wedding.

In Kazhiyur where most of the documentation was done, probably due to an old conflict about the temple, the idols of the other four Pandavas were not there. Kazhiyur, surprisingly only had idols of Draupadi, Arjuna and Krishna and only the marriage of Arjuna to Draupadi was performed. The wedding rituals begin with an invocation to Parvathi and Shiva. The priest lists out the rituals that he would be performing. "The marriage of Draupadi is being celebrated in a grand manner. First we anointed the 'Arasaanikaal', to begin the wedding. Then we tied the hands of the bride and groom to each other. Then we invoked Vinayaka and it will continue with the gift of the Mangalsutra. We kindly request all the devotees to be seated

Unparalleled in learning, Dhaumiya Rishi arranged all the required things in order, as ordained in the shastras, to conduct the wedding as per the musical Vedas. In front of the Vedic fire he lit,

Dharma, who held high the flag of dharma performed the rituals, the marriage rituals as conducted by Dharmaraja.

In the storytelling session, the marriage of Draupadi to the five Pandavas was described as having been performed over five days. First day, Yudhishtira marries her. Next day she comes, to marry Bhima. The mangalsutra tied by Dharmaraja is already there. When one mangalsutra is there another cannot be tied, and one that is already there cannot be removed. They did not know what to do. The Goddess asked for a fire to be lit. She entered the fire and emerged out in a completely different form. Now there was no Mangalsutra on her! The next day Bhiman married her, and again she entered the fire and married Arjuna. The following day she entered the fire again and married Nakulan, and the next day she entered fire and emerged from that, and Sahadevan tied the mangalsutra. After marrying all five she entered the fire again, and emerged out with one single, common mangalsutra.

Villibharatham sees the five Pandavas as a singular entity and the question of morality of five men marrying Draupadi is not seen here as an issue. Right through the text there are descriptions of the Pandavas as a single body with five heads and if one of the heads was killed, the other four would also die immediately. Wedding Rituals continues with the tying of the 'Thaali' or the Mangalsutra to complete the wedding

“There was joy all around and everyone celebrated. “There was joy all around and everyone celebrated. Arjuna has now become the bridegroom! And our Draupadi has become the bride! It is great great joy to all who had attended and seen the wedding! Drupada's desire to see his daughter married to Arjuna finally bore fruit! There was joy all around and everyone celebrated! To see our Mother Draupadi, one needs thousands of eyes! With her face filled with compassion, and with a generous heart, you are the mother who blesses us daily. To truly look at you we need thousands of eyes!

After their marriage to Draupadi, the Pandavas live in Panchala kingdom and Vidura advises his brother Dhritarashtra that it was not right for the princes of Hastinapura to live as guests in some other kingdom. Dhritarashtra invites the Pandavas with Draupadi back to Hastinapura and again crowns Dharmaraja as the crown prince. He knows that there was no hope of his sons living in peace with their cousins and gives the Pandavas the Khandava forest to establish their kingdom.

One day Vidura said, “Elder brother, it is not right for our sons to be living in an alien country. We should bring them back.” Dhritarashtra consented to bring them back, and hence Pandavas returned to Hastinapura. For a second time Dharmaraja gets anointed as the crown prince. Dharmaraja has three coronation ceremonies at Hastinapuram. He had already been anointed once, again on his return, and later for the third time he would be crowned, after the Great War.

One day, Dhritarashtra called his brother’s sons and said, “Dharma, you are a very good person, but Duryodhanan is not kind like you. He harbours malice towards you. Instead of living together and adding to enmity, it is better to live apart and have a good relationship. There is this Khandavaprastha, a place where once our ancestors ruled, but today it is a forest. I give that to you, as your share of the Kingdom. If your feet touch that land, the forest would again become a fertile country. You go and live there happily.” See what ‘good’ intentions Dhritarashtra had!

Dharmaraja reached the seat of power, after circumambulating the city, worshipping at the lotus like feet of the people of Hastinapura. Later, on the orders of the King Dhritarashtra he decided to move to the thick, large forest, infested with ghosts. He dared to venture into this forest, which none now dared to enter which was once an ancient city where their ancestors had once flourished and later perished. The forest was fearful and full of ghosts.

