

Performance Traditions of the Mahabharata in Tamil Nadu

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Lecture 12

Rajasuya Yaagam

Dhritarashtra says

“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 Kazhiyur, the main village we did our documentation, the important Koothu called ‘Rajasuya Yagam’ has traditionally not been performed. The Chettiyar community who were in charge of the sponsorship of the third days event felt that the narrative of the Koothu was too violent to be performed in their village. So a light hearted romantic comedy from the Mahabharata, popular in the villages was performed instead. This was a koothu called ‘Sundari Kalyanam’, popular all over South India, based on which an extremely popular Tamil/Telugu film of the 1950’s called ‘Maya Bazaar’ had been made. The storytellers though would narrate the story of Rajasuya Yagam as it would be impossible to narrate the rest of the Epic without narrating the decisive moments in this dramatic story. For us also, it was impossible to present the Mahabharata performances without this Koothu and we shot the Koothu later in a nearby village called Ayyampettai with the same Koothu troupe which had performed at Kazhiyur.

The rendition of the same narrative was different in both the Koothu and the storytelling sessions, and there was a strong reason for it. In the Bharatham sessions, the narrative began with the burning of the Khandava forest, setting the tone for the ominous events set to follow. The Koothu narrative however began on an emotional first person narrative of a King called Brihadratha. King Brihadratha, though blessed with all the wealth in the world, did not have any children. After intense Tapas, a son was born to him called Jarasandha, who is a crucial character in this Koothu Rajasuya Yagam

Brihadratha laments “My clan, which has flourished for several generations now has no way to continue. Is it because of my fault?” Chorus sings “My clan, which has flourished for several generations now has no way to continue. Is it because of my fault?” Brihadratha cries “When I die, there is none to offer water and sesame, and perform my funeral rites. I do not have a son. Is it my Karma?” Chorus sings “When I die, there is none to offer water and sesame, and perform my funeral rites. I do not have a son. Is it my Karma?”

In the Koothu, Brihadratha’s lament on not having a son to perform his funeral rites after his death sets the emotional register framing the narrative of this Koothu. The question of whether it was just fate or the consequences of his own actions which resulted in his current predicament is again posed before the audience. This is a recurrent question posed in the various Koothu enactments by the main character lamenting to the audience about his or her predicament. As the audiences would already know the story, they would know that sometimes it was forces beyond the characters control which led to it’s current predicament while in others, it was the characters own action which led them to the position they find themselves in. What the audiences are presented with, are multiple archetypes to engage with the world. Some of the archetypes presented would resonate, at least partially, with their own experiences in life. The sheer duration of the festival spread over over twenty days with performances stretching for about twenty hours a day, would enable an introspective participation for individual members of the audience, depending on their own level of attentiveness.

That Jarasandan’s father, his name was Brihadrathan. He had married two princesses from the Kashi country, had all the riches, but he did not have children.

Brhadrathan laments “My ministers, I do not have a son to rule over this house! Though I have everything else a person could want!” Brihadratha says “I have no one to perform my funeral rites, to offer sesame and water after my death. Oh! I do not have a son. Is it due to the sins I committed?”

A sad Brihadratha, hands over the reins of his government to his ministers and departs to the forest to perform Tapas for the birth of a son. In the forest he meets a Rishi, Chanda Koushika who gives the King a magic fruit to give to his wife. Brihadratha, of course forgets to mention to the Rishi that he had two wives and the entire narrative is reprocessed by the village audiences as a dilemma of a man married to two women. As he was passing through the forest he met a Rishi called Chandakaushikan. He fell at his feet and conveyed his sorrow over not having a son,

instantly a magic mango fruit manifested in the Rishi's hands. The Rishi gave it to Brihadrathan and asked him to give it to his wife and a child will be born to her

Rishi Chandakoushika says "I will give you a red mango by the grace of Shiva! I will give you a red mango by the grace of Shiva! You will have a son!" Brihadratha says "O great Rishi! If you shall do so, it would be a great blessing to me!" The Rishi says "I will give you a red mango by the grace of Shiva!" A pleased Brihadratha says "O great Rishi! If you shall do so, it would be a great blessing to me!" When the fruit was taken to the wives, the eldest one wanted to have it. The younger one said she wanted to have it. Both of them are adamant about having it for themselves. The elder one says, she has the claim to it being the eldest.

Younger one says, "what if you are the eldest, I am the favourite wife." Brihadratha to his wives "My dear wives! Both of you please come to partake this magic mango fruit!" Chorus "My dear wives! Both of you please come to partake this magic mango fruit!" Brihadratha to his wives "My dear wives! Both of you please come to partake this magic mango fruit!"

Chorus "My dear wives! Both of you please come to partake this magic mango fruit!" Brihadratha says "Dear wives! A great Rishi graciously gave this fruit, so dear wives partake this fruit joyously!"

In Koothu, Brihadrathan gives the fruit to his two wives asking them to decide as to who gets to eat the magic fruit. He finds himself in a dilemma when his wives start fighting between themselves as to who had more right to the fruit. Brihadrathan thought that if he had known that would be trouble like this, he would have asked for two fruits. But, both of them were adamant to eat that fruit themselves! He thought how to solve the problem, and cut the mango into two pieces, offered both of them one half each. As a result of this, both of them conceived at the same time went into labour and both of them deliver a child at the same time. A child was born to them the same way as the mango was split, as two halves, each with one hand, one leg, one ear and one eye.

