

Performance Traditions of the Mahabharata in Tamil Nadu

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Lecture 18

Karna Moksham

Dhritarashtra says

"When I heard that the men of Dhritarashtra, after killing off Abhimanyu, were cheering, mindless with joy, and Arjuna unleashed his fury on Jayadratha Saindhava then, Sanjaya, I lost hope of victory"

In the Mahabharata festivals of Tamilnadu the first thirteen days of war are usually narrated with the sacrifice of Aravan which actually begins the war. Abhimanyu is brutally killed on the thirteenth day of the war and Arjuna promises to avenge his son on the fourteenth day. On the fourteenth day of the battle Arjuna had taken a vow that he would kill Jayadrathan the Kaurava warrior, for killing his son Abhimanyu. He had also sworn that if he was unable to kill Jayadrathan, before the end of the battle, he would immolate himself. Shakuni had hidden Jayadrathan deep below the ground and Arjuna is unable to see him for the entire day. Now Arjuna is almost ready to fulfil his vow of immolating himself when Krishna intervenes. On the thirteenth day of the war Abhimanyu is killed by the Kauravas in an unjust battle. (Arjuna) Takes a vow to kill Jayadratha who killed his son, goes and procures weapons from Shiva in the night. "Where is Jayadratha, where is Jayadratha", they go searching for him on the fourteenth day.

Shakuni, reasoning that Jayadrathan can only be killed if he was visible on the ground, so he hid Jayadrathan deep in the ground. Arjuna had gone to Kailasa the previous day to obtain a weapon with which he could kill Jayadratha. Krishna who had made a promise to Sahadeva that he would ensure that the five Pandavas, survive the battle had covered the sun with his Chakrayudha just before sunset.

Duryodhana and the Kauravas warriors think that it is night not knowing that it was just Krishna's Chakrayudha which was covering the sun. Now they think Arjuna has to fulfil his vow by immolating himself and they bring out Jayadrathan on a Royal elephant to watch the proceedings. At that moment Arjuna lifted the bow he had received from Shiva and carefully takes aim. Jayadratha was brought on the king's elephant. Krishna said "There comes Jayadratha, shoot your arrows Arjuna." "Just a fraction of a second," Arjuna said. Arjuna shoots the arrow that he had aimed and knocks off Jayadratha's head. Krishna says "Arjuna, his head should not fall on the ground." and tells him that "On the banks of Samthapanchaka, the father of Jayadratha, Viruthakshatra is doing Tapas, that whoever is responsible for his son's head to fall on the ground should also die by having his head shattered into thousand pieces!" Arjuna again shot another arrow carrying the son's head to fall on his father's hands. Shocked seeing his son's head in his hands, involuntarily he dropped it and his own head shattered into thousand pieces.

In ancient times war would be only waged in the day and there would be peace at night when the soldiers could rest and prepare for battle the next day. The Kauravas, angry with Krishna for deceiving them into thinking that the battle was over, want immediate revenge.

The Kauravas attack the Pandavas in anger and the battle unusually continues well into the night. In the eighteen days of war, warfare only on the fourteenth night war was fought. Though Duryodhana started it, he soon regretted it. Because Rakshasas are powerful in the night, in the night warfare, Hidimbi's son Ghatothgaja, minces the forces just like pounding chillies. Duryodhana goes and complains to Karna, who brings a spear, and targets Ghatothgaja. It flew fast and consumed Ghatothgaja's life. Karna had saved the mighty weapon the Velayudham to use against Arjuna. But due to Duryodhana's anxiety at Ghatothgaja decimating the Kaurava troops he is compelled to use it against Ghatothgaja. By his death, Ghatothgaja saves the life of his father's younger brother Arjuna. The war at night only ends with the death of Ghatothgaja. The tired soldiers prefer to sleep on the battlefield itself, to wait for the next day's war to begin.

On the evening of the fifteenth day of battle, when the sun was about to set, my younger brother Duryodhana requested the archer Drona. Duryodhana said "Guru, go to the battlefield and destroy our enemy, the Pandavas" Drona went and destroyed Pandava armies. The next day, a furious Drona wreaks havoc on the Pandava army and Krishna is worried. Both Bhishma and Drona had already informed Dharmaraja and Krishna as to how and when they could be killed even before the battle had started. Krishna decides now, that the time was right for Drona to be killed.

The Seven Celestial Sages come in the form of swan and advise an angry Drona. “Drona, why are you so angry? Cool your temper, the purpose for which you were incarnated is now complete! They ask Drona not to be angry and ask as to why he was working hard to finish off dharma fighting on behalf of adharma? Dharma should not be destroyed. Reduce your anger.” Dronachari was a partial incarnation of the teacher of the Rakshasas, Shukracharya. Neither was he associated with good people as Shukra nor as Drona!

Krishna goes to Dharmaraja and says “Dharma if you want to kill your teacher today, you have to tell a lie”. An aghast Dharmaraja asks “I who have never uttered a lie should say one now? And that lie would be the cause of my teacher’s death?” Drona had declared that he would choose to die if someone he trusted announced that his son Ashwatthama had been killed in the battle. Krishna who knows that Drona cannot be killed in battle wants Dharmaraja to tell a lie. A reluctant Dharmaraja finally agrees to tell a half truth. Krishna asks Bhima to kill an elephant called Ashwatthama and he asks Dharmaraja to announce that an elephant called Ashwatthama had been killed. “Should I lie to rule? I do not want the kind of power that comes from deceit!” says Dharmaraja. Some conduct their life on lies; it is no surprise if they utter one. But I who have never lied, if I do now, they will point out later in my life, that Dharma lied. I do not want this aspersion on me Kanna.”

