

Paṭukaḷam: Performing the banality of war and evil

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Abstract

The enactment of the eighteenth day of Kurukṣetra war in the Mahābhārata festival in Draupadī Amman temples is known by the name, Paṭukaḷam, in the northern districts of Tamilnadu. Throughout the night before the Paṭukaḷam the villagers construct a huge colorful mud and sand sculptural effigy of Duryodhana. The following morning Terukkūttu actors adorned as Bhīma and Duryodhana perform the final fight around the Duryodhana sculpture that brings Kurukṣetra war to an end. The performance has the participation of all the villagers, who gather around the huge Duryodhana effigy and stamp on it to reduce the figurine to rubble as soon as Bhīma kills Duryodhana. Immediately afterwards, another Terukkūttu actor playing Gāndhārī (mother of Duryodhana) chases away the crowd with a broomstick and a winnow. Gāndhārī and her motley entourage enter into a mock lament singing dirge songs while the crowd cheers and laughs at their plight. The mockery and the dark comic elements of the performance and the actual funerary rites conducted for Duryodhana afterwards layer the last day of the Mahābhārata festival with complex attitudes towards war and its causes. Drawing upon my fieldwork in the villages of Tūci, Takkōlam and Ariyanūr, I argue in this paper that Paṭukaḷam portrays the banality of war and evil, and reveals the intricacies of performing them.

Key words: Mahābhārata , Tamil folk theater, Terukkūttu, Kurukṣetra, Paṭukaḷam, war

The enactment of the eighteenth day of Kurukṣetra war in the Mahābhārata festival in Draupadī¹ Ammaṅ temples is known by the name, Paṭukaḷam. Mahābhārata festival known also by the name fire walking festival is celebrated in the northern districts of Tamilnadu during the summer months. Mahābhārata, the great epic of the Bharata dynasty and Rāmāyaṇa are two Sanskrit epics valued for centuries for their high literary merit, religious inspiration and teaching of morals for everyday life. The Mahābhārata was composed around 300 BC and received numerous additions until 300 AD. It is divided into 18 cantos containing altogether about 200,000 lines of verse interspersed with short prose passages.



Paṭukaḷam: Sculptural effigies of Duryodhana, Śakuni, and Salyan Takkōlam 2009

The central theme of Mahābhārata is sibling rivalry and fratricide between Pāṇḍavas and Kauravas over the kingdom of Hasthinapura. The conflict begins when Dhṛtarāṣṭra, the eldest son of the Kuru dynasty has to pass over his crown to his younger brother Pāṇḍu because of his physical blindness. After reigning for a brief period Pāṇḍu renounces his kingdom due to his incurable illness and goes to forest with his two wives, Kuntī and Madhuri. The five sons of Pāṇḍu, the Pāṇḍava brothers (Dharma, Bhīma, Arjuna, Nakula, and Sahadeva), grow up in the court along with their one

¹ Sanskrit transliteration is followed for all character names in the Mahābhārata

hundred cousins, the Kauvras, sons of Dhṛtarāṣṭra. The prominent among the Kauravas are the eldest son Duryodhana and his loyal demonic brother Duḥśāsana. Because of the enmity and jealousy that develops between the cousins, the Pāṇḍavas are forced to leave the kingdom at the time of their father's death. During their exile the five jointly marry Draupadī and meet their cousin Kṛṣṇa who remains their friend and companion thereafter. They return to experience some years of prosperity in a divided kingdom but are again forced to retire to the forest for 12 years and spend one year of life in disguise when the eldest brother, Dharma loses everything (including Draupadī who is pawned away) in a game of dice with the eldest of the Kauravas. Immediately after their defeat in the game of dice, Duryodhana sends Duḥśāsana to bring Draupadī to the court. Duḥśāsana forcibly drags Draupadī by hair into Kaurava court. Draupadī wearing a single garb and menstruating is further humiliated when Duryodhana orders Duḥśāsana to disrobe her in front of the crest fallen Pāṇḍavas and other helpless elders present in the court. Draupadī clasps her hands above her head in a gesture of worship and prays to Lord Krishna to help her. Recognizing Draupadī's moment of ultimate surrender Kṛṣṇa saves her as the single garb of her sari miraculously grows endless and tires Duḥśāsana so that he faints². A furious Draupadī vows that she would tie her hair only with the blood of Duryodhana and Duḥśāsana. After twelve years of life in the forest and one year in disguise the Pāṇḍavas return to claim their kingdom but Duryodhana refuses to give even a pinhead of a land. In the ensuing bloody battle at Kurukṣetra, Kṛṣṇa participates as a non-fighting charioteer of Arjuna and ensures the Pāṇḍavas victory over the Kauravas. Almost half of Mahābhārata's verses are devoted to the description of the great battle. In the middle of the war field, just before the war, Kṛṣṇa reveals himself to Arjuna as the Lord of the Cosmos and teaches him Dharma, one's duty and meaning in human life. Hindus revere this portion of Mahābhārata known as Bhagavat Gītā as the holiest of the sacred texts. If Gītā preaches the philosophy of surrender to Kṛṣṇa, the eighth avatar of Lord Viṣṇu and guides how human beings need to "act", it is Draupadī of all characters in Mahābhārata who exemplifies Gītā's ideal. In Bhagavat Gītā if Kṛṣṇa says that he is the universal time, destroying and recreating everything, Draupadī is also Kālī (the goddess of time), born out of fire, a feminine vehicle of Kṛṣṇa. The battle of Kurukṣetra annihilates Kauravas and an avenged Draupadī ties her hair with the blood of Duryodhana and Duḥśāsana before the Dharma's ascendance to the throne.

