

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

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### **Lecture 03**

#### **THE IDEA OF THE CHARIOT**

“Two birds, beautiful of wing, close companions, are seated on a tree. One bird eats the sweet fruit of the tree, the other silently watches”

Jonardon Ganeri in his ‘The Concealed Art of the Soul’ speaks about two interesting conversations Vyasa has with first Ashwatthama, and later Arjuna. Ashwatthama is disgusted that his powerful weapon Narayaneeyam was ineffective against Arjuna and throws down his arms declaring that it is all lies or an illusion’. Ganeri says that Vyasa gives Aswatthama one explanation. He then meets Arjuna on the other side of the battle field who tells him of a wondrous vision that he had. Arjuna says that in his vision he saw a burning figure killing the enemy army before he could even fire his arrow and says the soldiers that he thought he had killed were dead even before his arrow struck them. Vyasa, Ganeri says, gives another explanation to Arjuna and quotes from the Mahabharata to explain the idea of the cosmos itself as a chariot “When Vyasa explains the meaning of the battle to Arjuna, it is through a ritual cosmological homology. Rudra, we are told, fashioned the very cosmos in the shape of a chariot ready for battle: And

“Siva, having made the two mountains, Gandhamadana and Vindhya, the two bamboo poles; and the earth with her oceans and forests, the chariot; and Sesa, the lord of snakes, the axle; and that lord of lords having made the sun and moon the two wheels; {This passage is found in the Northern Recension, Appendix I, no. 25] Rudra made this chariot with all the deities as parts of this gigantic Chariot.

Vyasa implies that the burning figure that Arjuna saw in his vision was none other than Siva who did the actual destruction

In the Tamil tradition, this question of Arjuna to Vyasa is framed directly as a question of whether they were agents of action or mere instruments to Bhima and Arjuna. In a Koothu play called ‘The Fight between Bhima and Arjuna’ a similar idea is expressed in a more dramatic form. At the end of the war a fight erupts between the two brothers, with each claiming that they alone were responsible for the Pandavas winning the war. The fight turns ugly and Krishna is

called to settle the dispute. Krishna takes them to Aravan who is the only person who has witnessed the entire war.

Krishna says “Aravan! Both these brothers are fighting saying that they killed more soldiers than the other. You have seen the entire eighteen day war. Tell them who killed more!” Aravan says “O the creator of illusions! You used both of them as mere instruments! In the eighteen days of war, you were the person who killed the eighteen Akroni, or divisions of armies. It was neither my father Arjuna or his brother Bhima! It was only the weapon in your hand, the Chakrayudham which killed all the armies It was you who ended this Mahabharata War!” [Seetharaman Koothu Actor interview] Aravan, is the ultimate observer and is the only one who has seen the battle through his mind’s eye. Krishna takes the fighting brothers to Aravan to settle their dispute. Aravan settles the issue for both brothers.

The story of Aravan can be found in village traditions wherever the Mahabharata is performed. He is variously known as Khatu Shyam in Rajasthan, as Iravan in Himachal Pradesh, Babrika in Andhra and in all these places he is seen as a bodyless head of a warrior. In the Mahabharata, the Pandavas had to sacrifice a physically perfect human being to Goddess Kali to ensure victory in the Great War. Aravan/ Khatu Shyam had no objection to being the human sacrifice, but as a warrior he wanted to witness the entire battle. Krishna grants him a boon that his severed head would be able to see the entire battle. On all Dharmaraja/Draupadi Amman temples one can see Aravan heads from the previous festivals, witnessing the site of battle. Ganeri explains this passage thus “One thing, by now, should be amply clear. This was no simple battle of good over evil, with 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. And the most pernicious form of all is the concealment of the self from itself, for that leads to desire, and desire leads to anger, and someone who acts with anger in their soul is ensnared all the more in an illusion of their own making. If one’s worst enemy is one’s own anger reflected back, pacifying oneself is the only way to win.

The Mahabharata has a lot of stories of ethics that illustrate as to how a human being has to live. The Bharatham stories have been narrated traditionally to remove the rancour within the listener’s hearts and to live harmoniously with each other.

[Na Muthuswamy “In a sense it looks as though all the villagers were the subjects of the Pandavas and the Kurukshetra War was fought in the village to re-establish Dharma on earth! That is another interpretation that arises.”

