

## **Performance Traditions of the Mahabharata in Tamil Nadu**

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### **Lecture 11**

#### **Subhadra Kalyanam**

Dhritarashtra says

"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"

In the Ramayana, Lakshmana had taken a vow not to sleep for the fourteen years of their stay in the forest to serve and protect his brother and sister in law. Rama who was moved by his younger brothers devotion and sacrifice had vowed that in his next birth he would be born as the younger brother to Lakshmana to serve him as faithfully and as devotedly as Lakshmana had served him.

This is the reason the tradition gives for Adisesha, being incarnated as Balarama and Vishnu as his younger brother Krishna. The younger sister of Balarama and Krishna was Subhadra who along with Arjuna is the protagonist of this particular Koothu. This Koothu as performed by the Renukambal Kattaikoothu Mandram is a light hearted comic caper unlike the Bharatham session in the morning

The Bharatham session of the morning started on a serious note with Narada narrating the story of the Asura brothers Sunda and Upasunda. This narrative also begins significantly, with Arjuna's ongoing tussle with the forest dwellers. This tussle would finally get resolved when Shiva appears before Arjuna, pleased with the intensity of his austerities, in the Koothu 'Arjuna's Tapas'

Arjuna tells Kattiyakaaran “Hunters had captured our cattle! Quickly I picked up arms, fought with the hunters. I recovered the cows and returned them to the Brahmin. I returned to place the arms in the armory. Kattiyakaaran says”You placed the arms in the armory!”

Arjuna says “When I was returning, I accidentally saw the toes of Dharmaraja and Draupadi!” Kattiyakaaran says “You saw their toes!” Arjuna says “I felt ashamed and came out!” Kattiyakaaran says “You came out!” Arjuna says “I again went in search of Narada. Kattiyakaaran asks “You went again in search of Narada. Why? ”

Arjuna, because he inadvertently intruded on Dharmaraja and Draupadi, has to spend one year in Thirthayatra or on a pilgrimage to temples by the river. Arjuna’s Thirthayatra in the Koothu is treated like a light-hearted comedy and is the only comedy in the Koothu cycle. Arjuna, of course, has a romantic encounter in each of the sacred thirthas’ that he visits

Arjuna says “The first place I went on the pilgrimage was to Naga loka where I married Ulupi, the daughter of the King of Snakes. I stayed with her for a while and she bore me a good son Aravan.

Standing in the river Ganga, the dark skinned Arjuna fell in love with Ulupi who had large fish like eyes that extended till the ears, who came to bathe with her friends

Deep in love he went behind her in the cave like opening to the nether world and married the beautiful woman graceful like a flower creeper. While bathing in the river Ganges, Ulupi, daughter of the Naga king Kauravya saw Arjuna. Ulupi, seeing how handsome Arjuna was, wondered why he had become an ascetic at such a young age. The girls took away Arjuna who was in meditation to Naga loka. He opened his eyes and saw he was surrounded by ladies. Arjuna married Ulupi and lives with her for a few months and as a result, Ulupi bears him a son

In the flower bed with humming of bees he indulged in happy union, with the sounds of the lady’s jingling anklets ringing in his head. He spent days with the red sweet lipped lady, soft as a just bloomed lotus; She bore him a son Aravan

After the birth of their son Aravan, Arjuna takes leave of Ulupi and travels southwards. Ulupi gives Arjuna a boon that no water born creature would have the power to harm Arjuna. This boon becomes important in the Tamil rendition of the Epic as it would immediately become useful in Arjuna's one year journey. After he visited Kashi and such sacred places in the north Arjuna headed towards the south.

An exemplary devotee, Parthan, after having visited and bathed in the great sacred rivers of the North, in the east, west and in all directions, reached the southern regions that grants boons to all devotees, he finally reached the Tirumala hills, dotted with many flowing waterfalls. Arjuna was an exemplary, an ultimate devotee. That is why Villiputharar says: "He was the ultimate in Bhakti and hence headed towards South India known to grant boons".

Arjuna says "I next reached south Pandya country and married Chitrangadha and stayed with her for some time. Chitrangadha and I had a son called Babruvahanan" Kattiyakaaran says "You had another son there!" The next romantic encounter that Arjuna has on his one year pilgrimage is with Chitrangada.

Chitrangada, in the Mahabharata, is described as the Manipura Princess whereas in Villibharatham she is described as the Princess of the Pandya kingdom whom Arjuna meets at Madurai. Chitrangada, in the Tamil renditions is also not a warrior princess. But the resonances of the Mahabharata depiction of Chitrangada can be found in another Tamil Koothu called Alli-Arjuna.

He stood there bewitched to be in the delightful hug of the slender lady, having been mesmerised by her green coloured complexion, her red lips, white teeth, eyes sharp as poisoned arrows, nectar sweet talk, shy countenance, with voluptuous bosoms straining against the tied upper garment and her slender waist. He was just maddened by her beauty.

Arjuna stood in front of the beautiful lady, and she too looked at him. She did not know who he was, and he did not know who she was, but the moment they saw each other, they lost their hearts to the other. They consummated their love by mutual consent. Only after that she asked him: "Who are you"? And he replied "I am Arjuna". She felt happy as soon as she heard the name Arjuna! She was delighted that Arjuna was going to be her husband. Arjuna takes leave

saying “Lady, I will come and meet your father tomorrow and formally ask for your hand in marriage”

Other than Chitrangada, being a Pandya princess and also not being described as a warrior princess, the Villibharatham narrative is faithful to the Mahabharata rendition of the story. A son, Babruvahana is born to them who is adopted by his maternal grandfather as his heir. Chitrangada’s father tells Arjuna “If my daughter were to give birth to a son, you should give that boy to me,” he said. Why did he ask this?

