

Performance Traditions of the Mahabharata in Tamil Nadu

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Lecture 16

Krishnan Thoodu

Dhritarashtra says

"When I heard that both Karna and Duryodhana had set their minds on punishing Keshava and that he had shown himself in his Cosmic form then, Sanjaya, I lost hope of victory"

This play, called "Krishnan Thoodhum, Mannan Vaadhun" or Krishna as the emissary of the Pandavas, is one of the most complex narratives, in this festival. Krishna on the behest of Dharmaraja and the Pandavas goes to meet Duryodhana to negotiate peace and to get back the Pandava kingdom from Duryodhana. While Dharmaraja is the only person who wants peace, Draupadi and the other four Pandavas are clear that they want war. This narrative begins immediately after Arjuna has defeated Duryodhana and the Kauravas in the Virata Kingdom at the completion of their thirteenth year of Vanavaasam. Both in the Koothu and the Bharatham session Dharmaraja gives the same analogy of what he wishes to be the future with the Kauravas. He gives an example of a pond where multiple creatures live in harmony with each other. He thinks or rather, he hopes, that both the Pandavas and the Kauravas can live in harmony in Hastinapura like the multiple fishes in the pond. On the other hand Draupadi and the other four Pandavas have taken a vow when Draupadi was humiliated in court to destroy the Kauravas. Dharmaraja is torn between his own desire for peace and the anger of Draupadi and the other four brothers against the Kauravas.

Draupadi sings "My beloved husbands! Men who abide in Justice! Praise to you and I bow down at your fragrant feet! Because of that wicked Duryodhana we lived in the forest where I was taken care of by all of you! You protected me as if I were your own eyes! I salute all of you who are like the pillars of Dharma!

The Virata king, pleased with Arjuna saving his kingdom from the Kauravas had wanted him to marry his daughter Utthara Kumari. Arjuna had refused this marriage as Utthara Kumari was his student in dancing and hence he was like a father to her. He suggests that Utthara Kumari get married to his son Abhimanyu. The Virata king happily conducts the marriage of Abhimanyu and Uttharakumari. He also gives the Pandavas the kingdom of Umalaya Pattinam where they are currently staying as they are trying to negotiate peace with the Kauravas.

Duryodhana who has been constantly beaten by Arjuna and the Pandavas thinks that the Pandavas were able to defeat him because they had Krishna as their support. Now Duryodhana wants to enlist Krishna's help and he goes to meet Krishna at Dwarka. Arjuna has come on a similar mission to Dwarka at the same time. Krishna, who is aware that both Duryodhana and Arjuna would shortly come to meet him, pretends to be asleep. But he has placed two chairs, one at his head and one at his feet for his two expected guests. Duryodhana comes first to meet Krishna. A proud Duryodhana who is actually "Ahambhavam" or Ego personified takes the chair at Krishna's head while Arjuna, humbly takes the chair at Krishna's feet. When Krishna wakes up he obviously sees Arjuna who is sitting at his feet.

Arjuna went and touched Krishna's feet. Krishna immediately jumped up the moment his feet was touched and said "Welcome Arjuna! Welcome. Krishna also asked "Are Dharma and Bhima doing well?" He pretends not to notice Duryodhana who has been waiting for a long time. Arjuna asks Krishna "Please look behind you", and Krishna who turns swiftly only now acknowledges Duryodhana's presence. Krishna tells Duryodhana "Why have you taken the trouble to come all the way? If you had just sent word, I would have come to your palace" A pleased Duryodhana, not understanding Krishna's sarcasm thought that Krishna respected him! You think Krishna respected him? Krishna says "Duryodhana, Arjuna, both of you have come at the same time to meet me! What is the matter"? Both had the same request to make "In the forthcoming Bharata war you should extend your support to us".

Krishna understands that both Duryodhana and Arjuna have come to enlist his aid in the forthcoming war and he offers a choice to both his cousins. He says one of them can have his army while the other can have him by their side. Duryodhana immediately chooses Krishna's army while Arjuna chooses Krishna and requests him to be his charioteer in the forthcoming war. Duryodhana who is happy that he has got Krishna's army at his side also makes another condition. He says that Krishna should not lift a weapon or fight for the Pandavas when he is the charioteer of Arjuna.

Krishna pretends to be surprised that Arjuna chose him over his army, and asks Arjuna as to what use will he be if he cannot fight for them in the battle? Krishna says “Arjuna, I created an excellent opportunity for you whom you missed! They say that those who forget to use their hands when fighting and those that lose their voice in the law court are the same! You lost a good opportunity as I will be useless to you if I cannot pick up a weapon and fight! Arjuna says that if Krishna fights than what will he, Arjuna, do? Arjuna asks Krishna to be his charioteer and help me win the war. Krishna, due to their great friendship, acceded to Arjuna’s request. Duryodhana and Arjuna take leave from Krishna, pleased with the success of their respective missions to Dwarka.

