

Fieldwork Report: Discourse of the blurred genre: Case of Draupadi Kuravanchi Koothu

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Abstract: This paper analyses how folk creativity finds expression in the context of village festival ambience by blurring many genres. This paper also describes how framing devices of the blurred genres are used to transport the audience between fiction, ritual and reality. One of the most recognizable framing devices of Therukoothu is the endless repetitive descriptions of Draupadi's humiliation in the Kaurava court as exemplified by the text and performance of Kuravanchi.

*T*herukoothu¹ as the theatre of *Mahabharata* occupies the psyche and the landscape of the villagers of northern Tamil Nadu during the summer months. *Mahabharata*, the great epic of the Bharata² Dynasty and *Ramayana* are two Sanskrit Indian epics valued for centuries for their high literary merit, religious inspiration and teaching morals for everyday life. The *Mahabharata* was composed around 300 BC and received numerous additions until about 300 AD. It is divided into 18 cantos containing altogether about 200,000 lines of verse interspersed with short prose passages. The central theme of *Mahabharata* is sibling rivalry and fratricide between Pandavas and Kauravas over the kingdom of Hasthinapura. The conflict begins when Drtharashtra, the eldest son of the Kuru dynasty has to pass over his crown to his younger brother Pandu because of his physical blindness. After reigning for a brief period Pandu renounces his kingdom due to his incurable illness and goes to forest with his two wives Kunti and Madhuri. The five sons of Pandu, the Pandava brothers (Dharmaraja³, Bhima, Arjuna, Nakula,

and Sahadeva), grow up in the court along with their one hundred cousins, the Kauravas, sons of Drtharashtra. The prominent among the Kauravas are the eldest son Duryodhana and his loyal demonic brother Dhucchasana. Because of the enmity and jealousy that develops between the cousins, the Pandavas are forced to leave the kingdom at the time of their father's death. During their exile the five jointly marry Draupadi and meet their cousin Krishna, 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, Dharmaraja loses everything (including Draupadi 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 Dhucchasana to bring Draupadi to the court. Dhucchasana forcibly drags Draupadi by hair into the court. Draupadi wearing a single garb and menstruating is further humiliated when Duryodhana orders Dhucchasana to disrobe her in front of the crest fallen Pandavas and other helpless elders present in the court. Draupadi clasps her hands above her head in a gesture of worship and prays to Lord Krishna to help her. Recognizing Draupadi's moment of ultimate surrender Krishna saves her as the single of garb of her sari miraculously grows endless and tires Dhuchchasana so, that he faints. A furious Draupadi vows that she would tie her hair only with the blood of Duryodhana and Dhucchasana. After twelve years of life in the forest and one year in disguise the Pandavas return to claim their kingdom but Duryodhana refuses to give even a pinhead of a land. In the ensuing bloody battle at Kurukshetra, Krishna participates as a non-fighting charioteer of Arjuna and ensures the Pandavas' victory over the Kauravas. Almost half of *Mahabharata's* verses are devoted to the description of the great battle. In the middle of the war field, just before the war, Krishna 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 *Mahabharata* known as *Bhagavat Gita* as the holiest of the sacred texts. If Gita preaches the philosophy of surrender to Krishna, the eighth avatar of Lord Vishnu and guides how human beings need to "act", it is Draupadi of all characters in *Mahabharata* who exemplifies *Gita's* ideal. In *Bhagavat Gita*, if Krishna says that he is the universal time, destroying and recreating everything, Draupadi is also Kali (the goddess of time), born out of fire, a feminine vehicle of Krishna. The battle of Kurukshetra annihilates Kauravas and an avenged Draupadi ties her hair with the blood of Duryodhana and Ducchassana before the Dharmaraja's ascendance to the throne.

Over centuries of oral and written transmissions, the texts of *Mahabharata* live innumerable lives through their endless versions in all Indian languages across the Indian subcontinent. The *Mahabharata* festival, which we witnessed in the Tamil village Kulamanthai, is only a tiny

miniscule expression of *Mahabharata*, with its millions of followers, and its spiritual and artistic practices all over India.

When we reached Kulamanthai, one of the epicentres of *Therukoothu* performances in the region, the twenty-day festival comprising of story telling, rituals and dramatic performances was already on. Kulamanthai is an interior remote village located within the Thiruvannamalai district in Cheyyar taluk. Vandavasi and Cheyyar are the nearest towns about seven kilometres. Kulamanthai is roughly one hundred and thirty-five kilometres in the south from the city of Chennai. A sugar mill on the Vandavasi bypass road acts as a landmark to find the unformed road leading to Kulamanthai. Driving from Chennai one sees an arid and dusty landscape dotted with small rocky hills, isolated palm trees, ponds and small lakes. Cheyyar is also the name of the river that originates in the Javvadu hills near Thiruvannamalai, flows through the outskirts of Cheyyar town and joins Palar as a tributary. Mirages loom large on the absolutely dry sandy riverbed of Cheyyar where trucks mindlessly quarry sand for construction work in the ever-growing city. The villagers channel the rare flow of rainwater in Cheyyar during monsoons to their intimate lakes and ponds and save it for irrigation. The economy of this agrarian society inevitably depends on what is known as 'lake irrigation'. The heavy rains of 1996 have become a forgotten dream and the lakebeds are also dry, black and cracked like the pairs of feet that walk on them. Erumaivetti Lake that irrigates the surrounding of Kulamanthai is no exception. In the busy streets of Cheyyar town and the bus stand scores of men and women sit on their haunches hugging their knees; their foreheads are wrinkled in the tiring heat. The vegetables on the pushcarts, the fruits on the stalls and the over crowded town buses sag in unison. The cruelty of explosive summer heat has a pervasive presence like the epic of *Mahabharata*.

The villagers believe that the epic's presence in Kulamanthai is as old as the practice of reciting *Paratham*⁴ in the region. Hildebeitel dates the practice of reciting *Paratham* in Draupadi Amman temples to circa 600–700 AD citing Kuram copper plates of Parameshvaravarman I Pallava. He also argues that the present practice of using Villiputurar's text for story telling sessions of *Mahabharata* probably goes back to the fourteenth century (Hildebeitel 1991, 14-15). In fact, the invitation poster for the festival published by the villagers and the festival committee accords predominance to the story telling by publicizing the photograph of the story teller Muthuganesan. The second in order of importance is his companion and reader of poetry, Thevarasan. While mentioning the *Therukoothu* troupe as the third in order, the leader's artistic lineage is highlighted. The festival itself is called 'the big festival of *Mahabharata* in the temple of Draupadi Amman'. The story telling starts ten days in advance and only from the eleventh day evening onwards is it complemented by all night theatrical performances. The only ritual printed

in the poster invitation is the fire walking ceremony in the penultimate day of the festival. The epic incident of Pandava's eldest brother Dharmaraja's ascendance to the throne marks the conclusion of the festival.

To have all the three significant parts — rituals, story telling and the theatre — in the performance cycle is a luxury of the large-scale festival affordable, only if the economy of the village permits. Usually the *Therukoothu* 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 *Therukoothu* 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 *Therukoothu* is for rest, contemplation and anticipation. The ritual efficacy of conducting *Mahabharata* festival in honour of Draupadi Amman lies in the firm belief that the ascendance of Dharmaraja to the throne is the restoration of justice; and it empowers Draupadi Amman to safeguard and nourish the fertility of the land and people. Different episodes of *Mahabharata* are believed to provide different blessings and boons to communities and individuals. For instance, performing the play 'Karna'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 Draupadi, the gypsy in '*Kuravanchi*' is said to enhance the intellectual prowess of the child. The belief system structures, relates, shapes and interprets the sacred text and performance and so organizes the levels of participation of the villagers. Despite the paucity of funds if the festival committee and the villagers of Kulamanthai had organized a full *Mahabharata* festival it was because they were concerned about the failure of monsoons year after year. The fact that the festival was being organized after a lapse of several years enlivened their hope for rejuvenation, agricultural prosperity and growth. The festival accentuated, fine-tuned and aligned the subliminal consciousness of the villagers towards *Mahabharata* through *Therukoothu* and other theatrical devices employed in the rituals and story telling.

