

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

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Lecture 17

HIDIMBI KURI [45 MINUTE]

“Times have changed. Historical consciousness now owns the globe. Even in societies known as ahistorical, timeless, or eternal - India for example - the politically powerful now live in and with history. Ahistoricity survives at the peripheries and interstices of such societies”
Ashis Nandy

Four people in the Mahabharata other than Vyasa know the past, the present, and the future. They are Hidimbi, Sahadeva, Krishna and Draupadi. In Nallapillai Bharatham there is a line which says that Hidimbi knew the past, the present and the future. But nothing more is said in Nallapillai Bharatham about this.

She could narrate what had happened, what was happening, and what would happen. Nallapillai just says that Hidimbi could narrate the past, the present and the future. Using this line from Nallapillai Bharatham, my father created an event as though Hidimbi was foretelling the future

It was Shri Muthuganesan who first popularised this. He made this into a one day programme using Pambai Harmonium and Udukkai drums. When the next storyteller went to perform in the same village he was also requested to perform this. So the storyteller had to learn what Muthuganesan had performed to sing it himself. So the first storyteller who first popularised this was Muthuganesan Ayya, the next person who popularised it was my father.

In the 1950's the storyteller Muthuganesan's father, Sundaramoorthy of Kanchipuram created a new event in the Mahabharata festivals cycle using this line from Nallapillai Bharatham. This event was called “Hidimbi Kuri”. In this Bharatham session created by Sundaramoorthy the entire Mahabharata would be sung helping people to remember the Epic afresh

This session became extremely popular and if any storyteller did not sing Hidimbi Kuri, he would not be recognised as a Bharatham storyteller! It became mandatory in all Mahabharata

festivals to sing the Hidimbi Kuri before the start of the Koothu or the theatre cycle. Currently there are two major styles in which Hidimbi Kuri is sung. One was popularised by Muthuganesan the son of the creator Sundharamoorthy and the other was by Manivasagan's father Melpallipattu Krishnamurthy. In Hidimbi Kuri, Hidimbi narrates the entire Mahabharata in a capsular form to Kunti.

There is one probable reason why Hidimbi Kuri became so popular when it was sung first about sixty years back. This session of the storytelling gives the audience the time to remember the Epic again. And when they remember the Epic they would also remember the various renditions that they had seen over the years. This memory will also necessarily have to include memories of them having watched significant episodes of Mahabharata in their own lives. Remembering the Mahabharata and the various renditions that they had seen across the years would also become a vehicle for them to remember oneself. The very popularity of Hidimbi Kuri, created a problem in our shooting village Kazhiyur

In this village, there had been no Mahabharata festival for over twelve years and most of the younger people in the village had no experience of having watched the entire Mahabharata festival. Hence most of the younger people had only a sketchy idea of the various narratives of the Mahabharata. A lot of these younger people were employed in a nearby SIPCOT industrial unit and Sunday was their only holiday. So Hidimbi Kuri, which according to the program was to have been performed earlier was shifted to Sunday so that the youngsters would have the entire narrative of the Mahabharata in their minds before they started watching the Koothu which would start from that night onwards. While this shift in the programme helped the youngsters to engage with the Koothu better, this had other unforeseen complications

This change of schedule disrupted the intricate structure of the festival where the same episode Mahabharata would be explored in three different dimensions as a ritual, as storytelling and as Koothu

Because of this shift, it so happened that a Koothu would be performed one night while its ritual would be performed on some other day. This also led to some rituals not being performed as the sponsors of the next day would refuse to accommodate the ritual of the sponsors of the previous day as it would disturb their own programme. Now it became clear as to why the programme list was considered sacrosanct in these villages as even a minor shift in the programme could lead to enormous disruptions. The program list is the main reason as to how continuity has been maintained down the ages in a huge decentralised festival like this with multiple sponsors.

Bhimasena who was built like a mountain escaped from the burning Lacquer Palace, carrying his mother and four brothers on his shoulders. As he fearlessly emerged from the tunnel into the forest, the poet describes this image of an escaping Bhima thus “Carrying his mother and four brothers on his shoulders, Bhimasenan emerged from the tunnel and it looked as though a gigantic snake with five heads was emerging from the ground

The poet says that it looked as though a snake with multiple heads was emerging from its lair. Villiputthuraar describes Bhima coming out of the underground tunnel carrying his four brothers and his mother on his shoulders by saying that it looked as though a magnificent snake with five heads was emerging from the ground. This image resonates with the narrative of Bhima first becoming aware as to who he really was, when he emerges from Nagaloka breaking the waters of the Yamuna

After Bhima and the Pandavas escape from the burning Lacquer palace they find refuge in a forest called Hidimba Vanam. This forest, is under the control of a man eating demon called Hidimba and Hidimba becomes the first demon of the outside that Bhima has to kill.