Dharmaraja, who in Koothu, is constantly addressed as Shanthamurthy, wants peace while Draupadi and the other four Pandavas are eager for war. The Pandavas after having completed their thirteen years of Vanavasam have sent the guru of King Drupada named in Tamil as Ulugama Munivar as their emissary to the Kauravas. Drupada’s purohit argues logically as to why Duryodhana has to return the Pandava kingdom to them, but Duryodhana does not relent. Dharmaraja, even after Duryodhana has categorically refused to return the Kingdom still hopes that peace can be negotiated. The Pandavas invoke Krishna to go as their second emissary to Duryodhana.

Dharmaraja sings to Krishna “I bow before your lotus like feet and seek the solace of your protection!” The Pandavas and Draupadi in chorus sing “We bow before your lotus like feet in surrender” Dharmaraja continues “Peaceful kings and noble celestials! What virtuous deeds did we commit for you to descend from the Heavens?” The Pandavas and Draupadi in chorus sing “We bow before your lotus like feet in surrender” Dharmaraja sings to Krishna “What virtuous deeds did we commit for you to descend from the Heavens to meet us on earth?” Dharmaraja continues “You exalted and virtuous divinity we are delighted and happy that you heeded the call of your devotees!” The Pandavas and Draupadi in chorus sing “We bow before your lotus like feet in surrender”

Krishna comes at the request of the Pandavas and speaks individually to Draupadi and the five Pandavas to get their opinion as to what they really want. Krishna says “You lived peacefully, roaming around in the large forest for a very long time without looking back at the unjust acts of Duryodhana with the wicked mind do you want to go back to the forest? Tell me Pandavas do you want to reclaim the honour of your wife? I don’t know. Tell me separately and honestly what is there in each one’s heart, if you want me to go as your messenger. Oh Pandvas you who do not know the scheming mind of Duryodhana! Krishna asks directly “First, what is the opinion of

each of you? Do you want to get back the kingdom, or as your uncle said do you want to go back to the forest and live of fruits and vegetables?”

Krishna deliberately speaks provocatively to incite the younger brothers. He had been incarnated to ensure that the Great War was fought. The poet describes the purpose of Krishna’s birth “Descended from the heaven, to destroy Adharma on earth” Could Dharma agree for war? Dharmaraja thinks that the war should not happen at any cost. But if Krishna’s purpose of being incarnated has to be fulfilled, the Great War has to fought! That is why he provokes the younger brothers.

Dharmaraja “I do not want to rule causing blood to be shed! Please advice as to how we could peacefully co-exist with our cousins? An angry Bhima says “Kanna, what is my brother saying? Does he have no sense of shame or honour, despite all his famed wisdom and valour? Please think of that day thirteen years ago, when our Draupadi was dragged to the court by these wicked men! I rose up in anger that day and if I had been allowed, I would have killed all of them on that day itself! It was our brother who asked me to calm down, and I have been patient for these thirteen years. If as elder brother asks you to request our kingdom back from them, even if I want to remain calm, my weapon, my mace will not be!

Krishna thinks that it is futile to expect Duryodhana to keep his word and return the Pandava kingdom as he had promised. Krishna thinks Dharmaraja’s pacifism is meaningless and in this scene he goads even Dharmaraja to agree to war as a last resort. Once he gets the consent from Dharmaraja he goes as the Pandava emissary to Duryodhana. Even the pacifist Dharmaraja is goaded by Krishna into thinking of war as the only solution.

Krishna says “Oh Dharmaputra Maharaja I do not know whether you are thinking clearly or not! The wicked Duryodhana, the bearer of the serpent flag bearer will not understand your goodness and return your kingdom happily!” Dharmaraja tells Krishna that the way he was talking was designed to create enmity and dissension among us! If enmity takes root in a person it will destroy him along with his whole clan.

If we the Pandavas and the Kauravas led by Duryodhana go to war with each other, it is not only we who would lose our lives, but all the kings of the world would be destroyed! Kanna let us not go to war. Krishna mocks Dharma “Would a peacock give its feathers if you croon ‘Oh

peacock!” gently to it? If you want the feather, you should be ready to pluck it off the peacock! If you want sandal paste, you must be ready to grind sandalwood!

The only one without any fault during the Mahabharata times was Dharma. He is described as “kodhu ilaan” one without a fault. Rama is described by Kamban in the Ramayana as “vasayil aiyyan”, the faultless one, and Dharma here is described as the faultless, perfect man! Dharmaraja protests weakly “If there is going to be a war, do you know who would fight in this war Krishna? My grandfather Bhishma, my uncles, my teachers and kinsmen! Finally who is Duryodhana, Krishna? He is also my younger brother! Do I have to kill my kith and kin to rule the world? No Krishna I do not want this war!

In this scene from Koothu, Krishna continues to keep provoking Dharmaraja by asking him as to what he should do if Duryodhana refuses to give half the kingdom as he had promised. Dharmaraja the pacifist says that he would be happy if Duryodhana agrees to give five out of the fifty six kingdoms under his control. Krishna goads Dharmaraja again by saying what if Duryodhana refuses to give the five countries. Dharmaraja asks Krishna to ask for five villages. His brothers and Draupadi are angry with Dharmaraja at what they think is Dharmaraja’s cowardice.