Krishna says “You do not have to lie, but say something that would resemble a lie.” What is it that “resembles a lie”, he asked. “Ashwathama the elephant has been killed by Bhima. Go and announce that. Drona will think Ashwathama is dead. He agrees to it and goes to where Drona and Drishtadhyumna are fighting. Bhima became the lion to kill the mad elephant Ashwathama, capable of trouncing armies, alas! “Ashwattama hatha kunjara” Only the word Ashwathama reached his ears, but before “Hatha” could be heard Krishna sounded his conch. Karna says “Krishna asked Dharma to go where Drona is fighting Dhrishtadumnya and run shouting “Hatha kunjara Ashwathama”. As Dharmaraja ran saying this, Drona only heard ‘Ashwatthama Kunjaraha’ thought may be his son Ashwathama had been killed. Drona dropped his sword and screamed “Ashwathama, my son,” stood there defenseless!” Drona thought “Dharma will not lie, my son must have died before me” Thinking thus, Drona throws away his weapons.

Drishtadhyumna aimed his arrow at Drona. Dharamaraja pleads with him not to kill his defenceless teacher as it was an unjust thing to do! But Drishtadhyumna ignores Dharmaraja and shoots Drona! Krishna, the instigator and betrayer reminds Dhritadumna of his father Panchala’s vow, “Drona my son definitely would one day kill you!” Drishtadhyumna pulled out his sword,

slashed Drona; he fell, slain in his chariot. Oh! That tapasvi's head has been knocked off by the arrow of Drishtadyumna, riding the chariot with galloping horses. A warrior comparable to Shiva who with his weapon Pinaka plucked out the middle head of Brahman, seated on the lotus.

Ashwatthama when he hears of his father's murder is furious with Krishna and the Pandavas. Ashwatthama shoots a weapon called the Narayanastram, which was one of the most powerful weapons on earth against which no defence was possible. Krishna, who knew how the weapon could never be defended against, but only neutralised again steps in and saves the Pandavas and their army

Ashwathama was angry. Did the truthful Dharma lie; did that betrayer of the teacher Drishtadyumna sever the head of his teacher? He launches the weapon Narayanastra. Krishna asked everyone to drop their weapons. He said that the Narayanastra would not kill anyone who was unarmed. The entire Pandava army dropped their weapons. Only Bhima still stood holding his mace and the weapon left everyone else and rushed towards Bhima! Krishna saw the weapon approaching Bhima and pulled the mace away from Bhima. Since he was now unarmed the weapon did not harm him. Ashwattama is amazed that his powerful weapon the Narayanastram could not kill the Pandavas or Krishna. He throws down his weapons in disgust and leaves declaring that everything is an illusion, it's all lies! Ashwattama does not take any further part in the war till Bhima kills Duryodhana by breaking his thigh.

Out of the five plays dealing with the war, only two seem to be mandatory and are performed in all the villages, and these Koothu's are 'Karna Moksham' or the Moksha of Karna and 'Pathinettam Por' or The Eighteenth Day War. Most villages like to keep the violence depicted in the festival, which is basically to promote 'Samarasam' or peace, to as minimum as possible. The other stories of war were only narrated by the Bharatham storytellers. So on the sixteenth day of the festival the storyteller had to narrate the entire incidents of the battlefield from the first to the thirteenth day. On the seventeenth day the storyteller narrated the events of the battlefield from the fourteenth to the seventeenth day.

An angry Duryodhana paces on stage and sends his soldiers to his Uncle Shakuni as he wants his uncle's advice. After the death of Drona, Duryodhana consults with Shakuni as to who should lead the Kaurava army

For the Pandavas it is Krishna who decides as to who would lead the Pandava army each day. Now ironically, Shakuni whose entire intention in life, was the destruction of Duryodhana and the Kauravas takes on the mantle of appointing leaders for the Kaurava army. Shakuni says that Karna who had taken a vow to kill Arjuna is the correct person to lead the Kaurava army and Duryodhana appoints Karna as his next general.

Shakuni sings “I am always a companion to Duryodhana and am the dark Saturn who has come to get rid of him. Duryodhana does not know my true intentions and trusts me implicitly! I am the gold of the Gandhara Kingdom! And a fierce lion in creating unrest and revolt!”

Karna Moksham is the emotional, tragic climax of this festival, both in the sixteenth day storytelling session and in the Koothu which follows later in the night. Karna, whose entire tragedy in life was his ignorance of his own identity is informed just before the battle of his true parentage. He knows now that he is the eldest of the Pandavas being the first born son of Kunti. Karna, who is loyal to his best friend Duryodhana, chooses to fight with Duryodhana and the Kauravas rather than along with his own brothers. The protagonist of the play, Karna, begins by narrating his own story as an emotional first person narrative and this sets the tenor of the Koothu.

I, the extremely mighty warrior Karna, son of the Sun, have now come before you! I am the most powerful warrior, the brave, the expert and fierce warrior Karna Raja!”

Karna Moksham is the climax of this anti-war festival where the horrors and brutalities of war are addressed. Most storytellers would compare Vaali Moksham from the Ramayana with Karna Moksham from the Mahabharata.

Karna Moksham is very important in Mahabharata. In Ramayana Vali Moksham is important, and in the Mahabharata Karna Moksham! Why these two particular narratives are called Moksham? Because they got Moksha, which otherwise was far away, immediately! When they were facing death, neither Duryodhana nor Ravana think of the divinity. But Karna and Vali thought of the divinity in their last moments and the Supreme One appeared before them.

Duryodhana says “I have sought you Shakuni Uncle, who has been like a god to our clan. The dirty five Pandavas should perish! Please come up with a good plot to destroy them my dear Uncle!

Karna seeing a disheartened Duryodhana cheers him up by saying that he will definitely win the battle for him. Duryodhana inauspiciously asks Karna to go to war rather than the proper address of asking him to go to war and come back victorious. Even Duryodhana seems to know that Karna would not return alive from the battlefield

I will make you the sole ruler of this world! Please do not worry, but annoint me as your General!

