

Performance Traditions of the Mahabharata in Tamil Nadu

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Lecture 15

Kichaka Vadham

Dhritarashtra says

“When I heard that the very best of my sons had been crushed by Arjuna who was on a single chariot, when the great-spirited warrior lived in Virata’s kingdom then, Sanjaya, I lost hope of victory”

Once the Pandavas chose to stay there, the rains poured on the kingdom and the lands became fertile again. In the festival villages it is believed that it would rain when the story is narrated, the ritual performed and the Koothu enacted

On the orders of the bearer of the venomous serpent flag, Duryodhana, the five Pandavas spent twelve years, along with their Drupada’s daughter Panchali and with the company of many Vedic Sages with kindness and affection, having flowers, fruits, tubers, leaves for their food, sharp in intellect, and senses under control, they passed the twelve years as if it was just a day’s time.

The rains for which the entire festival is celebrated descended in torrents on Kazhiyur village on this particular day of the festival. The Koothu which usually starts around ten PM in the night was consequently delayed and started well after midnight. Finally the organisers of the festival found some plastic sheets to cover the performing space giving protection to the actors from the rain and the Koothu enactment began. Because of the huge delay in the start the entire Koothu could not be performed and only a part of the play was performed on this particular day

King Virata tells Kattiyakaaran “This Virata land, is a small island in my Kingdom, it is small part called Umalayapattinam. Kattiyakaaran repeats “Umalayapattinam” Virata “It is a small island!” Kattiyakaaran says “You are ruling several such countries!” Virata says “One day my brother Trigarthan, also called Susharman asked me to divide the country. I want one half and you take the other. “Countrymen are all only praising you! Anyway as I had to give him his part someday, I gave Umalayapattinam to him, and I kept Virata Kingdom for myself

The Koothu began as usual with a first person narrative with the Virata king articulating the core problem of the play indirectly addressing the audience. Like in all Koothu enactments, the opening statement both states the actual conflict and sets the tenor of the play. The play begins with a recounting of a fight between the Virata King and his younger brother. This fight between the brothers is again a mirror narrative reflecting the fight between Pandavas and their cousins the Kauravas over kingship.

Virata says “After some time had elapsed, my brother again picked up fight with me. Kattiyakaaran says “My brother again picked up fight with me” Virata says “He said Elder brother as our countrymen are only praising you, so you should not live! You should not live!” Kattiyakaaran repeats “If you die!” Virata says “If you die our countrymen will praise me!” And called me out for a fight! Both of us fight!”

Trigarthan is more powerful than his brother the King of Virata and defeats him in battle and chases him out of his own kingdom. The Virata King appeals to the kings of the fifty six countries to come his aid to help him in his fight against his brother Trigarthan all the fifty six kings refuse as they are scared by the power of Trigarthan. Finally in desperation the Virata King enlists the help of Kekaya King Kichaka. Virata says “Finally! I went to Kekaya kingdom and surrendered at the feet of Kichaka Raja, I said Kichaka Maharaja! You have to save my life! My brother is waging a ferocious war with me, so please save me!”

This play, which is set in the Virata kingdom, is also popularly known as Kichaka Vatham or the killing of Kichaka. The Pandavas now have enormous power with Arjuna having obtained the Pasupata Yantram from Shiva. With this amount of power in their hands, they could easily become despots. While the narrative of why they choose the roles they choose to play in their one year of hiding has multiple nuances, both the Koothu and the Bharatham sessions foregrounds the killing of the despots within themselves, the inner Kichakan as the crux of the play

Kichaka sings “In this Kekaya Kingdom! I, Kichaka Rajan am coming fast to the welcome shower of lotus flowers by flower girls!” “The beautiful Kichaka is coming! All the Ministers come and bow down to me! Look at the way the beautiful Kichaka is coming before you! “When I come, the world trembles!”

Initially the Virata king does not think of going to the Kekaya king Kichaka for help, because the Kekaya king, his brothers and sister were born to a Shatriya king and a Brahmin mother. Subadhra or Sudeshna the elder sister of Kichaka was also unmarried because no Shatriya king wanted to marry a princess of mixed parentage. After every King had refused to come to his aid, the Virata king finally in desperation goes to Kichaka for help. Kichaka is willing to help but he has his own conditions to make.

That is when; the Virata Raja heard the power and prowess of Kichaka and reached out for help in the battle. Kichaka said “O Virata King, the entire country knows of my power. Once they know I stand by you, no one will come to fight with you.

I will always stand by your side, but he stipulated a condition for his support. He wanted the Virata King to first marry his elder sister. His sister Sudheshna had remained unmarried for long as her father was a Shatriya, and her mother a Brahmin. Because of her being of mixed parentage, no Shatriya wanted to marry her. Kichakan defeats Trigarthan and has his brother-in-law crowned the King of the Virata kingdom. Trigarthan finds asylum with Duryodhana and is biding his time to attack his brother again.

