

Performance Traditions of the Mahabharata in Tamil Nadu

Prof.Prof. Sashikanth Ananthachari,Prof. Rajesh Kumar

Department of Humanities and Social Sciences,institute IIT Madras

Lecture 08

A brief introduction to Koothu as a theatrical form

“The aesthetic experience of a drama is first born in the heart of the poet, flowers as it were in the actor enacting the role, and bears fruit in the spectator. All three in the serene contemplation of the work form in reality a single knowing subject fused together”

One distinctive feature of the ‘Koothu’ form is that the first act of each Koothu begins with the central character of the particular play articulating her or his Dharmasankatam or moral or ethical dilemma directly to the audience. The audiences would have of course heard the same story in the afternoons in the storytelling sessions as a third person narrative; that is as someone else’s story. In Koothu, they would be presented with the same narrative as an emotional first person, lived narrative of the central character of the narrative. Now the reason for a few important episodes of the Epic was being performed thrice, first as a village ritual, second as a narration in the afternoon and third finally it’s enactment as a Koothu becomes clearer. As a ritual, the episode is presented/performed as an abstract idea with its own powers of invocation.

For example, a blazing hut on fire in the centre of the village representing the Lacquer Palace from which the Pandavas escaped might invoke the entire Vanavaasam of the Pandavas and what happened later, to an attentive member of the audience. The elaboration of the same episode as a narrative serves to help the audience to visualise the context. The idea is contextualised by answering questions of who, where, what and why as to what was the context for the Kauravas to attempt to burn their own cousins alive. The episode now becomes more concrete in the minds of the audience. Koothu, by emphasising the emotional experience, presents the same episode as a lived narrative.

In terms of a loose cinematic analogy, the ritual functions as a long shot, the storytelling sessions functions as the mid shot, while the Koothu enactment functions as the close up. This again has to do with one's quality of attention. To the extremely attentive member of the audience, the long shot is enough for them to engage with all the details within the frame; to one with a lesser attention the mid shot serves to draw the eyes to the subject on hand and the close up removes all ambiguity by explicitly showing the subject of the frame.

In the festival, unlike in the imperfect cinematic analogy, each form of performance- as ritual, as storytelling or as theatre, a different perspective is presented to the audience. This structure of the festival is what gives the audience/participant, a polyphonic, immersive experience of the Epic.

The mighty Karna, son of the Sun, I have come. A warrior more powerful than any other, I will knock down in instant entire armies! I am Karna the heroic noble expert warrior. Praised by chariot warriors, horse men and foot soliders alike, surrounded by kings of charitable nature. Giver of all that is asked, Karnan the great earned fame, gained the distinction of being Karnan

On each night of the enactments, the audiences would live through the Dharmasankatams of the principal protagonists of the Great War. Some of the dilemmas of the characters may partially resonate with the Dharmasankatams felt by individual members of the audiences in their own lives.

The storytellers constantly keep reiterating this idea by saying 'Please do not think that Ducchasana, Duryodhana or Kichaka are just some characters from a story. All of us also have shades of these characters within ourselves. Please do not think Kichakan is just a character from a story, Kichakan can be found in all of us! Each of us has to vanquish our inner Kichakan and that is why this story is narrated. If a person listens to the Bharatham completely and internalises and understands the intentions and motivations of each character, and lives their lives accordingly, than such a person will not be swayed by anyone or anything on to a wrong path!

The penultimate day's spectacular performance is the killing of the Duryodhana who is both within and 'outside' of oneself. Here Duryodhana expresses his anguish and dilemma in the penultimate day's Koothu-The Eighteenth day's War, or Pathinettam Por

Every night, the Koothu actors will begin their performance from the Dharmaraja/Draupadi Amman temple. In the temple, they would sing an invocation song to Draupadi asking her to protect them as she had protected the Pandavas in their stay in the forests or their Vanavaasam.

BEGINNING OF EACH NIGHT'S KOOTHU

Mother Panchali, please protect us, your devotees! We believe in you implicitly, the one with a noble heart!