Duryodhana says “Here, I crown you my commander! Go to war, elder brother!” Elder brother, today, in the seventeenth day of the war, to clinch victory for us, you have to kill that Arjuna, middle born among the Pandavas. Therefore, to the battle, you go! Karna asks the Kattiyakaaran “Did you hear the command my elder brother has given? To all the warriors who went to war on all the sixteen days he bid them farewell by saying “Go and return victorious! To me alone he has just bid farewell by just asking me to “Go!” Younger brother, instead of asking me to go for the seventeenth day of the war and return successfully, you commanded me just to go! To say just go, is inauspicious. Kattiyakaaran agrees that it was an inauspicious farewell “To say go and return victoriuous is auspicious. Karna asks “Younger brother Duryodhana why did you use this expression? Duryodhana says “Elder brother! For sixteen days I bid my entire generals farewell, asking them to go and come back successfully. But none of the warriors, younger brothers, relatives did return and see my face ever again. That is why on this seventeenth day if I say “Elder brother! Go to war! Maybe our enemies will die and you will come back successfully” Karna says” Younger brother Duryodhana, your words sound like a mere consolation given to the widows who have lost their husbands. Kattiyakaaran repeats Karna’s words. Karna says “Let everything happen as per the plans of Brahma! Younger brother! Today, like never before I have a desire to look at your face intently. Duryodhana says “Look at me, and go and return Go and come back. victoriously! Go! Go!

Villibharatham has a lovely song describing Karna’s entry into the battlefield. The poet says that seeing Karna enter the battlefield the entire Kaurava army felt revitalised and it also looked as though all the Kaurava warriors killed in the sixteen days of war had come back alive with Karna’s entry.

On the morning of the seventeenth day, the sun rises, Karna worships Sun. Sun god looked at him as if thinking whether he would see the boy alive the next day! Karna appeared to be shining to everyone that day. The gems in his crown shining bright, the precious gem in the ornaments

on his ears shining bright, the gold jewellery set with gems on him shining bright, the gems studded golden anklets shining bright, His glowing rays of red surpassed the one who had sired him. Who would not have delighted in the beauty of Karnan that day?

Invariably in most storytelling sessions the audiences would feel disgruntled with the storyteller for not mentioning Karna's dialogue with his wife, Ponnuruvi before entering the battlefield. In the Mahabharata Karna is married to a woman called Shibangi and they have four children, three of whom are killed in the war. In the Koothu rendition Karna is depicted as a man in a troubled relationship with his wife Shibangi, Ponmala or Ponnuruvi. This particular scene from the Koothu seems to have tremendous resonances in the village community. Most storytellers would be forced to address their audiences anger at the omission of this dialogue.

Outside some were talking it seems, how can Karna go to war without getting an auspicious send-off from Ponnuruvi. That is the Koothu writer's version, but Mahabharata is written by a poet, there is no story of that kind of send-off in Bharatham. For over twenty years I have been reciting the Bharatham but it seems no one has paid any attention. You would have heard the story Karna Moksham in Koothu, they would say only one son was born, that too somehow one son was born! In Mahabharata they had four sons! How can a couple live as man and wife without talking to each other?

Karnan had never spoken to his wife, to Ponnuruvi properly. Whatever it was, they were not compatible. There was always a distance between them. Only towards the end, when he is about to leave for the battlefield, he asks for heroic farewell from his wife. Only when she finally agrees accepts to give the formal heroic farewell does she understand who her husband, Karna truly was. Till then she used to denigrate Karna, abusing him for being a lowly charioteer's son and even hated him.

Ponnuruvi sees a frightening dream the day before Karna is supposed to enter the battle field as the general and she hears a voice from the sky foretelling a great tragedy. Her first concern is whether these omens foretold a tragedy in either her parents or her brothers family. The song she sings when she wakes up from her nightmare is significant because everybody in the audience would know that the tune as being the tune of Dharmarja's song. This tune is first sung when Yudhisthira/Dharmaraja is conferred the title Rajathiraja after he has conquered all the fifty six countries of the Kingdom and has performed the Rajasuya Yaagam. Here when Ponnuruvi sings this tune, the tragedy of Karna would be truly invoked in the minds of the audience. Karna being the eldest son of Kunti was the rightful heir to the kingdom and the song subtly suggests that. "Ponnuruvi sings "When I am sleeping, I am getting frightening dreams! My dear friends! I would like to rest my head on your laps for a little while. Let us head to our inner chamber. My dear friends!"

In Koothu Karna sends his soldiers to Ponuuruvi to ask her to come to meet him saying that he wanted a heroic saying that he wanted a heroic farewell from her before he entered the

battlefield. This was the custom in all warrior families where the wives would bid adieu to their husbands praying for their safety of their lives in the battle.

Karna sings “My dear lady, I called you, to express what is in my mind lady. Do not misunderstand or argue with me! My Queen!

Ponnuruvi, who despises her husband as he was just a charioteer’s son, refuses to come. Sarcastically she tells Karna that she would have come if he could tell her who his parents were; Meaning that Karna being a charioteer’s son was not a true warrior whom she, born in a Shatriya family, could bid farewell to.

Karna sings “My dear Lady, the indifference you have shown me from the day of our marriage, is not just! My Queen! My Dear Lady!” Chorus “My dear Lady, the indifference you have shown me from the day of our marriage, is not just! My Queen!” Karna “Why not bring the betel leaves and bid me a heroes farewell as I am about to enter the battlefield, my Lady, my Queen!” Chorus “Why not bring the betel leaves and bid me a heroes farewell as I am about to enter the battlefield, my Lady, my Queen!”

Finally Karna reveals his true identity to her, as being the first born son of Kunti and the deity of the Sun, Surya.

Karna asks the Kattiyakaaran “Tell me now guard, am I born in a lesser clan, this Karnan? No
Is Karnan the son of a charioteer? No
Is Karnan the son of Athirathan? No
Is this Karnan the son of the charioteer Rathan? No.