The Pandavas spent their twelve years of Vanavaasam as though it were just a day. Finally Dharmaraja asked his brothers as to which country would be appropriate for their one year of living in hiding. Arjuna bowed down before him and said “Elder brother! Apparently there is a kingdom of the Virata country. There is a king, a descendant of Manu, who is ruling the kingdom with integrity. He is known as Virata and his kingdom would be the best place for us to live incognito!”

Before entering the Virata kingdom the Pandavas hide their weapons in a Vanni tree in a Kali temple at the edge of the kingdom. Only Dharmaraja and Arjuna would be able to see the weapons as to what they really are. To the rest of the people including Bhima, the weapons

would look just like snakes. In Tamil traditions the Vanniyar Jati were supposed to have been born out of fire from this tree. Hence they were made the caretakers of the Pandava weapons for this period of a year. In the ritual that would be enacted in all these villages, Arjuna in his eunuch form as Brihanala would finally take the weapons from this Vanni tree to fight against the Kauravas.

As they entered the Virata kingdom, everyone was bowing down to Dharmaraja. Dharmaraja had eyes brimming with kindness and looking at his kind eyes, people immediately felt like bowing before him. As Dharmaraja entered the palace of Virata, the Virata king wondered as to who the beautiful person was and immediately bowed before him.

The Virata King asked “Oh Brahmin! May I know who you are?” Would Dharmaraja ever lie? He definitely would not! In reply Dharmaraja asked the Virata King “Have you seen Dharmaraja?” Virata replied that he had seen him. Dharmaraja replied “I am the same Dharma, but with a different body!” But Virata thought there must be much in common between the Brahmin and Dharmaraja! Dharmaraja said “I know four Vedas, six Shastras, sixty four arts, ninety six essential principles and all commentaries on them! I can clear any doubts you may have on any of the philosophical doctrines”

In Koothu, Dharmaraja, the Pandavas and Draupadi are announced on stage by the Kattiyakaaran by saying as to who they actually were. So the audience know the disguise that each of the characters are seen in. But Dharmaraja casts a magic spell on the Virata court. So that everyone excepting the Pandavas and Draupadi forget who they actually were and only see the disguises the Pandavas are in

Kattiyakaran announcing to the audience “Watch the way Dharmaraja make his entry in disguise as the Brahmin Gangu Bhattar” Dharmaraja’s invocation song to Vishnu, before he enters the stage “Harirajavaradha cast your generous look on us! Please cast your glance on us, and end our troubles” Chorus “Please cast your glance on us, and end our troubles”

Dharmaraja says that he was Gangu Bhattar, one of the twelve thousand Brahmins who chose to leave Hastinapura when the Pandavas left for their Vanavaasam. He said all of them had stayed with the Pandavas in their Vanavasaam for twelve years and that he had learned all that he knew

from Dharmaraja himself. The twelve years Vanavaasam of the Pandavas finished the day before and overnight the Pandavas had disappeared to spend their thirteenth year in hiding.

Dharmaraja sings “What can I tell you about our fate, Oh King Virata” Chorus “What I can tell you about our fate, Oh King Virata King?” Dharmaraja says “O king, I cannot spend my entire life in your kingdom. I can stay only for a year in your kingdom as I have to get back to Indraprastha before Dharmaputra returns to his kingdom. Kindly offer me your protection in your kingdom for a year”. The Virata king agrees

The next day after Dharmaraja, Bhima enters the Virata court disguised as a cook Balayudhan. Significantly, Bhima when he enters declares that he is hungry. Bhima, who is known to be a glutton, chooses to live this year as his counter self- as a cook and provider of food for other people. Each of the Pandavas and Draupadi, in this one year of hiding, assume roles which were diametrically opposite to what they actually were. In Koothu, it is Gangu Bhattar or Dharmaraja who introduces Bhima to the Virata king as Balayudhan. He says that Balayudha was not only a great cook but was also a great warrior who could not be defeated by anyone in battle.

Bhima says “Elder brother, I am ravenously hungry!” Dharmaraja says “Younger brother, be patient! You will soon get enough to satisfy your hunger” An angry Bhima asks “What is the reason for our pitiable condition?” Dharmaraja says “It is due to our fate!” Bhima angrily retorts “Do not blame it on fate! We have been reduced to this state because of you!” We roamed around the forests and endured so many troubles; I have even forgotten what it feels to be happy!” Dharmaraja says “Our fate is like that but do not worry, we will soon go back to our own Kingdom!” Kattiyakaaran who has overheard this says “Oh! The two of you are brothers? I will go immediately and report to the King!” Bhima says “You will die, badly if you do so!” Kattiyakaaran says “Even if I have to die, I will tell the King the truth and die!” (Dharma casting a magic spell) You shall forget everything; forget all that we were speaking. Kattiyakaaran who has now forgotten everything asks “What were both of you talking about?” Virata King asks Dharmaraja pointing to Bhima “He says he is also from Indraprastha! Oh Brahmin! Do you know him? Dharmaraja says”He will cook well, we can call his food as delectable as cooked by the great King Nala!” Virata asks “Are you speaking of this man?” Dharmaraja says “Not only can he cook well; he is also called Balayudhan as he can fight with many weapons and no warrior can defeat him in battle!” Bhima says he will kill them all! Virata King says”So, you say he is also a brave warrior! But do not say that no one can defeat him!”

