

Performance Traditions of the Mahabharata in Tamil Nadu

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Lecture 13

Draupadiyin Thugilum, Parandhamanin Arulum

or The attempted disrobing of Draupadi and Krishna's gift

Dhritarashtra says

“When I heard that Draupadi, tears in her throat, had been dragged into the assembly, grieving, in a single garment, and she in her period, while her protectors stood by as though she had no one to protect her then, Sanjaya, I lost hope of victory”

This Koothu, along with the previous Koothu, the Rajasuya Yagam of Yudhishtira is the fulcrum around which the entire festival is structured. In these two plays, the Great War, in which millions of people will lose their lives and which Yudhishtira was trying to avert, becomes inevitable. This particular group, the Renukambal Kattaikoothu Mandram, started this Draupadi Thugil Koothu with an invocation song to Draupadi, where they say that they are just poor actors who are enacting her story for their livelihood. Shakuni invokes Draupadi “Oh mother Panchali, please take care of us, your devotees! Mother Panchali, I trust you, the noble born. Oh mother Panchali; please take care of us, your devotees!

They would have to, in this play abuse her and hence ask her forgiveness for this. They ask her to protect them like she protected the Pandavas in the forest. Most Koothu groups sing this invocation song to Draupadi at the juncture of the play where the attempt to disrobe Draupadi is made. This song would be usually sung mostly by the Kattiyakaaran or the Suthradhar. In this particular group's performance, this song was sung by Shakuni

Shakuni says “Mother of the Earth! You were the wife of the five Pandavas, the beautiful Panchali Mother! We are conducting this drama as our ancestors did, for the sake of our mortal body for our food and livelihood. In this Koothu we might call you disrespectfully using abusive words. You have to forgive our mistakes and bless us mother. Duryodhana rages “Shakuni

Uncle! That deceitful Draupadi laughed at me, O Shakuni Uncle! That arrogant bitch shamed me! [Duryodhana faints] Shakuni sings “Beautiful Draupadi who was incarnated to destroy the royal dynasties!”

Shakuni is seen as a partial incarnation of Kali Yuga, the times we are living in now, where adharma would be at its peak, Shakuni prefigures this coming age in the Dwapara Yuga. He is also seen as the ‘double’ of Krishna as both desire the same thing for different reasons- the destruction of the Kauravas. Krishna wants to destroy the Kauravas to establish Dharma on earth while Shakuni wants to destroy the Kauravas as an act of revenge for Bhishma’s killing of his hundred and three brothers and father

Shakuni, steps out of his role to sing this invocation song and once that is done; he gets back into character again. On stage, this invocation song is punctuated by Duryodhana’s rage and humiliation where he abuses Draupadi in the filthiest language possible. The invocation song continues with Shakuni apologising to Draupadi and singing her praises. Shakuni sings “Oh mother Panchali, I trust you, the noble born, please take care of your devotees!” As Duryodhana relives his humiliation, Shakuni continues the invocation song “Please protect us from instigators of mischief!

Each Koothu group would bring in a different element into an already known tale and no two renditions of the same play by different Koothu groups would ever be the same. Shakuni, rather than the Kattiyakaran singing the invocation songs was a different element we found in this group’s rendering of this narrative. This is an important point to note, as while the overall structure of each festival, performed in different villages might be apparently the same, no two festivals would be identical. This is because each Koothu group and storytellers would give a different emotional texture to the same narrative and the emotional register of each festival would be unique to that village for that particular year.

Shakuni sings “Please protect us from instigators of mischief! Cast your eyes on us at this moment O Mother and protect us, your devotees!

Even the festival the next year at the same village might have a totally different flavour as different performers would be hired by the festival village. Shakuni, singing the invocation song, in this particular groups rendering of the Koothu has another important reason. The two main

characters in this Koothu are Shakuni and Dharmaraja and Koothu rendered by this group is a conflict between Adharma, represented by Shakuni and Dharma, represented by Yudhishtira. In this play, Adharma wins at least temporarily.

Duryodhana rages “That whore Draupadi laughed at my fall! O Shakuni Uncle!” Chorus “That whore Draupadi laughed at my fall!” O Shakuni Uncle!” Duryodhana rages “She also clapped her hands at my humiliation! O Shakuni Uncle!” Chorus “She also clapped her hands at my humiliation!” O Shakuni Uncle!”

Duryodhana in this tradition is seen as a personification of rage and envy He feels jealous that Dharmaraja had performed the Rajasuyayagam and was conferred the title of Rajathi Rajan or the King of all Kings. That title, he felt was rightfully his as he was really the King of fifty six countries, while Dharmaraja had just been given a small tract of land to call as his kingdom. He had deceitfully given the Pandavas, an inhospitable tract of forest land to call as their Kingdom. But the Pandavas had managed to turn this forest into a great land with Indraprastha as their wonderful capital.

Duryodhana addressing the Kattiyakaaran “If you remember there was not a single torture that we had not inflicted on the Pandavas! When we were young, we tried to harm them with many tortures! Finally, we burnt all six of them in the Lacquer Palace. And finally when we thought they were all dead, that Arjuna appeared in the Panchala kingdom disguised as a Brahmin, bent the bow and won Draupadi’s hand in marriage! Even if I could forget that, they took away the beautiful Subhadra who was betrothed to me. That crook Kannan made Arjuna come in disguise as a Sanyasi, and he got Subhadra married to Arjuna! Even if I could forget that, but these beggars, idiots, and useless fellows, also performed the Rajasuya Yaga? Shakuni adds to Duryodhana’s humiliation “Who has the right to perform the Rajasuya Yaga? It should only be performed by kings with wealth, power and influence”

His envy is further provoked when he sees the wondrous palace built by the Asura or Gandharva architect, Mayin and the wealth of the Pandavas which they have amassed in a short period of time further increases his jealousy.

