

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

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Lecture 6

POTTURAJA AND THE ANTI- WAR NATURE OF THE FESTIVAL

“From Asokavarma descended the powerful spotless race of the Pallavas which resembled the descent of Ganga on earth as it purified the entire world”
Kasakudi copper plate grant of Nandivarma Pallava

A series of calamitous wars fought between the Pallavas and the Chalukyas seem to be the earliest strongest memory of these regions and hence of this anti-war festival itself. Four cities are connected intrinsically with this Mahabharata tradition; Kanchipuram, the capital of the Pallavas, Senji the place where Draupadi was born again out of fire, to kill a demon Rochakan or Asulamasuran who was terrorizing the people, Badami the capital of the invading Chalukya armies which in the narratives of the region is remembered as a demon, Vatapi, and finally Mamallapuram which was a monument commissioned by the Pallavas to commemorate the temporary victory of the Pallavas over the Chalukyas.

The narrative of Mamallapuram starts simply enough with a story of a poor Brahmin, Pundarika, who comes to Mamallapuram to cross the seven seas to reach Vaikuntam, the abode of his deity Vishnu. In a pond in Mamallapuram, he sees a lovely lotus which he thought would be the apt gift to his deity. As he steps into the pond, a crocodile grabs him by his legs and all that Pundarika could do was to pray to his deity, Vishnu, to save him. When the crocodile hears the prayer, it transforms into the king Mahendravarman who recounts his narrative to Pundarika.

He says he was a king who was cursed to being a crocodile due to his own vanity. He says that once he was taken to Indraloka, or the land of the Devas and was amazed by the amazing sculptures there and wanted to rival that work in his own kingdom! Due to his extraordinary obsession with sculpture, he neglected his duties as a king, being of feeding and protecting his people; he requests Pundarika to meet his son Narasimhavarman and inform him that the curse on him was redeemed by the actions of his son. After saying this, the king Mahendravarman disappears.

With the narrative of Mahendravarman another narrative is alluded to here; the narrative of Gajendra Moksha, where Vishnu saves his devotee, Gajendra, the King of the Elephants by slaying the crocodile that had grabbed his legs. This narrative of Gajendra Moksham is a recurring motif in Pallava iconography and in the Mahabharata festivals as it is celebrated currently. The narrative of Gajendra Moksham has philosophical overtones with the crocodile

representing ignorance or 'avidya' as the tradition calls it, which has to be slayed by Vishnu for the elephant to realise who it actually was.

In Pallava iconography of this all the nuances of this narrative are alluded to making each narrative frieze a 'poly-narrative'. This play which the Pallava sculptors and their King Mahendravarman, who also called himself 'Vichitra Chitthan' or a 'strange thinker' will be elaborated more in the next session. Mahendravarman was dramatist, musician and a great patron of the arts like his counterpart King Pulikesi of the Chalukyas. Mahendravarman, his son Narasimhavarman and their descendants launched a new chapter in sculptural traditions, where an image or a frieze, had an excess of meaning which could never be reduced to a single narrative. This tremendous sense of play in image making seems to end with the Pallavas.

Returning to Pundarika's narrative, once Mahendravarman disappears, a bemused Pundarika goes towards the sea wondering how he was going to cross the seven seas as he could not swim. At this point an old man approaches him and says that he can dry up the ocean by emptying it with his water vessel, but first he wants Pundarika to cook some food for him as he was very hungry!

Pundarika did not believe that the old man could dry out the ocean, but he remembers that Mahendravarman was cursed because he neglected to feed his people, so he goes to cook food for the old man.

When he returns, he is surprised to find the old man missing, but an idol of Varaha, the wild boar incarnation of Vishnu, the rescuer of the earth and all its knowledge from the depths of the Oceans, standing where he had left the old man.

Pundarika realized that the old man must have been Vishnu and realized also that he need not swim across the seven seas to Vaikuntam as he had already met his deity; but Pundarika was surprised by the iconography of Varaha's form.

All Varaha icons look east towards the direction of the sea from where Varaha had rescued the earth from the demon Hiranyaksha, but the Varaha of Mamallapuram looked West!

So Pundarika asks him as to why he was looking in the opposite direction when Varaha replies that shortly, he will be installed in Kanchipuram, the direction he was looking at.

To re-stress this narrative, it is repeated two more times with 2 other people, Narada Muni and Agastya Rishi visiting Mamallapuram, and being surprised by the gaze of Varaha and asking him the same question. Varaha gives the same reply to both Narada and Agastya.