On the next day Arjuna, entered the court as a person who was neither a man nor a woman, in the form of a eunuch. The great Indra's son, the one holding a long bow, praised as a valiant man excelling all the Devas took on the form of an eunuch, transforming himself for a year by the old curse of Urvashi, the slender waisted, with breasts adorned with thick ornaments, eyes sharp like a sword, with jewels adorning his ears, appeared in the dancing hall, he who was the epitome of masculinity, came as an eunuch having accepted Urvashi's curse. It seems Arjuna had very long hands. In Ramayana Emperor Dasaratha is described as having long hands. Whoever has long hands is considered as being naturally born with luck. Arjuna, who had long hands, thought that if his hands were noticed, he could be identified as Arjuna so he disguised the size of his hands by bending one hand by placing it on his hip, and with the other hand holding it.

Arjuna enters in disguise as the eunuch Brihannala singing an invocation song to Krishna/Vishnu "Nanda nandana Mukunda who resides in beautiful Vaikunta! Nanda nandana Mukunda Who resides in beautiful Vaikunta! I invoke the one who as a child showed the entire Universe in his mouth to his mother Yashoda! "I invoke you! Nanda, joyous Mukunda who resides in beautiful Vaikunta!"

Arjuna who was not satisfied by earning laurels in this world had also gone to other worlds to prove his bravery, had killed the invincible Asuras called Kaalika Nivatakavachas who were three million in numbers. And by doing so he had given life back to even Indra! Such a great warrior now entered the court as an as eunuch! He went straight to the court and King Virata asked "Who are you?" Arjuna said "I am Brihannala and I can sing and dance very well" I heard you have a daughter, and if you permit me, I can teach her singing and dancing!" The King said that his daughter was in the inner apartments and asked Arjuna "Go and teach her singing and dancing"

The next day Nakula entered the place in disguise as a horse groom, Dharmakeerthi. While in the Bharatham session Nakula comes in disguise as a horse groom Dharmakeerthi to the Virata court in Koothu he comes as a Muslim warrior and a horse trader Rowther Bhai. The Rowthers were horse traders in medieval Tamil Nadu, but now this community has moved on to other professions.

Nakula in disguise as 'Rowther Bhai' "Our good white master, asked us to drink alcohol! Asked us to get into fights and to break peoples skulls" Asked us to drink liquor! Our good white

master, asked us to get into fights and break peoples skulls! Our master, a good master! Asked us to drink liquor! Asked us to quarrel and wanted us to break skulls

This particular Koothu also makes a comment on the colonial times when the British introduced mass produced alcohol among the people. Alcoholism and indiscriminate consumption of alcohol is a major problem in the villages of this region. Nakula, after making his social/political comment on alcohol, reveals as to who he really is. He also promptly casts a spell on the Kattiyakaaran so that he will forget who he, Nakula really was. But the audience know who he is. Nakula tells Kattiyakaaran “In reality I am not ” Kattiyakaaran admiringly says “He also speaks good Tamil” Nakula says “I said that I was Ravuthar Bhai, in reality I am not a Muslim! I am the fourth born among the five Pandavas, Nakulan. One popular image of Nakula in the Mahabharata is of him being the fastest swordsman riding on horseback. It seems, Nakula would ride out into the pouring rain and deflect each raindrop with his sword. And when he returned back there would not be a single drop of water either on his body or on his horse.

Nakula says “We brothers looked around, to see which the prosperous nations are where we could live in hiding and we saw that the Virata Kingdom was the most prosperous. We saw free food being distributed in plenty to anyone who needed it! So we decided to take refuge here! “Now who am I?”He asks the Kattiyakaaran who says “Bhai!” Again Nakula asks as to who he was and Kattiyakaaran says King Nakula. Nakula casts a spell on the Kattiyakaaran who promptly forgets the entire conversation. The following day Sahadevan came as caretaker of cows, Tantribalan. All the Pandavas came with a different garb, each one of them

Sahadevan asks the Kattiyakaaran “Do you know who is the new person who has come before you?” Kattiyakaaran says he does not know. Sahadevan says “I am the fifth brother of the Pandavas! I am the expert in the Vedas, Shastras, arts, literature and well read, I am Sahadeva, the youngest of the five Pandavas. In the Mahabharata, he is known as one of the four people who know the past, the present and the future. To reiterate- each of the Pandavas and Draupadi assume roles which are diametrically opposite to who they actually were. Nakula and Sahadeva, the intellectuals become the grooms in the horse and the cow stables; Bhima the glutton becomes a cook providing food for everybody. Arjuna the epitome of masculinity becomes an eunuch, living in the inner apartments of the Virata kingdom and Draupadi, the goddess and the queen of the Pandavas becomes the maid to the queen of the Virata kingdom, Sudeshna or Subhadra

“A beautiful lady capably of being worshipped even by Lakshmi, who resides on the lotus full of honey.”

