

Performance Traditions of the Mahabharata in Tamil Nadu

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Lecture 20

Dharumarin Pattabhishekam and Ashwamedha Yaagam

Dhritarashtra says

“Alas! Ten, I hear, have survived the war, three of ours, and seven of the Pandavas. Eighteen armies perished in that battle, that war of the Shatriyas. Now a dullness that is all overspread by darkness seems to permeate me. No sign of sense do I see, Bard, my mind seems to go crazy”

Traditionally, in most festivals, the theatre cycle would end with the Koothu ‘Pathinettam Por’ or the Eighteenth day’s war where Bhima would finally kill Duryodhana. After the ritual Padugalam or ‘The Battlefield’, the Koothu performers would take their payments. After the ritual Firewalk or ‘Theemidhi’ there would be no programmes scheduled for the nineteenth night of the festival so that the village audiences could get some rest and return refreshed for the twentieth day’s event, The Pattabhishekam or ‘The Coronation of Dharmaraja’. Of late in quite a few villages, it has become a practice to end the theatre cycle on a happy note rather than with the violence of the ritual Padugalam. So the Koothu performers would be asked to enact a eleventh play for which they would not be paid any remuneration. This Koothu could have no connection with the Mahabharata at all and is purely a choice made by the contemporary village audiences. In Kazhiyur, the Koothu listed for the nineteenth night performance was on the deity of Tirupati, Venkatesa, his romance with Padmavathi, and later his marriage. This is an extremely popular play and which when we were shooting was being broadcast multiple times on a popular television channel.

At the request of our friends from the village, we asked the organisers to stage a different play which was very rarely performed. This Koothu was the ‘Ashwamedha Yagam’ of Dharmaraja and both the Koothu troupes and the organisers acceded to our request. This Koothu again started on a hyper emotional first person monologue of Dharmaraja. When the play begins, Dharmaraja has been ruling the kingdom for forty one days. He is still maddened with grief at the enormous loss of life he was responsible for in his quest to reclaim his own kingdom. Draupadi and the other Pandavas are unable to calm Dharmaraja.

Arjuna sings his grief “Desiring the kingdom we waged the Bharata war” Chorus “Desiring the kingdom we waged the Bharata war” Arjuna “We killed our own grandfather Bhishma, in our desire for land!” Chorus “We killed our own grandfather Bhishma, in our desire for land!” Arjuna “On the thirteenth day of the war, I lost my son Abhimanyu!” Chorus “On the thirteenth day of the war, I lost my son Abhimanyu! Arjuna “I desired this petty tract of land and this kingdom!” Chorus “I desired this petty tract of land and this kingdom!” Arjuna “On the sixteenth day of war, our archery teacher Drona also died!” Chorus “On the sixteenth day of war, our archery teacher Drona also died!” Arjuna “On the sixteenth day of war, our archery teacher Drona also died!” Chorus “On the sixteenth day of war, our archery teacher Drona also died!” Arjuna “We killed him for the greed for this land and this kingdom!” Chorus “We killed him for the greed for this land and this kingdom!” Arjuna “On the seventeenth day of the war, I killed my own elder brother Karnan!” Chorus “On the seventeenth day of the war, I killed my own elder brother Karnan!” Arjuna “We retaliated to the Kaurava aggression and won the world! But we also lost our entire army! Our army is also dead! The strongest one of them all, my son Aravan also died! My son Abhimanyu who could raise a storm himself, also perished! Where is the great teacher Drona? He died at the hands of Drishtadhyumnan! With my own hands, I, Partha, killed my elder brother Karna!

Both Dharmaraja and Arjuna’s grief is that they were responsible for their grandfather Bhishmacharya and teacher Dronacharya’s death. Arjuna’s grief is compounded with the fact that he was responsible for the killing of a brother that he never knew he had in Karna. Karna’s death is one narrative strand which weaves through this Koothu. War does not respect any kinships and the person standing on the other side is the enemy whether he was the father, a brother, or a son. Numerous women and children had lost their dear ones in the Great War and the death of Karna represents and stands for all the needless deaths caused by this greed for land. Finally Draupadi and the Pandavas invoke Krishna to counsel Dharmaraja. Krishna says that Dharmaraja had acquired Brahmahatya Dosham for the enormous carnage he was responsible for and he has to perform the Ashwamedha Yagam to get released from his madness.

In Ashwamedha Yagam, the Yajaman or the king performing the ritual has to send a horse to roam freely across all the lands. If any king stops the journey of the horse, it would be an act of declaring war. This act of rebellion has to be put down by the Yajaman to declare himself the Emperor of the entire World. Krishna asking Dharmaraja to perform the Ashwamedha Yagam to calm his sense of grief over the Great War at Kurukshetra is another paradox; as another series of wars was implicitly a part of this Yagam. In effect Krishna counsels Dharmaraja to wage a larger war to get over his grief of the Great War.