A shocked Brihadrathan says "Oh God! These children are born in half as lifeless bodies. Why did this happen? "Is it the result of my cutting the mango into two halves?" Chorus "Is it the result of my cutting the mango into two halves?" Brihadrathan laments "The promise that the Rishi made I would have a son, his promise has proved untrue! Oh God! God, my family deity! Do you not you have any pity on me! Oh Makali?"

He takes the lifeless bodies, and throws them outside the kingdom. A dejected Brihadrahan throws the two stillborn half children in the forest. He laments to his clan deity and also the guardian deity of his kingdom that even she did not seem to have any mercy on his plight. Earlier in the Koothu, the king had banned the worship of local deities and there was no worship at the temple of Jara, the guardian deity of his kingdom in his rule. While the Koothu names Jara as the guardian deity with demonic qualities who roams the forest devouring human flesh, the Bharatham session, calls her a forest Goddess. In Koothu, Jara enters the city on her usual night patrols of the city of which she was the guardian deity. She declares that she is known by many names and she is Kali, the goddess of destruction, she is also Angalamman and she is also the guardian deities of various villages known under various names, and she was also Jara, the guardian deity of Brihadraha's kingdom. On stage a live chicken was offered as a sacrifice to goddess Jara and the actor bit the neck of the chicken signalling the acceptance of the sacrifice and went into a trance.

Hail Govinda! Victory to the Goddess Jara! Victory to the Goddess Jara! She is Jara! She devours human flesh. In half a second circumambulate the world. None are equal to her. She wanders across directions thunderously. She is Jara

One day, the deity, the protector of the town, the Goddess whose name was Jara when she was going around the town, saw the lifeless bodies of the child, and playfully joined the two half babies. The rejoined child was granted life and the baby started crying.

Ohoo, Mother! Can you see how the child is? It is astonishing it has one leg, one eye, one hand the nose in half, everything is half. It has one leg, one eye, one hand the nose in half, everything in half. This child has been born as a miraculous child. When a baby is born, there would have been blood; this baby was born in halves! Seeing the half babies, someone thought them as lifeless and discarded them in the forest! As I was patrolling all the four directions, I saw these half babies in the junction between the four streets! I will bless this child with life!

In Koothu, Jara smells human flesh and discovers the two still born half children. Jara, in a moment of play unites the two symmetrical halves and breathes life into the united whole. The Goddess discovers that the child was the son of Brihadrahan and hands him over to the king. Because Jara had found the child in the intersection of paths in the jungle, or 'sandha', she names

him Jarasandha. Finds out whose baby it is, names it Jarasandhan and hands it to King Brihadrathan.

Brihadrathan exults “You have come to give us sandal, fragrances and great Joy! Goddess Jara! I Bow down at your feet Goddess Jara!” Chorus”You have come to give us sandal, fragrances and great Joy! Goddess Jara! I Bow down at your feet Goddess Jara!” The king asks the child to be taken to his wife. Brihadrathan exults “You have come to give us sandal, fragrances and great Joy! Goddess Jara! I Bow down at your feet Goddess Jara!” Chorus”You have come to give us sandal, fragrances and great Joy! Goddess Jara! I Bow down at your feet Goddess Jara!” Chorus”You have come to give us sandal, fragrances and great Joy! Goddess Jara! I Bow down at your feet Goddess Jara!” Since he got life because of me, name him Jarasandhan. He will be extremely strong. He would be undefeated in war.

A delighted Brihadrathan accepts the child from the goddess, and asks her to enumerate the qualities of his son. Jara says that his son will be a great warrior, unrivalled in physical prowess. She says that while he will honour and respect the Brahmins, he would have a vicious, irrational, dislike to Shatriyas, a Varna to which he also belonged. Saying this, Jara disappears. Jarasandha later in life would capture the kings of eighty six countries, to offer as human sacrifices to the Goddess Kali.

Brihadratha asks Jara “Mother! Please tell me the qualities of my son! ” Jara asks “You want to know his qualities? If he sees a Brahmin, this child would give him great respect! If he sees a Shatriya like you, he will roar like a lion, this child!” Brihadratha asks Jara “Mother, please tell us about his strength?” Jara asks “You want to know about his strength? The animal that I ride is a lion. I have given this child the strength of seven lions!” [Saying this Jara disappears][

He would be kind to Brahmins, intelligent, and skilled in all arts, but he would hate the sight of Shatriyas. As he detested the sight of kings was why he had imprisoned the eighty six kings in his jail.

In Koothu, the scene shifts to the Pandava court where Dharmaraja speaks about how the kingdom of Indraprastha came into being. The simmering conflict between the fraternal cousins the Pandavas and Kauravas which finally led to the Great War now enters centre stage.

Dharmaraja says “When the hundred and five of us were children, we lived together in peace. When we were five years of age, they would say, these are our brothers. When we became ten years of age, they called us competitors! Kattiyakaran says “They called you competitors!” Dharmaraja says “When we became older” Kattiyakaan says “Some stayed friendly, some became enemies” Dharmaraja says “Some were incited to become enemies!” My younger brother Duryodhana said “Elder brother! Let’s share the kingdom! One kingdom for you and one kingdom for us! I did not object!” Kattiyakaan says “You did not object!” Dharmaraja “One needs to learn to compromise to live in peace! Kattiyakaan says ”You need to learn to compromise to live in peace” Dharmaraja says “A person who learns to compromise will never be brought to ruin! A person on the path of destruction, would not compromise. My younger brother Duryodhanan said “Elder brother! I will give you Khandava forest!” Kattiyakaan says “I will give you Khandava forest!” Dharmaraja says “We accepted this and when we saw Khandava Vanam we were surprised that it was a huge untamed forest!” Kattiyakaan says “It was a huge, untamed forest!” Dharmaraja says “So we decided to turn what was a forest, into a country where people could live!”