² Field video recording of Terukkūttu performance, 'Disrobing of Draupadī' can be accessed here <http://tinyurl.com/3-Tukil-on-Youtube>

Over centuries of oral and written transmissions, the texts of Mahābhārata live innumerable lives through their endless versions in all Indian languages across the Indian subcontinent. The Mahābhārata festivals I have been documenting and studying in the Tamil villages of Tūci and Takkōlam since 2007 are only a tiny minuscule expression of Mahābhārata, with its millions of followers, and its spiritual and artistic practices all over India. I extended my research to include Ariyanūr since Jeyachandran, the village elder decided to build a new Draupadī Ammaṇ temple and revived the tradition of celebrating the Mahābhārata festival in his village as recently as 2011. In the villages of Tūci and Takkōlam the villagers believe that the epic's presence in their villages is as old as the practice of reciting Pāratam in the region. Hildebeitel dates the practice of reciting Pāratam in Draupadī Ammaṇ temples to circa 600-700 AD citing Kuram copper plates of Parameshvaravarman I Pallava. He also argues that the present practice of using Villiputtūrār's Tamil Mahābhārata text for storytelling sessions probably goes back to the fourteenth century (Hildebeitel 1991, 14-15). The invitation posters for the 2009 festivals published by the villagers of Tūci and Takkōlam accord equal prominence to the afternoon storytelling sessions, all night Terukkūttu performances and other processions and festivities. Many poets of great calibre expanded and improvised the Tamil poetic creations of Mahābhārata with the general purpose of establishing Kṛṣṇa as a divine avatar of Viṣṇu and accommodating the local histories of the region (Manavalan 2005, 204-227)³. As the Bhakti movement was sweeping south India from the eighth century onwards the Tamil versions of Mahābhārata became canonical texts exhibiting ethos and aesthetics of Bhakti movement. Of these texts, Villiputtūrār's Tamil Mahābhārata is considered to be of great religious importance and the Mahābhārata storytellers keep a copy of Villiputtūrār's text in front of them and recite passages from it verbatim during the festival. Villiputtūrār's text is of seminal importance to the Vaiṣṇavite theology and Villiputtūrār had been accorded the status of Vaiṣṇavite saint and often referred to as Villiputtūr Āḷvār. For the theatrical performances, however, another improvised text known by the author's name Nallāpiḷḷai Pāratam⁴ is used (Srinivasan 2007). As the Bhakti movement emphasized the emotional intensity of the devotee as the way of attaining communion with the God, the Tamil recital and later on the theatrical performances of Mahābhārata highlighted the utter helplessness of

³ Tamil scholar of comparative epics A. Manavalan argues that the Tamil textual traditions of Mahābhārata has greatly contributed to the canonization of it as a religious text and establishment of Kṛṣṇa as a divine avatar.