The Tamil name '*Therukoothu*' literally translates itself into 'street drama' according to contemporary dictionaries. Nonetheless the etymology of the word '*Koothu*' goes back to the ancient *Sangam* Tamil literature of first century C.E. meaning ritual enactments involving sacred possession or trance (Frasca 2003). Possession or trance is a regular feature of *Therukoothu* performances. Both the actors and members of the audience slip into trance during ritually charged performances such as 'Disrobing of Draupadi'. The urban colloquial usage of the word '*Koothu*' refers to 'commotion' 'fun' or 'melodramatic

situation' in everyday life and never to the art form. The villagers of northern districts of Tamil Nadu use the words 'Koothu' and 'Natakam' (drama) interchangeably in common parlance. The region specific usage of the word itself is the indicator of the fact that this theatre is confined to this region. Hildebeitel's survey of Draupadi Amman temples records as many as two hundred and twenty five temples in the two northern districts of one of which Kulamanthai is a part (Hildebeitel 1991, 25). That there was, in fact going to be another festival immediately after the one we were attending shows the intense vibrancy of this tradition in the region. Despite the large number of Draupadi Amman temples and performances, if not, full-scale festivals, the knowledge about this tradition and the art form remains scant in urban areas, the rest of Tamil Nadu and the media. The venues, dates, program schedule and festival calendar do not reach the press or television channels headquartered in Chennai and they remain part of 'local knowledge'.

Deploring the urban lack of knowledge about this tradition Hanne M. de Bruin writes, "For complex theatre traditions such as *Kattaikoothu*⁵ which carry the label 'folk' require a similar degree of exposure as 'high culture' art forms termed 'classical', in order to understand them, develop a 'taste' for them and to appreciate their nuances" (de Bruin 2003). But the sociological reasons go well beyond matters of taste, hierarchy of cultural strands and consequent low status accorded to rural performers and their art form. Quoting Gustav Oppert, Hildebeitel states that whereas the *Ramayana* is favoured by the *Bhramins*, *Sudras* or non-*Bhramin* castes adopt the *Mahabharata*. Referring to the prevalent beliefs that *Mahabharata* is not to be read in homes as it arouses family conflict whereas *Ramayana* by way of contrast should be read in homes as it portrays ideal family conditions, he further argues that *Mahabharata* as an epic lends itself to drama, public presentations and tragic modes (Hildebeitel 1991, 396). All these sociological conditions contribute to the modes of transmission of the theatre of *Mahabharata* as it is found today.

In the blasting heat of the summer afternoon, the villagers had gathered under the tiled roof of the courtyard in front of the shrine of Draupadi Amman to listen to the telling of the *Mahabharata*. The storyteller, Muthuganesan sits on a raised platform along with his companion 'poetry reader', Thevarasan. Surprisingly, Muthuganesan does not wear *Vaishnavite*⁶ holy marks on his forehead like many of the devotees and Thevarasan. He adorns his forehead with prominent *Saivite*⁷ marks. Earlier he had been ceremoniously brought to the temple-shed by the ritual practitioners clad in yellow clothes with a respectable umbrella held over his head. During the ceremonial procession through the streets the women wash the feet of the ritual practitioners as they cross their doorsteps. On the raised platform prominently propped up are the microphones, a container covered with yellow cloth with a slit on top to facilitate dropping donations by the

audience, ritual offering of betel leaves, nut and coconut, a soda bottle for Muthuganesan and a flask full of hot water for Thevarasan. Muthuganesan's high pitched story telling is alternated by Thevarasan's sedate and sober reciting of poetry from the *Mahabharata* text which is kept reverentially on his harmonium. Muthuganesan has committed the entire *Mahabharata* to his memory and does not refer to any text at all during his telling. Nevertheless, he knows the complex and long text astonishingly well and stops at the appropriate places to prompt Thevarasan's recital. Thevarasan's recital is in accordance with the Tamil music tradition of 'Pann' or melody whose moods are classified and named after the types of landscapes. In this type of music, singing is restricted to recital and words cannot be distorted to achieve variations in melody. Thevarasan sits meditatively till his turn and uses his harmonium judiciously and minimally as a pure accompaniment. Word dominated singing is a characteristic of religious music, which Muthuganesan uses well to highlight or focus the poignant moments in his story. His allusions cover the entire gamut of Tamil classical literature. He handles indirect speech, reportage, descriptions and dialogues of heroic characters in literate high Tamil and alternates it with colloquial local Tamil for everyday experience and speech. The transition is dramatic in its effect with audience nodding their heads along with him or sitting awe struck with literally open mouths. His facility in handling colloquial Tamil seems to be limited in comparison to the amazing repertoire of literary jokes that he has at his command. That, however, does not deter the audience from applauding his jokes executed in contrived colloquial. The audience includes largely women, old men, children, Draupadi Amman herself who sits inside her shrine and the icons of Vishnu, Balaram and Lakshmi who are given the front row seats. The conspicuous absence of young men does not seem to be an issue as the microphones and the loud speakers amplify the already loud story telling and carry it to wherever they are. In the storyteller's art the thin membrane separating fiction and reality breaks many a time assisting the audience to traverse through both the realms. The audience does play these slippages 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 Krishna and to Draupadi Amman and the belief system give the audience opportunities to imbibe and display their faith. The entire festival is in honour of Draupadi and so the story that is happening is also told from the point of view of Draupadi Amman at the will of Lord Krishna is the understanding that permeates their behaviour and action. When the storyteller narrates the event of the five Pandava brothers performing the *Rajasooya* 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 *Rajasooya* 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 *Mahabharata*. Even when the storyteller stops in between to announce the list of donors when single donations exceed ten rupees the seriousness of the epic instance is never lightened. In fact he resumes with ease, the main thread of the story after his digressions as if nothing has happened. Thevarasan is expressionless when people appreciate him with currency notes. The donations earmarked for the temple go to offset the cost incurred by the festival organizers. To encourage such donations the organizers have arranged a lottery system by which single donors making a contribution beyond one hundred rupees are eligible for prizes by drawing lots on the last days of the festival. The prizes ranging from stainless steel vessels to a bicycle and an electrical rice grinder are on display on the benches besides the storyteller's platform. Even as divine icons jostle with mundane prize objects, the language of the sacred texts merges with the language of the streets. The easy seeping through different realms in an egalitarian coalescence is extended to the different levels of consciousness as well. Though the audience is very attentive and hangs on every utterance of the storyteller many doze off quietly waking up only for what holds their interest. This feature is shared by the all night theatrical events also.