The violence of this Koothu and the next Koothu ‘Pagadai Thugil’ which would follow is framed in the Bharatham session by a light hearted episode. This is, in fact, the last idyllic moment in the lives of the Pandavas before they are forced to go on their third and final Vanavaasam. This story is narrated by the Bharatham storytellers before they start narrating Dharmaraja’s Rajasuyayagam.

One day during spring time, Krishna and the Pandavas with their wives and families are playing and cooling themselves in the garden pond. After finishing their swim everyone left for the shore, except Krishna who takes us all safely ashore, who was still in the pond! Why Krishna did not go ashore was because his undergarments were washed away while swimming, and he was nude!

A hungry Bhima tried to hurry Krishna out of the water not knowing the reason for Krishna’s staying in the pond. An embarrassed Krishna asked Bhima to go ahead saying that he will follow later. None among them knew the reason for Krishna lagging behind. Only Draupadi knew Krishna’s predicament and tore a piece of her sari for Krishna to cover himself. Krishna draped the sari of Draupadi as a loincloth and stepped out of the water. Bhima laughed his head off at Krishna’s predicament asking him as to how he could let his garments slip away?

Krishna thanked Draupadi mentally for her gift of a sari, as otherwise Bhima might have dragged him nude out of the water! At the right moment you saved me from embarrassment by giving me a yard of your Sari! He thought that if Draupadi faced a similar predicament, he would give her thousand of saris to save her from embarrassment! That is what he is going to do tomorrow and give her thousands of saris! At the same juncture when the Pandavas and Krishna and their wives are at the Yamuna, a different narrative interrupts this light hearted moment in the Mahabharata.

Agni, the deity of fire, in the disguise as a Brahmin draws out Krishna and Arjuna from the gathering, Agni, afflicted by a severe ailment, requests the help of Arjuna and Krishna to consume the Khandava forest, to cure himself of his own ailment. The deity Agni himself came in the disguise of a Brahmin and asked, "Krishna and Arjuna, I am hungry, give me food," In this tradition guests, are always given whatever they wanted. When Agni asked Krishna and Arjuna, he was promised whatever he wanted. As soon as he heard their promise, Agni revealed as to who he was. Krishna and Arjuna bowed to him and heard his story.

A king called Svetaki performed yagam continuously for twelve years. By the grace of Shiva, ghee poured steadily from the heavens, as copious as the size of elephant trunk. What will happen to a person if one consumes only ghee for twelve years? Having consumed ghee for twelve years, even the divine Agni was stricken with illness. When he complained to Brahma, he was told of the cure for his ailment. Brahma said "There is a forest called the Khandava forest if you burn this forest you would be relieved of your ailment"

Agni tried burning the forest seven times. There was a serpent called Takshakan in the forest, who was a close friend of deity of rain, Indra. Every time Agni attempted to burn the forest, Takshaka would complain to the King of the Devas, Indra. Indra would douse the fire with rains and made it impossible for Agni to burn down the forest. That is why he said he has sought the help of Krishna and Arjuna. Because they had given their word, Arjuna was ready to fight his own father, Indra! This event is compared to a minor Pralaya where the earth is deluged under water.

Only six creatures escape, or are allowed to escape, from this burning forest. Two of them, Ashwasena, the son of the King of snakes, Takshaka and Mayavadana, a Gandharva Architect, each become in their own way, instrumental in making the Great War inevitable.

That baby snake Ashwasena, who was in his mother's mouth, looked at the one who had killed its mother, and sees Arjuna. It identified the enemy of Arjuna, and sought asylum with Karnan. "Karna, he killed my mother, he is my enemy, and he is your enemy. Keep me with you! I will help you kill Arjuna at an appropriate time."

The burning of the Khandava forest also has another far reaching consequence. Takshaka the king of snakes, enraged with Arjuna for killing his family, takes a vow to kill all the progeny of the Pandavas. In that forest, there was a Rishi called Mandabala. One day, when he was passing, he saw a female bird crying over the death of the mate. Seeing the affection of the bird and to save the female bird's tears, the Rishi transmigrated into the male bird's body. The male bird came to life, and the two birds were in delight and spent time happily together as a result of which four birdlets were born. The four hatchlings saw fire engulf the forest, prayed to the deity Agni, by chanting mantras. They were after all born to a Rishi were they not? Hence the four hatchlings alone did not die! They were Jaritari, Sarisrikan, Stambhamitran and Dronan. Mayan did not die, Ashwasena the snake child did not die, the four hatchlings did not die, all the rest all perished in the fire.