Dharmaraja says “Please ask for half the kingdom Krishna! If he refuses to give half the kingdom please ask him to give us five countries! And if he refuses to even give this please ask him to give five villages! Krishna says “Listen Shantamurthy! I will go to Hastinapura and ask Duryodhana respectfully to give the Pandavas half the kingdom! If he agrees I will return with the good news! If he refuses, I will ask for five countries! I will accept if he is ready to give, else I will ask for five villages! If he refuses even this, what shall I ask Shantamurthy!” If he will not give even that, ask him at least for five houses! My master! If he refuses to give even that, please ask him for at least five feet of land! And if he even refuses this [Dharmaraj breaks down and cries unable to speak] you go!” Krishna again mocks him by saying”Do not be afraid and say it boldly! I am here for you!” Kattiyakaaran says “The saint Dharma has toched his heart! Now he will speak honestly!” Dharma continues “If he refuses even that, than war is the only option!” [Dharmaraj breaks down in despair Krishna exults] Dharmaraja laments “Alas! What will happen to my younger brothers! What will happen to Duryodhana? Slowly, with the taunting of Krishna, Dharmaraja starts doubting as to whether Duryodhana will agree to any of their requests. Krishna keeps increasing Dharmaraja’s doubts, by asking him persistently as to what he should do if Duryodhana rejects each of these requests

Krishna is also trying to provoke the anger of the other four brothers provoking Dharmaraja to realize that war was the only option available. Bhima intervenes by saying “Enough of this pity towards Duryodhana! My dearest elder brother! Then Krishna asks for Arjuna’s opinion who says “Just remember Kanna what happened thirteen years ago when our Draupadi was dragged to the court, dragged by her hair. She could only cry “Govinda, Govinda!” I can still hear her cries in my head! I have no idea why my elder brother is reluctant to go to war! An angry Krishna addresses both Bhima and Arjuna “Both of you stood silently in the court that day Draupadi cried”Govinda! Govinda!” Where was your anger then? I had to save my sister from humiliation! Krishna intervenes at this point and advises patience to both Bhima and Arjuna. Krishna knows that the Pandavas will lose the war if Vidura, Ashwatthama and Karna are not neutralized. His mission to meet Duryodhana is not really to ask him to return the Pandava Kingdom but rather to neutralize the three important warriors in the Kaurava camp. He mocks Bhima and Arjuna by saying neither Bhima’s mace nor Arjuna’s bow could save Draupadi being humiliated in the Kaurava court. Krishna gets the opinion of Draupadi and Nakula and they are also as angry as Bhima and Arjuna. Sahadeva is the only person who maintains calm, and Krishna takes Sahadeva out separately to speak to him alone. This dialogue between Sahadeva and Krishna is a crucial dramatic element as it is performed in the Koothu in these festivals. After Nakula sat down having expressed both his anger and opinion only Sahadeva remained calm Krishna asks the silent Sahadeva “Each one of you has expressed their opinion, so why are you alone keeping calm?” Sahadeva retorts with an old proverb “If you tie the cow, you should marry the girl! Krishna is puzzled and asks what he means. Sahadeva says “My opinion on this is the same as yours”

In popular traditions Sahadevan is one of the four people in the Mahabharata who know the past, the present and the future. Both in the Bharatham and Koothu enactments, Sahadeva’s knowledge of time is attributed to his scholarship and his understanding of astrology.

In one version Sahadeva’s understanding of time is attributed to an advice given by his father Pandu. King Pandu before his death is supposed to have asked his five sons to eat a bit of his flesh before cremating him. He says that they will gain immeasurable knowledge by doing so and this knowledge would be of immense help them in the future. The first four sons of Pandu, Dharmaraja, Bhima, Arjuna and Nakula are horrified by this request of their father. Only Sahadeva is curious and eats the little finger of his father. Krishna comes to know of this and rushes to Pandu’s cremation. Only Sahadeva is curious and eats the little finger of his father. Krishna comes to know of this and rushes to Pandu’s cremation to stop Sahadeva from obeying his father’s request. Krishna arrives too late as Sahadeva has already consumed a little bit of his father’s flesh and in that moment he gains a vision of time. Krishna curses Sahadeva by saying

that if he revealed his knowledge of the past, the present or the future to anybody he would die. Krishna in effect curses Sahadeva to keep this knowledge to himself.

Sahadeva is also known to be the wisest among the five Pandavas and when asked by Krishna about his opinion on his mission to Hastinapura, Sahadeva just laughs! Sahadeva says that he knows Krishna's intention was not to broker peace, but to actually ensure that the war took place. He says that he was in complete support of Krishna's intention.

Sahadeva says "You have been incarnated in the Dwapara Yuga to reduce the burden of people on Goddess Earth in the Great War! The day that Goddess Earth complained about her inability to bear the burden on her, immediately the number of days the Great War would be fought and the number of warriors who would die was decided then and the invitation to the carnage was printed! Krishna asks "Sahadeva, then are you saying that I am responsible for the Great War?" Sahadeva says "Is there any doubt about it, Kanna?" Krishna replies "If you know all the divine secrets, you would also know of ways to stop the Great War! Please let me know how the war can be prevented from happening?" Sahadeva says "The war can only be stopped if you crown Karna, the King of Hastinapura and let him rule the earth. You have to kill Arjuna and shave off the Divine lady Draupad's hair and put Bhima's feet in fetters! This earth should not be ruled by either Dharma or Duryodhana. Karna should be crowned. His choice, that Karna can be crowned the king might create a doubt as to whether Sahadeva knew the truth, that Karna was his elder brother.

