

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

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Lecture 9

BIRTH OF YAYATI [34 MINUTES]

“Know this for certain, not all the food, wealth and women of the world can appease the lust of a single man of uncontrolled senses. Craving for sense-pleasures is not removed but aggravated by indulgence even as ghee poured into fire increases it...One who aspires to peace and happiness should instantly renounce craving and seek instead that which neither grows old, nor ceases - no matter how old the body may become”
Yayati from Mahabharata

The birth of Yayati seems to be an important marker in these Mahabharata festivals as he seems to represent a polarity from his father Nahusa. The birth of each king in the Lunar Dynasty is celebrated in the village and more importantly they are seen as though they were born in the village itself. Each village celebrates the birth of their heroes and heroines as a birth in their own village and for the birth of key figures in the Mahabharata sweets are given to the participating audience by the sponsors of the respective event.

Villibharatham also does not say that these heroines and hero were born rather it says, they were incarnated “Avadharithar” that is the word Villibharatham uses to represent each birth. In the first few days of the festival each village would celebrate the incarnation of key figures from the Epic.

A son was born to King Nausha named Yayati. That Yayati earned plaudits from all, was also praised by Vyasa to be the better than all. In days of yore Yayati embraced the mountain like bosoms of Sukracharya’s daughter Devayani matching the mass of his strong shoulders and gave her two profligate sons.

The literary model for Villibharatham seems to be distinctly Kalidasa’s ‘Raghuvamsham’ In Raghuvamsham, Kalidasa narrates the stories of the kings of the Suryavamsham or Solar Dynasty.

He emphasises stories of major kings who had enormous potential for greatness, but for some reason or other they never could achieve their true potential.

Kalidasa narrates the stories of Dilipa, Raghu, Aja, and Dasaratha in great detail, but says that in Rama, the Solar Dynasty reached its acme. Villibharatham again speaks in great detail about major kings in the Chandravamsam or Lunar Dynasty and says that Yudhishtira/Dharmaraja represents the acme of Chandravamsam. The storytellers, while making the comparison between Rama and Yudhishtira as the acme of their respective dynasties do not elaborate any further on this.

King Yayati married Shukracharya's daughter Devayani and two sons Yadu and Durvasu were born to them. Vaishampayana, narrating the Bharatham said that Yayati married Shukracharya's daughter Devayani and two sons were born to them.

Immediately Janamejaya asked him that King Yayati was a Shatriya, so how could he get married to a Brahmin girl? Janamejaya's question to Vaishampayana, as to how Yayati got married to Devayani

is one of the recurrent questions on Varna which is found in the Mahabharata

Yayati, is attracted to Devayani says that though all the four Varnas rose from the same body the rules for each were very different. Yayati says that he can only get married to Devayani with her father's consent. Shukra consents whole heartedly to this marriage as his daughter was truly in love with Yayati and the marriage takes place.

In the 14th century Villibharatham it is said that five classes of people are exempt from Jati or Varna rules

They are the King, beautiful women, great warriors, great scholars and ascetics. In the Mahabharata, Vaishampayana narrates the story of Kacha or Gaja as an explanation.

Once, Shukracharya joined the able Rakshasa King Idapapanman [Vrishaparvan] who wanted to gain control over the universe helping the Asuras gain an upper hand against the Devas with his deceptions.

There was a Rakshasa called Idadhabharman/Vrishaparvan. He was the King of all the Asuras. This Idadhabharman had great wealth, was a great warrior and had a huge army but still he was not satisfied.

But he did not have peace of mind. He lacked peace of mind as he always wanted more out of greed. A man can have desires but he should not have greed for more. Why he lacked peace of mind was because he lusted after the wealth of his counterparts the Devas. Because of this there would be frequent fights between the Asuras and Devas in these fights the Devas were able to kill innumerable Asuras but again and again they were brought back to life.

The Asuras had a preceptor called Shukracharya who knew the mantra called Mrithya Sanjeevini chanting which he could bring back dead people to life. By chanting this mantra he revives all the killed Asuras. So the Devas were unable to defeat the Asuras. So Gaja, the son of the preceptor of Devas Brihaspati offered to join as a student of Shukracharya to learn the mantra from him. So Gaja left Devaloka to join Shukracharya as his student.