Now the King of the Devas, Indra, came to fight. He lost to his son Arjuna in the fight. Agni was cured of his disease after burning the forest. He gifted the bow Gandiva and an inexhaustible quiver of arrows to Arjuna, and he gifted a white conch to Krishna. Agni blessed Krishna and Arjuna and took leave

The Rakshasa Architect Mayan who was spared by Arjuna says "Arjuna, if you did not protect me that day, I would not be alive now. I want to pay you back for the help you did. Please ask me whatever you want and I will be happy to oblige!" Arjuna said that "It is the duty of a warrior to give asylum to the needy. Since, you raised the cry of assistance I helped you. Therefore, you need to give me anything in return" Mayan said "Sir that shows your magnanimity. Even then, I want to do something for you, for the sake of my own happiness" Mayin says that he knows of enormous amounts of gold buried by the Rakshasa King Vrishaparvan in the lake Bindhusaras. He just wants some manpower to transport this gold to build a palace for the Pandavas.

In the Mahabharata, it is Bhima alone who goes to retrieve this buried treasure. On an auspicious day he started the work on the Palace, the Rakshasa called Mayin. He did not use granite, bricks, sand, cement or lime mortar, but built the hall only of gold and embellished it with diamonds and gems! With the building of Mayin's Palace and the Hall of Illusions, the stage is set for the next

dramatic movement forward. In Koothu, Rishi Narada visits them at Indraprastha. Narada says that he had met their father Pandu, who was suspended in the netherworlds as he had been denied permission to ascend to the heavens. King Pandu had sent a message for his sons that Dharmaraja had to perform the Rajasuya Yagam for him to reach the heavens

Dharmaraja asks “Narada! What did my father say? Please tell me in great detail” Chorus “Narada! What did my father say? Please tell me in great detail” Dharmaraja asks “Narada! What did my father say? Please tell me in great detail” Chorus “Narada! What did my father say? Please tell me in great detail” Narada says “Yesterday I had been to Heaven, and I met your father, King Pandu on the way”. How would Dharma have felt hearing that? He asked Narada “Is my father doing fine?” Narada says he was fine. Narada says “As I was travelling from heaven, I met your father with whom I had a conversation!” Dharmaraja asks “What did he say?” Narada says “To release him from the netherworlds and attain Heaven, you have to do good deeds to help him reach Indra’s abode” Chorus “To release him from the netherworlds and attain Heaven, you have to do good deeds to help him reach Indra’s abode”

King Pandu, due to his untimely death, has not reached Heaven, but was suspended midway. Dharmaraja cries in shock! Narada says he told him “If you go down to earth and see my sons, ask them to help me reach heaven! That’s when he told Narada “If you see my son Dharma, ask him to perform the Yaga called the Rajasuya Yaga, that will elevate my status. I have come here to convey that message” said Narada.

Narada says “For him to reach the abode of Indra, you have to emerge victorious, in all the four directions and perform the Rajasuya Yaga” Chorus “For him to reach the abode of Indra, you have to emerge victorious, in all the four directions and perform the Rajasuya Yaga” Narada says “For him to reach the abode of Indra, you have to emerge victorious, in all the four directions and perform the Rajasuya Yaga” Chorus “For him to reach the abode of Indra, you have to emerge victorious, in all the four directions and perform the Rajasuya Yaga”

Krishna says that performing the Rajasuya Yagam was a massive task as it would require an enormous amount of wealth. Any king performing the Rajasuya Yagam must also not have any enemy kings.

Krishna says “Dharmaraja! To perform Rajasuya Yaga is not a simple task! You will not be able to perform it! Dharmaraja says”But we have to do it Kanna! Why is not not possible for us?” Krishna said “Oh Dharma! You have all the qualifications to perform Rajasuya Yagam and nobody else has it! But ...Dharmaraja asks “Why are you saying “but”, Kanna?” Krishna says “If you have to perform Rajasuya Yagam, you should not have enemies anywhere in the world. If there are enemies, either you have to destroy them or you must make them your friends” That is when Bhima intervenes in anger “Kanna! Do we have enemies? We have to perform this Yagam to find out who are our enemies!”

Krishna begins narrating the story of Jarasandha, who was not only the enemy of the Pandavas but also the enemy of all Shatriyas. Even he, he says, had lost to Jarasandha eighteen times in battle and to avoid any further battles had shifted his capital to Dwarka, in the middle of the ocean.

Krishna says “Bhima, not only for you, he is an enemy to all the kings on earth. He had come to fight with me eighteen times and unable to fight with him eighteen times and afraid of more battles, I have gone hiding underneath at sea at Dwaraka” The next question becomes as to what was the enmity between Jarasandha and Krishna making Jarasandha attack Krishna 18 times?

“That is ok sir, if Jarasandhan has to come and fight Kannan eighteen times; there should have been some enmity, isn't it? Why did he come eighteen times to fight?” Jarasandhan had two daughters, Asti and Prasti. They were married to Kamsan. What did Kannan do, kill his maternal uncle Kamsan. An angry Jarasandhan said “He killed my son-in-law, that Kannan and killing him widowed my daughters! I shall not leave this Kannan.” Jarasandhan fought him eighteen times!

Krishna says “I had fought with Jarasandhan eighteen times, failed and fled. Kattiyakaaran asks “Why Swami? There is a reason for this. There are seven people in this world who possess the strength of seven lions. Who are they? Idumban, Bagan or Bakasuran, Jarasandhan, Manimaran, Kichakan, Duryodhanan and Bhiman. All the seven are equal in valour” Kattiyakaaran says “All seven of them possess the strength of seven lions” Krishna says “Whoever dies first at the hands of one of them, fate has determined that the rest have to die at the hands of the same man! “Krishna says”That is the reason that I lost to him. I will take Bhimasena and kill Jarasandha! Just wait and see!”

