

Performance Traditions of the Mahabharata in Tamil Nadu

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Lecture 04

SAMAYAMGANACHARIKUMARAVARGAM

AN INTERRUPTED TRADITION

THE CUSTODIANS OF THE FESTIVAL

“Also we are an epic people. We like to sprawl, we are not much involved in the story intrigues, and we like to be re-told the same myths and legends again and again.

We, as a people, are not sold much on the ‘what’ of a thing, but the ‘why’ and ‘how’ of it.

This is the epic attitude”

Ritwik Ghatak

The Samayam Ganachari Kumaravargam are a group of five men who inaugurate the festival by tying the ‘Kappu’, a sacred thread around their wrists at the start of the festival. They live in the temple for the entire duration of the festival and on completion of the festival they would remove the sacred thread from their wrists and return to their respective houses. Their special status in the village lasts only for the duration of the festival after which they would resume their ordinary lives in their villages. They also don on multiple roles in the various rituals of the Epic performed in the village. In one ritual they become the five Pandavas, while in another they become Aravan, sacrificing himself to ensure victory for the Pandavas and in the last ritual, the killing of Duryodhana, they become five Kaurava warriors deputed to guard Duryodhana from Bhima. Everyday of the festival would start with the Samayam Ganachari Kumaravargam, ceremoniously washing Draupadi’s weapons and collecting sacred water from the village pond for the temple.

The Samayam, Ganachari, Kumaravargam appears to have once been a way of networking in the villages, but now that network exists in only 39 villages around Bolur in Thiruvannamalai district where it is mandatory that Sammayams for one village attend the festivals of the other 38 villages in the consortium. Now, in most villages, the Samayams are independent of each other while still performing the functions of the Samayam in their own village.

[Muthuganesan interview] “In this network around Polur, it is mandatory that the Samayam, Ganachari, Kumaravargam of one village attend the Mahabharata festivals in the other thirty eight villages of the consortium. Now, in most villages, excepting for those around Polur,the

Samayam, Ganachari, Kumaravargam are independent of each other while still performing the functions of the Samayam in their own villages.”

[Melpallipattu Krishnamurthy] “There is a village called Aadhamangalam Pudur, near Polur on the way to Mulakaadu. I performed the Bharatham there two years back and there were Samayams of thirty five villages present. If they were conducting a Mahabharata festival that year, the Samayams from the village have to personally invite as per ritual, all the Samayams of the thirty five villages to their festival. The Samayams from these villages would come and participate in the final ritual of the ‘Theemidhi’ or firewalk in the festival. The Samayam, Ganachari, Kumaravargam and Dharmakarthis from the thirty five villages will come as a group to attend this festival. The Samayams from this village have to welcome them to their village with proper ceremony, with drums and fanfare. In the final ritual, the Samayam Ganachari, Kumaravargam of all the thirty five villages will be the first men to walk the fire in this festival. It is a formation like this.

[Muthuganesan] This discipline now exists only around the villages near Thiruvannamalai. If the Samayam has invited the Samayam of another village, they have to attend or they will be fined. If for some unfortunate reason they are unable to attend they have to inform or pay the fine. This applies only for the villages in the consortium. This entire network assembling is what is called the Samayam. This organisation where all these Samayams participate in a festival has been instituted by our ancestors. This was probably done when the festivals were first celebrated.

You wont see such an organisation around our area [Kanchipuram] But every temple will have a Samayam, Ganachari, Kumaravargam. But in those villages the Samayam means one thing specifically. As I told you before, you cannot make a generalisation on this. Each region has its own specific rituals and customs.”