[Mani Vaasagan interview] “If we conduct these festivals, people from other villages would visit our village giving it importance. Because people visit in large numbers, it also generates revenue for the village. A lot of family’s livelihoods are centred on these festivals, the Koothu troupes, the storytellers, the public address system electricians, the light men, the carpenters and other

artisans also make money. If a festival happens in a village, every person in the village gains in one way or the other.”

[Na Muthuswamy interview] “The entire village is involved in these festivals in various capacities. The festival is not just about telling some stories...The festival is performed for the well-being of the village; till this festival lasts the theatre Koothu form will survive. Rituals are very important to us. This theatrical form Koothu has survived such a long time because of it being a ritual in the Draupadi Amman temples. Otherwise it might have perished a long time ago as it is very expensive to conduct such festivals.”

Mahabharata is divided into 18 books or Sargams. In most performance traditions of the Epic, only ten of the eighteen Sargams are performed and there is a strong reason for this

[Interview] “We never narrate the entire eighteen Parvas of the Epic, but will only narrate ten and complete the festival on an auspicious note with the crowning of Dharmaraja. If we continue with the next eight Parvas, by narrating the Shanti Parvam, it might end on an inauspicious note with the Pandavas also going to heaven, Arjuna losing his valour and even Kannan [Krishna] being shot down by a hunter and reaching his abode at Vaikuntam.. These kinds of scenes would come... So in this festival these portions are not included.”

The first event for a long time in the Mahabharata festivals is called hoisting the Daal flag or the ‘false flag’

[Saravanan interview] “First, before a Bharatham festival begins, they would hoist something called a ‘false flag’ if you look on top of the Tamarind tree there you will see it. It is a yellow cloth tied three months before the festival. From the time the ‘false flag’ is hoisted and the ‘true flag’ is hoisted and the Festival should end in three months after the false flag is hoisted.”

[Pandurangan Interview] “The festival should not end within two months after the false flag is hoisted; there is some kind of calculation there. The moment the false flag is hoisted is the indication that a festival will be conducted that year. Immediately messages would be sent to people from the village settled elsewhere and talks will begin. All the sponsors of the individual events would be consulted to decide as to how the festival could be conducted. But if they say that due to bad rains, the harvest has been bad and there is little income and they might request that we stop with the hoisting of the false flag and not take it further. In deference to their wishes the festival might not happen that year. Once the idea of holding a Bharatham festival has been mooted, representatives of all the Jati’s in the village would be called for a meeting with the village heads. Here everyone’s opinion, and financial readiness and only after getting everyone’s opinion will they proceed. The village heads will say that they intend holding a Mahabharata festival and if we are ready, we would also like to participate in the festival. First we will broadcast this message on a public address system and call for a meeting of the village. These village meetings can be held for three or four times. We will call the important people in each street and propose that we want to host the huge Mahabharata festival that year and ask for their

opinions. If they give permission for the festival, we will do a breakdown of the money needed for conducting this festival. Once we make the budget we will ask the sponsors of each individual event of the festival to take responsibility of collecting the amount from their respective streets. Other than their individual event, they will also declare how much they can contribute for the temple fund for the festival. From this temple fund we will meet the singer/storytellers and the Koothu troupes payments. We will decide payments for both the Bharatham storytellers and Koothu groups for twenty days. This payment will itself amount to three and a half lakh rupees. Then there are incidental expenses which will amount to fifty thousand rupees. These expenses alone will be over four lakh rupees. Then there are other expenses to be met from the temple common fund like the Pandal decorations, the public address systems and loud speakers- all these together would amount from ten to twelve lakhs of rupees. Other than these common expenses, the sponsors of the ten days have to meet the expenses of their individual event.”

[Mani Vaasagan interview] “The Mahabharata festivals are the only festivals in which all the communities in a village organise together. It is a difficult exercise getting all the communities together, so in some villages, the false flag will be hoisted secretly in the night without anyone knowing! If the flag is hoisted, everyone has to join together to conduct the Bharatham festival that is why the practice of hoisting the false flag was instituted in olden times!”