Krishna, in Koothu, narrates as to why he did not kill Jarasandha, but preferred losing to him in battle. He reiterates the idea of six people being equally powerful as Bhima who abuse their power to become despots. Anyone who kills any of the despots is fated to kill the other five. Bhima had already killed Hidimba and Bakasura and it was his destiny to kill Jarasandha and the other three despots.

Bhima says “Krishna! If he is your enemy, our enemy, and enemy to the entire world of Shatriyas, why have you spared him so long? Come, let us go. I will take care of him,” he said. When Bhima expresses eagerness to fight Jarasandha, Krishna says that as Shatriyas they would not be able to even reach the borders of Jarasandha’s kingdom as he viscerally hated Shatriyas.

Krishna says” Bhima, we need someone like you. But we cannot set foot in his kingdom easily. He detests kings. Shatriyas cannot enter his kingdom, he respects only Brahmanas. Therefore, let us go in the disguise of Brahmins. Disguised as Krishna VEDIYAN, Bhima VEDIYAN, Vijaya VEDIYAN, the three leave for Jarasandha’s kingdom. So Krishna suggests that the three of them Arjuna, Bhima and himself travel to Magadha disguised as Brahmins. Girivirasam is the name of the country. It means that the country has hills as its fortress wall. As they enter the kingdom and declare “We are three Brahmins who have come”. They are allowed entry into the kingdom

In Koothu, there is no attempt to present the scene ‘realistically’. Each actor is still dressed in the costumes of their role and their ‘brahmin’ disguise is just a shawl draped over their original costume. Shortly they will be revealing as to who they actually were and a change of costume at this stage would just be an unnecessary exercise, interrupting the flow of the drama.

Krishna says “Bhimasena, we have reached Girivirisapuram. See here, they have tied three drums! Why are these drums placed here? If any of the citizens in Girivirisapuram have any problems, if they beat the drum once, it will keep resonating for a week. Breaking these three drums is the right way to attract Jarasandha’s attention to pick up a fight with him! So break these drums now!” Bhima says “Watch me break the drums Uncle! I will break the drums; watch as I break these drums!

An angry Jarasandha enters “Who is the one that broke the drums? The drums that are sounded when our people are in trouble?” Jarasandhan sees them, and immediately figures out that they

are not Brahmins. Jarasandha says “You are not Brahmins! Who are you pretending to be Brahmins?”

Seetharaman sings Jarasandha’s song “Who are you? Climbing the walls breaching the boundary and breaking the drums. Oho! You do not look to be Brahmins! Oho! You don’t appear to be Brahmins! So who are you? Climbing the walls, breaching the boundary and breaking the drums!”

Krishna says “Oh King Jarasandha adorned with garland of musk fragrance! Listen! I am a Yadava from the Yadu clan. These two are the younger brothers of the Lunar Dynasty’s leader, Yudhishtira. One of them is the son of Vayu; the other is the son of the King of the Devas, Indra, ruling over high walled, golden city of Amaravati. King, with an army of rutting male elephants, to get past the guards, we came in disguise as Brahmins,

When Jarasandha directly questions them Krishna says that they are Krishna, Arjuna and Bhima respectively who have come to fight him. Jarasandha says that as he had already defeated Krishna eighteen times in battle he was not interested in fighting him. Arjuna, he says, is a mere stripling and also rejects him as an opponent to fight against. He agrees to fight with Bhima, as he thought Bhima looked his equal in physical valour. Bhima and Jarasandha fight furiously for many days and nights, with neither getting the upper hand over the other. In the Bharatham storytelling session, the fight is described in great detail as a fearsome fight.

The fearsomeness of their fight, the dust they raised swirled as red and black clouds around them! Both of them charged at each other twirling the maces in their hands! They threw their maces into the sky, and before their maces could reach the ground, they beat their thighs and chests in challenge! Each charged at the other fiercely and clashed their maces at the other clamorously! Both their maces break with the the power with which they hit the other! They threw away their broken maces. They jump high in the air and land on each other and the earth trembled and all the people who were watching were scared by this spectacle!

In Koothu, the actors playing Bhima and Jarasandha just somersault towards each other with finally both holding the others hands and twirling around on the stage. Bhima and Jarasandha’s fight in Koothu, They fight for days together and finally Bhima tears apart Jarasandha’s body and thinks he has won the battle.

Suddenly Bhima rushed and jumped at Jarasandha kicking at his chest. He fell like a rootless tree. Bhima pounded the fallen Jarasandha! Pressing against one leg strongly, he pulled the other leg apart, tearing him up like a banana stem, tore him by half, threw the half bodies! Bhima proclaimed victoriously! “Kanna, I have won, I have won.” But Jarasandha’s body reunites and he fights with renewed energy against Bhima

Krishna who knows how Jarasandha can be killed instructs Arjuna to tear a plantain twig into two parts and to place the two parts in opposite directions” Krishna just smiled and picked up a twig, tore it in to half, and threw the pieces in opposing directions. Bhima was sharp in taking hints. That is why Villiputhurar called him the scholar of knowledge! Krishna says “Why are you troubled Nephew? I will give you a hint as to how Jarasandha can be killed!