Karna says “Younger brother Duryodhana! Please calm down. Duryodhana continues his rant “We all respected their invitation and went, but did they give us any respect befitting great kings?”

Not at all! I went on my own to look around the palace. I tripped on a stone, my crown slipped and I fell down”

His ultimate anger was reserved for Draupadi as she had laughed at his own discomfiture when he had tripped and fallen in the magic palace of Mayin. Duryodhana continues “She laughed!” Kattiyakaaran mocks “They laughed!” Shakuni says “They laughed at my nephew’s fall! Shakuni “The wife of the five, Draupadi laughed. Not only did she laugh, she also called for her friends to laugh at Duryodhana’s humiliation!” “There you see, my elder father-in-law’s son. My father-in-law was born blind. His eldest son seems to be blind also! Is he half blind, quarter blind or even more? Saying these hurtful lines she clapped her hands and laughed merrily with her friends!” Duryodhan angrily asks “Can she laugh?” Kattiyakaaran says “She should not laugh!” Karna tells Kattiyakaaran “That woman who laughed at my younger brother!” Kattiyakaaran says “She had laughed. But she should not have laughed” Karna says “Why? She should not have laughed as my younger brother is the Emperor lording over fifty six kings. Can she laugh at him?”

The laugh of Draupadi is the ultimate humiliation for Duryodhana for which he wants revenge. He takes a vow that just as Draupadi had laughed at him in open court; he would make the entire world laugh at Draupadi. A thoughtful Duryodhana remembers Dharmaraja having offered seats to kings, the wielder of powerful spear soaked with the blood from the chest of opposing kings. Duryodhana is sitting brooding over all those grand proceedings of the Rajasuya Yaga with rage and envy. His eyes which were naturally red, had become even more due to his rage.

Karna says “The five brothers, who ride strong chariots drawn by horses have also grown stronger, and if let this be for some more time, Dharmaraja will rob us of our prosperous lives too. The Babul tree with sharp thorns needs to be uprooted young, if we let it grow unchecked, even the axe would get blunted in our efforts to chop them down.

The Pandavas are growing in stature now. Even as they are on the rise, we should go with our troops and attack them. Ducchāsana says right now the Pandavas seem to be at the height of power, but he says that the Pandavas glory is just like the moon in its full moon stage which will shortly wane, but Duryodhana’s glory was like the Sun in all its brightness. He advocates war saying that the Pandavas should not be allowed to grow any further. Both Ducchāsana and Karna want to go to a war with the Pandavas. Karna may be a good person for the larger world. But when he was working in consonance with Duryodhanan, his heart was not true says the poet.

Duryodhana was already burning with jealousy. Karna's words to Duryodhana was like adding fuel to the raging fire and Karna also boasts that he could kill all the five Pandavas with just one arrow. Shakuni laughs at Karna's vanity and says that the Pandavas were too powerful right now to be defeated by force.

Shakuni says "If we think we can win the war against Pandavas, it is not possible. To be born, to die, born, die, like that even if we had seven lives, we cannot defeat the Pandavas! If we want to destroy them, it can only be done with deceit, teachery and fraud. That is how we can win against them. Duryodhana laments calling out to his uncle. A naive Duryodhana believes in Shakuni's plan to destroy the Pandavas but he doesn't realise that Shakuni's actual plan is the final destruction of Duryodhana

Duryodhana sings to Shakuni "That I am ruling the world is all due to your efforts Uncle Shakuni!" Chorus "That I am ruling the world is all due to your efforts Uncle Shakuni!" Duryodhana sings "I do not have any other person to support me, but for you Uncle Shakuni!" Chorus "I do not have any other person to support me, but for you Uncle Shakuni!" Shakuni consoles a grieving Duryodhana saying "Do not cry" Shakuni asks "Did you hear what he said? Am I not ruling because of you, is there a better companion to me than you? Shakuni asks Kattiyakaaran "Who else is there for my nephew, but for me?" Duryodhana asks "Am I capable of doing this fraud Shakuni Uncle?" Chorus "Am I capable of doing this fraud Shakuni Uncle?" Duryodhan sings "Only you can make me succeed in my plans, Uncle Shakuni!" Shakuni says "Do not cry!" Chorus "Only you can make me succeed in my plans, Uncle Shakuni!"

Shakuni asks Duryodhana to build a palace like the one that the Pandavas have built, and to invite Dharmaraja, as the eldest brother to inaugurate the palace. If the Pandavas come, ensure that Dharmaraja sits in front of me and play a game of dice with me. Your job is only to make him sit in front of me to play the dice. Once Dharma agrees, I will appropriate all that is his, and give it to you. Nephew, this is a promise I make on my pair of dice.