The story is a cryptic reference to the defeat of Mahendravarman by the Chalukya army. It seems it took Narasimhavarman 7 to 14 years to regroup, build an army and wrest Kanchipuram back from the Chalukyas.

The rock panel sculpture variously known as “The Descent of the Ganges” or ‘Arjuna’s Penance’ is also said to be celebration of Narasimha Varman’s victory over the Chalukyas

In a lot of Pallava depictions of Vishnu in his cosmic sleep, where the earth has been submerged in a deluge, there will be image of Pundarika standing behind Vishnu. This can be seen both in the Shore Temple at Mamallapuram and the later temple built in the Vijayanagar period which is located next to pond called ‘Pundarika Kulam’ or the pond of Pundarika, and is located in the middle ground between the Shore Temple and the frieze ‘The Descent of the Ganges’

The Epics, the Mahabharata and the Ramayana, while being discourses on Ethics, are also simultaneously a vehicle for the people to remember the memories of the region.

If there were five caves near a village, people would say that these were the caves that the Pandavas stayed in their life in the forests. On listening to the story closely, one would find a local memory connected with these caves which would have been forgotten if the local memory was also not linked to the Epic.

This seems to have been a unique way through which oral traditions have survived over long periods of time.

The second birth of Draupadi at Senji, seems to be one such memory, encapsulating different eras of time.

The second birth of Draupadi essentially doubles the text; it is both Vyasa’s epic, while simultaneously also being a memory of the people of this region.

Draupadi, also becomes ‘doubled’, she is both the Queen of the Pandavas and also the representative of all people unjustly affected by a war of not their making.

[T NATARAJAN SINGS THE INVOCATION SONG TO DRAUPADI] Mother Panchali! Please look after your devotees! You blossomed like a flower in our box of grains. Just like you protected the Pandavas in the forest, please protect us your children. Mother Panchali! Please look after your devotees!

Before each nights Koothu enactment, the actors would begin their performance by singing an invocation song to Draupadi, who was curiously, born in Senji a small fortress town in Thiruvannamali district of Tamil Nadu. The storytellers, also knew this narrative, but would only narrate it if requested with a disclaimer in the beginning saying that this was not a story from the Mahabharata, but was a story found in a text called ‘Draupadi Mahathmiyam’. None of the storytellers had personally seen this book, but Alf Hildebeitel has published an extract from this text in his pioneering work on the Mahabharata festivals of Tamil Nadu which he unfortunately named ‘The Cult of Draupadi’. Hildebeitel records that he had seen a partial copy of the text in a Draupadi temple in Puducheri or Pondicherry. This narrative, while being the story of the birth of Draupadi at Senji, is also the story of Pottu Raja, the first

guardian deity of all Dharmaraja/Draupadi Amman temples. The narrative of Pottu Raja as narrated by the Bharatham storytellers and the Koothu performers are also significantly different.

But the song as sung by the Bharatham singers, the Koothu actors and by the villagers who knew the song had one distinct commonality. All the three renditions stressed the role of Draupadi as a protector of the Pandavas in their Vanavaasam and implore her to protect them as she had protected the Pandavas.

[T Natarajansong]-
“Oh my mother, our mother whom we worship, I only believe in you, please assist us
For the Pandavas who went to the forest, my mother, you went as Virashakti to be their protector. O lady who resides in Senji, my mother, the sister of the victorious Ram Lady who was born of fire, the sister of the blue skinned Krishna”

The idea of Vanavaasam is again stressed, and the session will conclude with an exploration of this notion of Vanavaasam, or stay in the forests.

The narrative of the birth of Draupadi at Senji as published by Hildebeitel and as narrated by the Bharatham storytellers is basically the same with some crucial variations. In the version published by Hildebeitel, the crucial figure of Pottu Raja is a general in Sunithan's army, while in the versions as narrated by the Bharatham storytellers; he was an ardent devotee of Shiva.

[Melpallipattu Lrishnamurthy] There is a book called 'Draupadi Manmiyam', only in this work is the history of Pottu Raja spoken about. He is not from the Mahabharata or the times of the Great War. Pottu Raja has the right to the first worship at Draupadi Amman temples. There is absolutely no connection between the times of the Mahabharata and Pottu Raja. Arjuna's son was Abhimanyu and Abhimanyu's son was Parikshit. The grandson of Parikshit was a king called Sunitha Maharaja. Sunitha Maharaja who was a descendant of the Pandavas was ruling in Hastinapura in Kali Yuga.