Now Krishna asks Sahadeva directly as to whether he thought the war could be averted. Sahadeva says the only way to stop this war was to make Karna the king, banish Dharmaraja from the kingdom, kill Arjuna, imprison Bhima and shave off Draupadi's hair! Karna had to be made the king because Duryodhana would not contest this as Karna was his closest friend. Dharmaraja, he says, has to be banished for otherwise the other four brothers would again rally around him again. Bhima had to be imprisoned as he had taken a vow that he would kill Duryodhana and his ninety nine brothers. Arjuna had to be killed as he had taken a vow to kill Karna which again would lead to the war and finally Draupadi must be shorn off all her hair as she had taken a vow that she would only tie her hair with the blood of Duryodhana. He says only if these four conditions are met, can the war be averted, otherwise war he says, is inevitable.

In the Bharatham session the storyteller insisted that Sahadevan did not know that Karna was the eldest of the Pandavas, but still he insisted that Karna be made King as he felt that was the only

way that the war could be averted. Krishna asks “If Karna is crowned the King, Arjuna is killed and Draupadi’s hair removed, will that be enough to stop the Great War?” Sahadeva says “That alone is not enough to stop the war! The orchestrator of all these events is finally you! That is why you should be tied up first!” Sahadeva jokingly says the only way to stop the war is to tie up Krishna and prevent him from going to Hastinapura. He says that if Krishna goes to Hastinapura he will definitely ensure that the war takes place. Krishna mocks Sahadevas by asking him whether he thought that he could really tie him up? Krishna says that in each of the twelve thousand pillars of the hall they were meeting, there would be a form of Krishna and asks Sahadeva as to how he would identify the real Krishna to tie him up. Krishna says “No divinity from all the eight directions can tie me up! So how do you think you can tie me up Sahadeva?”

Sahadeva before tying up Krishna invokes him; here an idea which was first expressed in the narration of Arjuna’s Tapas is reiterated in a different fashion. In the episode where Arjuna does Tapas, Arjuna fights with a hunter not know that the hunter was really Shiva in disguise. During the course of the fight Arjuna manages to land a blow on Shiva and all the creatures on all the seven worlds feel the pain of blow of Arjuna on Shiva. The storyteller said, that Shiva or the ultimate divinity, was inherent in all creatures and hence the pain felt by Shiva was felt by all the creatures on all the seven worlds! In this Koothu, Sahadeva is unable to find the true form of Krishna, so he prays to him and ties himself up. Once Sahadeva ties himself up, Krishna who is also within Sahadeva is also tied! These two narratives of Shiva and Krishna being in each and every creature in all the seven worlds again underline the notion of inclusivity that this festival celebrates. Both Vaishnavas or devotees of Vishnu, and Shaivas, or devotees of Shiva, take equal part in this festival. The festival itself, becomes a celebration of the divinity within oneself.

Sahadeva says “I am tying you up Kanna, I am tying you, who are present in all creatures!” Chorus “I am tying you up Kanna; I am tying you, who are present in all creatures!” Sahadeva “I am tying you up Kanna, I am tying you, who are present in all creatures!” Chorus “I am tying you up Kanna; I am tying you, who are present in all creatures!” “Do not think I am just a scared little bird that you can just shoo away, my devotion to you is too deep and I will tie you with my Bhakti!” Chorus “Do not think I am just a scared little bird that you can just shoo away, my devotion to you is too deep and I will tie you with my Bhakti!” Sahadeva “My devotion to you is deeper than the deepest ocean with which I will tie you!” Chorus “I am tying you up Kanna; I am tying you, who are present in all creatures!” Sahadeva “I have immersed myself in the path of true knowledge of you which is unencompassable” Chorus “I have immersed myself in the path of true knowledge of you which is unencompassable” Sahadeva “With which I am going to tie you up now!” Chorus “With which I am going to tie you up now!” Chorus “With which I am going to tie you up now!” Sahadeva “I have immersed myself in the path of true knowledge of you which is unencompassable” Chorus “With which I am going to tie you up now!” Sahadeva

“I am like the maidens of Gokula who were drawn sensually towards you” Chorus “I am like the maidens of Gokula who were drawn sensually towards you” Sahadeva “They could only reach you when they transcended their physical selves!” Chorus “They could only reach you when they transcended their physical selves!” Sahadeva “They could only reach you spiritually when they transcended their physical selves!” Chorus “I am tying you up Kanna, I am tying you, who are present in all creatures!” [Sahadeva finally invokes Krishna by chanting his name “Govinda! Govinda!” and ties himself up] By tying the Krishna within himself Sahadeva manages to tie up Krishna also. Krishna beseeches him asking him to untie him and Sahadeva puts a condition for untying Krishna. The promise made by Krishna to Sahadeva has repercussions later as the narrative unfolds

Sahadeva tells Krishna “In the forthcoming Great War, you should with your glance protect the five of us! Oh Divine One!” Krishna beseeches Sahadeva to untie him “I shall make the praiseworthy scholars sing your praises and your fame on all the three worlds will be eternal!” Sahadeva says “If I have to untie you I have a condition to make! Even if Duryodhana agrees to give back the kingdom, his uncle Shakuni would prevent that. Duryodhana is like a spinning top, controlled by the string called Shakuni. He will ensure that the war that takes place for eighteen days is fought!

