

Performance Traditions of the Mahabharata in Tamil Nadu

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Lecture 02

A BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO THE MAHABHARATA FESTIVALS OF TAMILNADU

“In a world surrounded by water, to stand along with the four Vedas, the fifth Veda, the Mahabharata was narrated by the Rishi of unfading power of austerities, We bow in respect and love to Vinayaka who transcribed the text with Mount Meru as the slate and his tusk as the writing tool”

Villibharatham

In over 300 villages in Tamilnadu and southern Andhra Pradesh, the Mahabharata is celebrated as a unique festival. The festival is variously called Agniotsava Vasantha Bharatha Thiruvizha,[The Spring Mahabharata Festival] Dharmaraja Draupadi Amman Mahabharata Koothu Vizha, Draupadi Amman Theemidhi Vizha [The Firewalk Festival], or sometimes simply as ‘Padugalam’[The Battlefield] referring to the penultimate days spectacular event.

During the heydays of the Pallava rule in these regions there seems to have been state patronage for these festivals. There are copper plate inscriptions mentioning both land and money being allocated for the reading of ‘Bharatham’ or the Mahabharata as it is known in Tamil. Currently each family in these villages contributes money for the celebration of the festival and the total revenue generated in each village can vary between 30 lakhs to one and a half crore of rupees, depending on the affluence of each village. This festival is unique because it is probably the longest running, independently funded theatre festival in the world being performed for well over a thousand years.

Na Muthuswamy first drew my attention to the intricate structure of this festival and its design. He said cryptically “The Mahabharata plays a huge part in Indian and Tamil cultures specifically. It helps one to understand as to what life is; it helps in the development of one’s own personality, it also helps one to understand one’s own behavioural patterns. You will understand it when you see the ten day Koothu festival. The festival is not about some plays being enacted which people just watch; there is a design and an excess of meaning here.” The structure and design of the festival will be one element explored in this book.

The first question which arises is that when returns from agriculture have been declining for the past few decades why do the farmers spend such huge sum of money to conduct these festivals?

The answer given unanimously was deceptively simple- to promote ‘Samarasam’ or peace and harmony in the villages. The Mahabharata, at its core, is a narrative of a fratricidal war fought between cousins over Kingship in which there are finally no real winners. This narrative of the calamitous war becoming a vehicle to promote peace and harmony begs one to ask as to how the Epic was seen in these villages. A storyteller, Muthuganesan gave the pithiest description of the Epic. He said it speaks about the repercussions of “Man Aasai, Penn Aasai, Pon Aasai” meaning that all conflicts at the core hinge on three kinds of desire- the desire for land, or women or gold.

Conflict resolution also seems to be one core of the festival and in every festival you can see old resentments flaring up, conflicts between communities and sometimes conflicts amongst the organisers themselves. A lot of these conflicts are resolved during the course of the festival itself, while some are deferred to raise their head again, in the next festival

These festivals can be celebrated for about ten days to hundred and twenty days with the Vellore Mahabharata festival being the longest such festival which is celebrated for four months. All the festivals culminate with the crowning of Dharmaraja/Yudhisthira , the eldest of the five Pandavas as the King, but paradoxically enough Dharmaraja, in most villages is never taken out of the temple; only Draupadi and the idols of the other four Pandavas are taken out in procession every day of the festival.

The storyteller Kanchipuram Muthuganesan says; “There are a lot of details in these Mahabharata festivals, generally they will not bring Dharmaraja’s idol out of the temple. Because Dharmaraja not wanting to see the Adharma of the new Yuga, the Kali Yuga, had crowned Arjuna’s grandson as the King and departed to the heavens. Respecting his wish of not wanting to see Kali Yuga, they will not bring him out of the temple. This is in 99% of the villages, but in one percent of these villages they will bring Dharumar’s idol out in procession! When you ask them why they bring him out of the temple they say that if that noble soul’s gaze fell on all the atrocities happening in Kali Yuga, maybe things will be better!”

There are basically two texts used to narrate the story of the Epic. The first is a 14th Century text called ‘Villibharatham’ or the Bharatham written by a poet from Villiputthur and an 18th century text written by Nallapillai called Nallapillai Bharatham. Nallapillai Bharatham is a portmanteaux text incorporating all available renderings of the Mahabharata in Tamil, including Villibharatham. Professional Singer/storytellers and professional Koothu troupes are hired by the villages to sing the Bharatham and to enact the theatre, but the rituals are performed by the villages themselves.

