

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

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### **Lecture 14**

#### **Arjuna's Tapas**

Dhritarashtra says

"When I heard that Arjuna had appeased the God of Gods, who wore the guise of a mountain man, the Three-Eyed God, in a battle, and had obtained the great Pasupati missile then, Sanjaya, I lost hope of victory"

After the dramatic episode of Vastrabharnam, or the attempted disrobing of Draupadi the Pandavas depart on their next Vanavasam and reach the forest called Kamiyaka Vanam. Veda Vyasa comes and meets them in the forest. Dharmaraja, Draupadi and the Pandavas are both angry and sad at the predicament they find themselves in. Vyasa consoles them by telling them mirror stories of other kings who found themselves in worsed predicaments than the Pandavas themselves. He says these sad times will also pass. The audience in these festival villages also relives the Vanavasam of the Pandavas by listening to the stories that the Pandavas themselves heard on their own Vanavasam. These stories are told to the Pandavs by both Vyasa and other sages who drop in on to Kamiyaka Vanam to meet the Pandavas

Dharmaraja sings "We bow to you, we bow to you, we bow to you, and we bow to you to thy lotus feet we surrender! What merit we must have earned for such a divine Sage to call on us!" Chorus "We bow to you, we bow to you, we bow to you, we bow to you, and to thy lotus feet we surrender!" Dharmaraja sings "You have come from the heavens to the earth honouring us with your blissfull presence" Chorus "You have come from the heavens to the earth honouring us with your blissfull presence" Dharmaraja sings "Oh holy one, oh venerable one, we touch your golden feat, you the Great Sage of Peace" Chorus "We bow to you, we bow to you, we bow to you, and we bow to you! To thy lotus feet we surrender!" Dharmaraja sings "Honouring us humble ones, you have come here eagerly" Chorus "Honouring us humble ones, you have come here eagerly"

Dharmaraja sings “We are so grateful with our minds in absolute bliss!” Chorus “We bow to you, we bow to you, we bow to you, we bow to you, to thy lotus feet we surrender!”

Dharma, do not assume that you are the only one to have lost all your wealth and been forced to live in the forest! Before you several kings like Emperor Nala gambled his wealth, and lost his land to Pushkaran. He had to abandon his wife and had to leave everything and everyone behind to become a charioteer in a land in a distant land for King Ritupuran! Your fate is better far you have come along with your wife and brothers. You are undergoing one thousandth of the trials that they had to go through. When we realise that there are so many others who are suffering more than us our own problems seem to melt away.

You Dharma are not encountering one thousandth of what Harischandran had to go through. Thus Vyasara brought some clarity to Dharma’s heart. Son, do not think that you are the only one who has problems in this world. This is all planned by time. Many noble monarchs like Nala and Harischandra have spent years in the forest. Your troubles are only for some more time. Those too will pass.

Vyasa says that there is no guarantee that Duryodhana would give back the lands of the Pandavas after the Pandavas finished their thirteen years of Vanavasam. He says that war would be inevitable and for the Pandavas to win this battle they would need the Pasupata yantram from Shiva. He says that Arjuna is the correct person to beseech this weapon from Shiva and asks Arjuna to do Tapas for Shiva. Vyasa says that Arjuna in his previous birth was actually the sage Nara who along with his counterpart Narayana had waged war for thousands of years against the Asura, Dhanasura. Both Nara and Narayana were unable to kill Dhanasura completely and the last unkilld portion of Dhanasura was now reborn as Karna whom Arjuna had to kill to fulfill their vow. Vyasa, of course does not say that Karna was the eldest born son of Kunti and hence the eldest of the Pandavas. But the audience and the listeners know.

This is another distinctive feature of epic performance traditions, drastically different from dramatic narrative traditions. In the dramatic narrative tradition, both the characters and the audience are in the dark about what lies ahead and the revelation of the end, the climax, is a vital element of the dramatic narrative structure. In the Epic tradition the audience already know what lies ahead, and the crucial element of the dramatic narrative tradition, the ‘suspense’ is quietly dispensed with. The principal question for the audience in these traditions is as to why, given what is going to happen later did each character behave in a certain fashion? While the dramatic

narrative tradition draws in its audience with its suspense and intricacies of plot. The Epic narrative distances the audience, rather offering them a space for introspection.