The Devas were helpless and appealed to Kacha or Gaja as he known in this tradition. Kacha was the son of Brihaspati, the priest of the Devas. The Devas want Gaja to learn this Mantra from his father's disciple Shukracharya. Gaja accepted this and spent a thousand years as Shukracharya's student to try to learn this Mantra from him. Shukracharya had a beautiful daughter called Devayanai who was attracted by Gaja's intelligence and beauty and both of them spent a long time together. Devayanai was very affectionate towards Gaja from the time she met him.

Gaja would get up early morning everyday to pluck flowers from the garden for his teacher Shukracharya's pooja. Gaja was a devoted disciple to his teacher Shukracharya. The Asuras were suspicious as to why Brihaspati's son had joined as a student of his father's rival Shukracharya they wondered whether he had come to learn the mantra from him and complained of this to their King Idadhavarman.

The King of Asuras asked his soldiers to capture Gaja, kill him, chop him up into pieces and bury his body. The next day when Gaja went to the gardens to pluck flowers the Asuras captured him, chopped him into pieces and buried him in the ground.

Devayanai is worried that her friend Gaja who had left in the morning had not as yet returned and was anxiously waiting for him. Devayanai was worried that may her friend was dead and spoke of her fear to her father. Shukracharya through his spiritual eye could see what had happened and revived Gaja back to life by chanting the mantra.

Devayanai is worried that her friend Gaja had not returned home and asks her father to see where he was with his divine sight. Shukrayacharya realises that the Danavas had killed Gaja and had buried him. He chants the Sanjeevini mantra and brings him back to life. Gaja wakes up from a deep slumber not knowing what happened to him.

He tells Devayanai that he probably was tired and had slept in the forest. When he woke up from his sleep he said he had returned home. Devayanai who knows what had happened remains silent but is happy. The next day Gaja again goes to the garden to collect flowers.

The Danavas realise that every time they kill Gaja, Shukracharya would bring him back to life. The Danava king Vidavarman or Vrishaparvan suggests the best way to kill Gaja. He says that Shukracharya though being a Brahmin had the habit of drinking alcohol. So he asked his soldiers to kill Gaja burn his body, dissolve his ashes in alcohol and offer it to Shukracharya. Unknowingly Shukracharya drinks this alcohol and is inebriated.

Devayanai is again worried that Gaja had not returned home and wakes up her father to find where Gaja was. Shukracharya realises that he has drunk Gaja's ashes along with alcohol and is in a dilemma. When Shukracharya awoke from his drunken sleep he could see what had happened to Gaja through his divine vision. He realised that the Asuras had killed Gaja, burnt his body into ashes and dissolved the ashes in alcohol and presented it to him to drink.

Shukracharya asked his daughter whether she wanted either him alive or Gaja alive? Devayanai says that it is a ridiculous question as she wants both alive. The Rishi said that it was impossible and declared that only one of them could live. He says that the Asuras had killed Gaja burnt his body to ashes and dissolved it in alcohol and presented it to him. Unknowingly he had drunk this alcohol. Now he says Gaja was in his stomach.

If I awaken him with the mantra Gaja will split open my stomach and come out killing me, if I do not revive him with the mantra Gaja will get digested in my body. That is why he says he asked his daughter to choose whose life she wanted to save.

Devayanai suggests a simple solution. She says that Shukracharya can teach Gaja the mantra when he is in his stomach so that when Gaja comes out of her father's body he can chant the mantra and revive her father back to life. This way she says both can live. So Gaja finally learns the mantra that he had come to learn and his mission with Shukracharya was finished.