This plot by Ducchāsana, Duryodhana, Shakuni and Karna happens in open court with all the Kaurava elders present. Only Vidura when he hears the plan in the open court, advises Duryodhana against gambling

Vidura says “Let there not be deceitful gambling for the sake of the kingdom” Chorus “Let there not be deceitful gambling” Vidura says “If there is a request from your father asking for Dharmaraja to return the land given” Chorus “If there is a request from your father asking for Dharmaraja to return the land given” Vidura says “The humble Pandavas would hand the Kingdom back and go back to live in the forest” Chorus “The humble Pandavas would hand the Kingdom back and go back to live in the forest” Vidura says “You can then rule the entire world by yourself!” Chorus “You can then rule the entire world by yourself!”

He says that all that Duryodhana has to do is to ask for the Pandavas wealth and kingdom from Dharmaraja which Dharmaraja would willingly give, out of his sense of generosity. But a humiliated Duryodhana does not heed Vidura’s advice and is bent upon extracting his notion of revenge. They built a large palace, for the sake of the game of dice alone.

Once the palace was built, Duryodhana asked Shakuni, “Uncle, if I send an invitation, will the Pandavas accept it and come?” Shakuni says “The Pandavas definitely will not come on your invitation. Your father should personally write the letter, and your uncle Vidura should be asked to deliver it to them. If you do so, even if it not for your word, but as a mark of respect to your father, the Pandavas would come,” he said.

Duryodhana tells his father about the plot which he, Shakuni, Karna and Ducchasa have hatched. He says he first thought about going to war with the Pandavas and realized that the Pandavas were too powerful at this point of time to be defeated in war. The Pandavas he says can only be defeated by treachery and deceit

The Pandavas he says will immediately suspect an invitation coming from Duryodhana himself and refuse to come suspecting foul play. So he wants his father to write the invitation and ask his brother Vidura to deliver the letter. The naive Dharmaraja, he says, will not be able to refuse Dhritarashtra’s invitation and will definitely come to Hastinapura. Dhritarashtra dictates the invitation “Dear Pandavas, let you be blessed with more and more victories. Your younger brothers have also built a palace. You must come and see this beautiful palace. Please follow the illustrious Vidura and come here without any hesitation!”

Vidura reluctantly delivers the letter to the Pandavas. Vidura reveals the plot and says it was the Pandavas decision whether to accept the invitation or not. Dharmaraja says “Father has sent the

invitation and if we raise objections, the world would laugh at us. Let us go hoping for the best brothers! Dharmaraja asks Vidura “Are there any other good and auspicious things that we should know? Please explain the plot and treachery behind the invitation, asking us to come, dear father Vidura!” Dharma says “Brothers! If we do not go on the invitation of the father’s elder brother, we would be laughed at as wayward, fatherless children. ”Bhima disputes this”I know what the world would say is not true”

Dharmaraja asks Vidura “Are there any surprises that await there in Hastinapura like what my dear brothers suspect? Vidura reveals the plot “Successful Duryodhana deliberated his intent with his father, discussed his thought. Do you not know what plans they have made for your visit to the palace? Duryodhana’s maternal uncle Shakuni plots to receive you there and entice you to gamble in front of the royal court to get you on to play the game by hook or crook, to engage you in a game of which he was the master of.

Dharmaraja feels sad, “Should I participate in the game and gamble? I will not do so! Will Duryodhana never have a change of heart? When we were kids, he wanted to destroy us. Even now his thoughts have not changed a bit!” Dharmaraja would never do anything without consulting his brothers.

Vidura says “I told them the correct thing to do, quoting many codes of ethics, but they did not pay heed to my words! Whether to decide come to Hastinapura or not, is purely a decision yours to make. ”As I was leaving, they also warned me not to tell you about their plot! But it did not feel right to me, so I have told you all that transpired there! “Whatever it may be, our father’s elder brother has sent the invitation, and it has been brought to us by our father’s younger brother! Even if we do not go for the sake of Duryodhana, we have to go respecting our father’s brothers”

So he tells Vidura that they would leave to Hastinapura the next day itself. Vidura said “So be it” and took leave from there. The lizard appeared, the crow pheasant jumped in front of Dharma from right to left, the stags showed up in front, jumping. Scholars well versed in the art of predictions, warned about all these inauspicious omens. The soothsayers desisted making any predictions, as Dharma paid no heed to their words. As the omens were bad, the soothsayers ask Dharmaraja not to travel and to postpone it by a day. Dharmaraja remains adamant saying that whatever could happen would be for the good and that he would not take a step back, once a

decision was made. So Dharmaraja reaches Hastinapura. The actors playing the Pandavas travel through the audience waking them from their deep sleep.

Dharmaraja says “Come, let us go to Hastinapura!” Chorus “Come, let us go to Hastinapura!” Dharmaraja says “Come, let us go to Hastinapura!” Chorus “Come, let us go to Hastinapura!” Dharmaraja says “Let us, each one of us get into our chariots and travel in luxury!” Chorus “Let us, each one of us get into our chariots and travel in luxury!” Dharmaraja says “Let us, each one of us get into our chariots and travel in luxury!” Chorus “Let us, each one of us get into our chariots and travel in luxury!” Dharmaraja says “Come, let us go to Hastinapura!” Chorus “Come, let us go to Hastinapura!”

