

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

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### **Lecture 17**

#### **Aravan Kalabali**

Dhritarashtra says

"When I heard that Bhishma, supreme champion, was struck down by Arjuna, undefeated though he was in many a battle, after Arjuna had stood Sikhandin in front then, Sanjaya, I lost hope of victory"

Now that war has been declared Krishna sets about with his plans to ensure victory to the Pandavas. He knows that his brother Balarama was fond of Duryodhana and might be tempted to join the Kaurava army and fight against the Pandavas. Krishna did not want to fight against his own elder brother and he had to ensure that Balarama was elsewhere when the Great War was being fought.

Krishna stops Balarama when he is on the way to Hastinapura saying that he wanted to speak to him. Krishna creates a magic cow which strays into the nearby paddy fields, destroying the crops. Balarama, who is primarily a farmer's deity, sees this and is shocked that the hard earned labour of the farmers was being destroyed. So he just throws a small stone at the cow hoping that it will run away but the cow unfortunately falls down dead. Krishna pretends to be aghast at this and says and says it is a crime to kill a cow. Krishna says "Elder brother! They say it is sin to kill a cow, to kill a baby, a woman, an emissary; you have unjustly killed a cow! Balarama asks "Younger brother what should I do now? Krishna says "To atone for killing a cow, you have to go on thirthayatra, only then you will be absolved. Balarama asked" How can I go alone?" Krishna says "Already Vidura has broken his bow, saying he will go on a pilgrimage, so now you can join him" and he sends them off together. So in one stroke Krishna eliminates two warriors who could have been a threat to the Pandavas- Balarama and Vidura. So when the Great War is being fought, Balarama and Vidura who are on pilgrimage are oblivious to the carnage happening in Kurukshetra.

Sahadevan says “We spent twelve years of Vanavaasam in the forests. Kattiyakaaran says ”You spent twelve years in the forest” Sahadevan says “Then for one year we lived incognito in the Virata kingdom” Once the thirteen year period was over, who did we send as our emissary to the Kauravas? We have sent our uncle Krishna as our emissary to Hastinapura. He has gone to Hastinapuram. Kattiyakaaran says “Krishna has gone to Hastinapura!” Sahadevan says “But Krishna has not yet returned from Hastinapura! I do not know whether Duryodhana has returned our kingdom or refused to do so?” Since that time I have only been imparting the knowledge of the Shastras to anyone who asks, without any discrimination. Kattiyakaaran says “you have been imparting knowledge to all who ask without discrimination! Knowledge belongs to all and has to be shared unreservedly!

Krishna returns from Hastinapura and tells the Pandavas all that had transpired in the Kaurava court. When he says that Duryodhana tried to capture and jail him, for the first time even the peaceful Dharmaraja gets angry and wants to go to war immediately. He sends invitations to the Pandava allies to join them in this war against the Kauravas.

An angry Dharmaraja says “Younger brother Bhima! Time has come for your powerful shoulders! What what arrogance has that Duryodhanan tried to imprison Krishna! Send this message to all kingdoms and all those who want Dharma to prevail they will join us in this war! These messages reached all kingdoms, and various kings line up to join Dharamaraja’s war! Salya, the king of Madra kingdom and the maternal uncle of the Pandavas is on his way to join the army of Dharmaraja against the Kauravas.

Shakuni tells Duryodhana “Salya is coming with his entire army and he is also a great warrior!. We have to somehow get him to join us! Duryodhana asked “How can this be possible Uncle? He is the maternal uncle of Pandavas, so why will he join our side? If you were asked to fight for the Pandavas, would you? Shakuni says “Nephew! Nothing is impossible if you know how to scheme!” Shakuni schemes to get Salya on the Kaurava side and he asks Duryodhana to put up a free eatery on the path of Salya’s army. Let his army go and eat there and let Salya also eat there! Once he finishes eating go and pay your respects to him! The eatery is also mischievously named as though it was put up by Dharmaraja and Salya’s army dines there. Duryodhana falls in Salya’s feet after the army has had dinner and Salya realises that he has been tricked.

Once everyone had eaten, Duryodhana went and fell at the feet of Salya saying “Uncle Salya I pay my respects to you!” Salya asked “Why have you come here Duryodhana?” Duryodhana

said “This free eatery has been built by me Uncle! A surprised Salya asks “I saw the board outside calling this place”Dharma Dining Centre? Duryodhana explained “I wanted to call it Dharmam [meaning free dining centre] but someone has written it wrongly as Dharma, leaving out the M in the end!“ A shocked Salya asks “Duryodhana! Did I eat your food just now? Duryodhana said yes. Salya said “After eating your food I cannot fight against you!” Thus Salya was tricked into joining Duryodhana’s army!

Salya, with his army joins Duryodhana to fight against his own nephews. Shakuni wanting Salya in Duryodhana’s side has another reason which will be revealed in the seventeenth day of war. Dharmaraja is sad to lose the support of Salya and his army and he takes a promise from his maternal uncle Salya. He says that one day in Karna’s battle against Arjuna, Duryodhana would request Salya to be Karna’s charioteer. Dharmaraja asks Salya to accept this and being Karna’s charioteer also requests him to constantly undermine Karna’s confidence in himself. Salya hence becomes one of the causes for Karna’s death. Shakuni says “Here I come Uncle of the Lunar Dynasty and the nemesis of Duryodhana!” I have been born to destroy the Lunar Dynasty and cause the destruction of Duryodhana and the Kauravas!

The Kauravas have the support of eleven Akroni’s or armies against the seven Akroni’s or armies of the Pandavas. Each Akroni or division of army has 21,870 warriors on chariot, 21,870 warriors on elephants, 65,610 warriors on horseback and 1,09,350 foot soldiers, 21,870 warriors on elephants, 65,610 warriors on horseback and 1,09,350 foot soldiers. Duryodhana appoints Bhishma as the General of the Kaurava army. Now the Pandava army had seven Akroni armies, and the Kauravas had eleven Akroni armies. Duryodhana appointed the Grandfather Bhishma as the General of the eleven Akroni Kaurava army.

One day Duryodhana bowed down before Bhishma and asked: “Grandfather! It is said that one has to offer someone as sacrifice before the battle begins. Who should we offer as the sacrifice to Goddess Kali? Who should we consult on an auspicious date to start the war?”