A pair of singer/storyteller would inaugurate the festival. The singer would sing a song from the text which will be in a Tamil unknown to contemporary Tamil speakers. The storyteller will explain the song and ground it in the values of contemporary times.

[MD Muthukumaraswamy interview] “There will be two people involved in this. Sometimes they are mistakenly named as Villupattu singers, but they have no connection to the form called

Villu Paattu and are basically storytellers. They will read from the Villi Bharatham and there will be two people, one the storyteller and the other the singer with a harmonium. The storyteller has freedom and all kinds of liberties in his performance. It is essential that he knows both the Mahabharata and Villi Bharatham thoroughly. While he will extemporise freely, his accompanist will not deviate from the written text. The storyteller would narrate in a free form and stop at a juncture. For example if they were performing the Virata Parva episode of the Epic, the storyteller will give a general introduction to the story and connect it to everyday lived reality of the villages. The singer will sing some important verses from the text. The singer can take no liberties but be absolutely faithful to the text and the rules of how it should be sung. It is essential that the storyteller has to be a highly educated person and be a fountain of knowledge. It is not just enough that he knows the Mahabharata; he also has to know literature, Cinema and have a deep understanding of contemporary village life. It is only when knows all this will he be able to narrate the Epic.”

[Villibharatham Performance- Bakasura Vadham]

“When she heard of it, Kunti, the daughter of hills,
got angry and called for the killing of Bakasuran.

The daughter of just lineage commanded her son Bhima. “With the virility and power
granted by the great Hanuman, clash with the demon,
and pulling out his entrails and brains destroy the demons body!”

For the first few days of the festival, the Epic would only be sung and narrated as a story in the afternoon. This performance would be of four hours each day. Only when the singer/storyteller reaches the point of Draupadi’s marriage with Arjuna will the theatre cycle start. In most villages ‘Vil Valaippu’ or the play about Arjuna winning Draupad’s hand in marriage will be the first Koothu enacted.

After Arjuna wins Draupadi’s hand in marriage, the festival would be celebrated for 20 hours each day, with the village rituals in the morning, followed by the storytelling sessions while the Koothu would be enacted right through the night. While the storytelling and theatrical enactments would be performed by hired professionals, the village rituals would be performed by the villagers themselves. It is by the act of performing these rituals themselves; the villagers inscribe themselves into the Mahabharata. Though there is a designated space for theatre in these festivals, theatre is performed all around the village and every space in the village at one point or the other becomes performance space and everything from the storytelling sessions to the rituals being performed is also theatre. It is an immersive experience which does not seem to permit the notion of an outside. For the entire duration of the festival all the people in the village become

characters from the Epic and to perform this transformation, the village rituals play an important part.

To give an example;

The shift of tenor in the festival happens with the ritual of the 'Burning of the Lacquer Palace' performed by the villagers. As the storyteller is narrating the episode of the burning of the Lacquer Palace, the villagers would erect a hut like structure between the storytelling space and the theatrical enactments space.

In the Epic, when Dharmaraja/Yudhisthira asks for their rightful share of the kingdom from their fraternal cousin Duryodhana, he deceitfully promises to apportion the kingdom and asks the five Pandavas with their mother Kunti to stay in a palace he has built for them. Duryodhana has built the palace with combustible materials and intends to burn his cousins to death while they are asleep. To ensure their death, Duryodhana has also sent 6 assassins to complete the job. Bhima comes to know of the plot through Vidura and escapes carrying his four brothers and mother on his shoulders, leaving the 6 assassins to die in the fire.

In the village, 6 dolls representing the assassins sent by Duryodhana would be placed in the hut like structure and the villagers would set fire to it. An idol of Bhima would be carried around this burning structure and the nature and duration of the enactments change dramatically from this point onwards.

.[Video of the 'Burning of the Lacquer Palace']

Everyday the storytelling sessions begin with an invocation to Vinayaka, the scribe of Veda Vyasa. This opening song also invokes the idea of Pralaya, or the Great Deluge.

“In a world surrounded by water, to stand along with the four Vedas
the fifth Veda, the Mahabharata was narrated
by the Rishi of unfading power of austerities,
We bow in respect and love to Vinayaka
who transcribed the text
with Mount Meru as the slate and his tusk as the writing tool.

In Ramayana, Kamban described the world as 'Aazhisoozhulagam', meaning the world surrounded by water, in Villibharatham, he says 'Needazhiulagam' Aazhi means the Oceans.

