

Advanced Course in Performance Traditions of the Mahabharata in Tamil Nadu- 2

Prof. Sashikanth Ananthachari

Department of Humanities and Social Sciences

IIT Madras

Lecture 16

THE BIRTH OF DRAUPADI [41 MINUTES]

“Of the earth was born Sita for the decimation of Rakshasa clan. Now this girl born from the fire of the third eye of Shiva, will end the clans of kings who wear the anklets that brave warriors adorn”
Villibharatham

With the hundred and five cousins having finished their schooling with Dronachari, the stage is set for the entry for another major protagonist to enter the Epic. From the morning of the day of the ritual of Draupadi's birth, the villagers will prepare a Yaga Kundam where Draupadi will be born in the festival village. The immersive experience of the Epic begins from this point onwards. Two orders of memory are invoked by this ritual and its subsequent ritual, the 'Burning of the Lacquer Palace'

In the Mahabharata Drupada requests two sages Yaaja and Upayaaja to perform the Putrakameshwari Yaga for the birth of children. Yaaja and Upayaaja, initially refuse to perform this Yaga as this Yaga could only be performed by a person who was desirous of Moksha. Finally they relent and they perform the Yaga. In Tamil renderings, the sages are called Yaachan and Yupayaachan and the Yagam is performed at a place called 'Chaitramani' on the shores of the Ganga

The Yagam takes place at a place called Chaitramani on the northern side of the Ganges. At the end of the Yagam, a golden pot emerges from the sacrificial fires carrying a sacred elixir. The immortal Sages, Yaachan and Yupayaachan gave this elixir to Panchala King Drupada, asking him to give it to his wife so that she can conceive children. When Drupada looked for his wife, he found her missing. As the offering from the Yagam arose in a golden pot from the fire, Prishati, the wife of Drupada who was supposed to eat the offering was nowhere to be seen. Prishati's menstrual periods had commenced much earlier than normal and hence she had to leave the Yaga Kundam. Prishati informs her worried husband Drupada about this unforeseen development

Prishati said that she did not have the fortune of consuming the sacrificial offering, due to her menstrual periods. Now Yaachan and Upayaachan console her by saying that the Goddess who had given birth to the entire world was going to be born as her daughter. They said that the Goddess did not want to be born out of a womb of a woman, but wanted to be born out of fire itself. Drupada was unsure at the action he should take as Prishati was supposed to consume the offerings from the Yagam so that she could conceive. Yachan and Upayaachan allay Drupada's fears. The sages poured half the nectar into the fire, chanting mantras and at that time a figure arose from the fire

Adorned with shoulder jewels, shining crown, beautiful with precious stoned studded ear studs, bow in hand, body fitted with armour with the strength of diamonds apt for war, like a ferocious hunter of a lion jumping on the golden Meru! Drupada's son appeared on a chariot to the delight of the King Drupada

When half the offering from the golden pot is poured back into the fire, Dhrishtadyumna is first born first out of the fire. He emerges from the fire, on a chariot, as a fully grown warrior ready for battle. A huge chariot arose from the fire bearing a son who looked like a soldier ready for battle. The sages poured the remaining nectar into the fire chanting mantras for the birth of Draupadi. The second portion from the golden pot is now poured into the fire

Villagers would place camphor around the Agni Kundam where Draupadi will be shortly born in the village. The air in most villages would seem charged at this moment with many women going into a trance awaiting the birth of Draupadi. The singing of the invocation song to Draupadi also had a hypnotic quality.