Why had he come? To learn the mantra! Now that he had learned the mantra, he takes leave from his teacher and goes to meet Devayanai to bid farewell to her. Devayanai said if Gaja wanted to leave then he should also take her along with him. Gaja is shocked and says that Devayanai has misunderstood his friendship towards her. Gaja refuses to take Devayanai with him as she was like a sister to him as he was also given life by her father. Devayanai in anger asks whether Gaja had just come to learn the mantra from her father. Gaja accepts that and says let's remain friends. An angry Devayani curses Gaja and says that he would never be able to use the mantra to bring anyone back to life. Gaja also gets angry and he says that he would be able to teach someone else the mantra which they could use. He is also offended by Devayanai's proposal to him and says that no son of a Rishi would ever get married to her.

A scorned Devayanai curses Gaja that the mantra he had learned would be of no use to him. Gaja scoffs at this curse and says that he could teach someone else this mantra which they could use. He curses her for her improper conduct towards him and says that no Brahmin would get married to Devayanai and she will only be married by a Shatriya. After giving her this curse Gaja leaves.

Devayanai was friends with Idadhuvarman's daughter called Sanmishtai/Sharmishta/Devayanai and Sanmishtai's thousand friends one day went to the forest to play and feeling tired after their games they decided to swim in the pond. Each girl placed her dress separately and entered the water to swim.

Suddenly a huge gust of wind came from nowhere frightening the girls. In the Mahabharata, it is Indra, the King of the gods, who actually incites the fight between Sharmishta and Devayanai. Indra takes the form of a whirlwind and mixes up the clothes discarded by the thousand and two women. This mixing up of the clothes actually impels the narrative forward. In Tamil renditions, the wind is seen as accidental. It still impels the narrative forward, but it is seen as being unintentional.

The huge gust of wind swept all these arranged dresses into one huge heap. When the girls got out of water and tried to find their dress, they found that the wind mixed all the dresses up. The frightened girls picked up whatever sari they could find and wore it. As all the dresses were mixed up no girl was able to find her own sari.

Devayanai who got out of the water last was left with the silk clothes of the Princess Sanmishtai. Devayanai refused to wear the silk sari saying that she was wearing an ordinary cotton sari. She said that she would wear only her own sari.

Sanmishtai mocked Devayanai saying that the food which they were eating was provided by her father, the Asura King. She asked Devayanai that when they could eat her father's food, what was the harm in wearing clothes that he had purchased. Devayanai retorted angrily that the Asuras would not be alive, if not for her father's mantra.

We might be eating food provided by your father but if my father was not there all the Asuras by now would have been vanquished.

An angry Sanmishtai and her thousand friends push Devayanai into an abandoned well and leave. Devayanai clings to a creeper in the well struggling to come out. The thousand and one friends abandon a naked Devayanai to fend for her in the well.

King Yayati who was on a hunt was thirsty and searching for water to drink. He reaches the abandoned well where Devayanai was struggling for her life and is shocked. Wishing to rescue Devayanai, he puts out his hand for Devayanai to hold on to. Devayanai grasps the King's hand she notices his face and finds his name, Yayati inscribed on his crown. At that point she remembers the curse that Gaja had given her. This is the first time in her life that she was holding on to a man's hand.

Gaja had cursed her saying a Brahmin will not take her hand in marriage and only a Shatriya would marry her. Now only a Shatriya had first touched her hand and she thinks that according to the curse she was destined to marry Yayati. Though Devayanai looked boldly at the King's face the King did not even glance at her as she was not wearing any clothes. The King helped her out of the well and gave her his upper garment to wear and quickly left the forest.

After the King left Devayanai remained rooted in the same spot crying her heart out. She noticed a soldier on horseback passing that way.

After Yayati departs Devayanai spots a soldier on horseback and requests him to bring her father Shukracharya there. She tells her father all that has happened and says that they cannot

live any longer in the Danava kingdom. Shukracharya cannot refuse his daughter, but says that he was duty bound to inform his king first. The king rushes to them when he hears of this drastic decision of Shukracharya.

He knows that if Shukracharya leaves, the Devas would wipe them out and tries to work out a compromise.

Vrishaparvan says that he should not be punished for the mistake of his daughter. He says that they can mete out whatever punishment that Devayanai intends for Sharmishta, but requests that they remain in his kingdom.

