

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 09

Vil Valaippu, or The bending of the bow

Dhritarashtra says

“When I heard that the wondrous bow had been drawn and the target had been hit and dropped to the ground by Arjuna, and Draupadi had been taken as all the kings looked on then, Sanjaya, I lost hope of victory”

The first Koothu or play performed at Kazhiyur was the Koothu called ‘Vil Valaippu’ or ‘The Bending of the Bow’. In this play, Arjuna, in disguise as a poor Brahmin, bends the unbendable magical bow called ‘Kindhooram’ and wins Draupadi’s hand in marriage at her Swayamvaram.

For this Swayamvaram, or marriage ceremony all the kings of the fifty six countries of the land had been invited and Draupadi could choose any of the fifty six kings, but she chooses Arjuna as her husband. The audience have heard the story in the afternoon narrated by the storytellers and would be very familiar with the narrative. But still the play begins with a recapitulation of the context of the Koothu. This is significantly provided by Drupada, the father of Draupadi

Drupada says “Pandava’s are children of the divinities! They are also blessed by the divine Krishna, so they could not have died and must be certainly alive! Kattiyakaaran says”Yes they must be alive!” The Kaurava King Duryodhanan built a palace in Varanasi on the banks of river of Kashi, built this palace with Lacquer and other combustible materials that will catch fire quickly!

In this Lacquer Palace, on a dark, moonless night of Amavasya, the five Pandavas and their mother Kunti were made to stay inside and locked up inside. At midnight the palace was set fire to, and the Pandavas are said to have perished in the fire! Kattiyakaaran says “Do not be sad!” The minister says “The Pandavas did not die!” Drupada says “Could the handsome man who is destined to marry my dear daughter have died?” Kattiyakaaran says “Will he come or is he dead?” Drupada says “If by chance could he have died in the Lacquer palace built by Duryodhana?” Minister says “He definitely is not dead!” Drupada cries “That is the reason that I am saddened and worried!”

Drupada as a boy had been sent to the Ashram of Rishi Agnihotri to learn warfare courtcraft and the sixty four arts necessary for any young prince. Drona was his fellow student and surprisingly the aristocrat Drupada, and the poor Brahmin boy, Drona become the best of friends. While Drona was the best student in the Ashram, Drupada had great trouble learning. Drona to help out his best friend Drupada conducts private tuition classes for Drupada so that he could catch up with the rest of the class. Once the period of learning is over, Drupada reluctantly parts ways with his best friend Drona, to assume kingship after his father. Before he goes, in an emotional moment, he declares that he would give half his kingdom to his friend Drona.

Years pass and Drona who has hit on bad times, goes to meet his childhood friend Drupada just to ask for assistance to feed his new born child. Drupada thinks that Drona had come to claim half the kingdom and insults Drona in public. This starts the feud between Drona and Drupada which has far reaching consequences.

Drupada says “I have given birth to Drishtadyumnan to kill the teacher Drona! Kattiyakaaran repeats”To Kill the teacher Drona I have given birth to my son Dhrishtadyumnan!” Drupada says “To marry the handsome Arjuna, I obtained my daughter Panchali!” Drupada says “The teacher Drona will be killed anyway by my son Dhrishtadyumnan!” Kattiyakaaran repeats “The teacher Drona will be killed anyway by my son Dhrishtadyumnan!” Drupada Laments “When will I see the brave Vijayan, coming for my daughter Panchali’s hand?”

What is significant here is that the audience have already listened to this story as a third person narrative in the afternoon. In the night, in koothu, they see it enacted as a first person narrative. Though all the dialogues in Koothu are addressed by the main actor to his fellow actors on stage in actual practice, the main actor directly addresses the audience.

Koothu, in its performance, presents the already known tale as the emotional lived experience of the character addressing the audience. This constant shift from the third person to the first person both in the storytelling and in the enactments which follow in the night gives the audience multiple perspectives to engage with in the same narrative. While in the storytelling sessions, the audience would just be listening to someone else's story, in the Koothu enactments which follow, they would see and hear the same narrative as an hyper emotional first person narrative of the main character. This enactment of the same narrative as ritual, its narration as a story and enactment as an hyper emotional Koothu gives the audience a multi vocal, polyphonic experience of the Epic

Drupada says "Ministers! My son Drishtadyumna will somehow kill the teacher Drona" Minister says "Dhrishtadyumna will kill Drona!" Drupada says "But, people say that handsome Vijayan who is to marry my daughter died in the burning Lacquer Palace!" "Minister says "Yes that is true! Drupada laments"Is he dead? Or is he still alive?" Ministers say "They are alive!" Drupada says "If Arjuna does not come to get married to Panchali, my vow will fail, and that is what worries me!"