The Shakti manifest in the man-lion who rose in the mountain to tear the Hiranyan apart with his finger nails, the enemy who had built fortress on earth, the terrifying One who holds the skull. Dances to the sound of damru, anklets jingling, worshipped by the Vedas, her feet of lotus, the One who is the manifestation of mantras, legacy of the Vedic knowledge. Ambika, with soft feet, adorned on the breasts the garland made of fresh hundred petalled lotuses, wearing bunch of bangles, hair let loose, and the image of a blazing fire. Shankari, with a sword in her hand, smashed the crown studded with gems of asuras to dust, who were in conflict with the Devas and Indra of the celestial city of Amaravati. Radiant, glowing, like a dainty peacock; fragrant with the scent of kasturi, thread like waist bent under the weight of the youthful breasts, brimming as with tender coconut water. If the army of Yama, with teeth like crescent moon come to take away my life, seeing my despair, she would the sweet cuckoo appear, give me refuge. Auspicious, bewitching, she is the Lakshmi, she is the consort of Ekambranatha of Kanchi, has the kindness to shower grace to destroy the obstacles of the destitute who wander begging for alms

The beautiful One, holding Pasa and Ankusa in hand, bestows bliss of transcendence to the silent ones, who in their quite remain a painted picture, the worshippers of her radiant feet

A covered idol of Draupadi would be placed in the Yaga Kundam and once the camphor around is lit and is burning brightly, the cloth will be removed announcing Draupadi's birth.

Blue as the colour of kohl, the in-dweller, one beyond Time destroys fall, death, afflictions of the body, the terrible karma of the devotees. The Shakti manifest in the man-lion who rose in the mountain to tear the Hiranyan apart with his finger nails, the enemy who had built fortress on earth, the terrifying One who holds the skull. Blue as the colour of kohl, the in-dweller, one beyond Time destroys fall, death, afflictions of the body, the terrible karma of the devotees. Ambika, with soft feet, adorned on the breasts the garland made of fresh hundred petalled lotuses, wearing bunch of bangles, hair let loose, and the image of a blazing fire. Shankari, with a sword in her hand, smashed the crown studded with gems of asuras to dust, who were in conflict with the Devas and Indra of the celestial city of Amaravati. Radiant, glowing, like a dainty peacock, fragrant with the scent of kasturi, thread like waist bent under the weight of the youthful breasts, brimming as with tender coconut water If the army of Yama, with teeth like crescent moon come to take away my life, seeing my despair, she would the sweet cuckoo appear, give me refuge. Draupadi, like Dhrishtadyumna, emerges from the fire fully formed. Draupadi is seen as a beautiful young woman

Auspicious, bewitching, she is the Lakshmi, she is the consort of Ekambranatha of Kanchi, has the kindness to shower grace to destroy the obstacles of the destitute who wander begging for alms

The beautiful One, holding Pasa and Ankusa in hand, bestows bliss of transcendence to the silent ones, who in their quite remain a painted picture, the worshippers of her radiant feet. Draupadi was born out of the fire not as a young child, but rather as a beautiful young woman

On her birth the earth trembled, blood rained from the skies and bones fell from the sky. When Draupadi was born, there were earthquakes in the land, blood poured from the sky and there were numerous other ominous signs indicating the catastrophic events that were soon to follow. The same omens were seen at the birth of Duryodhana and an oracular voice from the sky had proclaimed that Duryodhana would be the cause of the destruction of royal dynasties

The oracular voice proclaimed "Of the earth was born Sita to the decimation of Rakshasa clan. Now this girl born from the fire of the third eye of Shiva will end the clans of kings who wear the anklets brave men do."

One line which is often repeated in the Bharatham sessions is that “Arakkar Kulatthai Azhikka Pirandhaval Seethai, Arasar Kulatthai Azhikka Pirandhaval Draupadai” Sita was born of earth causing destruction of the Rakshasas and Draupadi was born out of fire portending the end of Kings, that is- “Sita was born to destroy the Rakshasas while Draupadi was born to destroy the royal dynasties”. By re-enacting the ritual in their own village, the festival village Kazhiyur, becomes transformed into Chaitramani, the place where the original Yaga was performed

Each ritual performed in the village has two functions- one of transformation and another of transportation. Kazhiyur has now become transformed into Chaitramani and the villagers are transported back in time to the moment when Draupadi emerged from fire. This can be explicitly seen in the Koothu enactments which will soon follow. The main actor, in a performance will ask the Kattiyakaan or the Sutradhar “Naam Engirukkirom?” meaning ‘Where are we now?’ To which the Kattiyakaran would say that we are at Kazhiyur. The main actor will respond by saying “Illai, Illai, Naam Engirukkirom?” or “No! No! Where are we now?” And the Kattitakaan will respond ‘Indraprastha’ if the scene they were depicting is set in Indraprastha. The main actor will conclude this entire dialogue by saying “Naam Kazhiyur endra Indraprasthathil ippodhu irukkirom” That is we are at Indraprastha which is now currently in Kazhiyur! The audiences are both within the Epic and also outside in their own respective festival villages. Draupadi was born as “Ayonija” or “out of the womb”.