In Kazhiyur, the main village that we did our field work, the festival was resuming after a gap of twelve years and a lot of senior citizens of the village were either too old to participate or had passed away in the interim period. The role of the Samayam, Ganachari, Kumaravargam, a hereditary position passed on from father to son, had fallen on the shoulders of young men in their 20’s and 30’s that were really clueless as to what the position entailed. They would have been too young when the last festival was celebrated to have learned from their fathers about their responsibilities in the festival, but still the festival was conducted successfully. That is when the decentralized nature of the organisation of the festival becomes apparent. The entire festival is actually like a gigantic jigsaw puzzle with various custodians holding the individual pieces.

Each day of the festival, or each event had different sponsors who alone knew what had to be done on that day or that event and this right was fiercely guarded.

[Pandurangan Village Head Kazhiyur] -Eleven years back, our fathers were in charge and we were really too young to know what was being done. We were also busy with our education and

jobs. Only now we have come to take charge of the festival. There was a notebook with details of what had to be done on each day with a village elder. He sadly passed away last year. We asked his family for the book of instructions, but they could not find it. So now we are learning on the job by asking what had to be done from numerous people.

[Mani Vasagan]- In some villages, the festival might not have been performed for fifty or sixty years. The people would have forgotten as to how to conduct the festival and it will be extremely difficult to reconstruct the festival as it was celebrated once. For example, if Brahmins were in charge of an event- In a lot of villages there are no Brahmins living as most of them have migrated. So the the question will arise as to who should take over an event sponsored by the Brahmin community. Now in that village the Gounders might be dominant in number and would be given the sponsorship of this event.

Kazhiyur, a village with a history stretching back to a thousand years, originally had seven streets, each named after the Jati of the people who inhabited these streets. Each of these jati's had been assigned the sponsorship of a particular day or event that celebrated their identity or family craft. The Udayars, a community of potters would take responsibility for construction of the hundred feet Duryodhana sculpture, the Yadavas would take charge of all events associated with Krishna as Krishna was an Yadava by adoption, the Vanniyars would have control over all rituals associated with Draupadi because like Draupadi, they too were born out of fire and the Adi Dravidars, the largest population in this village with over a hundred families had the sponsorship of the penultimate days event- the Eighteenth Day War. Over the years a lot have migrations to the city had taken place and there was just one Mudaliar family in the Velalar Street and there were no craftsmen families currently living in the street named after them. Over the years, the sponsorship had been passed on from the jati concerned to the entire street currently populated by multiple jatis and I was curious as to how continuity was maintained in what was evidently a ruptured tradition. The answer given was deceptively simple. The answer that was given was deceptively simple.

[Ramalinga Mudaliar Vil Valaippu]-There was once fifteen Mudaliar families living in the Velalar Street. When my father was alive Velalars alone would sponsor the marriage of Draupadi Amman ritual. Now things have changed with Mudaliars having migrated. Now the entire street has become the sponsors of this event

[Arunachala Chettiar Sundari Kalyanam]-This community of Thousand Vaishya Chettiars have sponsored this event down the ages. Each family would contribute money, people with more money would contribute more and we would balance this and conduct the event happily with the support of the village people. Nothing can be done without the support of the village people. This is known as the thousand Vaishya Chettiar event and we have been doing it for ages. There were once forty families contributing, but the number has reduced, but we still have managed. We usually sponsor the Koothu called 'Sundari's Marriage' and we avoid the Rajasuya Yagam Koothu.

[Kannan Karunekar Street Virata Parvam] The streets have been named after the community living in them. Our street was called Karunekar Street because accountants used to live in this street. They were the original inhabitants. Later Karunekar Street came to be renamed as the Accountants Street. Once there were more than fifty families living here. Over course of time a lot have migrated to Cheyyar or Chennai. But whenever there is a festival, they will return compulsorily to the village. Now we have fixed the contribution from each family at five thousand Rupees. There are totally thirty two families, but a few are too poor to afford this sum. So we have collected a sum of one lakh fifty thousand from thirty families.