In Koothu the violent and dramatic narratives will be performed only late in the night after about one AM when most of the children would be asleep. Till the children sleep the buffoon will be entertaining them with jokes. The real narrative would start very late at night. Most of the audience would know this and would be asleep, waiting for the cue from the actors as to when the real drama would begin. The actors walk through the sleeping audiences waking them up. Duryodhana wonders in happiness at the beauty of the palace “Shakuni Uncle, come here and see the magic created by the sculptor! Pillars have been made in marble, embellished with emeralds

This travel of the actors through the audience also establishes Kazhiyur, as both Indraprastha and Hastinapura and also as the pathway of the travel from Indraprastha to Hastinapura. Each act, each ritual performed in this festival has a dual function; it is first an enactment of a particular narrative but it also has the function of transforming and transporting the audience to the times of the epic.

Duryodhana asks “Do you see those pillars?” Shakuni says “They have done a fantastic job!” Duryodhana feels happy. Duryodhana “It is four days since father’s younger brother left! He asks the Kattiyakaran”It will take two days to reach and two days to return!” Duryodhana says “The Pandavas will definitely come!”

The Pandavas go directly to Dhritarashtra’s palace to pay their respects. Seeing that his brother’s sons are flourishing better than his own sons makes the blind King jealous. With poison in his heart, he speaks sweet words to the Pandavas. His words are cloyingly sweet! The Pandavas take his blessings and go to Gandhari’s palace. They take Gandhari’s blessings and stay at her palace.

Dharmaraja praises Duryodhana's palace and says he has never seen anything like this before in his life. He also says that his brothers suspected some treachery from Duryodhana and did not want to accept the invitation. Dharmaraja says "What a wonder this is? What I can say about the greatness of this beautiful palace! It is truly splendid! Chorus "What a wonder this is? What I can say about the greatness of this beautiful palace! It is truly splendid!" Dharmaraja says "Oho, I have not seen anything comparable to this anywhere! What can I say about the greatness of this beautiful palace! Dharmaraja says "Oho, I have not seen anything comparable to this anywhere! What can I say about the greatness of this beautiful palace!"

Dharmaraja says "What can I say about the greatness of this beautiful palace! Dharmaraja says "Younger brother Duryodhana, this palace looks beautiful even from outside. You have spent crores to construct such a beautiful palace and you have wanted it to be inaugurated by me, the eldest in the family! How can I praise your magnanimity, younger brother! Shakuni says "You have to perform the opening ceremony!" Dharmaraja says "My own younger brothers had a lot of suspicions. However, dear Duryodhana has risen, above my own dear brothers by asking me to inaugurate this wonderful palace."

Dharmaraja is genuinely moved by Duryodhana respecting him as the eldest brother and asking him to inaugurate the palace. He says by this act of generosity of Duryodhana he has gone up in his esteem over his own younger brothers who suspected treachery from Duryodhana. Duryodhana is happy that the Pandavas have bit the bait; Shakuni says that the job was still not over, he still has to convince Dharmaraja to gamble with him.

[A demonic head, Padhumai placed in front of every new building to ward off the 'evil eyes' of jealous neighbours chases Shakuni] The Padhumai recognises Shakuni's intent and chases him around the audience! This is the second wake up call to the audience! Shakuni runs in fear screaming "Aiyayyooo ... what act of betrayal have I committed to this Padhumai?"

In Indian traditions, a ferocious looking doll called the Padhumai or Drishti will be placed outside the house. This is to ensure that the house owners are not affected by the envy of the neighbours. When Dharmaraja opens the palace with Duryodhana and Shakuni, the Drishti doll recognises Shakuni as the personification of envy and chases him through the audience provoking much laughter. This is the second wake up call to the audience that the real drama is about to begin shortly.

Duryodhana says “Till the time we reach my victorious father’s mansion for a feast of delectable nectar of food, why don’t you spend some time playing the game of dice with my great uncle who knows no malice. Duryodhana says “Shakuni Uncle does not know any magic or deceit as he is so innocent. Why don’t both of you play a game of dice for a while we watch the game and enjoy” Dharmaraja asked Duryodhana if he wanted him to gamble, which was seen as one of the five vices which has to be avoided and that too with Uncle Shakuni? Dharmaraja says “Making the magician Shakuni, a person who conjures up evil in his mind and making him the opponent. This looks like a ruse as you really want to rob us of our wealth in the ruinous gamble of dice. In a minute I will give whatever you ask! You just have to ask younger brother! Please stop this ruinous game of dice. Shakuni says, “Nephew Dharma! Only the poor should fear gambling! Why should a rich man like you be scared?”

While Dharmaraja is refuting Shakuni, Karna who was also there speaks directly to Arjuna, but speaks as though he was addressing Dharma. Karna mocks “Dharma! You are worried about a mock gambling war; I wonder what you will do in a real war?” Arjuna gets angry. “Do you know whom you are talking to?” Arjuna picks his bow, the Gandiva, Bhima picks up his mace, and Karna too picks up his bow. Dharmaraja saw this and felt “There should be no fighting now and said Uncle I am fine with playing the game of dice with you.” Dharmaraja knows that the only way to stop the immediate war is for him to accept to gamble and he reluctantly sits down to play. Whenever Dharmaraja does anything, he would not do it without invoking Karna. The only thing he did was to sit down for the game of dice without thinking of Karna.

