

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

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Lecture 18

THE KILLING OF BAKASURA [37 MINUTES]

“A true philosophical system is not to be looked upon as a soulless jointing of hypotheses; it is a living fabric ... It is not to be regarded as the special property of academic philosophy-mongers, to be hacked up by them into technical views, but is to be regarded as a form of life and is to be treated as theme of literature of infinite interest to humanity”
Krishnachandra Bhattacharyya

After the birth of Ghatotkacha to Bhima and Hidimbi, Veda Vyasa makes his next decisive entrance into the epic. Veda Vyasa appeared before them and the Pandava bowed to him. He said “O Pandavas, it is better that you remain in hiding for some more time. But you should not stay in the forest as you would not know news of what is happening in the country. There is a village called Munnoortrumangalam near by which is also known as Vethirakiyam” It’s a village where only Brahmins live, hence it called Vethirakiyam Vethirayar means Brahmins and because only Brahmins lived in this village it was called Vethiriaya Maha Nagaram

Please go and stay in the village Vethiriaya Maha Nagaram. A time will come when you will be able to reveal yourself” he said “Please take a bath in this magical lake so that you will be transformed into looking like Brahmins” he said. Bhima takes leave of his fully grown son, Ghatotkacha who promises his father that Bhima just had to think of him and Ghatotkacha would immediately appear by his side. The Pandavas and Kunti leave the forest.

On the way to Ekachakra or Munnoortrumangalam, they, who were kings capable of ruling the earth, donned the disguise of Brahmins learned in shastras and Vedas, chanting mantras they reached Vethirakiya Mahanagar

The Pandavas in disguise as Brahmins walk chanting sutras and mantras on their way, they are on their way to Vethirakiyam also known as Munnoortrumangalam. Seeing guests coming to their village, all the Brahmins of the village competed with each other to invite the guests to stay in their houses. Kunti and the Pandavas stay in the house of a young widow in Munnoortrumangalam. Every day, the Brahmins in the village would send three meals a day

to the Pandavas and Kunti. Kunti would give half the food to Bhima as he was eternally hungry and would feed the other Pandavas and herself with the remaining half

When the five Brahmins together with their mother reached the city, the people looking at the guests competed with each other to welcome them enthusiastically, showing great courtesy, the performers of Yagna holding the fiery Agni

We do not call serving food to friends and relatives as “Virundhu”. It is only feeding totally unknown strangers which is called Virundhu. Virundhu means something new, something novel. Manivasagan defined the difference between the Tamil word “Virundhu” which means feast and being hospitable. Virundhu, he says is when one feeds strangers totally unknown to oneself. This, in this tradition, he said has more value than when one is being hospitable by providing food to one’s friends and family

Kunti is embarrassed at imposing on the generosity of the Brahmins of the village and she says that henceforth they will only eat one meal a day, given as alms. Kunti tells Bhima that Yogi’s or ascetics would eat only one meal a day and says that they should eat food given as alms. When Bhima agreed, Kunti took a huge pot from the house, cleaned it and gave it to Bhima. It was Bhima’s duty to beseech food as alms every day. Bhima, the physically strongest of the five Pandavas is deputed to go out each day to beseech food from their neighbours. Bhima just went to four houses to beg and his huge pot was filled up. The Brahmins were so generous that the pot was easily filled. Bhima took the food and gave it to his mother. Kunti spread a white cloth on the ground poured the food on the cloth and gave half of the entire food to Bhima saying “Bhima, this is your share”. She made four portions of the remaining food and gave it to Dharman, Arjunan, Nakulan and Sahadevan. Kunti scraped the leftover food on the cloth and that was all she ate. Bhima’s hunger is not satisfied even when he is being given half the food received as alms. So he gets a bright idea that he will ask the village potter to make a much larger pot so that they will get more food. The interaction between the potter and Bhima in this rendering is very comical, but it also reveals the vulnerable underside of Bhima’s external tough appearance

The potter refuses to make the large pot Bhima asks for even with Bhima pestering him. As chance would have it, one early morning when the potter had gone to the riverbank to collect clay for making pots the wheels of his cart gets stuck in a rut.

The next day, the potter went to collect sand for making pots on the riverbank with his cart. He filled his cart with sand and tied his oxen but his wheels got stuck in a rut. He realised that

he would be able to drive only when somebody lifted the wheels out of the rut. But as it was very early in the morning, there was no one nearby. In the distance, the Udayar noticed a man sitting and called out to him saying “Younger brother please help me” The moment Bhima heard the call for ‘Help’ he came running. Who came running? It was Bhima

Bhimasena used to rise early in the morning for doing Pranayama and his Yoga practice. For a human being days are not numbered by the days lived, but rather of the number of intakes of breath. Bhima who is the son of Vayu can hold his breath for quite a long time. In Indian medical systems according to Manivasagan, a person’s life is not calculated in terms of number of days of life lived. Rather he says each one of our lives is determined by the number of breaths that one intakes. That is why, he said, adept Yogi’s live much longer as they have mastered control on holding their own breath

The ever helpful Bhima rushes to the potter’s aid and pretends to be angry with him and asks him to go home. The scared potter reluctantly leaves the cart behind and reaches home with his oxen. Once the Udayar left, Bhimasena made a turban of his upper garment placed it on his head and carried the cart on his head. The entire cart with a huge load of sand!