There was once my ancestor called Prapanjana Pandyan who was childless, and he performed Tapas to Shiva to be blessed with children. By oversight, when he was performing the Puja he offering only one kind of flower to his deity. There are four kinds of flowers, flowers from the plants, from creepers, from trees and from water. As he had used only one kind of flower, Shiva blessed him saying only one progeny would be born in his family in each generation. He says that everyone in his dynasty had a son, but he had only a daughter. Hence if his family line were to continue, it can be only through Arjuna. Hence you should not claim the son born to my daughter, but rather give him to me, the king told Arjuna. Babruvahana is the only warrior who defeats his own father Arjuna, when Dharmaraja finally performs the Ashwamedha Yagna. There is also a detailed description of Arjuna’s travels in the south, which stylistically does not match with the rest of the narrative making one suspect that it might be a later day interpolation.

Arjuna says “In the forests of Trikuta hill there was an elephant named Gajendra who was frolicking with a thousand female elephants. At the base of the hill was a beautiful lake which had a lot of lotus flowers in bloom and Gajendra notices that one of the lotuses was golden in colour” Kattiyakaaran says “A golden lotus flower was there!” Arjuna says “This elephant Gajendra thought that the golden lotus instead of being in the pond would be nice if it were to be on the feet of the divine Narayana and went to fetch it. Gajendra stepped into the lake to pluck the lotus not knowing that a crocodile that was guarding it from being plucked” Kattiyakaaran says “A crocodile was guarding the lotus!” Arjuna says “The elephant stepped into the lake to pluck the golden lotus with its trunk!” Kattiyakaaran “It plucked the lotus!” Arjuna asks “Will the crocodile keep quiet? It got angry and grabbed the elephant by its legs!” Kattiyakaaran says “The crocodile grabbed its legs!” Arjuna says “That’s what I said!” Arjuna says “The fight between the elephant and the crocodile went on for ages and the elephant could not escape!” Arjuna “Finally when the elephant was about to drown in the water, it invoked Vishnu by saying “Oh God, Govinda, will you not come and save me?” Arjuna asks “Did you know how Vishnu arrived?” Kattiyakaaran asks “How?” Arjuna says “With his weapons the sacred conch and bearing the discus in his hand, Vishnu came seated on his mount the Eagle Garuda!”

The divine Vishnu came on the Garuda mount with the conch and the chakra in hand, and threw the discus to kill the crocodile and saved the elephant Gajendra! That is when the Vishnu asked “Gajendra, you have been fighting the crocodile for ages! You did not call me when your fight started, so why did you invoke me today?” Gajendra replied “Oh Great One! I was not worried about losing my life. But I was worried that the lotus I plucked may not reach your feet that is the reason why I invoked you in person!”

One narrative, important in Vaishnava traditions finds a prominent place in Villibharatham. In this a Pandya king called Indradyumna had been cursed by Rishi Agastya to becoming an elephant and a Gandharva King called Huhu was cursed by another Rishi to becoming a crocodile. As both kings repented the actions that brought upon the curse on them, they were assured that they would be liberated from their curse by Vishnu.

This narrative of the elephant and the crocodile is also one of the beginning narratives of the Pallava memory of the port city, Mamallapuram. In this narrative, King Mahendravarman, who had failed in his duties as a king, of feeding and protecting his people, was cursed to being a crocodile. His son Narasimhavarman by recapturing Kanchipuram from the Chalukyas frees his father from his curse. Mahendravarman is liberated from his crocodile form when he grabs the legs of a devotee of Vishnu, Pundarika. The Sthalapurana of Mamallapuram records this narrative as being said by the crocodile turned king to Pundarika and is one narrative of the sculptures at Mamallapuram

Enroute, on the southern shore were five sacred waters, Agastya, Soubatra, Karandama, Pauloma, and Bharadwaja tirthas. When Arjuna went to enter the waters, those around there warned him by saying “Do not go down in the waters, there is a crocodile waiting” Not listening to the warnings, he got down, and the crocodile caught his leg. Arjuna pulled the crocodile and flung it outside water. Ulupi had given Arjuna a boon that there would be no danger to him from the aquatic animals. When the crocodile was flung on the ground, it took a female form, stood there with folded hands. Arjuna asked “Who are you”? She said “Arjuna! I am Varkai, we have been waiting ages here for someone to release us from our curse and have grabbed many legs. But, now when I grabbed your legs, my curse has been lifted. Please go to the other four tanks also and release my sisters there”, she said. He did that, and released all the five from their curse.

Villibharatham keeps constantly invoking the Ramayana while it invokes the Mahabharata. The storytellers in this festival also sing a lot of verses of the fourteenth century poet/saint Arunagirinathar. A lot of his poems end with the phrase 'Maayon Maruga' linking Murugan as the nephew of Vishnu, as he was the son of Vishnu's sister Durga

In the previous session of storytelling of the 'Bending of the Bow' where Arjuna wins Draupadi's hand in marriage, Mani Vaasagan had left a story incomplete. In this session he completed the story, again linking both the Epics together. Villibharatham describes the approach of various kings to bend the magical bow Kindhooram and win Draupadi's hand in marriage. When it describes Karna's walk towards the bow, it says that Karna resembled Ravana when he went to lift the abode of Shiva, Mount Kailasa.

