

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

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Lecture 7

THE BIRTH OF VYASA [36 MINUTES]

“For me, the special interest in this work is the role the author himself plays in the story. Vyasa not only composed the narrative, but being aware of the past and future of all his characters, helps them with solutions when they find themselves in a dilemma. Sometimes he may see into the future and emphasize the inevitability of certain coming events, making his heroes resign themselves to their fate” R K Narayanan

The Mahabharata has been written about in Tamil from the Sangam period. Only a few verses from these texts are available right now. There is a mention of “Bharatham Paadiya Perunthevanaar” or the Perunthevanaar who sang the Mahabharata in Sangam poetry anthologies. Except for this mention, there is no text available of the Mahabharata sung by this poet

Muthuratna Mudaliar in his forward to Perunthevanaar’s Bharatham records that during the Pallava period the Mahabharata was so popular that verses from the Sanskrit Epic would be sung and the meaning of it would be narrated in Tamil. Nandi Varma Pallava, seeing the popularity of the Mahabharata among the people commissioned a poet called Perunthevanaar who composed the “Bharatha Venba”. Currently only 339 verses of this 12,000 verse translation is available. In the 14th century a King called Varapathi Atkondaan commissioned a poet from Villiputthur village to write the Bharatham in Tamil. This is popularly known as Villibharatham and the poet’s name is known as being from the village Villiputthur.

Villiputthuraar, the poet only wrote 10 of the 18 Parvas of the Epic and his rendering ends with the coronation of Yudhishtira who is called Dharmaraja in Tamil traditions

In the 18th century a poet called Nallapillai undertook to write the entire Mahabharata in Tamil. His text is a portmanteaux text comprising of all previous renditions of the Epic, including Villibharatham in its entirety. The Mahabharata festival, as it is performed right now is structured around the Villibharatham. Villiputthuraar acknowledges his patron Varapathi Atkondan as being as generous a man as Karna of the Mahabharata.

Villiputhuraar only sang the first 10 Parvams of the Mahabharata comprising of 4339 verses. Later a poet called Nallapillai elaborated on this and composed the entire Mahabharata in Tamil. He was Nallapillai and his Bharatham had 13,950 verses.

In oral traditions, there is another framing narrative which accentuates the anti-war position of both the festival and Villibharatham. It seems Villiputthuraar and his brother had property disputes and they went to their King Varapathi Atkondan to settle their dispute.

The king had immense respect for both brothers as poets and did not want to take sides with one brother against another. So he asked Villiputthuraar to write the Mahabharata in Tamil after which he said he would settle their dispute. As Villiputthuraar was writing the Epic, he realised that his fight with this younger brother mirrored in a smaller way the fight between the fraternal cousins which led to the Great War. He apologised to his brother and gave him his due share of the property and peace was restored in his family.

In the wide vast world surrounded by water the Mahabharata was composed as the fifth Veda to stand along with the four Vedas by the Rishi undiminished in Tapas, the king among the Rishis

What is unfading asceticism? Rishis would practice severe austerities or Tapas to acquire spiritual power. If any Rishi gets angry and curses someone his spiritual power will decrease. That he calls faded ascetic powers. But he says there was a Rishi called Veda Vyasa, who had never been angry with anyone. Hence he had not cursed anyone in his life. This opening verse in popular traditions is ascribed to Villiputthuraar's son Varantharuvaar.

It is believed that Villiputthuraar began his Bharatham with the simple invocation song which says

“I bow before the One, who when he creates we call Brahma, who when he protects, we call Vishnu, and who when he destroys, we call Siva.”

The audience for his first presentation of his Bharatham, it seems were angry, that he began his Bharatham without mentioning Vinayaka, the scribe of the text.