Vyasa tells Dharmaraja “One of you five have to take a vow and go to Mount Kailasa, perform a Tapas to Shankara to get the weapon. Then you will have the power to win over your enemies! Vyasa continues “Son, the correct one among you to perform this Tapas among you, is only Dhanajayan”

Dharmaraja asks “Do you mean my younger brother Arjunan?” Vyasa says “Of course it is Arjuna! Dharmaraja says he will follow his advice

Vyasa says “Please send Arjuna with me and I will teach him the appropriate mantras!” Dharmaraja agrees. Vyasa was convinced it should be Arajunan who should go. Do you know why he said that it should be Arjunan? It was Dhanasuran in his last birth that is now born as Karna. It was Naran in his previous birth, who was born as Arjunan. Dhanasuran with his remaining one armor took refuge under the God of Sun, Surya. Surya made Dhanasuran to be born as Karna in this birth.

Arjuna’s Tapas is performed as a ritual, narrated as a story and enacted right through the night as Koothu. The entire event is spread across twenty four hours and each rendition, as ritual, storytelling and theatre offers a different dimension to the same episode and offers a different emotional texture for the audience to engage with. For the ritual the villagers would uproot a hundred feet palm tree from the neighbouring fields and transport it to the Dharmaraja, Draupadi amman temple. This tree will be decorated and will become Mount Kailasa, which Arjuna has to climb to perform Tapas to Shiva.

Cutting of the palm tree for Arjuna’s Tapas ritual- Previously this act of cutting the tree and transporting it and decorating it would take about 2 days of work for the villagers as everything had to be done manually. Now with JCP machines and mechanization, the entire work is much faster, but it would still take twenty four hours of labour for the artisans in the village for this particular ritual

Each ritual performed in the village offers a space for the village audience to inscribe themselves into the Mahabharata. The Epic as it is performed in these festivals because of these rituals becomes more than a re-enactment of a war fought elsewhere. It achieves the quality of the here

and now and while becoming the memory of the village, it also becomes the memory of the wars raging within each member of audience

The event 'Arjuna's Tapas' is one reason why Na.Muthuswamy calls these festivals as total theatre. Na.Muthuswamy says "In the Koothu that is performed the previous night just two characters enact the story. Is a theatre just character telling a story? No! Look at 'Arjuna's Tapas' Tree is cut down and brought by everyone to be planted. See this in cinematic language. No! Tree is cut down and brought by everyone to be planted. Carpenter and artisans have worked on it. Then Arjunan arrives ready to climb it. As he ascends, the women gather below to light flour-lamps. As he climbs higher and higher, he sings Thiruvachagam. Few women tie cradles and lay their babies in them and Arjunan showers them with bilba leaves and lemons. People rush to catch them. Isn't all this 'theatre'? All rituals are also theatre

Arjuna beginning his Tapas "With dreadlocks in my head and my body covered with sacred ash. Saffron cloth around my waist, along with my bow and arrows, here I come for my Tapas!

Arjuna's Tapas is one of the most popular events in this festival and people throng in huge numbers from even other villages to attend this ritual.

Dear Audience, Arjunan Tapas play will be finished in a little while. The 'Tree-Climbing' scene will take place around 6.30 p.m. If those who are not blessed with any children, women yet to get married, come with betel leaves and offerings stand beneath the tree; It is believed their prayers will be answered. People without children and single women, complete your ablutions, and come to the tree.

Arjunan at the tree among the crowd chanting 'Om Arohara, Soma Sekara Arohara Siva, Siva'. The actor playing Arjuna begins his Tapas, or the act of climbing the Tapas tree, by invoking the deity Ganapathy, as is the practice before beginning any venture.

Please grant me my desire to see the three eyed deity, Shiva, I surrender to you Ganapathy! I go seeking the divinity's feet dauntlessly, Om Arohara Siva. Praise to you who measures the earth and the heaven. Praise to you who has encompassed the goddess. Praise to you who is the spring and the light. Praise to you and your glow. You grew as the river and sat besides it. You became

the six senses and the four Vedas, Praise to you! You became the wind and are everywhere! Praise be to you! You, who rules the mountain Kailasa. Praise! Praise!

Arjuna is in deep Tapas. He is in intense concentration. He is totally unaware of anything that is happening around him. Wild animals think he is a rock and rub themselves against him. Snakes mistake him for a pit and coil around him. Snakes have formed a large pit around Arjuna and there are several coiled everywhere. Taking him for a tree! Taking his form for a tree, creepers have grown thick all over. Arjuna does not notice the rains, the wind or anything else as he is immersed in his Tapas. Arjuna sings another invocation song beseeching for the success of his mission as he climbs the rope ladder up the tree trunk.