The doorkeeper told the lotus eyed Sudeshna, a slender waisted beauty has walked in here like an ordinary woman” Sudeshna the sweet talker asked the doorkeeper to bring the bright faced lady in. The lady went straight to Sudeshna’s place. Sudeshna saw her approaching from the balcony of her palace and realised that the lady was coming to meet her, sent her friends to get the lady to her. Draupadi singing and announcing her entry as Vratasaarini “Look at how I am entering the court as a beautiful golden creeper!”

When Draupadi came to her palace, Sudeshna offered her vermilion, sandal paste and flowers and also gave her buttermilk to drink and refreshments to eat. This reception was a high honour called a Brahmin reception. After receiving Draupadi grandly, she asked her where she was coming from.

Draupadi said “The Pandavas who had taken a vow to live in the forests due to the detestable game of Shakuni, I lived in the proximity of the beautiful women in their palace whose eyes would make the deer flee, I am Vratasaarini or the one who has taken a vow that no man can look at me without his life being endangered. I was the maid in the Pandava palace of Panchali. As they lost in the game of dice they went to forest, I have been roaming in many countries and come to stay here for a while, as your maid. But I have a condition as I have taken a vow. I shall not look at any man, and no man should look at me. If they do so, it may even cost them their life.

On one level this period of stay in the Virata kingdom is the time when the Pandavas and Draupadi engage with their own notion of selves. For the final overcoming each one of them has to assume the shadow selves of who they actually were. The one year of living in hiding of the Pandavas is almost over and they are ready for their final overcoming.

Kichaka, handsome like Manmata the god of love, before he was burnt by Shiva, standing majestic among his hundred and four brothers, manly, dynamic, lustrous, and the general of Virata’s army. One day, Kichaka went to meet his sister Sudeshna, Virata’s Queen. Sudeshna, who walked like a swan and had a golden complexion, and only spoke sweet words like nectar to everyone, Kichakan had hundred and three brothers. Of the hundred and four he was the eldest and named Kichakan. He was comparable to the God of Love in beauty, he was also extremely powerful, but unfortunately, was a complete fool!

In Koothu, the scene now shifts to Kekeya kingdom where the audience can see Kichaka in his own court. For twelve years there have been no rains in the Kekaya kingdom and the farmers in the kingdom are in acute distress. But still Kichakan wants them to pay their taxes. He has also not gone to see his sister after her marriage to the Virata king. Sudeshna or Subadhra who wants to see her brother sends him an invitation for him to come to their kingdom and also meet his nephew and niece whom he has never seen. Kichaka says “I do not care if it has rained or not for the last twelve years! You owe me taxes which you should pay today, here and now, at this very minute! People protest saying how ruinous the demand was for their families. “Our wives will become widows and our children orphans if we try to pay what we do not have! Alas! Alas!”

As Kichaka is set to leave to the Virata kingdom he sees a series of bad omens foretelling his doom and eventual demise. The royal elephant on which he sets off collapses, a lone widow is heard wailing in the distance and suddenly a rat snake crosses his path. Each of these omens in the villages would be seen as an ominous sign when departing on a journey, and seen together they portend a calamity.

Kekaya! Oh Kekaya! Wonderful! Wonderful! You have decorated the royal elephant well. Kichaka proclaims “Kekaya! Oh Kekaya!” As Kichaka is about to mount the elephant, it collapses leaving Kichaka shocked. Kichakan sings “Dangerous omen are appearing! My mind is also disturbed! These are dangerous omens!” He asks the Kattiyakaaran “Do you see over there? Kichakan sings “Look there! A woman is wailing piteously alone! A lone Brahmin is also crossing our path!” Kichakan addresses the Kattiyakaaran “A small rabbit is running out fearlessly in the open! All this is disturbing! Kekeya! Oh Kekeya! Kichaka continues “All this is must only be the work of God! Maybe these indicate the fate that awaits me!” Kichakan is scared by all these bad omens but still he continues his journey to the Virata Kingdom. Kichakan addresses his sister “I bow down to your golden feet sister who raised me up so well!” Sudeshna says “Live prosperously little brother!” Kichaka says “Oh! The wife of the prosperous kingdom of the great Virata King!

In Koothu after meeting his sister and seeing his nephew and niece, Kichaka wants to return back to his kingdom immediately. His sister who is really seeing him after fifteen years delays his return and instead asks him to visit all the beautiful gardens in their kingdom. By this she hopes Kichakan will stay a few more days with her in their kingdom. Kichakan is of course entranced by the beautiful garden he sees. Sudeshna meanwhile has also sent Draupadi to pick some flowers for her. Draupadi represents Kichakan’s doom and the Koothu keeps intercutting

between Draupadi picking flowers in the gardens and Kichakan visiting various gardens of the Virata Kingdom. Kichakan and Draupadi are destined to meet and the Koothu dramatizes this forthcoming encounter.