Ravana is just able to lift it slightly and Shiva presses down on the mountain, humbling Ravana in the process. A humbled Ravana sings in praise of his deity which pleases Shiva. Shiva gifts Ravana a representation of his most powerful manifestation, the Atma Linga to install in Sri Lanka. With this powerful protection from Shiva, both Lanka and Ravana would become indestructible. Now it becomes the responsibility of all the Devas to ensure that Ravana does not install the Atma Linga in Lanka as Rama would be unable to kill Ravana with this powerful protection

When the King of the Devas Indra saw Shiva gifting the Atma Linga he immediately went to Ganesha and said "Swami, your father has given away the Atma Linga". If he took the Atma Linga and kept in Lanka, no one can destroy Lanka. It would be big trouble. Ganesha asked him not to worry. Vinayaka invoked Varuna, the deity of the waters and asked him to get into Ravana's urinary bladder.

Ravana was troubled with a swollen bladder and cannot urinate with the Linga in hand. And he does not know what to do. Shiva had instructed him not to put it down before reaching Lanka saying "Wherever it is laid, it would take root there" In an uncomfortable situation where neither could he place the Linga on the ground, nor could he urinate, Ravana sees running past him Vinayaka in disguise as a Brahmin boy. Ravana calls out to him "Little boy, come here, please hold this for a few minutes" The little boy replied "Ten-headed man, I am in a hurry",

Ravana said “I am also in a hurry, that is why I am requesting you to hold this” “Oh Ten Headed Man! I will count one to three and you should return by then! Ravana accepted this condition, handed over the Linga to the boy and went into the shade to answer nature’s call, Ganesha began his countdown by saying “Ten-headed Man, one, Ten-headed Man two, Ten-headed Man Three and after counting upto three he placed the Linga on the ground and left.

When Ravana finished answering nature’s call, washed and returned he saw the Linga was lying on the ground. He tried lifting it, the ten-headed Ravana, with his twenty hands and all his strength couldn’t lift.

The one who had lifted Kailasa could not lift the Linga even with his utmost effort and the Linga got squashed into the shape of a cow’s ear. Since it couldn’t be lifted even by the strongest, the Linga was called Mahabaleshwara, and the place Gokarnam. Arjuna ended his pilgrimage with Gokarnam. Ravana is duped by Varuna and Ganesha into placing the Atma Linga on the ground before he reaches Lanka. Once the Atma Linga is placed on the ground it becomes rooted and even the powerful Ravana cannot lift it up again.

Arjuna, in this rendition, reaches ‘Gokarna’ the place where Ravana had placed the Atma Linga and the Villibharatham narrative forks back into the Mahabharata again. Stories left unfinished in one session, and continued later in another session, is a characteristic feature of this performance tradition. This again serves to invoke the memory of the audiences. By remembering the Mahabharata, they also remember the Ramayana, creating a space to remember other memory narratives, either of collective or individual.

Shakuni sings “I am the gold of the Gandhara Kingdom! I am also a lion in creating distrust and enmity! I am a Lion, a lion! I scheme and think up cunning plots to cause the ruin of those who insult me

Guard, do you know how many of us were born to Gandhara king Subedha and Sowbhagyavati?” Kattiyakaaran asks “How many of you were born?” Shakuni says “A hundred and four sons!” Kattiyakaaran asks “Hundred and four sons? Any extra children? Shakuni continues “Other than us, only one daughter, Gandhari was also born. I was the eldest of the hundred and five of us!” Shakuni announces his name triumphantly “My name is Sha – Ku – Ni! Shakuni says “And if you remove the syllable ‘Ku’ in the middle, I will be Sani, the dark planet

Saturn spelling doom to my enemies!” Kattiyakkaran asks “To whom do you mean destruction? Shakuni says”I have come as Shani to that Duryodhana!”

In the Mahabharata, King Subedha, of the Gandhara kingdom is duped into offering his daughter to the blind King Dhritarashtra. When he realises that he had been duped he tries to stop the wedding but is killed along with his 103 sons by Bhishma, who abducts daughter Gandhari for Dhritarashtra to wed. For some reason, Bhishma does not kill the hundred and fourth son of King Subedha, who also accompanies his sister Gandhari to Hastinapura with one single intention in his mind. Shakuni wants revenge for the killing of his father and his brothers and his revenge would only be complete with the complete destruction of the Kaurava clan. Shakuni waits patiently to set his plan of revenge in motion and as a first step gains the utter trust of Duryodhana and his ninety nine brothers.

Shakuni says “That idiot Duryodhana does not know how steadfast I am in my intentions! He does not know really know me, the gold of the Gandhara Kingdom!

In Koothu, the youngest brother of Duryodhana, Vikarna knows Shakuni’s real intentions and warns his brother against trusting their uncle, but his warnings fall on deaf ears. Vikarna, as his name suggests is also a ‘double’ of Karna in this narrative. Only important characters in the Koothu are given both an elaborate costume and a stage entry song which underlines their importance. In this Koothu, Vikarna enters with a stage entry song and his implicit opponent is Karna. Vikarna tells Duryodhana “Do not listen to the words of uncle Shakuni! Do not lose your mind to his venom! Do no get trapped in his web of deceit! Do not let your mind believe his venom!