Devayani wants Sharmishta and the thousand maids to be her servants from that day onwards and the king happily agrees. Devayanai says that all her woes were caused by his daughter and wants as a condition that Sanmishtai should be her slave for life. She says that if the King was willing to punish his daughter then she and her father would stay in the Asura's kingdom. The King agreed to her condition. From that day onwards the thousand and one friends became hand maidens of Devayanai.

On another day, the thousand and two women are again playing in the forest and Yayati again passes by.

In the Mahabharata Yayati is drawn towards the beauty of Devayanai and Sharmishta and asks them as to who they were. Devayanai asks the king whether he has forgotten her already and tells her story. She says that Yayati was the first man who took her hand and so he was her rightful husband. Yayati being also attracted to her, says that he can only get married to her with her father's consent.

On another day King Yayati came again to the same forest on a hunt. Seeing Yayati Devayani sent one of her maids to tell Yayati that she would like to meet him. Yayati came to meet her and Devayanai bowed before him. Yayati who had not seen her face asks her as to who she was? Devayanai had only seen the King only once but she had recognized that it was King Yayati who had rescued her. But Yayati did not know who this girl was. As she was not wearing any clothes when he rescued her he had not even glanced at her face. That is why the King questions as to who she was? Devayani says she was the damsel in distress that he had rescued and asks whether he had forgotten her already.

She says her name is Devayanai and she declares her desire for him. Yayati was also enamoured with the girls beauty but he said unfortunately you are a Brahmin girl. Devayani

says her father would permit this marriage and a messenger was sent to inform her father. Shukracharya told Yayati that he stands by his daughters desire and had no objection to their marriage. So Devayanai and Yayati get married.

They indulged in sensual pleasures like that celestial couple Manmathan and Rathi. The days when he indulged in physical union, enjoying the sensual pleasure, happiness two sons were born, equivalent to Budha in knowledge. The sharp warriors with rowing swords Yadu and Durvasu appeared, stunning the brave.

Yayati and Devayanai live happily and two children, Yadu and Durvasu are born to them. Sharmishta and the thousand maids also live near the palace as maids of Devayanai. Sharmishta sees Devayanai and her thousand other friends married and with children but because of the condition imposed on her by Devayanai she lives alone.

Devayanai was living happily with her husband and her two sons, when Yayati celebrated his birthday. As part of his birthday celebration he gifted all the people who worked in his palace. That evening was magical and a full moon was glowing in the palace gardens. As the King was strolling in the gardens, Sanmishtai was also walking in the same gardens.

Yayati celebrates his birthday and generously gives gifts to all his subjects.

In the evening, on a lovely moonlit night he strolls down in the palace gardens when he notices Sharmishta bemoaning her fate. Sharmishta falls on his feet and tries to seduce him. Yayati refuses Sanmishtai's advances by saying that his father in law had made a specific request that Sanmishtai should never get married. He says he made a promise to his father in law and he would not dishonour it.

Sanmishtai says the King was protector of all and as she had fallen at his feet she declares now she is the King's responsibility.

The night was magical, the moon was glowing hauntingly and the King was seduced by Sanmishtai's beauty. Since then, they had physical relationship without the knowledge of others, happy in there union.

When the king proudly lived with her she bore him sons.

Lady with sweet words, Devayanai asked “tell me how you had sons in lightning speed”. Yayati and Sharmishta continue their affair in secret. Sharmishta gets pregnant and Devayanai notices this.

She questions her about the father of her soon to be born child. Sharmishta says that it was a wandering sage whom she had met in the palace gardens. Devayanai, who had been feeling guilty at the childish punishment she had imposed on a friend is happy for her and wishes her and the sage well. Sharmishta has two more children with Yayati

Yayati’s story in Tamil renditions it is treated as a comedy by most storytellers. It becomes a tale of a married man who has a clandestine affair behind his wife’s back. The storytellers play to the gallery and wring out every ounce of humour from a potentially ugly situation.

One day Devayanai notices three children playing in the palace gardens and is struck by their regal appearance. She asks the children as to whose children they were and they say that they were sons of Sharmishta and refuse to name their father.