The news of the Pandavas death with their mother Kunti, spreads like wildfire. while some people think that the Pandavas might have escaped and are still alive, no one really has seen the Pandavas after the burning of the Lacquer palace

Drupada, who had been humiliated by Drona had taken a vow that he will beget a son Dhrishtadyumna to kill Drona and he will beget a daughter, Draupadi to marry Arjuna. He is in a dilemma now as he has to arrange his daughter's marriage and Draupadi is adamant that she will only marry Arjuna and if Arjuna was dead she would rather go back to the fire from which she was born. In the Villibharatham narrative, the palace astrologer reads the Pandavas horoscope and declares that they are blessed with a long life and there is no way that they could be dead

In Koothu, again the astrologer is called by Drupada and he says that the Pandavas can never be killed as they have Krishna as their protection. He also says that Veda Vyasa will come shortly and clear all of Drupada's doubts

Drupada says “Venerable sage! Please listen to me, whether due to your blessings, or due to the Tapas of my daughter Panchali, if the Pandavas are alive then the Panchali’s vows will be completed successfully! Vyasa asks Drupada to send his soldiers to a kingdom near the Himalayas which has a magic bow.

In the Bharatham session this bow is called the Kindhuras and Vyasa says that nobody other than Arjuna can bend this bow. Vyasa asks Drupada to arrange for Draupadi’s Swayamvaram and send invitations to all the Kings of the fifty six countries confident in the fact that only Arjuna could bend the bow and win Draupadi’s hand in marriage. This is another significant intervention of Vyasa highlighted in the Koothu enactments

In Koothu, Drupada sends his warriors to procure the magic bow from the kingdom near the Himalayas and he also sends invitations to all the fifty six kings to attend the Swayamvaram. An invitation is not sent to Munnootrumangalam as Drupada did not know that the Pandavas were living there. And Munnootrumangalam or Ekachakra was actually a Brahmin village, where no Shatriya would be living

Vyasa says “O Panchala King! As long as Pandavas have the blessings of Vishnu who measured the three worlds with one step, that Gopalakrishna they will have no dangers! Wherever they are they will live happily! They will definitely come to garland your daughter! You do not have to shed tears for them!” Drupada says “Everybody I ask tell me the same thing! As you are the one who composed the great Epic which is known as the fifth Veda” Vyasa says “Yes” Drupada asks “How are you going to assure me that the Pandavas are alive or dead? Where are they now and how can I meet them?” Vyasa says “I will explain that!”

Vyasa says “At the border, there is a bow that belonged to Manu, Mandhata that is kept at the hills, where wrestlers thrive. No one other than the heroic Pandavas will be able to bend the bow! Bring that bow and conduct the Swayamvaram! King Panchala, in the foothills of Himalayas, there is a sacred bow belonging to the reign of the ancestors Manu and Mandhata, bring that sacred bow and conduct a large Swayamvaram in the Panchala kingdom. For this Swayamvaram all the kings of the land will come and none of them can bend this bow! Whoever bends this bow would definitely be Arjuna, and you can arrange your daughter’s marriage to him!”

In the storytelling session, the wording of the Draupadi's wedding invitation is drawn attention to. The Villibharatham verse can be read in two ways- either that Draupadi will garland the man she chooses to be her husband, or that Draupadi would garland the man already chosen by her as her husband

For the daughter to choose on her own, an appropriate partner in the Swayamvaram invitations were sent to kings who wear fragrant garland filled with flowers that attract humming bees. On the day the lady with deerlike eyes was to choose her groom, battalions of princes swarmed the place like the bees that try to hover around the flowers of choice for honey.

My daughter has thought of someone in her heart, she will garland only him. That is one meaning. I had this daughter with one person in mind, my daughter will garland only him, my daughter's Swayamvaram, all of you come. That letter was drafted with two meanings.

Draupadi also tells her friends that she will rather go back into the fire from which she was born rather than garland any other King. Drupada also reassures her saying that the great Vyasa, who knew the past the present and the future, had said that Arjuna would definitely come

Draupadi laments "What can I say my friends about my fate? My dear friends! Chorus sings" What can I say about my fate? Dear friends!" Draupadi says "When will I see that beautiful Vijayan with my own eyes? My friends!" Chorus sings "When will I see that beautiful Vijayan with my own eyes? My friends!" Draupadi laments "Alas! Dear friend!" Drupada reassures her "Daughter! The words that Vyasa himself said will not fail! That Partibhan who is praised by the entire world, will definitely come!" Chorus "That Partibhan who is praised by the entire world, will definitely come!" Drupada says "Daughter! The words that Vyasa himself said will not fail!"