Villiputturaar's estranged son who was in the audience is supposed to have defended his father saying that he had written an invocation song to Vinayaka, but had forgotten to read it and sang the first few invocation songs. This act of Varantharuvaar, brought the father and son together and peace in their family was restored. This story might be or not be true but it again serves to remind the reader of the anti-war nature of both the festival and the text

This first verse of Villibharatham, like the text itself weaves multiple narratives together. Every storyteller when explaining the first line of "Needaazhi Ulagam" or "A world surrounded by water" will invoke the idea of 'Pralaya' or the 'Great Deluge' when the entire world would go under water. Every time the world is again born, a Vyasa would also be born to organize all the knowledge of the past worlds.

Vyasa is also in this tradition, a sage who has not cursed anyone in anger which conjures the idea of the other Epic the Ramayana. Valmiki the author of the Ramayana was angered by a hunter killing two Krauncha birds in the act of making love. He cursed the hunter for his act of violence and realised that what he had uttered in Soka, in grief, was a Sloka, a verse. The Ramayana begins with Valmiki's grief which became poetry

"Fixed in metrical quarters, each with a like number of syllables, and fit for the accompaniment of stringed and percussion instruments, the utterance I produced in a moment of grief, Soka, shall be called Sloka, poetry"
Valmiki

Vyasa said that an Epic was born in his mind and requested Vinayaka to write it down as and when he sang the Epic as a song. Vinayaka said that he was an extremely fast writer and agreed to be Vyasa's scribe under one condition that Vyasa should sing as fast as Vinayaka could write. Vyasa agreed to sing as fast as Vinayaka could write but he made a condition. He said that Vinayaka should first understand the meaning of the songs before writing. When Vinayaka made a condition, Vyasa made a counter condition. Vyasa agreed to sing as fast as Vinayaka could write but Vinayaka had to understand what he was writing. On these mutual conditions they start composing the Mahabharata

It seems that Vinayaka was so fast that he started writing even before Vyasa sang. Vyasa noticed this and was surprised that Vinaya was writing what he was about to sing. Vyasa pondered on a solution to slow down Vinayaka's writing as Vinayaka the scribe started writing faster than Vyasa could narrate.

So, Vyasa to buy time stated composing extremely complex verses which even Vinyaka had to ponder over. Vinayaka had promised that he would only write when he had understood what he was writing and this gave Vyasa time to articulate the next verse. This is the reason the tradition gives for the diversity of styles within the epic. It has simple prose, dialogues,

and sometimes extremely complex verses. Vyasa reasoned that Vinayaka was able to write fast as he was composing simple songs. So he decided to sing verses which were complex in nature. Which he thought Vinayaka would have to ponder over. So he started singing verses that were difficult to understand easily.

The Mahabharata that we have now is just supposed to be a small fragment of the text that Vyasa composed. The Mahabharata of course had been narrated many times before in the seven heavens and Mani Vaasagan narrates how the tradition describes the number of verses which were narrated at each venue. With the difficult verses Vyasa composed a Mahabharata comprising of 8,800 verses.

He supposed to have sung totally 60 lakh verses in the longest version of the Epic. These 60 lakh verses sung by Vyasa did not reach the Earth completely. 30 lakh verses remained in the abode of the Devas. The Devas heard the Epic narrated by the sage Narada. 15 lakh verses were retained in the abode of the departed ancestors. A Rishi called Devalan narrated the Epic to the departed ancestors. 14 lakh verses were retained in the abode of the Asuras and the Yakshas. Vyasa's son Suka is said to have narrated the Epic to the Asuras and Yakshas. Only 1lakh verses of the original Mahabharata finally reached the Earth. He concluded this with a humorous story of a storyteller narrating both the Ramayana and Mahabharata in just two lines.

A storyteller like me once went to a King and wanted the King to listen to his narration of the Epic. The King wanted to know as to how long he would have to listen. The storyteller told the King that it would take him one year to narrate. The King said he did not have that amount of time and wanted a shorter narration. The storyteller said he could compress the narrative to six months. Again the King said he could not spare that amount of time. The Storyteller asked whether the King had time to listen for one month. Again the King refused citing lack of time. The desperate storyteller wanted one week to narrate and even that was refused. The King said that he will throw up a lemon up into the sky. He says that he will give the storyteller one lakh gold coins if he could narrate the Epic in that time.