The first ritual of the theatre cycle would be the placement of the bow, the Kindhooram, for the play 'Vil Valaippu' or 'The Bending of the Bow'. This bow would be placed in front of the stage and the actors would walk from the temple to circle around the space of the bow. The Samayam, Ganachari, Kumaravargam, the five custodians of the Dharmaraja/Draupadi Amman temple will follow the actors carrying the five magical weapons of Draupadi, the Veera Sattai, Veera Gandham, Pandara Petti, Kondham and Kodi Seelai. These will be placed in the foreground on one pillar of the stage where the bow that Arjuna bends, the Kindhooram is placed. This bow, which will remain till the end of the festival along with Draupadi's weapons become two framing structures for the audiences to engage with the theatrical performances. In some villages, an idol of Pottu Raja, or the first guardian deity of the Dharmaraja/Draupadi Amman temples would be placed alongside the Kindhooram becoming the third framing structure for the audiences to engage with the performances

Please cast your glance at us at this moment and Mother, please protect us!

The temple and the space designated for the performance is separated by a middle ground which is the space designated for the Epic to be performed as village rituals. The actors, while singing the invocation song would circle around the spaces where the ritual would be performed along with the Samayam, Ganachari, and the Kumaravargam. Mother Panchali, please protect us, your devotees! We believe in you implicitly, the one with a noble heart!

Each day of the festival, the Epic would be performed as one more village ritual and the path of the actors from the temple to the performing space would be longer, as they would circle around each new ritual space. This act of the actors, again underscores the importance of the village

rituals. The village rituals give the Epic its 'dual' quality- it is both the Sanskrit Epic while also being an invocation of the collective memory of the village itself. The actors will begin applying their make up once the invocation song is over and the weapons of Draupadi are placed next to the bow, the Kindhooram. Invocation songs to the various deities for the performance are being sung on stage

What I learned from my father was that the actor playing Arjuna always has to be painted in a particular shade of green of the Marudhu Tree. Now because the correct powders to mix the colours are not easily available, they just use green. There is a process to get this shade of green where you have to mix a few shades to get this particular shade of green. For villainic characters like Ducchasanana, we will use red; Duryodhana will be painted a lighter shade of red. For Dharmaraja we will use a light shade of rose. For Draupadi when in disguise we will use a mixture of yellow. For others we will use a mixture of the colour of the Sendhooram flower and other shades. So there will be slight differences in how the actors are painted in the basic make up. The actual differences can be seen only in the way each character is painted

There is a specific colour coding for each character according to the Rasa they represent. According to Natyashastra the eight colours that signify each emotion are; Green which represents beauty or Shringara or the erotic, White, which represents the comic or Hasya or laughter, Black which represents Bhayanaka, or the frightful. Blue which represents Bibhatsa or the sense of disgust, and yellow which represents Adbhuta or the sense of wonder. Later commentators have included a ninth Rasa- Shantha or peace which the colour white represents.

The colours the actors are painted in would also depend on the context in the narrative. For example when Bhima is in disguise in Ekachakra or Munnoormangalam, he would be painted in a light shade of pink. When he finally fights and kills Duryodhana, he would be painted black to emphasise the ferociousness of his presence.

The Koothu would begin first with invocation songs to say that we are about to begin our performance.

Then when the make up is finished we will bring out the screen and the actors would sing invocation songs to various deities behind the screen. Once they would begin with an invocation song to Vinayaka, second to the deity of the arts, Saraswathi. The third song will be to the deity of war, Muruga. Now only these three songs are sung.

Before, we used to sing more songs and an invocation to Vishnu would be sung before Murugan which would be the fourth song. An invocation to the guardian deity of the village would be the fifth. Only after singing these five songs will the Koothu begin. At the beginning of the performance, we would sing invocation songs to Ganapathy, Murugan and Saraswathi as we start rolling the drums. Once there used to be five or even six songs sung

After the invocation song to Draupadi is over and the actors are applying their make up, invocation songs to six deities were once sung. Now, because of time constraints only three songs are sung with a fourth to the guardian deity of the village where the festival is being performed. The singing of the invocation song to the guardian deity of the particular village, like the village rituals, gives centrality to the village which was the sponsor of the festival. Now the festival becomes the Mahabharata festival of that particular village, which in this case was Kazhiyur.