The Pandavas aghast at the sight of the forest immediately invoke Krishna, who immediately appears before them. Dharmaraja says “Kanna, our father’s elder brother has given this forest, as our share of the Kingdom” Krishna say “Do not worry Dharma, as you have set foot here, this forest will soon become a flourishing kingdom”

Krishna invoked Devendra, the king of the Devas and asked him to create a city in the forest, Devendra requested Vishwakarma, the architect of the Devas to construct the capital city. Vishwakarma after he was commissioned created a magnificent city with tall buildings, high fortress walls and deep moats. The city was so beautiful that when Devendran saw it, he was jealous that even his own city paled in comparison and named it Indraprastha. On an auspicious day they moved in to Indraprastha, and all the good people from Hastinapura also took residence there. Dharmaraja proves to be a good king and all the good people of Hastinapura migrate to Indraprastha to live under the rulership of Dharmaraja

Veda Vyasa had visited Panchala to resolve Drupada's confusion and now Rishi Narada visits Indraprastha to create confusion. The virtuous wife Draupadi and her mother-in-law Kunti bowed before the great Rishi Narada, with red hands, that plays the Veena, capable of producing divine music to which even Vishnu listened in rapture. Narada narrated an interesting story to the Pandavas

They all welcomed the great Rishi Narada and bowed down to him. Narada directly addressed Dharma, saying "Oh Dharma! There are problems for a man even living with just one wife. But, you five are living with one lady, are there not any problems between you all?"

A puzzled Dharmaraja says that there was no problem and Narada narrates the story of the Asura brothers Sunda and Upasunda "There have been brothers who have been more united than you!. Even they have had problems amongst themselves due to women!" He narrates the story of the inseparable brothers Sunda and Upasunda. There is a story, of Sundobasunda – two of them, Sundan and Upasundan, brothers.

They did Tapas invoking Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva who appeared before them and asked 'What is the boon you want?' The brothers said 'We should not be killed by anyone!' The brothers wanted immortality! When great Sages or great persons perform Tapas, they would ask for Moksha or a boon not to be born again on earth! But when Rakshasas do Tapas, they would invariably ask for immortality!

The divinities said "All those who are born have to die one day' so they asked the Rakshasas as to how they chose to die. Saying if this be so, the elder brother asked the three divinities that if they have to die, the elder brother said It should only be at the hands of his younger brother, and the younger brother said that his death should be at the hands of his elder brother. They thought "We should be worried only if we quarrel between us, but as we are united we are safe"

Sunda and Upasunda rejoiced that they had obtained immortality through a back door as they thought that there was no way that the brothers could turn against the other. Vishwakarma created the most beautiful woman, Tilottama, and both brothers were immediately besotted with her beauty and ended up fighting with each other which led to their mutual destruction. The divine Apsaras Tilottama appears before them singing a song from 'Tiruppugazh' in praise of Muruga, the god of War

“Seeing you ride the blue hued peacock, the innocent lady was immediately besotted! Give her the besotted lady, the fragrant garland that always adorns your chest. With your spear you dried up the sea and are a terror to the brave Asura clan. You are the meaning of the four Vedas! Lord, proud of “being” in all living beings!” She approaches them seductively, singing beautifully. The younger brother, Upasundan, was the first to notice her

Upasundan said “Elder brother! A beautiful lady is coming towards us!” Immediately the elder brother said “Younger brother! As I had seen her first, she was his wife. Bring her to me!” Younger brother says “No! As I had seen her first, she is my wife, so please forget her!” Sundan is puzzled and asks “What is this change younger brother? Till now whenever I have seen a beautiful woman, you would just go and bring her to me. Suddenly you have changed!” Upasundan says “Elder brother! I have obediently done that so far, but I want this woman for myself!”

A fight erupts between both of them with each claiming the beautiful girl as their wife and asking the other to treat her as the brother’s wife! Sundan wants Upasundan to think of the woman as his elder brother’s wife which Upasundan flatly refuses to do. Sundan says “What does being brothers’ matter when it comes to desire? Let us go to her and ask her to choose whom she desires!” Both of them rushed at her like animals. An angry Tilottama asked “Why are you behaving like animals, do you have any sense?” The brothers said “Oh beautiful lady! You can choose the one you desire amongst both of us” Tilottama said “If it was her choice, she would choose the bravest one among them!” Immediately the brothers chose to fight the other! The elder, as well the younger drew their swords at each other.