When the potter reached home his wife asked him as to what had happened to his cart as he had returned only with his oxen. As the potter was explaining to his wife, Bhima called him out from the street asking him to come out. The scared potter peered out of the window to see Bhima carrying his cart with its entire load of sand on his head. Bhima asked the potter as to where he should unload the sand. Bhima unloaded the sand where the potter wanted and finally the potter came out. Bhima pleaded with the potter saying “I am begging you shamelessly! Please make me a huge pot, as I am unable to withstand my hunger!” The potter also apologized to Bhima saying “I was wrong about you yesterday!” You are a very strong man able to lift an entire loaded cart! A strong man such as you needs to eat more!” The potter agrees to make the large pot as big as he can make for Bhima. The ever hungry Bhima asks the potter not to take too much trouble for him, but just asks him to make a pot with the entire cartload of sand!

One of the names of Bhima is Vrikodhara as he had digestive fires in his stomach which made him eternally hungry. One of the epithets used to describe Bhima was “Wolf belly” because of his perpetual hunger. The other epithet used for Bhima was of a person who had a belly of a snake because however much he had his stomach would still be flat. The potter makes the gigantic pot requested by Bhima and the generous people of Ekachakra/Munoormangalam provide food even filling that enormous pot. Even then Bhima was hungry. One day a hungry Bhima hears a woman lamenting her fate and wants to help her

“Did I pluck the flowers on the verge of turning unripe fruits on trees? Did I earn the curse of young girls? Did I put to grief people, collecting debt? Did I infect the path with thorns? Did I harm my mother at birth? Did I cheat anyone taking their money? Did I utter mouthful of lies and grab frivolous treasures? Did I insult the celestials? Or did I disrespect saints? Did I drive people away like a fatigued man? What did I do to them? Did I get high on my ego and indulge in murder and theft? Did I earn the label of a miser? Pardon my mistakes Oh Shiva, Sivakami’s husband, and my father Nataraja who resides at Chidamabarm!

The Pandavas were staying in the house of the woman who was bemoaning her fate. Kunti meets her to enquire as to what was troubling her. The great Kuru princes assumed a disguise, journeyed through a large forest and came to dwell in the city, in a prosperous house whose lady became dear to the kind Kunti. The beautiful and pious rich lady cried non-stop with tears of sorrow flowing down from her eyes suffering like a flower creeper lit by fire, over the cruelty of Bakasura. Kunti sees the woman crying and wants to know the reason for her tears. The woman laments by saying “Who knows what harm I did to anyone in any former birth of mine?”

She tells Kunti that there is a forest near their city called Ekachakra Vanam. “Nobody knows from where this dangerous demon called Bakasura came to Ekachakra Vanam to torment them” Now she learns about Bakasura, the second demon of the outside that Bhima had to kill

One line repeated often in the storytelling sessions is as to the reason why everyone has to go on a Vanavaasam, or live in the forest, periodically. Here it is said, one has to kill the demons both within themselves and outside themselves.

“The one who ends the lives of living beings, even that Yama would be scared to face him such an asura came into this city, murdered many families in large numbers, massacring them on the streets. My father and the other Brahmins were terrified, pained by his arrival, and out of fear voluntarily, their red hands rose above their heads, folded in surrender”

Usually everybody would be afraid of meeting the God of Death, Yama. But Bakasura was so huge and powerful that even Yama was scared of Bakasura! Everyday Bakasura would enter their city killing people and burning houses and the city elders were worried that if this continued one day their very city would be totally destroyed.

The elders pondered over a solution to stop Bakasura from entering the city, killing people randomly and destroying property. They decided that if they took food directly themselves to Bakasura, he would not enter their city. They decided that each day, one household in the city would supply a cartload of food, two oxens and human being who would drive the cart as the sacrifice to Bakasura. So the Brahmins of the village met the Rakshasa and said “Bakasura! If you keep killing people indiscriminately there might come a time that you will not find any food. Why should you trouble yourself looking for food when we are willing to deliver the food directly to you?”