Kichakan sings “How can I even begin to describe the greatness of my sister’s garden! My brother-in-law has created this beautiful garden just for my sister!” He tells the Kattiyakaaran “See the beautiful fragrant manoranjitham tree here! Oleander and the lily flowers are blooming in abundance!” “What does it take to grow this magnificent garden? The place calms minds! How can I even begin to describe the greatness of my sister’s garden?” Draupadi plucking flowers in another garden sings “I am going to pluck in your beautiful gardens! I am going to pluck large Jasmine and fragrant Roses from your beautiful gardens!”

This Koothu in the theatre cycle becomes a mirror play to the other play ‘Thugil’ where Ducchāsana tries to disrobe Draupadi in the Kaurava court. The blasphemous desire of Kichakan and the ensuing conflict becomes the core of the narrative. The killing of Kichakan, as performed in this play, becomes the final overcoming for the Pandavas and Draupadi so that they can be ready for the final battle at Kurukshetra. This play Kichaka Vadham, is also the other play in the theatre cycle where the divinity of Draupadi is re-emphasised. The Koothu, as it was enacted by the Renukambal Kattaikoothu Mandram was enacted as a conflict between Draupadi and Kichaka, with the storyteller Mani Vaasagan stating that Kichakan was just not a character in the Mahabharata, but existed in each and everyone of us. Kichakan, to him, was a latent tendency in all of us to abuse one’s power

Kichakan says “Wonderful! We have seen all the gardens in the three directions, the East, the West, and the South!” Even the eloquent thousand tongued snake king Adishesha cannot describe the beauty of this. How much my brother-in-law has spent to create the gardens for my sister? He asks the Kattiyakaaran “Now that we have seen all the gardens in three directions, why are we not allowed to see the one in the North? Kattiyakaaran provokes Kichakan’s curiosity by saying “May be there is some new kind of flower there, that they do not want you to carry away. Let’s go and see the northern gardens!” Kichakan assents “Yes, we should go and see the Northern gardens! We should not be worried about dangers there and we should go and encounter them! After all, we have the courage to confront it!” Lets go to the northern gardens

Kichakan is entranced by all the beautiful gardens he sees in the Virata kingdom and wants to visit another garden. This is of course the private garden of Sudeshna where Draupadi is

plucking flowers. Kichakan ignores the Kattiyakaran's warning and enters the garden. In Bharatham Kichakan directly goes to this garden and sees Draupadi. Kichakan saw the beautiful lady, and in that instant became attracted to her. He did not even pause to think as to whether the lady was married or not. He just lusted after her the moment he saw her.

Again the question of free will or fate is posed in the Bharatham sessions. Kichakan, once he sees Draupadi loses all free will and is immediately possessed by desire which will lead shortly to his own death. In Koothu the lustful Kichaka, first molests the maid who had gone along with Draupadi before chasing Draupadi herself.

Kichakan says "I see a beautiful lady, dainty like a bird in this garden! Maybe she is the reason why my sister said younger brother Kichaka do not to go to this garden?" A wondrous figure! When I see her, my mind has changed! She walks like a swan! She is the epitome of beauty! Kichakan sings to the maid "My peacock floating up in the skies! My beautiful bird!" Draupadi chants her brothers name "Govinda! Govinda!" Kichakan chasing after them asks "What is your name, do you have a right companion?" Kichakan molests the maid against her wishes.

Kichakan asks Draupadi "O lady do you have a right companion who matches your grace and beauty? Draupadi chants her brother's name "Govinda! Govinda!" When I saw your exotic looks with a complexion like ivory I immediately got bewitched! O lady, come and show me your love. "The moment I saw your beautiful form, I became enamoured with you. I swear on the four Vedas and the creator of the worlds that I am in love with you, lady with teeth white as milk!" Please give me an answer! I am totally in your thrall. Please show your kindness to me and love me! I am totally besotted with you! Draupadi chants "Govinda!" Kichakan asks Draupadi "Where are you from? Which city, which Kingdom? Young damsel how did you come here with the other girl? Are you a Gandharva Lady? Bewitching woman who speaks beautifully like a parrot, speak up your name. Please tell me your history my dear One!

In Bharatham Draupadi warns Kichakan that his life might be in danger from her five magical Gandharva husbands. In Koothu once Kichakan hears about these five Gandharva husbands he suspects that the maid before him but might actually be Draupadi and he directly asks her this question but Draupadi gives him an evasive answer. Kichakan then questions her as to her ancestry and her parents.