⁴ The voluminous Nallāpiḷḷai Pāratam, the performance text was collected and published in Tamil by R.Srinivasan in 2007.

the human existence through Draupadī's predicament and her need to surrender to the will of the God, Kṛṣṇa. The recital and the theatrical performances of Mahābhārata have the tradition of focusing on the individual characters, their inner conflicts and how the tensions within each of the individuals contribute towards the hastening of the war and the resultant colossal destruction at Kurukṣetra. Both the recital (or storytelling) and the theatrical performances of Mahābhārata while placing the banality of the causes of war on each of the individuals, imagine evil as an innate blindness to see the accessibility of good and divinity in Kṛṣṇa. The monumental failure of Duryodhana is in his inability to recognize Kṛṣṇa's divinity, an inability that leads him to commit the unpardonable crime of violating Draupadī's honor. Writing about Duryodhana and the discourse of sinning and virtue in the Mahābhārata David Gitomer says " Draupadī's pain and wrath, and the hatred that Bhīma, in sympathy with Draupadī, maintains and enacts toward Duryodhana are so powerful that in many places in Sanskrit Mahābhārata and in a number of other tellings the violation of Draupadī and its consequences become the primary dynamism of the narrative. Seen from such a perspective, this violation becomes the chief sin of its author, Duryodhana" (Gitomer 1992). The social imaginary of evil in Tamil Mahābhārata is thus embodied in the character of Duryodhana and the Mahābhārata festival presents Draupadī as the protagonist fighting for her justice against the mighty evil Duryodhana.

To have all the three significant parts — rituals, storytelling and the theater — in the performance cycle is a luxury of the large-scale festival affordable, only if the economy of the village permits. Usually the Terukkūttu festival season starts immediately after the Tamil New Year (mid April) and lasts till the end of June. Traditionally these months have been the post-harvest period. The harvest would be completed by the end of January, and then the paddy would be husked and sold. By February and March the villagers would have enough money to commission Terukkūttu performances. If January, the harvest month, is the time of paying worshipping tributes to the Sun God and the cattle by celebrating Pongal the post-harvest season of Terukkūttu is for rest, contemplation and anticipation. The ritual efficacy of conducting Mahābhārata festival in honor of Draupadī Amman lies in the firm belief that the ascendance of Dharma to the throne is the restoration of justice; and it empowers Draupadī Amman to safeguard and nourish the fertility of the land and people. Different episodes of Mahābhārata are believed to provide different blessings and boons to communities and individuals. For instance, performing the play 'Karṇa's salvation' on the sixteenth day after the death of a person is believed to liberate the departed soul from the cycle of rebirths

(Frasca 1990, 135 de Bruin 1998, xiii), attending the performance of 'Arjuna's penance' is believed to enhance fertility in women and giving one's own child in the hands of actor playing Draupadī, the gypsy in 'Kuravāñci' is said to enhance the intellectual prowess of the child (Muthukumaraswamy 2006). The belief system structures, relates, shapes and interprets the sacred text and performance and so organizes the levels of participation of the villagers.

In the Mahābhārata storyteller's art the thin frame separating fiction and reality breaks many a time assisting the audience to traverse through both the realms. The audience does play these slip-pages through numerous ways throughout the festival and also in storytelling sessions. The shared knowledge of the epic and its incidents, the unconditional devotion to their Lord Kṛṣṇa, to Draupadī Ammaṅ and the belief system give the audience opportunities to imbibe and display their faith. The entire festival is in honor of Draupadī and so the story that is happening is also told from the point of view of Draupadī Ammaṅ at the will of Lord Kṛṣṇa is the understanding that permeates their behavior and action. When the storyteller narrates the event of the five Pāṇḍava brothers performing the Rajasūya worship with the sacrificial fire and sends around the container covered with ritual yellow cloth among the audience, everybody contributes coins as their humble donations for the Rajasūya worship. A fictional event inside the epic becomes a 'real moment' with the audience participation with the real money going towards the temple as donation or to the storyteller as an appreciative gift. The fictional frame breaking with the real community participation is the unique nature of this festival of Mahābhārata.

In the Paṭukaḷam enactment the audience participation reaches its height as the entire space transforms into a war field. The transformation of the ordinary everyday village spaces into mythical and fictional spaces is effected through the storytelling and the theatrical performances.

If the sacred and crass, divine and mundane, fiction and real coexist and coalesce in the villages of Tūci and Takkōlam, the performances spaces seem to be transforming in harmony. If the simple shed, in front of Draupadī Ammaṅ shrine, is called 'royal assembly of Mahābhārata' (Parata sabai), the open space adjacent to it is called 'the war field' (Kaḷam). The 'war field' is where the villagers normally dry and husk their paddy on ordinary days. As the reminder of the Kurukṣetra war of the Mahābhārata the mud and sand effigy of Duryodhana lies hugely in the adjacent open space. It is the slain figure of Duryodhana, measuring a hundred feet easily, that lies defeated to the satisfaction