[Saravanan Arjuna Tapas disagreed]- In Kammalar or the artisan's street, the carpenters would contribute their labour to the festival. If a Vaaniyar was assigned the sponsorship of the ritual Arjuna's Tapas, he would have to hire the services of a carpenter from outside. The sheer labour charges for this ritual would work out to 15,000 Rupees. But if a carpenter was given the sponsorship, his labour itself would have been his contribution. Once each community might have been assigned the sponsorship of a ritual, that needed their artisanal labour; as you say the Udayars have been given the sponsorship of making the Duryodhana and Aravan sculptures. For example our street has the sponsorship of the ritual Arjuna's Tapas. But other than these I do not see a connection between sponsorship and family craft."

The episodes of the Mahabharata performed as village rituals are very important as it is by enacting these, the village claims co-ownership of the Epic. The rituals are performed by the villagers themselves whereas professional storytellers and Koothu actors are hired by the villagers for the other two components of the festivals. It is by performing narratives of the epic as village rituals, each village inscribes itself into the Mahabharata. Now the Great War, is not just a recounting of a war fought elsewhere, but becomes a memory of the village itself.

[Melpallipattu Krishnamurthy]-After the flag is hoisted announcing the start of the festival, there would be idols made of wood in the temple excepting for Dharmaraja. Dharmaraja would be the presiding deity of the temple without any wood idol. The reason for this is that the Five Pandavas represent the five elements; among them Sahdeva is earth, Nakulan is water, Arjuna is fire, Bhima is wind and Dharmaraja is Akasha or ether. The other four elements move, but ether does not. That is why there is no wooden idol of Dharmaraja.

[Muthuganesan]- There would be idols of Bhima, Arjuna, Nakula and Sahadeva which would be taken out in procession. Dharmraja's idol will never be taken out in procession as Dharmaraja, not wanting to see the terrible times of Kali Yuga had crowned his grandson Parikshit the king and departed to the heavens. So to respect his desire of not wanting to see the terrible times we are living in, Dharmaraja's idol will never be taken out. This is the case in about 99% of the temples. But there is also 1% of temples where Dharmaraja would be taken out in procession! The reason given being that if that noble soul's gaze fell on the terrible times we are living in, it might have a mitigating effect.

In our areas, for the ritual Arjuna's Tapas, the palm tree will represent Kailasa which Arjuna would climb. But if you look at the festivals near Senji, they would have a Shiva Linga at the base of the tree! Now because we watch videos on YouTube, we realise this. Arjuna would do Puja to the Shiva Linga before climbing the tree. Even when I performed in the Western districts I was asked whether we did this also? According to narrative Arjuna is granted Shiva's vision only after he sings sacred songs to Shiva and climbs the Kailasa tree. If Arjuna sees Shiva before climbing Kailasa, then why does he need to climb? The story itself changes here! But the villagers said that was their custom! So each village would added a few rituals of their own.

[Mani Vasagan]- In some villages for the final ritual they would place the heads of the five Pandava children, in some villages there would also be an image of Shakuni along with that of Duryodhana. None of this has any textual backing, either in Villibharatham or Nallapillai Bharatham. It has nothing to do with the Mahabharata itself. It can only be described as a traditional ritual performed in these villages because their ancestors have been doing it!

One document seemed sacrosanct and no alteration was allowed on this original document. This was the invitation to the festival with details of which event would be sponsored by which street and the Koothu which had to be enacted on that particular day. This program list called the 'Notice' was specific to each village and is really an important sociological document offering insights as to the jati demographics of the original inhabitants, whether the village was once a Vainava or Saiva village.

There have also been instances in many villages, where attempts made by the village elders to hand over the rights of sponsorship of an event from one community to another more powerful community have also led to conflicts. Because of this again these festivals are unable to conduct the Mahabharata festival for many years.

