

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

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Lecture 8

THE ORIGIN OF THE LUNAR DYNASTY CHANDRA VAMSAM [32 MINUTES]

“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”
Villibharatham

The first question posed in the Mahabharata is around the ambiguity surrounding the principal reason for the Great War to be fought. The Epic gives multiple reasons. One, it says that Bhooma Devi the Goddess Earth had wanted the burden of people she was carrying on earth to be reduced as she was no longer able to bear their weight. So Vishnu was born as Krishna and Durga was born as Draupadi to reduce the burden on Mother Earth.

In Tamil traditions it is said that Sita was born to be the nemesis of the Rakshasas, while Draupadi was born to be the nemesis of the Royal Dynasties. – [in tamil] Sita was born to kill the Rakshasas and Draupadi was born to destroy the Royal Dynasties

The Epic gives other possible reasons for the Great War to be fought. But, says that it's not finally possible to identify a single cause. Villibharatham brings the ambiguity of the original cause by narrating six different stories of the birth of Chandra, the moon God who was the progenitor of the Lunar Dynasty. The first birth of Chandra Villibharatham speaks is of Chandra's birth from heart of Vishnu. Vaisahampayana begins narrating the Mahabharata to King Janamejaya by narrating the different stories of Chandra's birth.

I will tell you the story of Chandra who was born of the heart of our Vishnu and the glory of the celebrated Kings of the lineage of Chandra to the extent that an illiterate like myself am capable of.

Like all poets in this tradition Villiputthurar starts on a humble note, he says that he is just trying to convey in Tamil what he, a person without knowledge had understood from Vyasa's Epic. He apologises for any errors in his rendering as these were of his own making and not of the Epic itself.

Chandra was famous for adorning the dreadlocks of Shiva. Chandra is also said to have been born to Sage Atri and his wife Anusuya. Chandra is also said to have been born when the ocean was churned for the elixir of immortality. Chandra is also said to have been born from the heart of Vishnu. Chandra is also said to have been born out of Fire. The birth of Chandra has been described in a number of places.

Earth, hit by the poison emanating from the sigh of the slithering snakes was distressed greatly. By his nature as shadow the Moon through the nectar of rays emanating from the circular body cooled Earth, made up of mud.

Chandra is also said to have been born to cool down the heat generated on earth, enabling human life on earth.

The first narrative of Chandra which Mani Vasaagan chose in his rendering was of Daksha's curse which connects the waxing and waning of the moon which Chandra's excessive love for the Nakshatra Rohini. One of his twenty seven wives

There was a "Prajapati" or ruler of the people known as Daksha this Daksha was the father of fifty daughters. He raised all his daughters with love and affection. He had twenty seven of his daughters married to Chandra. He gave his ten daughters to Yama as his wives. He gave eleven of his daughters in marriage to Sage Kashyapa.

These twenty seven daughters of Daksha were married to Chandra and were living with him. These twenty seven wives of Chandra are the twenty seven stars in the constellations. Among his twenty seven wives, Chandra was excessively devoted to Rohini as she was the most beautiful among his wives. The other twenty six wives did not like this. All of them complained to their father Daksha about this. They said "Father though we are also his wives he does not even glance at us. But he is only affectionate to our sister Rohini."

Daksha Prajapati called Chandra and told him that he gave his twenty seven daughters in marriage to Chandra because he was so handsome. He advised him to treat all his wives equally and not to show partiality to one wife. Warning him not to repeat this mistake again he asked him to leave.

Chandra out of fear of Daksha treated all his wives equally for some time. Soon he was again enamoured with Rohini's beauty and started spending all his time with her. Again the angry daughters of Daksha complained to their father.

A furious Daksha said that as the root cause of all the problems was Chandra's beauty. He cursed Chandra to lose a portion of his beauty each day. Chandra had sixteen marks of beauty. Each day Chandra started waning and losing a portion of what made him beautiful. A frightened Chandra complained to the Devas about Daksha's curse but the Devas were helpless against Daksha's power.

Being let down by the Devas, Chandra went to the creator of the world Brahma to resolve his problem. Brahma said that though Daksha was his son he was headstrong and that he would not listen to his own father's words. So he went to Vaikunta to Vishnu with his complaint and even Narayana said that even he could not help Chandra.

In desperation Chandra finally went to Kailasa and fell at the feet of Shiva to remove Daksha's curse on him. Shiva lifted Chandra who had fallen at his feet and placed him on his head.

How can I describe the beauty of Chandra shining from the matted locks of Shiva? Shiva lifted Chandra who had fallen at his feet and placed him on his head.

Shiva said that though according to Daksha's curse he would wane every day, because of the boon given by him, Chandra would again wax every day. This is the reason why Chandra wanes and waxes every month. That is the reason why the crescent moon can always be seen on Shiva's matted locks. If Chandra's place of rest was in Shiva's matted locks, who can describe the greatness of Chandra?