This is basically a farmers festival and the festival is celebrated so that there would be rains and a good harvest the next year. Farmers bring a portion of that years yield of grains to the temple, as an offering to the temple

[Selvam Pambai Drummer Kelur song]

Dharmaraja, while ruling Indraprastha, lost all his wealth to  
Dhritarashtra's son, Dhuriyan[Duryodhana] in a game of dice  
Panchali and the five Pandavas hence spent twelve years in Vanavaasam  
and one year of living in hiding

The sacred Panchali had taken a vow that she would only tie her hair  
at the end of the Bharata War with the blood of Dhuriyan

We remember this vow of Panchali [Draupadi]

One popular line that storytellers in the Mahabharata festivals of Tamil Nadu keep repeating is that if a hundred people listen/watch the epic, they are actually listening/watching to a hundred different Mahabharatas’. While they are watching/listening to the Epic, they are also simultaneously reflecting on their own lives. The Mahabharata is being performed both ‘outside’ and ‘within’ oneself. The outer grandiose spectacle of the Great War ‘mirrors’ the inner battles waging within each listener/viewer. Every year the spectacle of the Great War is re-enacted so that the audience could address their own battles better. A narrative of a calamitous war in which there are no real winners is celebrated annually, paradoxically, to promote ‘peace’ or ‘Samarasam’ within the participating communities.

[Mani Vaasagan Bharatham Storyteller] “In any village, the Mahabharata festival is celebrated, there would never be any fights between women with their daughters in law! In any village where the Bharatham is celebrated, there will not be any disputes between brothers! In any village where the festival is celebrated, husbands and wives would live amicably together!”

[Pandurangan Village Head Kazhiyur] “When you conduct such a huge festival, obviously there will be problems. Even in a wedding where hundred two hundred people participate, there would be problems; in a village festival of this scale with thousands of people participating, someone or the other might feel insulted at some point. Then whoever has numbers on their side would be heard louder, even a minor incident can be blown up out of all proportion!”

Commentary- The Mahabharata festivals which are celebrated to promote peace and harmony or ‘Samarasam’ in the villages have also given rise to their own share of conflicts in these villages. There are numerous cases where village communities were unable to reconcile their internal differences to jointly conduct the Mahabharata festivals for long periods of time. These conflicts were usually about the space and prestige that each community or Jati enjoys in the festival. But as the festivals are immensely popular, sooner or later, the communities work out a compromise between themselves to celebrate the festival again. In one village where there had been no Mahabharata festival for over fifteen years, one village headman said that getting all the communities on board together was like entering another Kurukshetra!

[Mani Vaasagan Bharatham Storyteller] “The day the festival begins, before the storytelling begins, in all old Draupadi Amman temples, there would be Dwija Sthambam[a flag pole] like in all traditional temples. These temples will have a Raja Gopuram, Kodi maram and would have been constructed according to Agamic rules. In these temples, the flag hoisting would be celebrated and they would hoist the flag as they do during Bramhotsavam times. In some temples, they would cut a fresh tree and hoist a flag on this.

In some temples they will not keep a special pole, but just draw a figure of Hanuman on a cloth and hoist it as a flag. It is called the Hanuman flag.

On Vijayan or Arjuna’s chariot in the Mahabharata War, Hanuman or Anjaneya ‘s figure adorned his flag. So in a lot of Bharatham festival the flag is called Hanuman’s flag and there would be sponsors for this event who would be called the sponsors of the Hanuman flag hoisting ritual.”

One image which proliferates in the epic The Mahabharata, and in a curious fashion, in the other epic Ramayana, is of the passenger and his charioteer. The charioteer, while being mostly masculine, can also in certain crucial episodes be feminine. The passenger is seen in this imagery as the ‘mind’ which needs the charioteer to navigate it through the labyrinthine forests called living in the world. Sometimes, the charioteer speaks, while he mostly listens to the mind, the passenger who owns the chariot. In the Dharmaraja/Draupadi Amman Temple at Kelur, a chariot is placed prominently on top of the temple to leave no room for ambiguity. In

Kazhiyur, our main village for our field work, the idols of Draupadi and Arjuna were placed in a chariot driven by Krishna in the ritual processions through the village

The Mahabharata, which is an implicitly anti-war text according to medieval Indian aestheticians like Anandvardhana and Abhinavagupta, begins by describing itself. The first question it poses is as to what caused this disastrous war in which there were finally no winners and lists a series of probable causes which could have led to the calamity. It gives up this speculation as being finally futile as the Great War had already taken place and millions of people had been killed. The next significant detail that the epic speaks about itself is that it is a narrative which has been retold many times before. Numerous sages who had heard the epic from either Vyasa the writer or his son Suka- literally the parrot –had already retold this narrative in the seven heavens. The first time the epic was narrated on earth, it says, was at the snake Yagna of King Janamejaya, the great grandson of the Pandavas. King Parikshit, due to a thoughtless action of his, was cursed to die by a snake and he was unable to avert his own death even after taking the stringent of security measures. Janamejaya, to avenge his father's murder, decided to perform a Yagna, the purpose of which was to rid the world of snakes. His Yagna was doomed to fail as snakes, in Indian traditions, represent the fruits of one's actions and what Janamejaya wanted to do was to 'free' action so that no act will have any repercussions'. This was obviously undesirable as it would lead to an immoral/amoral universe where anybody could do anything with impunity. So Janamejaya was asked to listen to the epic to learn the ways of Karma and ruminate on what it meant to lead an ethical life. All these details are narrated in the terse first 50 verses of the epic and the first voice of a person who was directly involved with the war who speaks in the narrative is the blind King Dhritarashtra- the father of the Kauravas whose antagonism with their cousins, the Pandavas resulted in the Great War.