The Mahabharata festival could only be conducted after these conflicts were resolved amicably. Each 'Notice' from different villages highlights different episodes from the epic. Mani Vaasagan, the storyteller we recorded at Kazhiyur and Kelur said that it was impossible to narrate the entire Mahabharata in 20 or 30 days of the festival and different villages highlighting different episodes from the Epic made it possible for the floating audience from other villages to get a nuanced understanding of the Epic after participating in multiple Mahabharata festivals in multiple villages. There were three places which were famous for the Mahabharata festivals which were extremely popular and would attract huge crowds for the unique feature they offered. People would visit the hundred day Arcot festival just to see the massive Aravan statue erected for the festival; Manamathi, a village of weavers was famous for its 'Nool Eni' a ladder made from cotton where each family in the village would weave a rung of the two hundred feet ladder necessary for a ritual and Utthiramerur, a village with a huge community of potters was famous

for its majestic Duryodhana sculpture necessary for the penultimate ritual. This made each festival unique to the particular village and no two festivals were the same.

[Mani Vaasagan] -In every Mahabharata festivals of twenty days, ten days would be centred on a Koothu performed at night. No one can change this programme and we would have to narrate the story that will be enacted later

[Murugesu Mudaliar Vil Valaippu]- If the storytellers narrate the story of Draupadi's wedding from 2PM in the afternoon to 5.30PM. In the night, the same story would be enacted as Kattai Koothu. The next morning, from 9am to 10.30am, the marriage ritual of Draupadi will be performed ceremoniously. The wedding procession will start from this house and the marriage will be performed in the temple,

[Mani Vaasagan]-Only in the 20 day Mahabharata festival will there be a direct correspondence between the storytelling in the afternoon and the Koothu performed at night.

The Notice- The first sponsors of the special events would be the Shaiva Velalars, or Mudaliars and Vanniars living in the same street. The second event sponsors would be the Naidu's. The third event would be sponsored by the Chettiars. There were five or six families who were in charge, now the Udayars have taken this over. The fourth event will be Panchali Thugil which will be sponsored by the Palla Theru Vanniars. They have been sponsoring this for ages. The fifth event will be sponsored by the Kammalar Street, by the artisans. There are also Gounders and Naidus in this street and together they would sponsor Arjuna's Tapas. The sixth event, Kichaka Vadham will be sponsored by Accountant Street Vanniars. The seventh event will be Krishnan Thoodhu sponsored by the Yadavas. The eighth day with the ritual of Aravan Kalabali and the Koothu of Karna Moksham would be sponsored totally by the Vanniars who live in Mettu Theru. In Mettu Theru, Chettiars also live, but this day's event is only sponsored by the Vanniars. They also have been sponsoring Karna Moksham. The ninth day's Koothu of the 18th Day war would be sponsored by the Adi Dravidars. After the Koothu at night, the next ritual would be Padugalam in the morning. In the evening there will be the fire walk both of which is sponsored from the common funds in the village.

Arcot Aravan was famous, and all the storytellers would say that as the Aravan sculpture at Arcot would be majestic, for Arjuna's Tapas, Manamathi was famous and for the Duryodhana sculpture Utthitamerur was famous for its size and grandeur. Now of course standardisation has set in with people having seen festivals in different villages and villages compete with each other in floral decorations, the colours they use. But in the 1980's it used to be said that Arcot's Aravan sculpture, Manamathi's Tapas Tree and the Duryodhana sculpture for Padugalam were a sight to behold.

[Selvarajan Manamathi Village]- If you remember those times, there used to be 300 or 400 looms in this village. Weaving was our primary occupation and each house would have at least two looms. For the festival each house would give a bundle of yarn [Bondhu]. We would collect this

yarn and the crossbar called 'Annakol' necessary for weaving. Till the festival was over no house would be able to weave without the 'Annakol'. This Annakol will be the rungs of the ladder in the ritual Arjuna's Tapas. Four days after the festival is over we would return the bundle of yarn and the Annakol to each family. Till the festival is over no household would be able to weave. This used to be the unique contribution of the weavers of this village for the festival and our rope ladder- the Manamathi 'Nool Eni' was very famous. Like this we would construct the ladder for the height we want. We would also place the ladder twenty or thirty feet from the tree so that it will be comfortable for the actor playing Arjuna to climb the tree.