Draupadi says “Kichaka listen to me, what you are doing is not appropriate, I will forgive you, please go away” If you come any closer to me, your life would be in danger from my five bodyguards! Kichakan sings “Are you the incarnation of the beautiful Rathi? Or are you the brightness of the Moon? Or are you fragrance itself? You wonderful looking woman drawing me towards you like honey attracts bees. What a shining presence! How wonderful! Brahma has created her just for me! Dear One! The moment I saw you I have been possessed! Who can be your parents? Please tell me the names of your parents? Dear One! The moment I saw you I have been possessed! Who can be your parents? Please tell me the names of your parents? Or tell me about the people who raised you here? Draupadi runs chanting the name of her brother “Govinda! Govinda!” Draupadi asks Kichaka “Why are you even willing to give up your live by chasing a woman who has no interest in you? “Does the intellect get corrupt, steadfastness wither when bad times descend” she cried, she who speaks softly like a parrot “When the five senses cause distress, leaving one to be blind to the wise sayings of elders, even though one knows what is not correct, your senses lead you astray. They say that when a man encounters ominous times, he would lose his intellect, his masculinity, his wealth, his learning and everything else. Like that is it bad times for you Kichaka?

Do not think Kichaka is some character from a story. There is a Kichaka latent in everyone’s heart who should be defeated! That is today’s story. A person who after reading the Mahabharata carefully, understands all the characters, and lives his life accordingly, then such a person can never be led astray by anyone!

Draupadi says “Elder brother! I am actually married to five Gandharvas, who are currently flying in the skies. So it is not wise of you to desire me! Kichakan tells Kattiyakaaran “She says that these Gandharvas have married such a beautiful woman and are flying in the skies! I am doubtful, seeing that this woman has her hair untied. Once the Pandavas had lost their kingdom in gambling to their cousins, Panchali [Draupadi] walked out the court with her hair untied! Maybe, by any chance could this woman be Draupadi? Draupadi replies ambiguously “Elder brother! Am I Draupadi? I am not her!” Kichaka says “Mother! Please tell me if you are Draupadi. The one who was born to protect the world by being born out of fire! The Draupadi who garlanded the five Pandavas! If she so desired she can burn this entire world surrounded by water! Please tell me whether you are our Mother Draupadi! I will ask for forgiveness for my bad behaviour, fall at your feet and disappear leaving no trace of me behind!

Draupadi maintains that she is not Draupadi. Keechaka is confused when he hears Draupadi saying that she is not Draupadi. Now he becomes more persistent in his chase of her. Draupadi is

angry and a furious exchange of words happens between them with Draupadi calling him a rabid dog.

Kichaka asks Draupadi “Do not abuse me calling me a rabid dog and admonish me!” Chorus “Do not abuse me calling me a rabid dog and admonish me!” Kichaka asks “Willingly embrace me as to unite with you is my only desire!” Chorus “Embrace me as to unite with you is my only desire!” Draupadi runs calling “Govinda! Govinda!” Draupadi sings “I am not a courtesan to embrace you wicked Kichaka!” Chorus “I am not a courtesan to embrace you wicked Kichaka!” Draupadi sings “I am not a courtesan to embrace you wicked Kichaka!” Chorus “I am not a courtesan to embrace you wicked Kichaka!”

Draupadi finally eludes Kichaka and escapes into the inner apartments of Sudeshna’s palace. A lovelorn Kichaka waits in the same garden for Draupadi to return. He waits for six days, without sleeping or eating, but Draupadi does not return.

Kichaka says “It is now six days since I met Vratasaarini in this garden! Since that day I have not eaten anything for the past six days. I have not bathed, nor have I thought about changing clothes. For some unknown reason she attracts me like a magnet and I am unable to forget her! When I went chasing after her she ran inside my sister’s palace, into the private chamber in the palace. But where can she run from me in my country? Can she run past me across the borders of this land? Impossible! Let me see how she runs! I shall just wait for her here!

In Bharatham, Sudeshna or Subadhra, the sister of Kichaka is worried about his health and requests Draupadi to just meet him. Sudeshna or Subadhra also knows that Kichakan is the only defence for her husband, the Virata King against his more powerful brother Thrigarhan. If Kichakan is not there, the kingdom would become a slave to the enemy. She asks Vratasaarini “My brother seems determined to even forsake his life if he does not meet you! Please go and see him just once”.

Sudeshna gives Draupadi a flower bouquet and asks her to just throw it at her brother. The people around informed Kichakan that the woman that he was pining for had come! Kichakan was elated the moment he heard this news and the almost dying Kichakan came back to life! He gets up excitedly saying “Oh my beautiful maid, have you come?” and goes running towards her. Draupadi saw that the sight of her gave a new lease of life for the lovelorn Kichakan. He went

towards her and just tried to touch her. Before Draupadi went to meet Kichakan, she had prayed to the Sun God, Surya. Surya had sent an invisible, celestial being to protect Draupadi and the celestial being just lifted up the approaching Kichaka and flung him aside and disappeared!

Only then did the lust which had ensnared him lift slightly. Kichakan tells his sister “For seven days, I have only been longing for her! If both of you do not help me in getting her, I will not live! And your husband would be killed in revenge by my brothers making you a widow!