Eternal recurrence is an idea embedded in different systems of thought in Indian traditions, both of the theist and atheistic schools. The world is reborn afresh from deluge into the Satya Yuga, the time when everyone leads virtuous lives; this is followed by Treta Yuga where Adharma makes its presence felt; Dwapara Yuga when the Great War was fought where the values of the previous two Yugas start disappearing followed by the Kali Yuga in which we live where there is an almost near eclipse of Dharma.

Every time the world recovers from a deluge, another Vyasa will be born to organize all the knowledge of the worlds and compile the four Vedas, Brahma would again ask him to compose the Mahabharata, and the Great War would be fought again.

A popular saying in these festivals is that the Mahabharata is re-enacted so that Draupadi can hear her story again. Draupadi is seen as the representative of all the people unjustly affected by war. Draupadi is 'doubled' - she is both the Queen of the Pandavas and the primary audience for this spectacle. No performance can begin without her presence. In all the storytelling sessions, the village rituals and the theatre enactments idols of Draupadi and four Pandavas will be given pride of place; only then can the performance begin. Dharmaraja/Yudhisthira in most villages never leaves the temple and there is a strong reason why.

In one Koothu where Draupadi has to be abused in vile language, the Kattiyakaaran, the Sutradhar will draw a circle around the actor playing Draupadi and say

“Mother! We are just poor actors enacting your story so that you can listen to it again.

Oh! Mother Panchali, I place my trust only in you, the noble born.

You are the Goddess of this earth! Mother!

Mother of all the Worlds, who was the wife of the five Pandavas, the beautiful Panchali!

For the sake of sustaining this perishable body and for our living, we are enacting this play as it was enacted by our ancestors. In this play we have to abuse you in ugly language. Please forgive us for this and all our errors.

Only after this invocation will the actor step back into his role and abuse Draupadi in the filthiest of languages.

Draupadi becomes the site for a double invocation; while she is the 'wronged' Queen of the Epic, she also invokes all the wars that the people of this region were subject. This second memory, which again will be elaborated later, is not a lament or a dirge, but is an affirmation of the will to live of the people- even through calamitous times.

In the Epic, the Pandavas spend 3 periods of their lives in the forest, in Vanavaasam; they are born in the forest, return to the city to claim their patrimony and are cheated by their cousin to again escape to the forest. They return again only to lose their kingdom to their devious cousins to begin their longest stay in the forests. In their 3 Vanavasams, or life in the forests, they listen to stories of other people that mirror their own predicament. In the festival villages, due to the duration of the performances, the entire village virtually lives in Vanavaasam, in the performances spaces spread across the village, and listen to the stories the Pandavas heard in their life in the forests.

The beginning of the theatre cycle happens in the Dharmaraja/Draupadi Amman temple-the storytelling space, with the Koothu actors singing an invocation song to Draupadi and walking towards the performance space singing this song. In between the actors will circumambulate the

ritual space where Duryodhana will be finally killed before they begin their performance. Everyday another ritual will be performed between the storytelling space and the performance space and the actors would circumambulate each new ritual space before beginning their performance.

This circumambulation of the middle space linking the storytelling and performance space serves to underline their importance. This is one way the village inscribes itself into the Epic and the Mahabharata as it is celebrated achieves its duality. It is both the Sanskrit Epic while also being a memory of the village itself.

On stage, the actors would sing six invocation songs of which five will be to Rajagopal [Krishna as a King], Saraswati, Durga, Murugan and Shiva while the sixth song will be to the guardian deity of whichever village they are performing- this again serves to underline the importance of the festival village and is another way where the village inscribes itself into the Epic and its performance.

The invocation song to Draupadi is important in its own way as it addresses a Draupadi reborn in Senji. No one, currently among the audience could recount this story and the few storytellers who spoke about the second birth of Draupadi claimed that it was found in a book called 'Draupadi Mahathmiyam' [The Greatness of Draupadi], a book which none of the storytellers themselves had seen. But the narrative survives in a song sung everyday by the Koothu performers before each night's performance. So why was Draupadi born in Senji and how did that become a memory of a region?

The popularity of the Mahabharata festivals seems to be increasing each year and newer Dharmaraja/Draupadi Amman temples are being built each year. It is a belief that the new temple, to be authentic, had to have a little bit of land from the temple tank at Melaccheri in Senji making the temple tank almost devoid of any sand.

When we went to interview the priest at the temple in Melaccheri, he was ready to throw us out as he thought that we were people trying to steal sand from the temple tank! The camera in our hands saved the day, and we did a long interview with him which will be a part of a later session dealing with Senji