Though the Koothu is called Dharumarin Ashwamedha Yagam Alladhu Babruvahanan Sandai, that is the Ashwamedha Yaga of Dharmaraja or Arjuna’s fight with Babruvahana, Arjuna is the real protagonist of this Koothu. Krishna tells Dharmaraja that to perform the Ashwamedha Yagam he would need a five coloured horse or a Panchavarna Kudhirai. This horse, he said was

with Yavanasuran, the king of Bhadravati, who was also a kinsman of Ravana. Again the Tamil rendition of the Bharatham invokes the Ramayana in its narration of the Mahabharata.

Arjuna takes leave to go to Bhadravati to get the five coloured horse. Arjuna asks Dharmaraja “Elder brother! What is the way to get over this curse of Brahmanicide?” Dharmaraja says “There is a kingdom called Bhadravati, and the king Yavanasuran has a five coloured horse, the Panchavarna Kudhirai! If we bring that five-coloured horse here and we perform the Ashwamedha Yagam, I would be cured of the curse of Brahmanicide” Kattiyakaaran mocks saying “He says his madness will be cured” Arjuna says “Elder brother! Even if the blue skies were to suddenly turn red, even if I my head is broken and my blood is spilled, whatever the consequences, even if the blood of our enemies gushes out from their bodies like fountains, if this is the only solution for to get rid of this curse, I will fight against friend or foe! I do not care even if I have to lose my life in this effort! I just want my elder brother to find peace! The curse has to be lifted! Breathe easier as your younger brother Arjuna am just waiting to do your bidding!” A pleased Dharmaraja says “My dear brother Arjuna!” Arjuna asks “To which country should I go to?” Dharmaraja says “To the kingdom of Bhadravathi!” Arjuna says “I will go there and return soon my elder brother! For the sake of my brother to perform the Yagam, I will leave today! I will meet that Yavanasuran, talk sweetly to him and get the horse if he gives it gracefully! If not, I will get it with my might! Please give me leave my dear elder brother!

Here the Tamil Koothu tradition makes three important changes from the Mahabharata. In the Epic, there is a mention of Krishna asking a grief-stricken Arjuna to visit the temple at Bhadravati located on the river Tungabhadra to regain his tranquillity and peace of mind. Here the Bharatham says that the horse needed for the Yagam was in the kingdom of Bhadravati. The horse needed for the Yaagam was five coloured and here the Koothu writer seems to be alluding to the purpose of the Yaagam itself. The five coloured horse like the five senses is prone to wander, and maybe the purpose of the Yagam was to regain control over one’s senses and achieve clarity in one’s own life. The third decisive intervention made in this Koothu is that the climax is set in the Pandya capital of Madurai rather than at Manipura, making the Tamil land a part of the Epic.

Arjuna tells Yavanasuran “I, the younger one, bow down respectfully to you great king! My elder brother Dharmaraja needs the unique horse you have to perform the Ashwamedha Yagam. Please give it to me without any hesitation great king! Please give me the horse King! Please give me that unique horse!”

Arjuna promises that he will return the horse unharmed once the Yaagam was done. Yavanasuran refuses to loan the horse and a fight erupts between Arjuna and Yavanasuran. Arjuna defeats Yavanasuran who promises to give the horse to Arjuna after getting the consent of his wife Prabhavati.

Prabhavati says “We have raised the horse as though it was like a son we never had! My dear, it will be unfair to give him to Arjuna! Please do not give him my dear to Arjuna!

Yavarnasuran and Prabhavathi had all the wealth a couple could ask for except the wealth of having a son. Prabhavathi wanted her husband to get married again to beget a son, but an uxorious Yavanasuran out of love for his wife refuses to get married again. In their palace garden there was an old horse which gave birth to a young foal. The foal was unusual as it had a coat of five colours and the couple adopt this foal as their child. For Prabhavati, this five coloured horse was their son and she was unwilling to loan it for Dharmaraja’s Ashwamedha Yaagam. Finally she consents to give their son to Arjuna if he promises to return him unharmed after the Yagam.

At the crux of this Koothu, there are three sons- The Five coloured horse, the son of Prabhavati and Yavanasuran, Vrishaketu, the son of Karna, whom Arjuna had taken the responsibility of being the surrogate father and Chitrangada and Arjuna’s son Babruvahana who had been adopted by his maternal grandfather as his heir. The Epic is again grounded in the emotional, lived realities of the festival audiences and three different parent/son equations frame this Koothu.

Arjuna takes the horse back to Hastinapura and meets Krishna. The five coloured horse is represented by a young actor wearing a colourful costume who crawls on all fours behind Arjuna.