That particular day it was the turn of the widow to send her only son as the human sacrifice to Bakasura. As she had no other support in life, the woman was lamenting, bemoaning her fate. She tells Kunti “Mother, listen! I am overcome with grief when I think of offering as sacrifice, my only son and the man of the house.” The woman said that it was the turn of her house to feed Bakasura and cries that she has to send her only son as the human sacrifice. In the storytelling sessions while songs from Villibharatham would be sung, the narrative to elaborate these cryptic songs would be from Nallapillai Bharatham

The beautiful song sung at this juncture is really dense, cryptic poetry. Having heard the lady of the house speak, Kunti daughter of the blemish less Yadava clan with whom the lady of the house had a pure friendship, said a few words of consolation to make her feel better. Kunti says “A warrior comparable to the immortal Hanuman is one of my sons, who would fight the demon who roams around in the dark of the night. He will break his skull and tear his entrails out of his body!” Kunti says that she has five sons each stronger than the other and she will send one of one of them to take the food to Baka. The widow is shocked by this and says it will be improper for her to send guests living in her house to be killed by Bakasura. Kunti reassures her by saying she will send her second son Bhima, who was as strong as Hanuman himself. Kunti reassures her by saying that her son was as powerful as Anjaneya and says that she will send one of her five sons instead of her son. Once they heard, that offer of one of the sons ready for sacrifice, she felt like the parents, who did Tapas to Shiva and were blessed with a son, the invincible Markandeya whom even Yama could not destroy! After being reassured by Kunti, the woman felt happy, stopped crying and started cooking food for Bhima to take to Bakasura

In this one line Villiputthuraar, invokes an entire narrative of Markandeya Purana of a couple who worshipped Shiva to be blessed of a couple who worshipped Shiva to be blessed with a son called Markandeya, whom even Yama could not kill! Kunti invokes this story to the widow to explain that Bhima like Shiva had protected Markandeya would also protect her son

from death. Kunti invokes this story to the widow to explain that Bhima like Shiva had protected Markandeya would also protect her son from death

This is one interesting feature of Villibharatham where one terse four line verse could encapsulate multiple narratives, stretching across multiple epochs of time. Villibharatham just invokes the Mahabharata but does not claim to narrate it. Each rendering of the same verse could be vastly different as different storytellers could choose to highlight a different narrative from the same verse.

The widow is convinced by Kunti's arguments and Bhima is also happy that he will get to eat the food meant for Bakasura. Kunti called Bhima and said "Son, please have a bath and get ready. A feast is being prepared for you!" Bhima was absolutely elated hearing the word 'feast' as he had seen a feast being cooked and did not realize that it was for him! Bhima rushed to get ready. Kunti said "My son, after feasting, you also have to kill a Rakshasa called Bakasura who lives in Ekachakra Forest!"

Usually in most villages as the story teller is narrating this episode, two actors who will play Bhima and Bakasura will be donning on their makeup and the cart to take the food to Bakasura would be decorated

The moment the Bharatham session ends the actors playing Bhima and Baka would go to each house in the village to collect the food cooked in their houses for this ritual. By cooking food for Bhima to take to Bakasura, the festival villages don on their next avatar of Ekachakra or Munnotrumangalam, and all the villagers themselves, become characters from the Mahabharata. In Kazhiyur, the ritual started much later in the evening.

Bhima got ready for the feast, wearing fine clothes and everyone in the village blessed him as he climbed on the cart bearing food saying "May victory be yours!"

As long as Bhima was driving through the village, he drove the cart at a leisurely, patient manner, but when he crossed the village borders, he started racing towards the opponent he had to kill. One could not say whether the cart was flying or moving on the ground. The racing cart created a dust storm in its wake!

Now take 'Bakasura Vadham'- what is happening here? Bhima is going to kill Bakasura-so what do the people of the village do? They would clean up a bullock cart; spread a clean

white cloth on it. Now the actor playing Bhima would drive through the village. A cartload of food, two oxen and a human sacrifice- this is what the village had promised to give to Bakasura as food. As Bhima drives through the village every household in the village would bring the delicacies cooked in their own house of Dosa, Vada, sweets and savories and place it in Bhima's cart to take to Baka! Bhima drives this cart

He appeared like a strong spherical Sun that had come down to earth, to the Brahmins who looked at him on the streets, to the delight of their eyes. Bhima walked on the forest path, shimmering in the heat, creating a mirage, looked up trying to locate Bakasura as if he was Trivikrama [Or Vishnu who measured the entire Universe with just three steps] who was measuring the world

Bhima searches for Bakasura and sees a river flowing in the distance. He sees Bakasura sitting next to the river. Bakasura, who has killed numerous animals in his life is seated on the heaped up bones of these animals- that was his throne on which he was seated! Around him were dogs and wolves ready to eat the scraps of food he would throw to them- these were his ministers! A king seated on a throne surrounded by Ministers in his court still needed a ceremonial umbrella over his head, the crows and vultures flying over his head became his umbrella!

