



Subaltern Revisions of the Mahabharata in the Tamil Folk Theatre Bharathakoothu

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Abstract

This paper examines the unique folk theatre performance of Tamil Nadu - Bharathakoothu that stages episodes from the Mahabharata. The festival has three parts including ritual, performance and community participation. The festival is celebrated for Draupadi Amman. This worship has been for over a thousand years across more than thirty villages. The substantial aspect of the festival is Bharathakoothu that localises the great narratives of the epic articulating the subaltern perspectives. Bharathakoothu is highly deviated from the Sanskrit retellings and delicately integrates village rituals, environmental theatre, and contemporary social commentary. It becomes the cultural store house of the Tamil Nadu and challenges the sacred hierarchical knowledge association of the epic. Based on the Richard Schechner's concept of "restored behavior" the Koothu is analysed. Further, Ranajit Guha's framework of subaltern expression highlights how the performances address gender injustice, caste undercurrents and everyday rural apprehensions. The study aims to establish Bharathakoothu's role as both an active site of cultural continuity and reinterpretation.

Keywords: Mahabharata, folk theatre, Tamil Nadu, subaltern narration, Draupadi Amman, performance traditions, Koothu, restored behavior

Introduction

The *Mahabharata* is the most popular Indian epic. The epic has been a source of inspiration to the many regional performance traditions. Bharathakoothu the *Mahabharata* festival of Tamil Nadu is one such unique celebration in India. It has a rich tradition of more than 1,000 years of continuity. The *Mahabharata* festival is celebrated in over 30 villages across Tamil Nadu and southern Andhra Pradesh. The festival has various names including the Spring *Mahabharata*, the Fire walk festival of Draupadi Amman and final battle. The festival

receives wide-ranging patronage during the Pallava rule. This festival is undoubtedly the longest running theatre festival in the world being performed for over a thousand years. Such astonishing festival seamlessly blends storytelling, ritual, theatre with extensive community participation. These festivals are performed by the people remembering their ancestors for the wellbeing of the village. Though *Mahabharata* festival is a narrative of the fratricidal war between cousins over Kingship there is finally no real winner. The intention of the performing of the calamitous Kurukshetra war is to promote harmony



and peace among the village folk. Historically these villages in Tamil Nadu have experienced a continuous conflict. This festival enlarges the epic's influence from literary appreciation to lived experience. The *Mahabharata* festival is centred around the epic character Draupadi who is the Goddess of the village people. Therefore, the festival effortlessly intersects the sacred epic narrative with village life making the Bharathakoothu Koothu performance a fertile ground for studying subaltern interpretations.

Bharathakoothu: Interweaving Narrative, Ritual and Enactment

Unlike conventional theatre, Bharathakoothu is deeply embedded in local social life. The month-long Bharathakoothu festival begins with religious rituals. Various rituals and village folk procession take place in the morning. Following it, the professional storytellers are hired to narrate the Tamil text of the *Mahabharata* in the afternoon for the first fifteen days. The two prominent texts used to narrate the story of the epic in the Koothu are the 14th Century text *Villibharatham* written by Villiputhurar and an 18th century text Nallapillai Bharatham written by Nallapillai. Nallapillai Bharatham includes all the previous renderings of the *Mahabharata* in Tamil. The storyteller explains these texts to people adding the contemporary issues. During the narration, the Kattiyakaaran, the Sutradhar, or the stage director would constantly remind the audience the significance of the *Mahabharata* episodes that is performed as rituals in the morning. He critiques the *Dharmasangadam* - moral dilemma of the protagonist of each particular episode giving the audience a multi-dimensional, multi vocal almost polyphonic perspective of epic. Thus, the elite sacred epic becomes the folk epic.