In these eighteen days of war, the heads of the five of us Pandavas should not fall on the ground! Only if you promise me that you will protect the five of us will I untie you! Because the five of us have taken a vow that if one of us dies, the other four shall die immediately! First promise that you will protect the five of us, and then I will untie you.” Krishna says”Sahadeva, as you have requested, till the forthcoming Great War concludes, I will protect the five of you from any harm!”

Finally Krishna meets Draupadi and wants her opinion. Draupadi is worried that Krishna might try to negotiate peace, as she really wants war to avenge her honour. Draupadi tells Krishna”It is because of the trust in you that I have been living with my hair untied. If you go and negotiate peace and get the kingdom from these wicked people then I will not be able to keep my vow of not tying my hair!” She falls at his feet, crying. Krishna lifts her up and says “Mother Panchali! Do not cry! I am not going to negotiate peace! Neither will the Kauravas return the kingdom, nor will I accept it even if they give!

Krishna before leaving to Hastinapura gets a promise from Sahadeva that neither will he reveal to anyone that he had tied Krishna up, nor will he disclose what they had spoken about. Sahadeva promises Krishna that he will not reveal as to what had transpired even to his own brothers till the war was over. Krishna because of the promise that he had made to Sahadeva also becomes instrumental in the deaths of Ghatotgaja and Abhimanyu the sons of Bhima and Arjuna respectively to protect Bhima and Arjuna.

“Krishna says “I shall take leave, to go to Hastinapura to speak to Duryodhana!” Chorus “I shall take leave, to go to Hastinapura to speak to Duryodhana!” Kattiyakaaran says”Go and return successfully!”

Duryodhana when he first hears that Krishna has come to Hastinapura is delighted and he wants the entire kingdom decorated to welcome Krishna. Again both in the Koothu and Bharatham, Duryodhana is depicted as a different person when he is outside the influence of Shakuni

Duryodhana sings”Praised by all kings, I the leader of the lunar dynasty, look at the way I King Duryodhana come before you! With a resplendent crown studded with precious gems, with sparkling ear-rings on both ears and an emerald pendant shining on my chest!

Duryodhana says”We have to welcome Krishna who has come to meet us! Get the entire city decorated with flowers, and let there be music everywhere to welcome him! “Hear this dear people! The great Krishna is going to come to our court Let us all go together and receive him with the respect he deserves! All Kings in this court! Our teachers! Elder brother Karna Maharaja, younger brother Ducchasa, the divine Krishna has reached our Magnolia orchard! So let us go and receive him with honour! Let us go and receive him with royal fanfare, with floral garlands and an entourage of music, royal elephants and horses to welcome him happily to our court! Duryodhana says “The one [Rama] who sent Hanuman as his emissary and set Lanka on fire has himself come today as an emissary. Go, decorate the country, he said. Let us all go to receive him, Duryodhanan also goes to welcome him as Shakuni was elsewhere

Shakuni when he saw this stopped this and asked what they were celebrating? He said as Krishna has come they were going to welcome him! Shakuni said that Krishna has come as the emissary of the Pandavas! Pandavas are your enemies, why are we welcoming Krishna who has also become our enemy as he has come representing our enemies? Duryodhana says “When you are

not around, Shakuni Uncle, I am unable to think clearly!” Duryodhana sings”Uncle! Hearing the Krishna was coming, even I lost my senses for a moment! I was not thinking clearly when you were not around Uncle! I listened to bad advice of the people around me Uncle! Even if the universe were to fall apart and shatters to pieces, I will not yield any land to the Pandavas!! This is my promise to you Uncle! Krishna is sure to go back disappointed!”

Krishna when he reaches Hastinapura does not go to Duryodana’s palace straight away. He chooses instead to halt at Vidura’s palace. Krishna knows that if he went to Duryodhana’s palace directly he would have been welcomed and honoured. He also knew that Duryodhana would be enraged if he learnt that Krishna had gone to Vidura’s palace first; So stage one of Krishna’s plan is set in motion to ensure that Vidura does not take up arms for the Kauravas against the Pandavas.

Krishna’s chariot reaches near Vidura’s palace who was a staunch devotee of Vishnu. Krishna laughingly asks “Vidura, do I also have a house in Hastinapura? Vidura laughed and said “Kanna the entire world belongs to you!” He invited Krishna in by saying “My house is yours to stay in!” Once Krishna heard these words from Vidura, he promptly got down from his chariot and entered Vidura’s palace. The entire city had kept Vidura isolated, but when the divine Krishna entered his house, all the people followed Krishna to Vidura’s house! Vidura sings “I am the king of kings of the Lunar Dynasty! Praised all across the country as the great King Vidura! I am known as a generous hearted, brave man! I am also praised by all as being a great archer!”