The invitation to Draupadi's reached all the countries but it did not go where it should have importantly reached. In koothu, the Pandavas come to know of Draupadi's Swayamvaram from the Brahmins from Munnootrumangalam who were traveling to Panchala kingdom

In Villibharatham, Krishna comes in disguise as an old man and informs the Pandavas about the Swayamvaram and asks them to attend it. Vyasa, whose other name is also Krishna, functions in the Epic as a double of Krishna, by counselling the Pandavas. Each crucial movement forward in

the Epic is inaugurated by either one of the Krishnas. When they heard the news of Swayamvara through the old Brahmin, the five with their mother along with the Brahmins of the beautiful town took the tough forest path, travelling in the chariot of their mind

Krishna himself appeared in disguise as an aged Brahmin. Arjuna went and bowed down to him. "Respected sir, where are you coming from?" The aged Brahmin said "I am coming back from pilgrimage. There is a country called Panchala. There is a girl called Draupadi there, and it is her Swayamvaram tomorrow" he said. Arjuna asked "Swami, have you seen that girl?" The old man said "Yes, I have seen her" Arjuna asked "Is she such a great beauty?" The old man said "She is definitely a great beauty and even the thousand tongued Adishesha cannot describe her beauty".

Arjuna went straight to mother Kunti and said "Mother! It seems tomorrow is the Swayamvaram of Panchali" Kunti said "The work for which we had come here is completed. We should not overstay our welcome here. You have to compete in the Swayamvaram. Let's go!" On hearing Kunti, they left by the night and walked all the way.

Arjuna leaves to Panchala with his mother and brothers to win the hand of Draupadi in marriage. Arjuna and the Pandavas are still in disguise as Brahmins, as they do not as yet want people to know that they are alive. Some Brahmins from the village Munootrumangalam or Ekachakra also accompany them on this journey. They travel through the night and in Villibharatham there is a beautiful passage where the moon watches over their journey

Arjuna says "Let us feast on the sight of Draupadi's wedding scene in the famous Panchala Kingdom"

Chorus "Let us feast on the sight of Draupadi's wedding scene in the famous Panchala Kingdom" Arjuna says "Let us feast on the sight of Draupadi's wedding scene in the famous Panchala Kingdom"

Chorus says "Let us watch the spectacle the sight of kings trying to bend the bow. Let us see who Draupadi garlands as her husband!" Arjuna says "Let's go without getting noticed by the bearer of poisonous snake flag, Duryodhana! Come come elder brothers, younger brothers. Let us go to Panchala kingdom!"

As the Pandavas travelled at night, they noticed a fence placed around the Ganga. Dharmaraja said that the river is common property and said that they should destroy the fence and carry on. They destroy the fence and go. The fence was put up by a Gandharvan called Angurabharanan also known as Chitrarathan. In the Bharatham sessions the Gandarva, Chitrarathan or Angurabharanan is said to have a thousand wives while the Koothu says that he had Sixty thousand wives.

Both in the storytelling and the Koothu he is depicted as a person who was a slave of his own desires. Arjuna's journey which begins here, in a sense mirrors Bhima's journey. Bhima, to understand the nature of power, had to kill the powerful demons of the outside who had abused their strength to become despots. While Arjuna on his journey towards self-realisation, has to confront this notion of desire; this journey of Arjuna to conquer desire culminates in his Tapas towards Shiva, where he finally manages to overcome this notion called desire.

Kattiyakaran announces the entry of King Angurabharanan or Chitrangada. King Angurabharanan performs 'Tirukki' or pirouettes announcing his entry. Kattiyakaran while mocking the king pretends to praise King Chitrangada. Angurabharanan gets angry and whips him. Angurabharanan says "Hey deer, remember me in your heart! The god of love is shooting arrows at me!" Deer, honey, deer, honey Hey deer, my heart has been struck with the arrows of god of love!

Angurabharana says "Hey, I am dying for you, pious, virtuous wife!" Chorus "Hey, I am dying for you, pious, virtuous wife!" Angurabharanan compels his reluctant wives to disrobe and join him to play in the river. Angurabharanan, in some fashion is a shadow self of Arjuna whom he has to confront.