Arjuna sings “Look at the way the five coloured horse is coming! Look at it following obediently!” Arjuna says “We have reached Hastinapura!” Kattiyakaaran says “Krishna has been waiting for you!” Krishna tells Arjuna ” Hang a notice on this horse saying Dharmaraja is planning to perform the Ashwamedha Yagam at Hastinapura and everyone is expected to offer their tributes to the king to perform the Yagam successfully! The horse should be left to roam freely across all lands with the notice also saying that the person following the horse is one among the Pandavas, King Arjuna! If anyone captures this horse, whoever it might be, that person immediately becomes your enemy!

It was just forty one days since the Great War had concluded and the treasury of Hastinapura was empty. Krishna says that to conduct the Yaagam, Dharmaraja would need money which was absent in his treasury. Krishna also suggests how money could be obtained to perform the yagam. Krishna, also significantly asks Arjuna to take Karna’s sixteen year old son Vrishaketu on this expedition of following the five coloured horse. In the Mahabharata all the sons of Karna excepting Vrishaketu had been killed by Arjuna. Arjuna remorseful at killing his own brother Karna chooses to become the mentor of Virshakethu and is extremely protective of him.

Arjuna says “We will travel all around and conquer and the kingdoms in all the eight directions and win fame! Come Vrishaketu!”

Kings all across the lands contribute money for Dharmaraja's Ashwamedha Yaagam and Arjuna and Vrishaketu reach Madurai the capital of the Pandyas, rather than Manipura as in the Mahabharata.

Arjuna says "We have traveled across multiple kingdoms! My son Vrishaketu, do you see the temple towers before you?"

They tie the horse outside Madurai Meenakshi temple to do puja to the deities of the temple. Madurai, in Tamil renditions is the home of the Pandya princess Chitrangada whom Arjuna had married. They have a son Babruvahana who had never met his father. Arjuna had left Madurai when Chitrangada had given birth to their son and Chitrangada had raised their son as a single mother. Arjuna seems fatalistically drawn towards Madurai. The question of whether one was actually responsible for one's own destiny or just was a victim of fate, which runs through the festival is re-articulated here. Arjuna seems destined to have a fatal encounter with his son Babruvahana. Chitrangada who seems to have a premonition of this tries to make her wilful son stay at home, maybe to prevent this fatal encounter between father and son. Though the Koothu identifies their kingdom as the Pandya kingdom with Madurai as its capital, Chitrangada in her song calls it Manipura, thus making the location of this climactic encounter between father and son, either here or maybe everywhere.

Chitrangada sings "Welcome, my darling son, the emerald called Babruvahana! My treasure, Babruvahana! Babruvahana says "Mother, I will go out and return shortly! I want to see the beauty of our beautiful Manipura land!" Chitrangada says "My son, I do not want you to go roaming around Manipura, so son, stay at home and do not leave!"

Chitrangada is a doting mother to her son Babruvahana who in the Koothu is depicted as a man/child. While he has the petulance of a child, he is also a powerful warrior like his father Arjuna. Babruvahana likes wandering around the kingdom on his own and in this scene his mother entreats with him not to go wandering as she is scared that he might not return. But she is unable to stop him and the stage is set for the fatal encounter between Babruvahana and his legendary father Arjuna

Babruvahana sings "What is this written on this wondrous horse! My eyes are blinded by the beauty of this horse! My father must be here! What is this beautiful horse whose beauty dazzles my eyes making me want to take it with me?"

Babruvahana is struck by the wonder of the five coloured horse and reads the note attached to it. The note says very clearly says that the horse has been sent by Dharmaraja for his Ashwamedha Yaagam and all kings in support of Dharmaraja should give gold for the conduct of this Yaagam. Any king capturing their horse would be declaring their opposition and hence would have to fight Arjuna.

Babruvahana who is eager to meet with his father Arjuna takes the horse home as that would ensure that the father and son meet. He also goes to his father with gold for the Yagam which Arjuna angrily rejects. Arjuna according to the rules of the Yaagam is obliged to fight with anyone who had abducted the horse. A heated exchange ensues between both of them and both draw out their weapons.

Babruvahana sings “Dear father! I have bought some gold for your mission! I have come with gold for your Yaagam! Father! Babruvahana tells Kattiyakaaran “This is my father. Do you recognise him? He is my father! I have come with gold and jewels to give to him! Is there any shortage of gold and jewels in our kingdom? Kattiyakaran says ”There is an abundance here!” Babruvahana “Let me give it to him!” An angry Arjuna rejects the gold and says “Hey! Who are you who had the guts to capture the horse?” Babruvahana says “Father!” Arjuna asks “Who are you calling your father? I have never seen you before in my life! Who knows which prostitute gave birth to you?” Babruvahana gets angry. Angry Arjuna “You son of a prostitute! How dare you claim to be my son! Am I your father? Arjuna “I am furious with your arrogance in capturing the horse even after reading the notice posted on it! Kattiyakaaran provokes Arjuna ”If he was really your son, would he captured the horse?” Arjuna says “He is not my son, and I do not know which prostitute gave birth to him!” Babruvahana angrily says “It is written in the notice that it is Dharmaraja’s horse and the one coming along with it is Arjuna! And because I tied it, he is abusing me by calling me the son of a prostitute! Hereafter he is not my father! Arjuna says “Neither are you my son!” Babruvahana says “The moment you abused my mother, you are no longer my father! Leave my kingdom immediately!” Arjuna says that war should not be waged at night and they fix a venue for the next morning to continue their fight.