This is another day in the festival when all the villagers become characters from the epic. Usually in Koothu at the beginning of each scene, the actor would ask the Kattiyakaaran as to where they were? In this case the Kattiyakaaran would reply that they were in “Kazhiyur”, the village where the Koothu was being performed. The actor would continue “So this is Kazhiyur, which is in Hastinapura!”

The festival village is transformed into Hastinapura and all the villagers living there, also become citizens of Hastinapura. Vidura wants to celebrate Krishna’s visit to his house by organising him a feast. And Krishna tells him that if he has to organise a feast, he has to organise it for his entire army which he has left outside Hastinapura. Vidura accepts Krishna’s request and organises a huge feast for Krishna and his entire army.

In the Bharatham session in the morning as the storytellers are describing Vidura’s feast, the sponsors of the event would distribute sweets among the audience. In the night’s Koothu, all the

sponsors of the event would cook a meal for Krishna and serve it to the actor playing Krishna on stage. The entire village thus becomes Vidura's palace where Krishna eats. Feast was served for everyone that evening on a banana leaf. The divine Krishna gets served the feast by Vidura himself. The last item in a feast is payasam (kheer), that payasam is served on the leaf.

Kattiyakaaran sings high Bhakti poetry from the tenth Century poet Andal's Thiruppavai "Let us sing the praise of the one who measured the three worlds with just three paces of his feet! Let us keep the paavai nonbu (the steadfast prayers of maidens in the month of December} So that it shall rain in plenty, three times a month, making our lands fertile and the country prosperous. Where tall superior-paddy fields flourish, where fishes dance! Where the dreamy bees intoxicated by the blooming water lilies buzz! Where the maidens carry the pots filled by the generous milch cows! Let everybody be filled with eternal wealth!

The next day, Duryodhana's court has assembled. He walks through a thousand ladies on each showering his path forward with flowers. Duryodhana lived as luxurious a life as the king of the Devas, Indra on earth! A life of pleasure! He went and sat on his throne, asked everyone to take their seats. All eyes are him, waiting to hear what he would speak.

Duryodhana sings "The one who is coming is a thief who walks with a butter churning stick, unfit to be in our presence! So listen to what I have to say! Respected elders in the court! The person who is coming is not our equal, but a half breed! There are many classes of people who live inbetween the city and the forest, and this Krishna is the lowest of them all who is just a cow herd! Therefore, none of you should fold your hands to welcome him." Kattiyakaaran says "If you fold your hands and show respect. Duryodhana "I will cut off the legs of anyone who stands in respect at Krishna's entry! I will cut off the hands folded in respect to this thief!" I will chop off the hands folded in respect. If you bow your head, I will chop off your head! If you do not obey me I will personally throw you out of my court!

Hearing Duryodhana proclaim thus, all the people in court felt miserable. As Krishna enters the court the entire assembly is silent. Each one is waiting for the other to stand up in respect to the divine Krishna! The moment Krishna entered the court, the first person who stood up in respect to him was the eldest in the assembly, Bhishma. When the ultimate divinity is in front of you, who can be seated ignoring the divinity? Once Bhishma stood in respect, the entire court followed suit!

Duryodhana, poisoned by Shakuni's advice, has specifically warned members of his court, not to show any respect for Krishna as he enters the assembly. Bhishma, when he sees Krishna, immediately stands up in reverence and the rest of the court also follow. Duryodhana is furious with this and he is further angered when Krishna walks up straight up to him and speaks. In Koothu Shakuni keeps pulling Duryodhana away from Krishna and the mise en scene of this segment works with Krishna's moving towards Duryodhana and Shakuni pulling him away. Koothu, by this, underlines the hold that Shakuni has over Duryodhana

Krishna sings "Respected Duryodhana, my respects to the bearer of the serpent flag! Are you doing fine? I have come as the messenger for the world famous five. Duryodhana says "I know exactly why you have insolently entered my court and am disgusted by it! What right do you have to speak in a royal court, you cow herd whose job is to take cows and goats to pasture? Shamelessly you have come to me with a begging bowl in your hands. I know exactly why you have insolently entered my court and it disgusts me!"

Krishna says "Duryodhana, I have come to your court, but you have not asked me as to why I have come! Is this the respect you have for me?" An angry Duryodhana says "Hey Krishna! I do not have to learn about respect from you! You had come to my country yesterday and instead of coming straight to my palace you went and stayed at my uncle's house! So what respect have you shown me? Krishna says "Duryodhana only you differentiate by saying my palace, his palace! I see no such differences! As Vidura, the one holding bow met me first and invited me I went with him. Now I have come here as the emissary of Pandavas. The Pandavas are your enemies and hence as their emissary, I become your enemy also! If I had come and stayed in your house, I would have to eat the food you served me! Once I have eaten your food, I will lose the right to oppose you. That is why I did not come to your house!"