It was a huge dense, fearsome forest called Hidimba Vanam. In this forest lived a terrible, horrifying Rakshsa called Hidimbasuran. Hidimbasuran who lived deep in the forest could sense that human beings had entered his forest as he could smell human flesh. He would feast on the lions and tigers in the forest and occasionally when human beings strayed into the forest, he relished eating them!

He had a sister called Hidimbi who was somewhere else deep in the forest and Hidimba yelled out to his sister calling “O sister Hidimbi, O sister Hidimbi!” She responded “Yes elder brother!” He could only yell as they never spoke in a normal voice. He said “O woman Hidimbi!, some humans have entered our forest, so go break their legs, kill them, drink their blood and bring them to me!” Hidimbi rushed to do her brother’s bidding and the earth rumbled as she ran.

The Pandavas in the Mahabharata, undergo three periods of life in the forest or Vanavaasam. These three periods in life are where the Pandavas reach self-realisation. Bhima begins the first journey of the Pandavas towards self-realisation

As Hidimbi rushes towards the humans, from a distance she sees five sleeping figures and a strong virile man guarding them “Who are you, why have you all come into this forest at this

time of the night?" so asked a strong rakshashi, auburn-haired, appearing like a divine lady who resided in the forest. She whose sharp teeth from the red lips shone like moon's rays dispelling the darkness, asked Bhimasenan

When Hidimbi sees the five sleeping figures and the man guarding them she is struck by Bhima's presence. She thinks "I do not know who he is, but he looks very handsome!" Hidimbi asks the seated Bhima "Sir, might I know who you are? Bhima is affronted by her temerity in asking as to who he was and replies arrogantly "Do you think I will reply to an impertinent question from a woman? First tell me who you are!" Hidimbi replies saying "This is a forest dreaded by even the Devas, but you have entered it fearlessly. This forest is called Hidimba Vanam, ruled by a fearsome Rakshasa called Hidimba, who is my brother" My brother could smell human flesh and asked me to kill you, drink your blood and bring your bodies to him. That is why I have come!"

Hidimbi who was born with three breasts and it was predicted at her birth that the moment she saw her true love in her life her third breast would disappear. When Hidimbi sees Bhima her third breast magically disappears and now it becomes her task to save her lover Bhima from her brother Hidimba.

Hidimbi said "I do not know how many lives we have lived together. But the moment I saw you I was immediately attracted by you!" Bhima says angrily "What are you blabbering, you woman?" Hidimbi says "What is the use of killing you? I came here to kill you at the bidding of my brother. You with shoulders beautiful like two mountains, chest adorned with beautiful long necklace of precious stones. How can I express my desire, as girls with surging, adorable breasts feel shy, reticent to express burning desire to their lover?" Hidimbi pleads with her brother for Bhima's life by saying that she was in love with him. Hidimba replies angrily asking "How can a lioness who lives in the forest be in love with a deer? He flung his sister aside and rushed to Bhima asking "Who are you and how have you seduced my sister?"

He rushed to Bhima, clenched his fist and hit Bhima with a strong blow on his shoulder. Hidimbi who has fallen in love with Bhima tries to stop her brother from killing him. Hidimba and Bhima fight furiously while the four Pandavas and their mother Kunti are fast asleep. When they wake up they see their brother Bhima, fighting with a huge demon. Arjuna picks up his arrow to kill the demon, but Dharmaraja stops him as he can see that Bhima has the upper hand in the fight against the demon.

The cannibal with sharp nails punched Bhima, Hidimba the eater of human flesh! Charged on Bhima, unrestrained, and with flaring tempers, they grappled with each other. Hitting the other with uprooted trees, dashing their broad shoulders against each other, like two clouds in the skies amidst roaring thunder! Hidimba uprooted a huge tree to charge Bhima with and Hidimbi pleads with her brother not to kill Bhima. But Bhima uprooted a bigger tree!