They named the first born son Dhrishtadyumnan. The Goddess who was incarnated next was named Krishna by her father. As she was the daughter of the Panchala King she was called Panchali and as Drupada’s daughter she was also called Draupadi. But her true name was Krishnai

The Goddess Earth, unable to bear the burden on her had requested Vishnu and his sister Durga to reduce the weight on her. Vishnu, respecting her request was born as Krishna, while his sister Durga was born as Draupadi. Their birth on earth also made the Great War inevitable. Draupadi, as she was dark of skin was named Krishna by her father like her brother Krishna. As she was the daughter of Drupada, she was called Draupadai. As she was princess of the Panchala kingdom, she was also known as Panchali

It was at this time there was a discussion at Hastinapura as to whom to crown as the future King. Dharmaraja was found to be the most suitable person and was made the Crown Prince. Right through the Epic, it is said that Dhritarashtra would first make a decision based on

Dharma, but then his inherent sentimentality would soon make him deviate from the path of Dharma.

After the hundred and five cousins complete their schooling, the issue arises as to who should be crowned the King. Dhritarashtra, who knows that Dharmaraja was extremely popular among the people, and also because he was the eldest born, appoints Dharmaraja as a Crown Prince

Dhritarashtra's son Duryodhana was unable to accept this and he cried to his father. Wicked Suyodhanan distressed by the coronation of Dharmaraja as prince reached out to his father and with no considerations of political propriety started talking to his father what came to his mind, petty minded jealous talk. Father, he cried! I thought that after you I would be crowned the King, but you crowned this Dharmaraja who came from nowhere as the future king. You have done me injustice!

When Duryodhana lamented thus to his father, Dhritarashtra said that being a blind man, he had no real right to be the king. The kingdom rightfully belonged to his younger brother Pandu. It was Pandu who sacrificed his kingship to me and his kingdom has rightfully to his son Dharmaraja. He added that Dharmaraja was elder to Duryodhana and was the rightful king, he asks his son to serve his brother by being his Prime Minister

This angers his son Duryodhana who enlists his uncle Shakuni's aid in changing the mind of his father. Duryodhana insists that he will only serve as the king and never as a Minister! Now Shakuni intervenes. He questions Dhritarashtra by asking what was wrong in Duryodhana aspiring to succeed his father as the king. Shakuni is shocked that they have named a person who came from the forest as the future king to which Dhritarashtra also laments saying that it was the decision taken by the elders in the Kaurava court and he was also helpless. Shakuni says anything is possible if one was ready to use deceit and treachery. Shakuni in these traditions is supposed to be a partial incarnation of the darker, adharmic Kali Yuga which was to soon follow the Dwapara Yuga, heralding a world without order. This is stressed in the major Koothu called "Pagadai Thugil" which is at the core of this festival. In this there is an attempt made by Ducchāsana to disrobe Draupadi in the Kaurava court. The Koothu, as rendered in this village became a dialogue between Shakuni, who represents Adharma with Dharmaraja who obviously represents Dharma

The burning of the Lacquer Palace is the next immersive experience of the Mahabharata in this festival. Usually in most festivals and even in the previous festivals at Kazhiyur, the

theatre cycle would begin immediately after this episode of the Mahabharata. In Kazhiyur, for some reason which will be elaborated later, the schedule was changed resulting in changes in the intricate interlinking between the ritual, the storytelling and the theatrical enactments.