The first actor who enters the stage would be the Kattiyakaaran or the Sutradhar who would give the audience the title of the Koothu, the name of the theatre group performing, the name of the writer who had written the particular Koothu, with a brief introduction to the contents of the play. Like all artists in this tradition whether it is the storyteller or the writer of the text itself, the Kattiyakaaran would start with a request to the audience to forgive the actors for any mistakes in their performance owing up to the mistakes as coming from their own ignorance of the original text.

Tonight we are going to present to you the play 'Nalayini Charithiram' Nalayini Charithiram! Nalayini Charithiram! We humbly request to forgive all the mistakes we make just as you would forgive your own children when they are being naughty

This is an important statement that Villiputthuraar makes in his invocation of the Mahabharata as does the Kattiyakaaran at the beginning of each performance. The onus is again on the audience to use their sense of discrimination and see how the representation that they were watching or hearing deviated from the original text.

No one among the performers currently, knew exactly as to who wrote the text of the Koothu plays, but in Kanchipuram and Thiruvannamalai, the writing is attributed in oral traditions to a

writer called Konamalai Ramaswamy. In the texts of the Koothu published in early twentieth century, one name listed as the author of the play is a person called Ammaniammaal.

From what we have heard, this lady Ammaniammaal, had purchased the palm leaf scrolls because she had got these scrolls printed and published by Rathnavel and Sons, her name was listed as the author. So now we know of the play called 'Ammaniammal Kuravanji', her name listed as the author. Actually the Koothu's have been written by various authors and if you look at old palm leaf scrolls you will find the names of the individual authors. Nobody knows as to who this lady was and why she had purchased and printed these scrolls. Some research is needed here! But if you look at the Koothu 'Kuravanji' two versions are being performed currently, there is 'Ammaniammal Kuravanji' which we do not know who wrote, in this Koothu Draupadi carries Sahadeva as her child on her hips! In the version we perform of the author Konamalai Ramaswamy, Draupadi carries Krishna as a child. If you want to know the times that the author Konamalai Ramaswamy belonged to, he was a contemporary of my grandfather. Because he had acted as Hiranyan in a Koothu with my grandfather! That is what I gathered from my father.

But the general consensus seems to be that Ammaniammal might have been the person who had collected all the palm leaf scrolls of the Koothu texts available and had them printed as books. Other writers have also written some of the Koothu's being performed currently and the Kattiyakaaran would announce the name of the author before each night's performance

We quote Villibharatham verse in Koothu when Bhishma describes the strengths of both armies to warn Duryodhana. Villibharatham says "That Arjuna could destroy in a second the entire Universe including the seven heavens" That Arjuna if he wanted to could destroy the entire world in the blinking of an eye! Bhishma asks whether Duryodhana still wanted war, but Duryodhana is not deterred. A lot of Koothu writers have written inspired by these verses!

The Koothu texts cannot be accurately dated without more research and all that can be said listening to the language is that that it might be three hundred to four hundred years old. Later writers also have worked on these core texts making identifying the original author, at best, an act of speculation.

The chap books or Koothu books of the text, published in the early twentieth century, are usually sixty to seventy pages long and are much more elaborate than the Koothu's being performed

currently. There may be three reasons for this abridgement. To perform the entire text would entail about twelve hours of performance, but currently, due to the scheduling of the festival events the Koothu enactments rarely go beyond eight hours.

Another reason for the abridgement can be that the number of actors necessary for performing the entire text would be at least sixteen, which contemporary Koothu groups cannot afford. This would include four instrumentalists and at least two chorus singers. There also would be four actors who would exclusively play the feminine roles in the performances. There would also be about four junior interns who while being trained will also be given small parts to enact. Effectively each Koothu group would only have a core group of four to five seasoned actors. In this core group, there would be actors, famous for their enactment of a particular character and the Koothu writers would have to constantly rewrite the original Koothu to suit the strengths of their group. So the same Koothu enacted by two different groups will have a difference in texture. We have footage of the crucial Koothu 'Pagadai Thugil' performed by two different groups. In one group's rendering the actors playing Ducchasana, Duryodhana and Draupadi were the seasoned actors in their group and in this play the emphasis was on the conflict between Duryodhana and Ducchasana with Draupadi. In the Renukambal Kattaikoothu Mandram's rendition of the same Koothu which we shot for the project, the actors playing Shakuni and Dharmaraja were given more importance. The same narrative was represented as the conflict between Adharma which Shakuni represented and Dharma which Dharmaraja represented