Before any battle it was a custom in those times to sacrifice a physically perfect human being with thirty two marks of physical perfection to Kali, the Goddess of the battlefield. Four people in the Kaurava and Pandava army qualified as having the thirty two marks of physical perfection. They were Duryodhana’s son Lakshmanakumara and Salya in the Kaurava army and Arjuna and Krishna in the Pandava army. None of these four could be offered as a sacrifice and Bhishma suggests a fifth, Aravan the son of Arjuna and Ulupi.

Bhishma says “There is this warrior Aravan, if he wishes can destroy our entire army in a single day! You should request that undefeatable warrior Aravan, to be the human sacrifice! He will accept your request of being the human sacrifice! If that young warrior is sacrificed, you will be able to win the battle, the kingdom and lead a good life!” “There is this warrior called Aravan who can destroy our entire eleven Akroni army in a single day! His name is Aravan and he is Arjuna’s son! If you sacrifice Aravan and start the war on the day Sahadeva determines” He does not say that he will win! But he does not say “You will succeed!”

Bhishma asks Duryodhana to consult with Sahadeva an expert astrologer as to what would be the correct time to offer the sacrifice so that they could be victorious. Duryodhana was sceptical whether Sahadeva will give the correct answer as he was actually a warrior in the enemy camp. Bhishma says “Duryodhana, you only see people as friends or enemies! But Sahadeva is not like you! He is an astrologer, and will only be truthful to his knowledge!” Duryodhana then directly walked into the place where Sahadeva and demanded “Sahadeva! In the forthcoming Great War, that Dharma’s head has to fall on the ground and I should emerge victorious, so suggest an appropriate day to start the war”

Since Sahadeva was a man honour bound by his shastras, he looked at his astrological and said “If you do not choose a day in the month of Margazhi, on a new moon day, when the Sun and the Moon are together if you sacrifice a perfect warrior to begin the war, you would not succeed”. Duryodhana tells Sahadeva “I want to go war younger brother! And Dharma’s head should roll on the ground! Younger brother tell me the correct time to offer the sacrifice and begin the war so that I will succeed! Sahadeva says “Elder brother! If you share what your intentions are in Hastinapura clearly, I will look at your horoscope and give a correct prediction without fail” Duryodhana says “Sahadeva! I want one of the Pandavas and your elder brother, that Dharma’s head to fall on the ground! It is for that I want to consult you as to whom to offer as a sacrifice and the correct date of sacrifice for me to be victorious! Give me correct the prediction true to your knowledge of the Shastras! Though Sahadeva knows that what Duryodhana was asking would lead to the destruction of the Pandavas, Sahadeva being true to his knowledge gives Duryodhana the correct answer as to the right time to offer the sacrifice

In the Bharatham renditions it is Bhishma who suggests Aravan as the right sacrifice but in Koothu, Sahadeva is the person who points Aravan out to Duryodhana. On the day of Amavasai, the day sun and moon come together, on such a day sacrifice a hero, and take his blood, splash it across the battlefield, victory would be on the side if the war is begun after that. How should that

person be? He must be the only child of his mother. Must have upright bristling hair, he should be a short tempered man! Such a man should be offered as the sacrifice, to ensure your victory, Sahadevan said.

Duryodhana asked “Okay, now please tell me does this ideal man exist and as to where I can find him?” A truthful Sahadeva sadly says “Elder brother! Such a man exists! Alas he exists! He is there elder brother in the the land of Nagas, he is the son of the Naga princess Ulupi! Duryodhana says “Do not cry! Who is he and where can I find him?” Sahadeva says tearfully ““You are asking who this man is and where he can be found!” Sahadeva says “Elder brother! He is the son of my brother Arjuna and the Naga princess Ulupi and is named Aravan! Elder brother! He exists!”

[Aravan’s stage entry song] The King of the Lunar Dynasty, the son of Dhananjaya![Arjuna]! Here I am coming King Aravan, the fearless warrior! With my throne glittering, and the arms on my shoulders sparkling, here I am coming, the fearless Aravan, with great speed!

Munnuswamy a potter living in a village called Nedumurai, about twenty kilometres away from Kazhiyur was commissioned by the village to sculpt both the head of Aravan and the torso of Duryodhana for the climactic event, Padugalam. Munnusami was originally a Koothu actor who when he got married to Balagujalambal, the daughter of a potter, took up his father-in-law’s profession and gave up acting. He is now a potter himself and he sculpts the idols for all these festivals.

Duryodhana went straight to the Naga Kingdom and met Aravan and said “Aravan, I have decided to sacrifice you in the coming new moon day! You should attend my sacrifice by consenting to be the sacrifice yourself!” Aravan tells Duryodhana “Father’s elder brother! You have all lived a full life! How can you ask for my life which I am just starting to live? Aravan says he was aware of the tortures his father was subjected to by Duryodhana. So beats up Duryodhana in anger in revenge. But Duryodhana is adamant! He says “Even if I have to lose my life, I would rather die in your hands! But as I want to rule this kingdom you should accept to be the person sacrificed!”

Duryodhana says “It is your father’s younger brother Sahadeva who read your horoscope and said that the time for your death has come! Aravan asks” Are you saying that it is my uncle

Sahadeva who has predicted my death? Is it he who said that I will definitely die on the new moon day tomorrow? Whether I choose to be sacrificed or not, my life will end at nine PM at tomorrow's New Moon day? If that be the case, I consent to give up my life which will anyhow depart uselessly by consenting to be your sacrifice tomorrow! Aravan says "Father's elder brother! If my body stays blemishless till This New Moon day, I am willing to be your sacrifice! He tells Duryodhana "Okay. I cannot make this decision on my own. I will get mother's permission and come to your sacrifice!"

Aravan sings to his mother Ulupi "My respects! Mother! I, King Aravan bow to you; I pay my respects to you Mother! Ulupi mourns on Aravan's decision "Why are you making empty arguments? What you are saying makes no sense! My dear brave son, please do not leave me! I can only call the man who made this suggestion, a wicked man!

[Ulupi now invokes her brother Krishna] Ulupi says "If my elder brother, the protector of the world, Krishna comes to know of this, he will save your life my son!" "Son, you should not go", says the mother and faints. Can a mother send a son, no, not possible. She falls down in a faint and Aravan prays to Krishna, asking for his help in either saving him or consoling his mother. Krishna then goes and meets Aravan and requests him to be the sacrifice to Kali on behalf of the Pandavas. But Aravan says that he had already promised Duryodhana that he will be his sacrificial offering on the forthcoming New Moon day.