Shakuni instructs Dhritarashtra to find some pretext to send the Pandavas to Kashi where he will get a palace made of combustible materials for the Pandavas to stay in. Shakuni says that the palace can be burnt when the Pandava were asleep killing them. All five Pandavas will burn to death there! With Dharmaraja dead the kingdom would naturally belong to his son Duryodhana. Shakuni stands up and argues for his nephew Duryodhana and manages to change Dhritarashtra's mind. He says that if Duryodhana cannot be made the King according to Dharma then he should be crowned through treachery and deceit. He wants Dhritarashtra to find some pretext to send the Pandavas to Kashi where he schemes to have them killed.

As the storyteller is narrating this episode, the villagers could be seen constructing a hut like structure made out of hay, firewood and other combustible materials outside the Dharmaraja/Draupadi Amman temple. This structure is supposed to represent the Lacquer Palace built by Shakuni to burn the Pandavas alive in Kashi or Varanasi.

In Indian traditions, one is supposed to attain Moksha or release from the eternal, sorrowful cycle of birth, death and rebirth if one dies naturally at Kashi. Here the storyteller joked that Shakuni wanted to give the Pandavas Moksha by killing them in the sacred city. Shakuni's henchmen start singing the praises of Kashi when Dharmaraja was around. Praised by the leaders of the Vedas, and said to be as great as the place where Vishnu and all Devas reside, decorated with festoons, splendid with golden temple towers, the great city of Varanasi! They say that there is no city equal to Kashi, as there is no river equal to the Ganga and the only meaningful journey that one can make in one's life was a pilgrimage to Kashi and the only meaningful word that the tongue can utter was the word Kashi

Shakuni's men keep singing Kashi's praises in Dharmaraja's presence. Shakuni has instructed people to keep speaking about the glories of Kashi when Dharmaraja was around. Once the idea of visiting Kashi was planted in Dharmaraja's mind, he instructed Dhritarashtra to lie about a dream in which Dhritarashtra saw his brother Pandu. Dharmaraja at that moment has no reason to disbelieve Dhritarashtra and he decides to perform the last rites for his father at Kashi. Little does he realise that the Kauravas actually want to perform the last rites of the Pandavas at Kashi.

One day Dhritarashtra called his younger brother's son Dharmaraja and says that he saw his brother Pandu in a dream. As he had died a premature death, Pandu said that he was denied entry to the heavens. If he was to attain heaven, he asked me to ask his sons to perform his last rites at Kashi. Obviously he did not have any such dream but was only lying at Shakuni's instruction

Dharmaraja says "Father's elder brother! Did my father request this in your dream? We will immediately leave to Kashi! Saying this he prepares to leave to Kashi with his mother and his younger brothers and after taking the blessings from all his elders begins their journey. When he went to his father's younger brother, Vidura to get his blessings, Vidura makes a cryptic statement. Vidura says "Dharma! When there is a raging fire in the forest, only the rats in the forest will not face any danger" When the entire forest is on fire the elephants, the lion, the tiger and the buffaloes would burn with the forest. But the rats would find their way under the earth and escape.

Vidura who knows about the plot to burn the Pandavas in Kashi, warns Dharmaraja with a cryptic statement. He says that even if there were raging fires in a forest, only the rats would escape as they could burrow their way out of the forest beneath the ground. Dharmaraja did not understand Vidura's cryptic statement but understood that there was some danger from fire awaiting them. Shakuni also sends a minister called Puroshan with them.

As Vidura bears no malice or animosity to anybody, or anything, he is equally affectionate to the children of both his brothers. All the plots to kill the Pandavas are made in Vidura's presence by the Kauravas and inevitably Vidura objects weakly to these plots. Vidura has also lost his standing in the Hastinapura court after the entry of Shakuni. Right through the Epic, he keeps alerting the Pandavas about the dangers awaiting them, helping them to remain watchful. While the Pandavas are performing the Shradha rites for their father at Kashi, Duryodhana and his brothers secretly send combustible materials to Kashi from Hastinapura.