In the Bharatham storytelling sessions the first person who comes to test Arjuna's Tapas is his father the King of the Gods, Indra. Devendran comes down himself in the form of a Brahmin with a huge belly, snow-white hair hunched back, balancing on a staff, and a laughing stock of women, to detract Arjuna's concentration. The entry of Indra at this juncture is crucial to understand the significance of Arjuna's Tapas. Arjuna wants the Pasupata Yantram from Shiva, a weapon which he cannot really deploy as it would really mean the destruction of the entire world. Arjuna of course does not use this weapon in the war and the question becomes as to why Vyasa had asked him to ask for this particular weapon from Shiva.

Arjuna now sings songs from the text Thiruvaasagam. Shankara! Nama Shivaya! You who are the head of all the celestial beings! Chorus "Shankara! Nama Shivaya! You, who are the head of all the celestial beings," Arjuna sings "You appeared as a Linga and took seat in my heart!" Arjuna sings "I seek your feet of you who have the moon as an adornment" Chorus "I seek your feet of you who have the moon as an adornment"

Indra, when he meets his son, mocks Arjuna's desire to see Shiva and he says that even Brahma and Vishnu were unable to see Shiva and rebukes Arjuna for his presumption. Can you find that absolute matter that Vishnu and Brahma were unable to find? No one is yet to discover the supreme self, so you think you can? Arjuna says "They sought with their ego, and hence could not see him. I seek him with my love, and Shiva is bound to yield to my love.

The narrative which both Arjuna and Indra refer to is part of the Pallava iconography of Lingodhbhava which has its own history. Once Vishnu and Brahma were fighting between

themselves as to who was the more important deity. Suddenly a huge pillar appeared before them in the middle of the ocean. Both Brahma and Vishnu did not realise that the pillar before them was indeed Shiva. Vishnu declared that whoever could see the bottom of the pillar or the top of the pillar first, would be the greater deity.

So Vishnu took on the form of a wild boar, a Varaha and dove down to the bottom of the ocean to see the bottom of the pillar while Brahma took on the form of a swan and flew towards the top of the pillar. Vishnu went down thousands of kilometres searching for the bottom of the pillar and he gave up his quest because the pillar was actually endless. Brahma who was flying to the top also could not see the other extreme but he saw some flowers falling from the sky from top of the endless pillar.

Brahma asked the flowers which were falling to bear false witness saying that he had seen the top of the pillar. Shiva revealed himself to both Vishnu and Brahma as being the pillar which they have seen and Vishnu humbly acknowledged defeat as he was not able to see the feet of Shiva. Brahma vainly declared that he had flown to the top of the pillar and Shiva cursed him for his dishonesty. He said that Brahma would be the only deity who would not be worshiped in any temple. This is reason the tradition gives as to why the creator of the world, Brahma was not worshiped in any temple. But as an exception to every rule there is a temple for Brahma at Pushkar in Rajasthan. Arjunan blesses the gathered crowd and sings as he climbs the rope ladder up the tree trunk.

In Koothu it is Krishna who comes as the seductress Mohini, to test the sincerity of Arjuna's austerities (Krishna in disguise as Mohini) Humming "Thanthaane thananne thaane Seated on the winning peacock thanthaane thananne thaane

The Koothu hinges on the notion of conquest of desire because Arjuna in his previous Thirthayatra or pilgrimage had fallen in love with numerous women and the pilgrimage was secondary on that journey. Arjuna is a man known to be easily seduced by feminine charms and Krishna wants to know whether Arjuna has really overcome all desire. The ritual, the storytelling and the theatre, place a different emphasis on different elements in the narrative, giving a different emotional colouring to the same narrative. It is interesting to see the path all three take to converge to this singular idea of this overcoming of desire in this complex rendition. The Koothu in contrast to the austerity of the storytelling and the rigour of the ritual is treated almost as a farce as a light hearted comedy.

(Mohini luring Arjuna) The moment I set my eyes on him, my eyes go weak, as his energy is very strong. Is he not every woman's dream? Brahma excelled himself in creating him! He is sparkling like a cloister of stars as he comes here

Arjuna rejects Mohini's advances and explains why. Arjuna tells Mohini that Vyasa had told him that war was inevitable and to win the war they needed the Pasupatra yantram from Shiva. Only a person who had transcended desire could see Shiva and Vyasa had asked him to do severe austerities to Shiva, to beseech for this weapon. Arjuna says that now he is an ascetic who had transcended desire.