The Gandharvan had a thousand wives. As he wanted to sport with his wives in private, he had erected a fence around the river. When he sees someone approaching, he shoots an arrow against the intruders in anger

Arjuna says "Come come elder brothers, younger brothers, Let us go to Panchala kingdom!" In the darkness, some crooked fellow has created a fence" Chorus "In the darkness, some crooked fellow has created a fence" Arjuna says "In the darkness, some crooked fellow has created a

fence and the road is obstructed” Arjuna says “Some fellow has put up a stone and thorn fence. If we try to go around it it will take time, come let us break the fence! -

In Bharatham it is Angurabarnan who first shoots at Arujna and Dharmaraja declares that one should not voluntarily pick up a fight, but neither should one run away, when one is challenged and asks Arjuna to retaliate

In Koothu, on the other hand, Dharmaraja is not present in the fight between Angurabharanan and Arjuna. The fight between Angurabharanan and Arjuna in Koothu is purely verbal and Arjuna finally throws a stick which he has in his hand at the Gandharva which burns him. This is one interesting feature of the Koothu enactments, as the fight between Arjuna and the Gandharva has elaborate dance steps or ‘adavus’, but the actual killing is dealt with perfunctorily and there is no attempt made to make it seem ‘realistic’.

The arrow that Angurabharanan shot rushes towards Arjuna. He tells his brother that someone was shooting at them and Dharmaraja says that one should not voluntarily pick a fight, but should not run away when challenged. But Arjuna was unarmed. But as they say, for an able person even a blade of grass can become a weapon. Arjuna was walking carrying a wooden torch. Arjuna chants the appropriate mantras and turns the wooden stick in his hand into a weapon and hurls it at Angurabharanan. The weapon shatters Angurabharanan’s arrow and also burns him. A charred Angurabharanan falls down

Angurabharanan laments “I am burning, burning, who will save me now, who will save me now?” Alas! I am burning! Who can save me now? I am burning!”

In Bharatham at the request of Angurabarnan’s wives, Kunti asks Arjuna to revive him. All the thousand wives of Angurabharanan started crying. Kunti seeing this declared that when we are on an auspicious journey, these women should not lament inauspiciously and asks Arjuna to revive the Gandharva. Arjuna chanted a mantra and Angurabharan’s body cooled. A revived Gandharva bowed before Arjuna, recognising him even in his disguise. Arjuna is surprised at this and Angurabharanan explains how he recognised him. “I am a Gandharva and once when I was flying in the skies I had carelessly spit out the chewed betel leaves from his mouth. My spit landed unfortunately on a Rishi doing Tapas below whom in anger had cursed me as I was flying away

The Rishi said that his arrogance would be humbled by Arjuna and he would lose all his powers. Angurabharanan had never lost to anyone before, and realised that it could only be Arjuna whom he had lost to. In Koothu Angurabarnan who has been revived by Arjuna gifts him with five hundred magic horses. Arjuna says he will collect the gift when he needs it and Angurabharanan shows him a short cut to the Panchala Kingdom. Angurabharanan asks “Do you know what I am going to gift you for humbling me? I am giving you five hundred magic horses! Arjuna says “Brother because of the troubles caused by our cousins we have been living in disguise! Let your gift remain with you now. When I need them, I will pick up the magic horses from you!” So be it!

Arjuna says “I need to go to Drupada’s country, show me the way!” Angurabharanan says “Elder brother! I have a small request! It is the duty of the elder brother to listen to the younger brother! I want to hug and kiss you! Arjuna says”No, no” Angurabharanan says “Even if you refuse, I have to do my duty! The younger brother has to listen to his elder and the elder brother has to listen to the younger! Angurabharanan hugs Arjuna! Arjuna “You call this affection? Angurabharanan”Yes, this is my affection! Arjuna says “Show me the route!” Angurabharanan picks an arrow and says “Follow the path of this arrow! Where it leads will be Drupada’s country! So farewell elder brother! Can I kiss you again? [Arjuna politely declines] Arjuna sings”We are on our way seeking to reach the divine Panchala country!”

Arjuna and the Pandavas have been travelling in the night and at the end of the fight between Arjuna and Angurabharanan dawn breaks, both in the Koothu enactment and in the narrative. In the Bharatham session the song sung at this juncture was ‘Thirupalliezhucchi’, a song invoking Vishnu to awaken from his sleep. It is significant that the same song is repeated when Arjuna defeats the first of his shadow selves, Angurabarnan and the song functions as an invocation song for Bhima and Arjuna to awaken. Arjuna’s journey, the journey of fire towards self-realisation, begins from this point

Night gave way, it dawned and with it was gone the overnight dew. The face, and the eyes, the mind, were fresh, the fields were in all glory, in all the eight directions. Flowers bloomed on the ponds and orchards. The male and female of Chakravaha birds came together. There were sounds of drums and the conches. The Sun has reached the eastern peak. Darkness has been removed and it is morning. Flower blossoms galore, dripping with honey. Celestials and kings have come to your sanctum to awaken you from your slumber. Drums, trumpeting noise of male and female elephants thunder like the seas, everywhere. Wake up my recumbent deity! It is now dawn!