Bakasura was running a small kingdom of his own there! Like a king on a Simhasana, he was seated on a mound of bones devoid of any flesh. Overhead were the vultures creating shadow like the ceremonial umbrella. Singing his praises were the jackals! People who see the terrifying face of Bakasura would be scared, But Bhima was calm and happy and thought "If I kill him now, the food would get cold and spoiled!" and decided to first eat the food before killing Bakasura! Bakasura was fuming, waiting impatiently for his food. Smoke billowed out of his eyes with fire emanating from his mouth

For this ritual the villagers would cook food in their own houses for Bhima to take to Baka and the actors playing Bhima and Baka would travel from each house collecting food

Once the entire food is collected the actors playing Bhima and Bakasura would finally reach the Dharmaraja/Draupadi Amman temple where Bhima would finally kill Bakasura. Usually food from the city would reach Baka early, but on this day it had not reached him well after lunchtime. Bhima, as he did not know the path to Ekachakra Forest had been delayed searching for the path

Finally Bakasura sees the cart approaching, and Bhima also stops the cart on seeing Bakasura. The moment that Bhima stopped the cart, he released the two oxen, which rushed back to the village. Till now no oxen sent with the food cart to Bakasura had ever made their way back. Now Bhima is deep in thought, his question being whether he should eat first before fighting Baka, or should he fight him first before eating? His problem was not with fighting, but eating the fresh food first! So Bhima starts gobbling up the food as fast as he can

Bakasura had seen the cart approaching and had also seen Bhima releasing the oxen and feasting on the food. He is amazed that a Brahmin boy was gobbling up food meant for a tiger which Bhima, a small cat could easily polish off! Bakasura rushed angrily towards Bhima. Baka's clenched fist hit Bhima's body, his neck helping the fistfuls of food that Bhima had swallowed, to go smoothly into Bhima's stomach! Bakasura angrily screamed punching Bhima "Where will you go? I will kill you and eat your flesh, along with my food that you have eaten!"

Baka solves Bhima's only problem of not having brought water to swallow his food by hitting Bhima on his back! And Bhima decides to continue eating while Bakasura's punches helped him swallow it! The more Baka punches Bhima, the faster Bhima is able to swallow as it feels to Bhima that Baka is gently shaking him! Bhima eats all the food not leaving a morsel behind!

Now Bhima and Baka fought with their hands and legs locked with each other's, valiant as two terrible lions, they dashed their heads. They beat their chests and clasping each others' shoulders, they clashed and wrestled furiously! They then fought, uprooting trees and hurling huge boulders against the other! It was a heroic battle! Bhima fought furiously with Bakasura, finally killing him by severing his head! Bhima then bathed in the river. Now because people should believe him when he said that he had killed Bakasura, he took the severed head and placed it in the cart.

When Bhima returns to the village after killing Bakasura the villagers run in fear thinking that it is Baka who has returned. Till this point of time, no one who had taken food to Baka had returned alive and the villagers naturally assume Bhima to be Baka. Bhima runs after them asking them to stop, which only makes them run even in faster in fear. Seeing the people running in fear, Bhimasena rushed after them shouting "Please do not run!". The villagers' only started running faster Bhima ran faster ahead of them, trying to stop them!

After stopping the fleeing Brahmins, Bhima announced that the Rakshasa who was terrorizing them, Bakasura was dead. All the Brahmins rejoiced hearing this. In gratitude all the Brahmins of the village said that as Bhima, who himself was in disguise as a Brahmin, must definitely be a divine incarnation as had killed Bakasura who was the nemesis of their city

They lauded Bhima and sang Bhima's praises. From that day onwards, Bhima was given a royal feast each day in every house in the city! And the Pandavas were now living a luxurious life in Munnootrumangalam. But, in the outside world, everybody believed that the Pandavas were burnt to death in the Lacquer Palace. The people who were most troubled by this was the Panchala King Drupada and his son Dhristadyumnan.

The death of Bakasura is the point in the festival when the theatre cycle also starts. And now the festival takes over the lives of its entire audiences. From this day on, each day's enactments of ritual, storytelling and theatre could go up to twenty hours and all the villagers live in Vanavaasam away from their own homes, in the various performing spaces spread around the village. In this period of self-imposed Vanavaasam, the villagers would listen to the stories that the Pandavas listened to on their own Vanavaasam

Usually in most villages the Koothu 'Vil Valaippu' or the 'Bending of the Bow' where Arjuna attends the Swayamvaram or the ceremony where Draupadi will choose her own husband would be the first play enacted. In some villages, the childhood feats of Krishna could be enacted in a Koothu called 'Jalagiridai'. In Kazhiyur, the first Koothu enacted was 'Vil Valaippu' or the 'Bending of the Bow'