(Arjuna) "When one is on one's way to Kasi, the repercussions of one's actions follow behind him" (chorus) On one's way to Kasi (chorus) One's karma follows behind him. This has become my story and as I am on my way to Kailasam, on Tapas for the Almighty, here comes this temptress to distract me. "I Arjuna am headed to do Tapas, trekking through the forest" Chorus "Ardently, I am headed to do Tapas, trekking through the forest" Arjuna sings "I do not know why this vulgar woman comes in front of me! Siva Sivane!" Arjuna sings "Shiva save me from this calamity! Please stop Mother! Why have you come to hinder my pursuit? Oh, Mother! Chorus "Shiva save me from this calamity! Please stop Mother! Why have you come to hinder my pursuit? Oh, Mother! Arjuna sings "I am on my way to perform Tapas to Shiva! Please do not try to distract me from my quest!"

Krishna appears in his true form before Arjuna and explains the reason for the test. He says that Arjuna had a tendency to be distracted by beautiful women and on this journey he had to be totally above desire to be successful. He is pleased with Arjuna's resolve and blesses him to get the Pasupata Astram from Shiva.

Arjuna says "Kanna, why this disguise Thirumale?" Krishna says "Nephew, this is all for you!" Arjuna asks "Why Uncle?" Krishnan says "I did not want you take this Tapas to get the Pasupata Astram lightly! Your Tapas has to be blemishless for you to see Shiva! Arjuna says 'Unless I can perform Tapas without any temptations for several years, I can never attain the Pasupata Astram. Krishnan says "You must be single-minded in your austerities! As I know very well about your character! Arjuna asks "Why Uncle?" Krishana says "Even if a stone statue were to be draped in a sari, you will examine it closely to check whether it was a male or female form; such is your lust! Hence I came in the illusion of Mohini to test you!"

Arjuna says “Kanna! Now that you have tested my mental resolve, my rigour” Krishna interrupts “It is perfect! If you proceed like this...Arjuna interrupts “Can I attain what I want? Krishna says”Of course you will obtain the Pasupata Yantram” Arjuna says “Bless me and give me leave!” Krishna “My blessings will always be with you!”

In Koothu, another person tries to disturb Arjuna’s Tapas and this is a woman of the forest called Berundi from the hunter gatherer family. This incident prefigures the fact that soon Shiva and Parvati will appear in disguise before Arjuna as a hunter gatherer couple. One of the grouses that Shiva has with Arjuna is what he calls the treatment of Arjuna of his people the forest dwellers or the hunter gatherers. Berundi when she sees Arjuna is immediately attracted towards him but Arjuna remains steadfast in his austerities

Berundi “I hail from this forest, Berundi is my name! I fell for your handsomeness, satisfy my lust now!” Berundi “My husband who lives in this forest is Kandaberundan. Arjuna replies “Kandaberundan! Berundi”My name is Kandaberundi” Arjuna replies “Kandaberundi. Berundi says “As soon as I laid my eyes on you, I fell in love with you. Arjuna says”Oh, mother!” Berundi “Give me a kiss!” Arjuna sings “Clothed in bark and headed for the sight of Shiva, I have taken a vow. Do not block it with your lust! Or the sins will befall on you, do leave, Mother! For those who do practice Tapas truly will have absolutely no desire for women! Do not ever speak like this. Arjuna says “Please do not look at me like that. I bow before you as my own mother!”

Berundi’s husband Berundan comes shortly later and he is angry with Arjuna. Berundan “I have come to fight you in this forest, turn around, you brainless, scoot, I’ll make you tremble. Let’s see your courage, this world should know, I’ll rip your intestines out, you’ll see! Arjunan says “Cocky Berunda If the oceans break even mountains cannot build a dam I shall not be responsible, for my actions in wrath. Do not listen to your wife’s lies and head into a needless fight. Stylised fight between Bernudan and Arjunan. Arjuna mocks”A leap not even touching my crown is not a good leap”