The important aspect of the festival is the reiteration of the key episodes of the *Mahabharata* particularly Draupadi's humiliation and the Pandavas' exile performed thrice daily - morning, noon and at night. Professional theatre groups or Koothu actors are employed by the villagers to enact the key episodes from the *Mahabharata* from the 16th

day onwards at night. The theatrical performance is primarily in the Therukoothu and Kattaikkuttu styles that bring the *Mahabharata* to life. In most villages the Bharathakoothu *Vil Valaippu* or 'The Bending of the Bow' is the first Koothu in which Arjuna wins the swayamvar and marries Draupadi. Occasionally in some villages, the festival might begin with 'Jala Kiridai' Koothu where the childhood adventures of Krishna is presented. After Arjuna wins Draupadi's hand in marriage, the festival will be celebrated for about twenty hours each day. While the storytelling and theatrical enactments would be performed by hired professionals, the rituals of the *Mahabharata* would be performed by the villagers themselves. It is by performing these rituals, the epic is deliberately repeated. As a result, the teachings of the epic is ingrained into the collective memory of the village folk. The Koothu is performed not just on the stage alone but also in the village streets, and sometimes in the entire village with villagers taking on the roles of epic characters. Entire village is transformed into dynamic stage where myth, devotion, and performance unite.

Community Immersion in Bharathakoothu

The exceptional feature of the festival is the beautiful blend of rituals and theatrical performance of the epic. Villagers perform the rituals along with storytelling and the theatrical performances. These village rituals make the festival a living memory of the village itself. Although a designated theatre space exists, performances take place across the entire settlement. Entire village at some point transforms into a stage. The seamless merge of rituals and storytelling with performance obliterates the boundary between performer and spectator. It creates an immersive experience to the village folk. The community participation makes the performance as one of the largest environmental theatres in the world. The ritual of the Burning of the Lacquer Palace is a striking example of the villagers participating as characters of the *Mahabharata*. For the Burning of the Lacquer Palace event, villagers have built a hut-like structure near by the theatre. They put six dolls representing the assassins sent to



kill the Pandavas inside hut. The Lacquer Palace is then set fire, and an idol of Bhima is carried around the burning hut. Another renowned ritual performed by the people with enthusiasm is the killing of Bakasura episode. The Koothu actor playing Bhima role collects food from various parts of the village settlement and engages in combat with Bakasura throughout village. For this ritual the village people prepare different kinds of food and give to the Koothu actor. This performance serves as a prime example of how the whole village transforms into a performance space. Varusakkani, the researcher of folklore points out in his study, “Apart from performing the story of the Mahabharata as a ritual, these events have also shifted away from the story of the Mahabharata and have become events that fulfil the needs of the people who are celebrating it as cultural events” (58).

Draupadi as Goddess, Audience, and Voice of the Subaltern in Bharathakoothu

The village people strongly believe that the Koothu is performed and the epic is narrated for Draupadi to see and hear. Draupadi is believed to be the chief listener of the recital. No performance can begin without her presence. In all the storytelling sessions, the village rituals and the theatre enactments the idols of Draupadi and the four Pandavas would be given pride of place. The final ritual is *Theemidhi* (fire-walking) ritual, where devotees walk barefoot over burning coals. This ritual symbolizes Draupadi's trial by fire and her unwavering purity. The worship of Draupadi Amman is vital in the Mahabharata festival. Koothu does not just remain a narrative of a great war. It includes the voices of the victims. Draupadi is seen as the representative of all the people unjustly affected by war. Draupadi is both the Queen of the Pandavas and is also the primary audience for this festival.

The collective participation of the village folk into *Mahabharata* Koothu aligns with Ranajit Guha's emphasis on fragmentary, non-institutional forms of subaltern expression. Unlike scripted Sanskrit retellings which embodies the great patriarchal ideals this theatrical performance allows performers to

include the local caste and gender struggles. The storyteller has the privilege to add his or her own interpretation to the great epic. The story teller along with the *Mahabharata* text, has to know literature, Cinema and have a deep understanding of contemporary village life. Draupadi is called ‘Agatthin Krishna’ or ‘Krishna of the Inner Landscape’ while Vasudeva Krishna is called ‘Puratthin Krishna’ or ‘Krishna of the Outside’. The story teller means that the Pandavas needed both Krishnas to negotiate within themselves and negotiate with the world. The inner Krishna was needed to negotiate tranquillity within, while the outer Krishna was needed to negotiate their way in the world. This idea is a strong example of subaltern narration found in Tamil folk and performance traditions rather than in the classical Sanskrit Mahabharata. Draupadi is not only the chief heroine of the Mahabharata, but a goddess connected with the rural market town of Gingee (Hiltebeitel 3).