Krishna comes and asks Aravan "Would the victory of the wicked Duryodhana who denied your fathers their own land winning the war make you happy? Or would you be happy if your fathers who lived in Vanavaasam in the forest for twelve years and in hiding for another year are victorious?" Aravan says "Uncle Krishna! What kind of question is this? That Duryodhana has been our father's enemy since birth, would I be happy if he wins? I would only be happy if my fathers win! Krishna asks "What are you saying?" Aravan says "My father!" Krishna asks "Only if Pandavas win you would be happy Pandavas?", Aravan concurs "Only the Pandava victory will make me happy! "Krishna says"Then, I ask you come to be the sacrifice on behalf of Pandavas!" Aravan says "That is not possible now! If you had asked me asked before I had given my word to Duryodhana, I would have come! I cannot retract my given word! Krishna asks Yes, you cannot go back on your word. But what was promise you made?" He also says that he had only promised Duryodhana that he will be the sacrifice, if there were no physical imperfections on his body before the New Moon day.

Aravan says “If until this New Moon, my body remains blemishless, I promised to be the sacrificial victim!” Krishna tells Aravan, that he will not be breaking his promise to Duryodhana as the Pandavas will be sacrificing him one day earlier. Krishna says “You have promised that you will go on tomorrow’s New Moon!” Aravan says yes. Krishna says “I say the New Moon is today! So come with me!” Aravan says “Uncle, are you joking!” Aravan says “There seems to be no end to your pranks! How can it be the New Moon today? For tomorrow is the New Moon day?” “Come I insist that today is the New Moon!” Aravan says “How can today be the New Moon da”? Krishna asks “Why not?” Aravan says “It is not possible!” Krishna asks “What If I prove that today is the New Moon?” Aravan says “If you can prove it, I will readily be the sacrifice for my fathers!” In Indian traditions, people offer prayers to their departed ancestors on an Amavaasai or a New Moon day. And Sahadeva had suggested an auspicious New Moon day for Duryodhana to offer Aravan as the sacrifice.

Krishna whimsically chooses to perform this ritual to the ancestors on the day before the New Moon or Amavasai. Assuming the day before Amavasai to be the New Moon day, the Brahmins of Kashi, instructed by Krishna perform the ritual to their departed ancestors. Surya and Chandra, the sun and moon gods are surprised to see Krishna perform this ritual the day before the actual New Moon. So they come down to earth to inform Krishna that he had got the date of the New Moon wrong and that he should perform the ritual the next day

A perplexed Surya and Chandra came down to earth, bowed to Krishna and asked “Krishna Amavasai is tomorrow, so why are you performing the ritual today?” Krishna asked them to define the New Moon “What is Amavasai?” he asked. They replied “The day, we Surya and Chandra, come face to face and appear together before the citizens, that day is called Amavasai!” Krishna mocks them “Lift your hands properly in blessing! And look properly at each other!

The day both of you come together as one planet, facing each other, as one planet, that day is called the New Moon day! Surya and Chandra agree and say yes! Krishna asked “If so, how have both of you come now?” Without realizing both of them had come together. Krishna says “Today both of you have come together on a planet and facing each other, blessing the citizens! Then is not today Amavasai? Surya and Chandra exclaim “We have been fooled, Chandra, by this sorcerer Krishna. We have been fooled, Chandra, by this magician!”

While the head of Aravan is made in the potter’s village the body is made using straw and wood in the festival village itself. The whole process takes about 8 hours after which the potter’s

handover the Aravan statue to the villagers. An Invocation song to Kali, the Goddess of the battlefield is sung after which the priest removes symbolically the thirty two marks of physical perfection on Aravan's body and puts them in a pot.

While the narrative of Aravan under various names is a pan Indian narrative, the narrative of Aravan being the sacrifice to Kali in the Great War is found only in Tamil renditions of the Mahabharata. Aravan, in these renditions, had no problems in being the human sacrifice but he had three conditions to make. First he did not want to die as a bachelor; second he wanted to watch the Great War even after he was sacrificed and third, being a warrior himself, he wanted to at least fight one day in the war. Krishna agreed to all of Aravan's conditions.

Aravan says "In this Mahabharata war, for the entire eighteen days of battle, I should not die; I want to witness the entire war! Krishna says "You would like to see whether it is the unjust Duryodhana who is going to win, or the epitome of truth, Dharmaraja is going to win and as to who would win and rule the kingdom? Aravan says "Yes I want that vision even after my sacrifice!" Krishna says "Because my blessings I grant you the vision to watch the entire eighteen days of war, to see what each warrior does and as to who kills whom in the war and as to the number of warriors each warrior kills! In this Kurukshetra battle field, you should by yourself" Aravan completes Krishna's sentence "I will cut up my body myself!" Krishna continues "You should cut yourself up and spray your blood on the battlefield!" Aravan agrees. Aravan sacrificing himself in the battlefield.

Ulupi laments "Alas my dear son! The womb that gave birth to you as if it was the fruits of my Tapas is now burning! Alas my dear son! I did Tapas to beget you, my dear one, and carried you for three hundred days! Alas my kingly son! After the sacrifice of Aravan the armies of the Pandavas and Kauravas enter into battle formation.

The Kaurava army is numerically far superior to the Pandavas army and Duryodhana wants to know from Bhishma as to how long it will take for the Pandava army to be destroyed. Duryodhana spoke to his grandfather Bhishma and said "Grandfather! Wherever I look, I can only see hordes of armies!" "We have eleven Akroni's or armies on our side while the Pandavas only have only seven Akroni armies! So please tell how many days it would itake to destroy the Pandava armies?" Bhishma says it will take him half a day to destroy the Pandava army, while Drona could do in three days and Karna would take about five days to destroy the entire Pandava

army. Drona's son Ashwatthama, he says, is the best warrior in the Kaurava camp and he could destroy the entire Pandava army in twenty four minutes!

Duryodhana is pleased as he thinks the war is already won and Bhishma rebukes him by saying that you just asked me about the strength of or army and he never asked me about the strength of the opposing force. Bhishma then speaks about the strength of the Pandava army and Duryodhana is dispirited. Arjuna, Bhishma says, in a moment's time, before a blink of the eye, he can destroy both the Kaurava and Pandava army together! Arjuna had the Pasupata weapon which can destroy the entire world in the blink of an eye!