Hidimbi wonders at Bhima's strength as she had only seen Rakshasas uprooting trees and is surprised to see a human do it as easily. In the fierce fight that follows, Bhima finally kills Hidimba like a fierce lion killing a raging, maddened elephant! When Hidimba is killed dawn breaks in the forest. He left the corpse of that valiant rakshasa in the forest once it became lifeless, leaving it as a feast to the birds, in the night. And as if lights were lit for the birds feast, the sun rose lighting up the great eastern skies.

“The sun has risen over the eastern peak dispelling darkness, ushering in the day. Honey filled flowers in blossom, celestials and kings are approaching you, awoken from your slumber!

Interestingly, a song invoking Vishnu to awake is sung immediately after Bhima kills Hidimba. This song, called Thirupalliezucchi, is important as it is a song of awakening which is also repeated when Arjuna defeats his own shadow self the Gandharva called Angurabharanan/Chitrarathan. This defeating of the Gandharvan, Angurabharanan or Chitrarathan, is the beginning of Arjuna's journey towards self realisation. The sun rises in the morning and the poet describes this spectacle saying that all the animals who were Hidimba's preys rejoiced. The wolves and the dogs rushed to feast on Hidimba's body and the sun rose as though to dispel the darkness in their lives.

Hidimbi proposes to Bhima and their entire romance is treated like a comedy of a shy man running away from a headstrong woman to whom he is naturally attracted to Hidimbi realises that the only way to get Bhima to accept their love is by gaining his mother Kunti's trust.

Hidimbi says “In her childhood, a girl is dependent on her parents support, when she become a young woman, she needs the support of her husband. Till that day, her brother was her protection and Bhima had just killed him and now Bhima had to be the one to protect her.”

Bhima went straight upto his mother Kunti and said that they had to leave the forest immediately. Kunti first wants to know as to how they landed in the forest in the first place, but Bhima who is in a hurry says that he will explain that later. Now Hidimbi realised that she could attain her desire only with the help of Kunti as only a woman can understand what was

in another woman's heart. So she went straight upto Kunti, fell at her feet saying "Mother In Law! Please give us your blessings."

Kunti, surprised by Hidimbi asks as to how a union was possible between a Rakshasi and a human being?

Hidimbi says that she was a Rakshasi, only in her physical appearance, while she at heart she was a forest Goddess, Salakadankudi, who knew the nature of time and she could predict the future. She tells Bhima that after listening to her fortune telling, Bhima could decide about their marriage. A curious Kunti intervenes at this point and tells Bhima that they should listen to Hidimbi's prophesy before leaving

Hidimbi can see that Kunti is worried about the future of her sons when already numerous attempts have been made on their lives by their cousins the Kauravas. Hidimbi says she knows the past, the present and the future and she tells Kunthi that her children are destined for greatness. She narrates and sings the entire Bharatham starting from the Lunar dynasty till the point where Bhima has killed her brother Hidimba. Hidimbi continues her narrative of the future and she tells Kunti that hearing the future would set her fears at rest. But she also tells Kunti that at the end of her narration Kunti will forget all that Hidimbi had prophesied

Hidimbi begins her prophesy by invoking all the deities in the seven heavens. Mother who is beyond Time! I, Hidimbi invoke you to foretell the future. I seek the protection of the God of the clan, Ganesha, to tell the past, present and future I seek the protection of the God of the clan, Ganesha, to tell the past, present and future

Kunti is impressed with the invocation songs that Hidimbi sings and she realises that she is no ordinary forest dweller. Hidimbi says that she is now going to narrate the genealogy of the Lunar dynasty to which the Pandavas belonged. As she is narrating the genealogy of the Lunar dynasty, Hidimbi does not leave out the name of a single King which impresses Kunti tremendously. So the romantic comedy between Hidimbi and Bhima continues with now Kunti speaking up for Hidimbi. Kunti tells Bhima "Son! Are you calling this woman a forest dweller? She has not missed the name of a single king from our dynasty when she was recounting our family tree!"