Both Arjuna and Berundan fight and Arjuna renders Berundan unconscious. Berundi pleads with Arjuna for her husband’s life and Arjuna revives Berundan. Berundan falls unconscious. Berundi pleads for her husband’s life. Arjuna asks “You woman, who says you regrets your actions, is it true?” Chorus “You woman, who says you regrets your actions, is it true?” Arjuna “Have you

realised the poison you have spread?” Chorus “Have you realised the poison you have spread?” Arjuna “Have you realised the folly of your deeds?” Chorus “Have you realised the folly of your deeds?” Arjuna “If evil Berundan comes back to life will he not cause more harm?” Chorus “If evil Berundan comes alive, will he not cause more harm?” Arjuna “Can one trust the words of a hunter?” Chorus “Can one trust the words of a hunter?” Arjuna “Can one trust the words of a woman wearing a sari? Who might betray you at the last minute! Arjuna “Neither can I ignore a person who pleads, nor do I see a change in you woman!” Arjuna “Can you assure me that Berundan will not try to do more harm after I revive him?” Arjunan: Hey Berundi! I shall revive your husband as you wish! Berundi: Just wake my husband up and I’ll take care of the rest. Arjuna “Miserable Berunda, though your life is worthless, in this endless forest, that spans eight-directions, may you come alive again!” Arjuna “I had thought of killing you, but as I am on an auspicious mission to the land of the Devas, I forgive you!” Arjuna says “Listen Berunda, if like me, others come on such a mission to this forest, do not ever trouble them!” Protect them during their Tapas, obey and cooperate with them. I bless you both with all my heart!” Berundan “May victory be yours!”

In Hastinapura Duryodhana is gloating for he thinks that the Pandavas must be suffering in the forest. The divine Sage Narada, meets him and tells him that Pandavas are doing fine and he also warns him that Arjuna was doing severe austerities to get the Pasupata Yantram from Shiva. He says that, if Arjuna gets the Pasupata Yantram from Shiva the Pandavas will be invincible in the forthcoming battle. So he says that if Duryodhana wanted to win the forthcoming battle he had to first stop Arjuna’s Tapas. He asks Duryodhana to send his friend Mugasuran to disturb Arjuna’s Tapas

The middle one of the Pandavas, Arjunan in Indraneela Mountains, is in deep Tapas to the Supreme Shiva who bears the moon in his locks. If he succeeds and Shiva does award him the Pasupatha Asthram, Arjunan will be undefeatable. Imagine Duryodhana’s thoughts listening to this! Duryodhana asks “Divine Sage! What do you mean?” Narada says “You have a friend called Mukasuran. Send him” Narada really did not say this to help Duryodhana! There was a friend of Duryodhana called Mugasuran. Duryodhana’s friend Mugasuran had got a boon from Shiva that his death could only happen at Shiva’s own hands. Mugasuran to help his friend Duryodhana goes to Kailasa to disturb Arjuna’s Tapas

To disrupt Arjuna’s Tapas, Mugasuran goes to Kailasa in the form of a wild boar. Parvathi seeing the severe austerities that Arjuna is undergoing is curious as to why her husband Shiva was not responding to Arjuna’s austerities.

Shiva says that the time to destroy Mugasuran and to bless Arjuna had come. He also wanted to tease Arjuna by giving him a hard time! He asks Parvathi to disguise herself as a huntress and I will come as a hunter. All our Gana's or soldiers will come as our tribe's people. The four Vedas will accompany us as hunting dogs.' And so, the almighty Shiva comes disguised as hunter.

Shiva and Parvathi as hunters- Parvathi to Kattiyakaaran "We travel from village to village to attend the festivals! Kattiyakaaran "Do you travel by bus? "No we only walk!"

Drums rolling loud, the army of hunters enter. Uma Devi follows the divine Shiva. Arjuna, hearing the commotion, was rattled out of his Tapas. He opened his eyes to see a wild boar ready to pounce on him. He picked his bow, placed an arrow and shot. The divine Shiva, as the hunter, also shot an arrow at the very moment.

In the ritual Mugasuran is depicted as a man with a red cloth covering his head shaking the palm tree which is actually Kasilasa on which Arjuna is doing Tapas to meet Shiva. Arjuna shoots the wild boar in its head and Shiva shoots the same wild boar from its back. The boar dies hit by both the arrows. A fight starts between Shiva and Arjuna as to whose arrow caused the boar's death. While Shiva claims that the boar belonged to him as he had shot it first Arjuna claims that it belonged to him because the wild boar had sought his protection.