Arjuna tells Vrishaketu “My own son has now become my enemy and is eager to fight with me! Go immediately to Hastinapura and tell my brother Dharmaraja this news and return fast, my son Vrishaketu!”

Arjuna who realises that Babruvahana is a more powerful warrior than Vrishaketu, sends Vrishaketu to Hastinapura to apprise Dharmaraja of this new development. This he does to ensure that Babruvahana, his own son, does not kill Vrishaketu, the son of his elder brother Karna. Vrishaketu objects to leaving the battle and Arjuna articulates very clearly as to why he wants Vrishaketu to leave.

Arjuna tells Vrishaketu “I am entreating you, please do not go to war, my dear son! I am already being abused by the world for having killed your father! I do not want my son responsible for your death!”

Vrishaketu, who bears no rancour towards Arjuna for killing his father wants to prove his loyalty to his adopted father. So, rather than returning to Hastinapura as requested, he rushes to fight Babruvahana himself. Vrishaketu and Babruvahana fight and as Arjuna feared, Vrishaketu is killed

Arjuna laments “Alas! Are you dead my son, forsaking your mother to a lonely life! You have chosen to die like a warrior! Did you not want me as your father? Is this the will of god that you die this way? Alas my son! Arjuna laments “My dear son and a pleasure to see for my sore eyes!” Chorus “My dear son and a pleasure to see for my sore eyes!” Arjuna “I do not know how I can survive even a second without you?” Chorus “My dear son and a pleasure to see for my sore eyes!” Arjuna “My son! You promised me that you will be the shoulder that I could lean on in my old age! Arjuna “Did you have to die at the hands of my wicked son?” Chorus “Did you have to die at the hands of my wicked son?” Arjuna “Is it the will of fate that you should die before me?” Arjuna is devastated by the death of Vrishaketu and feels as though he has killed his own brother Karna again. He articulates one of the central questions of the festival whether all the tragedies in our lives were just an act of fate or they had brought it on themselves. Arjuna is also honour bound to fight Babruvahana as he had captured the five coloured horse and also to avenge the killing of Vrishaketu. Arjuna, unusually uses harsh language against his son going to the extent of calling him the son of a whore. An enraged Babruvahana disowns Arjuna as his father. In the stylised battle that follows, Babruvahana kills Arjuna. Babruvahana tells Arjuna “I cannot let you live any longer after you abused my mother vilely! [He asks the Kattiyakaaran] Would my real father have abused me thus?” Kattiyakaaran says “Definitely not!” Arjuna says “You who killed my son Vrishaketu are my enemy!” Arjuna and Babruvahana fight and Babruvahana says “Look at my arrow coming towards you!” Babruvahana kills Arjuna.

Chitrangada on hearing the death of her husband calls upon all the wives of Arjuna excepting Draupadi and all decide to immolate themselves along with Arjuna on the funeral pyre. Chitrangada says “Once our husband has died why should we live on this earth? Let us all give up our lives elder sisters!” The wives of Arjuna invoke Krishna as they are preparing to immolate themselves on Arjuna’s funeral pyre.

Four wives of Arjuna Subhadra, Bogavathi, Ulupi and Allirani come to Madurai and as all five women are about to enter the funeral pyre set on stage, Krishna magically appears before them and stops them. He says that he can revive Arjuna back to life and asks Ulupi to get a gemstone called the Nagamani and a magic herb from her kingdom. When Ulupi returns Krishna asks her

You have brought the mantra of Rishi Bhringi. Where is his head? When Arjuna and I burned the Khandava forest, snakes had perished.

When Ulupi returns with the required objects, they find that Arjuna’s body is missing. Again the narrative goes back in time to the burning of the Khandava forest. At the request of Agni, the deity of fire, Arjuna and Krishna had helped him to burn the forest to cure himself of an ailment. All the snakes of the forest were burned and the king of snakes who held Arjuna personally responsible for the carnage had hid his body ensuring that he could not be brought back to life. Krishna retrieves Arjuna’s body and using the Nagamani and the magic herb revives Arjuna back to life again Krishna chants the mantra to revive Arjuna. Arjuna wakes up “Kanna, why have all my wives gathered here? What happened?” Krishna asks “You do not remember anything?”