of Draupadī Amman sitting inside the shrine and the idol of Bhīma (who killed Duryodhana) guarding her threshold. With Draupadī and Bhīma frozen in perpetual victory and Duryodhana in permanent defeat the villagers go about their day-to-day routine throughout the year. They run their cattle over the figure of Duryodhana and children play over him. Surrounded by the paddy fields the empty space adjacent to the Draupadī Amman temple is a meeting point, a way station, a playground and a multi-utility agricultural space. Parallel to the shrine of Draupadī Amman is the stage for Terukkūttu performances. Rectangular in shape the raised platform is a permanent structure with a big room at the back acting as its green room. The shrine of Draupadī the sprawling figure of Duryodhana, the guarding idol of Bhīma and the Terukkūttu stage defining the performance space is not unique to the villages of Tūci and Takkōlam. Rather, the spatial arrangement is typical of Mahābhārata spaces throughout northern districts of Tamilnadu. During the season festive ambience is created by erecting a series of wooden poles on the border the of performance area with white tube lights and running nets of small color serial electrical bulbs wound through the poles. A colorful electrical bulb figure of Kṛṣṇa stands as a forty feet tall installation hovering over the figure of Duryodhana. Thus lit well, the vendors of local snacks, tea, balloons and tobacco adding to the carnival ambience, loudspeakers blasting Tamil popular film music and the air thick with the smell of palm toddy and earth the everyday empty space transforms into performance space. As the acting area is not limited to the stage, every episode in the epic brings its own spatial transformations sometimes to the entire village. As fictional, every day, ritual, imaginary, sacred and performance spaces collide, the attitudes appropriate for different spaces also collide. For instance it is not uncommon to see a fully made up actor having a casual smoke and conversation with his friend during a performance or a villager casually propping up his bicycle over the ritually decorated figure of Duryodhana. As realms and spaces vary and overlap so do the actors, ritual practitioners, participants and onlookers with varying degrees of intensity.

For the Paṭukaḷam event, in variation to the single effigy of Duryodhana statue in most places Takkōlam has the triple effigies of Duryodhana, Śakuni and Salyan. Tūci and Ariyanūr follow the general pattern of having only one⁵. While the mud and sand effigies of Takkōlam are fragile and easily destructible the Duryodhana effigies of Tūci and Ariyanūr are made up of much stronger

5 Hildebeitel notes another variation with double effigies in Karnataka (Hildebeitel 1991, 332).

mortar and lime material. The choice of the materials of the Duryodhana effigy also reveals the attitude the participants have towards the Paṭukaḷam event. For the participants and the organizers of the Mahābhārata festival in Takkōlam ‘the real event’ of the participants jumping over the effigies and destroying them is part of their expression of disgust against the Kurukṣetra war. For the people of Tūci and Ariyanūr it is important to retain the partially damaged effigies of Duryodhana in the Draupadī Ammaṅ temple squares throughout the year as a reminder of the victory of the good over the evil.

For Paṭukaḷam is one of the most emotionally charged events in the whole of the Mahābhārata festival. The enactment of disrobing of Draupadī in the Kaurava court and the final day fire walking are the only other two events that could be as powerful and as emotionally charged as Paṭukaḷam in the month long festival. By the time the festival reaches the last but one day of the festival for the Paṭukaḷam event the villagers have listened to the entire Mahābhārata from the storytellers, watched the episodes as all night theater and many walk as if they are in between the states of sleeping and wakefulness. Taking into account that the audience participation and the reaction in the Mahābhārata festivals are not totally unpredictable, Hanne M. de Bruin proposes the existence of a hypothetical construct ‘oral reservoir’ that determines the contextual expressions. According to her, the oral reservoir may contain “the framework and plot of plays, verbal and non-verbal material (including music, dance, mime, gestures, make-up, costumes, conventional themes, settings, formulae and imagery), performance conventions and devices (including ritual actions and recall strategies) and emotions or stimuli triggering emotions, including various *rasas* and *bhavas* as well as trance-like states, which fit into the culturally defined pattern of emotional reactions evoked....” (de Bruin 1999, xxviii).