Duryodhana says that Shakuni will play with Dharmaraja as Duryodhana’s representative. He then states the rules of the game. He says that Dharmaraja has to first place his wager which he would match as a wager placed by Shakuni. If Dharmaraja won, the wager that Duryodhana placed will become the property of Dharmaraja. If Shakuni won the game of dice, Dharmaraja’s wager will belong to Duryodhana

Dharmaraja laments “Desperate for a wager with me Shakuni Uncle, as my opponent, hands itching, tongue dangling, take this as my bet, a wonderful pearl necklace worth a hundred crores and play carefully! I am putting up as a bet. Shakuni says “Did you see, my dear nephew, Dharma has kept hundred crore necklace as the wager! “Duryodhana says”I am keeping hundred crore worth gold necklace as bet on behalf of my Uncle! Uncle please play cautiously!”

In Tamil renditions of the Mahabharata, it is said that when Shakuni's father died he wanted his son to make gambling dice out of his wrist bones before cremating him. He says that this magic dice will fall on whichever number that Shakuni wanted and Shakuni would be invincible in gambling. This dice he says will come handy in Shakuni's plan to destroy Duryodhana in the future

In the Koothu that was performed by this particular group, Shakuni actually invokes black magic spirits to help him. Shakuni sings "Come running Kuttisathan [a goblin], I am going to win because of him!" Shakuni proudly shows the evil spirit! Shakuni addresses Dharmaraja "What is the the number on the dice that you want? You will lose, let me roll now! Come, come Kuttisathan to assist my rolling and win the game. Shakuni asks "Hey you! What is the number of dice on my throw? Kattiyakaaran says "The numbers are eighteen and ten!" Shakuni claims victory! Duryodhana corrects him saying "Victory to us Uncle!" Duryodhana gloats "My golden Uncle, how can I praise you? Show me your right hand and let me kiss it!"

At first when they sat down for the game of dice, Dharmaraja was not interested in gambling. But after losing two games, even Dharma was drawn into gambling. In the second game he lost the chariot given by the divine Krishna. He placed all the chariots that there were in Indraprastha as the wager, he then gambled away all the horses, elephants and servants in his kingdom. He gambled away even his royal sceptre. Drawn so far into the game, he lost all his wealth and even his own country.

Dharmaraja sings "You invited us and asked us gamble! I spoke against gambling! So let us continue the game of dice! Let's play on!"

In the games of dice that follow, Dharmaraja loses all his wealth, his kingdom to Duryodhana and says he has nothing left to gamble. Shakuni says he still has his brothers, himself and Draupadi, to place as a wager. Dharmaraja said that he was placing his brother Sahadeva as the wager, lost him, then placed Nakula, Arjuna and Bhima as his wagers and lost all of them.

When the people in the court wondered as to what Dharmaraja had left, that he could place as a wager, Shakuni said that if he so wanted, he could place himself as the wager and gamble! Dharmaraja sings "Let your wealth increase Uncle! And even if we lose all, let Dharma prevail!" Chorus "Let your wealth increase Uncle! And even if we lose all, let Dharma prevail!"

Dharmaraja laments “Let your wealth increase Uncle! And even if we lose all, let Dharma prevail!” Chorus “Let your wealth increase Uncle! And even if we lose all, let Dharma prevail!” Dharmaraja laments “Whatever travails we have to endure, it will be finally for the good, even if we lose the country and all our wealth” Chorus “Whatever travails we have to endure, it will be for the good finally, even if we lose the country and all our wealth” Dharmaraja sings “Even if we cringe as your slaves, let your wealth increase!” Shakuni impatiently says “Roll the dice!” Shakuni asks the Kattiyakaaran “Hey you! Check the numbers on Dharma’s dice!” Kattiyakaaran says “It is the same three” Shakuni asks “Now who has to play?” Kattiyakaaran says “It is our turn!” Shakuni says “Jai Shankar! I shall destroy all the five brothers! I shall make them slog as our slaves! Come to me, my evil spirits!” Shakuni asks the Kattiyakaaran “What have we got now?” Kattiyakaaran says “Two twelves, two sixes and a five” Shakuni says “Again victory is ours!” Shakuni gloats “Hey, nephew Dharma! You hoped that you will at least win this game, but you have lost and I have won!” Shakuni says “Hey, Let’s play one more game!” Dharmaraja laments “Shakuni Uncle! What more do I have to place as a wager?” Shakuni says “Don’t cry and say you have nothing to bet!” Shakuni says “The entire country worships the Queen of you five, Draupadi as a goddess. Bet that goddess and play on!” The cruel ones are celebrating, screaming, euphoric.

Shakuni saw and told Duryodhana “The game is not over yet. Why are you celebrating prematurely?” Duryodhana says “Dharma has lost himself, what more can he offer as a wager?” Shakuni says “What Dharma has lost so far is not the real wealth; he still has something even more precious. That day when you slipped on the stairs and fell, have you forgotten Draupadi’s laughter? Let him wager Draupadi!” Dharmaraja was shattered. Dharmaraja laments “My dear, my beloved you are precious to me like my own eyes! Alas my dear lady! Is this what Brahma ordained that I place you as the wager?” Chorus “Is this what Brahma ordained that I place you as the wager?” Dharmaraja sings “My dear lady! Is it the fate of this king to wager you?” Chorus “My dear lady! Is it the fate of this king to wager you?” Shakuni impatiently says “Roll the dice!” Dharmaraja laments “My sweet lady! Has it been ordained by the gods that I wager you?” Chorus “Has it been ordained by the gods that I wager you?” Shakuni says “Roll the dice! Roll, roll!” Dharmaraja now says “Govinda!” Dharmaraja says “Uncle, I now wager the precious wife of the five of us, Panchali!” Dharmaraja tries his best to win the game, but again the dice does not roll in his favour. The dice is also magical, and behaves as if it found its equal in Shakuni, filled with treachery, head to toe, rolled with affection towards him, rolled to secure his victory, spoiling Dharman’s chances.