Narada warns Dharmaraja that sooner or later the same fate as Sunda and Upasunda might await the Pandavas. He suggests a course of action which can help them avoid this fate. If you should avoid conflict, one of you should live with Panchali for a year, and the other four at that time should treat her like a mother. The others should not even see her. If any one happens to see her in that period, they should go on pilgrimage for a period of a year. Placing this condition, Narada left. By that system, it was the turn of Dharmaraja to live with Draupadi for a year

Under Dharma’s rule none had sorrow, fear, illness, or hunger. Powerful Dharma, was unperturbed about his enemies’ expertise in war, as he was ruling to the ultimate benefit of his citizens, none suffered from sorrow, fear, illness, poverty, enmity, theft, murders, in his rule with

all rising to a better life, with happiness and prosperity, to live as happily as Dharmaraja was, at that time.

The Pandavas have settled in their life with Dharmaraja as the King, Bhima as the Prime Minister and Arjuna as the General of the Army. Everyone in the kingdom is happy with Dharmaraja's just rule when some Brahmins come to the court to complain that some forest dwellers had abducted their cattle. Arjuna promises that he will retrieve their cattle and realises that to get his weapons he would have to cross a garden where Dharmaraja and Draupadi were resting. Arjuna, though he remembers Narada's warning rushes to get his weapons as protecting the subjects of their land is his priority.

At the doorstep of a great palace, where kings from across the world, surrounded by the roaring waves (of seas) paid their tributes, crowding the place, there at that doorstep entered a Brahmin priest, sad and imploring by raising his hands above his head. He could only repeat "is this right, is this right, what is happening in your Kingdom?" "Dharma should I face such a situation under your rule?" when he complained – Dharmaraja is the King, Bhima is the minister, the younger one, Arjuna is the commander of the army! When you complain to your king, the commander will first come to listen to your complaint. Arjuna, the chief commander rushed to listen to their pleas

The doorkeepers of the palace took the complaint of the Brahmin inside. At once Arjuna rushed, and kings surrounding him bowed. Arjuna asked "Why are you complaining like this, you the protector of the legacy of Vedas?" The Brahmin replied "Warrior adorned with ornaments befitting the brave, the hunters have poached my cows from the cowherds." The Brahmin cried "Arjuna! The hunters have abducted my cows! Can I face such an adversity under Dharma's rule?" An angry Arjuna replied "Do not fear venerable man! I shall soon retrieve your cows, ensuring that no harm comes to them" He promised the Brahmin and walked towards the armoury to pick up his dreaded bow. The crest among the archers saw the small bird like feet of Draupadi playing with Dharmaraja in the cloud roofed gardens.

Arjuna said "Venerable man! Do not worry. I will go immediately and recover your cows and return them to you!" Promising this he rushed to the armoury to get his weapons. On the way was the morning garden, where Dharmaraja and Panchali were sitting. When he was rushing, he glanced at the feet of Panchali; he looked only at the feet. Saying "Siva, Siva", he closed his eyes. Arjuna retrieves the cattle, but realises that he has to go on a Tirthayatra or a pilgrimage to

all the sacred rivers for a period of a year. The next day everyone is surprised not to see Arjuna in court. He enters in the garb of an ascetic and announces his decision of going on a Tirthayatra for a period of a year.

Next morning, at dawn all the members were present in the assembly, but Arjunan was missing. Dharmaraja asked “Bhima, where is Arjuna?” He appears, adorned with rudraksha, draped in bark-cloth, ashes smeared on his forehead, matted locks. Arjuna, as an ascetic, went to bathe in the Bhagirathi, which flowed out of the matted locks of Shiva, the destroyer of the Asura Tarakasura

Arjuna says “Elder brother! I am going to go on a pilgrimage!” When Dharmaraja asked why Arjuna said “Brother I am going on a tirth yatra just as Sage Narada had warned, I saw you accidentally when you were alone with Panchali yesterday. That is why I have undertaken this!” “It has been long-cherished desires for me visit the Southern parts of the country. I am leaving, bless me” And with his blessings and he left. First, he wanted to go bathe in Ganges and then start the tirth yatra. He went and took a dip in Ganges. Arjuna’s Theerthayatra is treated as a romantic comedy in the Koothu that follows. Arjuna falls in love with a beautiful woman in each of the places he visits.

Arjuna, as an ascetic, went to bathe in the Bhagirathi that flowed out of the matted locks of Shiva the destroyer of the Asura Tarakasura. There, in front of him, came the ladies from the land of Nagas, belonging to Adishesha, to bathe. Arjuna falls in love with a beautiful woman in each of the sacred temples he visits and gets married to them. His thirthayatra only ends with Arjuna getting married to his childhood sweetheart, Subhadra, who was the sister of Balarama and Krishna