At this point of time, the author of the Epic, Veda Vyasa enters his own narrative and asks Dhritarashtra whether he wanted his eyesight back so that he can watch the Great War. Dhritarashtra asked Vyasa as to who would win and Vyasa replied that his sons would definitely not win! Dhritarashtra says "Venerable Sage! I was not able to see my sons neither being born nor growing up and should I see them dying now?" He said he did not want to see the battle, but would like to hear about it.

Vyasa does another intervention here. He saves Sanjaya, the charioteer of Dhritarashtra from Satyaki saying that Sanjaya was too precious to be killed in the battle. He also gives Sanjaya the ability to be at all corners of the battlefield simultaneously. Sanjaya is also given the ability to listen to all conversations on the battlefield and he can also listen to the unspoken thoughts of each warrior fighting in the battlefield! Dhritarashtra hears one of the most comprehensive descriptions of the battle, even as it is being fought

Bhishma organises the army under the leadership of various generals and Karna is upset that Bhishma has deliberately given him a lesser position. An angry Karna complains to Duryodhana and says that he will only step into the battlefield when Bhishma falls in battle.

On the Pandavas side Krishna anoints Subhedhan, the eldest son of the Virata king as the general of the Pandava army. Krishna appoints Arjuna, Bhima, Abhimanyu, Dhritadhyumnan as chariot warriors and apponts Sikhandi, Virata and Dharma as maharathis or another form of warriors on chariot, Ghatotkachan and Dhruvada as samarathis , another class of chariot warriors and finally Nakula and Sahadevan were appointed as antharathas or warriors whose duty was to protect the chariot warriors. Subhedan was of course was the General of the Pandava army. Now

Arjuna in armour enters the battlefield with the divine Krishna, in the hands which played the flute, holding the reins of Arjuna's chariot!

Arjuna enters the battlefield with Krishna as his charioteer. In most of the retellings of the Mahabharata Arjuna is seen as facing a dilemma when he sees all his kinsmen arrayed on the other side of the battlefield. Arjuna throws down his weapons as he does not want to kill his own family. But this narrative of Arjuna's dilemma, is narrated only in the tenth day of battle in the Mahabharata, when Bhishma falls in the battlefield at the hands of Arjuna Sanjaya who is recounting the events of the battlefield says in a shocked manner, that Bhishma has fallen! Dhritarashtra is aghast and asks as to how Arjuna could have the heart to kill his own grandfather. Sanjaya then tells Dhritarashtra that on the first day of battle itself, Arjuna did not want to fight this war with his own kith and kin. Arjuna asks Krishna "Look at all the warriors assembled here to fight; you know who are they Krishna! My grandfather is here, my uncles, my other relatives are assembled here! And finally who is Duryodhana Krishna? Is he not my elder brother? Arjuna is confused with these emotions running through his head and he lets his bow the Gandiva drop. "There are no enemies here, all are my relatives, and should I kill them? Should I kill them?" he asked. But Krishna managed to persuade Arjuna to fight by narrating his discourse on Dharma, the Bhagvad Gita to him. This positioning of the Gita Upadesham in the Mahabharata comes at a very dramatic juncture when the patriarch of the Chandra Vamsam, Bhishma, falls in the battlefield.

Krishna says "Arjuna you are in grief over something you should not be saddened over! You keep repeating "My Grandfather!" Is your grandfather, his body or his life? If the grandfather for whom you are grieving is his body, that body is sure to perish some day. If your grandfather is his life, than that life is indestructible! It cannot be destroyed by fire, air, water. Why are you grieving over destroying a body that is sure to perish some day? Do not think that you are the one who is doing the destruction! I am the person who from within you who is actually the agent of action. Because you are deluded, you are seeing things which are meaningless and do not exist!"

Most commentators on the Bhagavathgita describe the Gita as a dialogue between Arjuna and Krishna. One storyteller said that there were actually four voices in the Gita. He said that the first two voices were of Krishna speaking to Arjuna, and the other two voices were of Sanjaya reporting this dialogue to the blind king Dhritarashtra. He described the four voices as Para, Pashyanti, Madhyama and Vaikhari. With Krishna being the voice of Para, Arjuna being Pashyanti, Sanjaya the charioteer of Dhritarashtra being Madhyama and Dhritarashtra the blind king being the voice of Vaikhari. No real engagement with the Gita, he said was possible,

without engaging with these four voices which represented four ascending levels of consciousness from Dhritarashtra to Krishna.

Krishna asks Arjuna “Why are you shouldering the burden of killing? Place the burden for the killing on me and shoot your arrows at them! “You are not the agent of your own actions! The real agent is me working through you! I have been incarnated over numerous epochs of time for the sole purpose of protecting people and for the destruction of Adharma! It is not you who are the real agent, but are my instrument!” Krishna then shows him his cosmic form, his ‘Vishwaroopam! In this gigantic Cosmic form, Arjuna can see all the armies before him already dead and sees all the warriors being swallowed by the mouth of this Cosmic form! Arjuna, with his confusion cleared, pulls himself together, rises and stands on his chariot with his bow the Gandiva.

Dharmaraja before signalling the beginning of the war gets down from the chariot and takes the blessings of his grandfather Bhishma and his teacher Drona. Both Bhishma and Drona are pleased with this gesture of Dharmaraja and reveal to him and Krishna as to when and how they could be killed. Bhishma says that he can be killed on the tenth day of battle if Dharmaraja makes him fight against Shikandi as Bhishma would not fight with a person who was originally born as a woman. Drona says he can be killed on the fifteenth day, if a person he trusts announces that his son Ashwatthama had been killed in battle. Drona says that he will immediately throw down his arms and Dhristadumnya, who was born to kill him, could easily kill him.

All the soldiers in both the Pandava and the Kaurava armies are waiting for the signal from Dharmaraja and Duryodhana respectively signalling the beginning of the war. When Dharmaraja sees Arjuna back on his chariot with his bow, the Gandiva, he waves his battle flag and signals the beginning of the war and Duryodhana follows suit.