If the sacred and crass, divine and mundane, fiction and real coexist and coalesce, the space seems to be transforming in harmony. If the simple shed, in front of Draupadi Amman shrine, is called 'royal assembly of *Mahabharata*' (*Bharata sabai*), the open space adjacent to it is called 'the war field' (*Kalam*). The 'war field' is where the villagers normally dry and husk their paddy on ordinary days. But as the reminder of the *Kurukshetra* war of the *Mahabharata* the mud and sand figure 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 Draupadi Amman sitting inside the shrine and the idol of Bhima (who killed Duryodhana) guarding her threshold. With Draupadi and Bhima 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 Draupadi Amman temple is a meeting point, a way station, a playground and a multi-utility agricultural space. Parallel to the shrine of Draupadi Amman is the stage for *Therukoothu* 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 Draupadi, the sprawling figure of Duryodhana, the guarding idols of Bhima and Potharaja⁸ and the *Therukoothu* stage defining the performance space is not unique to the village, Kulamanthai. Rather, the spatial arrangement is typical of *Bharathakoothu* festival spaces throughout northern districts of Tamil

Nadu. 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 colour serial electrical bulbs wound through the poles. A colourful electrical bulb figure of Krishna 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 we shall see 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.

Essentially, the ritual provides the overarching framework for the layers and layers of significance. The ritual starts much before the festival, well in advance. Once the village *panchayat* (administration) decides to hold the *Mahabharata* festival, on an auspicious day the villagers in a procession take the idols of Pandavas, Kali and Potharaja to the village pond for a ritual bath. They carry a yellow flag post, sword of Draupadi, *Veera Jatti* (another weapon of Draupadi), her anklet and a pot of water back to the performance arena and erect the flag post to the musical accompaniment of *Pampai*, *Parai*, (types of drums), anklet and *Nathaswaram* (a long pipe — wind instrument). The villagers decide the festival committee in front of the erected flag post. In the case of Kulamanthai since it has predominance of *Agamudaiya Mudaliar* caste all the five festival committee members were drawn from that caste. The festival committee then decides on the storytellers and the *Therukoothu* troupe to be invited. The festival calendar is also drawn. Once the flag in Draupadi Amman temple is hoisted the villagers are not supposed to stay outside the village even for one single night. With the donations collected from the villagers the committee pays an advance and offers a *thamboolam* (betel leaves and nuts – a token of respectful invitation) to the storytellers and the *Therukoothu* troupe leader. The ritual procession to the pond is repeated everyday of the festival both in the mornings and just before the performances in the evenings. On the first day of the story telling the villagers brought Muthuganesan ceremoniously to the *Barathakoothu* shed and he tied yellow twines around the wrists of all the five festival committee members. From then onwards the five men in yellow were believed to be the personification of the five Pandava brothers of the epic story. The assumption of the five festival committee members as characters in the epic

is the first cross over from the real world into the mythological world. From the moment of the ritual yellow twines being tied on their wrists the five men are expected to follow several observances. They should not sleep in their regular beds, go to their houses and shave or cut their hair. They must sleep in the courtyard in front of the Draupadi Amman shrine till the end of the festival and eat only vegetarian food in the premises. Every day only after they hand over the ritual pot full of water drawn from the pond to the leader of the *Therukoothu* troupe are the actors authorized to perform. The significance is that as the Pandava brothers they symbolically transfer the right to assume the roles of epic characters to the actors. This transfer of rights over a period becomes a convention between the villagers and *Therukoothu* troupes. The rights to perform and the obligation to invite constitute and determine the choice of troupe to be invited. These rights need to be recognized by the villagers. Such recognition happens in the acts of women washing the feet of yellow clad men as they walk through the streets in the daily ceremonial procession. From the pond to the performance stage the procession is marked by stops at the street corners for dance accompanied by drumming. Retrogressive steps characterize the dance and bending backward movements suggest inclination towards trance. Although we did not see any of the five-committee members going into a trance during their journey from the pond the villagers assure us that such possessions do occur and they authenticate their assumption as Pandava brothers.

Kulamanthai committee paid thirty thousand rupees to the two storytellers for twenty days and twenty thousand rupees to the troupe of fifteen actors and musicians for ten days⁹.

The fee for the *Therukoothu* troupe depends on its popularity, heritage, specialties and acting abilities. When the troupe leader receives the advance and *thamboolam* they together decide on the epic episodes to be played. There is a complex relationship between the afternoon storytelling sessions and the episodes of all night dramas. Sometimes what is narrated in the afternoon is performed the same night. Sometimes the storyteller draws allusions to the previous night's performance to explicate a scene. There are also rare instances of Kattiyankaran, the clown, referring to the storyteller to make a point. Story telling sessions and the cycle of plays complement each other in the presentation of *Mahabharata* in its entirety. However departures from the agreed schedule of plays are also normal due to various reasons. The changes in the schedule are effected at the last minute and the actors and the audiences accept the changes stoically without any protest. There are also instances of actors performing free extra dramas after the last day of the festival in gratitude for the festival invitation (Mu. Ramaswamy 1999). To be prepared for such eventualities both the troupe leader and the actors have to be versatile in playing various roles and should have the entire play texts of *Mahabharata* committed to their memory.

“Purisai Kalaimamani Natesa Thambiran therukoothu nataka manram”, the *Therukoothu* Company that performed in Kulamanthai is one such versatile group with a known heritage of at least one hundred and fifty years (KannappaThambiran 1991 Mu.Ramaswamy 1999). According to Purisai KannappaThambiran, an octogenarian doyen and a renowned guru of *Therukoothu* tradition, his cousin Natesa Thambiran and he himself come from a tradition initiated by their grand father, Veerasamy Thambiran. After the death of Natesa Thambiran factional fights within the family led to split in the joint family and also in the professional troupe. Natesa Thambiran’s son Subramaniya Thambiran is the present leader of the group functioning independently for the last two decades whereas KannappaThambiran’s son Sampanthan runs his father’s group. The training for the young actor in play composition, songs, music and *adavu* (dance steps) takes place in the living room of his house as part of his growing up. Non-family members also join the training in the *Vattiyar’s* (guru) house but they never become the group leader and they are not given ritually important roles. The artistic leadership stays within the family as a matter of hereditary right although it requires competence and talent to maintain it. The factional fights between the performing cousins are well known to the villages surrounding the villages of Purisai and Kulamanthai adding another dimension to the story of sibling rivalry presented by *Mahabharata*. Incidentally *Agamudaiya Mudaliars’* lives are also full of family feuds over the ownership of agricultural wetlands. The non-family actors are like minor characters in the epic and they come and go while the family continues the tradition through its male progeny generation after generation. Only male actors perform all the roles including the female ones. That includes the role of Draupadi as well.

The *Thambirans* belong to the vegetarian caste called ‘*Pandarams*’¹⁰ whose traditional occupation is to make flower garlands for the gods in the temple. They are non-Brahmin priests for the land owning castes such as *Agamudaiya Mudaliars* who populate Kulamanthai. Their funerary rites where they are not cremated but buried unlike other caste Hindus confirm their priestly status. This is because it is believed that because of their life long engagement with the ritual performances they attain salvation¹¹ (*Samadhi*) with their bodies.

It is in his priestly status that SubramaniyaThambiran receives the symbolic pot of water from the Pandava villagers clad in yellow and hands it over to his actors. The actors then take the pot to the Draupadi Amman shrine and bring the lamp from the shrine to the green room. With the lamp soot the actors draw ohm in Tamil with Ganesh marks¹², the *Vaishnavite* symbols of *Chakra* (wheel) and conch on the *Mirudangam* (a type of drum) and begin their make up. The facial make up is an elaborate process by which the actors slowly get into the character.