Vikarna was also the only brother of Duryodhana who had objected to the Kaurava’s plan of burning the Pandavas alive in the Lacquer Palace. He also knows that Subhadra, the sister of Balarama and Krishna was in love with Arjuna and tries to dissuade his brother in his attempt to marry Subhadra. An angry Duryodhana expels Vikarna from his court disowning him as his brother.

Vikarna says “Elder brother I can only see bad omens and nothing good can result! Please think about your desire, elder brother!” “The curse of the Pandavas is powerful and when I try to steer you on the right path, you are getting angry and pushing me away!” Duryodhana says “Enough

of your unwanted advice, get out of my court, I am going to getting married and I disown you as my brother! Vikarna continues “Uncle Sakuni has come like the dark Shani to destroy us! This kingdom will go to waste Elder brother if you listen to our deceitful, useless Uncle!, This kingdom will be totally destroyed because of him!” “Elder Brother our entire dynasty will be destroyed by this useless Shakuni!” Angry Duryodhana asks Vikarna “Get out of my court!

Duryodhana, sends his father’s elder brother Vidura to Dwarka to ask for Subhadra’s hand in marriage for Duryodhana from her brother Balarama. While Duryodhana knows that Balarama would welcome this proposal he also knows that Krishna would only support the marriage of his sister Subhadra, to the man whom she loved, Arjuna.

Duryodhana to Vidura “Listen to the reason why you were called for, my father’s younger brother! Chorus sings “Please listen to the reason why you were called!” Duryodhana sings “Listen to why you were called to the court of the great Chandra Vamsa kings, who wear embellished crowns. The sister of Krishna, the creator of chaos, Subhadra, the beautiful Subhadra! I have fallen in love with her and unable to sleep! I want to get married to her! You please go to Dwarka and express my desire to both Krishna and his elder brother Balarama. Please get both Krishna and his elder brother Balarama’s consent for this marriage and finalise the engagement! Please return after finalising our engagement! I trust you will get their consent, please leave to Dwarka immediately! Chorus sings “Please listen to the reason you were summoned to this court!”

Balarama is delighted with Duryodhana’s proposal for Subhadra as he had intended to get his sister married to one of the hundred and five brothers of the Lunar Dynasty. He accepts Vidura’s proposal on behalf of Duryodhana but says that for the alliance to be formalised he would also need the consent of his brother Krishna.

At this point, the Kattiyaakaran or the Sutradhar interrupts by chanting ‘Govinda! Govinda!’ While Govinda is one of the names of Krishna, what the Kattiyakaan is insinuating is that the proposal of Duryodhana was as good as rejected. In colloquial humorous parlance, when you say that Govinda will decide and the other person chants ‘Govinda! Govinda!’ that is the end of the matter, or the decision will not go in your favour

Balarama tells Vidura “I have no objection giving my sister in marriage to your brother’s son!” Vidura says “I am happy, and then shall we arrange for the engagement ceremony?” Balarama says “If I have to arrange the engagement, I have a condition to make” Vidura asks “What is the condition?” Balarama says “But, I do not know what my younger brother’s opinion is on this. I have to first consult with him” Kattiyakaaran mocks saying- “Govinda Govinda!” Balarama says “Only after consulting my younger brother can we fix the engagement” Kattiyakaaran says “Govinda Govinda”

The crux of this Koothu, in a sense is the power dynamics between the brothers Balarama and Krishna.

Vishnu who was moved by Adishesha’s unwavering devotion to him as Lakshmana had promised him that in their next incarnation he would serve Adishesha in the same way as he had been served by Adishesha as Lakshmana. This is the reason the tradition gives for Krishna’s incarnation as the younger brother of Adishesha, Balarama. But Krishna being a natural mischievous prankster, the equation between the brothers becomes hilarious. Krishna, while pretending to be the dutiful, obedient younger brother, would be wilful and steer his brother on a path which the elder would not have naturally chosen

Krishna comes to meet Balarama “Elder brother, dearest elder brother, what was the reason for summoning me? Balarama replies “Younger brother, Kanna, I called you to ask you about something” Krishna replies “I am your younger brother and will do whatever you ask of me!” Balarama replies “I am thinking of arranging the marriage of our sister Subhadra” Krishna replies “That is good and what you say is right and it must be done soon. Who is the right groom for our sister Subhadra?” Balarama “Vidura came asking for Subhadra’s hand for Duriyan” Krishna says “Great!” Balarama”Younger brother Krishna! Today Vidura came in haste from Hastinapura!” Kattiyakaaran asks “Why?” Balarama says “When I asked him the reason, he said, Balarama! You have to give your sister Subhadra in marriage to my brother’s son” Kattiyakaaran says “I see, he asked for your sister’s hand! So what did you say?” Balarama says ‘Of course I said yes! Balarama says “I have nursed this desire to get Subhdra married to one of the hundred and five princes of the Kuru Dynasty. Kattiyakaaran clarifies “The hundred Kaurava princes or the five Pandava Princes!” Balarama says yes. Balarama says “I had intended to get my sister married to one of the hundred and five princes and when Vidura asked, I promptly agreed!” Krishna says “Elder brother! I am also happy with your decision and consent truthfully (but he says“a sathyam” which means- untruthfully)

Krishna also says that he is in agreement with his brother's desire to get their sister married to the son of the elder brother of Vidura. Both Pandu and Dhritarashtra are the elder brothers of Vidura and Krishna words his agreement ambiguously by not naming the name of the groom whom his sister is to wed. Krishna knows that Subhadra was in love with Arjuna, while Balarama wants to arrange her wedding with Duryodhana. Now Krishna's task is to get his elder brother to consent to their sister's marriage to the man she loved. Krishna tells Vidura "Sir, my brother and I have promised to get our sister married to your brother's son!"