[Commentary]The story of Draupadi's birth in Senji is set in the times when King Sunithan, a great, great, great, grand descendant of the Pandavas was ruling in Hastinapura. A demon called Rochakan in some versions and as Asulamaasuran, in others, was terrorizing his Kingdom. This Asulamaasuran was the descendant of the demon Bakasura who was killed by the Pandava warrior Bhima. Asulamaasuran wanted to avenge his ancestor's death at the hands of Bhima by killing the progeny of the Pandavas completely.

[MANI VAASAGAN INTERVIEW] Asulamaasuran challenged Sunitha Maharaja in battle. Because it was in the times of Kali Yuga, men were not as strong as in earlier Yugas. So, Sunitha Maharaja did not have the power to stand up against Asulamaasuran. So the people of his kingdom, terrorised by this demon were facing tremendous hardships.

[Commentary] Asulamaasuran had a hundred heads and for him to be killed all his hundred heads had to be severed from his body. He had also obtained a boon from Brahma which made him think that he was invincible. If his hundredth head landed on the ground, another

hundred Asulamaasurans would emerge from this severed head. In sort, he could not be killed. Sunithan was helpless against this demon

[MANI VAASAGAN INTERVIEW]- Sunithan was told that only a form of Shakti, the consort of Shiva could kill Asulamaasuran. His ancestress Panchali, he is told, was born from fire and he is advised to re-perform the Yaagam so that Draupadi can be incarnated again . As only she could kill the demon Sunithan was asked by his ministers to search for the two immortal sages, Yaachan and Upayaachan, who had performed the Yagna where Draupadi was born from fire and to request them to re-perform the yaagam so that Draupadi could be born again. Sunithan searched across all the lands for the sages and finally found them at Senji

[MELPALLIPATTU INTERVIEW] Sunitha Maharaja again performed the Yagam. Ambal, Panchali was again born from the fires of the Yagam. Again Draupadi was incarnated. She emerged from the fires of the Yagam as a form of Shakti. She was already Shakti and emerged with a form like Goddess Kali. She was dark, with her hair flowing free, with a broad forehead, bangles on her arm. She carried the Soolam [a trident] the Pambai drum, heroic whip, Veera Gandham, Kodi Seelai and Draupadi was again born from fire in her heroic form as ‘Veera Panchali’ with her five magical weapons.

[Draupadi’s song from Draupadi Luravanji Koothu] I am Draupadi who was reincarnated in the city of Senji. I was born in the fires of the Yagam and garlanded the five Pandavas. I was born in the fires of the Yagam to be the protector of the world.

[Mani Vaasagan] Ambal now went and fought against Asulamaasuran. In this ferocious fight she severed the head of Asulamaasuran, but at the place his head fell down, another demon was born.

[Commentary] Every time she severed his head another Asulamaasuran was born from his severed head. At that time a voice from the sky rang out announcing that the head of the demon should not touch the ground. A person should catch the head before it touched the ground for the demon to be truly killed. Draupadi said that she could kill Asulamaasuran, but said that she needed a man who would hold the hundredth head of Asulammasuran from falling to the ground for all of eternity. She said that only an ardent devotee of Shiva could perform this feat and said that Pottu Raja was the man who could hold the demon’s head till the end of times.

[Mani Vaasagan] Pottu Raja who was the general of Sunitha Maharaja’s army said that he would catch the head of the demon. In the fight between Asulamaasuran and Veera Panchali, the Goddess again severed his head, but this time Pottu Raja was there to catch his head. Thus Asulamaasuran was killed by the Shakti who was incarnated as Veera Panchali. Pottu Raja held on to the head of the demon. That person was Pottu Raja

[Commentary] To this day he stands outside all Dharmaraja/Draupadi Amman temples holding the 100th head of the demon Asulammasuran, thereby averting a certain disaster if the head fell on the ground. Hence Pottu Raja became the first guardian deity of all Draupadi

Amman temples and receives the first offerings of all the devotees in these Mahabharata festivals, for as Hildebeitel says, “that if he was not there, the festival just would not be”

[Mani Vaasagan Bharatham Storyteller]- Draupadi said “Sunitha, we lived as your ancestors. Our history has been written as an Epic poem by Veda Vyasa. Our history should be known widely. So please build temples for us and narrate our history to the people there. So it was Sunitha Maharaja who ensured that the Epic reached the people as stories and theatre in those days. It might have been the Pallavas who again did this in recent times. But if you ask as to who built these temples and created a space for people to listen to the Epic, originally, it was only Sunitha Maharaja.