In Koothu on the other hand, the Virata king recognises that his Kingdom has only become prosperous after the entry of the six people and he is very angry with his brother-in-law Kichakan. Draupadi pleads to the Virata King for justice “Oh my king, where can I report this harassment? Is this justice? Wise king please stop me from being harrassed! An angry Virata king says “Is your brother harrassing this lady? When I look at this lady she looks divinity personified! In Koothu the Virata king and Sudeshna chase Kichakan out the palace and Kichakan says that he will die pining for Draupadi. Sudeshna tells her brother Kichakan “You leave our kingdom and never enter my palace again! If you are really a good brother leave without causing any more trouble!”

Draupadi, who is pestered by Kichakan, meets Bhima and asks him for help. An angry Bhima wants to kill Kichakan immediately. In this particular Koothu, whenever Bhima comes on stage he keeps repeating that he is hungry. An angry Bhima tells Gangu Bhattar or Dharmaraja “Oh Brahmin! I am hungry, I am ravenously hungry!” Gangu Bhattar says “If you are so hungry, you should go to the forest and find dry wood there! You can appease your hunger safely there!

Dharmaraja or Gangu Bhattar seeing Bhima’s anger and hunger for blood gives him a sensible advice in a coded language. He says that if Bhima is hungry he should go to the forest and appease his hunger – meaning that Bhima should not kill Kichakan within the city but rather lure him outside into the forest where he could kill him. This way, he says, no suspicion will fall on Bhima when Kichakan is found dead. Bhima tells Draupadi “Kichakan will also come after you tomorrow! When he does speak to him deceptively and lure him out of the city towards the forest where there is a white abandoned palace!

When Kichaka sees her again in the garden the next day, his heart melts. A delighted Kichakan sings “Oh dear, I am finally happy at heart seeing you again! Chorus “Oh dear, I am finally

happy at heart seeing you again! Kichakan sings “I was really worried that you might ignore my love as that of a fool! I wonder what my good fortune is to again hear the sound of your anklets! My pretty deer, I am absolutely delighted!”

Draupadi on Bhima’s advice asks Kichakan to meet her in an abandoned palace in the forest in the middle of the night. As Kichakan walks in the dark forest, he again sees terrible omens foretelling his imminent death. Kichakan is scared but his fate draws him on. A scared Kichakan mentally addresses Draupadi “Oh my beautiful maid! Is it for my sake you have come bravely in the middle of the night to a place inhabited by ghosts? I promise you not to even glance at any woman with the eyes that have seen you!” I will not touch anyone else with these hands which have touched you”. Bhima was listening to all this, imagine how would he have felt?

Darkness, and in the background of a pillar Bhima shook his hands which were wearing bangles and Kichaka heard their jingling sound. Kichaka wanted to touch the soft hands which wore the bangles, but was surprised when the hands he grabbed in the dark were hard as iron. Now Bhima grabbed Kichakan’s hands and Kichakan realised that he had been tricked!“ A tricked Kichakan asks Bhima “Hey! Who are you?” Bhima replies “A Gandharvan!” Kichakan asks “So you are the Gandharvan mentioned by Vratasaarini? Bhima replies”I am the same person! Bhima says “I am that Gandharvan, the younger brother of the Pandava Dharamaraja, Bhimasenan!” Kichakan asks”Then who was the lady’s maid who I have been chasing for the last seven days?” Bhima says “You mean Vratasaarini? Without any doubt, she was Draupadi herself!”

A repentant Kichakan says “Alas! Oh Mother of the World! When I first saw you with dishevelled loose hair, I asked her whether she was the Queen of the Pandavas.” I asked her if she was Draupadi, I will fall at her feet and ask for forgiveness and disappear forever from her sight! But, sadly I did not listen to the only one line she said “I am Draupadi” Did I chase mother Panchali, who was born out of fire for the last seven days? Was it Mother Draupadi whom I chased? Well I cannot undo what I have done through my ignorance! Now you have become my enemy. Draupadi had kindled my desire for her and made me lose my mind! Hey, Gandharva! You are not a Gandharva! You are one of the Pandavas!” Bhima replies “I am Bhiman!” Kichakan asks “The younger brother of Dharmaraja? Kichakan says “I am immediately going to Hastinapuram to inform king Duryodhana that the Pandavas are hiding in the Virata Kingdom”. If he can find you here, he will again send you back on Vanavaasam for thirteen more years. I will leave immediately to Hastinapura! Kichaka and Bhima now fight on stage as Bhima cannot have Kichakan reporting their presence to Duryodhana! Bhima says “I have killed Kichakan”

After killing Kichakan Bhima quickly lights a fire and burns Kichakan's body. This he does so that there won't be any evidence of Kichakan's death. Kichakan's brothers, hear the roar of the fight between Kichakan and Bhima and rush to their brother's aid. But they arrive too late and only see the burning body of their brother.

The brothers saw the burning body of their elder brother and one of them saw Vratasaarini walking away in the dark and said "The one responsible for our brother's death is going over there, let's capture her and toss her into this fire! With her death, at least our brother's soul would find peace".