Hidimbi continues the narrative of the Lunar dynasty leading up to the birth of Bhishma/ Viduman and the death of Chitrangada and Vichitravirya leaving no progeny behind. Bhishma of course had taken a vow of celibacy and he rejects Sathyavati's request that he propagate the dynasty which was now issueless

Through the blessings of Veda Vyasa a blind son, Dhritarashtra was born to Ambika, your husband Pandu was born to her sister Ambalika and a son Vidura was born to Ambika's friend. All three children reached adulthood. The blind Dhritarashtra was crowned the king, the white skinned Pandu was made the General and Vidura was appointed as the Prime Minister. Hidimbi continues describing the birth of three children Dhritarashtra, Pandu and Vidura and Kunti is impressed with Hidimbi's deep knowledge of the past

Due to the Sage Kindhama's curse Pandu could not beget children. Through the blessings of Yama, Vayu, Indra and the Ashwini twins the five Pandavas were born. Hidimbi speaks on the curse on King Pandu that he cannot have children and describes how the five Pandavas were born. Hidimbi says "Mother in law! When you were troubled by your childlessness you remembered Durvasa's blessings. In your childhood you served Sage Durvasa and he pleased with you taught you a mantra! Chanting the mantra taught by Durvasa you invoked Yama and Dharmaraja was born

Here Hidimbi suppresses the story of Karna's birth as it was a divine secret which could not be revealed. If the Pandavas knew that Karna was their eldest brother, will the Great War take place? Hidimbi of course does not speak about the birth of Karna and his current identity as if she had said that Great War which was destined to happen would have been stopped by Kunti

"Mother in law, hearing that you had given birth to children in the forest, Gandhari, who lived in Hastinapura felt jealous saying "Kunti who came after me as the daughter in law, has given birth to a child before me" Gandhari's pounded the foetus in her womb! The hundred sons and a daughter were born not from her womb but from pots through the intervention of Vyasa. When she hit her own stomach in jealousy, she aborted and her uterus dropped out of her womb. And the aborted foetuses were placed in hundred and one pots and a hundred sons and a daughter were born

Hidimbi speaks about the time having come to name the future king and of Dhritarashtra taking the correct decision of anointing Dharmaraja as the crown prince

The people are of course happy with this but Duryodhana is unhappy and with the help of Shakuni manages to poison Dhritarashtra's mind. It is at that time, Dharmaraja was anointed as the crown prince. Your wicked, jealous cousins itching to destroy the five of you plotted to kill you at Kashi. Thinking of ways to kill you, they sent you to Kashi. By building a grand

palace of Lacquer, Duryodhana tried to burn and kill you! The six of you escaped from the burning Lacquer Palace and reached this forest

Was all that I narrated true? These are all events which happened in the past! Now I will prophesise what is going to happen in the future. Thinking of ways to kill you, Duryodhana sent you to Kashi and by building a grand palace of Lacquer, he tried to burn and kill you! Hidimbi says that now she will narrate the future of the Pandavas. Hearing this she says will destroy all of Kunti's fears

You will stay in Salihotra Vanam for some time and from here you will journey ahead disguised as Brahmins you will go to a village called Munnoormangalam or Vethriyamanagaram. The city would be terrorized by a demon called Bakasuran

My dearest Bhima will kill this Rakshasa like he killed my brother Hidimba. From there you will leave still in disguise as Brahmins to the Panchala Kingdom, where there would be competition of 'Bending the Bow' Arjuna Raja would bend this bow, a feat, which no one before him could do. The princess of Panchala will garland Arjuna Raja in disguise as a Brahmin as her husband. All five of you will get married to her. Again you will return to Hastinapura. You will be given a forest as the share of your kingdom.

The intractable forest land given to you will become fertile once you enter the forest and you will establish your capital there. Even the King of the Devas would feel envious that his capital was nowhere as splendid as your capital and for that reason you will name your capital Indraprasta and rule the kingdom justly. You will rule wisely from Indraprasta! The beautiful Narada will raise a question! You shall rule from Indraprasta. The beautiful Narada will raise a question!

Once Narada comes to visit the Pandavas at Indraprasta and declares that he had met their father King Pandu who is still to reach heaven as his son had not performed the Rajasuyayagam. Dharmaraja on Krishna's advice decides to perform the Rajasuyayagam which is the next decisive moment in the epic, which will lead the Pandavas on to their third Vanavaasam. Life has its own ups and downs and that is what entails living. The level to which you have risen in life will be the level you will shortly fall.