The Pandavas have returned after living thirteen years in the forest and if you return their lands as you had promised, the world will praise you! Did Duryodhana deny the promise he had made? No! Krishna says "If you choose to deny the promise you made, it would neither be a manly nor a brave position! An angry Duryodhana tells Krishna "Get out of my court now if you want to leave with some respect! I am not interested in listening to your deceitful advice on how I should behave! Without respecting me as the king of the Kuru clan, your deceitful talk is like tricking metal workers into buying needles from you! Just go! Go!"

Duryodhana says “The Pandavas are cowards and I will not give even a tiny speck of this great land of brave men! Duryodhana says “Shamelessly the Pandavas have sent you to beg land for them! Do the children of Kunti’s clan have any honour left? Will you get what you desire without fighting for it? Can you get anything in life by staying at home and just holding out your hands? Clearly, I will not even give a straw to an undeserving person, even if the divine Shiva asked me to! I will not accede to the cowards request and you pleading for them are useless. A huge argument between Duryodhana and Krishna follows, with Duryodhana flatly refusing to give even an inch of land to the Pandavas.

Duryodhana says “Even if I am chopped into pieces and burnt on the coals in the fire and if my burning pieces of flesh were asked ”Duryodhana, will you give land to the Pandavas? Even then my burning flesh will scream loudly no! No! Even if after my flesh has been reduced to ashes in the fire, and my ashes were asked “Duryodhana! At least now will you give land to the Pandavas?” Even my ashes will scream no! I will not give any land to the Pandavas!

Suddenly Duryodhana changes his mind and asks Krishna “You want a kingdom for the Pandavas? Come tomorrow I will tell you my decision!” Suddenly, Duryodhana changes his mind and asks Krishna to come back the next day for his final decision. Now Krishna sets the stage for second and third portion of his plans. After leaving Duryodhana’s palace he goes straight to meet Kunti at her own palace. After Krishna left the court, Duryodhana started abusing Vidura by abusing Vidura’s mother. He said that Vidura could only think like his mother who was after all just a whore! The first part of Krishna’s plan of isolating Vidura from the Kaurava’s begins working. Duryodhana, still angry with Krishna for having stayed at Vidura’s palace rather than coming to meet him directly starts abusing Vidura’s mother.

Vidura was enraged when Duryodhana spoke derogatorily about his mother whom he valued more than even his own life. Vidura says “I should pluck out your tongue Duryodhana for abusing my mother” He vents his anger on his magical bow by saying “If this bow were still in my hand I might have to fight against the noble Pandavas!” Saying this he broke his bow into two pieces, threw it to the ground and left Duryodhana’s court in anger. Vidura curses Duryodhana “In the Great War which will begin shortly, you will die at the hands of the Pandavas! I break my bow to ensure it”

Vidura, like Dharmaraja, who is one of the calmest persons among both the Pandavas and Kauravas gets angry when Duryodhana starts abusing his mother. He breaks his invincible bow

and declares that he will not take part in the war. Making Vidura break his own bow was the first part of Krishna's plan. Vidura with his bow would have been invincible in battle and because he was Dhritarashtra's minister he would have been forced to take up arms for the Kauravas against the Pandavas. So Krishna eliminates one possible source of danger and his next target is Ashwatthama, the son of Drona.

Krishna then went up to Ashwattama and asked "Whose side would you fight for in the war?" Ashwattama calmly replied that he would fight on the side his father chooses to fight. As they were talking, Krishna deliberately drops his ring on the ground as though by accident. A helpful Ashwattama picked the ring up and gave it to Krishna. Krishna asked Ashwatthama whether it was going to rain, Ashwatthama looked up and said there was a cloud cover around sun and that it might rain and placed the ring back on Krishna's hands. This was all the conversation that happened between them!

In the storytelling session Krishna isolates Ashwatthama after Duryodhana had declared war as his real intention. In Koothu, on the other hand, Krishna pretends to have dropped his ring and Ashwatama graciously picks it up and gives it to Krishna. Krishna asks Ashwatama to point his hands towards the sky and Ashwatama dutifully obeys. Ashwatthama tells Krishna "Your ring has fallen to the ground" Krishna asks Ashwatthama "Do you see the skies?" Ashwatthama looks and says it looks cloudy so it might rain!"

Shakuni whose real intention is the same as that of Krishna that is of the destruction of the Duryodhana and Kauravas deliberately misreads Ashwatthama's gestures and accuses him of being a traitor to Duryodhana. Shakuni tells Duryodhana "Did you see what Ashwatthama just did? Duryodhana asks" "What did he do?" Shakuni says "Ashwattama has promised Krishna on his signet ring that he will not pick up weapons and fight in the war against Pandavas! Shakuni says "Nephew Duryodhana! Krishna asked Ashwattama to join Pandavas, to which Ashwatthama refused. Krishna said that it is alright even if you do not fight for the Pandavas, but said that even when he was on Duryodhana's side, he should function in a manner helpful to the Pandavas! To this request, Ashwatthama made a solemn promise on mother earth and the sky as witnesses that even when he was on the other side he would only act favourably to the Pandavas! Please do not trust him! Duryodhana tells Ashwatthama "I respected you as you are my teacher's son! But I saw you promising Krishna that in the forthcoming Great War you would refuse to accept the post of my General to lead my forces and made this promise with the earth and the sky as the witnesses! Foolishly Duryodhana believes Shakuni and expels Ashwatthama from his court.