Arjuna says “The last thing I remember was fighting with my son!” Arjuna awakens as though from a deep slumber and does not remember anything after his fight with his son Babruvahana. Krishna narrates what had actually transpired. Arjuna had killed Bhishma, the grandfather of both the Pandavas and Kauravas deceitfully on the tenth day of the Great War. Bhishma’s mother, the celestial Ganga had cursed that at least for a day, Arjuna’s head had to be severed from his body. Krishna says that he had given his word to the youngest Pandava Sahadeva, that he would protect the lives of all the five Pandavas. Ganga’s curse and his own promise were obviously at odds with each other. Krishna says that to ensure that both were true, he had orchestrated the entire drama. He says that he was responsible for Dharmaraja’s ‘madness’ and was also responsible for Babruvahana fighting and killing his own father. The Koothu, like the Epic that it is based upon, resists closure. The question that is repeated in each Koothu still remains open. The question being – is one or one’s action responsible for the predicament that one finds oneself in? Arjuna, by his burning of the Khandava forest and killing his grandfather Bhishma, is partially responsible for his predicament. Destiny, in the form of Krishna, was responsible for the rest. So the question the festival, the enactments and the Epic itself keep posing to its attentive audience is as to what was the ethical action which would leave the least residue or Karma? The Koothu ‘Dharmaraja’s Ashwamedha Yaagam’ ends on this note early in the morning on the twentieth day of the festival. A simple concluding ceremony of the Ashwamedha Yaagam is performed on stage.

The twentieth day programme at Kazhiyur began with the cremation rites for Duryodhana and his ninety nine brothers. The Samayam Ganachari Kumaravargam have become the kinsmen of Duryodhana as they had donned on the role of the five protectors of Duryodhana in the ritual Padugalam. All the people who tied the ‘Kappu’, would perform funeral rites for Duryodhana like when there is an actual death in the village, in the village, when their relatives come and perform the final rites, like how they would do for their own relations, similarly it is performed for Duryodhanan by the people who wore the ‘Kappu’, the sacred thread. Only after that the coronation of Dharmaraja is performed! Their relatives would give them new clothes to wear with which they attend the coronation! In a lot of villages this ritual would be performed immediately after Duryodhana is killed and the last day of the festival would end on an auspicious note with the crowning of the ideal king, Dharmaraja. For this ritual, the kinsmen of Duryodhana are supposed to get their head tonsured, but in most villages only the facial hair of the kinsmen are removed. Otherwise the ritual performed is a truncated version of the cremation rites performed for an actual death in the village. Gopalan, the priest of the Perumal temple at Kazhiyur was drafted in as the officiating priest and Shankar was drafted in as the barber and Ezhumalai, Ramachandran, Ramesh, Thangaraj and another Ezhumalai were the Samayam Ganachari Kumaravargam in this ritual

Wedding celebrations are one and funerals rites are another ritual. The saying is that for one you have to put lentils in a pot, for the other you have to put it in the fire! To put lentils in a pot to bake is for a marriage, to put it into fire is for the funeral. This is a dialogue that I have written in

my current play. That is what is having relatives' means. Whatever be the enmity between them, but when it comes to a ritual, they will reunite!

Once the ritual is over, the Samayam Ganachari Kumaravargam have a ritual bath in the village tank severing their ties from Duryodhana, thus freeing him. Now they would wear new clothes purchased by their actual 'pangaalis' or relatives in the village and proceed to the concluding Bharatham session.

For Duryodhana's death, you have performed all the final rites, and completed it, have you not? But, I have not yet killed Duryodhanan. Even those of you who have not attended Bharatham festival for the eighteen or nineteen days, if you attend even this one session, and listen to the Bharatham and listen to the Coronation, it seems you will earn the fruits of having listened to the entire Bharatham.

In the final session at Kazhiyur, Mani Vaasagan again went back in time to the point before Duryodhana's death after having his thighs broken by Bhima. As Duryodhana lies dying, Krishna takes the Pandavas away from the battlefield and drives the chariot carrying Arjuna, again the idea of the chariot surfaces and the reason for Krishna taking the Pandavas away from the battlefield would be explained later in the session

After Bhima breaks Duryodhana's thighs, Krishna takes Pandavas to the banks of river Vogavathi. On the way, the divine Krishna asks Arjuna to jump out of the chariot. He jumped out and then the chariot caught fire spontaneously. "Kanna what is this miracle, the chariot is ablaze on its own!" Arjuna asked. Krishna said "Bhishmacharya, Kripacharya, Salyan, Karna and such great warriors fired divine powerful weapons, did they not?" The power of those weapons was still on the chariot. "The chariot did not burn because of me, because I was present in it. And as I got down, the chariot caught fire," In the Mahabharata war many warriors lost their chariots, and fought with new chariots. But because of the divine Krishna, only Arjunan alone fought the entire war from one chariot!

As Arjuna's Chariot burns, Duryodhana is all alone in the battlefield awaiting his death. Duryodhana still has some unfulfilled desires and his death, according to this tradition can only happen once he has come to terms with his desires.