The Kattiyakaaran who has been listening to Krishna's evasive replies asks him directly as to whom he had given consent to get married to their sister. Krishna laughs and says that his brother should have actually asked the question posed by the Kattiyakaaran. Krishna makes his intentions clear to the Kattiyakaaran and the rest of the narrative is about how Krishna gets his elder brother to agree to their sister's desire

Krishna sings "The most suited groom for my sister is the one whose red hand wields the Gandiva bow!" Chorus sings "The most suited groom for my sister is the one whose red hand wields the Gandiva bow!" Krishna says "It is only the red handed wielder of the Gandiva, Parthiban! The one praised by the entire world who is on pilgrimage, the victorious Dhananjayan! Vijayan!" Chorus sings "It is only the red handed wielder of the Gandiva, Parthiban! The one praised by the entire world who is on pilgrimage"

Krishna tells Kattiyakaaran "Elder brother wants Subhadhra to wed Duryodhana, has made the engagement plans with Vidura. I am not in favour of giving my sister Subhadhra in marriage to the mindless Duryodhana, I prefer my aunt's son, Arjuna, the handsome famous archer, as the most suitable groom for my sister!"

What is interesting here is how the narrative of the Great War is processed in this village tradition. Krishna and Balarama, while being divinities are also brothers with their own peculiar interpersonal equation. The audiences can relate to this as it might resemble equation between brothers either in their own family or of a family in their village.

Subhadhra tells Kattiyakaaran "I want to marry Parthibha and be praised by the world as the wife of the sweet talker Arjuna!" She says "Do you know the middle one among the Pandavas? It is Arjuna; I have lost my heart to!"

And when Krishna, who knows of Subhadra's love for Arjuna, teases her by saying that her marriage to Duryodhana had been arranged it might resonate with the bantering between siblings the audiences have seen in their own family. The narrative of the Great War is grounded in the here and now and processed by the village audiences through their own interpersonal equations with their family and kinsmen.

Krishna says "Sister Subhadra, do you know who is going to be your groom? A tearful Subhadra asks "Who is it elder brother?" Krishna teases her by saying "The Great King of Hastinapura, Duryodhana is going to be your husband!" Subhadra wails. Subhadra says "If you think that I would consent to marry the vain Duryodhana instead of Vijayan you are mistaken" I will tell you very clearly that I will give up my life, to be cursed by all rather than marry the vain Duryodhana

Krishna says "Dear Sister do not worry! I am thinking of ways to overcome the consent given by our conch coloured and strong brother. Dear sister! Listen, in grandeur that would take even Vidura by surprise I will get you married to Arjuna! I will accomplish this with fun, games and entertainment! Please do not tell anyone of my plans as you know our elder brother's fierce temper! Explain this to your friends, the fish-eyed Subhadra! Be prepared for my plan! Let some time pass and let our brother carry on with his work

Krishna who is aware of Arjuna's exploits on his supposed 'pilgrimage' questions his love for his sister. The bantering which Krishna indulged with Subhadra continues with Krishna teasing Arjuna in this scene

Krishna teases Arjuna "Is it appropriate for me to speak about your exploits on your pilgrimage dear friend of mine? You romanced the daughter of the king of Nagas who came to bathe in the river! Then you reached Madurai and romanced Chitrangada! I am tired of your romantic escapades! Enough of this, is it even appropriate of you to behave thus? Now is it right for you to ask me to cheat the luxurious king Duryodhana for you to get married to my sister? An angry Arjuna protests "Do not mock me! Why are you laughing at my despair?

Arjuna pleads with Krishna to stop the marriage between Duryodhana and Subhadra and when Krishna pretends to be helpless, he falls at Krishna's feet asking him to help his cause. The audiences would of course know that Krishna intends to get his sister Subhadra married to the man she loved. The interaction between Arjuna and Krishna would be amusing in the village context where the hero, Arjuna in this Koothu is portrayed as being as fallible as any unsure young man

One of the reasons given by many participants as to why the festival was so popular was because the Mahabharata, they said, was useful in understanding the world. One participant, Venkatesan, said that in these agrarian villages most men over fifty would not have any formal education as they would have been working in the fields with their fathers from quite a young age. Listening to the Mahabharata, he said, was the only education they had access to where they could both understand the world and themselves. Every narrative in the Epic would have some resonances with an occurrences in the village itself and as the Epic says

‘All narratives known to mankind can be found here; a narrative that is not found here will not be found nowhere’

Krishna tells Arjuna “We have already given our consent to Subhadhra’s marriage to Duriyan [Duryodhana] so listen, it’s over! Arjuna pleads by physical acts of atonement “Who has more right to marry Subhadhra than me, her own aunt’s son?”

Krishna finally relents and says “Arjuna, I have no choice but to cheat my brother to help you get married to my sister! That is okay, but you have to continue to be in your disguise as an ascetic longer! Tomorrow all of us will come here for our annual celebrations! Your acting as an ascetic should be good enough to convince my brother of your saintliness! He said, “I will ensure that you are taken back with us to our kingdom and I will see that you get married to my sister!”