At the same time both Dharmaraja and Duryodhana wave the battle flag signalling the start of war. And with heroic chants of “War! War! War!” both armies charge against each other. Soon after the battle begins, there are soldiers who have lost their hands, their legs, and some who have lost their heads! Everybody is rolling on the battlefield and a dangerous war has begun! Both armies fight aggressively. Wherever one looked, one could see arrows flying in the air, with the swishing sounds of the flying arrows resounding everywhere! And the clanging of swords clashing against the other could be heard all around!

Duryodhana has made Bhishma the general of the Kaurava army but Krishna surprisingly has chosen Subedhan, the eldest son of the Virata king as the general of the Pandava army. Subedhan is an excellent warrior and in the first day of battle he runs amok among the Kaurava army killing numerous soldiers and threatening the life of even the great warrior Salya. Duryodhana panics seeing the valour of Subedhan, and entreats for the help of Bhishma in handling this. Bhishma enters into a single combat with Subedhan and a furious battle begins between them. Bhishma's chariot pulls up before Subedhan and both commanders engage in fierce combat!

Though Subedhan was just a young boy, he was able to hold his own against Bhishma and started showering a volley of arrows at Bhishma! Bhishma was surprised that such a young boy was standing up to him and decided that the boy should not be left alive! So Bhishma taunts him "Hey Subedha, can you fight only from afar with arrows or can engage directly, one to one, in sword fight?" Subedha said "Respected elder! Not only can I fight with my bow, I can also equally fight with the sword!" Saying this, and throwing away his bow, he picked up his sword. Deceitfully then Bhishma shot arrows at Subedhan who was standing before him with a sword, hitting at Subedhan's chest, his shoulders and cut his head. Who was the one doing this unjust act? It was Bhishma! In the very first day of battle, Bhishmacharya started fighting an unjust war! The Commander of the Pandavas is killed on the first day itself! The Pandavas lose terribly on the first day of war. On the second day of war, Dharmaraja at the behest of Krishna appoints Dhrishtadyumna as the general of the Pandava army. Dharmaraja who had never wanted war in the first place is disturbed by the number of warriors killed on both sides of the battlefield. Bhishma fights like a man possessed and the Pandava army is unable to withstand his onslaught.

Second day of the war, Dhrishtadyumna was appointed the commander by Dharmaraja on the advice of the divine Krishna. Bhishmacharya skilfully organises the Kaurava army in a Garuda Vyuha or Eagle shaped formation. The face of this eagle was Bhishma, with Drona and Kritavarma and Kripa and Ashwathama as its head. The armies of the Trikartas, Kekayas, Bhurisrivas, Salya, Bhagadatta, Saindhavas and others standing as the neck of the eagle and he kept Duryodhana well hidden in the back of this formation. Protecting Duryodhana was the main job. On the second day the Pandavas faced a severe defeat!

The third day's battle was wonderful with Bhishma fighting brilliantly! No one around could see him bending his bow, but a steady stream of arrows flew from his bow! An angry Krishna admonishes Arjuna who is admiring the fighting skills of his grandfather. Krishna says "Bhishma

is fighting ferociously like a raging forest fire, but why are you admiring him? But you are just admiring him without retaliating!

While Bhishma is killing the warriors in the Pandava army, Arjuna watches silently enjoying seeing the skill of his grandfather. Krishna gets angry with Arjuna and asks him as to why he is letting Bhishma go unchallenged. Arjuna says he just wanted to watch his grandfather fight. Bhishma then provokes Arjuna and Krishna by shooting arrows at them. Krishna gets furious with Bhishma for this and gets down from his chariot carrying his weapon, the Chakrayudham. Krishna says “Bhishma, on the first day itself you made the young boy Subedhan who was fighting furiously with his bow, drop his bow to pick up his sword, and then deceitfully shot his head down! Now, you are shooting arrows on Arjuna who was simply watching you!

Bhishma is happy that he will be killed by Krishna, but Krishna just admonishes him for the adharmic way in which he had begun the battle by killing the Pandava general Subhedhan. Now Arjuna gets into the fight. Arjuna picks up his bow and says, “Kanna now see what I do to my grandfather!” and shoots a single arrow. It multiplies into hundreds, thousands, ten thousand, lakhs and has and all these arrows attack Bhishma simultaneously! Bhishma’s chariot and weapons are destroyed, his charioteer killed and Bhishma runs for cover! After suffering severe casualties in the first three days of the battle, the Pandava army hits back and win the fourth, the fifth, the sixth and the seventh day of the battle. Bhima kills thirteen of Duryodhana’s brothers and gloats about this, which enrages Duryodhana.

On the fourth day of the war, Bhima kills Senavindhu, Sudhakanan, Pingalasan, Salasandhan and Bhimavahu, five brothers of Duryodhana. Every day, Gandhari used to be brought everyday in a palanquin and she would hug all the hundred sons and bless them. This day when she embraced her sons, she found five missing. “Where are my five sons”, she asked. She was told that Bhima had killed them in battle, the previous day. Any mother would cry if sons are dead, there is nothing wrong crying. But do you know what she was saying when she cried for her sons? Gandhari laments “The Pandava plans are working as five sons of the hundred of mine are dead, while the five sons of Kunti are still alive!” This envious thinking was what destroyed Gandhari!

On the eighth day of the battle, Aravan according to the boon he had been given by Krishna gets to fight for one and a half hours in the battle. In the Koothu rendition of this play, it is Krishna who plots the death of the Pandava warrior Aravan at the hands of Alambasuran. Alambasuran,

of course was the brother of Bakasura, a demon killed by Bhima earlier in the narrative. On the eighth day of battle, Aravan kills one akroni or a battallion of the Kaurava army. As the divine Krishna had promised, he was made the commander of the Pandava army on the eighth day. Duryodhana sees eight of his brothers killed and Aravan destroying an entire battallion and wonders who has the power to defeat Aravan. Duryodhana finds the forest dwelling demon, Alambasuran, the brother of Bakasura to be the correct warrior and invites him. Duryodhana asks for Alambasuran's help. Alambasuran asks "What do you want me to do?" Duryodhana says "You have to kill Aravan" Alambasuran accepts to kill Aravan, but is powerless against Aravan. So divine Krishna asks Alambasura to take the form of the eagle Garuda, since Aravan was a snake prince, but Aravan cuts off the wings of the eagle Alambasuran. Alambasura falls, failing to kill Aravan.