Krishna says “Arjuna! Bhimasena has torn apart Jarasandhan and flung the two halves in the air!. But his body keeps rejoining! And again he returns to fight Bhima who seems to be tiring! As Bhima can understand hints and fight you go where he is fighting a tear a twig into two parts. Bhima will understand the hint and tear apart Jarasandhan into two parts and place the two parts in opposite directions so that the body cannot reunite and he will die!” Arjuna does as Krishna instructs and tells Bhima “I am pleased with your valour!” He tears a twig for Bhima to see and Bhima understands the hint! Bhima understands Arjuna’s signal and finally kills Jarasandha. Bhima and Jarasandha fight. Bhima says “I will keep coming at you with renewed vigour!” Bhima kills Jarasandha who ‘dies’ offstage

After the killing of Jarasandha, Krishna crowns his son Sahadeva as the king of the land. Sahadeva who knew that his father was a despot bears no rancour with Bhima for killing his father and also swears allegiance to Dharmaraja. The three warriors free the eighty six kings imprisoned by Jarasandha and also win their allegiance. More importantly, they obtain the wealth plundered by Jarasandha and now Dharmaraja has enough wealth to perform the expensive Rajasuya Yagam.

Dharmaraja immediately sends invitations to all the kings of the land through the celestial sage Narada, to participate in his Rajasuya Yagam. The divine Sage, Narada delivers the invitation to Dharmaraja’s Rajasuya Yaagam to all the kings of the land. People flock in huge numbers to participate in this ceremony. Dharmaraja receives the blessings of all the Rishi’s who have accepted his invitation. After reporting their successful mission to Dharmaraja, Krishna takes

leave from Dharmaraja to return to Dwarka. Dharmaraja, against Krishna's explicit warning wants Krishna to return and be the Chief Guest at the Rajasuya Yagam.

Krishna tells Dharmaraja "Both people who are my friends as well enemies would come to attend the Yaga. If I am present here it might lead to some unfortunate incidences! Dharmaraja insists that Krishna attends whatever mishaps that might occur, the Rajasuya Yagam cannot be performed without the divine Krishna!, So you have to be present!" Krishna says "You really want me attend? So be it!"

In Koothu, Dharmaraja sends the first invite to Krishna's mortal enemy, Sishupala, the king of Chedi. Sishupala was also a close friend and ally of Kamsa and Jarasandha, two kings whose death Krishna was responsible for. The inherent violence in the narrative escalates at this juncture. Dharmaraja says "The King of Chedi is my first cousin born to my aunt, the Lion cub, Sishupalan. Ask him to arrive two days early. Send him a letter asking him to come two days early" Kattiyakaran says "I will send the invitation!"

Krishna makes a dramatic entry into Indraprastha to attend Dharmaraja's Rajasuya Yagam. People flock in large numbers to catch a glimpse of Krishna. Again at this juncture, the Ramayana is invoked where people thronged in huge numbers in Ayodhya to get a glimpse of Rama. One girl, was applying mehendi in one hand, one hand had been completed and was applying mehendi on the other! As they said Krishna was coming, she thought she would miss seeing him if she were to complete her ornamentation and she rushed to see Krishna. Another girl was applying kohl in one eye and as was about to apply kohl to her other eye, she hears of Kannan's arrival and rushes out with her kohl stick in hand to see him, thinking she can finish applying kohl later. Another girl was having a bath and as she heard that Kannan is coming, she did not wait to complete her bath, and draping a cloth around her body dripping with water she rushed to the window to see him!

That is the kind of crowds that used to throng, to see Rama, Kamban describes it saying "They thronged to see him, like hoards of deers, crowds of peacocks roaming, groups of fish swimming in the water, like the humming bees, the lightning glow, the ladies, whose hair was wet with all the adorned flowers, swarmed around him, rushed with the sound of their anklet bells."

Sishupalan makes a roaring entry on to the stage announcing himself as a young lion. Sishupalan's stage entry song- Sishupalan announcing himself - "Here in this assembly of great kings, I have come! The young lion Sishupalan!"

Duryodhana, the other crucial character of this narrative also comes to attend. Dharmaraja, being a gracious host offers to show around Duryodhana the palace, but Duryodhana prefers to view the palace on his own.

Duryodhana says "It seems in Indraprastha, because my father's younger brother, Pandu, died and had not reached Heavens they are performing the Rajasuya Yaagam. I have got an invitation saying when they are going to perform the Yaagam. The Pandavas and we are cousins. My cousins have invited us to Indraprastha! Uncle Shakuni shall we go to Indraprastha? Shakuni says "Nephew Duryodhana! Let's go to Indraprastha!" Elder brother Dharmaraj I pay my respects to you and seek your blessings elder brother!"

Dharmaraja assigns tasks for each of his brothers. Bhima, as he was a great cook himself, is given the responsibility of the kitchen to ensure that the guests would eat meals that they would never forget in their lives. Arjuna is given the charge of taking care of the guests while Nakula and Sahadeva are given the responsibility of welcoming the guests and putting them up in suitable accommodations.

Dharmaraja surprisingly makes Duryodhana the custodian of the treasury and Karna responsible for giving gifts to all the people who have gathered for the ceremony. One should understand as to who was the correct person to execute a job well, and assign duties accordingly! The text Thirukural says "Any task has to be assigned to the particular person who was most capable of completing the task successfully" Karna is giving wealth away in lavish amounts, but the more wealth he gifts; more and more wealth accumulates in the treasury. Because of the person in charge of the treasury was Duryodhana! Who is Duryodhana? He was a lucky King to whom wealth poured naturally! As Duryodhana was in charge of the treasury, the wealth in the treasury only grew and never decreased!