Born in the Lunar Dynasty, as the son of the Divine Surya and mother Kuntamadevi. I was not born after three hundred days of pregnancy like you all, she gave birth to me in an instant, my divine mother

Only in the end before Karna entered the battlefield does Pnnuruvi understands who Karna was and the way he lived, and asks for his forgiveness and bids him a heroes farewell

There was a difference in the way Siruvanjpattu Sitaraman played Karna from other renderings of Karna, where he would be depicted as purely a tragic character. In Koothu only the wicked characters carry a whip and invariably the Kattiyakaaran, or Sutradhar would be the person getting whipped. Even about twenty years back, the whip was not a prop in Koothu and older theatre groups refuse to let their actors carry a whip on stage. The whip is relatively a new addition and as it is popular with the children in the audience generating laughter a lot of Koothu groups now let their actors carry a whip on stage. Unusually, in this play even the tragic hero Karna, carried a whip.

Ponnuruvi sings a song of repentance “ Being ignorant of your true greatness, I spoke disrespectfully and abused you! You were born in a great lineage, before the five Pandavas!

Ignorant of that I felt pain, being pounded like the paddy chaff. Not realising your greatness, I spoke disrespectfully to you, my King! I abused you in whatever way I wanted! You were like a smouldering ember hidden among the ashes and I was just an ignorant wretch! Knowing your identity, I am seared to the bottom of my heart! You are a precious, glittering gem, hidden in a piece of cloth bearing your grief silently!

Only in this play in the theatre cycle is Karna depicted as a tragic hero. In all other Koothu plays Karna is just shown to be a willing accomplice of Duryodhana in all his activities. Now Ponnuruvi/Ponmala repents her ill-treatment of her husband when she knows his true identity. Ponnuruvi now wants Karna to leave the wicked Duryodhana and join his brothers, the Pandavas in their fight. Karna rejects this straight away as it would be a dishonourable thing to do. Duryodhana had made him what he was when the rest of the world had rejected him, and Karna says that till the day he dies, he can never forget all that Duryodhana had done for him.

Duryodhana's song to Ponnuruvi "I do not know if I will return victorious after my fight with the Pandavas! Or if I will be slain by the arrows from Valorous Gandiban (Arjunan) in the battlefield.

Karna has a premonition that he might be killed in battle that day and asks his wife Ponnuruvi if he is killed in battle, not to seek asylum with the wicked Duryodhana but to go and find asylum with his real brothers, the Pandavas. His tragedy was his loyalty to Duryodhana which binds him to Duryodhana till his death. Karna sings to Ponnururivi

"If I die on the battlefield, please do not go to Hastinapura! Chorus "If I die on the battlefield, please do not go to Hastinapura!" Karna sings "Please seek asylum with my brothers, with my flesh and blood, the righteous Pandavas and live with my mother Kunti!" I bid farewell to you"

Saying this Karna leaves leaving a tearful Ponnuruvi behind! Karna says that the entire world will come to know who he is when his mother, Kunti would take his dead body in the battlefield, place it on her lap and lament the death of her first born son Karna.

Karna's song "My mother Kunti would cry - Have you been killed, my dear son Karna? Have you worn your final battle armour? My son Karna, the precious jewel of the Kuru Clan! The son born to me before the five Pandavas, my eldest son Karna! I who knew how to give birth to you did not know how I could raise you and scared of the worlds taunts abandoned you in the river. My mother would come and wail over my shattered body so that the country, my friends and relatives hear and say this is he who I gave birth to as a child myself! This is Karna, my son! This is he! When she beats her chest and cries, the entire world shall know I am the king of the Lunar Dynasty!"

The Kaurava army has been decimated by the much smaller Pandava army and on the sixteenth day, Duryodhana is worried. Karna consoles him by saying that as long as he was alive he will

ensure victory for Duryodhana. He says he has a nagastram with him which is sure to kill Arjuna.

Karna sings “Younger brother, dear Duriya why are you letting your mind get troubled?” Chorus “Younger brother, dear Duriya why are you letting your mind get troubled?” Karna “Dear King, why are you so distressed? Do you think it is difficult for me to kill the weak five? Younger brother, dear Duriya why are you letting your mind be troubled?” Chorus “Younger brother, dear Duriya why are you letting your mind be troubled?” Karna “Why should you feel weak when I am there? I shall launch my Nagastra and kill Arjuna!” Kattiyakaaran asks “Do you know what he is carrying?” Kattiyakaaran pretends fear.

A worried Duryodhana warns Karna that Krishna was secretly helping the Pandavas with his magic and his deceit. Karna says he wants a charioteer like Krishna was for Arjuna, to ensure victory for Duryodhana. And the only equivalent charioteer to Krishna was the General Salya.

Karna says “With my long weapon I will destroy the Pandavas, kill Arjuna, I will do all I have promised, but .. A worried Duryodhans asks “Karna why are you saying “but”? Karna asks “Do you know why Arjuna is winning every day’s war? It is because of his charioteer Kannan! Krishna is a magician, does some magic from time to time seeing to it that Arjuna always wins! If only I have a charioteer like Krishna I will win this war for you! Duryodhana says “There is no one equal to him even in Devaloka!” Karna says “You say no equal to him in Devaloka, yes, there is no equal there, but there is someone his equal on this earth. That Salliyam is his equal in driving the chariot!” Duryodhana says “I will get Salliyam to be your charioteer, but you have to ensure me victory!” Duryodhana immediately goes to Salliyam and bows to him saying “Uncle, my respects to you!” A surprised Salya asks “What is the reason for Duryodhana, the one who would not bow down even if the heavens bow down, for this?” Duryodhana says “Protect us like the dark cloud coloured Kannan, protects the Pandavas!” Salya is amused “Hey Duryodhana! You want me to protect you like Krishna? Do you think Kannan is some ordinary mortal?” He everyone and everything being the omnipresent Supreme Being Narayana himself! You must be mad if you think I am his equal!” Duryodhana hesitantly says “I would like you drive the chariot for one day for Karna, the same way that Krishna does for Arjuna!” An angry Salya says “Duryodhana! If someone else had said these words, I would have cut out that person’s tongue! Since the words were uttered by Duryodhana, I am keeping calm!” Duryodhana says “There is nothing undignified in being a charioteer Uncle! The Narayana whom you worship, does not the Kannan drive the chariot for Arjuna?” The person who you call a great warrior Arjuna, did not that Arjuna, in an eunuch form, drive the chariot for Utthara Kumara when we seized the cattle of the Virata Kingdom Uncle?” Salya asks “Duryodhana, what do you want from me? You want me to protect you like Kannan! That is what I have agreed to! For your sake I will be a charioteer to Karna for a day, but remember that Arjunan follows Kannan implicitly! Even I will instruct on some war tactics to Karnan, if he obeys my instructions, I will drive his chariot! The moment Karna ignores my advice, I will abandon Karna on the battlefield. If my condition is acceptable to you I will drive Karna’s chariot!