Luminous, born out of the dazzling bright rays from the eyes of Atri and Agni's face with strange rays possessor of the sixteen phases or attributes that he gives one a day to Surya and others in the waning phase only to regain them in his waxing phase.

Chandra was the son born to Sage Atri and Anusuya Devi. Once the divine mischief maker, Narada ground iron into small pellets shaped like ground nuts and took it to Brahma's world. Narada was noted for carrying tales from one place to another, generally causing confusion

and distress everywhere. That is why one of the names of Narada is of a 'mischief maker'. But the confusion Narada creates with his mischief will always end in some good. Narada took some iron nuggets which looked like groundnuts and asked Saraswathi, the goddess of learning, if she could fry them. Saraswathi said it was impossible to fry iron nuggets into groundnuts.

This narrative hinges on the word jealousy. Anusuya literally means one who is without jealousy. She's happily married to Atri a sage who has transcended all passions. Anusuya, through her austerities has acquired magical powers and she's able to accomplish a feat, that even the three goddesses of knowledge, wealth and valour. Saraswati, Lakshmi and Parvati were unable to accomplish. The three Goddesses Saraswati, Lakshmi and Parvati were puzzled as to how a human being could do something which they themselves were unable to do.

Narada, the divine mischief maker, sings of the feat of Anusuya in the seven heavens and the three supreme goddesses are curious as to how a human being could do something which they had failed to do. The Devas or the gods and goddesses share the same human frailties of the mortal beings and the three goddesses want their respective husbands, Brahma the creator, Vishnu the protector and Shiva the destroyer, to test Anusuya's magical powers.

The trinity of divinities beseech for food as alms disguised as Brahmins in front of Atri's Ashram. When Anusuya came out of the ashram she saw three priests of divine form. She welcomed them inside, cooked food for them and was about to serve them when the three Gods in disguise declared that they had taken a vow only to eat food served according to their vow. They said they will only eat food served to them by a person not wearing any clothes.

The gods land on earth, disguised as old sages and plead for food in front of Anusuya's house. Anusuya is pleased to cook food for them, but when she is about to serve, the three sages declare that they would only eat food served by a naked person. The gods have also come to her house at the time when they know that her husband Atri would not be there. Anusuya finds herself in a difficult predicament; neither can she refuse to serve her guests food, nor could she serve food for them in the nude. Through her magical vision, she sees who these sages actually were and again, through her magic, transforms them into six month old babies. Happily she serves them food in the nude.

The three goddesses are worried at the prolonged absence of their husbands and send Narada to check the reason. Narada sees the three gods happily playing as children and reports back to them. One child claps to a rhythm, one child sways to the rhythm and the third child

dances to the beat. Narada who saw the three supreme deities transformed into six month babies he got scared thinking if he stayed longer he would also be turned into a child and ran from the place. Anusuya put the three children in cradles and sang lullabies to make them sleep.

She sang 'araro...araro' which also means 'who are you? Who are you?' at that time her husband Atri returned and was surprised to see three babies in his house. He asked Anusuya as to who these babies were? Anusuya had already replied to her husband's question in the lullaby that she was singing.

The apparently meaningless rhyme 'araro...' can also indicate a mother singing to her child. This is philosophy in an ordinary lullaby where she sings that in this birth you might be my child, but in their previous birth mother and child could have been totally unrelated. Then Sage Atri looks at the babies through his magical vision and recognises as to who they actually were. Lakshmi, Saraswathi and Parvati, now meet Anusuya and plead with her to give their husbands back. Anusya smilingly obliges and Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva are restored to their true forms.

The gods are pleased with both Anusya and Atri and offer them any boon they desire. Atri wants the three gods to be born as their children and Brahma is born to them as Chandra, Vishnu is born to them as Dattatreya and Shiva as Durvasa, the sage ready to curse at even the slightest offense. This is another narrative of Chandra's birth.

The sage Durvasa was born to them as an incarnation of Shiva. Dattaraya was born as an incarnation of Vishnu and Chandra was born as an incarnation of Brahma.

The next narrative of Chandra's birth is recorded in the story of the 'Churning of the Ocean' The Devas and their anti-selves, the Danavas want the elixir of immortality. For this it is said they have to churn the ocean together. The king of snakes, Vasuki agrees to be the churning rope and Mount Mandhara becomes the churning rod and together the Devas and the Danavas, churn the ocean.

The first emanation from the ocean through their joint effort was a deadly poison Halahala or Kaalakoota literally 'time puzzle' When the milky ocean was churned for the elixir of immortality poison emanated from the ocean first. The heat from the poison was impossible to bear. Both Devas and Danavas were unable to withstand this poison, and Shiva swallowed

this poison to help them. Though the poison was gone, the heat generated by the poison was still there and Chandra was born to cool the earth.