The Mahabharata festival is very significant as it is the living library of Tamil folk traditions. The oral storytelling, classical music, and communal theatre are all preserved in great extent by this festival. This Koothu is a great cultural heritage of India which is acknowledged by many scholars. Despite this, this great festival lacks institutional support and functions purely sustained by village devotion. Under the power of modernization, many folk arts have been destroyed this festival continues to prosper, echoing contemporary themes. “The exchange of knowledge for the occurrence of traditional Koothu continues on social and cultural platforms. This continuum is characterised by different socio-economic conditions that challenge the existence of Koothu. Yet even in the face of socio-economic change, cultural continuity cannot be easily aborted.” (Thampirasa).

Schechner's "Restored Behaviour"

Offering the most immersive experiences, the ‘Koothu’ resonates the echoes of an epic still deeply in the Tamil psyche. Richard Schechner, the performance theorist reflects that through ritual and theatre social norms is reinforced and contested. The Bharatha Koothu exemplifies this duality. Schechner



defines performance as “twice-behaved behaviour” (36). The repetitive, ritualized performances of Draupadi’s disrobing or Karna’s death are not mere re-enactments but reinterpretations. Each reiteration allows performers to infuse new meanings. For instance, Draupadi’s disrobing is re-enacted with heightened emotion, moral outrage, and often with an intentional connection to real-world injustices faced by women today, serving as a critique of contemporary gender violence. Draupadi’s humiliation in the Kaurava court is a pivotal moment in the epic. It exposes the patriarchal injustice and the failure of elders to protect a woman’s dignity. This epic’s injustice parallels with the contemporary news headlines. Thus, the Koothu transforms myth into an act of social commentary and resistance.

Bharathakoothu provides ample space for the articulation of subaltern voices that emerge through localised reinterpretations that diverge sharply from Sanskritic canon. Koothu actors often implanted scenes absent from classical texts. One such example is Karna’s leave-taking from his wife Ponnuruvi which is found only in the local reinterpretation. It profoundly foregrounds the emotional and domestic dimensions overlooked by elite literary traditions. These additions assert the authority of community memory over textual orthodoxy. By infusing the epic with colloquial humour, social realism, and commentary on everyday relationships, koothu transforms the *Mahabharata* into a living critique of hierarchical knowledge systems. Though as per Schechner’s notion of “restored behavior,” the Koothu performance deliberately repeats the age-old patriarchy story simultaneously it reshapes narration for contemporary audiences. Thus, the Koothu empowers relegated communities to include their own values, grievances, and lived experiences into the moral ground of the epic.

The stimulating aspect of the Koothu performances is that epic battles are interwoven with deeply local concerns. In the layered narrative myth and community life speak to one another. The lamentations of Karna and Duryodhana are staged along with the affirmation of the villagers towards the expansion of agriculture, local economy and the

continuation of the festival itself, though many migrated to city. Erasing the temporal gap between the text and real life of rural Tamil Nadu, the Koothu performances reframe the epic’s moral crises such as Duryodhana’s belated acknowledgment of his injustice toward Draupadi as lessons on values over rigid identity. The festival asserts its role not only as cultural heritage but as a form of ethical inquiry embedded in subaltern memory.

Conclusion

Bharathakoothu being more than just a performance, serves as a vital cultural artefact and continues to resonate with audiences, conveying timeless truths about human nature and societal values. It offers a space to contest and reshape dominant narratives about the nation, functioning as an active site of reinterpretation. The canonical epic’s ethical dilemmas are localised, providing their moral lessons, and subaltern voices gain narrative authority. Unquestionably, the Bharathakoothu intensely asserts the cultural agency of rural Tamil communities. Koothu sustains an alternative cultural memory for Tamil Nadu’s subaltern communities through the highlighting the marginalized voices and challenging patriarchy.

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