The poet who rendered the Mahabharata in Tamil, and is only known as being from the village Srivilliputhur acknowledges his patron who made his work possible. He compares the generosity of his patron Varapathiatkondan, saying that it was no less than the generosity of the great Karna. Kamban who wrote the Ramayana in Tamil acknowledges his patron numerous times in the work. But the patron of Villiputthuraar is only acknowledged once as Karna is preparing to enter the battlefield.

Karna on the verge of leaving for war, indulges in generous charity. The one who gave Ramayanam in Tamil to us, it is the great Kamban. Who patronised Kamban? It was Sadaiyappa Vallal. If there was no Sadaiyappa Vallal we would not have a Ramayanam in Tamil. Similarly, Villiputharar wrote Bharatham in Tamil. The philanthropist who patronised Villiputthuraar was Varapathi Atkondan, Vattapagai Vendan, the one who ruled Thirukovalur. He was the one who commissioned Villiputthuraar to sing the Bharatham in Tamil. Like how whoever went to Varapathi Atkondan received generous gifts, all those who went to Karnan also received gifts.

Karnan had undertaken a vow to give whatever anyone asked from him unfailingly! The charitable Karnan after giving generously now ascends his chariot to leave to the battlefield. Salya is seated on the drivers seat of the chariot.

Salya and Karna have ego clashes right from the beginning of their partnership. Duryodhana wants Salya to be what Krishna was to Arjuna but the reality works out far differently. The relationship of Arjuna with Krishna is harmonious while the relationship between Salya and Karna is exactly the opposite. An angry Salya being addressed as the charioteer says “Hey, Karna, you are calling me a charioteer, when have you ever won any battle? You keep saying that you will defeat Arjuna, but when have you ever defeated him? Please draw your sword and let us see who the real warrior among the both of us is!” Promptly Karna drew his sword as did Salya! Duryodhana who noticed this from a distance rushed to stop them.

Duryodhana says “I asked you to go fight together and make me victorious! But rather, both of you are fighting one another!” Salya asks “Duryodhana, what did you ask me to do? You wanted me to protect you like Kannan, which is what I agreed to! I want this Karna to respect me like how Arjuna respects Kannan! Only if Karnan is willing to do this will I drive his chariot. If he disrespects me I will leave the chariot and walk away. Only if you agree to this will I drive! Karna also accepted to this and the chariot finally moved.

Karna does not also realise that Salya has been already instructed by Krishna to undermine Karna’s confidence. Karna is extremely vulnerable and in an introspective mood when he enters the battlefield. Karna, at this moment when he can feel death approaching, remembers his teacher Parashurama and he tells Salya about Parashurama’s curse. When Karna enters the battlefield Dharmaraja is the first person to challenge him. Dharmaraja unusually uses abusive language against Karna. Kunti had taken a promise from Karna that he would not kill any of the

Pandavas excepting Arjuna. Karna, who remembers his promise to his mother Kunti, only fights half-heartedly with Dharmaraja.

Karna thought, "Is he not my younger brother? If he knew that I was his elder brother, would he use such abusive words?" Karna says "Hey Dharma! This is a battlefield! Here the war has to be fought with arrows, and not with sharp words. Do not abuse me unbecomingly, but take up your bow and fight!" Both start shooting a stream of arrows at each other. Suddenly Dharmaraja is injured by Karna's arrows runs from the battle after losing his chariot, his weapons and even losing his name Yudhishtira in the process after getting defeated by Karna! Yudhishtira, means one who would stand firm in battle and not run from battle showing his back to an opponent! Looking at the fleeing Dharma, Karna says, "Hey Dharma, you who are called the epitome of self-discipline, of truthfulness, and whose word is truth itself! Please do not run! Stay!"

Bhima who was watching Karna taunt his brother from a distance thought "Karna! What right do you have to taunt my brother?" An angry Bhima picked up his mace and charged at Karna! Salliyana saw him charging at the chariot and realised Bhima was aiming at the chariot. He told Karna "Step down from the chariot!". Both of them jumped off the chariot. Bhima moving fast at the chariot, flung his mace with the same momentum and smashed Karna's chariot to pieces! Smashed by Bhima, the chariot flew high in the air, dropped down, and shattered into thousands of pieces! An angry Karna taunts Bhima "Hey Bhima, come and fight me, you glutton!" Now the Kattiyakaaran taunts the actor playing Karna! Karna says "I and that Bhima fought furiously! In that Kurukshetra battlefield our maces clashed at each other creating clamorous sounds!" Suddenly Karna charged at Bhima and with his mace hit Bhima's mace out of his hands! Bhima's mace shattered into thousands of pieces! Karna then hit Bhima on his chest, and Bhima was felled like an uprooted tree. Karna tells Kattiyakaaran "I thought it was the correct time to use the weapon given by the King of the Devas, Indra, the thunderbolt weapon against Bhima! And I said Hey Bhima! The time for you to die has come!" Karna charges against the Kattiyakaaran, who like Bhima cries out "Mother!"