Shakuni says "Oh! mother Panchali, I trust you, the noble born You are the Goddess of this earth Panchali mother, we are conducting this drama as our ancestors did, for the sake of our food, livelihood, we may call you disrespectfully, abusive words we are going to use. You have to pardon us and bless us mother! vDuryodhana says "Deceitful Draupadi laughed at me, O Uncle! That arrogant bitch shamed me, O Sakuni Uncle. Shakuni continues his invocation"O Mother who have been incarnated to destroy the royal dynasties! We worship you!"

Any viewer who has watched multiple renderings of the same Koothu will consequently have a highly nuanced understanding of the same narrative. This is because the flavour and emotional register of each groups rendering of the same Koothu could be vastly different. Now with the increase of the Mahabharata festivals annually, an actor with a reasonable proficiency in his craft, would break away from his parent group to start a Koothu troupe of his own. So each established troupe constantly has to improvise with resources on hand or sometimes borrow actors from another group. This could be another cause for the abridgement of the performances due to the lack of seasoned actors.

Each Koothu as per the printed chap books or Koothu texts is not divided into ‘Acts’, rather each Koothu seems to have seven or eight movements. These movements are dependant on the complexity of the narrative being presented. Each movement usually starts with the screen entry of the main character of the movement.

[Duryodhana’s stage entry song] Duryodhana says “Look at the way Duryodhanan is entering with his ninety nine brothers and Uncle Shakuni to the court! With royal fanfare and trumpets blaring announcing his entry! I Duryodhana am on the way to my court!”

Kattiyakaaran announcing Duryodhana’s entry “What you are watching now is the King of Kings, the great Duryodhana entering his court! Watch the way Duryodhana Maharaja enters the assembly!

If Duryodhana Maharaja is coming, he would announce from behind the screen “The famous King who rules Hastinapura and the scion of the Lunar Dynasty, Maharaja Dhritarashtra who was the father of hundred sons, look at the way, I Duryodhana the eldest of his sons am entering the stage!” This will be from behind the screen!

Before the actor enters the stage there will be screen held and the audience cannot see the actor. The actor will run behind the screen four or five times announcing himself in the third person! If it is Ducchāsana entering he will sing the actor playing the character will sing ‘Ducchāsana Maharaja is going to enter’ He will announce himself in the third person! It is like this- it is I who have donned the role of Ducchāsana and have spent three hours applying my make up! But when I enter I will sing “from behind the screen “Ducchāsana Maharaja will be coming! Only when the screen is removed I will sing”Here I am Ducchāsana Maharaja come before you!”

When he sings the Viruttham or verse, he says “look at me entering!” When the screen is removed and the actor has to announce himself he will say “Here I am, the son of Surya, the powerful Karna Rajan who has come before you!” This is an announcement that the actor has transformed himself into the character! Now the actor is not Rajagopal! This process of transformation starts from applying make up and when the actor sings the verse from behind the screen he is further transformed and when the screen is removed, he becomes one hundred percent the character he is portraying! This is why the first announcement is in third person!

An actor 'performing' Duryodhana on stage will render him as to what the tradition considers the essence of Duryodhana the sense of anger, envy and impotent rage. Every movement of the actor, every dialogue spoken, would accentuate this swabhav or basic disposition to the world of the role that actor has chosen to represent. In that sense, there would not be any nuances in this rendering of Duryodhana as he is not seen as character in the classical notion of the word. He is rather seen as an archetype of one possible engagement with the world.

The nuances are never within the role, but always rest in the context where the archetype is placed in; it is here that the role of counter-selves, the mirror selves and the shadow selves of the role become important for the audience to perceive the nuances. Every character in the Mahabharata would have a 'double' or a counter self in a specific context. In Tamil traditions, Krishna is called 'Kannan' with a hard consonant 'N', while Karna is called 'Kannan' with a soft consonant 'n'. This is to highlight the idea that Karna, as the first born son of Kunti should have been to the Pandavas what Krishna actually was- the charioteer helping them navigate their way through life. Karna's tragedy was that he did not really know who he was resulting in him becoming a warrior in the enemy camp and dying a meaningless death, at the hands of his own younger brother Arjuna.