Despite all efforts Dharmaraja could not get the dice to roll in his favour. Shakuni’s magic dice obeys him implicitly and falls on whatever number he wanted. When Dharmaraja loses Draupadi

as his final wager, Duryodhana sends his soldiers to get all the Pandava wealth to be brought to Hastinapura.

Dharmaraja sings “O Supreme being! Is this your Justice? Omnipresent one, is this Justice?” Chorus “O Supreme being! Is this your Justice? Omnipresent one, is this Justice?” Dharmaraja laments “Lord of the worlds, is this Justice? Omnipresent One, is this Justice?” Chorus “O Supreme being! Is this your Justice? Omnipresent one, is this Justice?” Dharmaraja asks “As we ruled our Kingdom, are we now to rule the forest? Lord of the worlds! Is this Justice? Omnipresent one, is this Justice?”

Duryodhana says “The Pandavas are now my slaves! Kattiyakaaran says “They are your slaves!” Soldier! The Queen of the five is at my mother Gandhari’s palace! Run fast and tell her that she is the slave of the King and her master the Great King Duryodhana asked her to come to his court!”

Kattiyakaaran runs offstage. In Villi Bharatam the soldier does not go as he was afraid of Draupadi. The intelligent soldier points out something about the legality of Dharmaraja’s wager which at least the elders in court should have noticed but had failed to. He says he asked Draupadi to come to the court, but she asked whether Dharmaraja had placed her as a bet before placing himself as a bet or had he lost everything including himself before he placed her as a bet. Dharmaraja only after he had lost himself did he place Draupadi as the bet! Did Dharmaraja, who had lost himself, have any right to place his wife as the bet? The intelligent soldier decides to say this as Draupadi’s question.

An angry Duryodhana asks “Why have you come alone?” Kattiyakaaran says “I went and called her, but she raised a legal objection!” An angry Duryodhana asks “What? She raised a legal objection? What objection? Kattiyakaaran says “She asked whether her husband had lost her first before losing himself, or did he lose her after losing himself?” Duryodhana asks “Did you tell her that the kings, the husbands had lost the game and have become my slaves? And did you tell her that she was now the wife of the slaves of King Duryodhana?” Soldier says “Yes, I did tell her” Duryodhana asks “What did she say?” Soldier says “As I told you she raised an objection!” Duryodhana asks “Did the slaves wager me after losing themselves, or did they wager themselves after losing me? How dare she ask questions? Who is this Draupadi to question me?” Then, Duryodhana rose: “How can a woman who is wedded to five men be called virtuous? That

they considered her virtuous and gave her pride of place in the Yagam that blasphemy is what has made them lose everything now.

Duryodhana suspects that the soldier he had sent had not asked Draupadi to come to court. So he sends his brother Ducchasa to bring her to the court. He says it would be good if she comes willingly, but should she refuse to come, he asks Ducchasa to drag her by her hair to the court. Duryodhana asks Ducchasa “Bring that arrogant woman to the court!”

[This scene has emotional resonances for the audience and here the actor playing Ducchasa can be heard angrily asking the audience to calm down]

Duryodhana says “When you go angrily, she will cry! Do not be moved by her tears!”
Ducchasa “I will not be moved by that Draupadi’s tears who had laughed at you!”
Duryodhana “She has laughed at many people! Duryodhana says “She has laughed at many people and walks around with swaying her hips”! Bring that arrogant woman here! Drag her with all respect through the streets! Duryodhana says “Bring her to court with all respect! Drag her by her hair through the streets and bring her soon! In most Koothu performances the Kattiyakaran or Sutradhar will sing an invocation song to Draupadi apologising to her for the violence which they are going to enact shortly. This particular Koothu was different as Shakuni had sung the invocation song at the beginning of the play itself.

Ducchasa says “Hey Panchali! Dharma lost himself and his brothers in the Court. He also lost you wholeheartedly. They are shattered and cringing in the court, come and see for yourself”
Draupadi says “Whatever the case may be Ducchasa! I am not in a position to come to the court. A woman will not speak of this to her husband, she will not say this even to her father. But as I consider you my son I can tell you that I am having my menstrual periods and so am not in a condition to come to the court. Draupadi does not heed Ducchasa’s words and an angry Ducchasa finally breaks the door open

When he entered her room and saw Draupadi, unconsciously he gets frightened! When he saw her he was scared to touch her. That is when he pulled out a weapon called Sendu, one that would extend when you throw, and contract when you pull it back. He stretched the weapon towards Draupadi’s hair and pulled her by her hair! Her lovely hair is dishevelled! [Storyteller now invokes Krishna]

In this Koothu for this particular scene there were two Draupadi's and two Ducchasana's. At first it was puzzling as to why suddenly two actors were playing the same role. As the first Ducchasana drags Draupadi by her tied hair and pulls her behind the stage the second Ducchasana would pull the second Draupadi back on stage. Now the audience can see that Draupadi's hair is untied. Till Draupadi ties her hair with the blood from Duryodhana's thigh, as she pledges at the end of this play, Draupadi in these festivals henceforth will only be seen with the hair dishevelled. Draupadi entreats her brother Krishna to save her from humiliation saying "Govinda! Govinda! Govinda!"