One night when Vidura was doing his night patrol of the city he sees this and stops the convoy. Vidura sees Lacquer, wax, camphor and other combustible materials being sent secretly from Hastinapura to Kashi and finds out the reason why. He also identifies the architect, Kanakachari, who has been deputed by Shakuni to build the palace at Kashi. The architect was also unhappy at the task he had been assigned as Dharmaraja was an extremely popular man and every one wanted Dharmaraja to be the future king

Vidura stopped the convoy of vehicles and wanted to know what it was carrying. He is refused an answer as the driver says that it was a state secret. Vidura insists on knowing as he was the Prime Minister of the kingdom. Vidura sees the vehicles carrying extremely combustible materials and learns that it all being taken to Kashi. He learns that they were being taken to build a Lacquer palace for the Pandavas to be burnt alive.

Vidura asks as to whom the architect was and immediately Kanakachari, the architect comes and bows to Vidura. Vidura pleads with Kanakachari saying “Kanaka! Think that I am falling at your feet! Good people like the Pandavas should not die, but sadly the wicked Duryodhana wants to kill them. I am not asking you to not build the palace, but please build a secret tunnel under the palace for the Pandavas to escape. Tell this secret only to my dear nephew Bhima so that he can escape with his brothers from this palace!”

Kanakachari promises to Vidura that he will build a secret tunnel for the Pandavas to escape from the burning palace. He also promises Vidura that he will only tell Bhima of Vidura’s message and of the secret tunnel

In this ritual, the five custodians of the Dharmaraja/Draupadi Amman temple the Samayam, the Ganachari, the Kumaravargam will don on the role of the five Pandavas escaping from the burning Lacquer Palace after Bhima has set fire to it. As there had been no Mahabharata festival in Kazhiyur, for over twelve years the new custodians of the temple, did not know exactly as to what their function was. The storyteller could be heard during his narration giving these Samayam, Ganachari, Kumaravargam instructions as to what to do. At one point in the ritual, where an idol of Bhima had to be taken around the burning Palace, the custodians realised that they had forgotten to get a sculpture of Bhima sculpted for that particular ritual. So, as a compromise, an idol of Pothraja, the primary guardian deity of all Dharmaraja/Draupadi Amman temples was taken in its place around the burning palace.

Kanakachari would build the palace the entire day, while at night he would secretly build a tunnel under the palace. Now the palace has been built and Dharmaraja goes to inspect the palace. When he knocks on the walls, he is surprised to hear hollow noises. He realises that no stone, sand or limestone was used to build the palace and hence the walls of the palace was absolutely hollow. Dharmaraja is suspicious of the construction of the Lacquer Palace and warns Bhima to be alert to any hidden dangers.

“It is a deceitful act, building an abode of wax. Duryodhana’s conduct is also deceitful. He also has a big army large as seven seas under his control. There could be a dagger inside the folded hands of enemies, we are surrounded by danger!”

Dharmaraja says “Brothers! This palace looks extremely suspicious to me. It looks ominous and dangers seem to lurk within.” He tells Bhima that he is too trustful towards people and asks him to be extra vigilant from that day onwards. He says that they should check the food they eat, the clothes they wear and even check the sandal paste given to them to wear

Kanakachari tells Bhima that on the instructions of Vidura, he has made a secret tunnel for the Pandavas to escape from the Lacquer Palace when Shakuni’s man Purosana tries to burn the Pandavas alive in it.

Kanakachari says “Duryodhana has built the Lacquer palace to burn you alive in it. Please do not believe Purosanan who is always with you! He is the person deputed to set fire to this palace when all of you are asleep, on the coming new moon day. On your father’s younger brother Vidura’s instructions, I have built a secret tunnel without anybody knowing. There will be nine pillars in a series and one pillar would be misplaced, If you kick the misplaced pillar you will notice the way to the underground tunnel! When you plan to escape, kick the misplaced pillar and before leaving take care to close the secret way behind you”

The day of the new moon is approaching! A worried Duryodhana asks his uncle Shakuni as to what they can do if the Pandavas escape again? Shakuni agrees with Duryodhana’s fears. He says the Pandavas are not ordinary mortals as they possess supernatural powers! When the palace is burning and if they are still awake, they will somehow manage to escape. So he suggests that they drug the Pandavas unconscious before they set the palace on fire. If they drink alcohol, they can be drugged, but the Pandavas do not consume alcohol. Shakuni says it does not matter if they do not drink alcohol, they drink honey. Honey is also called alcohol