It is at this point that Ashwatthama, the son of their Guru Dronacharya meets him. Ashwatthama was furious with the Pandavas for killing his father through deceit and with Bhima for breaking Duryodhana's thighs which were against all norms of warfare. Ashwatthama was the partial incarnation of Shiva and was really the most powerful warrior in the Kaurava army. In the battlefield, a dying Duryodhana was murmuring in pain and Ashwathama meets him and calls him "Duryodhana, Duryodhana!" Duryodhana says "Ashwathama, everything is over! There is no point in talking about what has already happened Ashwatthama!" Duryodhana, tell me if you have any desires you want me to fulfill and I will do it immediately!" It seems if people have unfulfilled desires, their life would resist leaving their body! Duryodhana asks "Can you really

fulfill my only desire Ashwatthama?” Ashwatthama says “Before the sun rises tomorrow, your desire would be fulfilled!”

Ashwatthama rushes to the camp of the Pandava army to kill the Pandavas. This is the reason why Krishna took the Pandavas away from their camp and the battlefield to save them from the wrath of Ashwatthama. Ashwathama reached the Pandava army camp, late in the night. Krishna who knew that Ashwatthama would come he had not taken the Pandavas back to the camp, but taken them to the Vogavathi river. Krishna had also left a demon to guard the camp. That demon chased Ashwathama away! He went and chanting the many names of Shiva, he invoked him who appeared before Ashwatthama. Ashwatthama mistakenly asked a boon that he should achieve victory against the Pandavas, and not that he should be able to kill them!! Shiva gave him a magic sword and disappeared. Ashwatthama returned to the Pandava camp with Shiva’s sword and the demon disappeared, scared of that sword. When he enters, he sees the entire army sleeping, tired from the eighteen days of war. The first person he sees is Dhrishtadyumnan, the elder brother of Draupadi who was sleeping. Dhrishtadyumnan awoke, raising his sword, asking “Who are you?” Ashwatthama flung the sword in his hand at Dhrishtadyumnan which severed his head! Ashwatthama had taken a vow to kill the one who was responsible for his father’s death, that vow was now fulfilled. Then he went inside, Ashwatthama with the magical weapon from Shiva is invincible and he kills the entire Pandava army while they are still sleeping. His rage is still not abated and he sees the five sons of the Pandavas sleeping and mistakes them to be the Pandavas. He severs their heads and takes the severed heads victoriously to Duryodhana. Ashwatthama exclaims triumphantly “Look! I have brought you the heads of the five Pandavas!” A pleased Duryodhana says “You have returned victoriously Ashwathama! You have achieved single handedly, what my eleven battalions failed to do! You are indeed a great warrior! Welcome Ashwathama and give me just the head of that Bhima! Let me just look at that Bhiman and die happily” Why did he want to see only Bhima? Because he was really the long term and a lifelong enemy! Duryodhana notices that there is only one head bigger than the rest. He does not see it, but just takes and weighs it. He realizes that it is not Bhima’s head as it is lighter.

Duryodhana says “Ashwathama you have made a mistake. As if the wicked deeds I have done are not enough, you have added this also? Since we were children and played together I only wanted to kill the Pandavas, but I never ever wanted to kill their children. You have gone and killed these children and brought their heads to me!”

Duryodhana, when he sees the severed heads of the five Pandava children is horrified and his transformation begins. Duryodhana curses Ashwatthama for destroying their entire clan and he says that his fight had always been with the Pandavas and not their children. Duryodhana says “You have destroyed our entire Kuru clan Ashwatthama! You wicked man, who has destroyed our race! My brothers and our children died in this war, and here I too am about to die shortly. I did not regret that as I thought the Pandava children are alive to rule the Kingdom!” See how Duryodhana has a change of heart towards the end of his life! He banishes Ashwatthama from his sight in anger.

Again here, the Pallava connection is interesting. Most royal dynasties in India claim their genealogy from the Solar, the Lunar or the Agni or Fire dynasty, but the Pallavas claimed that they were the descendants of Ashwatthama who was really a disgraced figure at the end of the Great War. As he was an immortal he could not be killed and Krishna banishes him from the kingdom. Ashwatthama, it is said, can only return in Kali Yuga when he would become the Vyasa, or the composer of the Mahabharata of that Yuga. The Pallavas who really took the Mahabharata to the people might be claiming that they are the Vyasa of Kali Yuga.

As Duryodhana is dying in the battlefield, Sanjaya Rishi, who recounted the Great War as it was happening to Dhritarashtra, meets Duryodhana and Duryodhana's transformation continues. Duryodhana says "In my last moments, before my life leaves my body, I wanted to share the thoughts in my mind, and you have come. Venerable Sage! Please ask my parents not to cry over our deaths. Henceforth the Pandavas are the children to my parents. Ask them to accept them as their children. Let Dharmaraja rule this world. Report this to my father as the dying words of Duryodhanan!" Sanjaya Rishi also left the place, but Duryodhana's life did not depart from his body yet.