As the day breaks, the Pandavas see a large pond which has a lotus flower blooming. The Pandavas and Kunti notice many small bees swarming towards a lotus which are scared away by a gigantic bee. On their journey, they are witness to several such omens. Kunti says that these are good omens as the small bees which were swarming towards the lotus were like the fifty six Kings who had landed in Panchala Kingdom while Arjuna was like the gigantic bee who would finally win Draupadi's hand in marriage.

In the storytelling session the Ramayana is invoked at this point, with the image of flags fluttering in the wind. As the Pandavas were walking in Panchala, it looked as though the flags on the walls were fluttering faster! It looked as if they were asking Pandavas to come faster. In the midst of agar fragrant smoke, looking at the prosperity of the market place, walking under the canopy of clouds that had covered the skies, letting in a golden glow, they walked, looking like male lions covered in the skin of beautiful cow, reaching a potter's house. They were fluttering as though saying "All the Kings have arrived, why are you coming this late, come fast Pandavas". The flags appeared to be inviting them! It is similar to the scene Rama encountered while walking into Mithila. In the Kamba Ramayanam: "Lakshmi, due to our fortune has left the blemish less lotus flower and born here". The flags of the well -guarded Mithila city were like its long hands, waving to the lotus eyed Rama saying "Come here!" Similarly the flags in the Mithila fluttered calling out. "Hey Raghava come fast. People of Mithila are saying that there is no one who can bend the bow to marry Sita, so please come fast!"

The Pandavas when they reach Panchala choose to stay in a potter's house rather than in a Brahmin street as befitting their disguise or in the palace befitting their status as Shatriyas. This according to storyteller had a specific reason as the potter was really like Brahma. The potter Brahma creates our body like a clay pot inside the womb, creates our body.

As per custom the wedding ritual procession of Draupadi would begin from a potter's house. Villiputthuraar says that the Pandavas stayed at a potter's house in Panchala Kingdom. In a lot of villages there is still the custom of the marriage procession starting from a Udayar or potter house to this day. In a lot of villages the Koothu 'The Bending of the Bow' will be performed at night and the marriage will start from a potter's house. If there were no Udayars in a particular village, there have been cases where the marriage procession has started from a potters house of a nearby village.

In the festival village, a huge bamboo pole representing the magical bow Kinduram is planted right now before the theatrical space. This bow does not remain just as a prop for this play 'Vil Valaippu' but is left in front of the theatrical space till the point that Duryodhana is finally killed in the festival. This bow hence becomes a framing device through which the audience can engage with the rest of the theatrical enactments. In most villages the theatrical enactments would have another framing device with the five weapons of Draupadi which the Samayam Ganachari Kumaravargam would ritually place by the stage before every theatrical enactment. Draupadi's weapons and Arjuna's bow frame the way the entire Epic can be engaged with

Na.Muthuswamy narrated an interesting anecdote he had seen of the Vil Valaipu in his life, but the practice he describes does not seem to be in parlance currently.

If you see the Koothu 'Vil Valaippu' in the villages, you will find it very interesting. The young men from the villages would first try their hand at bending the bow, only after this would the bow is handed over to the actors. The ritual starting from the villagers bending the bow before handing it over to the actors, this transition would be beautiful, wonderful!

In Vyasa's Mahabharata, the immortal Sages Yaja and Upayaja, who had performed the Yagna where Draupadi emerged from fire, have also ensured that the magical bow could only be wielded by Arjuna

Expert in arts, this is the bow, these are the arrows. Like the potter's wheel set in motion, in the speedily rotating wheel, the target is suspended, which is not static, you can see its reflection below. Whoever among you targets it correctly, hits it and brings it down, will be the King, young Draupadi will garland. Dhrishtadyumna says "Oh Kings! Whoever the bravest amongst you let him take the bow and bend it! It is not enough if you just bend the bow! The hero who bends and strings the bow should look at the target suspended above in a wheel through the reflection in the water below. Above the fast revolving wheel will be a mechanical fish! Looking at the reflection in the water below, you have to bring down the fish by shooting through the wheel! Your arrow has to strike the fish and you have to catch the fish before it falls on the ground! My sister Draupadi will garland whichever brave man who performs this extraordinary feat!" When all the older kings among the crowd heard it, their faces fell down in disappointment!

Draupadi is decorated and brought to the court for the Swayamvaram. Her brother Drishtadyumna declares the rules of the contest to the contestants. The Kings of fifty six countries who are present at the Swayamvaram, introduce themselves to the court before trying their hand at wielding the bow.