Arjuna says from the top of the tree "I who am from the Lunar Dynasty, give you sanctuary as you have sought my protection" Shiva asks Arjuna "Are you from the mountain? Or one of the brave men who saves this world? A merchant come in disguise? To shower flowers? Or someone who resides alone, all by himself? 'Hey kid! Who are you? A dead man or a live Brahmin? Shatriyan or a Suthiran or a Vaisian? Who are you?" Arjuna looked at him. Why make a fuss? Let's see what he does once he knows who I am. 'I am the middle-born Pandanva, Parthan, Arjuna,' he said. Shiva promptly announces, 'Hey Arjuna, I have been looking for you all this time.'

When Shiva realises who Arjuna is, he says he had been searching for him for quiet some time for the injustice that Arjuna had done to the forest dwelling community starting from Ekalavya. This becomes another pretext for the mock fight between Arjuna and Shiva. One of our own tribe, Eklayva had to go through so many trials with your mentor who demanded his thumb. You

are the enemy of my entire tribe. When you destroyed the Khandava forest, how many hundreds of hunters would have perished?

When we hunters hustled the Bramins' cows, you thrashed and killed the poor hunters, to save the cattle. Then I swore you as my enemy. Today, you have shot at the boar that I aimed and shot first. Now you are my direct adversary. You lout pick up your bow and let us see who amongst us the champion is. So they both pick up their bows and rain arrows at each other. Nevertheless, neither's arrow touches the other. In the Bharatham storytelling sessions the fight between Arjuna and Shiva is real with both of them shooting arrows at each other.

In the ritual the fight is more verbal wiith both Parvati and Shiva hurling abuses at Arjuna. Shiva wanted Arjuna to give up the wild boar so that they could eat it. But Arjuna refuses saying it went against his Shatriya ethics to forsake a creature that had sought his protection. Shiva laughs at the mention of Shatriya ethics and lampoons Arjuna's ancestry. He said that though the Pandavas had one mother they really had five fathers and sarcastically asks what kind of Shatriya ethics he was speaking about? Though you have a single mother Arjuna, you were born to five fathers you spoilt brat!

Arjuna explains that his father Pandu had a curse that he would die if he indulged in sexual intercourse. So his mother at the request of his father had invoked the boon given by Rishi Durvasa to her to beget the five children.

Arjuna says Our Dynasty has descended from the cultured Moon, the Lunar Dynasty. Shiva and Parvathi laugh at this and taunt Arjuna. Shiva "He is speaking of a Dynasty! Who is his father? Parvathi says"Ask him yourself, my husband! Shiva asks "Who was your eldest brother born to? Arjuna says"Eldest brother Dharma was born to Yama" Shiva taunts "What about the one born after him? Arjuna"Brother Bhiman was born to the divine Wind God, Vayu whom the entire world respects. Shiva taunting again "And you? Who were you born to? Arjunan"I was born to the one who rules the heaven, Indra" Shiva "And those two youngest brats? Who sired them? Arjuna"They were born to the the divine physicians, the Ashwini twins"

Now Parvathi jumps into the frame and says let's forget about your mother and asks sarcastically as to whether the five Pandavas were married to a single woman Draupadi. Arjuna says "You seem to act as though you know everything! Hey you hunter! You are ridiculing me!" "Hey! You

“speak as if you saw it all, you know it all, and you are shaming my clan!” Parvathi “First tell me, how many wives do the five of you have?” Arjunan “The five of us are married to the same woman” Parvathi “How can five men get married to one woman? How do you share her?” Arjuna “That gentle woman the five of us are married to was born from fire! She is the goddess to all of us, you fool!

In the ritual Arjuna, who is angry with both Shiva and Parvathi for both lampooning his ancestry and their marriage to Draupadi angrily asks as to who Shiva is.

Arjuna “Hey you, who are you? Shiva says” “Do you know who I am? People call me Annamalai. We have come in disguise from Kailaya Mountain to save the world! Parvathi “My name is Unnamalai

Shiva says he is Annamalai one of the various names of Shiva. Annamalai refers to the deity at Thiruvannamalai in Tamil Nadu and locates Shiva for the local audiences as the presiding deity of their own region. More significantly, in Thiruvannamalai, Shiva is worshiped as fire in the Panchabhutas and the five Pandavas also represent the Panchabhutas of which Arjuna represents the element fire. And in a sense Arjuna is also a manifestation of Shiva which is what Parvati is curious to see. Arjuna in the ritual says that once he finishes doing his Tapas he would destroy Annamalai and the fight in the ritual starts at this point.