Each part is consequently exaggerated to foreground the nature of its essence and exaggeration here is how abstraction is achieved. Exaggeration, finally, is a form of distancing allowing the audience to grapple with the essence that is being presented before them. It is a way for them to connect to the same latent, inarticulate emotion present within themselves presented in its over stated, exaggerated, almost grotesque form. The actor, consequently, has to remove any personal mannerism, or any unnecessary gesture which might dilute the essence of what he was representing. As Duryodhana, the actor is rage personified, and every movement and every word he utters on stage should be consistent with this notion of unbridled rage.

That whore Draupadi laughed at my fall! O Shakuni Uncle! She also clapped her hands at my humiliation!

The actor, behind the screen, mentally prepares himself by focusing his mind on the principal emotion of the character he is representing. This is to avoid any digression which would divert the audience's attention from the essence of what he was representing. The artist in this tradition, be it the poet, the actor or the sculptor, never reproduces or represents reality; rather he 'invokes' a latent memory. This invocation of the idea of a personal, latent memory has the potential of

invoking a more primeval memory of what 'being-in-the-world' actually means. The aesthetic experience, which while addressing one's own experience of the world, also becomes, when the sense of self 'melts', a transcendent experience, blurring the demarcation between the self and the world.

Abhinavagupta says;

Once the screen is removed, the actor will sing what we call the 'Darbar' or Assembly song! There is also a small song for the removal of the screen. I will sing a small screen removal song for you

[Dharmaraja screen entry] Kattiyakaaran announcing Dharmaraja "Please see the King of Kings, Dharmaraja, surrounded by his brothers and his armies entering the assembly!" [Dharmaraja's screen song] Dharmaraja sings "I who abide by Dharma and wearing sandalwood garland am coming through the streets" Actors performing 'Tirkey' or 'Pirouttes'

Two young actors will hold a screen behind which the actor can be seen partially donning his head dress.

As he is completing this he would sing an invocation to the deity of his choice. After this he and the chorus would announce the character. Once this is done the actor will perform a series of pirouette's called 'Tirkey' to impel himself into the character that he is portraying. The actor, after transforming himself into the character would simply remove the screen and announce himself to the audience. [Dharmaraja's Darbar song] "Here I have come! The King of Kings, The crown jewel called Dharmaraja have come before you!

All that's present in Indian theatre can also be seen in Koothu. If you see the Assamese Ankia Bhaona or Natya the same structure can be seen here. There is place to don your make up, the musicians are seated before this space, the screen is before the musicians, and the performance space is in front of the screen. The audience would be seated before the performing space. The screen is not between the audience and the performers! The screen only separates the actor from the character he is portraying! This is the structure! This structure was there in theatre halls constructed as per the Natyashastra and this structure can be seen in its subtle form here!

The screen in Indian theatre traditions, both in its Sanskrit and Vernacular forms is never between the actors and the audience as is normal in contemporary proscenium theatre. The screen in these traditions is always between the non-performing self of the actor and his performing self.

The actor stands behind the screen and impels himself into a trance-like state where he has to de-individuate himself as a person to transform himself into the character that he is representing. Only when this process is complete, the screen is removed and the actor, steps before the audience to announce as to who he is- "I am Duryodhana, the King of the Kauravas!" The exaggerated performance styles of these traditions are but a form of 'distanciation'.

The Kattiyakaran and the Koothu text would announce the entry of a character by saying, for example 'Duchasana Maharaja Goluvukku Varum Vidham Kaanga' that is watch the way Duchasana Maharaja enters the court. [Duryodhana's Darbar song]

Once everyone has assembled in court Duryodhana would sing "Because we gave the five Pandavas half the kingdom, they have become powerful and arrogant! If we let them perform the Rajasuya Yagam, they might even rule our own kingdom! Elder brother Karna Maharaja! Uncle, the King of Gandhara! Younger brother Duchasana! Out of pity we gave the Pandavas some land but they have accumulated more wealth than us! If we just sit and watch, they might rule the entire World! Duryodhana after singing the verse called 'Viruttham' would speak this dialogue.