The next day before dawn, people of Dwaraka gathered on the hillock on the command of Krishna to celebrate the festival for rains, to Indra. Balarama wearer of fragrant garlands came along with the Yadava, Bhosa clans, and other kings. Subhadra of tender breasts and a face green in complexion also arrived, surrounded by her friends.

Krishna finally relents and declares his real intention of stopping this proposed marriage between Subhadra and Duryodhana. He says for that he has to trick his impetuous elder brother into accepting the marriage of Subhadra with Arjuna he reveals to Arjuna what he intends to do.

Krishna says “Brother-in-law, do not lose heart! It is good that you have come here! Brother-in-law do not lose heart! It is good that I am here for you! I will ensure that your marriage to Subhadra succeeds. My plans will not work if people realise that you are Arjuna, so please stay in this ascetic disguise longer. Brother-in-law do not lose heart!

Krishna tells Kattiyakaaran “I do not want my sister to get married to the idiot Duryodhana! That is why I tested my brother-in-law, Arjuna’s sincerity! Kattiyakaaran says”You only want her to get married to Arjuna!” Krishna says “I will see that Subhadra gets married to Arjuna!” Krishna tells Arjuna “It is good that you have come disguised as an ascetic. Please sit under a Banyan tree and keep chanting the five syllable Mantra of ‘Om Namō Shivaya’

The setting for Krishna’s plot is the annual festival of the Yadavas in honour of the King of the Devas, Indra who was also the deity of thunder, lightning and rains. Krishna who knows his brother quite well asks Arjuna to remain in disguise for a few days longer and camp in the region where the Yadavas would be celebrating their festival.

Balarama, who gets information that a holy man was visiting the district, wants to visit him not knowing that it was Arjuna in disguise. Krishna pretends to dissuade his brother by saying that nowadays most ‘holy men’ are really fakes knowing fully well that his stubborn brother would now insist on meeting this holy man. Krishna also says that to convince Balarama that Arjuna was really a holy man he would have to insult Arjuna and beat him up in front of his brother. Balarama who he knows likes to take up contradictory positions to his brother would immediately take up cudgels on Arjuna’s behalf and half the battle would be won! The news of the ascetics visit reached Balarama.

He told Krishna “It seems an ascetic has come to the place where we celebrate Indra’s festival! They say that seeing a holy ascetic brings salvation. It seems to be our good fortune that a holy man has come here! Come, let us go and see him”, he said. Immediately Kannan replied: “Elder brother, these days we cannot believe people who call themselves “Holy Men” and we do not know if he is a real holy man or a fake Swami!” and says he does not want to meet him! Krishna knows that if he says ‘no,’ then Balarama will definitely do the exact opposite! That is the peculiar relationship the brothers had!

Krishna instructs Arjuna “Brother-in-law, I will come with my brother and when I come I will beat you up and kick you. Arjuna says “I do not care whether you bring your brother or not, but please bring your sister” Krishna irritatedly says “First listen to what I am saying carefully! I will beat you up in front of my brother. Kattiyakaaran says “I will beat with a lathi” Krishna says “You must bear the blows to convince my brother” Kattiyakaran “I will thrash you to your bones!” “It is necessary to convince my brother that you are really a holy man! So put up with all the thrashing and keep chanting Óm Namó Shivaya’ So sit in this place giving blessings to passers by and keep chanting Shiva’s sacred mantra!”

Balarama walked swiftly towards the ‘holy man’ and the moment he saw him, he prostrated before him in devotion and respect. Arjuna was shivering in fear at his impersonation when he sees that such a senior person was falling at his feet. He thinks that if Balarama knew that he was really Arjuna he would take his plough and thrash the living daylights out of him! Arjuna is trembling in fear, but Krishna signals him from behind his brother asking not to be scared as he was there! With the confidence he gained from Krishna’s assurance, Arjuna picked up Balarama from his feet saying “Son! Please get up! Balarama was moved by this statement of Arjuna and tells his brother “Kanna! I must be really fortunate for this saint to call me his son”. Krishna who is having fun replies “Yes Elder brother, you must have really done a lot of good in life to be called a son by this man”.

Balarama calls his younger brother “Gopala come here and also receive the blessings of this saint!” Balarama says “Kanna look at this ascetic, we can say he is the dweller of the Kailasa! Krishna asks”How does he look?” Balarama says “If he has a third eye, we can call him Shiva himself!” Balarama, impressed with the ‘saint’ thinks that he looks like the three-eyed Shiva, the divine consort of Uma

Arjuna is aghast at the thought of Krishna bowing to him “The Universe bows at your feet. How can you Narayana fall at my feet? From your navel a lotus emerged bearing the creator of the worlds, Brahma and through him you created this entire Universe. How can you fall at my feet?”

Thinking this, Arjuna silently prayed in his heart. Who was the one who really bowed down before the other? It was Arjuna who bowed down while Krishna simply played along. But Arjuna prostrated to Krishna silently in his heart.

Krishna says “Elder brother this is not right! Please do not trust ‘saints’. When you look at them they will keep chanting the sacred names of Shiva! But when you are not looking will grab what they can lay their hands on and run away! Brother you are not doing right by trusting these frauds!”