In the Bharatam storytelling sessions, when Draupadi is dragged from Gandhari's house, she pleads to Gandhari to save her from her son. Gandhari who knows her son, says she is helpless as her children would not listen to either parent

Most storytellers would comment as to how this scene is enacted in Koothu. In Koothu Gandhari is shown as a cruel mother-in-law who takes her sons side and tortures Draupadi. The storytellers would say that Gandhari was no ordinary woman but a lady from a great family and she would not behave in such a cruel fashion. As she was dragged by her hair, her lovely dark hair was dishevelled by the wicked Ducchasana, who dragged her by her hair. She was like a prey trapped in the nets of the predator in the hands of Ducchasana. She was like a deer trapped in the paws of a lion as Ducchasana drags her forcefully behind him by her hair.

When they reached the palace of her mother-in-law Gandhari, she rushed and fell at her feet and complained about what torture her son was inflicting on her: "Your son is abusing me!" People say that even an evil spirit would be moved by a woman's tears. Look at your son's heartlessness!

The same Ur or core text would be rendered differently by different groups. Some groups will highlight the conflict between Duryodhana and Draupadi that will get more stage time, while Dharmaraja will have much lesser stage time. While the core narrative performed by all groups would be the same, the emotional colouring could be vastly different. This again would give the audiences exposed to multiple groups rendering of the same narrative, a highly nuanced engagement with the core narrative

Being a theatre person myself, when I read Mahabharata, what interests me is as to how the story is narrated theatrically and what does Koothu do, to convert it into a story for the theatre, that is amazing. Therefore, the story telling in the afternoon and the performance of the Koothu in the night are very important. It also helps people in understanding what is there in Mahabharata beyond the Koothu.

Draupadi when she is dragged to the Kaurava court, appeals to the elders Bhishmachari, Dronachari, Kripachari, Ashwatthaman and Kritavarman. She wants justice from them and asks a very important question. She asks the elders whether Dharmaraja had lost himself first in the game of dice before placing her as a wager. Her question which none of the elders can answer is as to how a person who has lost himself can place another as a wager.

Even Bhishma, the wisest in the assembly is ambiguous in his response and does not answer Draupadi's question directly. All of them in that court are silent and Draupadi asks "Uncle should this happen to me in your court?" Draupadi addresses Bhishma first "Oh, son of Gangadevi, and cries at the feet of Dhritarashtra. "Father-in-law please look at the atrocity your son is committing." She cries at the feet of Vidura and even he keeps quiet. Adharma is ferocious and rampant, Dharma is quiet. That is when she address the court in general "People of this court! I want justice! I demand justice from the wisest here!" "When I see Dharmaraja now, I can see he has gambled! Did Dharmaraja wager me before he lost himself, or wager me after he had lost? If he had lost, and then put me up as the wager, what rights did he have to do so? What rights did he have to wager me after he had lost himself" Draupadi's question is one of the unanswered moral dilemmas in the Mahabharata

Usually in Koothu, the troupes would invite the five priests of the Dharmaraja Draupadi Amman temple, the Samayam, Ganachari Kumaravargam to stand in for the five elders to whom Draupadi would address the question. The entire Kaurava court cannot obviously be shown in the Koothu as it would involve over hundred and thirty actors and each theatre group would have about ten or twelve actors. Most of the actors would be playing two roles in each Koothu, and the makeup change will happen during the transitions between the scenes

That is when Vikarnan, one of Duryodhana's brothers stood up and spoke "People of the court! The lady's question is right! How did someone who had already lost have the right to wager the lady? Why are you maintaining silence? Answer her question!" he said. All in the court were slightly happy, that someone from among them raised the question.

Then Karnan rose and asked Vikarnan to sit down. “Are you the elder in this court, or the most learned? You are rushing to proclaim justice! If a man buys a tree, it includes all that is there on the tree, the leaves, flowers and the fruits, together! When Dharman has become a slave, all that belongs to him, including the lady is our slave. If there is someone here to refute it, can do so,” he said. None refuted.

Only Vikarna, the youngest of the Kaurava brothers rises to Draupadi’s defence. He says that Mother Draupadi was the wife of five Pandavas and Dharmaraja had no right to stake her himself without the consent of his four brothers. He says that actually Dharmaraja was duped into gambling and that the entire game was also illegal. Shakuni, he says was the person who suggested that Dharmaraja place Draupadi as a wager. Shakuni did this, he says, because he knew that Dharmaraja was now addicted to gambling which again in Vikarna’s eyes made the wager suspect as it was made under duress.

Karna, actually, unknown to himself, the eldest of the Pandavas, rises up in defence of his great friend Duryodhana. He is the one who makes the most hurtful comments against Draupadi and he orders Vikarna to sit down. In the Mahabharata, every character has a ‘double’ and here Vikarna becomes Karna’s double. Vikarna actually articulates what Karna should have rightfully said. In Koothu, till the play ‘Karna Moksham’ where Karna would be finally killed, he is always portrayed as a negative character in cohorts with Duryodhana and Shakuni. Only in “Karna Moksham’ does Karna become the tragic hero, popular among most audiences. Both in the festival villages and in popular culture, Karna remains the most popular figure in the Epic. The tragedy of Karna somehow seemed to resonate with almost the entire audience.