Now the next target is for Krishna is Karna, and to achieve this target, he now goes to Kunti's palace to meet her. Krishna tells Kunti that the child she had abandoned when she was a child herself was now a grown up man and he was the Anga King Karna. In Bharatham storytelling sessions this story is told in the episode of Krishnan thoodhu. But in Koothu this entire scene is dramatized in a play called Karna Moksham which is the emotional tragic climax of this festival

Krishna tells Kunti "I have come to discuss a very important matter. I overheard some women at a well who were drawing water and one of them said that Kunti as a child had given birth to a son and had abandoned him in the river. Kunti is shocked and says "I thought no one knew my secret! How did these women know it Krishna? You definitely must be divinity himself Krishna! Please tell me as to what happened to my son?"

Krishna tells Kunti that her son is alive and is now the best friend of the Kaurava king, Duryodhana. Kunti wants to go and meet Karna immediately but Krishna asks her to wait and go and meet him the next day. He then tells her what she should ask from her first born son Karna. He also tells her that war is imminent and that she should be patient if she wanted her sons the Pandavas to be victorious in battle. The next day Krishna goes to Duryodhana's court knowing fully well that a plan has been hatched to capture him and imprison him. Dhritarashtra says that when hunters trap a tiger and capture it, they would first de-skin it before killing it and suggests they de-skin Krishna

Shakuni says that an emissary cannot be killed, but we can imprison him. So plans is hatched to dig up the earth and create a cavity below and to place a false plank on it with a throne on top, so that Krishna when he tries to sit will fall in the cavity below and be captured. Shakuni says "Let us spread bamboo sticks over a hollow cavity and create a false throne. With the weight of Krishna, the bamboo sticks will break and Krishna will fall into the cavity below and, our armies can capture him

In the story telling session the suggestion to kill Krishna comes from Dhritarashtra. Shakuni knows who Krishna really was, knows that Krishna cannot be killed and he also wants Krishna's help in destroying Duryodhana and the Kauravas. So Shakuni suggests they invite Krishna over for lunch and make him sit on a makeshift throne, placed on a hollow plank. Shakuni hopes that the plank will break when Krishna sits on the throne and that he would fall straight into the trap they have set for him below.

Duryodhana sings deceitfully a song in praise of Krishna invoking him as Rama or Raghupati “Krishna! Who is also Raghupati! I thought over what you said yesterday! If you want me to give the Pandavas land, then let us sit on these two thrones, one for the petitioner and the other for the defendant! Let us talk and please sit here!” Smiling, as he knew the plot, Krishna went and sat on his throne. The plotters were surprised that he did not fall in their trap! Duryodhana glared at Ducchāsana, Ducchāsana glared at Shakuni while Shakuni glared at Karna! The divine Krishna showed he was way ahead of the plotters! Krishna says “Listen Duryodhana you had planned to lure me deceitfully into the pit! Your plan has gone up in smoke!

Krishna does not fall into the trap designed for him and an enraged Krishna shows his ‘Vishwaroopam’ or his cosmic form to the members of the Kaurava court.

The giant form Krishna took grew in size! People living in the nether worlds were scared, the celestials were also scared, Asuras, Rakshasas, guardians of the eight directions, Gandharvas, Siddhars all were scared, but Duryodhana alone was not scared The poet describes him as incapable of being scared! He just did not move.

Duryodhana says “Now there is no way that I will agree to give even a speck of land to them! Why are you trying to beg needlessly for them? Whether it rains, or the sun blazes heat, I will not give them any land! I will not also give them even five houses to live in! Krishna asks “What is that you want?” Duryodhana says “I want a war! Krishna asks”Is that your final decision? Duryodhana says “Yes Kanna!” Krishna says “If so Duryodhana extend your hand and let us shake hands agreeing to a war! Duryodhana says “Why should I touch the hands of a lowly cattle grazer like you who roams pastures with his cows! Saying this Duryodhana hit a pillar to seal their pact. An angry Krishna says that I once killed Hiranyan when he struck a pillar [in his Narasimha incarnation] I can kill you also easily now!” An angry Krishna says that he could easily kill Duryodhana if he so wanted but then he says that the vows of vengeance made by Draupadi and the four Pandavas would then become meaningless. Duryodhana says “We [the Kauravas] will meet the Pandavas in battle six days from now! Who ever wins the war gets the Kingdom! See how I destroy the Pandavas!” Krishna exults saying “Duryodhana has committed to war!

The actor playing Krishna makes an announcement”Respected members of the audience! This play called “Krishna as the emissary and Duryodhana’s argument” ends with the crossing of hands!”

In Koothu, Duryopdhana and Krishna would stop before their hands cross each other because it is believed that if they cross hands then there might be some problems between the actors playing Duryodhana and Krishna later. This is one distinct feature of Koothu where the actors studiously maintain a distance from themselves and the character that they are portraying