Krishna as he had promised beats up the fake sage Arjuna who takes all the blows calmly chanting the name of his deity, Shiva. Krishna says “Hey you! Who is this fake, lying ‘saint’ sitting under this Banyan tree?” Kattiyakaran chases Arjuna, threatening to beat him up. Krishna says” I have seen many imposters like you. If I see you in the city I will kill and bury you. Confess if you want to live!”

Arjuna hides behind Balarama to escape from the Kattiyakaran. Balarama, as his brother suspected, gets angry with Krishna for insulting such a venerable sage and falls at the feet of the much younger Arjuna. Balarama also invites the ascetic to stay at their house and asks for Krishna’s opinion on this. Krishna ‘apologises’ to Arjuna “Why should you be troubled anymore by me? Elder brother now the decision you make is up to you!” I tried warning you, but now whatever happens hereafter, you cannot blame it on me! “Why should you be troubled anymore by me? Elder brother now the decision you make is up to you!”

Krishnā also bows to the ‘saint’ I bow down to you venerable sage! Please come and take our sister! Balarama gets offended by what he thinks is Krishna’s ‘slip of the tongue’ “What, take our sister resolutely?” Krishna corrects himself as he had said ‘sister’ instead of ‘residence’ and says “Come, and take up residence in our palace”

Arjuna wants someone to serve him in his stay at Balarama’s residence and refuses both Balarama and Krishna as his attendants. Balarama suggests their sister Subhadra to being Arjuna’s attendant which Arjuna promptly accepts against feigned protests from Krishna. Krishna knows that the more he protested, Balarama would deliberately take up a contrary position not knowing that he was actually falling in line with Krishna’s own plans.

They go and get Subhadra. The moment Arjuna got to know Subhadra is coming he starts chanting mantras loudly. Arjuna starts mischanting mantras loudly. “Woman, come and delight us” Only Kanna understood what he meant. Krishna asked his brother to listen to what the saint was chanting”Elder brother listen to that mantra carefully. He was chanting”Mahadeva come,

delight us”, but when he saw our sister uproaching, he is chanting “Maadhe [meaning- woman] come and delight us” He said do not trust this fake saint. Balarama gets irritated with Krishna and asks “Why are you twisting the words”? Subhadra came and bowed down. “Child”, child it seems! “Whatever you desire in your heart will happen very soon”.

Subhadra would get up early in the morning, bathe and draped in new garments, she would go and wake up the one in sanyasi garb, by singing songs of awakening and would fetch flowers for Arjuna’s puja. She would also provide the kind of food Arjuna desired. Every day, Arjuna had eyes only on Subhadra and devoured the beauty of Subhadra.

The virtuous lady did not know the man who had come to her great home in disguise, the one who has taken the saffron robe as a shield, as if to disguise the hidden sensual fire inside him.

Subhadra who does not know that the ascetic was really Arjuna serves him dutifully. Arjuna has eyes only for Subhadra and does not even glance at Subhadra’s friends who were also serving him. The friends get suspicious of the ascetic and warn Subhadra that there was something not right about the ascetic.

A suspicious Subhadra asks Arjuna “Venerable Sage! Who are you? And where are you from? Arjuna says”I am from Indraprastha!” Arjuna says “Lady Subhadra! My land is Indraprastha!”

Subhadra is happy on hearing the name Indraprastha and enquires about the well being of her aunt Kunti and the Pandavas to which Arjuna says that they were all fine. Subhadra actually wants to know about Arjuna, but she enquires about everyone else excepting Arjuna and the ascetic is disheartened.

Subhadra asks Arjuna “Venerable Sage! Is my aunt doing well? Arjuna replies”She is well as she is finally the Queen Mother!” Subhadra asks “Is Uncle Dharma doing well? Arjuna irritately replies “Yes, he is the King and also is fine!” Subhadra persists “Is Uncle Bhima doing fine? Is Nakula Uncle doing well? Arjuna replies curtly’ ”Yes they are all fine” Subhadra again asks “Is Uncle Sahadevan fine? An irritated Arjuna says”Yes, he is also fine” Subhadra says “Sage, when I enquired about Aunt Kunti and Uncle Dharma and Bhima you replied happily. But, why did your face fall when I asked about Uncles Nakula and Sahadeva?” Arjuna shamelessly asks

Subhadhra “Why did you leave out the name of the middle brother Arjuna?” When she heard the name Arjuna, her face turned red like a sindoor, trembling, started sweating. The friend standing next to her stated “She did not ask about Arjuna Uncle as he was already present here!” Arjuna was shocked whether the friend had guessed his true identity and he was scared. And he thought that “The great Balarama himself has been prostrating at my feet every day, but this simple girl found out my identity!” The friend allays his fears by saying “I meant that Arjuna is ever present in Subhadhra’s heart!”

Arjuna asks “Lady Subhadra, I have a doubt! You asked about the well being of the four brothers Dharma, Bhima, Nakula, Sahadeva and then asked how are the five doing? Why did you forget one name there? Subhadhra says “I left out Arjuna as he is the one to whom I am going to get married! Arjuna says”I am that Arjuna!”

Arjuna removes his disguise and reveals to a delighted Subhadra that he was actually Arjuna. Her friends run and report the matter to Yashodha who is worried as to what would happen if her eldest son Balarama got to know of it. Krishna reassures her by saying that as he could not directly oppose his elder brother Balarama he had staged all this drama to get Balarama’s consent for Subhadhra marrying the man she loved, Arjuna.