[Commentary] Draupadi’s request to King Sunithan is the reason the tradition says about the origin of the festival. Potturaja, who stands outside every Dharmaraja Draupadi Amman temple holding the decapitated head of Asulamasuran was to be the temples primary guardian deity of these temples. He also would have the right to the first worship in these temples. It was Pottu Raja who originated these Mahabharata festivals first and that is why he gets the right to the first worship.

The narrative of Asulamasuran and Pottu Raja has multiple resonances within the narratives of the Mahabharata. In the Great War, Arjuna had to kill a Kaurava warrior, Jayadrathan who had once tried to abduct Draupadi, and had also deviously killed his son Abhimanyu. Arjuna is told that Jayadrathan, due to the boon that his father had obtained for him through his austerities could not be killed without the person who caused his death also losing their life in the process. Krishna finds a loophole in the boon that Jayadrathan’s father had obtained. The boon just said that the person, who was responsible for his son’s head to fall to the ground, would have his own head shattered into a thousand parts. So Krishna asks Arjuna to shoot Jayadrathan’s head and to ensure that the head fell on Jayadrathan’s father’s lap who was doing Tapas near the battle field.

Arjuna did exactly that and a startled father of Jayadrathan became the cause of his own son’s head to fall on the ground. Hence his head, according to the boon that he himself had obtained, was shattered into a hundred parts.

These resonances of all the local interpolations with the narratives of the Epic itself, is a cardinal principle in the structure of these festivals. The Mahabharata celebrated in these festivals does not remain a narrative of a war fought elsewhere, but simultaneously invokes an individual or a collective memory of the region itself. By listening to and remembering the Epic, one also tends to listen to and remember oneself. The memories of the Great War, also becomes a memory of all the wars that the people, either individually or collectively, have fought or are fighting in their own lives.

This is one important structural element of these festivals, and is one important reason for key episodes of the Epic being performed thrice; once as ritual, second its narration as a song/story and third its enactment as an hyper-emotional theatre form- the Koothu.

Every year, through this process, the audiences are given a space to relive the Epic, the Great War fought at Kurukshetra. Through this process, they also relive the wars in their own lives, either their own individual wars or the wars of their communities of belonging

The Koothu actors narrate a different story of Pothraja. This story again has resonances with the popular interpolated narrative of the Koothu. 'Draupadi Kuravanji'. The resonances do two things simultaneously; first they re-stress the centrality and divinity of Draupadi in these traditions. They also posit the idea of Draupadi as the representative of all people unjustly affected by war.

KURAVANJI SONG VIDEO

The Koothu narrative begins with Parvathi and Shiva in their periodic visits to the world, choosing to visit a Vanni, an Ashwattha tree forest. Parvathi, in a moment of play, fashions a marvellous fort with ramparts and fortifications from the sands of the forest. Shiva, entranced by her playful fort, created a wonderful city Shivanandapuri around Parvathi's whimsical creation. Now they needed a warrior who could guard the city of their dreams and Pormannan was born out of the sacrificial fires.

Parvathi and Shiva gave him five magical weapons, with which to guard this divine city; with these arms Pormannan and the wondrous city of Shivanandapuri were indestructible. These magical weapons were also the weapons of Draupadi, as she was really Durga, another manifestation of Parvathi.

[KOOOTHU ACTOR SELVAM INTERVIEW] A statue will be in front of Draupadi Amman temples. He is called Pottu Raja or Pormannan. After Krishna returns from his peace mission and war is certain. Krishna says that Pormannan has five magical weapons with which they could win the war

[Commentary] The narrative now reaches the times of the Great War. The Pandavas were ready to fight their cousins, the Kauravas and Krishna realized that for the Pandavas to win the Great War, they would need the five magical weapons of Draupadi which were currently with Pormannan. Pormannan was also a vital ally they needed as Pormannan could defeat all his foes, with just a look from his eyes

[VO OVER PAINTING] -First Bhima, in disguise as a wood cutter, tries to win with his might, these sacred objects from Pormannan, but fails as Pormannan proves to be stronger than him. A vanquished Bhima is jailed by Pormannan, again mirroring the imprisonment of Bhima in the interpolated play 'Draupadi Kuravanji', another popular narrative of these festivals.