Again the divine Krishna appears and sings "This is the right time, to kill Aravan" Krishna sings "There is no way now, to reduce the burden on mother Earth because of this Aravan. This is the correct time to kill Aravan as he would be danger to the Pandava army also". Krishna says "If this Aravan lives any longer the promise I made to the Pandavas that I would protect them would fail as Aravan will kill the armies on both sides. The Koothu gives an interesting reason as to why Aravan had to be killed and this reason is found in all the versions of Aravan's story found all across the country. Aravan or Barbarika had made a promise to his mother that he would always fight for the underdog against a mightier foe. But as Aravan was a great warrior, he would decimate the mightier army making it the weaker force in the equation; Now he would be honour bound to fight for the other army which had now become weaker. So the promise that he made to his mother would make him constantly shift sides in the battle, till he was the only warrior left alive. This is why Krishna had to see that Aravan did not fight too long in the war. Again when Alambasuran in his eagle form goes to fight against Aravan, Aravan looks at him contemptuously. Aravan thinks that someone with his wings cut off cannot fight! So he throws down his sword and turns his back on Alambasuran. Agaaya Vaani, an invisible voice from the sky, at the instruction of Krishna tells Alambasura that Aravan can only be killed with his own sword! Alambasuran picks up Aravan's sword and stabs him in the back. Aravan dies on the eighth day of the war. But remember he had got a boon that if he dies, he should be able to see the eighteen days of war. So the divine Krishna ensured that and he watched the entire war! That is why Aravan's head is kept in all festivals!

One of the interesting features of this festival is the constant contestations of truth by both the storytellers and the Koothu actors, as to who was narrating the original Mahabharata. Sometimes these contestations could be strident, sometimes it would be subdued. While narrating the events of the eighth day of battle, the story teller made a sarcastic observation. That in Koothu, Duryodhana is only seen to be weeping once he has lost all his brothers and his entire army on

the eighteenth day of war. He said that in the Mahabharata, Duryodhana weeps when thirteen of his brothers are killed by Bhima and he complains to Bhishma. Bhishma sarcastically asks him as to whether he was mourning only the thirteen of his brothers who were killed or was he mourning all the Kaurava warriors who had lost their lives in the battle. Bhishma also says that it is still not too late to call off the war and asks Duryodhana whether he should speak to Dharmaraja and put an end to the war. An angry Duryodhana obviously refuses.

Now the war has reached the tenth day, and the day on which Bhishma said that he could be killed has been reached. On the tenth day, Bhishma is fighting furiously and the stream of arrows flying from his bow was decimating the Pandava army. Seeing this Krishna saw told Arjuna, "Do not leave your grandfather unchecked! if he fights like this, your entire army will be destroyed today!" Arjuna followed Bhishma wherever he went. Only Arjuna was able to stand up to him and fight.

Bhishma has also been given a boon by his father Shantanu, that no person would be able kill him and death would come to Bhishma only when he wishes for it. Bhishma had already told Krishna and Dharmaraja that he could be killed on the tenth day if he was made to fight Shikandi who was neither man nor a woman. Now Krishna summons Shikandi to fight with Bhishma. Krishna summons Shikandi who was neither a man nor a woman and made him stand on Arjuna's chariot. When Bhishma saw Shikandi, the transgender, he threw away his bow refusing to fight and went into a yogic trance. Both Shikandi and Arjuna shoot at the defenceless Bhishma. Bhishma is able to differentiate the arrows shot by Shikandi at him and those shot by Arjuna. And he is pleased whenever Arjuna's arrows hit him. Finally he falls, felled by the volley of arrows shot by Arjuna.

Both the Kauravas and the Pandavas stop the war and rush towards their grandfather. Everybody, including Duryodhana is in tears. The arrows fired at Bhishma have drained his body of blood and Bhishma declares that he is thirsty. Duryodhana sends Ducchasa to get some water. Bhishma says "Duryodhana, the water you bring will not quench my thirst! Let the one who shot me get me some water!" Arjuna immediately shot an arrow at the ground. The arrow travelled down the earth and got the waters of underground Ganga to gush straight into Bhishma's mouth.

Duryodhana then got some people to remove the arrows stuck on his body. Bhishma asked him not to remove the arrows but wanted a bed to rest on! Again Bhishma said "Let he who shot me, also make me a bed! Arjuna made him a bed of arrows to lie on and Bhishma rested on it!

Bhishma said “Duryodhana! Arjuna! Do not cry for me. I will not die now. I will not give up my life when the sun is in the southern hemisphere! [Dhakshinayam] I am waiting die when the sun moves to the northern hemisphere [Uttarayanam] to die. My father has granted me such a boon. It is a boon to decide one’s own time of death! I will only die by my own choice! I will only choose to die once I know who wins and loses in this war! All of go you back, get some rest and get ready for tomorrow’s war!”

Only Duryodhana was unable to stop crying. He was really attached to his grandfather! For the Pandavas were born and grew up in the forest, lived for only a short period with him, again lived in the forests, from there they went to Indraprastha, then again went to live in the forests! But Duryodhana had never been separated from his grandfather! From the day he was born he grew up with him in the palace and lived with Bhishma all his life! He truly had great love for his grandfather!

In the night in the battle field, Bhishma finds his feet drenched by tears and sees Karna silently weeping at his feet. Bhishma now explains to Karna the reason why he did not make him one of his main generals on the first day of the war. He says if he had done that Karna would have immediately taken up fight with Arjuna, and the fate of Bhishma now might have been the fate of Karna much earlier. He says Duryodhana could handle the death of his grandfather Bhishma but he would have been totally shattered by the death of his best friend Karna. It is for this reason, he says, that he wanted Karna to stay away from the battle for the sake of Duryodhana. Bhishma says as a warrior he can respect another warrior and Karna he declares was one of the greatest warriors in the world.

Bhishma in Tamil traditions also knows of Karna’s true identity and he discloses it to him at this point of time. Bhishma says “Karna I will tell you a secret! The Pandavas whom you keep calling as your enemies, they are actually your younger brothers! The mother of the Pandavas, Kunti, is also your mother! The Son god, Surya, is your father” Somehow Bhishma had learned about the secret of Karna’s birth. But Karna bowed to him and said he was aware of his true identity. Karna says “Krishna who came as the Pandava emissary revealed this to me! After that I have also met my mother Kunti” Bhishma is shocked when he realises that Karna already knew about his identity and that he was the eldest of the Pandavas but he still chose to fight for his best friend Duryodhana. Bhishma is really humbled by Karna’s sacrifice.