The irritated storyteller said that if the King was willing to give him two lakh gold coins he would also narrate Ramayana together. The King was puzzled as the storyteller said he needed one year to narrate Mahabharata but now he was willing to narrate Ramayana also in just a minute of time. The storyteller challenged the King that he could narrate both epics together for two lakh gold coins.

The King accepted the challenge and threw up the lemon to the sky and even before the lemon thrown up could touch the ground, the storyteller said “without touching he was destroyed” and “without giving he was destroyed”. The King did not understand when the storyteller said that he had just finished narrating both the epics together

In the Ramayana the ten headed and twenty armed antagonist of Rama, Ravana abducts Rama’s wife Sita and just pleads with her to be his wife without even touching her. Ravana was destroyed by Rama without even laying a finger on Sita and that became the Ramayana. In the Mahabharata Dharmaraja asks his cousin Duryodhana to return his kingdom but Duryodhana refuses to return the Kingdom or even five countries or even five villages or even a needle of land. Duryodhana was destroyed because he refused to give and this resulted in the Mahabharata

Mani Vaasagan the storyteller we recorded for this project began with the self-description of the Mahabharata.

“All stories known to mankind can be found here. A story not found in the Mahabharata can be found nowhere”

In an eternal city ringing with auspicious sounds ruled by the descendants of the lunar dynasty a city resplendant as Indra’s kingdom even Indra the lord of the Devas praised Hastinapura which was currently ruled by Janamejaya

Hastinapura was being ruled by a King called Janamejaya of the Lunar Dynasty. He performed a huge offering to the Gods for the well-being of the entire world. The source of the story which can also be found in Nallapillai Bharatham seems to be from the 9th Century Bharatha Venba composed by Perunthevanar. In Vyasa’s Mahabharata the Epic is first narrated to Janamejaya at his aborted Snake sacrifice so that they could understand the ways of Karma. In Nallapillai/Perunthevanaar two more Yagams precede the Snake Yagam of Janamejaya. There is a strong reason for this.

In Vyasa’s Mahabharata the first question that is posed as to what caused the Great War to be fought?

The epic gives numerous possible reasons but says that it would be difficult to pinpoint a single cause for the war. In Nallapillai/Perunthevanar’s rendition Janamejaya directly

questions Vyasa as to why he who knew the past, the present and the future did not stop the Great War. Vyasa says that the war was inevitable and that no one could stop it.

Janamejaya says they had five ancestors called Pandavas and hundred people called Kauravas. These hundred people and five people fought each other for a paltry desire for land and destroyed each other, he asked Vyasa why he did not stop this? For this paltry desire for land how many people lost their lives? Janamejaya thinks Vyasa could have advised Pandavas and Kauravas and stopped the war.

Vyasa says the Great War was destined to happen and that fate no power on earth could have stopped it happening. Janamejaya who does not believe in fate refuses to accept this answer from Vyasa. To underline this point of inevitability or fate he says that in eight days Janamejaya would be guilty of being responsible for a Brahmin's death and he dares Janamejaya to change his fate. Vyasa laughed at Janamejaya's naivety and said that he would see the inevitability of fate soon. He says in eight days Janamejaya would be responsible for killing a Brahmin he dares Janamejaya by asking whether he could do anything to stop it.

After Vyasa left Janamejaya consulted his ministers asking them as to how he could avoid the sin of killing a Brahmin? The ministers advise Janamejaya to perform a Yagam for the next eight days saying that if he sits for the eight days in the sacrificial hall, then he can avoid the sin. So Janamejaya decided to perform the yagam for the well-being of the world. A poor Brahmin accepted to officiate in this yagam for all eight days.