Krishna realized that Pormannan, being an ardent devotee of Shiva, could only be defeated and won over by deceit. So he transformed himself into a decrepit 100 year old woman.

Arjuna is transformed into a seductive damsel Vijayambal, and together they venture into Shivanandapuri, both to retrieve Draupadi/Parvathi's magic weapons, and also to rescue Bhima. [END VO]

[Commentary] Pormannan is bewitched by Vijayambal's beauty and proposes to get married to her. Vijayambal has two conditions for the marriage; first she wants her brother Bhima freed, and second she needs Draupadi's sacred weapons for her puja, after which she would get married to Pormannan. A besotted Pormannan, against better advice, agrees. He soon realizes that he has been duped by Krishna and Arjuna, and in anger prepares to fight them.

[VO OVER PAINTING]- Krishna placates him by offering the sister of the Pandavas, Sanguvati, in marriage to him. [END VO]

[Commentary] Pormannan and Sanguvati get married, and the Pandavas have all the weapons they need for their war against their cousins. The Pandavas also get the powerful Pormannan, as an ally.

This narrative, relates rather whimsically, that no war can be won without the support of the people, hence of Draupadi; because Draupadi was really the people. This is according to the Koothu actors how Pormannan or Pottu Raja became the primary guardian deity of the Draupadi Amman temples.

This narrative has obvious resonances with the popular Koothu 'Draupadi Kuravanji'. In Draupadi Kuravanji, Bhima as in this narrative, first goes in disguise as a woodcutter and gets imprisoned. Instead of Draupadi going in to rescuing Bhima, here it is Krishna and Arjuna who go in disguise to Shivanandapuri to rescue Bhima and also get the weapons of Draupadi. Again in this Koothu as in Draupadi Kuravanji, Draupadi's divinity as the representative of the people is emphasised.

This is one unique way, collective memory works in Indian oral traditions; the narrative of the Epic, becomes a vehicle to rekindle a collective local memory of the region which might have been lost if the local memory had not been linked to a narrative from the Epic.

[KURAVANJI SONG VIDEO]- Panchala Kuravanji has come and asks her devotees to behold her arrival. I am the lady of Senji and with my peacock feathers predict your fortune

[Commentary] Now, due to multiple interruptions in the tradition, the local memory which triggered these narratives seem to have been forgotten, [VO ON POTTU RAJA]- but the figure of Pottu Raja/Pormannan, who stands guard outside every Dharmaraja/ Draupadi Amman temple, is a reminder of a memory that cannot totally be erased. [END VO]

[Commentary] There is a temple in a village called Mangalam in Thiruvannamalai district of Tamilnadu, where there is an annual festival to this deity Pormannan, who in Koothu memory has become fused with the narrative of the king Potturaja.

VO OVER PORMANNAN- In this farmer's festival, the people scatter part of the grains that they are going to sow in their forthcoming cultivation before this 18 feet idol of the deity

taken out in procession through the village, so that their seeds might yield a good harvest.
END VO

An inscription in the temple, cryptically defines this deity; it says “Nindral Kovil, Nagarndhaal Ther”, that is, when it stands, it is a temple, when it moves, it is a chariot. Meaning that when the deity is calm, where it stands is a place for worship, but when the deity moves, it will only be to wage war.

The Koothu narrative of Pothraja has nothing in common with the story as found in the Draupadi Mahathmiyam, a book cited by the storytellers as ‘authentic’. The storytellers would discount this other version as being purely a fiction created by the ‘illiterate’ Koothu writers.

Now one does not know the memory that these two narratives would have invoked in its initial narration about a thousand years back. One reason being that the numerous wars that these regions have witnessed, has made this an interrupted tradition. Villages have been unable to celebrate these festivals for long periods of time and the festivals have been revived only by popular demand again in times of peace..

But the intriguing and finally inexplicable narratives of Pottu Raja/ Pormannan, have withstood all these interruptions to become a memory marker of these regions. The Koothu of Pormannan as Pottu Raja, is not performed in the Mahabharata festivals, but is performed as a single Koothu in the festivals celebrating the deity, Pormannan

VO OVER DESCENT OF GANGES DRONE SHOT- It is the Pallavas who seem to have popularized the epic in these regions as they have commissioned many poets to write with themes from the Epic. Themes from the Mahabharata have also been sculpted in this region in the monuments commissioned by them, like the sculptures of Mamallapuram. What is interesting is as to how these memories of long forgotten wars is inscribed both in royal narratives and in popular perception. END VO

The Royal Pallava narrative starts, again, with a wild boar creating havoc in the gardens of Varadaraja Perumal Temple at Kanchipuram

[VO OVER VARADARAJA PERUMAL TEMPLE]- The king variously named as a Pallava King, a Chola King, a Vijayanagara king in narratives recorded down the years, first sends his soldiers to drive the boar away. His soldiers fail against the might of the gigantic boar, and the King sets out himself, to combat the boar. As soon as the boar sees the King, it runs with the King in close pursuit. Finally, it stops at a hillock at Senji and reveals itself in his true form as the deity Vishnu.