The Rajasuya Yagam is performed for seven days and on its completion, Dharmaraja asks their grandfather Bhishma as to who among all the assembled kings should be honoured first. For seven days, thus the Yaga was conducted to the satisfaction of the Devas, like Brahma's Yaga

conducted in ancient times in the Himalayas, appropriately, waters brought from all the eight directions were showered, like lightning and clouds in ocean they delighted in the shower of sacred waters, blessed by Narada and all the poets assembled sang songs of praise. Narada himself gives blessings. Yaga gets completed.

Dharmaraja goes to grandfather Bhishma and asks him who among the invited guests should receive the first ceremonial offering. In Koothu, the tableaux of this scene is extremely striking with Krishna and his antagonist Sishupalan, being placed diagonally opposite each other, indicating the inherent tension between both which would soon flare up. Bhishma says “All of us together have participated in the Rajasuya, unitedly as one!”

“We invoke both Shiva, the husband of Parvathi and Brahma, the creator of the worlds!” Bhishma invokes Vyasa and asks him “Please tell us revered Sage as to who among the kings is qualified to receive the first worship” You know about the kings who rule their respective territories, you adorned with the moving lotus garlands. Then, Vyasa looked at the respected Dharma and said: “Give it to the dark cloud complexioned, the holder of a large red Disc weapon.” From the kings assembled here, the invitees, who should be given the first honours?

Veda Vyasa said, “Dharma there is a leadership in everything. The Agnihotram, the invocation of fire holds prime place in Vedic worship. Leader among the mantras, Gayathri. Leader of the citizens, the king. Head of all rivers, the ocean, Leader among the stars, the Moon, and the chief among the light, Surya, the Sun God! The Leader of the mountains, the great Meru, leader among the birds, Garuda. For all the living beings, Krishna is the head, therefore “to the one whose complexion is that of a black cloud holding the red Disc weapon, should be given the first offering.” Dharmaraja tells Krishna “You are the omnipresent, you are in our hearts, accept the first offering of the Yaagam”

An angry Sishupalan tells Dharmaraja “You have insulted the kings present in the Assembly by honouring Krishna first” Is it appropriate to offer the ritual honours to the undeserving in-between Jati born Yadava? How can Dharmaraja insult us, the high born Shatriya Kings by honouring the low born Yadava? Angry Shishupala, equal in beauty to the god of love, before he was burnt by Shiva, renowned beyond compare across seven islands, strong like an elephant, troubled, shouted in rage: “In an assembly of kings who rule this earth, how is a cowherd, who lives on the countryside outside the cities be eligible to receive the first offering?”

In Koothu, Sishupalan in the guise of speaking to Bhishma, keeps insulting Krishna by enumerating the reasons why Krishna was undeserving of the honour. Krishna patiently listens to the abuse of Sishupalan and counts each insult by throwing a flower from his plate on to the ground. What is interesting in Koothu is that the chorus would repeat the main characters dialogue or song. This chorus would include all the actors present on stage excepting the actor whose song it was. In this scene the actor playing Krishna was also part of the chorus repeating the abuses of Sishupalan against Krishna. This is another characteristic feature of Koothu where it constantly delinks or separates the actor from the role that he is enacting.

Sishupalan sings “Enough, enough Bhishma! To call this ignorant fellow, this cowherd, this idiot, this fat fellow, a capable man is ridiculous!” Chorus “Enough, enough Bhishma! To call this ignorant fellow, this cowherd, this idiot, this fat fellow, a capable man is ridiculous!” Sishupalan sings “This trickster who does not know good behaviour and conferring this honour to this thief is totally inappropriate!” Chorus “Enough, enough Bhishma! To call this ignorant fellow, this cowherd, this idiot, this fat fellow, a capable man is ridiculous!” In this Assembly where Kings from heroic dynasties and wealthy clans have gathered with many famous crowned rulers present, Is Krishna brave? Or is he the strongest one here? Or is he the richest? In this earth surrounded by the seas, when did cowherds become aristocrats? “In this assembly of kings where the Solar Dynasty, the Lunar Dynasty, and the Fire Dynasty, where all the crowned kings are seated, how can this cowherd be honoured? I oppose this. ”Sishupala sings “You fool Kanna! Our enmity stretching across eternity is seeing its fruition today. We have been enemies for long, let us see whether it you or I who emerges victorious. Krishna says “You fool Sishupala show me the strength you boast about!

Sishupalan enumerates all the acts of deceit and cowardice that Krishna had performed right from his childhood. While Sishupalan thinks that he is insulting Krishna, to the audiences the stories he narrates at this juncture are the popular tales of the childhood feats of the divine child Krishna.

This Krishna was born under the star Avani Ashtami in the jail, when he was born; he made his mother and father to prostrate before him! By night he was moved to Aayarpaadi to grow as Yashoda’s son, this magician cowherd! As a child he killed Putana, the one who came to feed him milk. He stole milk and curd from the shelves in all the houses! Chee, chee, the characterless one kissed the cheeks of the young girls of Gokula without their consent! Does this idiot cowherd deserve first respect among the kings present? One who got beaten up with churners, respected and given first honours, it is a mistake. When he was tied to the grinding stone, he cried, such a coward, madman, and impoverished cowherd. Held a staff in hand, walked to the

forest, hurled the helpless calf and killed it! Subdued the snake Kalinga with his nails and with power tore a poor bird's beak apart. Does this cowherd deserve to be honoured? This lowly cowherd!