The Mahabharata is an Epic that at one level chronicles the genealogy of the Lunar Dynasty. Chandra's son was Budha, Mercury. There is none on this earth or in the higher realms who does not worship Chandra in the evening with the Vedic chants. When that Chandra had the boy named Budha from Tara of great intellect, that day all were happy over the wisdom of Mercury. As he was gifted with 'Buddhi' or 'intelligence' he was named 'Budha'

Ikshvaku Manu's son Sudyumna, one day while on a hunt mistakenly entered a forest where men were specifically forbidden to enter. In the forest there was a place where Parvati did her Tapas, a lot of men used to enter the grove and disturb Parvati's Tapas. So Parvati placed a curse on the grove, that men cannot enter the place. According to her curse if men entered the grove they would be transformed as woman. Ignorant of this, a King of the Solar Dynasty, Ilan entered the grove while hunting and was turned into a woman. Manu's son, unaware of the dangers of a curse that the one who entered the forest of penance will turn a girl by Parvati.

Wielder of the long, curved bow, King Manu's son rode the chariot drawn by horse with heavy mane was transformed into Ila, endowed with womanhood. One month Ila would be a woman and would not remember her life as a man and the next month she would become a man Sudyumna and not remember his life as a woman.

Now the King of the Manu's Dynasty spent his days roaming the forest as a woman Ila. Chandra's son Budha saw this girl called Ila in the forest. In a grove filled with honeyed flowers Chandra's son, Budha, the son of Tara stuck by the valiant arrows of the God of love enjoined in amorous union with Ila, of delightful beauty. Budha saw Ila fell in love with her and the son born to them was known as Pururavas the founder of the Lunar Dynasty.

Budha and the lass with Elysian voice had Pururava as their son and brought him up as their son endowed with good qualities, with beauty like the God of Love, Manmatha

He grew up being compared to God of love for his looks, and martial prowess and beauty of the divine Muruga.

When Pururavas was ruling his kingdom justly, the divine Apsara Urvashi was abducted by an Asura. When Urvashi was abducted by the Asura Avanan she cried to Indra the King of the Devas for help. Urvashi, the celestial snatched away by the Asuras screamed “save me”. Devas, intending to rescue Urvashi from the clutches of the Asuras were scared to engage in a dreadful war. Chandra’s grandson looked to retrieve Urvashi the divine damsel whose sweet hair smelling of honey had bees buzzing around. Pururava accelerated his chariot, sending shivers through the Asuras carrying the captive.

Even Indra did not have the valor to oppose the Asura Avanan. So the human king Pururavas climbed on to his chariot and rescued Urvashi from the Asura, relieving her from the humiliation of being abducted. He escorted her to her home, Indra’s court.

Indra pleased with Pururavas said that even he did not have the power to defeat the Asura. He says even I was silent at this humiliation but you rescued Urvashi and protected our honour. Indra asked Pururavas to ask for whatever boon he wanted. Pururavas was already in love with Urvashi just wanted her as his wife. Indra said that moment Asura abducted Urvashi she did not belong to him anymore. The moment you rescued her from the Asura she immediately belonged to you. Indra said she will live for a few days with you, till she bears your child. Once the child is born she will leave you and return back to my court. Narratives of this tradition resonate with one another and no storyteller can actually encapsulate all these resonances in a single narration.

For example, there were two important sages called Nara and Narayana who were practising severe austerities to kill a demon Dambhodbhava also known as Sahasrakavacha. Dambodhbhava had been granted a boon by Brahma which gave him a thousand shields wrapped around his body. A person to break one body armour of Dambodhbhava had to practise austerities for a hundred years and Dambodhbhava thought he was invincible. As no one could defeat him, he became arrogant and became a tyrant. Nara and Narayana took turns in fighting this Asura. Nara would practise authorities for a hundred years while Narayana fought him, breaking one body armour. Narayana would then practise austerities for a hundred years, while Nara fought him.

When nine hundred and ninty nine of his armours were broken by Nara and Narayana Dambhodbhava took shelter behind Surya, the sun God. This part of Dambodhbhava was born through Surya as Karna to Kunti the eldest of the Pandavas.

The Mahabharata keeps repeatedly identifying Arjuna and Krishna as reincarnations of Nara and Narayana. Karna is born with the last Kavacha or armour of Dambodhbhava and that is the reason why Arjuna had to kill his own brother. The storytellers would of course narrate the story of Dambodhbhava on the death of Karna. This is a story which links the narrative of the founder of the Lunar dynasty, Pururavas, to the Great War.