What Hanne M. de Bruin does not include in her list is the set of values that guide the predictable course of Paṭukaḷam events. The values the villagers live by and the values Mahābhārata proposes get the spectacular performances in Paṭukaḷam. The events of Bhīma actor breaking the thigh of the Duryodhana sculpture and Draupadī actor tying her hair after dousing it in Duryodhana’s blood may be ritually important to enact the narrative sequences of Mahābhārata but those sequences do not reveal the antiwar sentiment that has been built over the month long performances. As the Bhīma actor runs after the Duryodhana actor around the sculptural effigy of Duryodhana the storytellers continuously remind the audience the unspeakable insult heaped on Draupadī in the

Kaurava court. In all the three villages of Takkōlam, Tcūi, and Ariyanūr the storytellers referred to Duryodhana as ‘our king’; a monarch who represents the causes of war found in each one of the participants of the Mahābhārata festival. Drawing parallels between the everyday lives of the villagers be it land dispute, sibling rivalry, petty jealousies, cheap tricks, power politics, or rigid identities and the episodes of Mahābhārata the storytellers make Duryodhana the extension of all those present in the Paṭukaḷam. The king on the run has been reduced to a pauper and a coward who seeks refuge inside the mountain of corpses of friends and relatives. As the storytellers whip up the emotions the crowd goes into a frenzy, cheering the Bhīma actor and regretting the fate of Duryodhana. The storytellers evoke all the efforts taken by Kṛṣṇa to broker peace between the warring cousins. In Takkōlam and Tūci many villagers went into uncontrollable trance when the storytellers were narrating how easily the war and the massive destruction could have been avoided had Duryodhana listened to the readily accessible divine Kṛṣṇa. They refer to how Kṛṣṇa’s emissary to the Kaurava court as an ambassador of peace failed when Duryodhana in counsel with Śakuni and Karṇa decided to capture Kṛṣṇa instead of listening to him. In Ariyanūr many men and women slipped into trance and they had to be carried away when the storytellers reminded the audience how their representative Duryodhana humiliated Draupadī. In Takkōlam when the Bhīma actor broke the thigh of the Duryodhana effigy the spontaneous jumping of the crowd on the three effigies was a release of the tension that had been building up over a month. The villagers were constructing the effigies of Duryodhana, Śakuni, and Salyan throughout the previous night and monumental community effort went into constructing and decorating those sculptural effigies. The effigies were reduced to rubble within a few minutes testifies to the powerful antiwar sentiment of the audience⁶. Such a release of tensions were not there for the villagers of Tūci and Ariyanūr until the arrival of Gāndhārī, the mother of now slain Duryodhana.

The lament of Gāndhārī⁷ further highlights Tamil Mahābhārata festival’s disgust with the war. Tamil proverbs mention that losing one’s own child is the worst kind of tragedy one could ever experience in a life time. Even Rāvaṇa losing his son Indrajit in the battle against Rāma in the Rāmāyaṇa is treated with great sympathy in Tamil epic tradition. Gāndhārī losing her son Duryodhana in the final battle of Kurukṣetra does not only receive any sympathy but it is treated with great

⁶ The Takkōlam field video recording of this event can be accessed at <http://tinyurl.com/1-Padukalam-on-Youtube>

⁷ Field video recording of Gāndhārī lament can be accessed at <http://tinyurl.com/2-Gandhari-on-Youtube>

ridicule and mockery. The erstwhile queen mother of Duryodhana is dressed in black sari like a witch and carried on a ladder. Gāndhārī actor inappropriately smokes and beats her breasts vulgarly to the ridicule of the cheering crowd. To her lament a motley crowd of young men dance joyously. As a lone desolate mother Gāndhārī chases away all the crowd jumping on the sculptural effigy of Duryodhana. With a winnow and broomstick in her hands the Gāndhārī actor alternately cries and dances to the lewdly gesturing crowd. Gāndhārī's only fault was her giving birth to a war lord of an evil son, Duryodhana. The mock lament and the ridicule in a way releases the tension Mahābhārata festival has been building up so far, but the caricature of the post war desolation cannot be missed too. The ritualized mock lament of Gāndhārī and the laughter it evokes are at the stage where the Mahābhārata festival meets its post war devastation and the aporia attendant to it. Their king Duryodhana is on the one hand destroyed but with his destruction everything is also lost. While the unsurpassable impasse created by the Paṭukaḷam is temporarily overcome through the ritual laughter and the Gāndhārī episode the new beginnings call for further purification and sacrifice.

The villagers of Tūci and Takkōlam conducted proper funerary rites for the slain Duryodhana befitting a deceased family elder. The chief Mahābhārata festival organizer of Takkōlam village shaved his head the day after the Paṭukaḷam event and went through real funerary rites as if his own father had passed away. The other devotees of Draupadī Amman were waiting to walk on fire⁸ that evening. The new beginning will be made with the ascendance of Dharma to the throne.

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⁸ To read further on the fire walk rituals in the Mahābhārata festival please see my article at <http://tinyurl.com/6jw7eoy>

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