It is significant that in a narrative of war, the first voice that is heard is of the vanquished. The Mahabharata, when speaking of itself, says that knowledge of two associated Philosophical streams, Samkhya and Yoga are necessary for its understanding. Samkhya says that from Mahat, the sum total of all the knowledge of the world three Gunas emerge called Sattva [goodness, calmness, harmonious], Rajas [passion, activity, movement] and Tamas [ignorance, inertia, laziness] These three Gunas or qualities are present in everyone and everything in different proportions. The three half-brothers Dhritarashtra, the first born, Pandu the second and Vidura the third represent Tamas, Rajas and Sattva respectively. What has been vanquished in the Great War is Tamas and significantly that is the first voice from within the participants of the war that is heard. Dhritarashtra, significantly speaks to Sanjaya, his charioteer. When Tamas, the blind King Dhritarashtra speaks, the Great War is already over and millions have lives have been lost. The king laments to Sanjaya, listing out the events of the epic when he knew his sons had lost the war. Each of the events he lists is an occasion that he could have intervened and averted the inevitable war; but blinded by his own Tamas, he had failed both his sons and their cousins. The charioteer very rarely intercedes and by listening silently, he almost becomes transparent. In effect, the Blind King is directly speaking to the reader, the listener – the audience who by

default become the ‘charioteers who listen’ These events which Dhritarashtra enumerates where he could have averted the Great War are what are dramatized and performed in the Mahabharata festivals of Tamilnadu. The Tamil village performance tradition makes a significant change here. The idea of Sanjaya as the ‘listener’ might be too abstract and that function is grounded and is accorded not to Sanjaya, the charioteer of the blind king, but to Draupadi, the Queen of the Pandavas. Before every event of the festival, idols representing Draupadi and Arjuna would be ceremoniously given pride of place in the performing space, and only after that would the performance begin. One of the various names by which Draupadi is addressed in the epic is as ‘Krishna’ [the dark hued] and she is seen as the sister of Vasudeva Krishna, the charioteer of the Pandava warrior Arjuna. One storyteller made this connection and said that Draupadi is called ‘Agatthin Krishna’ or ‘Krishna of the Inner Landscape’ while Vasudeva Krishna is seen as ‘Puratthin Krishna’ or the ‘Krishna of the Outer Landscape’. Our storyteller, Mani Vaasagan laughed at this analogy and took it upon himself to mock such fanciful stories being spread around by illiterate storytellers! Krishnan Thoodhu Koothu

The original storyteller who used this metaphor said that for the Pandavas to navigate their lives they needed the support of both the inner and outer Krishnas’. The inner Krishna was needed to achieve tranquillity within, while the outer Krishna was needed to negotiate their way in the world. This idea will be elaborated during the narrative dealing with Draupadi’s wedding to the five Pandavas. There is a popular invocation song of Draupadi which articulates this idea; it says “Mother, just as you protected the Pandavas in their travels in the forests, please also, protect us, your children”

The Mahabharata, as it is celebrated in these over 300 village festivals in Tamil Nadu, is narrated/sung as a story, performed as village rituals and enacted right through the night in a traditional theatre form called the Koothu. The festival is intricately structured, with the storytelling leading to the village rituals which in turn would lead to the theatrical enactment. Some crucial episodes of the Epic would be celebrated in all three order of performance as ritual, storytelling or theatre and there is a strong reason why.

The first question that arises is as to who were the custodians of this intricately structured festival who had ensured continuity down the ages the festival has been performed. At a first glance, the five men of the Dharmaraja/Draupadi Amman Temple, the Samayam, Ganachari, Kumaravargam look like being the custodians of the festival as each event of the festival has to be inaugurated by them.

The role played in these festivals by the Samayam Ganachari Kumaravargam will be elaborated in the following module.