The other important detail which emerged was that these festivals were once 'cashless' festivals with the members of the village contributing their labour for the festival. Now with most of the crafts people of these villages having migrated elsewhere, everything has to be outsourced and the cost of conducting a festival can range between 15 Lakhs to a 100 Lakhs of rupees.

Money for the festival is raised from village revenue of the fishing lease in the tanks and sales of produce of the village commons. This would be augmented by individual collections from each family contributing money for the day their street had undertaken to sponsor. This is called 'Thalaikattu' and each family's contribution can range between a thousand to three thousand rupees depending upon the scale of the event being conducted. The entire revenue for conducting this massive festival is raised from within the village itself. There is also a tremendous sense of competition between the streets as to whose event was the grandest in the festival

[Pandurangan]-If you look at the expenses for the festival, the village elders would have to bear the common costs of conducting the festival from the revenue generated by private donations, leasing of the tamarind trees produce and sales of fish from the village lakes. If you calculate the common costs, it will amount to seven to eight lakh of Rupees. Other than this the sponsors of each event from the various Jati's/Streets will also spend. Their expenses can range from a minimum of one and half lakh Rupees to a maximum of three Lakhs of Rupees. On an average, if each street was spending two Lakhs each per event, the costs for just the ten days would work out to twenty Lakh rupees! The village will spend eight Lakhs from the village common fund! The minimum sum total expenses would be 28 Lakhs!

[Nagendran]- The eighteenth Day war is our sponsorship. We have collected seven hundred rupees from each house and collected seventy five thousand rupees for this event for Draupadi Amman, for the decoration of the idols, fireworks for the event, drums and fanfare.

[Saravanan]- Five families cannot take up the sponsorship of an event. If you look at current economics it will take a minimum of one and a half lakhs to sponsor an event. We are only eight families of the Udayar or potter community in this village. But what you say is right- if a potter was given the sponsorship of the Aravan ritual, he would first know how the Aravan and

Duryodhana and Kali idols had to be sculpted and would invest his own labour saving about twenty thousand rupees. If some other community was given this, they would have to spend this money from their own purse. That is why, to save money, sponsorship was given to craftsmen families ages back.

[K V Selvamani Kazhiyur]-Earlier the festivals would not be extravagant and would be celebrated simply. There would not be electric lights, and there would be just a single petrolmax lamp for the theatrical performances. They would have to pump this light every two hours to generate bright light. Now of course there are lights and microphones! That time there would be no mikes and their voices itself would have the quality of mikes!

[Veeran Councillor]-Because of competition between different villages, each one wants to outdo the other. The sponsors for last night's event hired fancy lights from Marakkanam. They spent sixty thousand rupees for hire and transport of the lights! Because of competition between streets is so high, the fireworks were purchased from Pondicherry. Everything was brought from outside and nothing local.

[D Etiyappan] Nobody does anything simply anymore and everthing has become costly. The villages are also more prosperous right now. The population has also increased making more money available.”

Conducting such a huge festival with multiple stakeholders is a tricky proposition and the tension of old fights and past enmities constantly simmer below the surface, flaring up suddenly. The flow of the festival seems to embrace these in its stride and most such incidents subside, maybe to be resumed once the festival was over. The venue of the festival in Kazhiyur was again a narrative of a past conflict. There are two Dharmaraja/Draupadi Amman Temples in Kazhiyur-one an older dilapidated structure and another newer temple which was the venue of the current festival.