Duryodhana is secretly angry that the contest was not announced in the invitation itself. But he does not protest as that would have seemed like a sign of weakness. The one who does not bow to anyone, the king who thinks there is none equal to him in the world, looked at the strong weapon, the bow and looking at its invincibility, furious yet pretending to be calm, not uttering a word, that was Duryodhana trying to save his face

Duryodhana wanted to get up and ask why they have kept this bow bending competition. But, he also thinks as to that the others sitting there might think that Duryodhana cannot do it, that is why he was protesting. So he controlled his anger and sat in the assembly, with a smiling face. Draupadi is brought in, Duryodhana is introduced to her by saying, “See this is the great King Duryodhana, the illustrious King from the Lunar Dynasty, the son of King Dhritarashtra, protector of Udhyana forest, into whose hands wealth will naturally flow, the great King Duryodhana

I am the king of Hastinapura, the great Duryodhana! Long live Duryodhana! This is the king of the Anga Kingdom, big benefactor, Karna, the most charitable, the great donor, the brave, great warrior Karna. I am the great warrior Jarasandha, ruler of Magadha. Do you understand who I am? I am the ruler of the Madra, the great King Salya. Do you understand who I am? I am the ruler of the Chedi Kingdom; I am the Lion King Sishupalan!

Draupadi does not even glance at any of the Kings present in her Swyamvaram, and is waiting for Arjuna to announce himself. She is worried when she does not see Arjuna among the Kings present there. But her friends reassure her saying that Arjuna would definitely come. This trope of the heroine lamenting to her sakhi or friend, about the absence of her lover, is a popular leit motif both in Indian theatre and poetry.

Draupadi laments “My dear friend, Arjuna, the possessor of all wealth, has not come! Can my heart bear this sorrow?” Chorus sings “My dear friend, Arjuna, the possessor of all wealth, has not come! Can my heart bear this sorrow?” Draupadi sings “Would it be the past sins of Kunti

that has affected the Pandavas? I hope no one has harmed the Pandavas!” Chorus sings “Would it be the past sins of Kunti that has affected the Pandavas? I hope no one has harmed the Pandavas!” Draupadi says “My dear friend, I do not know what harm that Kunti has done in her past which is affecting her sons now?” Friend says “My dear lady, no harm could have happened, to the five brothers!” Draupadi sings “My dear friend, could it have been Pandu’s past deeds that has caught up the five brothers?” Chorus sings “My dear friend, could it have been Pandu’s past deeds that have caught up the five brothers?” Draupadi says “My dear friend, I do not know what could have been their father Pandu’s actions that is affecting his sons now?” My dear friend, I was incarnated from fire; would the same fire have destroyed the one I am supposed to marry? Friend says “My dear Lady, wherever the Pandavas are now, as long as they have the protection of the divine Krishna, nothing can harm them” Before the Swayamvaram ends, the person you are intended to marry will definitely come, bend the bow and wed you! Kindly do not shed tears over this!”

Balarama and Krishna have also come to attend Draupadi’s Swayamvaram. Balarama, seeing the impossible task placed before the Kings, asks his brother Krishna whether he should try to bend the bow as he thinks that he would definitely be able to do so. Krishna stops him as he knows that Draupadi was meant to marry Arjuna and he points out Arjuna in his disguise as a Brahmin, to his brother Balarama

A number of Kings try bending the bow, but most of the Kings find that they cannot even lift the bow.

King Salya who was one of the greatest warriors in the land was the first warrior who was able to lift and bend the bow. Salya with strong shoulders, he walked like a tiger, lifted the bow with both his hands, kept it steady in front, but unable to string the bow, he crashed down and his pride of being a great warrior crashed with it.

He walked towards the bow like a tiger and lifted the bow with the same speed. He placed the bow upright and bent the bow. He was King Salya he tried to bend it, but he was able to bend it just by a quarter, it would not yield anymore. He tried pulling it more, but he only got tired, started sweating, lost his energy, and the bowstring slipped out of his hand. When the bow straightened and lifted up, it took Salya by force and flung him in the air.

Salya sings “I will bend this bow, I will win Draupadi’s hand in marriage!” Salya asks the Kattiyakaaran “Hey, see if the bow has bent?” Kattiyakaaran mocks him “Everyone keeps asking me the same question! I knew you will not be able to bend it!”