Bhishma was shocked knowing that Karna already knew who he was! Bhishma says “Karna! Now you have destroyed my ego and my pride!” When asked why Bhishma said “I thought that it was I who had made a great sacrifice by giving up claims on the kingdom so that my father could get married again! Though I had given up kingship, I enjoyed all the pleasures of the post! But, when kingship came looking for you, but you chose to reject it for the sake of your friendship and have chosen to fight for your friend! Compared to the sacrifice you have made my sacrifice is really nothing! You are really a great hero! I bless you!”

In the war of the eleventh day, the poet says both the Pandava and the Kaurava armies were dispirited after the fall of Bhishma. The battlefield, he says, looks like the sky without the moon, a pond without lotus and there was an air of sadness and loss in everybody. Now the question becomes as to who will be the general of the Kaurava army after the fall of Bhishma. Just as Krishna had taken on the responsibility of appointing generals for the Pandavas, now Shakuni takes on that mantle for the Kauravas. Shakuni suggests that Drona should lead the Kaurava army. In the eleventh day's war, Arjuna's son Abhimanyu captures Duryodhana's son Lakshmanakumara and drags him through the battlefield. Lakshmanakumara somehow escapes from Abhimanyu, but Duryodhana is humiliated at the insult done to his son. So he tells Drona that he wants Dharmaraja captured and dragged through the battlefield just like his son had been done by Abhimanyu.

On the twelfth day, the Pandava army has been arranged protecting Dharmaraja at its centre by Dhrishtadumnya. Drona tries his best to capture Dharmaraja but he fails on the twelfth day as both Bhima and Arjuna are constantly at Dharmaraja's side thwarting all of Drona's attempts. Duryodhana is angry at Drona's failure. That night Duryodhana asked “Teacher, why did you not capture Dharma?” Drona replied that as long as Arjuna and Bhima are at his side, it will be impossible to capture Dharma. Some people called Narayana Gopalakas came and promised that they will draw Arjuna and Bhima early in the morning, very far away from Dharmaraja the next day and said that the opportunity can be used to capture Dharma.

On the morning of the thirteenth day they came and deliberately provoked Arjuna and Bhima to a battle. Both Arjuna and Bhima who would not shirk a fight when deliberately provoked, and they were drawn very far away from the Kurukshetra battlefield and Dharmaraja. Knowing that Arjuna, Bhima and Krishna were not by Dharmaraja's side, Dronachari arrayed his army in a ‘Chakra Vyuha’ formation. On the thirteenth day of battle Drona ensures that both Bhima and Arjuna would be occupied elsewhere and would not be able to guard Dharmaraja. Now he sets his plans afoot to capture Dharmaraja. Drona arrays his army in the Chakravuyha formation, a formation extremely difficult to penetrate into, targeting Dharmaraja. Only four people knew

how to break this formation and they were Arjuna, Krishna, Ashwathama and Arjuna's son Abhimanyu. While Krishna, Arjuna and Ashwathama know to break into the formation and also how to break out of it, Abhimanyu has learnt only how to break into the formation.

Dharmaraja tells Abhimanyu "When your father and uncle are not around, our teacher Drona is trying to capture me. Only your father, your uncle Krishna and you know how to break this Chakra Vyuha formation. He asks Abhimanyu inauspiciously to go to war! He should have actually said auspiciously "Go and return victoriously! But as Dharmaraja was worried when he heard that Drona wanted to capture him, in a helpless and confused state of mind he asked his nephew Abhimanyu inauspiciously "Go to war, Leave immediately!"

Abhimanyu breaks into the formation to protect Dharmaraja. For quite a few days Abhimanyu had wanted to create havoc among the Kaurava forces. He rushed to wear his armour, pick up his bows, swords and other weapons to fight, and is all set to enter into the fray. Dharmaraja said "Come, embrace me" fondly to the gallant Abhimanyu who had defeated Drona the previous day and sent him to fight. Dharmaraja says "Go fast, into the harsh war, destroy the enemy forces and win by the grace of the Goddess of the battlefield!"

With the warrior's foot ornament on his feet, a pearl necklace bright as the moon adorning his chest, Beautiful serpent design shoulder ornaments adorned his shoulders and two emerald earrings, red like the rays of the setting sun glittered on his ears, removing all darkness and with a shining crown Abhimanyu rode his chariot!" Abhimanyu entered the fray like a young lion charging against a mad elephant! The earth trembled with the thunderous sounds of his chariot. Abhimanyu knew only how to break into the Chakravyuha, but not the mantra to get out. It was the mantra that he learnt while in his mother's womb.

One day while Subhadra was pregnant, the divine Krishna went to see his sister. Subhadra said "Elder brother! I am not able to sleep, so please tell me a story" Krishna agrees and begins telling a story. Krishna narrated to her the story of the Mahabharata starting from the birth of the three brothers Dhritarashtra, Pandu and Vidura and continuing up to the twelfth day of the battle.

Subadhra does not find the story interesting and falls asleep as Krishna is narrating it. But the child in her womb, to whom maybe Krishna is actually narrating the story, is listening to his uncle with great interest. Krishna continues his narration by describing what will happen on the

thirteenth day of the battle. He says that Drona would try to capture Dharmaraja and arrange his army in the Chakravyuha formation which only four people knew to break into. Krishna says that if this mantra is chanted, the Chakravyuha can be broken and chanted the mantra. By the time he completed chanting the mantra, Subadhra woke up and apologised for falling asleep. Abhimanyu even as an unborn child in the womb is an avid learner and he quickly learns the Mantra from Krishna. At this point Subadhra awakens and apologises to her brother for falling off to sleep and not listening to her brother's story. Subadhra woke up and apologised for falling asleep. Krishna stopped his story and said "What was lost in sleep will remain lost!" Subhadhra's falling asleep determined the life span of her unborn son. He knew the mantra to break in, but not the mantra to break out!