Duryodhana finally puts to rest his anger and resentment with the Pandavas and mentally makes peace with them. He still has an unresolved anger and that is with Krishna for manipulating him into losing the war. Krishna now meets the dying Duryodhana. Krishna says "Duryodhana I thought that finally you were repenting your actions, but you are still angry with me!

Duryodhana tells Krishna "You betrayed me even in the final moment! I lied when I said that I could be killed if I was hit on my head, if I had hit Bhima once more, he would have died! At that moment you pointed out my thighs to Bhima to kill me! Karna used the snake weapon against Arjuna only once! Even then you saved Arjuna by pressing the chariot into the ground. If Karna had used the same weapon against Arjuna for a second time, Arjuna would surely have been killed! Again you were responsible as you had sent Kunti to request Karna not to use the weapon more than once against Arjuna. Again I lost! Duryodhana lists five instances where Krishna tricked him into acting against his own interests which directly led him in losing the war. He says that Krishna had tricked him into distrusting Ashwatthama with whom Duryodhana could have easily won the war. Krishna also neutralised Vidura and weakened Karna with his treachery,

Krishna laughs and says that even if Duryodhana had not been tricked these five times, he would still have lost the War. He says the Pandavas too had five powerful weapons which they never once used in the War. Krishna says that Dharmaraja had an elephant and if Dharmaraja had chosen to ride the elephant to the war, no one could have defeated him! Bhimasena had a mace called the 'Shatruqaadhani' gifted by the Nagas, and if Bhima had used this mace, no one would be able to defeat Bhima! Arjuna had the Pasupata Astram which he had obtained by performing Tapas to Shiva. If Arjuna had used this Pasupata Astram in war, he would also have been unbeatable! Nakula had a horse and if Nakula had rode into the battlefield on this horse, he

would have also been unbeatable! Finally he speaks about the sword of the scholar Sahadeva which was invincible which again Sahadeva did not use in the war! Though the Pandavas had these five mighty weapons in store, they never once used it in war! If by chance you were not tricked by me the five times you listed, the Pandavas would have chosen to use these five secret weapons and they would have won the war anyway!

Krishna says “Duryodhana! You had mighty warriors on your side and a huge army, but you were fighting for Adharma! The Pandavas had fewer warriors and a much smaller army but were following the path of Dharma! Wherever there is Dharma, that is where the divinity called Krishna would stand with! And where the divinity called Krishna stands, there will be victory! Duryodhana accepts Krishna’s argument and finally his mind is at rest.

Krishna says “Duryodhana, you were a perfect instrument for the purpose of my incarnation! Till the end you did not budge even an inch from Adharma!” Even if Duryodhana relented a little from his path, the war might not have happened. That was Duryodhana, who was steadfast on his path even if it led to his own ruin! Krishna says “Duryodhana! They are waiting to welcome you in the heavens, you give up your life happily and go to heaven!” Finally the divine Krishna blesses Duryodhana, only after which Duryodhana’s life left his body. Once Krishna leaves, Duryodhana also breathes his last and has a grand entry into the heavens.

The storyteller intervened at this point and asked a rhetorical question as to why Duryodhana was welcomed in the heavens. You may think as to why Duryodhana who only did wicked deeds all his life was granted heaven? There is no one who is totally good and no one who is totally wicked!

For as Ganeri says on the Great War “One thing, by now, should be amply clear. This was no simple battle of good over evil, with the gods on one side and evil doers on the other. In the end, it looks much more as if the two sides in the battle were not fighting against each other at all but rather together battling in different ways against a common enemy. That enemy was illusion in all its manifold forms.

Duryodhana, in his death, is finally freed from his sense of anger which had governed all his actions. For this to happen and for Duryodhana to be welcomed into the heavens, he has to see his own anger reflected back, for his final transformation.

At the end of the Great War there were seven warriors alive in the Pandava army and three alive in Duryodhana’s army. The five Pandavas, Krishna and Satyaki from Pandava side, these seven were alive. In Duryodhana’s army, Ashwathama, Kripacharya, Kritavarma. Ashwathama and Kripacharya being immortals did not die. Only these three did not die, the rest perished. All the dead were cremated together and many women chose to be immolated along with their husbands in the funeral fires! It was an incredibly gory sight to the eyes. Though Duryodhana finally finds peace, Dharmaraja is extremely troubled at the enormous loss of life. He is reluctant to be crowned king at the expense of so much suffering. Krishna takes Dharmaraja to Bhishma who is