After singing the song, the actor would repeat the content in 'Vasanam' or prose dialogue in contemporary Tamil that 'Viruttham' is where we would recite a verse in parts, after reciting half the verse the music will begin and after the second verse again music will join in. We call it 'Virutthapa'. This verse is what is called 'Viruttham'. It will consist of one or two paragraphs. Usually each verse will have eight lines. There are also sixteen line verses which only major characters like Karna or Arjuna would recite and this will come both as verse and song. For example, I will sing Karnan's 'Virutthapa' "

"The Pandavas and Duryodhana have fought for sixteen days with multiple weapons in this Bharatha War. When he sings 'Pala Pala' or multiple, the music will join in. In 'Viruttham' only the harmonium will accompany the actor. Like this" With multiple weapons, they fought! A lot of

great kings were killed so that wolves and jackals could roam merrily feasting on their blood in the battlefield!

Other than the Viruttham and Tharu, there are other forms of songs specific to Koothu. One of which is called the 'Surul Paattu' where the words roll off one another

What is called 'Surul Paattu' is like this "Enough, enough Bhishma! To call this ignorant fellow, this cowherd, this idiot, this fat fellow, a capable man, this cowherd, this idiot, this fat fellow, a capable man, this devious tricky fellow, this idiot who does hostile acts, this cowherd, this idiot, this fat fellow, a capable man the words you said aren't appropriate Enough, enough Bhishma. Are you out of your mind? Ignoring the victorious kings. Turning the refined into devil Is he touched by the seven and half Saturn? Has Dharman lost his honour? Grandfather! If it was someone else, I would have cut off the tongue. Grandfather! Are these your arrogance playing out? Let us see, him getting the honours Aio,

Sishupalan abusing Bhishma and Krishna "Are you out of your mind? Ignoring the victorious kings, turning the refined into devil! Is he touched by the seven and half Saturn? Has Dharman lost his honour? Grandfather! If it was someone else, I would have cut off the tongue. Aio, to the one who ate stolen ghee and milk from the cowherd homes! The puja that is being offered to this cowherd Krishnan Enough, enough, Bhishma!

This is sung by Sishupalan when Krishna is given the first honours at Dharmaraja's Rajasuya Yaagam. So an angry Sishupalan abuses Bhishma, Krishna and Dharumar. This type of song is like 'Rap' music. Where the 'Surul' will come in is inbetween when we sing' some lines of the song differently. So first we will sing and at a juncture we will get into 'Surul'. The writers when they give us the text would indicate which lines have to be sung in the 'Surul' form.

There is another form of singing popular in Koothu and this called 'Sambhashanai'. In this the actors would have a dialogue in song with one actor posing a question in song to which the other actor will reply in the same tune. This is called 'Samavadham' Arjuna sings to Krishna "You Illusionist is this also your game? How can you deny me your sister's hand in marriage? Krishna replies" "Why this desire for an unattainable fruit?" Arjuna "If our desire is not fulfilled, harm might happen and if harm might happen, my heart will feel the pain" This Samavadham. Arjuna

has this dialogue with Krishna when he is denied Subhadra's hand in marriage. It is only two people singing with no chorus.

The Koothu's start around ten PM but the audiences would know that the real performance would only begin after one AM when their children are fast asleep. So they come prepared for the performance with mats to spread and to catch up on their sleep. When the real performance is set to begin, an actor from the stage would run in to the crowd waking them up announcing that the real performance was about to begin. Till one AM, early in the morning, the Kattiyakaaran, called the buffoon in contemporary language will keep entertaining the children present with humorous skits. The text of this cannot be found in any Koothu texts and are either written by the writers of individual Koothu groups or improvised by the actors themselves.

What is a play? It is like lovely golden statue! A poet discovered this statue and wanted to write a poem on that! A painter who saw the same statue wanted to paint the form of the sculpture. A priest who saw the same sculpture wondered as to what would be the correct form of worship to it. A thief who saw the same sculpture saw only the gold and calculated how much money he could make out of it!