Krishna says "This Sishupala is abusing me with whatever words that comes to him. I am staying calm! There is a reason for that. When he was born as a son to the King of Chedi, Damagosa and Satvathi Devi he was born with four arms and three eyes. Everyone went to see this miraculous child wondering whether Shiva himself has been born as a child! I too went to see him with my brother Balarama as he was finally my aunt's son! When we had gone to see him, I picked up the child and immediately two of his arms and an eye disappeared. Immediately my aunt Satvathi realised that her son was destined to die at my hands! She took a promise from me that I can kill him only when he commits a hundred faults. He has been abusing me all his life, but today his faults have crossed over a hundred! I should not spare his life anymore!"

Krishna, having kept the promise he had made to Sishupalan's mother now fights him and kills him. Krishna and Sishupala fight and Krishna says "I will kill you immediately! I will kill you immediately!" A divine glow arises from the slain body of Sishupalan surprising all the members in the court. The sage Narada now explains to the assembly as to who Sishupalan really was.

Once upon a time when Rishi Durvasa visited Vaikunta, the abode of Vishnu to meet him Vishnu was resting and the two doorkeepers who stood watch prevented Durvasa from entering Vishnu's resting place. They said that as Vishnu was asleep, Durvasa could not enter. Durvasa got angry, should one even say anything about Durvasa's temper! "You are preventing me from seeing Vishnu so I curse you both to be born as humans on earth," Vishnu himself rushed out and said, "Divine Sage, you have cursed my own gatekeepers, please alter your curse."

Durvasa said that a curse once uttered cannot be retracted, but offered to modify the curse. He said that if the gatekeepers chose they could be born on earth as the devotees of Vishnu, they would be born a thousand times, or they could be born as cruel demons they will have only three births. Whether they choose to be born a thousand times or want to be born only thrice Durvasa said was the choice they had to make!

The doorkeepers wanted to be back at Vishnu's abode soon and chose three lives as cruel demons. They also got a boon from Vishnu that though they were born as cruel demons, their

deaths should be at Vishnu's hands. They were the ones who were born in their first lives as Hiranyakshan-Hiranyakashipu, in the second one as Ravana-Kumbhakarna, and in this life as Kamsan-Sishupala. Kamsan has already been killed by Krishna, now Sishupala was also released from the curse. As the reason for Sishupala's birth was over, he left as a light, back to Vishnu's abode,

Then Sahadeva stood up and said the first honour would only be given to Krishna and if anyone objects, he said he would kick them by placing his left foot on their head. Then the first honour was accorded to Krishna, followed by honours to the rest. The Rajasuya Yagam of Dharmaraja is successfully completed and he is conferred the title of 'Rajathi Raja' or the 'King among the Kings' by all the Devas. Duryodhana, who is envy and rage personified, is infuriated at this honour conferred upon his cousin setting the stage for the final act of this Koothu.

The King of kings, I, Dharmarajan seated on my throne, I come before you in style and luxury. The King of kings, I, Dharmarajan seated on my throne, I come before you in style and luxury. I have my brothers on both sides with the beautiful lady Draupadi by our side. All the Kings of the world pay homage to us. The King of kings, I, Dharmarajan seated on my throne, I come before you in style and luxury

An envious Duryodhana, in this rendition in Koothu, walks through the palace with his uncle Shakuni looking at the palace in wonder. Embarrassingly for him, Duryodhana trips and falls on his journey and hopes that nobody has noticed his fall. Unfortunately Draupadi has seen him fall and laughs merrily with her friends at his plight. This scene in most renditions of the episode would have Duryodhana's brother Ducchasana accompanying him at his scene of humiliation.

There was a strong reason for Shakuni accompanying Duryodhana in Renukambal Kattaikoothu Mandram's rendition of this narrative and this reason will become apparent in the next Koothu, 'Pagadai Thugil'. Duryodhana, walking in rage and envy, trips in a pond in the palace. He looks to see whether anyone has seen his fall. He looks up and sees Bhima laughing, Draupadi who was at his side, seeing Bhima laugh at Duryodhana's humiliation, laughs involuntarily. When she laughs, she also claps her hands and the sound of the jingling of her bangles infuriates Duryodhana further. Draupadi also says mockingly "I thought only his father was born blind, but it seems his eldest son is also blind!"

Shakuni vows to Duryodhana “Today this Draupadi clapped and laughed at your humiliation, I will make the entire world laugh at her humiliation! If I fail to do this, nephew Duryodhana, what I have in my hands is not gambling dice, this is the army! This is my solemn promise!” The Kauravas leave Indraprastha in humiliation. The Pandavas power at this moment is larger than the Himalaya Mountains! Rise and fall in life is what characterises ‘being on earth’. The Pandavas who are at the peak of their glory are going to face an even bigger fall! That is what is waiting for them tomorrow!

The humiliated Duryodhana and the Kauravas return to Hastinapura with Draupadi’s laughter ringing in their ears. War with the Pandavas at this juncture, was out of the question as the Pandavas were too powerful. Shakuni suggests deceit as the only way of defeating the Pandavas.