First, second and third day of the yagam was over the fourth, fifth and also the sixth day of yagam was completed. During the seventh day of Yagam, the Brahmin slept off as he was chanting the mantra. Janamejaya noticed that the Brahmin was sleeping as the yagam was about to get over but the Brahmin was still chanting the mantras in his sleep. The Brahmin dreamt that he was walking in the forest and a tiger was chasing him.

Janamejaya worried that the yagam might be spoiled and gently tried to wake the Brahmin. When Janamejaya tapped to wake him, at that point of time in the Brahmin's dream the tiger was about to pounce on him and coincided with the Brahmin's dream of the tiger leaping on him the scared Brahmin fell into the sacrificial fire and died.

The Karma I tried avoiding by performing this yagam itself made me guilty of the crime I was trying to avoid. Janamejaya went to Vyasa and said that he had predicted he was now guilty of having killed a Brahmin.

He asked Vyasa as to how he could absolve himself of this Karma. Vyasa says that Janamejaya had to listen to his ancestor's history of the Mahabharata to absolve himself of his crime. It is after the story of the Brahmin's death does Vaishampayana narrate the Mahabharata to Janamejaya. Living in the world is seen as a sorrowful experience and listening to the Epic it seems would help one to terminate the sorrowful cycle of birth, death and rebirth.

Sage Vaishampayana now begins narrating the Mahabharata that is when the tradition of listening to the Mahabharata began in this country. The people who read Mahabharata will be freed from being born on earth again. It will lead them on the path to Moksha or liberation. For the Kings who read this it will become a good moral text to be just rulers. It has all the knowledge of the world, which is why it is called the fifth Veda. One who listens to the Mahabharata will attain moksha. One will be freed from the endless cycle of birth, death and rebirth. One who reads the Mahabharata is thus freed from sorrow.

Contemporary scholars like Vishwa Adluri and Bagchee have put up an argument that the Epic has to be read as an integrated whole. Scholars prior to them were more interested in as to what the original narrative was and what the later interpolations in the Mahabharata were

In the book 'Ways and reasons to think of the Mahabharata as a whole' edited by Vishwa Adluri with articles by numerous scholars, Adluri puts up an interesting argument. He says that the Mahabharata begins with an 'instruction manual' which indicates how the text has to read. In this argument Sauti's description of the Epic becomes important. Sauti, one of the main disciples of Vyasa had heard the epic directly from his guru and was one of its first retellers. At the outset Sauti declares that Veda Vyasa wrote the epic in both detailed and abridged forms and there are multiple points of entry to read the Epic.

"Some read the Mahabharata from the first Mantra, some from the story of Astika and some from the story of 'Uparichara Vasu' while some read the whole text"

The first description that Sauti states about the epic is "The wisdom of this work, like the stick used for applying collyrium has opened the eyes of the world which were covered by the darkness of ignorance.

In the Mahabharata festivals of Tamil Nadu the narration usually begins with the story of Uparichara Vasu. Mani Vasagan the storyteller of our project said this was the case only in the twenty day Mahabharata festivals as it was impossible to narrate the entire Epic in such a short duration. He said that in longer festivals they would narrate the story of Astika, Pouloma and other stories that the Epic begins with.

Vaishampayana before narrating the epic, said he would first tell the story of the author Veda Vyasa and narrates the story of his birth.

The great kingdom of Chedi, repository of all wealth had women with fish like elongated eyes, sharp breasted, bright eyes like the lotus and where large female monkeys playing drums.

Two stories of Uparichara Vasu begin the narrative in the festivals of Tamil Nadu both of these narratives serve to establish Satyavati the mother of Veda Vyasa and the great grandmother of the Pandavas and Kauravas as Mula Prakriti, the active feminine principle of Samkya philosophy. King Vasu was the ruler of a prosperous kingdom called Chedi. Satyavati or Matsyagandhi as she is originally called is born from nature and she is nature herself, Prakriti, personified.