“Hey you Annamalai! You bear the names of my God and Goddess. When I finish my Tapas, I shall kill you and make your wife a widow! Parvathi “You wayward man! This Annamalai is never going to die when I Unnamalai is with him! So this Unnamalai will never become a widow. Arjuna “I will complete my Tapas and come down! Let’s see whether you or I die!

The fight between Arjuna and Shiva is intense and all the weapons of Arjuna prove useless against Shiva. Shiva breaks the bow of Arjuna which prior to this no one in the world had been able to do. Bereft of his bow Arjuna lands on Shiva’s chest and strikes a blow. The blow of Arjuna on Shiva reverberates around the entire world and everything and everybody on the world feels the blow of Arjuna on Shiva, for Shiva was the entire world himself.

In the sparking sky, in the heavens all felt the blow, many forefathers In the world of the Devas, Indra, Devas, the Sun, the Moon, the Asuras, Gadurars, Gandharvas, and Sidhars, everyone felt the blow. In earth below, who did not feel the blow? Even the mud and the pebble! On earth, every human, sage, siddar, philosophers, great people and poets also felt this blow! From the elephant to an ant, all eighty four lakh kinds of living things felt the blow. Even Arjuna who instigated the blow felt the impact. The Pandavas felt the blow, and Duryodhanan who was seated in his palace too felt the blow

The reason given for the fight between Arjuna and Shiva in the ritual is that Parvathi wanted to see the fish birthmark on Arjuna's back shoulder. Now Shiva pretends to be angry and throws Arjuna up in the sky so that Parvathi can see the fish birthmark on Arjuna's shoulders. Arjuna being the hero, that he is, does not want to show his backside to his opponents and as he is falling he turns around to face his opponents. When he falls on the ground he screams at the hunter Annamalai and says where you are? But Annamalai has disappeared. Arjuna screams for the hunter in rude language calling him a fool, an imbecile. But there was no one before him. Suddenly there arose a glow. Inside the glow was Lord Shiva with his consort Parvathi, seated on his vehicle Rishaba, the bull. Arjuna! Your cousin Duryodhana, on learning about your Tapas sent his friend Mugasuran as a wild boar to disrupt your austerities. I came down with my wife and children as hunters, along with the four Vedas as our hunting dogs, and got beaten up by you"

Shiva says that war between the cousins was inevitable and grants Arjuna the Pasupata Astram. After gifting Arjuna the weapon, Shiva bids Arjuna farewell saying that they were returning to Kailasa.

There is intense competition in the festival village between the various sponsors as to who had organised the grandest event. This intense competition between the various sponsors was a part and parcel of this festival which sometimes had some funny incidents associated with it. In Kazhiyur the Koothu group had to shorten the ritual Arjuna's Tapas as the sponsors of the next event had taken away the statues of Draupadi and Arjuna from this ritual. The sponsors of the next event felt that the ritual was taking too much time and they did not have time to decorate the idols for their own ritual they were sponsoring. So the Koothu group reluctantly had to shorten the entire ritual to suit the next event's sponsor. When Shiva finally appears before Arjuna, Arjuna gets confused and forgets as to what he had really done Tapas for. When Lord Shiva appears without warning, Arjunan is clueless. He danced, sang, cried, threw himself on the ground, stood up, and cried,

‘Hahara Sambo Sankara Lover of Parvathi, Lord of generosity, Omnipresent, you came to honour this humble one? Shiva inquired what boon he would yearn for. This is my lucky break, Lucky break Who could be more fortunate. This is my lucky break, Lucky break Who could be more fortunate Who could have such a Tapas and such a reward!

He suddenly wants moksha or liberation from the endless cycle of birth, death and rebirth. Shiva laughs and says that, Arjuna did the austerities to get the Pasupata weapon from him and gives it to him. He also tells him that he has one more birth on earth as a later day saint called Kannapanayanar who was born a hunter. ‘Whether knowingly, or unknowingly, you have used foul language on me you will be born as a hunter in your next birth. You may be a hunter, but not a fool. That is when I will grant you your salvation.’ And so it is said that Arjuna was reborn as Kananappan, but there is no textual evidence for this later day narrative!