Abhimanyu entered the first layer of the Chakravyuha and was stopped by the teacher Drona who asked "Abhimanyu where are you going?" Abhimanyu bent his bow and fired an arrow at Drona which landed respectfully at the teacher's feet "Teacher! This is my salute to you! After saluting his teacher Drona, Abhimanyu defeats him. He then defeats Drona's son Ashwatthama, Karna, Salya and other great warriors in the Kaurava camp before reaching the centre of the formation. Single headedly he holds the entire Kaurava army at bay. Standing at the centre, of the chakra vyuha, Abhimanyu's chariot was swirling around; Abhimanyu destroys all the arrows fired at him, from all directions, by all the Kaurava warriors all around him! Abhimanyu was single handedly fighting an army of thousands!

Meanwhile Bhima returned victoriously and was surprised not to see Abhimanyu, by his brother's side where he had left him to guard Dharmaraja. Bhima returning after winning his battle comes to Dharmaraja and is shocked by Abhimanyu's absence. He knows that Abhimanyu knew how to break into the Chakravyuha formation, but did not know how to break out of it. So immediately he rushes in to save his nephew, but is deceitfully blocked by a Kaurava warrior, Jayadrathan. An angry Bhima says "Abhimanyu is a true warrior, and can hold his own even alone against thousands of warriors! But these are wicked people who will not fight fair" Bhima immediately rushed to protect his nephew with his mace. Duryodhana who saw Bhima rushing in asked Jayadratha to throw a sacred garland gifted to him by Shiva and stop Bhima! Jayadratha threw the sacred garland which had adorned the divine Shiva's head in Bhima's path to block him! Bhima said "You are throwing this garland, which is equivalent to the divinity itself on my path! I will not insult Shiva by crossing it! If you can, engage in a just warfare with my nephew!" Saying this Bhima turned his chariot towards Dharmaraja.

Abhimanyu fights valiantly inside the Chakravyuham and he kills Duryodhana's son Lakshmanakumara. Duryodhana is shattered at the death of his only son and he wants

Abhimanyu killed at all costs. Duryodhana laments in despair “My son, for whom did I start this war? I was hoping that you would rule this world after me, but this wretched boy has killed you”. Everybody there tries to console Duryodhana, who says “I do not need your condolences! Just kill the boy who killed my son!”

Till now the Kaurava soldiers were following the hero’s code that only one person will fight against another, but now on Duryodhana’s incitement all of them attack Abhimanyu together which was against all rules of warfare. The boy Abhimanyu saw all the Kaurava soldiers charging at him simultaneously! He realises that they have decided to wage an unjust war against him and decides that he will kill them all and wages war on multiple fronts at the same time! It was then, Karna who was behind Abhimanyu, fired an arrow in a dastardly fashion and destroyed Abhimanyu’s chariot.

In Koothu this is a very dramatic scene where Abhimanyu loses his chariot, his bow, his hands, but he still continues to fight valiantly against the Kaurava army. Even after losing his chariot, Abhimanyu whirls around and fires an endless volley of arrows at his foes! Seeing this, the teacher of archery, Dronacharya, fires an arrow from behind Abhimanyu’s back which breaks his bow!

Abhimanyu had brought only one bow to the fight and he threw it down and started fighting with swords in both hands. With these swords, he both deflects the arrows fired at him while also chopping the heads of the soldiers near him! Some arrows pierce his body, but Abhimanyu ignores them and still continues fighting! Drona, at that moment fires another arrow cutting off Abhimanyu’s sword bearing hand! Abhimanyu was not disheartened by losing his arm and with his body dripping with blood, he picks up the broken wheel near him, chants a mantra taught to him by the divine Krishna and whirls it around his head! The chariot wheel keeps spinning over his head and no one can come anywhere near Abhimanyu!

Duryodhana says that in a short while the sun will set and they will not be able to kill Abhimanyu and he sends his soldiers to bring his brother-in-law Jayadrath there. Jayadrath had obtained a magic mace from Shiva to kill Bhima who had earlier humiliated him. Because of Abhimanyu’s valour he is forced to use the magic mace against Abhimanyu and Abhimanyu in his death saves his uncle’s life. Duryodhana says “Jayadratha! Use the mace that you received from the divine Shiva to kill Bhima and kill Abhimanyu immediately with that!” Abhimanyu sees the gigantic mace in Jayadrath’s hands and he realises that the mace will be the death of

him! He also picks up a mace and both hurl their maces at each other! Jayadrathan's mace shatters Abhimanyu's mace and rushes to his head, shattering it to pieces!

A flame was seen leaving his body skywards when Abhimanyu fell. The sun also sets with Abhimanyu's death, and the thirteenth day's war ended on that note. Arjuna is shattered when he learns that his son Abhimanyu has been killed in such a cowardly fashion.

Arjuna laments over his son's body "My son! You who could not be defeated by anybody, you who defeated my teacher Drona, defeated Ashwatthama, defeated Karna, and defeated even Kripa and Kritavarman! Will you not open your mouth and narrate your heroic exploits! Alas! I heard that my elder brother Bhima came to stand by you in your fight, but that wicked Jayadratha stopped him by throwing Shiva's sacred garland on his path! Arjuna laments "Early in the war I lost my son Aravan, the son of Ulupi, daughter of the King of the Nagas! Today I have lost you too! For an obstinate fool like me, is there anything more horrible to endure?" Arjuna rages in anger "My blood boils when I hear that the wicked Karna broke your chariot by shooting it from behind your back! Even my teacher, I heard, shot at you from behind your back and cut off your arm!

Arjuna takes a vow "I will kill Jayadrathan who killed my son before the sun sets tomorrow! If I fail my vow! If by sunset tomorrow if I do not kill the king of Sindhu, Jayadratha by sunset tomorrow, I will immolate myself by walking into a raging fire! This is my pledge on everything I hold sacred!" By sunset tomorrow I will decapitate the head of that Jayadrathan, who killed my son! If I fail in my vow, I will walk into a raging fire and no power on earth can stop me killing myself!"

Krishna says that if Arjuna has to win tomorrow's war, they have to go to Kailasa in the night to get weapons from Shiva and Krishna leaves to Kailasa with Arjuna. Arjuna when he learns that Jayadrathan killed his son takes a vow that before the sun sets the next day, he would kill Jayadrathan. Arjuna also says that if he is unable to kill Jayadrathan before the sun sets, he will immolate himself in fire. The death of Abhimanyu is the emotional lead to the tragic climax of this festival, Karna moksham which will be performed the next day.