Shakuni sends five hunters with their mother carrying five pots of honey to the Lacquer palace. The poet says that they did not go to the Lacquer palace on their own; rather he says their own fate led them there. One principal argument which emerges from the later renderings of the Mahabharata in Tamil is about the inevitability of ‘Fate’. A human being, in these renderings has no agency her/himself, but is purely a victim of their own destiny. It is first clearly articulated in Janamejaya’s question to Veda Vyasa where he asks him as to why he, who knew the past, the present and the future, did not stop the Great War in which numerous people lost their lives needlessly

Vyasa in this rendering says that war was inevitable and nobody could stop it. When Janamejaya, who did not believe in a notion called ‘Fate’, challenges this, Vyasa dares him to avert the death of a Brahmin which he was going to cause himself in the next eight days. Janamejaya tries to avert this ‘Fate’, but he fails and the Brahmin dies in his Yaga Kundam. So in later Tamil renderings of the Mahabharata the Epic was first narrated on earth to

Janamejaya for him to understand the ways of 'Karma' or of Fate. In the following story, the same idea is reinforced. Duryodhana, to doubly ensure the death of the Pandavas has also sent six assassins to the Lacquer Palace. The storyteller says that the six did not go out of their own volition to the Lacquer palace, but their destiny led them there.

One day a hungry hunter and his wife were unable to find any food. In the evening the woman pointed out a birds nest on a tree to her husband. The hunter climbed the tree and saw five hatchlings which had not as yet opened their eyes. Feeling pity for them he climbed down from the tree. When his wife asked him whether that there was nothing to eat there, the hunter replied that there were only five poor hatchlings there. Their mother must have gone to get food for them. When the returning mother bird finds her hatchlings missing, she might even place a curse on us. He says it is better to go to sleep hungry rather than incur the mother's curse.

The huntress protested saying they say that hatchlings are very delicious and wanted her husband to fetch them. The hunter refused and went to sleep. His wife was unable to sleep and sliently climbed the tree and burnt the nest with the hatchlings. She feasted on the five roasted hatchlings herself! As the result five son's ware born to the hunter's wife and soon the hunter died. The five sons born to her are now young men, as their mother set fire to five hatchlings thats why they are going with their mother to get burnt alive in the Lacquer palace

The five hunters and their mother, the assassins sent by Duryodhana to kill the Pandavas offer to share their drugged honey with the Pandavas and Kunti. While the four Pandavas and Kunti accept the offer, the vigilant Bhima refuses. When all the assassins and the Pandavas and Kunti are asleep, Bhima carries his four brothers and his mother on his shoulders and escapes through the secret tunnel. Before escaping, he sets fire to the Lacquer Palace leaving the five hunters and their mother to be burnt alive instead of the Pandavas and Kunti

In the festival village, after the hut like structure, the Lacquer Palace is set fire to the five custodians of the Draupadi Amman Temple, the Samayam, Ganachari, Kumaravargam run through the burning structure, mimicking the esacape of the Pandavas from the Lacquer palace. As an idol of Bhima was not there, an idol of Pothraja, here made to represent Bhima was taken around the burning palace

The next day people discover six burnt bodies in the ravaged palace and everyone thinks that Kunti and the Pandavas are dead. Now the second Vanavaasam, or stay in the forest of the

Pandavas begins. In most festivals, the theatre cycle will begin at the end of the ritual and the festival would completely take over the lives of its audiences

The festival from this day onwards would be celebrated for almost twenty hours a day and the entire village would live in Vanavaasam away from their homes in the various performing spaces spread across the village. Here they would listen to the stories the Pandavas listened to in their own Vanavaasam or stay in the forest

The structure of the festivals would also become extremely intricate from this point onwards with the ritual leading to the storytelling, which would lead to the theatrical enactment of the same episode performed right throughout the night. The entire audiences would be literally immersed in the Epic.