This is another unique feature of epic traditions where no narrative really ends and can get carried across multiple epochs of time. Later in the narrative when Karna again wants Moksha or release from the endless cycle of birth, death and rebirth he is denied that because he is supposed to be born as a Pallava general Paranjyothi. Paranjyothi would attain Moksha as the saint Siruthondar. Paranjyothi the Pallava general after the war at Vatapi was disgusted with war and became an ascetic known as Siruthondar. As Siruthondar, Paranjyothi attained Moksha. Another village later in the year would celebrate the festival of the general turned saint, Siruthondar. The Mahabharata as it is celebrated in these villages is not restricted to this particular festival. There would be numerous festivals celebrated right through the year celebrating portions of the epic.

From the heavens came down a chariot, from which alighted Devendran. He took Arjuna along with him to Devalokha. Arjuna, who is treated as a special guest there, is entertained with Urvashi’s dance. As Urvashi was dancing, she seemed mesmerised by Arjuna and had eyes only for him. The narrative now converges on the idea of conquest of desire. Indra who had visited his son at the beginning of his austerities again comes when Arjuna is successful in getting the weapon from Shiva. He immediately takes him to the celestial heaven, Indraloka. Arjuna is pleased to meet his father but is also impatient to return to Draupadi and his brothers. Indra for some undisclosed reason keeps delaying Arjuna’s departure. He makes a surprising request to Arjuna when he asks him to learn dancing from the Apsaras Urvashi. In Indian traditions, a good king is supposed to be versatile in all the sixty four Arts and dancing was definitely one of the sixty four arts. But Indra’s request at this juncture when war seems imminent, looked surprising

Arjuna begins learning dancing from Urvashi and Urvashi is immediately drawn towards Arjuna and tries to seduce him. For Arjuna, Urvashi was like his mother, as she was really the wife of his great ancestor Pururavas and he rejects her advances as it would have been morally inappropriate to accept them. Urvashi declares that Apsaras like her were creatures of pure desire who lived outside notions of human morality. Arjuna is steadfast in his refusal and an angry Urvashi curses Arjuna, the ultimate hero, to become an eunuch, the complete opposite of what he actually was. At the break of dawn all are present in the Deva Sabha, but Arjuna was missing

Indra sends a Deva called Chitrarathan to look for Arjuna. He returns to inform about Urvashi's curse on Arjuna. Indra tells Urvashi that it was improper to curse guests who visited Indraloka and asks her to withdraw her curse. Arjuna went and fell at Urvashi's feet. Now her anger from Arjuna's rejection of her had abated. "I sought you with desire and yet you stood steadfast. Praise be to you!" She blessed him and changed the curse. Arjuna entreats, 'Mother, can I take on this curse for a year when it is most convenient for me?' Urvashi granted him this. Urvashi, at the request of Indra and the other Devas, retracts her curse but surprisingly Arjuna wants to live this curse for a period of a year where he wants to live his life as an eunuch Brihannala.

The Telugu film, Narthanasala, where NT Rama Rao plays the role of Arjuna/Brihannala gives an interesting reason as to why Arjuna was cursed to live as an eunuch for a year. In this rendition, the entire chain of events is actually orchestrated by Arjuna's father Indra. Indra knew that there was great anger in his son and now he had the weapon, the Pasupata Astra with which he could destroy the entire world. War, to him, should be waged only for Dharma and never out of a sense of anger. So he wanted his son Arjuna to understand this by living in the inner apartments of a Palace along with the women and children. For in any war the aftermath of the war was felt only by the women and children. In this rendition, Indra knew when he asked Arjuna to learn dancing from Urvashi that Urvashi would be attracted towards Arjuna. He also knew that Arjuna with his sense of morality would reject Urvashi leading her to curse him.

In the next episode of the Mahabharata, the Aghyanavasam, or the thirteenth year of exile, where the Pandavas have to live in hiding without revealing their identity each of the Pandavas choose an identity which is diametrically opposite as to who they actually were. Draupadi and the five Pandavas live as their shadow selves and their journey of self-realisation comes to a completion in the kingdom of Virata.

Dharmaraja, the epitome of righteousness chooses to be the gambling companion of the king of Virata. Bhima, the glutton chooses to be the cook, providing food for everyone. While Nakula and Sahadeva, the intellectuals, choose to be grooms in the stables taking care of horses and the cows. Arjuna, the ultimate warrior, chooses to spend that year as an eunuch dance teacher to Uttara Kumari, the princess of the Virata Kingdom