Your wicked cousins will attend the Rajasuyayagam and Duryodhana will trip and fall in the assrmbly. Draupadi will laugh saying that she had thought that only the father was blind and

says that maybe the blind king's son was blind too! Duryodhana will be offended by Draupadi's laughter. You will be a victim of the schemes of your wicked cousins. You will lose all wealth to Shakuni's cunning game of dice; you will lose all your wealth, your kingdom and your brothers. Dharmaraja will be made to wager himself also in the game, by the wicked men! He will lose this game also! All of you will become the slaves of the arrogant Duriyan. The wicked ones will now make Dharmaraja place the Goddess as the wager! Dharmaraja will lose the Goddess Draupadi also in the game! At that time the wicked ones will drag Draupadi to the assembly and try to disrobe her. Ducchāsana will try to disrobe the divine Panchali! You will lose all wealth to Shakuni's cunning game of dice. All of you will become the slaves of the arrogant Duriyan

The Pandavas on their third Vanavaasam live in six forests before reaching Kamiyaka vanam, where Veda Vyasa meets them. Vyasa asks Draupadi to invoke Surya to get the Akshayapatram, with which she can feed the thousands of guests who would visit the Pandavas in the forest. You will be gifted the Akshayapatra or the ever full pot of food from Sun! Arjuna's severe Tapas will get you the Pasupata weapon. Assuming different identities you will reach Virata's city in disguise! She continues the narrative with the Pandavas spending their thirteenth year of Vanavaasam in the Virata Kingdom in disguise, thus successfully completing their thirteen years of Vanavaasam. In the battle to rescue the captured cattle, you will attain great success against the Kauravas!

You will take the Virata king's daughter Uthirai as bride for Arjuna's son Abhimanyu. As a gesture of gratitude, the Virata King would give his daughter in marriage to Arjuna's son Abhimanyu. He will also give a city called Upalaaviyam as a gift to you. It is when you are staying at Upalaaviyam that you will send the omni-present Krishna as your messenger to negotiate getting your kingdom back from the wicked Duryodhana. Krishna will also go as your messenger, stay at Vidura Azhwar's house and partake his wonderful dinner there. The next day he will go to Duryodhana's court and ask for your kingdom which will be refused, he will ask for half the kingdom which will also be refused, he will ask for five villages even which will be refused. Hidimbi finishes her narration by declaring the final victory of the Pandavas and the coronation of Dharmaraja. The later narrative of the Mahabharata is not narrated by Hidimbi, nor is it performed in any of the Mahabharata festivals. She now says that Bhima will also get married to her and they will have a son called Ghatotthajan

Bhima who is secretly in love with Hidimbi now makes a weak protest to getting married to her. He says that he cannot marry Hidimbi as his elder brother Dharmaraja was yet to be married. Dharmaraja who knows that Bhima was secretly in love with Hidimbi says that if the elder brother consents, then the younger brother could marry before the elder brother. With Dharmaraja and Kunti's blessings Bhima and Hidimbi get married simply in the forest. Hidimbi had magical powers and she just reached out her hand and two garlands appeared.

She kept one of herself and gave the other to Bhima. They get married in a simple fashion in the forest just by exchanging garlands.

Overcome by desire they were wedded together, in the midst of large mountains, where streams as sweet as honey run, where creepers with their dense growth provide cover, where there were large orchards, and surrounded by fragrance of kasturi or musk deer they lived together. Now when the Pandavas were living in the forest called Salihotra Vanam, Bhima and Hidimbi were lost in their love for each other and Hidimbi conceived a child.

Colour as the darkness of night, mountain like shoulders and bristling body hair on the back of the body, with mouth capable of creating powerful roar, so was born Ghatotkacha, or the one whose head was bald

A child was born and the new born child grew instantly. The son was covered with body hair hard as iron bristles. He had a mountain on one side as his shoulder and another on the other side. While his body was covered with hair like iron bristles, his head was absolutely bald with not even a single hair. That is why he was named Ghatotkacha or the bald headed one!

Veda Vyasa makes his next decisive intervention in the Epic right now. Right through the Epic, Vyasa is in constant dialogue with both the Kauravas and the Pandavas. While he keeps warning the Kauravas that the path they are on will only lead to their destruction he keeps counselling and consoling the Pandavas on their predicament.

Vyasa asks the Pandavas to remain in hiding longer as Duryodhana's spies are still looking for the Pandavas. He tells them that in the forest, they would not be able to hear of any news of what was happening in the Kingdom and asks them to shift to a nearby village called Ekachakra or Munnoormangalam in Tamil, where they should live in disguise as Brahmins.