Krishna asks Yashoda “What else could I do mother? You want Arjuna as your son-in-law; Subhadra and Arjuna also love each other! I could not stand and allow Balarama’s unjust desire to arrange Subhadra’s marriage to Duryodhana as it would be like offering a beautiful parrot as prey to a cat. I was not able to openly oppose him which is why I had to play some games! Everything will finally be resolved! Do not worry!” With Subhadra’s friends, and his mother knowing of the ascetic’s real identity, Krishna knows that soon Balarama will also know of his deception. So he quietly arranges a simple wedding ceremony for Subhadra and Arjuna and asks them to leave before Balarama could come

### The marriage of Subhadhra to Arjuna

Krishna says “Sister Subhadhra, and brother-in-law Arjuna, I will give you a chariot. Let Subhadra drive it and both of you leave! I will manage elder brother’s anger! More importantly, he asks Subhadra to be the charioteer so that his brother could realise that it was not Arjuna who

was eloping with Subhadra but rather Subhadra who was eloping with Arjuna. The image of Subhadra as the charioteer of Arjuna is an iconic image of this narrative in the Mahabharata

Even before the incarnation of Vishnu could explain what had happened, the blue robed Balarama, the king of the Yadavas, marched with four kinds of armies to fight against Arjuna whose valour even the god of death would fear.

Balarama says angrily “Kanna let our forces rise, let us see who wins, whether it is Arjuna’s bow or me with my plough! And see if he really has courage or the power! Who is he trying to play games with me? Let our forces march. All of them leave and Krishna says “Elder brother, just look at Arjuna’s arrogance! We should not allow him to get away! I kept repeating to you that he did not look an ascetic. I also asked you not to send Subhadra to serve him, but you did not listen!” Balarama says “Younger brother! I will not spare him”. The forces march on and Arjuna seeing them starts shooting arrows. Subhadra pleads with Arjuna “Please do not shoot at them! They are all my relatives”. Arjuna says “Subhadra, I am not shooting at them, they are the ones doing trying to harm me! All I am doing is just warding off their arrows to prevent us from getting injured”.

Krishna points out that it was not Arjuna who was driving away Subhadra, but rather the other way around. As the armies near Arjuna’s chariot, they see that it is Subhadra who is driving the chariot with Arjuna as the passenger! Krishna says “Elder brother see carefully! Is Arjuna driving the chariot or is it Subhadra?” Balarama is puzzled and says “What is this? It looks like our sister is herself driving the chariot”. Krishna asks “When the actual faults are of our own making, what is the point of fighting with Arjuna”? That is why Krishna asked Subhadra to drive the chariot. The moment Balarama sees this, his anger subsides. Krishna placates Balarama and owns up to his own role in this entire drama.

Krishna says “Why are you angry with Arjuna? All that happened was because of me! Ignore it as if you are not even aware of all the drama that I caused! Let there be no enmity, please bear with me dear elder brother! Elder brother when you and Vidura agreed about Subhadra’s engagement, I wanted to find out our sister Subhadra’s wish. She said that she will only marry our aunt’s son Arjuna or else was prepared to give up her life! It is I who made Arjuna come here in disguise as an ascetic. It was I who performed the marriage of Arjuna with our sister! I am responsible for all that happened!

An angry Balarama abuses Krishna “You useless fellow! You did all the mischief and passed the blame on me. I do not want to see your face! Krishna laments “Nobody appreciates the good I have done! You wanted her to get married to the person of your choice and I performed the marriage to the person she chose! But our dear sister wants her dowry only from your hands!” Balarama says “When she got married without my knowledge, I do not want to ever see her face again!” Krishna placates Balarama “Elder brother calm down” He asks the Kattiyakaaran to bring the ‘dowry’ for Balarama to carry. Balarama leaves to Indraprastha to meet Dharmaraja bearing the wedding gifts, a mat, a pot and a plastic chair for Subhadhra and Arjuna. He requests Balarama to go to Indraprastha as a conciliatory gesture and bless the young couple. He requests Balarama to go to Indraprastha as a conciliatory gesture and bless the young couple. A mollified Balarama leaves to Indraprastha

Balarama tells an apologetic Dharmaraja, “Dharma! There is no need for you to ask for forgiveness. If my brother was not making mischief, your brother would have also behaved well! My brother gave that space, and your brother just played along! But what rankles me most is that Arjuna was sitting in the pose of an ascetic and believing that he was a genuine ascetic, I fell at his feet every day! He kept saying “Son, rise up” “Son, rise up” That added insult to injury! Bhima started laughing when he heard that. “Why are you laughing?” Balarama asked. “What is wrong in falling at Arjuna’s feet if you wanted a groom like our handsome and brilliant warrior, Arjuna as the son-in-law of your family?”

That is when even anger personified Balarama lightened up and laughed. Arjuna came there, fell at his feet, and Balarama blessed him. The real Bharatham only begins now. The mischief and games of Krishna are going to start happening from now on.

In Kazhiyur, the main village that we did our documentation, the next play ‘Rajasuya Yagam’ was not performed as the Koothu was found to be too violent. The Mahabharata according to the storytellers actually begins with this Koothu and we shot this Koothu in another village, Ayyampettai with the same Renukambal Kattaikoothu Mandram. The cycle of violence which begins in the Koothu ‘Rajasuya Yagam’ can only be resolved in the final encounter between the Pandavas and the Kauravas at Kurukshetra.