Three types of make-up and costumes are in vogue. The Kattiyankaran (literal translation announcer, but also known as buffoon or clown), female characters, ordinary citizens and characters in disguise are made up realistically. The main epic characters are known as *Kattai Vesham* (*kattai* - wood, *vesham* - make-up) referring to the elaborate wooden ornamentation for the shoulders. The Krishna character is always made up as described in the sacred texts. Actors playing *kattai veshams* are the ones that use elaborate facial motifs as well. As the actors are required to play different roles during the cycle of plays or during the performance of even one play as we did see in the '*Kuravanchi*' episode, the elaborate self-make up of the faces helps them in the transition. The colour scheme codifies the traditional interpretation of the characters. The basic rose base signifies the neutrality of the character, green denotes valour and goodness and red connotes valour but badness of the characters. Karna's facial make up is green in the episode of his death and salvation but in other episodes he is adorned in red. Dharmaraja walks around in ordinary rose in all the episodes and assumes green only in the last episode of his coronation. The three thick black stripes bordered with black dots run across the ridges of the noses of all the *kattai vesham* characters. Heavy black stripes are drawn over the lids elongating up to the edges of the ears to highlight the eyes and also to facilitate rotating. Only the princely cousins wear full-fledged crowns, *kreetam*, with the sizes indicating hierarchy. A smaller crown called '*chikrek*' distinguishes Arjuna character. In an interview with Subramaniya Thambiran's actors they confirmed that Frasca's meticulous description of the facial make up scheme is valid for their group also and it remains unchanged over the years (Frasca 1984, 1990). They changed over from their dry grass and straw skirts to plastic skirts made out of package waste obtained from the nearby sugar mill. Although the plastic looks horrific in the place of grass and straw, actor Mani who is the senior most artist in the group with an experience of three decades, feels that the plastic is 'modern' and 'convenient' to withstand the wear and tear of vibrant jumping around. The wooden shoulder ornaments are called '*puja keerthi*' literally meaning 'pride of the shoulders'. *Puja keerthi* is worn finally just before the entry on to the stage.

With the curtain drawn over the green room for privacy and secrecy the actors begin their make up at 6 p.m. for a play that is to start at 10 p.m. Children and others constantly peep through the sides of the screens much to the annoyance of the actors. Especially the actors dressing up for the female roles with wooden balls for artificial breasts are continuously taunted and jeered. They largely ignore such disturbances and often light up their *beedis* in assertion of their maleness. Despite the long hours of make up the second transition of actors getting into the characters do not complete till they enter the stage.

Just in front of the curtain separating the green room from the stage and at the extreme back of the stage sit the musicians and the *Vattiar* (teacher) on a wooden bench. The musicians consist of one *Mirudangam* player, cymbalist, harmonium player and a *Mugaveenai* player. *Mirudangam* (two-sided drum) and cymbals provide the *Talam* (rhythm) and *Mugaveenai* (a high-pitched, hand held pipe instrument) complements, supplements or alternates with the background singing. Subramaniya Thambiran leads the singing when he is not playing any roles and as he sings the first line clapping the cymbals others join immediately following his lead. His troupe does not use microphones and takes pride in not using it as they consider the non-use as a sign of purity and vocal prowess. High-pitched *Mugaveenai* and loud cymbals drown the singing and the words are hardly audible. After the invocation of Ganesh's blessing for successful performance and the introduction of the night's play the background singing continues for hours before the first character's entry.

Kattiyankaran makes his entry by announcing his own name in the third person. The typical first entry of Kattiyankaran invariably is composed in a Tamil prosody called *Tharu*. It goes like this:

“Here came Kattiyankaran
One who guards
The doors of Dharmaraja. (Chorus repeats)

Here came Kattiyankaran
One who guards
The doors of Dharmaraja (chorus repeats)

With the crooked stick in the hand
With the crooked shake in the walk
Silencing the ones who shout
Calming the ones who trouble
With the leap in the air
With a shake in the stick
Here came Kattiyankaran
One who guards
The doors of Dharmaraja. (Chorus repeats)

Like a cub of a lion
With worldwide fame
Here came Kattiyankaran
One who guards
The doors of Dharmaraja.

To conduct the play properly
 Announcing his own name
 Here came Kattiyankaran
 One who guards
 The doors of Dharmaraja. (Chorus repeats)"
 (*Draupathai Kuravanchi Natakam* Page 6)

The musicians sitting on the bench and the actors who are not yet on stage also sing the chorus repetition. This includes the actors who are dressing themselves up in the greenroom as well. Kattiyankaran as the conductor of the play, as a jester and as the representative of the audience on stage has immense liberties in terms of his movements, language and gestures. After the entrance song Kattiyankaran breaks into prose with the English word 'Silence!' He literally silences the children shouting in the front row. His prose is full of comical alliterations rhyming at the end. The alliterations are nonsensical with the rhyming last words such as *Latti, Vatti, Mutti, Potti, Putti* and *Sotti*. Actor Meghanathan as Kattiyankaran delivers the nonsensical rhyme with all seriousness and suddenly announces,

"All the people who have gathered here are 'very good'. In Thiruvannamalai district, Cheyyar taluk, Purisai village lives a 'set' of late K. Natesa Thambiran who was awarded 'Kalaimamani'¹³. The owner of this set is Kalaimamani N. Subramanya Thambiran. Today, this night, in this village of Kulamanthai at the event of Draupadi Amman fire walking festival on this stage we are going to perform one part of *Mahabharata* called '*Draupadi Kuravanchi*'. If there are mistakes in word, meaning, music, *thalam* (rhythm), *Mirudangam* and in several other aspects please forgive them as you would forgive the mistakes of your own children." (Partial translation of audio recording Kulamanthai performance May 6, 200).

It may be interesting to note the English words such as 'very good' and 'set' are used to rhyme with colloquial Tamil words. *Therukoothu* performances use a wide variety of high and low Tamil freely mixing them to achieve dramatic effects, double entendre and nuances. Caste dialects and borrowings from other languages are also freely used. Although Kattiyankaran mentions that *Draupadi Kuravanchi* is a part of *Mahabharata*, the classical Tamil text written by Villiputturar does not contain *Kuravanchi*. Actually only chapbook versions of *Kuravanchi* are available in print. Whole corpuses of chapbooks containing stories of extrapolation exist as instances of folk creativity, imagination and interpretation. Published by individual entrepreneurs such as B. Rathina Naicker and written by local *Vattiyars* such as Tindivanam Thanikachala Mudaliar the corpus of chapbooks exist ever since printing technology was introduced in this region.¹⁴

The chapbooks offer very interesting insights into the dynamics of *Therukoothu's* relations with orality and literacy. If *Therukoothu* performances