Pururavas gave a son, Ayu the illustrious one, good in character to Urvashi, to the delight of the Devas and Agni. Ayu rose as praiseworthy among the Kings with number of yagas to his credit – bountiful offerings to Devas, illustrious one, good in character to Urvashi, the deer eyed one who rose from the thigh of magical Vishnu

With this line the poet refers to the birth of Urvashi.

At first in the heavens there were just three celestial dancers Menaka, Ramba and Thilothama. Indra sent the three dancers to seduce the sages Nara and Narayana who were practicing severe austerities. Narayana seeing this rubbed his thigh and a beautiful woman emerged from his thigh. Seeing the woman's beauty the three dancers ran away ashamed at not being able to match her perfection. That woman was called Urvashi as she was born from the 'Uru' or thigh of Narayana. Pururavas lived with Urvashi for sometime and they had a son called Ayu.

No story ever really ends in the Epic tradition. Stories are only partially resolved only to resurface later.

A single story can actually straddle multiple epochs of time. To the audiences, reconstituting the various fragments presented before them into a notion of a whole however imperfect, is one key component of the experience of listening to Epic narratives

To cite another example Kalidasa, in his Vikramorvashiyam, his play on the story of Pururavas and Urvashi works within this narrative tradition. He retells the story of Sudyumna/Ila, the mother of Pururavas in a different fashion. Sudyumna wanders unknowingly into a sacred forest and is turned into a woman.

In Vikramorvashiyam Urvashi wanders into a sacred grove where women were not supposed to enter and is turned into a creeper. Pururavas in his search for her cannot find her even though he is just standing by her side. Urvashi of course can see Pururavas but cannot call out

to him as she is now a creeper entwined on a tree. Urvashi and Pururavas in Kalidasa's version are finally reunited and a son Ayu was born to them. Ayu was the next great King in the Lunar Dynasty and he had a son called Nahusan.

One idea thread that runs through the Tamil redition of the Epic is the question of whether everything is preordained or whether an individual has agency to change their own destiny.

This is about the story of Nahusa where Yudhishtira meets his ancestor Nahusa and releases him from a curse which has transformed him into a gigantic python. Though he had the crown, a large army and ruled a vast country, Nahusha remained dispassionate like the lotus leaf from water drops

He lived a detached life performing a hundred Ashwamedha yagas. He Nahusa earned the crown from Indra, ruled the Devaloka too. He commanded a large army of spear wielding warriors. He was the good son of Ayu. When Nahusa was ruling his kingdom, he performed a hundred Ashwamedha Yagas. Yudhishtira or Dharmaraja as he is called could only perform one Ashwamedha Yaga after great effort.

Most storytellers compare Nahusa with Yayati both great kings of the Lunar Dynasty. Nahusa even though he had absolute power lived an extremely austere, dispassionate life. Yayati, his son on the other hand was an extremely sensual man who thought that his body was what he was. Nahusa while living on earth, ignored his sensuality and his discovering of his own sensuality in the heavens led to him being cursed. Yayati on the other hand discovers on earth itself that nothing is ever enough for a sensual person. On this realisation, he crowns his son king and retires to the forest to lead an austere life.

Nahusa called upon the seven celestial sages to take him to the wife of previous Indra. The seven celestial sages carried the new Indra seated in a palanquin on their shoulders. The seven sages were Agastiyar, Atri, Angisar, Gauthamar, Kashyappar, Pulasthiyar and Vashishtar.

The movement of the palanquin was slow as Sage Agastiya was far shorter than the rest. An impatient lustful Nahusa wanted to reach Indrani soon and as Agastiya was slowing the palanquin. He kicked Sage Agastya asking him to go faster "sarpa...sarpa" Sarpa in Sanskrit means "go faster". Agastya angered by being kicked by Nahusa who kept repeating "Sarpa! Sarpa!" and cursed him to become a Sarpa which also meant a Snake. A repentant Nahusa

beseached Agastya to change his curse. Agastya said a curse once given cannot be retracted. Nahusa wanted to know as to when he would be freed from the curse. Agastya said you live as a snake and in your lineage a King would be born called Dharmaraja, only on seeing him; he would be freed from his curse. Nahusa's release from his curse happens hundreds of years later and Nahusa has been waiting patiently for this.

Once Bhima goes to get the Parijata flower for Draupadi and is trapped in the vice like clutches of his great great ancestor Nahusa who is now a python. All of Bhima's fabled strength is of no use against the python and Yudhishtira goes to rescue his brother.

Nahusa says he will release Bhima if Yudhishtira is able to answer all his questions on Dharma correctly. Then the discourse on Dharma begins and the first question that Nahusa asks is as to what makes a Brahmin, a Brahmin. After Yudhishtira has answered all of Nahusa's questions to Nahusa's satisfaction, Bhima is released. Nahusa is also freed from his curse and receiving his true human form he departs to the heavens.