[END INTERVIEW SAME NARRATIVE AS TOLD BY A PRIEST- ELLANGADU] The wild boar stopped at a hillock at Sanjeevi Puram, now known as Senji. It stopped on top of a rock and suddenly disappeared. Then it spoke as a voice from the sky and asked him to build a temple for him there. The boar said that was the reason why he had bought the king to that place. When the King asked as to what he should do, the voice from the sky asked the king to

build a temple for him in his restful form as Ranganatha. The deity also describes as to how his image should be sculpted in the king's dream.

[Commentary] Vishnu asks the king to build a temple for him in his recumbent form there. This is the first Pallava temple at Senji of Vishnu resting on his bed, the seven headed snake Adishesha. Ranganatha, in this temple is seen with a hand protecting the stomach of the pregnant Adishesha. Even now if you see the main idol of Ranganatha, he would be resting on Adishesha with a hand protecting the foetus of Adishesha.

The iconography of the main deity is interesting as in all Pallava iconography. Unusually, the deity Ranganatha faces south, the direction of Yama or Death. The deity or the king seems to be assuring his devotees or subjects to guard them from the fear of dying or wars, as finally Senji was a fortress city. The recurrence of the stories of the wild boar in these narratives could also refer to the ensign on the opposing Chalukya army's flag.

[VO OVER CHALUKYA ENSIGN]- The Chalukya flag had Vishnu in his Varaha avatar where he took on the form of a wild boar to retrieve both the world and knowledge from the depth of the oceans after another great deluge. The Pallavas who were contesting with the Chalukyas seem to be also contesting the Chalukya alter ego of being Varaha, the rescuer of the world. END VO

[Commentary] The incessant wars between the Chalukyas and the Pallavas are remembered to this day in the form of a demon called Vatapi, which was how the Chalukya capital Badami was known as in these regions. Narasimhavarman, after the defeat of his father against the Chalukyas captured Badami and restored peace in his own kingdom. One of the appellations of Narasimhavarman is 'Vatapi Kondaan' or the king who captured Badami.

The Vanniyars, one of the numerous Jati's who fund and celebrate these festivals in these regions, have a memory of this war in their Jati Puranam, or the story of the origins of their Jati. The cryptic story is to why the Vanniyars became known as the people who ate the crab.

[VIDEO THE VANNIYAN WHO ATE THE CRAB, GOPAL GOUNDER] In Vanniya Puranam there is a story of a warrior who was terrorising the Devas. The helpless Devas beseech Shiva Perumal's help against the warrior. Shiva said that only a person born out of fire could kill this warrior and said that he and the other Devas were equally helpless against this warrior. Even Brahma said the same thing. The people called Durvasa Rishi to perform a Yagam so that a Vanniyar could be born who could kill this warrior. Durvasa performed the Yagam and the first Vanniyar was born out of the fires of the Yagam. That is why the Vanniyas still wear a sacred thread and are called Vanniyakula Shatriyas. The Vanniyar got blessings from Kali and Kamakshi Amman before fighting against the warrior. He crushed him and ate him. That is why even now the Vanniyars are said to be the people who ate the crab. The unbeatable warrior knew that he was no match for the Vanniyar and thought that the only way he could escape would be to transform himself into a crab and hide under the rocks. The smart Vanniyar found the crab, crushed it and swallowed it. That is the story of Vatapi and Janatapi

[Commentary] The endless series of wars between the Pallavas and the Chalukyas are not the only memories of war of the people of these regions. Another major upheaval faced by this region was the invasion by the Bijapur Sultanate. How the story is remembered in popular imagination is striking in itself

VO OVER SENJI- This is remembered as the story of Muthala Ravuttan, another guardian deity of the Dharmaraja/Draupadi Amman temples. Once there was a wicked magician called Mutthala Raavuttan, who in his quest for power was terrorising the people. The helpless people implored Draupadi to protect them. Draupadi at the behest of the people, met Mutthala Raavuttan and promised him all the power he desired, if he would only sacrifice a pregnant woman to her.