The lady did not even turn to look at the Pandavas. If she had looked at Bhima once, even Dharma could not control him. She realised that Dharmaraja was bound by his word and she also kept calm. In the storytellers rendering of this scene, Draupadi does not look at her husbands, the Pandavas when she is dragged into court. She knows that if she looks at either Bhima or Arjuna, they would be provoked, leading to immediate war and the time for war had not yet come

In Koothu, Dharmaraja has to calm his brothers down and he says “Listen brothers, even with great kings, their life and prosperity is always transient. Sometimes distress and sorrow lasts for a short time. If uncertainty takes over, it can last forever and all would be lost. Be patient my dear younger brothers because, this too shall pass.

Duryodhana says “Slaves should not any wear upper garment. Take it away” Ducchāsana goes and asks for the upper garment. Though Dharma feels his self respect preventing him, asking him not to give, his sense of justice makes him relent. After Dharma himself had given the upper garment, the others also gave their upper garments. Then Ducchāsana went up to Draupadi. Men can give away the upper garment, but can women do? When Ducchāsana asks for her sari, Draupadi refuses to give. Now Ducchāsana tries to pull her sari.

The lady clutching her sari in one hand raised the other to the heavens, chanting the thousand names of the divine Krishna. The storyteller Mani Vaasagan said that when Draupadi first called out her brother’s name he did not respond as Draupadi still was holding her sari with one hand while entreating with her other. Only when she raised both her hands in absolute surrender to him, did Krishna come and aid her by providing her with an endless magical sari. As the rogue pulled her sari, the lady felt weak and she lifted both her hands and called out Govinda thrice! Krishna answered her first call itself

Ducchāsana says “As I keep pulling, the sari seems endless! What is this magic of this?” Draupadi keeps chanting “Govinda!” Draupadi prays “Oh Kanna, he keeps running trying to pull my Sari Oh Kanna Kanna!” Draupadi chants “Govinda!” Ducchāsana says “What is this magic, the more I pull different coloured saris are coming! Chorus “Colourful saris are coming, what is this magic?” Draupadi keeps chanting ”Govinda!” Ducchāsana says “What is this magic, the more I pull different coloured saris are coming! I am getting exhausted pulling the sari. Draupadi asks”Why did this happen to me Oh Elder brother Kanna!” she keeps chanting”Govinda!” An exhausted Ducchāsana faints in tiredness

Dhritarashtra in Vyasa’s Mahabharata is a character torn between what he knows is Dharma and his love for his sons. Like the rest of the court he is appalled at the dishonour done to Draupadi and finally intervenes. He apologises to Draupadi saying that she was his most important daughter-in-law and grants her two boons. As the first boon Draupadi wants Dharmaraja released from bondage and as her second she wants the other four Pandavas released. When all five Pandavas are again free men, they prepare to depart when Dhritarashtra grants the kingdom and wealth the Pandavas had lost to Duryodhana in the game of dice. As the Pandavas are leaving Hastinapura in their chariots, Duryodhana is scared as he sees both Bhima and Arjuna fuming in anger. He persuades his father to call back the Pandavas to play the thirteenth game of dice. He says that whoever loses in the thirteenth game has to live for twelve years in the forests and one

year in hiding. Dharmaraja respects Dhritarashtra's request and plays the thirteenth game of dice which again he loses

In Tamil renditions of the Mahabharata, it is Draupadi who asks Dharmaraja to play dice for the thirteenth time. Panchali said that they have to play another game of dice again to win their freedom from slavery. Dharmaraja agreed to this and invited Shakuni "Uncle come let us play the dice again." Shakuni laughed "After all that has happened, you still have desire to gamble?" When Dharmaraja sat down to play the dice again, he prayed, with devotion, chanting the twelve names of Krishna. Shakuni asked "Nephew, you have lost everything, what will you wager now?" Dharmaraja said that he would place all the fruits of the good deeds he had done in his life, and again they play. Shakuni plays with his magical rope, but it did not work this time. When the God arrived, the magic disappeared. Shakuni's magic did not work! Dharma prayed for the number one the dice to fall. When the dice was rolled it fell on one! He said, the slavery is lifted, game over, and got up. In the Koothu rendition of this play, it is Draupadi who plays the thirteenth game of dice in which she wins back the freedom of the Pandavas and herself.

Draupadi says "Listen! Members of this great assembly! I will get the thighs of the man who wanted me to sit on his lap, and will only tie my hair with the blood from his broken thighs! And standing on the dead Duryodhana's chest I will braid my hair. Till then I will not braid my hair! This is my vow!"

The Koothu ends with pledges taken by Draupadi, Bhima, Arjuna, Nakula and Sahadeva, each promising the revenge that they would extract after thirteen years. Only Dharmaraja remains unruffled and calm

Bhima says "Listen, members of this assembly. The one who asked Draupadi to be dragged to the court and the one who dragged her here, if I do not kill all the Kauravas with my mace, all excluding Vikarna, I will kill all the ninety nine of them with my mace. Till then I will not lift water with my hand to drink. I will only splash water from the pond with my mace and will consume only the droplets flying in the air! This is my pledge. If I do not fulfil it, I am not Bhima!"

The Kaurava elders intercede here as they do not want a war right now. They say that because thirteen games were played. Twelve of which Dharmaraja lost and one that he had won the

Pandavas have to spend thirteen years in the forest, twelve of them in the open and one where they have to live hiding their identity.