The magic bow drains the energy of the kings and flings them as far back as they have managed to bend the bow, in recoil. Salya who has bent nearly half the bow is flung back in recoil as were the other powerful kings who had attempted to bend the bow

Duryodhana gets up and talks. Where kings of the Solar Dynasty, the Lunar Dynasty, and the Fire Dynasty, are assembled, that there should have been a mention in the invitation itself about the bending of the bow. After we all arrive telling us about the condition of bending of bow, is Panchalan trying to test the manliness of the kings? I will bend this bow. I will win the hands of Panchali! Duryodhana says “However many Kings lose, or win, expecting praises, or fearing derision, or scared that enemies will laugh. All that does not matter!”

Duryodhana says “However many Kings lose, or win, expecting praises, or fearing derision, or scared that enemies will laugh! All that does not matter!” Kattiyakaaran mocks him saying “It is bending pretty well; I think you only will marry her

Duryodhana sings “Watch, as I bend this bow within a second!” Saying this Duryodhan tries to bend it fast, and the bow bends fast. To the uproar from the brothers, clapping that the bow is bending fast, he made the bow steady easily.

After holding it straight, he tried to bend, the bow bends quickly. Everybody clap their hands. Even Duryodhana’s brothers pleased with the speed of Duryodhana also applauded him. He easily straightened the bow and it started bending, but Duryodhana missed bending the bow completely by the distance of four fingers. That small distance proves impossible to bend, and Duryodhana loses his strength and he shivers and sweats. Looking at it Dushasana says “Elder brother, I advised you against trying!

The Magic bow proves impossible to string for all the kings in the court. The Kings who had managed to bend the bow the most were also flung farthest away from the bow when they were unable to string it. Duryodhana’s brothers who have been watching this have made their

calculation as to how far back Duryodhana would be thrown and are waiting to catch him when he is thrown back

The person who bent the bow a quarter, Salva was thrown back this far. Bhagadatta who bent half the bow fell here! The King who bent the bow the maximum, King Neela was thrown back this far!

Duryodhana has bent the bow more than any other King and his and ninety nine brothers guess as to where he would be thrown back! Drona's calculations, as to where their brother would be thrown back were accurate. When the bow straightened, it flung Duryodhana far back. Seeing that even the powerful Duryodhana was unable to bend the bow, the rest of the kings also lost heart. Karna got up at this moment and walked up to Duryodhana wanting his permission to try bending the bow himself.

Why he wanted Duryodhana's permission was because he knew that Duryodhana would not like anyone else to accomplish a task that he had failed in. That's why Karna asked his permission. Duryodhana asked whether Karna was confident of bending the bow and Karna said he was. Duryodhana said that normally he would not like anyone to accomplish a feat he had failed in, but said that he was willing to make an exception to Karna. Now Karna goes to try his skills with the bow

Well educated in all the texts, endowed with a brave hand, Karna, the young warrior, lifted the bow as confidently as the Asura king Ravana had tried to lift Mount Kailasa,

He stood in the court strong, and nonchalant as an archer, bent the bow missing it just by a fraction. Having bent it without a worry till then, the edge of the bow hit the crowned head of him, knocking him down. Karna lifted the bow, like how Ravana lifted Kailasam it seems. Bends it quickly, but to string the bow, he missed bending it completely by a hair's breadth!

If had overcome that fraction of a distance he could have done it. Did he not have the strength to do it? No, it is not that he did not have the strength! The two Sages Yama and Upayama had performed the Yagam where Draupadi was incarnated intending her to get married to Arjuna. The power of their mantras stopped Karna from bending the bow, and Panchali's own vow stops Karna from bending the bow, because of this even Karna is unable to bend the bow and he too is flung back by the bow. Karna also fell, flung furthest by the bow!

Karna sings “Watch how I bend this bow!” Before Arjuna [Gandiva] has a chance to bend this bow, look how I bend it! Watch how I bend this bow!

A happy Duryodhana says “Look how easily elder brother Karna has done it like an expert!” Dhrishtadumnya says “When Hastinapura’s Duryodhana Maharaja did it; we thought it was expert work, now I feel you will marry my sister” Karna says that as he has seen Draupadi, he will not leave without marrying her. Karna says “This might seem a big feat for others, but is a feat I can do effortlessly!

When all the Kings including Karna in the assembly have failed to bend the bow, Arjuna who has been watching silently now steps up. Arjuna asks whether being a Brahmin, he could also participate in the Swayamvaram. Duryodhana protests at this point by saying the Swayamvaram was meant only for Kings and Shatriyas.