Mutthala Raavuttan had a pregnant sister called 'Pal Varisai' and as he was about to sacrifice her to Draupadi, the goddess stopped him. She said that Pal Varisai was also a woman just like her and pleased with Mutthala Ravuttan's devotion, granted him all that he desired and also made him one of the guardian deities of her temple. She said that henceforth all the meat, alcohol and ganja offerings would be made only to Mutthala Raavuttan, while she would only accept all the fruit and flower offerings of her devotees. END VO

[MANIVAASAGAN INTERVIEW] Even now if you look at the older temples like the one's at Dindivanam or Vizhupuram, there would be a tomb like structure placed next to the idol of Pottu Raja. A lot of people now would not even know what it represents. That is the tomb of Mutthala Raja. In a few temples there would an idol to of Mutthala Raja In Dindivanam there is a separate idol for this Muslim King, particularly in Vizhupuram district, there would be a separate statue to this king. Some Muslim king in later times might have done some service to the temple and the statue could have been kept in his remembrance.

VO OVER SENJI CAVE- Previously most Dharmaraja/Draupadi Amman temples used to have a small shrine for this deity, Mutthala Ravuttan. These shrines, like the memory itself seem to have disappeared and only the older temples have these shrines now.

Wars and the memories of war seem to be a recurring sub text both within the performances in the Mahabharata festivals of Tamil Nadu and in the narratives framing these festivals. One of the reasons given by a lot of participants for the festival was that these festivals were celebrated to promote peace and harmony in the festival villages. This assertion, made by the actors, the storytellers and the villagers themselves, gives these festivals a distinctively anti-war character. Walter Spink and Robert DeCaroli add another layer to this reading of the Mahabharata festivals of Tamil Nadu as being an anti-war festival. Walter Spink was an American Art Historian noted for his path breaking work on the Buddhist cave temples at Ajanta.

[BEGIN VO OVER AJANTA SCULPTURES]- Prior to Spink, it was assumed that these cave temples were sculpted over a period of over two centuries. END VO

[Cpmmmentary] Walter Spink posited that these cave temples were conceptualised and carved during the reign of the Vakataka king, Harisena [460–477 CE]. Spink gives compelling

reasons for his argument that the cave temples were carved in a period of seventeen years than as speculated before.

Robert DeCaroli is an American Art Historian who has been again working on early Buddhist art. He wrote a paper called “An Analysis of Dandin’s Dasakumaracarita and its Implications for both the Vakataka and Pallava Courts” which Walter Spink quotes in his work on Ajanta. This deals with the poet and theoretician, Dandin’s [650-750 CE] work ‘Dasakumaracharitha’ which has been translated as the ‘Tales of the Ten Princes’

Spink says

VO OVER AJANTA CAVES- “Dandin, as the court poet for the young Pallava king Narasimhavarman II (695–722), constructed an arresting tale of the final years of the ancient Vakataka dynasty, from about 478 to about 484 CE. This is a story that had a special meaning for Dandin, because his ancestors had been closely connected with the Vakataka court in the fifth century. Transmitted in surprising detail via India’s remarkable oral tradition, Dandin’s recounting of ancient events made it a perfect vehicle for the listening pleasure, and the moral and political instruction of the poet’s young Pallava auditor. The young king would have been engrossed, in particular, by the actions of the heroic Visruta, a young prince from Magadha, who served as protector of his Vakataka queen and her children after their flight to Mahismati when the Vakataka imperium was collapsing around 478 CE.” END VO

Spink goes on to say

“Dandin was creating an elaborate metaphor within the tale by paralleling the characters with people and events in the Pallava court (and) in order to be effective he peppered the text with names that we now know to be historically accurate from fifth-century Vakataka inscriptional evidence”.

“What gave Dandin’s account a particular force was the fact that the struggle between the “virtuous” Vakatakas and the “pernicious” Asmakas could be compared, with instructive relevance, to the long conflict between Dandin’s own Pallava compatriots and the constantly threatening Calukyas.”

Spink also speaks about the resilience of Indian oral traditions when he speaks about the bhoja’s, storytellers from Rajasthan who till date sing/narrate the ballad of Pabuji, a historical figure who existed over 600 years back.