Bhima who was felled by Karna suddenly wailed "Mother! Mother!" Karna immediately remembers their mother Kunti's words "My son Karna! Other than Arjuna, none among the other four should be killed by you" Karna says "My mother Kuntamadevi had met me once and asked for two boons from me. The first was that I should not try to kill any brother among the five, excepting Arjuna! And the second, not to fire the Snake weapon that I have been nurturing, more than once at Arjuna! In respect of the boons that I had given to my mother, I lowered my hands which was about to strike Bhima and kicked him aside! Bhima went rolling in the Kurukshetra battlefield!"

That day Karna had the upper hand. He demonstrated to his brothers that he was indeed their eldest brother! That day Karna defeated everyone. He kicked the fallen Bhima and said "Hey you glutton! Get up and go!". Bhima felt totally ashamed. After defeating Dharmaraja, Karna then easily defeats Bhima and lets him live. A humiliated and enraged Bhima sees Ducchāsana

standing before him and engages him in fierce battle. Bhima had taken a vow not to drink water from utensils or with his hands till he drinks the blood of Ducchāsana. For thirteen years Bhima would strike the body of water and would just drink the droplets flying in the sky. The fight between Ducchāsana and Bhima is fierce, and Ducchāsana is unnerved by Bhima.

When Bhima and Dushāsana were fighting against each other, no one could go anywhere near them. Bhima was roaring like the mighty, ferocious man-lion deity, Narasimha! It was the pent up anger of thirteen years of enmity roaring! Bhima first broke Ducchāsana's hands, then he tore apart his fingers! Ducchāsana screamed piteously! Bhima tore open Ducchāsana's stomach, even as he was alive! Broke open his chest and threw his entrails out! Blood gushed forth from the mutilated body! Bhima just cupped the gushing blood in his hands and poured it into his own mouth! When their queen Draupadi was dragged into court by Ducchāsana, Bhima had taken a vow that he would split the wicked man's chest, throw out his entrails, and only after drinking the blood gushing out of his body would he quench his thirst by drinking water! Bhima just cupped the gushing blood in his hands and swallowed it! Seeing this the divine Krishna came rushing! He asked Bhima "Please do not drink that wicked man's blood! Just gargle your mouth with his blood and spit it out and fulfill your vow! If you drink his blood, your might also start thinking like that wicked man!"

Karna is disturbed by seeing the gory sight of Bhima fighting Ducchāsana. He hears that Arjuna is fighting against his son Vidasena and asks Salya to drive where that battle was going on. Karna's chariot goes straight to where Arjuna is fighting with Vidasena, eldest son of the four sons of Karna, and he was named Vidasena! Arjuna sees Karna approaching him and says "Hey Karna! You killed my son treacherously, when I was not around. Now I am going to kill your son in front of you! if possible, stop it," he said and drew an arrow. The burning weapon severed Vidasena's head. Karna says "I will not forgive this Arjuna who killed my son in front of my own eyes" Saying this he went and stood in front of Arjuna!

Arjuna who had taken revenge for the killing of his son Abhimanyu, by killing Karna's son Vidasena now suddenly feels affection towards Karna when he sees him. Krishna notices Arjuna's reluctance to fight Karna and asks Arjuna in a casual fashion to shoot at Karna. Arjuna says "Oh you creator of Illusions! What kind of magic is this? When I look at Karna, I feel as though I am seeing my elder brother Dharma's face! "

Krishna gives him an ambiguous answer which could mean that Karna was also the son of Kunti. Arjuna tells Krishna "Look at that Karna standing in the chariot Krishna! He just looks just like my elder brother Dharma! I will not shoot at him! " Krishna says ambiguously "Oh Kunti's son! He is Karna and you do not have to have any doubts! Shoot at him!" Krishna to further confuse Arjuna says pointing to Arjuna "Oh son of Kunti! [He points to Karna and says] He is definitely Karna! He is Kunti's son! [Pointing to Karna!] He is Kunti's son, do not doubt that he is Karna!" Krishna further confuses an already confused Arjuna! Arjuna tells Krishna "I do not trust you as on the eighth day of the war Aravan died because of you! On the thirteenth day, my son, the

brave Abhimanyu died. On the fourteenth day Gatotkacha died. Who schemed all their deaths Krishna? It was your scheme all along!” Krishna asks “What if it was my scheme?” Arjuna says “So I do not trust you. He looks like my elder brother and I am unable to raise my bow! My affection to him binds me Krishna!” Arjuna tells Krishna “I cannot shoot at him as I am unsure! First drive the chariot now to where my elder brother is! Only after I see him with my own eyes will I fight!” So Krishna drove the chariot to where Dharmaraja was. The first question Dharmaraja asks Arjuna was whether the wicked Karna was dead! Arjuna replies “Not yet elder brother! I just wanted to see you first” A furious Dharmaraja asks “You are saying that you left the battlefield mid-fight to come to see me! Are you even a warrior? The weapon that you have in your hand is it really the Gandiva bow?” This is the third time that Dharma ever got angry in his life! Arjuna gets furious when Dharmaraja sarcastically insults his weapon the Gandiva by asking whether Arjuna was really carrying it! Now, enraged, he gets ready to shoot his elder brother for this insult!

The story teller highlighted the irony here by saying that Arjuna was reluctant to fire at Karna because he looked like his brother Dharmaraja! But on the other hand he was willing to kill who he definitely knew was Dharmaraja, because Dharmaraja had questioned his heroism! Krishna laughs and says “Arjuna, you did not want to shoot at Karna because he resembled your elder brother! Now why do you seem eager to shoot at your own elder brother?” Arjuna says “I have taken a vow to kill anyone who slights the bow gifted to me by the deity of fire, Agni, whether it is my elder brother or even the supreme divinity himself!