The prosperous kingdom of Chedi was ruled by a king called Vasu Raja. One day he went with his army and entourage to the forest to hunt. Accompanied by kings whose lightening swords rustled the king left for a hunt. Seeing the pure rishis involved in penance, looking at that atmosphere and wondering what it is, he reached there, to see the austere men. After travelling through multiple forests he reached a peaceful ashram. In the ashram he saw a lot of asectics deep in dhyana. When he saw the peaceful ascetics Vasuraja realised

Vasu Raja seeing the blissfull Rishis decided to become an ascetic himself. He sent his ministers back with his signet ring and asked them to rule the kingdom. He said he would prefer to stayback in the ashram living the life of an ascetic. The fire from the austerities performed by Vasu Raja reached Indra in the heavens. The King of the Devas Indra wondered

as to why Vasuraja was performing severe Tapas. It seems Indra would get scared if any King on earth started practicing severe austerities

So Indra came down to earth and disturbed Vasu Raja's Tapas. Indra questioned Vasu Raja's need to perform Tapas. Vasu Raja replied that performing Tapas was the highest act in life. Indra agreed to Vasu Raja but said that King should not perform Tapas. A good king should govern his land well and ensure support to ascetics practicing Tapas. A king should ensure the prosperity and wellbeing of his subjects. Only then he said could even ascetics perform Tapas in peace. Tapas he says should be increased by a King but not performed by him. He advised the King to return to his kingdom and rule it well. He gave Vasu Raja a magic chariot with which he could travel to the seven worlds. He gave him a magic weapon with which he could destroy all his enemies and a lotus garland. He also gave him a golden form and the ability to travel the seven worlds instantly. After giving gifts to Vasu Raja, Indra left

Vasu Raja returned to his kingdom and started to rule with the magic chariot which Indra gave he travelled across all worlds. King Vasu, with the magical Chariot which he got from the King of the Gods, Indra travels across the seven heavens.

Once he sees a mountain Kolahala- which literally means 'uproar' or 'commotion' who had fallen in love with the river Shuktimati. He had engulfed the river in his passion and kept her within himself. King Vasu, kicked the mountain Kolahala creating a hole in the mountain paving a way for the river Shuktimati to flow out. A grateful Shuktimati gave the twins born to her and Kolahala to the King. The King made the boy his General and married the girl Girika

Once the ancestors of King Vasu wanted a deer to be sacrificed to them and Vasu prepared to go out to hunt. Girika said that it was the time of the month that she could conceive a child and wanted her husband to return home quickly. The hunt took longer than the King expected and he is forced to stay the night in the jungle.

As he was thinking of his beautiful wife waiting for him at home, he unconsciously ejaculates. He collects the semen in a leaf cup and requests a hawk to take it to his awaiting wife. As the hawk is carrying the leaf cup another bird attacks it thinking that the hawk was carrying food. The cup falls into Yamuna river and a fish swallows the king's semen.

Once some fishermen noticed a giant fish in their haul and hand it over to the king Dasharaja. When they cut open the fish they find twins, a boy and a girl in the belly of the fish. The fishermen thought it was a magical fish and handed it over to their king Dasharaja. When Dasharaja cut the fish open he saw twins, a boy and a girl in the belly of the fish. The dead fish rose up as a woman and said the twins were Vasu Raja's children and she disappeared

Dasharaja took the two children and handed them over to King Vasu who took the boy and asked Dasharaja to raise the girl himself. As she was born from a belly of fish the smell of fish permeated her that is why she was called Matsyagandhi. When the girl was growing in Dasharaja's house according to his family custom he made her the boat women. Now she was a boat woman ferrying people across the river Yamuna. One day there was floods in the river and Matsyagandhi knew she could not ply her boat that day and was resting by the river

On that day the great grandson of the creator of the earth Brahma, Rishi Parashara was passing that way. After some days, the able sage Vashista's son sage Sakthi's pleasant son Parasaran, the master of arts reached there was smitten, worried, hurt by the god of love, the good Manmathan's arrows.