mix a wide variety of Tamil the chapbook plays mix a wide variety of literary and folk genres. 'Viruttam', 'Tharu', 'Kavi' or 'Pattu' are the three genres used in the printed version of the play. 'Viruttam' like 'Tharu' again is the name of another Tamil prosody consisting of four, eight or sixteen lines (de Bruin 1998 xv) The grammar of 'Viruttam' finds an entry in 'A dictionary of Tamil Literary and Critical Terms' defines it as a 'poem dealing with the bow, sword, spear, sceptre, elephant, horse, country, capital city and liberality of a king each being praised in a decad of stanzas of a particular rhythm' (Murugan ed, 1999 300). While 'Pattu' or 'Kavi' is the general name for the songs used and these could be of any number of lines and follow the melody of any genre of folk song. Alternated with the sequences of verses and songs are the dialogues in prose for characters and general announcements for the audiences known as 'Pothu vacanam' (general speech). The rhythm and melody sequences are mentioned in the print version by the colloquial name 'jatai' and the literary word 'jati' is retained in the everyday speech. As the chapbooks are chronicles of spoken Tamil of their period they render everyday speech in classical prosody. In addition to this the chapbook writers' concept of high Tamil need not necessarily coincide with the expression of high Tamil prevalent in their period. In professional groups such as Natesa Thambiran's company the leader himself composes the play. That luxury is not available to a number of other groups and they employ *Vattiyars* to compose the plays. Over a period of time those compositions find their way to print. Vandavasi and Cheyyar towns still have a number of *Vattiyars* who specialize only in composing plays. Sometimes they simply recommend the published chapbooks and procure them for the groups to train their actors. The *Vattiyars* of Vandavasi and Cheyyar do not participate in the *Therukoothu* training process. After supplying the plays either in the printed or handwritten version they do however participate and lead small town drama groups that perform on the proscenium stages. The proscenium stage dramas have a totally different repertoire of social, historical and mythological plays. Secular plays that they are, they have no rituals associated with them. Some of the extrapolated texts of *Mahabharata* such as *Pilavendran Kalavu Malai* (the exploits of Arjuna) and *Alli Arasani Malai* (The Garland of Queen Alli) are common to *Therukoothu* tradition and the small town secular dramas. Nevertheless these plays are never performed as part of *Mahabharata* festival and they are performed as entertainment *koothus* individually. The leader of the *Therukoothu* group who in a way functions like a theatre director in the modern context mediates the relationship between the playwright of the chapbook or the texts and the actors.

Of all the chapbook plays *Draupathai Kuravanchi* is very special in the sense that it invokes the framework of Tamil literary genre known as 'Kuravanchi' on the one hand and contains the structure of *Koothu* plays on the other. The Tamil literary genre of *Kuravanchi* normally features a *Kuravan*

(a male member of *kuravar* caste) as *Singan* and a *Kuratti* (a female member of *kuravar* caste) as *Singi*. The *Singan* and *Singi* walk through the street, find the heroine and a *Kuratti* tells the fortunes of the heroine which normally centres on the heroine's good prospects in her love. This generic pattern has produced a long list of classical poems in Tamil classical literature including Lord Murugan's mythology where Murugan woos Valli, his second wife the *Kuratti*. As the *kuravar* caste is considered to be the lowliest of the low the purpose of the myth has been to indicate that the God resides even in the lowliest of the low and sometimes subverts the entire caste system. The *Kuravar* are actually nomadic, in fact tell fortunes and lead the lives of gypsies. Tracing the development of *Kuravanchi* as a dramatic form Se. Vaidhialingan argues that the musicality of the form must have contributed to its development as drama (Se. Vaidhialingan, 2002 282-83). The form of *Kuravanchi* is so flexible that one even finds *Bethlehem Kuravanchi* written during the early Christian missionary period narrating the birth of Jesus Christ. The flexibility of *Kuravanchi* structure lies in the *Pattu* section as it can accommodate a variety of folk songs and sometimes even contemporary Tamil film songs. While *Viruttam* and *Tharu* remain the fixed part of *Kuravanchi* drama, *Pattu* offers the scope for improvisation, change and addition. Despite the *Draupathai Kuravanchi* following all the generic rules of *Kuravanchi*'s dramatic structure Se. Vaidhialingan considers it as a corruption of the form, since Draupadi as gypsy does not tell fortune but instead soothsays the doom of the Kauravas (Se. Vaidhialingan 2002, 283) Hildebeutel however sees similarity between the structure of *Draupathai Kuravanchi* and "that of numerous Brahmana and classical myths in which the gods and demons (like the Pandavas and Kauravas) contest with each other for the elements of the sacrifice" (Hildebeutel 1991, 309). The elements of sacrifice in this case are the seed grains. For Hildebeutel, *Draupathai Kuravanchi* further exemplifies and supports his argument that Draupadi worship has cult status in the northern districts of Tamil Nadu (Hildebeutel 1991, 309). The summary of the play *Draupathai Kuravanchi* is as follows.

At the end of the twelve years of life in the forest the Pandavas have to begin their one-year of life in disguise. If they are discovered by the Kauravas either during the transitional period or during their life in disguise the Pandavas have to suffer another twelve years of banishment to the forest. To flush the Pandavas out of the forest before they go into disguise Duryodhana orders that if anyone comes to procure or beg for seeds they should only be given roasted grains. The idea is to starve the Pandavas of fresh seed grains so that they cannot cultivate and live in prosperity in the forest. He also prepares his army to search all the forests and plans to imprison the Pandavas before they go into life in disguise. Krishna, who visits the Pandavas in the forest, apprises them of Duryodhana's plan and advises Draupadi to go to Hasthinapura in the disguise of a *Kuratti* (gypsy) with Sahadeva on her hip

as her child. He further advises her that, as gypsies normally do, she should predict the future of the Kaurava women and seek as payment for her fortune telling, fresh grain seeds for their field in the forest.

Draupadi goes to Hasthinapura as a gypsy and manages to meet Duryodhana's mother, Gandhari and his wife, Peruntiruvai. They check the gypsy's abilities to predict future through a series of questions on folk beliefs. When Draupadi replies satisfactorily to all their questions Peruntiruvai asks Draupadi about her own past to test if Draupadi is an authentic fortune-teller. Draupadi demands seeds if she is accurate about Peruntiruvai's past. Draupadi then tells her of Duryodhana's attempts to kill the Pandavas and also of her own humiliation after the Pandavas lost in the game of dice. Immensely satisfied with the gypsy's accurate telling of her family's past, Peruntiruvai urges the gypsy to predict her future. Draupadi narrates the fulfilment of her own vow, that is, the horrible death of Duryodhana in the battlefield and Draupadi anointing her hair with blood from Duryodhana's thigh and adorning his torn intestines as flowers on her hair, as the future waiting for Peruntiruvai. On hearing this Peruntiruvai falls on to the ground and weeps and wails.

Seeing her daughter-in-law weeping Gandhari intervenes and challenges Draupadi, the gypsy to tell her some details of her own past. So Draupadi reveals some of the most personal details known only to Gandhari especially Gandhari's first marriage to a male goat and the circumstances of her conception of one hundred sons. Shocked by the truth and accuracy of these revelations, which were known only to her, Gandhari cannot console Peruntiruvai. Draupadi demands her payment of seed grains. Meanwhile Duryodhana learns about the *Kuratti* and her predictions, tests her himself suspecting her to be Draupadi. He orders her arrest. Krishna advises Arjuna to go to Hasthinapura as a *Kuravan* to secure the release of Draupadi. Arjuna as *Kuravan* fights with Duryodhana's warriors. Duryodhana wants to find out whether the *Kuravan* in the street is Arjuna. Kaurava elders advice him not to be bothered with the *Kurava* couple for the kings should not be bothered about such lowly caste people. More over if the *Kuravan* turned out to be really Arjuna he might destroy the entire kingdom. So Duryodhana releases Draupadi and both of them return to the forest with the seed grains. But as soon as they reach the forest they find out that the seeds are roasted and not fresh. When Krishna asks them to plant the roasted seeds anyway Arjuna asks Krishna how they will grow. Krishna replies:

"Listen, sister's husband (*maittuna*). If you ask how the roasted *cennel* will grow, the blackened ones will become crowlike (*kakkai colam*, a kind of millet), the black grains will become *uluntu* (black gram), the burnt ones will become *manakkam* (another millet), the cooked ones will become *centinai* (red millet), and the ones that have grown black will become *karuntinai*

(black millet). Since we have sown them in nine kinds like this, we give them the name *navataniyam* ("nine grains"). They will grow in three months in a way that is pleasing to the nine planets (*navakkirakankal*)." (*Draupathai Kuravanchi Natakam*, page. 64. Translated by Hildebeitel 1991, 308-309)

And so the roasted grains grow, to the amazement of Duryodhana. Meanwhile the Pandavas and Draupadi Amman (as she is called in this finale) settle down in the kingdom of Matsya.