Agni, the god of fire, had given the Gandiva bow to Arjuna, when Arjuna and Krishna had helped Agni in the burning the Khandava forest. For Arjuna, it was one of his most precious possessions and one of the names by which Arjuna was known as was as Gandibhan, or the wielder of the bow, the Gandiva. Krishna stops Arjuna’s fight with Dharmaraja and takes him again towards Karna. When Arjuna and Krishna had burned the Khandava forest, one snake had escaped the fire vowing to kill Arjuna. That snake Ashwasena becomes the Nagastram which Karna had, against which Arjuna had no defence. Both of them keeping shooting divine weapons at each other and whichever weapon is fired, the other counters it with its opposite. As it was getting late, Karna decided that there was no point in prolonging the fight with Arjuna and picks up the invincible Nagastram!

Karna says “Hey Snake prince! This Arjuna is both your and my enemy! ”Karna tells the Nagastram “Today is the seventeenth day’s war. This is the day we welcome Arjuna”. Arjuna tells Krishna “Uncle! He is going to shoot the Nagastram” Karna says “Snake! Go and get Arjuna’s head!” Salya interrupts “Karna! Why are you aiming at his head?” Karna says “Uncle, the King of Madra! Yes, I have aimed the weapon straight at his head. Salya who was the charioteer warned Karna “You are aiming at his head? The charioteer of Arjuna is Krishna who is a magician who will do some magic and save Arjuna! Do not aim at his head! Aim instead at his chest area between his neck and his navel!” Karna arrogantly replies “Madra king Uncle Salya! if I listen to you and aim at Arjuna’s chest and if Arjuna dies, who will be given the credit

for his death?” Salya says “Of course I will get the credit! They will say that I was responsible for your victory as it was it was me who advised you to shift your aim!”

That resolute, arrogant son of Surya, Karna! Karna ignores Salya’s advice and aims the snake arrow at the neck of Arjuna. That serpent arrow rushes forth emitting venom towards Arjuna. Karna dances the snake dance and fires the weapon at Arjuna. Arjuna asks Krishna “What happened?”

When he sees the arrow coming straight at him, Arjuna is clueless as to how he can counter this weapon. When the snake weapon came near Arjuna, Krishna pressed down the chariot wheels and the chariot went one foot under the ground!

So the snake weapon that was coming straight at Arjuna’s head, missed his head and hit his crown instead! That was the crown gifted by the King of the Devas, Indra, to Arjuna and it went straight back to Indra’s world! This is the origin of the phrase “The danger which came to one’s head, just disappeared with the headgear!”

When Karna refuses to listen to Salya’s advice, Salya curses him by saying that neither will he be able to kill Arjuna nor will Duryodhana be able to rule Hastinapura. Salya abandons Karna and Krishna saves Arjuna from the Nagastram. The snake Ashwasena wants Karna to fire him again at Arjuna. But Karna refuses as he had made a promise to his mother Kunti, that he will not use the Nagastram twice against Arjuna.

Karna tells the snake “I had given word to my mother that I will not fire you more than once against Arjuna! I cannot touch you again with my hands! I cannot break the promise I made to my mother!”

The snake Ashwasena which had taken a vow to kill Arjuna now immolates himself out of despair. After the departure of Salya, Karna now gets ready to fight Arjuna with himself being both the charioteer and the warrior.

Since Karna had grown up in a charioteer’s household, he caught hold of the leash in his big toe and both fought and drove his own chariot. At that moment all his knowledge of arms deserted him, the wheels of his chariot got stuck in the earth. Neither could he drive nor was he able to remember what he had learned! He stepped down from his chariot and tried to pull the wheels up with the strength of his shoulders. Krishna seeing Arjuna keeping calm, looked up at him and said “Arjuna! Shoot at him now!” Inexplicably all the arrows shot by Arjuna were going wildly off target.

Arjuna told Krishna “His chariot wheel is stuck in the mud and he is trying to lift it up. Is it not horrible that you are asking me to shoot at him now?” Krishna retorts “Was Karna not horrible when he shot at your son Abhimanyu from behind? Why are speaking about ethics for such an

unethical person?” Shoot him now! Shoot your arrows at him, and place the blame on me!” Arjuna now shoots at Karna and his arrows pierce his chest, his shoulders, his thighs!

Karna’s pain was unbearable and he cried out to all the divinities of generosity and said “Oh you deities of generosity! They say that your generosity will save you in times of need! I have been generous all my life, so will you not protect my life?” The moment he thought of these deities, they came down and stood as a shield around Karna. Now even Arjuna’s arrows could not pierce this shield! The deities were like a protective fence around Karna! All the deities of justice of Dharma [Generosity] now stand guard around Karna respecting his wishes.

So Arjuna is unable to kill even a defenceless Karna as Karna due to a curse of Parasurama had forgotten all the knowledge that he had acquired from his teacher Parashurama. Krishna realises that Karna cannot be killed as the merits of all the good deeds that he had done in his life were actually protecting him. For Karna to be truly killed, he had to be stripped off his last ‘Kavacha’ or protection; the merits of all the good deeds that he had done in his life. So Krishna comes disguised as a Brahmin, seeking alms from the dying Karna.

Karna who was lying down could hear the call “Karna, Karna” coming from somewhere near him. He realised someone was calling and lifted up his head. He saw a Brahmin approaching. “Karna, I am suffering from poverty!” The Brahmin asked “Please give me whatever you can give, give it immediately!” Karna faintly heard the voice and said “Venerable one! I do not know whether I am dead or alive! I am not even able to stand! Please do not ask me for something that I do not have! Please ask me for whatever I have and able to give!” The Brahmin asked please give me “All the merit that you have acquired, by your donations, charity. For a long time you have been generous and done good deeds in your life. All the merits of your good deeds have accumulated preventing your life from departing from your body!”