[Murugesu Mudaliar Vil Valaippu] - There was a man called Dharmalinga Udayar who owned the land. He had built the temple on this land and was maintaining it. The village people would go to the temple only during the festival, while the day to day maintenance of the temple right through the year was taken care of by Udayar and his family. There were Tamarind trees on this land and Udayar would make money from its produce. This was objected to by some villagers who thought that the temple was built on common land. The court declared that the land belonged to Dharmalinga Udayar and said that the produce of the land belonged to him. But the villagers could attend the festival, and go to the temple and the court ordered a five feet of land around the temple giving people access to the temple.”

The fight over the temple was irreconcilable and was taken to court. The man who owned the land on which he had built the temple was able to establish that he owned the land and had all rights to its produce. The court still had to determine as to who legally owned the bronze statues in the temple and the landowner was asked to hand over the idols to the courts custody till a

judgement could be made. As the idols were to be taken outside the village, the oracle of the village went into a trance and declared that she would not allow the idols to be taken out of the village.

[Kannan Kanakkupillai Street]- There is a person called Varadhu Kutty Mudaliar whose father was the village head at that time. He got the idols from the old Draupadi temple placed them in a Vinayaka temple. The judge passed on order that the idols had to be handed over to the court till the case was settled.

[Murugesu Mudaliar Vil Valaippu] The court officer loaded the idols on a bullock cart and was about to take them away. Two women in the village, rushed, stopped the cart and dragged it back. The court officer removed the axle of the cart, but still the cart moved and reached the Vinayaka temple. The two women placed the idols in the Vinayaka temple and fainted. The court officer reported this incident to the judge and the judge declared that the deities of the village did not want to leave the village and declared that the idols would not be taken out. Because the idols were placed in the Vinayaka temple it was decided to build the new temple there”

The landlord just withdrew from the fight and handed over the idols to the village which are currently installed in the new temple. This gesture of the owner of the land, again restored peace in the village and the court case was withdrawn by both parties amicably. Every day of the festival, one could see on the side-line numerous minor altercations between the various participants. None led to anything serious and the festival was not interrupted. The Pambai drummers and the Koothu actors sing an invocation song to Draupadi, who was reborn in Senji. The Bharatham storytellers also know of this story, but only narrate it if requested. The Pallava connection to this festival and anti-war nature and the history of the festival will be part of a later module.

The Mahabharata festivals would start on a leisurely note with only storytelling sessions in the afternoons. The storytellers would start narrating the Epic from way before the crucial antagonists the Kauravas and Pandavas were born. They start virtually, from the birth of ‘Time’, and of the world as we know it. What they are doing is to present the audience with the ‘context’ of both the Great War and the performance that they are engaged in. The epic is not just listened or seen as theatre but is inscribed both in the landscape and one’s own body and the episodes of the Epic performed as village rituals are important in this respect.

Each of these village rituals performed in these festivals has this function of both transforming the village to whatever location of the episode performed and also of transporting the audience to the times of the event. The rituals are actually markers of time in these villages and the mood of the festival itself changes as the narrative proceeds to its inexorable end

To reiterate the idea, the Mahabharata is, in these villages, not just a narrative of a war fought elsewhere, but is inscribed in the here and now; it becomes a reflection of the battle each member of the audience has to wage within, every day of their lives. The Epic is not performed in its

entirety and reconstituting the whole is the responsibility of each individual of the audience from the fragmented performance presented to them. Each individual would have in their lives seen multiple renditions of the same episode in numerous festivals and would have a cumulative memory of the Epic; this cumulative memory would also include their individual memory of an experience of watching the same episode earlier in their lives. By remembering the Epic, one also remembers oneself, reflects on oneself.

No single character of the Epic is privileged and all of them are seen as heroes in their own right- albeit flawed. The Kattiyakaaran, the Sutradhar, the stage director constantly reminds the audience of this and as the play is being performed would constantly critique the protagonists of the particular episode. This fact, combined with the fact that in the rituals the people don the roles of multiple characters of the Epic gives the audience a polyphonic and a multi-vocal perspective of the Great War.