Devayani asked whose sons are you. They replied coyly that they were Sanmishtai’s sons. Devayanai is surprised that the children resemble her husband a lot. She again asks as to who their father was? They said their mother was Sanmishtai but they do not know who their father was. At that moment King Yayati enters and all three children keep staring at him. Yayati signals to them to look away from him. He guiltily asks Devayanai as to who these children were and what they were doing in their palace and asks her to send the children away. Devayanai asks her husband to sit quietly. Yayati tries escaping by saying he has some important work, but Devayanai does not relent.

The youngest son Puru keeps staring at his father and Yayati tries to get him to look away. Again Devayanai asks “I know your mother is Sanmishtai but who is your father?” She gets a lot sweets and fruits to bribe the children and she took the youngest son Puru on to her lap and asked him as to whom his father was? Puru says he does not know. But seeing the sweets and fruits before him and says that the person who is sitting next to her was their father but he will not disclose that.

The youngest boy looks absolutely like her husband Yayati and Devayanai confronts her husband. Devayanai laments that the person whom she had punished to being a spinster and

suffer all her life had married her own husband Yayati. Angry with Yayati Devayanai left to her father Shukracharya's ashram.

Angry Shukracharya cursed Yayati for making his daughter cry and said the cause was Yayati's youth and beauty.

He curses Yayati to lose his youth and become a prematurely aged and diseased man. The moment Shukracharya cursed him Yayati immediately lost his youth and became a diseased old man. Yayati, who is now a diseased old man, pleads with his father-in-law to withdraw his curse. Shukracharya says he could not withdraw a curse once given. But he says if one of Yayati's sons is willing to exchange their youth for their fathers old age Yayati can regain his youth. Yayati agreed and went straight upto his eldest son Yadu.

Please accept my diseased old age and grant me your youth, he requested. Yayati is angered by his first four sons refusal and he disinherits the four of them. He banishes the elder son Yadu, to live outside the kingdom

Yayati curses Yadu for disobeying him and banishes him from the kingdom. This Yadu lived between the kingdom and the forest and was the progenitor of the clan of Yadus. Because they lived between the kingdom and the forest they were called "Idayargal" or the "in between people" Because Yadu was their progenitor they were also known as Yadavas. All the first four sons refused their father's request.

Yayati approached his sons and spoke of the curse of Sukracharya that rendered him old, which came with the remedy of barter. All except Puru declined, while Puru happily embraced his father's old age, to make Yayati young again.

The narrative of Yayati and his sons Yadu and Puru are repeated right through the Mahabharata festival till the killing of Duryodhana. The narrative is repeated both in the storytelling sessions and the theatre performances and it seems to function as an important memory marker for the festival community

One day, Yayati grew tired of his eternal youth which till then he thought was his identity. This he realized forever pushed him relentlessly in the pursuit of endless desires. So he gave up his youth and kingdom to his youngest son Puru saying

For some time Yayati again lived as a young man and one day tired of life, returned his youth to son Puru and made him King. Yayati retired to the forest to live the life of an ascetic. Because Puru sacrificed his youth to his father the dynasty which was known as Chandrakulam henceforth came to be called "Puru's Dynasty or Puru's Kulam"

Yayati's story does not end here. Yayati goes to the forest and lives life as an ascetic. Indra is pleased with his austerities and takes him to the heavens. One day Yayati and Indra have a long conversation on Dharma. Indra questions him on various aspects of Dharma and Yayati answers to the best of his ability

Indra says that Yayati, was one of the wisest men in the universe and asked him as to who he thought could be his equal. Yayati in arrogance suddenly says that he can't think of a single equal in the seven worlds for his sagacity. Indra is angered by the arrogance of Yayati and he is expelled from the heavens. Yayati falls down to the earth and like his counterpart Trishanku remains suspended in mid-air. It becomes the responsibility of his grandchildren born to his daughter, Madhavi to rescue him from this predicament. This other narrative of Yayati is another beginning for the Pallava story at Mamallapuram.