Draupadi looked behind and saw Kichakan's brothers chasing her and appealed to Bhima to save her. Bhima who was having a bath in the pond heard Draupadi's cry for help and immediately rushed towards her. He quickly uprooted a tree and started smashing the hundred and three brothers. He killed all of them and burnt them in the same pyre along with their brother. He returned to the kitchen by morning as though nothing had happened and started cooking. As soon as the new day dawned, news of Kichakan's death spread like wild forest fire. People said that "Apparently there was a lady's maid called Vratasaarini who had five Gandharvas as her husbands and because of her the hundred and four, Kichaka and his brothers were killed!" This news spread like wild fire across all the lands.

Meanwhile in Hastinapura, Duryodana has sent spies all across the land in search of the Pandavas. If the Pandavas can be found in their thirteenth year of hiding, then he would be entitled to ask them to go on a Vanavaasam again for another period of thirteen years. Hearing the news of Kichakan's death, the Virata king's brother Trigarthan went up to Duryodhana and said "That Virata king has been my long term enemy. I did not wage war against him because Kichakan was protecting him. Now that Kichaka is dead, just give me a few battalions and I will go on war against Virata. If the Pandavas are there, they would come out to protect Virata. I will send you good news soon! Trigarthan, the sworn enemy of the Virata kingdom, then laid siege to the Virata country.

The continuation of this story, called "The fight to capture the cows" will be generally narrated only in the place where the cattle are grazed. The continuation of the story is always narrated in the grazing fields of the cattle. Villagers from the neighbouring villages would bring their own cattle to the grazing fields of the festival village. The story tellers, the Koothu artists and the audience would move to the grazing fields to listen to the climax of this episode. In Kazhiyur

because of a disruption in the program, this particular theatre and ritual fell on two successive days. And the sponsors of the next day's event refused to perform this ritual as it would interfere with their own events sponsorship. So in Kazhiyur this story was left incomplete.

In Bharatham we would narrate the story of Virata Parvam and tell the sponsors that the story has to be completed amongst the cattle. But the sponsors might say that in our village we would perform this ritual only on the day when the play "Krishnan Thoodhu" is enacted! So when we agree and ask the sponsors of 'Krishnan Thoodhu' to perform this ritual, they would say that the sponsors of 'Virata Parvam' are someone else so why should we perform this ritual?

A spy returning from the Virata kingdom tells Duryodhana that a great wrestler called Kichaka was besotted with a maid working with his sister Sudeshna. One of her five Gandarva husbands angry with Kichakan had killed him Shakuni on hearing this immediately spoke "Duryodhana! That lady's maid is none other than Draupadi that Gandharva is none other than Bhima. The Pandavas are only there". Duryodhana asks "Uncle how can identify them?" Shakuni says "Duryodhana! There are a lot of cattle in that kingdom. If we go and capture them Pandavas come to their rescue. If we again see them, we can send them again to the forest for the next thirteen years.

Duryodhana, Karna, Shakuni, Bhishma, Dronacharya and Kripacharya attack the Virata kingdom from the other side. Now the Virata kingdom is under attack from two sides and the Virata king leaves with his army and Dharmaraja, Nakula, Sahadeva and Bhima to fight with his younger brother Trigarthan. Trigarthan was sent by Duryodhana with a battalion of the army; however he lost and ran for his life.

Duryodhana went over the northern side and started setting fire to the farms, setting the paddy and cane crops on fire. The poor farmers wanted to go the court of the king and tell him that their crops were on fire but found that there was no one in the court. They asked "Where is the king?" And were told "He is in the south fighting Trigarthan" Uttharakumara the young prince of the Virata Kingdom wants to fight with the Kaurava army and Draupadi suggests that Uttharakumara go to battle with Brihannala or Arjuna in his eunuch form as his charioteer. Arjuna drives Uttharakumara to the battle and he fights against the Kauravas

This ritual is actually performed for the wellbeing of the cattle in the festival village; even the cattle are given the space in this huge festival. Three actors, Arjuna in his eunuch form as Brihannala, Utharakumara the young prince of Virata and Krishna in his form as Mohini take part in this ritual theatre. It is believed that Krishna's presence as Mohini will give long life to the cattle. As the storytellers are narrating the story amongst the cattle Arjuna would take the weapons hidden in the Vanni tree to fight against the Kaurava army. Uttharakumara asks Arjuna as Brihannala "Shall we go to fight?"

Though the Kauravas lose to Arjuna in battle, they are actually happy because Arjuna had come out of hiding. They think that the one year period of hiding is not over for the Pandavas and now the Pandavas have to go on another Vanavaasam for thirteen years all over again. Bhishma corrects this assumption of the Kauravas and says that when they saw Arjuna, that one year period of hiding was already over. Rightfully, he says, the Pandavas can claim their land from Duryodhana as was promised to them thirteen years back when they went on their Vanavaasam. But everyone knows that Duryodhana would refuse to return the Pandava land and war was inevitable. This leads to the next narrative called "Krishnan Thoodhu" where Krishna actually goes as an emissary to stop the war.