lying on his bed of arrows. Dharmaraja feels more at peace after he listens to his grandfather Bhishma's advice. He still has to make peace with Dhritarashtra and Gandhari, the parents of the cousins whom he had killed. Then Krishna takes the Pandavas to Hastinapura where they go straight to Dhritarashtra's palace. Krishna bowed to Dhritarashtra saying "Uncle! I am Krishna paying my respects to you". Dhritarashtra said "You wicked man! You killed all my sons". Next Dharmaraja paid his respects. Dhritarashtra said "Dharma! It was your patience that finally brought you victory! My son I bless you! You should live content in life and be happy!" Dhritarashtra was really a good man. The only mistake he did was his showing affection to undeserving children. Dhritarashtra shows no anger against Dharmaraja, but rather blames himself for not restraining his sons from following a path of destruction. With Bhima however Dhritarashtra still has unconscious anger and Krishna again saves him from being crushed to death. Bhima was impatient to pay his respects to his father's elder brother! Dhritarashtra called out "My son Bhima! Where are you?" Bhima rushed towards Dhritarashtra, but Krishna stopped him. He asked Bhima to wait and stretched an iron statue the size of Bhima towards Dhritarashtra. Krishna said "Uncle, I think he is scared to come to you and he is coming now!" Saying this Krishna placed the statue before him. Dhritarashtra embraced the statue, thinking in anger "This is the man who killed my hundred sons!", and when he embraced the iron statue with unconscious rage, the iron statue shattered and Dhritarashtra fainted. Once he regained consciousness he asked Krishna "What happened?" Krishna replied "Do not worry, nothing happened. You only shattered the iron statue and Bhima is unharmed" Dhritarashtra said "Unconsciously, in my anger about the killing of sons this must have happened!". Dhritarashtra was a good man, but his thinking was unpredictable and one did not know how he would behave sometimes! After that Dhritarashtra blessed Arjuna, Nakula and Sahadeva.

Dhritarashtra next addresses Draupadi and apologises to her for not answering her question in the Kaurava court when Dharmaraja was invited to a game of dice by Shakuni. Dhritarashtra says "You virtuous Goddess! I am suffering today for my silence in court when you asked justice from me! The tears that you shed that day are now flowing as blood!" The Pandavas, Krishna and Draupadi next meet Gandhari. Gandhari takes the permission of Krishna to curse him. She knows that it was Krishna who had engineered the Great War where brothers would kill their own brothers. Gandhari asks Krishna "When you came as an emissary of the Pandavas, why did you not meet me? You met Kunti, but not me!" If he had met her, she would have fallen at his feet and begged him to save her children! That is why he did not meet her. Gandhari says "You arranged the death of my sons at the hands of their brothers!" If she was truly a virtuous wife, she says that she will curse him. " Krishna humbly accepts this curse. Gandhari curses Krishna "In the same manner as you made my sons die at the hands of their brothers, let your clansmen die at each others hands!" This curse of Gandhari reached fruition after thirty six years. She has no anger with the Pandavas and Draupadi whom she considered her own children. Gandhari also said that a country should not be without a king and asks Dharmaraja to accept kingship. Bhimasena brought sacred waters from nine rivers for Dharmaraja's Coronation or Pattabishekam.

The coronation ceremony of Dharmaraja, the concluding event in all Mahabharata festivals was again a truncated affair at Kazhiyur. This was because, for some reason there was no Dharmaraja idol at Kazhiyur. The ritual became symbolic with the priest holding up a 'Manimakudam' or crown which was taken around the audience for them to offer their blessings. The crown was consecrated, put on display. I request you also to worship the crown from where you are seated!

“Blessed by the affectionate mothers and fathers, blessed by the great Rishis, They took the crown to Krishna to bless. When Krishna looked at the crown, from his sight the Goddess of wealth, Mahalakshmi's blessings also fell on the crown and the Goddess ensured the prosperity of Dharmaraja's land. Krishna crowned Dharmaraja with his own divine hands.

Thus Dharmaraja's coronation to rule the world was performed by the one with coral coloured mouth, Krishna! The festival which began with the Pookaragam or a pot decorated with flowers being taken to the Dharmaraja/Draupadi Amman Temples, now concludes with the same pot being taken to the temple tank where the flowers are removed

As the storytellers were concluding the Mahabharata festival at Kazhiyur, the village elders could be seen dismantling the stage, the bow of Arjuna, the Kindhooram which was placed on the stage, the tree on which Arjuna performed his Tapas and finally the statue of Aravan. While the body is always dismantled, the head of Aravan is usually placed on top of the Dharmaraja/Draupadi Amman temple eternally looking down on the Kurukshetra of our lives as the 'ultimate observer'. Every other indication that a festival was held there is removed excepting the recumbent sculpture of Duryodhana. The sculpture is left out in the open for nature to take its course. Slowly the paint on the sculpture fades away, weeds grow on the sculpture, and nature reclaims the land that Duryodhana had once coveted. This mound of land representing Duryodhana is a permanent fixture in these villages and in the next festival, the weeds would be cleared from the sculpture and fresh clay applied. Another Duryodhana would be sculpted and painted again.

Again the Mahabharata will be celebrated, Aravan would be again there to see the spectacle of the Great War, and return to their respective villages from the festival village. Duryodhana would be again killed and Dharmaraja would be crowned the King