Hildebeitel further argues that the ceremony of the nine grains (Sanskrit *navadhanyam*) is given a mythological origin in *Draupathai Kuravanchi*. As Krishna and Draupadi collaborate in the scenes of death and revival, according to him *navadhanya* represents the principle of rebirth and immortality at the heart of symbolic sacrifices performed at Draupadi festival. For him it is no coincidence that Krishna should send Draupadi to trick the Kauravas into yielding it to the Pandavas before they enter the kingdom of *Matsya*, the Fish, (for their life in disguise) the "womb" of their regeneration. (Hildebeitel, 1991, 309)¹⁵

We witnessed further localization of *Draupathai Kuravanchi* in Kulamanthai on May 6, 2003. If the chapbook version of *Draupathai Kuravanchi* follows the structure of invocation to gods, *Viruttam*, *Tharu*, *Vacanam* (prose speech) and *Pattu* and the repetition of this structure till it concludes with *Mangalam* (auspicious ending) the performance text contains several digressions. The entrance songs by the characters behind the curtain, background singing and several of the prose speeches are more or less adhered to in the performance. The digressions occur once the characters start interacting with the Kattiyankaran or among them. To perform 64 pages of the play's script all night requires an enormous talent at improvisation on the part of all the actors and especially the Kattiyankaran. His presence is required continuously on stage all through the night, and two actors, Meghanathan and Rajendran perform the role on alternative nights. Apart from the physical stamina needed, the role also calls for acute sense of timing and rich linguistic abilities. As Subramaniyathamiran's group is very famous for performing *Kuravanchi* there was tremendous expectation on the part of audience. Their expectations were further augmented by the ritual import of the play, which was to bring agricultural prosperity in a village starved of rains.

We did see in the beginning of this chapter that the second transition from actors to characters does not get completed with make up alone. If Kattiyankaran enters the stage announcing his own name in the third person the *Kattai vesham* characters have a much more elaborate entry. In *Kuravanchi* a fully made up Duryodhana waits in the green room when the musicians sing the stanza announcing his entry.

“The famous King with precious stones in his crown
With his ministers on his side
With the stone on his neck shining like a lightning
On his shoulders flashing big as if they were huge clouds
With Sakuni, Salliyar, Karnan
With Bhishmar and Dronar
With his brave younger brothers surrounding him
Here comes Duryan to his royal court”

This passage with the third person reference to Duryodhana is repeated by actor Jothi playing Duryodhana both in the green room and at the entrance along with the musicians. He makes his entry with a vigorous rotating movement called ‘*Kirki*’ as the musicians continue to sing and Kattiyankaran and another actor hold up a big outstretched cloth in front of him totally hiding him. The stagehands holding up the curtain continue to sing along with the musicians and the actor. The audience can see only the feet and the anklets of the actor. All of them move on to the second stanza still referring to Duryodhana in the third person.

“The King of Kings, Sri Maha Raja Raja, The Fierce King
The unrivalled King, The Forceful King, Duriyabooban,
With the only flower umbrella held over his royal head,
With guards standing both on his side
With the drum beats thundering
With the crackers bursting
With Vikarnan, Karnan, Veeshmar, Dronar surrounding him
Here comes Duryodhanan
Veena and *Thamboor* play the melodies,
All the military generals bow their heads,
The snake flag flies high
Victorious music fills the air
Drummers walk with respect
Along with horses and lions
Here comes Duryodhanan
With the rosebay garland on his chest and
The auspicious crescent of moon on his forehead
Here comes Duryodhana”

As the actor jumps on to the middle of the bench where musicians are sitting, he strikes a terrifying pose with his spectre swung over his shoulder, his tongue pouted out and eyes fearfully rotating. The hand held curtain covering him all along is removed with suddenness as Kattiyankaran announces,

“Behold! Silence! Attention! For the King of Kings
The Maharaja of Maharajas!
The Extravagant King!
Duryodhana Maharaja!”

For a few moments the audience is favoured with the sight of Duryodhana standing on the bench before he jumps to the ground and starts rotating for the ‘*Jampai*’ or ‘*Jati*’. He spins like a whirling dervish, his arms flying up and down with the rhythm of his ankles ring out as he stamps the outside foot around to keep up with the inner one. At the end of the drumming Duryodhana slows down to dance steps and sings,

“Of all the kings in the world
There is only one Maharaja
I, Duryodhana the Maharaja of all Maharajas, come
I, Duryodhana the Maharaja of all Maharajas, come”

If the boastful self-introduction completes the transition from actor to character it is immediately intervened by the nonsensical song of Kattaiankaran.

“Papparapapara pai papparapara pai
Pai (mat) in the sky
Ayee (grand mother) in the Kuthir (Paddy basket)
Papparapapara pai papparapara pai”

Duryodhana looks perplexed but ignores Kattiyankaran who runs in a circle on the stage like a child driving an imaginary vehicle. Duryodhana blinks deeply before continuing,

“The cosmos trembles,
Even the dead shiver,
All the world reverberate
When the emperor walks”

Kattiyankaran replies with another song.

“Do the chicken need the (medical) treatment?

Do the sparrows need the treatment?”

Duryodhana stops him in the middle and asks,

“Hey guard! Do you know who I am?”

Kattiyankaran: “How do I know unless you tell me?”

Without batting an eyelid that all his introductions have gone waste, Duryodhana replies in all sincerity,

"My name is king Duryodhana with a garland of rosebay, an emperor who has never bowed his head before anybody. Our flag...

Kattiyankaran: "Your flag"

Duryodhana: "Do you know what is our flag?"

Kattiyankaran: "What flag?"

Duryodhana: "Aravar (snake) flag"

Kattiyankaran: "Avarai (beans) flag"

Duryodhana completely irritated, runs after Kattiyankaran to beat him up. After several such mishearing and beatings a disciplined Kattiyankaran repeats all the last sentences spoken by Duryodhana verbatim. However, he does not hesitate to intervene or irritate Duryodhana at appropriate places. For instance, when Duryodhana narrates the past incidence of Draupadi laughing at his fall, Kattiyankaran continuously intercepts to remind Duryodhana that she is goddess. He does not fail to bring out the fact that both the Pandvas and Kauravas gambled away the goddess. Kattiyankaran's interruptions may seem random but close listening to the audio recording reveals that his strategy is to ridicule the boastful identities and claims of characters and to push the characters to own up their claims and identities. For the audience, this technique brings forth all the information intact and for the actors, it pushes them deep into the characters. The 'ridicule and anger' exchange between Kattiyankaran and *Kattai vesham* characters tremendously enhances the emotional intensity of actors' identification with their characters. In the ritually charged episodes such as 'Disrobing of Draupadi' Ducchāsana is subjected to such virulent ridicule resulting in high voltage performance of the actor. Since *Therukoothu's* idiom of acting consists of *Kirki* (rapid rotation), rolling of the eyes and pouting of the tongue, such energetic acting would naturally lead the actor into trance. In the episodes where the characters are in disguise, the drama is greatly augmented by the ridicule and anger exchange.