The divine Krishna has come in disguise to collect Karna’s accumulated merits of his good deeds! Karna says “I was worried that you would ask for something that I did not have and make me, Karna, guilty of being unable to give which would have dishonoured me! You are only asking me to bequeath the merits I have acquired from the thirty one types of charity done by me! But we are in the Kurukshetra battlefield! Where can I find water to formally bequeath my merits to you? Krishna says “I have brought sesame seeds necessary for the ritual act of bequeathing” Karna says “How can I perform this ritual without water?” Krishna says “Pull the arrow on your chest and your blood will gush out and you can perform the ritual with blood instead of water!” Karna, right through his life had both done wicked as well as good deeds, and the fire of his wicked deeds were doused by the water of the good that he had done and he has been cleansed! The divine Krishna himself has come to grant Karna the vision of his true self! Maybe Krishna thought that Karna’s body had first to be cleansed because Karna had eaten food of the wicked Duryodhana! Krishna said “Just pull the arrow out!” Karna pulled the arrow and his blood gushed out. He used his own blood to perform the ritual bequeathing his merits to the divine Krishna! There is a beautiful passage in Villibharatham which describes this moment.

When Karna pulled out the arrow from his chest the blood that covered his body made it look as red as a sky when the sun is setting. A grief stricken Surya, unable to see the death of his son Karna, also sets for the day in the Western horizon.

“Unsurpassed warrior, renowned for his charity, delightful victories everywhere, his body was fully pierced and blood gushed out like the rays of sun stretched across the sky”

“Blood gushed out like the rays of the sun” is how the poet describes it. When the arrow shot by Arjuna stuck Karna’s chest, right in the middle, the blood that gushed out looked as red as the sky when the sun is about to set! The Sun set, unable to bear that sight (of the death of his son).

When Karna pulled out the arrow from his chest, and his blood gushed out, a few drops fell on the divine Krishna and he also felt that he had to gift something to Karna in return, though he had only come to take something from Karna! Krishna said. “Karna if you want any boon please ask and I will grant them to you! Immediately Karna realised that the person before him saying he will grant him a boon must be the divinity himself! If divinity comes before us, what will we ask? We might ask for our lives back! But Karna did not ask for this! He said “Venerable one! I have done both good and bad deeds! If due to my bad deeds I have to be born again on earth, I only want to be born as a human being. If in that life anyone comes asking me for alms, give me the heart to give, without ever saying no. He did not ask for riches for himself, but only asked to be blessed with a generous heart!

In this koothu as performed by some groups, Karna wants moksha or release from the eternal cycle of birth, death and rebirth from Krishna. Krishna tells Karna that he cannot be given moksha as he had performed only thirty one out of the thirty two mandatory meritorious deeds that one has to perform to attain Moksha. Krishna says that Karna to attain Moksha has one more birth left on earth as the later day Pallava general Paranjyothi who later in his life becomes known as the saint Siruthondar. Krishna says “Karna, you would be born in your next life in the Aamathiyar clan, at Thiruchettankudi as Siruthonda Nayanar, and your wife would be born as Venkaattu Nangai, your son Viswakethu as Seeralan. You will perform charities, and then reach my abode ultimately.

The Mahabharata as it is performed in these villages does not end just with this festival. There are numerous smaller festivals right round the year which celebrate parts of the Mahabharata. A smaller festival celebrating the life of Paranjyothi/Siruthondar will be celebrated later in the year, invoking resonances to these Mahabharata festivals.

A miracle happens at that moment there! The one who is never affected is Kannan, and Karna was the man who moved even Krishna! In the Ramayana, Rama sheds tears numerous times in the Epic! Has Kannan ever cried? Right from his birth, Krishna in this incarnation keeps insisting “I am the Supreme Divinity!” But Karna made even the divine Kannan cry. Now that Krishna has got all the merits of the good deeds performed by Karna, he finally tells him that he personally was responsible for all the tragedies in Karna’s life.

“Karna, I was the one who came as bee to burrow through your thigh. I was the one who sent Kunti to ask you not to shoot the Nagastra more than once against Arjuna! I was the one who sent the King of the Devas, Indra, to ask for your armour! The person who has come as a brahmin is also me! Now he asks Karna to look at him and grants him a vision of his true self, seated on his mount the Eagle, Garuda!

Now the time for Karna to be killed has come, but Arjuna is reluctant to fire against a defenceless Karna. But Krishna insists that Arjuna has to kill Karna and a reluctant Arjuna finally shoots at Karna.

Karna says “I fought with my own younger brothers to repay the debt I owed to my best friend! But now I have been blessed to see you with your sacred garland and to be embraced by you! Even after I fell senseless in the battlefield, I have been blessed to chant your sacred name consciously! Krishna says “Arjuna, fire your arrow now” Arjuna then shot at Karna with a weapon called Anjalikastram. The arrow went and stuck Karna’s chest exactly from where he had pulled out one earlier. Karna who had till now been chanting the name of the divinity, now screamed ”Mother” in pain! Kunti hears a voice from the sky declaring that her son Karna was killed in the battlefield. Kunti rushes to the battlefield to mourn her son, Karna. Kunti laments “Alas my son! Have you departed?” and rushes to the battlefield with her hair dishevelled, beating herself on her chest! When she reached the battlefield she saw Karna lying pierced by numerous arrows. She cries for her son placing his head on her lap. Arjuna then cried holding Karna’s feet saying “I thought I was shooting someone else, not realising that I was actually shooting myself!” Duryodhana also wept and everyone was in tears. Everybody finally realises as to who Karna really was. Dharmaraja angry with his mother Kunti for withholding the secret of Karna’s birth curses all womankind, saying that they would never be able to keep a secret.

The actor playing Krishna addresses the audience “Members of this assembly! The merits of all the good deeds done by Karna has been given as a gift to the divine Krishna sanctified by the waters of the river Ganga! If you dab this holy blood water on your eyes, you will also get a part of the merit of the good deeds done by Karna! Please place your offerings on this plate and dab this holy water on your eyes!

In the festival village the actor who played Krishna would take the blood with which Karna had gifted all the merits of his meritorious deeds to Krishna on a plate and carry it among the audience. For it is a belief in these festival villages that whoever smears the blood of Karna on their foreheads will also get a part of the merits of the good deeds that Karna had done in own his life.