Draupadi’s brother Dhrishtadumnya clarifies the point by saying that the invitation clearly says that Draupadi would marry any man who could bend the bow. Arjuna who is in the guise of a Brahmana, approached Dhrishtadyumna and asked “Prince, is it fine for a Brahmin to attempt bending the bow, or is it only for the Shatriyas?” Arjuna asks “Will the little peacock like Draupadi wed only if the target were to be shot by Shatriyas who rule their kingdoms on the strength of their shoulders or it can be a Brahmin whose lineage it has been to study the Vedas?” Dhrishtadyumna, an illustrious warrior of the clan said, “Your birth is not a disadvantage to marriage, if you are a true warrior” Arjuna immediately lifted the greatest of the bows, like how Shiva lifted the Mountain Meru. When Karna lifted the bow, it was compared to Ravana lifting Kailasa; in the case of Arjuna it is compared to Shiva lifting Meru to use it as the bow to overpower Tripurantakas. Arjuna lifted the bow, bent it quickly strung it to launch the arrow, shot the target fish hovering above in the wheel through the image down, the target fell and Arjuna caught it in his hand.

Built with strong shoulders, Arjuna lifted the great bow, that had put the crowned kings to shame, strung it high, launched a sturdy arrow to the surprise of all who exclaimed “he is the greatest of all archers” shot the target rotating in the mechanical wheel above, with the enthusiasm of the kings in the assembly. The learned conductor of yagnas and Sadhus jubilantly cheered. Devas joined in the celebration too, showering flowers. He accomplished the adventurous feat. The way he lifted the bow and shot the arrow, the handsomeness, Draupadi saw

it and realized it was Arjuna, and without even consulting her brother or parents she went straight and garlanded him.

Dhrishtadumnya says “We did not tell bending the bow was enough. The target object the fish has to be hit, looking at its reflection down in the water” Arjuna asks “Is that so?”

Arjuna easily bends the bow and claims Draupadi’s hand. Dhrishtadhyumna points out the other clause in the contest where it says clearly that the archer after stringing the bow has to shoot at a mechanical fish revolving in the ceiling by looking at its reflection in a bowl of water below. Koothu again does not try to realistically depict this scene and while Arjuna is looking down, he just throws a stick up in the air and it is assumed that he has hit the target.

Arjuna sings “If a Brahmin is allowed to compete, I will pick up the bow again and chant the appropriate mantras!” Minister, exactly like like what Veda Vyasa had said, a Brahmin has bent the bow, we should give Draupadi in marriage to him

The poet compares Karna’s confident walk to pick up the bow with Ravana’s confident walk, to uproot Shiva’s abode, the Mount Kailasa. This narrative will be continued in the next episode when the storytellers would speak about Arjuna’s Theerthayatra

A simple wedding ritual of Draupadi and Arjuna is enacted on stage where the couple just garland each other. An angry Duryodhana incites other Kings present to protest at the insult to the royal dynasties and attacks Arjuna. While Dharmaraja, Nakula and Sahadeva look with amusement at Duryodhana’s humiliation, Bhima and Arjuna fight and defeat all the kings present.

An angry Duryodhana sings “See who this Brahmin is, and how arrogant he is!” Arjuna sings “I bent the bow and married the beautiful Draupadi! If you dare come and fight me!”

Arjuna says “You people, did not have the talent to do bend the bow and now you are talking about courage! Fight me if you can! Shakuni says “I am doubtful he is a Brahmin, but must

definitely be a Shatriya as he fights well” Arjuna says “If you kings have the courage, come fight with me!”

Karna says “Younger brother Duryodhana! This looks like Arjuna. I do not think he is a Brahmin as he is fighting like a Shatriya! We are running as we are scared! Who is that lady in white sari?” Duryodhana says “That old lady? She looks like their mother Kunti!” Duryodhana says “Nakula, Sahadeva and Dharmaraja are standing there! The big one you see there, Bhima. This looks like Arjuna!” Karna says “Younger brother! It is not possible to fight with them!” Shakuni says “The Pandavas did not die in the Lacquer palace and have escaped! We lit the fire, Pandavas did not die!” Bhima and Arjuna defeat all the kings who challenge them and the Pandavas take Draupadi home to the potter’s house where they are staying. Now the next narrative starts.

Overcoming all, they walk home with Drupadi, to the potter’s house and call out “Amma, today we have received an offering. What do we do?” She said, “Children, all five of you eat it together”. It is also narrated as “We have brought a young girl (Kanni)” which Kunti mistook as “kani”, meaning a fruit and asked all five to share. “Amma come outside and see”, they said. She came out and saw a beautiful lady with long tresses. “Children, I heard it as kani” which is why I asked all five of you to share, she said. Dharmaraja said “Mother, when we see this lady, all five of us have a similar instinct, that all five of us should marry her!

The issue of five Pandavas getting married to Draupadi, is a dilemma which cannot be addressed by Drupada or Kunti and Veda Vyasa’s intervention is necessary at this point, to resolve this dilemma.