By the time Draupadi makes her appearance as gypsy, it is past midnight and most of the audience have gone to sleep. On the mats brought from their homes spread out to accommodate friends, relatives and strangers like us, the audience sleeps. Dreaming and snoring, yet with abundant caution and care not to disturb others, each one carving out a space for oneself, it is a mass of bodies stretched out on the ground. Few wander for a cup of tea or smoke. The play goes on as if everybody is attentive. In an experience of total liminality the voices of the actors trail behind you not allowing deep sleep to set in. In the silence of the night, the voices unmediated by microphones travel closely with you looking for defenceless resonance. Some murmur the songs of the actors in their half sleep. Some smile in

response to their dreams or to the jokes of Kattiyankaran. Sleeping children in the audience babble more audibly than the adults. It is only the third night of the cycle of plays and they need to participate in the morning ritual, listen to the afternoon story telling and come for the all night plays for seven more days. It is through this kind of transmission the third transition of audience identifying themselves with the characters occurs.

This process is much more subtle and hidden compared to the other two explicit transitions of villagers ritually assuming the roles of Pandavas and the actors getting into the characters. For the audience's identification with the characters does not take place in the mimetic plane as one would assume in the case of Aristotelian theatre, cinema or television. It is true that the audience recognize the individual talent of particular actors and there exists a sophisticated history of stars, legends and their memorable performances in the meta- folklore surrounding *Therukoothu*. It is also true that the actor's athletic ability to perform forceful '*Kirki*' (spinning) on stage, ability to deliver lists of different kinds at a remarkable speed (the 100 names of Kauravas, for example), ability to improvise and skills of language and repartee constitute the making of a star in *Therukoothu*. But what perpetuates a *Therukoothu* star in the memory of the people is the actor's proclivity towards trance and his ability to transfer it to the members of the audience. It would be naïve to assume that such transfers of mental states happen only through acting. Further analysis of '*Kuravanchi*' offers some clues to the understanding of the phenomenon of trance in this tradition although nobody went into trance that night.

Actor Balu played the role of Draupadi in the first part of the drama but it is Kanniyappan now who plays the role of Draupadi the gypsy. Two or more actors playing the same character is common in the set of plays dealing with the lives of Pandavas in disguise. In these episodes of double distancing (actor playing a character, the character is in disguise of another) mediated through the tripartite introductory convention of *Therukoothu* (third person introductory song behind the curtain, first person song after the removal of curtain and the interrogation of Kattiyankaran) audience's identification is neither with the character nor with the actor. The theatrical devices of *Therukoothu* simply do not permit such identification. *Therukoothu's* techniques cannot find parallels in the Brechtian devices of alienation either because what we are dealing with here is the intense emotional involvement of the audience ranging from ritual observances to trance.

With the willing suspension of everyday routine, instead of the proverbial disbelief, what the audience identifies with is the multiple framing of the fictional events with at least one frame devoted to their inclusion. As long as the frames are prim and proper it does not matter when a man plays the most important character of Draupadi or multiple actors play the same

role. Yet, this has to be written down as audience's identification with the characters because the frames are ephemeral, verbal and invisible. One of the most recognizable framing devices of *Therukoothu* is the endless repetitive descriptions of Draupadi's humiliation in the Kaurava court as exemplified by the text and performance of *Kuravanchi*. As Draupadi's humiliation is both the reference point and subject of all recounting it reaches the audience from different points of views of various characters. If Duryodhana reasons out that her mocking and laughing at him (when he visited the Pandavas as their guest during *Rajasooya* worship) were the reasons for her humiliation later on Kattiyankaran, the story teller and others preach lengthy moralizing on what should be the women's behaviour in everyday life. There is even a Tamil proverb that says 'If a woman laughs, disaster follows'. Duryodhana's permanent scar in the heart is not only because Draupadi laughed at him but also said "Oh! I thought only my father in law is blind. Now only I know my brother in law is also blind". Even Kattiyankaran, who mocks at everything Duryodhana says in an earlier scene, gives credence to the basis of his anger. Nonetheless, the humiliation he meted out on her is unpardonable. In *Therukoothu's* musings it is repeatedly said that the elder brother's wife deserves the respect and love that one reserves only for one's mother. Duryodhana not only ordered Duchhassana to denude her in public but also in a concealed sexual invitation asked her to sit on his thigh. It is a heinous crime cries every framing device in *Therukoothu* and that too in all caste dialects and language varieties of Tamil. If *Kuravanchi* uses *Kuravar* caste dialect, then the episode of 'The marriage of Subathra' uses *Brahmin* dialect to frame the injustice done to Draupadi.

The framing devices facilitate the improvisation immensely and allow Kattiyankaran to connect the scene to everyday life experiences. In *Kuravanchi* when Draupadi meets with Gandhari, Duryodhana's mother and her own mother in law, Kattiyankaran continuously intercepts it to connect it to the everyday conflict between mother in laws and daughter in laws. So the audience sees Draupadi and Gandhari not as mythological figure as the classical texts would present but as ordinary mother in law and daughter in law next door. Kattiyankaran in a variety of ways plays the bringing-everything-down- to- earth function. If a character speaks in a high flown literary language, he paraphrases it; if a caste dialect is used he mocks at it; he makes fools out of kings; and he links the great injustice done to Draupadi to the familiar experiences known to the audience. In a poignant exchange between Kattiyankaran and the gypsy who is to obtain fresh seeds, he criticizes the low quality of rice supplied through the government's public distribution system. Generally the framing devices emerge from Kattiyankaran and permeate to the audience whether they are asleep or awake.

However the alert ones in the audience nudge you to wake up if there are important scenes such as the first appearance of Kanniyappan as Draupadi,

the gypsy. He is dressed in Sari with artificial breasts, blue facial make up and a little spinning bucket on his head. The little spinning bucket is at once a comical device inviting hilarious comments from Kattiyankaran and useful for collecting donations from the audience. A woman from the audience willingly gives her sleeping baby into the hands of the gypsy, as Draupadi has to carry Sahadeva, the youngest of her husbands, in the disguise of a baby according to Krishna's wish. Our neighbours in the audience assure us that the baby would be handled carefully and also grow to be wise having 'acted' in the episode as Sahadeva. This is very similar to what we did see in the afternoon story telling sessions when audience contributed donations to successful conduct of *Rajasooya* worship. Compared to *Kuravanchi* the framing devices for audience's inclusion and participation are very elaborate in the episodes of *Bagasura Vatham* (Killing of Bagasura), *Arjunan Thapasu* (Arjuna's penance), *Madupidi Sandai* (The fight for cattle) and *Padu Kalam* (The Final War field). In '*Killing of Bagasura*' the actor playing the role of Bhima rides a bullock cart through all the streets of the village and the villagers place rice and vegetables on the cart for Bhima to take it to the Bagasura. In '*Arjuna's penance*' the actor climbs the pole centrally erected in the performance area as Arjuna had climbed the Himalayas to observe penance towards Shiva for getting the most powerful weapons. The villagers gather around the pole and wait for the Arjuna actor to reach the top of the pole. Once he reaches the top he throws lemons all around, which the villagers collect religiously. The lemons received from the actor are believed to cure infertility in women. The couples that benefited from earlier occasions tie cradles on the Arjuna's pole and rock the baby for a while. '*The Final War field*' looks almost like a war field because Bhima chases Duryodhana street after street literally fighting with their wooden spectres and kicking clods of dust after them. When they finally reach the decorated slain figure of Duryodhana Bhima kills him by hitting him on the thighs. On the slain figure of Duryodhana the villagers gather, sing mock dirge songs and beat the figure with broomsticks.