VO OVER AJANTA SCULPTURE- There are a lot of debates around this argument made by Spink and DeCaroli. END VO

The narratives of the Mahabharata festivals of Tamil Nadu and Dandin’s own connection to Mamallapuram, a port city of the Pallavas adds another layer in support of the argument made by Spink and DeCaroli

Dandin’s great grandfather, Damodara’s family hailed from Vidharba, the capital of the Vakataka empire. Damodara’s family migrated down south after the collapse of the Vakataka

empire and Damodara became the court poet of the Pallava king Simhavishnu [575–600] in Kanchipuram. Dandin, whose name literally means a ‘staff-bearer’ and refers to ascetics of an order of Sadhus, was born in Kanchipuram and as a young child was forced to migrate north, towards Ujjain. The frequent wars between the Pallavas and the Chalukyas, was the reason for Dandin’s migration north, as he records in his prose work, *Avantisundarikatha*. Dandin only returned to Kanchipuram after Narasimhavarman recaptured Kanchipuram from the Chalukyas and ushered in a period of stability in this region.

The first place that Dandin visited after he returned to Kanchipuram was Mamallapuram to meet the sculptor of Mamallapuram, Lalitalaya. The sculptor at that point of time had just started carving the monuments at the Pallava port city. The narratives of the cave temples at Mamallapuram seem nested between the defeat of Mahendravarman and the later victory by his son Narasimhavarman against the Chalukyas. This is alluded to in the *Sthalapurana* of Mamallapuram by the crocodile turned King Mahendravarman. He tells Pundarika a Brahmin who visits Mamallapuram that he was cursed to become a crocodile for his failure in his duties as a king. In this narrative, Mahendravarman explicitly says that his son Narasimhavarman had redeemed the curse on him by recapturing Kanchipuram and restoring peace in the region. The narrative of the cave temple known as the Mahisashusamardhini cave at Mamallapuram is another important marker.

[BEGIN VO OVER ANANTHASAYANA PANEL]- The narrative of Mahisashusamardhini is found in the text *Devi Mahathmyam*, a part of the *Markandeya Purana*. It records the narrative of Yogamaya withdrawing from Vishnu, awakening him from his cosmic slumber after which he kills the demons, Madhu and Kaitabha. With Vishnu’s awakening, the world is born afresh from another deluge. Facing the narrative frieze of Vishnu is the final image of the *Devi Mahathmyam* narrative where Durga kills the shape shifting demon Mahisa in his form as the buffalo demon. END VO

What makes the depiction of the narrative in this cave particularly interesting is that the context in which *Devi Mahathmyam* was narrated is also embedded within the narrative panels. A king called Suradha and another merchant had lost his kingdom in the case of the king and wealth in the case of the merchant. Both had retreated to the forests, in Vanavaasam to ponder on their respective predicaments. Both are directed to the immortal Rishi Markandeya to find a solution to their predicaments. The Rishi narrates the *Devi’s* story, listening to which he says help them resolve their problems.

[BEGIN VO OVER ANANTHSAYANA PANEL]- The opening image, the panel of Vishnu in his cosmic sleep with the threatening figures of the demons Madhu and Kaitabha, has an image of the narrator, Rishi Markandeya recounting the story to a king. The merchant, who is unimportant to the narrative of Mamallapuram, is not included in this image. In the narrative, after listening to the *Devi’s* narrative, the king Suradha regained his kingdom while the merchant attained Moksha.

According to oral tradition, the monuments at Mamallapuram were commissioned by Narasimhavarman to commemorate his victory over the Chalukyas. The Chalukyas who later

defeated the Pallavas to wrest the kingdom back are supposed to have defaced portions of the sculptures which celebrated Narasimhavarman's victory while leaving the rest of the magnificent sculptures intact.

Pottu Raja was the suffix of the Pallava Kings in their royal edicts as Mahendravarma Pottu Raja, Narasimhavarma Potturaja etc. The people of these regions must have been extremely distressed, like the poet Dandi, by these frequent wars between the Pallavas and the Chalukyas and the memory of these wars seem inscribed into the Mahabharata festivals of Tamil Nadu.

Vidya Dehejia interview

With the inscription of Potthu Raja into the epic as the guardian deity of Draupadi, other guardian deities appear, all of whom might represent the image of various wars and invasions the the people of the region had experienced.

Draupadi is seen in these narratives as the representative of the people with the power to negotiate autonomy to the 'village republic'. These memories of war are not 'historic' memories; rather they are generic and are neither a lament nor a dirge; they firmly celebrate the resilience of the people and assert their will to live, even under the most desperate of times.