The art of drama is also like that sculpture! Some people will enjoy the dancing! [Speaking to a talkative woman in the audience-"I will give you hundred rupees in the morning! Now keep silent!"]! The art of drama is also like this! Some people will like the dancing, some the singing, admire the costumes, some people will admire the beauty, some people will enjoy the vulgarity, some will enjoy the humour! Our art is also like that catering to all categories of audiences! So sit back and watch!

Murugan, the Kattiyakaaran for one of the Koothus that we had shot began his performance with a definition of the Koothu which is actually the opening Sutra from the Natyashastra. Bharata, the writer of the first play based on the Natyashastra, composed by Brahma wrote his play on the 'Samudra Manthan' or 'The Churning of the Ocean' . This churning of the ocean had to be a joint exercise where the Devas and their counterparts the Danavas had to work in tandem to obtain the elixir of immortality. Once the elixir emerged, the Danavas were denied their share of their joint venture. Bharata, whose name literally means the 'actor', invited all the Devas and Danavas for the opening performance. The Daityas and Danavas were angry at their depiction in the drama and the Daityas who were not invited created havoc resulting in the play being stopped. Brahma, who was invoked to settle this dispute, wrote the first Sutra of the Natyashastra

which stresses on the notion of inclusivity. That everyone watching the performance should get something from the performance itself. The first definition of theatre that Brahma provides is

The story behind, or the reason why the Natyashastra was first formulated, again ‘mirrors’ why the

Mahabharata was written in the first place.

Bharata the compiler of the Natyashastra and the first director of the drama in its new avatar says why the Natyashastra was formulated. He says that the Devas with their King Indra felt concerned at the disappearance of values in the world. They requested Brahma to create a form of amusement ‘which was both audible and visible’ which will divert people from their misguided ways towards a virtuous life. This form they said should be accessible to all irrespective of their gender or Varnas. Brahma acceding to the request from the Devas went into Dhyana to write the Natyaveda. The metre, the music, the grammar of acting or the enactment and finally the emotions were derived from the four Vedas and the Natyaveda was composed.

Traditionally in Indian theatre the Sutradhar, the Kattiyakaaran or the stage director functions as the voice of the author. He also assumes another role of the ‘outsider’ to the play being enacted and functions as an intermediary between the audience and the play, contextualizing the events on the stage for the benefit of the audience. In that sense, he provides the perspective from which the audience could or should engage with the play. He is literally the visible, tangible ‘fourth wall’ of contemporary proscenium theatre; The sutradhar, the Kattiyakaran or the stage manager addresses both the characters on stage and the audience, thus deliberately breaking this idea of transparency. So the audience cannot passively consume what is being presented to them, but have to willy-nilly reflect and reprocess what is on display before them [Shakuni’s death rites being performed in a mock funeral ceremony on stage where everybody joins in fun][Oppari or dirge songs are sung mocking/mourning Shakuni’s death or the death of Adharma]

The first Koothu enacted at Kazhiyur was the play ‘Vil Valaippu’ or ‘The Bending of the Bow’.

The Koothu begins with Drupada, the father of Draupadi’s Dharmasankatam or dilemma. I have fathered Draupadi to marry the handsome Arjuna! Brave Drona will be killed anyway Ministers, by my son Drishtadyumnan. But, if the handsome Vijayan does not come, my vow to get him married to Panchali. O my Ministers! Guru Drona will be killed by my son! Minister says “Dhritadyumnan will kill him!”

People say that the one intended to marry my daughter has perished in the Lacquer Palace Is he dead or is he alive? Minister says “He definitely is not dead” “People say that the one intended to marry my daughter has perished in the Lacquer Palace. Is he dead or is he alive? Drupada “If the person I intend to give my daughters hand in marriage does not come, I am worried that the vow I made would fail!

Drupada, due to a long standing feud with his one time best friend Dronacharya had taken a vow that he will father a son to kill Dronacharya and father a daughter who will marry Arjuna. Everyone in the land thinks that Arjuna and the Pandavas were burnt to death in the Lacquer Palace. Draupadi is also adamant that she will only marry Arjuna and if he was not alive, that she would rather immolate herself.