'The fight for cattle' that happened on May 7, 2003, the next day after *Kuravanchi* the villagers brought cattle to the performance area. After the *Kuravanchi* episode Draupadi and the Pandavas lead their one year of disguise in the country of Vrada. Duryodhana wages war on this country and steals the cattle. Arjuna defeats Duryodhana and wins the cattle back for the kingdom. In the evening men young and old assemble with their beasts in the village square, outside the temple. The cattle's horns are decorated and they are looking freshly washed and groomed. Some of the participants are no more than boys. As they wait for the event to take place, they smile and chat with their mothers and siblings in the surrounding audience. The actors, Duryodhana and Arjuna, prepare slowly in the green room at the back of their stage. They are putting on the same costumes and makeup used for the nighttime dramatic depiction of their character. However, they

are different actors from those who took the roles in last night's show, and tonight they will be different again. The storyteller Muthuganesan is prominent in the audience, along with the village *panchayat*, five men clad in yellow robes. One of the *panchayat* members brings extra banana palm branches to decorate the front of the stage area. In the branches, Arjuna's bow is hung. The three icons are brought on their bier out from under the eaves of the temple where they had earlier witnessed the story telling. A *pujari* (non Brahmin priest) performs a *puja* (worship) for us all, the crowd, especially children, surging forward to take part. The storyteller Muthuganesan gets onto a raised platform to relate the story that will be played out in this ritual. The audience is silent, totally attentive to his words – just as they had been earlier in the day when sitting for hours listening to his tales. Now, in the early evening, they are more relaxed, but nevertheless acutely attuned to the import of the story.

The actors are brought down off the stage area and onto the street level. Arjuna is given his bow. Duryodhana carries his characteristic sceptre. The actors are given a blessing and then commence their chase around the square, dodging through the crowd. The people cheer and whistle. The actors run at the cattle, forcing them and their owners to flee outwards into the dusty street and the paddy fields. Some of the frightened animals break loose and charge away in a cloud of dust. Arjuna and Duryodhana keep circling clockwise around the square and the temple area, running and jumping as they go. They are pretty athletic, but not menacing. In fact, their presence is surprisingly relaxed – as if they were pretty careless of the significance or impressiveness of their actions. As Arjuna and Duryodhana return from their half-a-dozen cycles, they slow down and wander into the crowd positioned at the edge of the stage platform. Like footballers coming off the pitch, heads down they slow to a walk and make their way through the group of women and children up onto their stage. The *panchayat* members join them and pat them on the back, congratulating them on a good performance.

As we move from *Kuravanchi* to *The fight for cattle* the earlier frames for transitions and inclusion of audience cave in and merge, everybody becomes a character in *Mahabharata*. Except for the thin outline of a play provided by the script everything else is part of improvisation, convention and oral tradition. Taking into account that the *Therukoothu* events 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 1998, xxviii).

What Hanne M. de Bruin does not include in her list is the set of values that guide the predictable course of *Therukoothu* events. The values the villagers live by and the values *Mahabharata* proposes feed into their belief system. It is this belief system that gives and sustains the dramatic force of *Therukoothu*. With Kattiyankaran as the conduit between the epic world and the real world the theatre of *Mahabharata* continuously localizes its axiology. At the centre of it lies the violation of a value, (violation of a woman's honour) which produces strongest range of emotions. As this system of values is intimately linked with the principles of natural justice, justice is what assures emotional balance. Aptly in Tamil trance in the *Therukoothu* context is referred to as '*Aavesam*' (Fury) and trances occur in most number when the episode 'Disrobing of Draupadi' is played. When the actor or the audience member goes into trance, the performance is immediately stopped and the actors playing Duryodhana and Ducchāsana pray to goddess Draupadi ask for her forgiveness. If the occurrence of trance authenticates the efficacy of *Therukoothu* performances, it also authenticates the efficacy of living by the values. Such a living is important for preservation of progeny and fertility in women, land and nature in general. As we depart Kulamanthai we think of the ritual observers who have to walk on the burning coal on the last but one day of the festival. Walking on the burning coal they complete their ritual observances and come back to the world of reality. Only on their return Dharmaraja can ascend on his throne to restore justice. *Therukoothu* remains a genuine and total community theatre.

And we do know what is theatre's double.

Notes

¹ All the Indian words are written as they are pronounced without transliteration and diacritical marks. Except proper names of persons and places all Indian words are in italics. Sanskrit names and pronunciations are followed for characters and concepts that are recognizable all over India. If Tamil and Sanskrit words are used for the same concept or character for any specific reason then they are mentioned in the endnotes.

² Bharat (in Sanskrit) and Paratham (in Tamil) are also official names of India deriving their root from the epic of Mahabharata.

³ Dharmaraja or Dharmarajan is the Tamil name commonly used for Yudishtra, the eldest of the Pandva brothers.

⁴ Paratham is the Tamil name for Mahabharata

⁵ Hanne M. de Bruin is the lone scholar who calls *Therukoothu*, *Kattaikoothu* because of the *kattai veshams* used in *Therukoothu*. She is also closely involved

in the formation and administration of an association called 'Kattaikoothu Sangam'. However artists and audience continue to refer to the form as Therukoothu in the banners, posters and everyday speech. It is only by the name Therukoothu Tamil speaking world continues to know the art form.

⁶ Vaishnavite mark on the forehead is known as 'Namam' in Tamil. It is a vertical U-shaped white stripe drawn on the forehead with a red line in the middle. Vaishnavites are religious followers of Vishnu.

⁷ Saivites are religious followers of Shiva. They wear a horizontal ash stripe on their forehead.

⁸ Potharaja is a historical figure who ruled the Gingee kingdom. His accommodation as a mythical character along with the other characters in Mahabharata reveals the way history and mythology mix. A Muslim warrior named Muttalarauthan is also normally accorded iconic representation inside the Draupadi Amman temple premises although we did not see his statue in Kulamanthai. For detailed analysis of such syncretic processes see Hildebeitel's 'Cult of Draupadi Mythologies: From Gingee to Kurukshetra'

⁹ Therukoothu groups follow a complex system of sharing the fees among themselves. For a detailed analysis of the sharing system see Hanne M.de Bruin's 'Kattaikuttu: The flexibility of a South Indian theatre tradition'

¹⁰ Therukoothu artists, leaders and Gurus come from several other castes also. They enjoy the status of ritual specialists irrespective of the castes they are born into.

¹¹ The ritual burial is followed only in Pandaram caste. When Kannappa Tambiran passed away on October 6, 2003 he was buried in the sitting position. His Therukoothu Company performed 'Karna's salvation' on the sixteenth day after his death to liberate him from the cycle of rebirths.

¹² Ganesh marks consist of Tamil alphabet equivalent of 'U' with two underscores. They are drawn before the beginning of any activity.

¹³ Kalaimamani is the annual award given by the government of Tamil Nadu for artists in all the fields of performing arts including folk performing arts and cinema. A Therukoothu artist considers this award as highly prestigious and if awarded it is advertised in the banners and in the announcements before the play.

¹⁴ Despite massive researches carried out on the Therukoothu tradition very little research exists on the phenomenon of printed folklore such as chapbooks. The recent publication of Stuart Blackburn's book 'Print, Folklore and Nationalism in Colonial South India' (2003 New Delhi, Permanent Black) is the first work in that direction. Vaidialingan, Se. 2002. Tamizh Panpaattu Varalaaru. Chidambaram: Annamalai University.

¹⁵ Hildebeitel cites Beck's 'Elder Brother Story' (*Annamarswamy Kathai*) to draw our attention to a similar episode where the roasted seeds sprout, by Vishnu's grace, when planted. In that epic also the heroes receive roasted seeds from their parallel cousins. This motif is immensely appealing to the agricultural communities.

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