Rishi Parashara wanted to cross the river urgently and asked the girl to ply her boat. The girl said that the river was flooded and said the boat needed at least twenty people for it not to capsize in the currents. She said as Parashara was alone the boat would just overturn due to lack of weight. Parashara said that he would create the amount of weight needed for the boat to be steady and asked her to ply the boat. Rishi Parashara sat on the boat and the boat moved steadily across the river

As the boat was travelling, Parashara kept looking both at the sky and the girl, alternatively. The curious girl asked him as to why he was frequently looking up at the sky. Parashara says it was going to be rare conjunction of two stars and that a son born to him at that time would become one of the greatest sages of all time. He said that the conjunction was about to happen very soon and he really did not have the time to reach the other shore and find a woman willing to bear his child He said that is why he was looking at her. Matsyagandhi, who was a twelve year old child gets offended by what she thinks are lecherous thoughts of the venerable sage.

Matsyagandhi gets angry and says that he has sacred ash all over his body and profane thoughts in his head. She say she is a pre-pubescent girl and asks him was this the way to speak to a child. Parashara says the girl has mistaken him. He says he has crossed all desires

in life. He says he will transform her child's body into a body of child bearing young women and suddenly Matsyagandhi becomes a young beautiful woman and is astonished

When Parashara tried touching her the girl demurred and said she said it was broad day light and that a man and a woman should not make love in the day. Parashara threw some sacred ash into the sky and immediately it became night. Again he went to touch her, Matsyagandhi said a man and a woman should not unite on water. Again Parashara threw sacred ash an island was formed in the middle of the river. When Parashara tried touching her Matsyagandhi said fragrance emanated from his body while her own body had the stench of fish. Again he threw some sacred ash on her and the stench of fish left her heavenly fragrance emanated from her body. The lady consented and then to complete the act, thinking of the ways to overcome the questions about daytime hid the sun to mate her.

After sage Parashara met all her requests Matsyagandhi consents to bear Parashara's son. Parashara creates a cosmic darkness all around and creates an island in the middle of the Yamuna River.

This cosmic darkness that Parashara creates invokes the idea of the cosmic darkness where the primal Purusha, the passive male principle, encounters his other, Prakriti, the active feminine principle. Sage Parashara and Matsyagandhi becomes a mirror of the primary duality which gave rise to the world and all its beings. Vyasa is born with all the knowledge of the past worlds in his hands.

Vishwa Adhuri speaks on the etymology of the name Vyasa which literally means a divider or compiler.

He says "Vyāsa, the epic's composer is also known as Kṛṣṇa Dvaipāyana Kṛṣṇa of the island as he was born on an island in the middle of a river. The Mahābhārata which occupies a no-man's land between the two beginnings is akin to Vyāsa's birth place at the center of two arms of a river, it can be interpreted as the Archimidean point from which the flux of becoming can be understood."

Because the child was born with four Vedas in his hands he was named Veda Vyasa. Mani Vaasagan, the storyteller said that when Vyasa was born literally with the Vedas in his hand, it became his job to organize the text which had become fragmented into four distinct parts, hence his name Veda Vyasa.

That morning, from the divine lady's great womb was born Veda Vyasa who had imbibed ignorance lifting lessons, which he would recite again. The child was born carrying the Vedas in his hands with dreadlocks on his head which looked as though molten gold were poured on his head

The new born child immediately grew into an adult. The adult child took his mother's blessings and left with his father but said whenever she wanted to see him he would be there. All that she had to do was to think of him. Saying this the child left with his father.

The woman now again became a young child leaving no indication that she had given birth to a child. Only the heavenly fragrance gifted to her by Parashara remained with her. That's why she became now known as Parimalagandhi from the earlier Matsyagandhi. A fully grown Vyasa leaves with his father. He promises his mother that all she has to do is just think his name and he would appear before her wherever she was

The Epic does not say whether Matsyagandhi now Parimalagandhi ever met her son till the death of her third son Vichitravirya. After her encounter with Sage Parashara, Matsyagandhi became known as Parimalagandhi or Yojanagandhi because the fragrance emanating from her body permeated the entire landscape.