

Pandavas put to sleep and revived through *abhicara*:

A Mahabharata episode from Kerala

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1 Introduction

In various regions of India, we find retellings of Mahabharata in written, oral and ritual performance traditions. Almost all of these retellings contain subtle and not so subtle variations compared to Vyasa's epic. In the eastern region, the first Bengali version [1] by Kabi Sanjay (early 15th century) is noteworthy for its remarkable variations. In Oriya there is a version by Sarala Dasa (15th century) and in Assamese there is a version by Rama Saraswati (16th century). The variations of these versions from Vyasa have been documented [2]. We can also read [3] about the variations in the south, namely, Villi (Tamil), Kumara Vyasa (Kannada), Ezhuttacchan (Malayalam) and Nannayya-Tikkana-Yerrapragda (Telugu). There has been extensive study of the mythic, ritualistic and dramatic forms associated with Draupadi as a village Goddess in Tamil Nadu [4]. It is in the background of this large canvas that we need to encounter, appreciate, and study four variations on a Mahabharata episode that involve *abhicara* from oral, ritual and performance tradition of Kerala. It is to be mentioned that this episode is absent from well-known written retellings of the Mahabharata in Malayalam. So far, we have located this episode in (1) Kuratti Thottam [5, 6] associated with the Theyyam performance of northern Kerala, (2) Nizhalkkuttu Pattu [7], a section of Mavaratam Pattu, a folk Mahabharata once popular in southern Kerala, (3) Nizhalkkuttu Pattu associated with a ritual called Pallippana [8] and (4) Nizhalkkuttu attakatha [9], the literary text for a popular Kathakali play.

2 Kuratti Thottam (The Kuratti Song)

One of the folk rituals of northern Kerala is Theyyam, where a performer *becomes* a deity through a series of invocations, body art and stylized rituals accompanied by rhythmic music. Different sections of the society who mainly belong to aboriginals of Kerala have their own specific deities [6].

There are about eighteen varieties of Kuratti Theyyams performed by Malayas, Velas, Mavilas, Koppalas, Cheravas and Pulayas. These theyyams are different in form, appearance and performance.

There are many (varying) myths regarding Kuratti. Siva and Parvati wandering in the guise of Kuravan and Kuratti is one of them. Malankurathi and Pullikurathi Theyyams performed by Velas are based on Parvati. On the other hand, the Kuratti Theyyam performed by Pulayas is referred to as Parvati's daughter at one place.

Kuratti Theyyam performed by Pulayas has the Mahabharata link. Pulayas mostly consider Kuratti as one who revived Pandavas from the effect of *abhicara*. The Kuratti Thottam of Pulayas of northern Kerala describes a theme similar to that in Mavaratham Pattu (Song of Mahabharata - popular in south Kerala) and the Nizhalkkuttu Pattu (Song of Shadow Piercing) recited by Velas, Pulayas and Malayas of north Kerala [5].

On the day prior to the theyyam ritual, the performer (*kolakkaran*) puts on light costume and makeup, stands in front of the diety, sings with the accompaniment of musical instruments and gets possessed towards the end. That form is called thottam and the song sung by the thottam is known as thottam Pattu. In Malayalam, the word thottam could mean feelings, creation, revival, epiphany etc.

The thottam (song) [5, 6] begins by mentioning the war between the five Pandavas and the Hundreds (popular way of referring to Kauravas, since they are hundred in number). The five Pandavas threw fruits of Peera (a small fruit with bitter taste) at Hundreds and the Hundreds threw lemons at Pandavas. The Hundreds were defeated in this war of fruit-throwing.

Deciding to harm Pandavas by using *abhicara*, the Hundreds summon Malayil Malankuravan. They ask him to perform *abhicara* on Pandavas. Kuravan replies that since the Hundreds and the five Pandavas are lords to him, he is not willing to do *abhicara*. The Hundreds threaten him by asking him to vacate the hill where he is staying. Under threat, the Kuravan is forced to perform the task.

The Kuravan installs items of black magic such as copper and tin plates, severed heads of cat, cock etc., along the path of Pandavas and performs *abhicara*. The Pandavas become unconscious and they lie on the ground.

The next day, Malankurathi (wife of Malankuravan), discovers the scene. She recognizes this as the work of Malankuravan. She bathes and arrives with medicines. She takes a wooden seat of Pala (a tree), draws magical circles and pins down (magical fixing) the Kuravan. Then she performs the reverse *abhicara*. She discovers and removes all the items of black magic installed by Malankuravan. She removes the effect of *abhicara* and the Pandavas are revived.

In part 2 of the thottam, Kuratti is described as daughter of Parvati. Here there is also a very brief mention of Siva, dice game, fives and the hundreds.

3 Nizhalkkuttu Pattu from Mavaratam Pattu

Nizhalkkuttu Pattu is part of Mavaratam Pattu, a folk Mahabharata once popular in Kerala [7].

Summary of Nizhalkkuttu Pattu:

Bhima saves his mother and brothers from the fire at the house and takes them to the forest. Bhima locates a Kuratti known to him. She provides good roots to Panadavas as

food. When Kuratti returns to her home her spouse, Kuravan, asks her about good roots. She answers that good roots are not available. Not believing her, Kuravan goes to the forest and discovers Pandavas there. He informs Turiyothanan (Duryodhana) that Pandavas are alive and they are in the forest! Duryodhana does not believe Kuravan and tries to kill him. Then Narada appears and certifies that what Kuravan says is true. Duryodhana orders Kuravan to perform Nizhalkuttu (piercing the shadow) on Pandavas. Kuravan demands things such as sword of thunder, eggs of elephant and horse, shoots of moonlight, powder of darkness, ropes of sand etc., which are impossible to get! This enrages Duryodhana. He asks Kuravan to arrange these things himself. Kuravan is unable to do so. Duryodhana threatens to kill Kuravan. Kuravan agrees to perform the *abhicara* using available things such as coconuts (instead of elephant and horse egg), shoots of jackfruit tree, rice powder, coir rope etc. He performs the *abhicara* and Pandavas are made unconscious.

Duryodhana gives gifts to the Kuravan. When he returns home, Kuratti questions him about the things he arranged. Kuravan refuses to answer, asking her right to question her master. Kuratti prepares to go to the forest. Her son stops her. She kills her son, throws away the body and proceeds to the forest. She discovers Pandavas and their mother lying unconscious on the ground.

Kuratti makes the necessary preparations and recites mantras to remove the effect of *shadow piercing*. She frees the Pandavas from the *abhicara* and revives them by singing *paratam* (Bharata, the epic?).

4 Nizhalkuttu Pattu associated with Pallippana

At the Ambalapuzha Srikrishnaswamy Temple, a ritual called Panthrandu Kalabham (12 kalabham) is performed during 1st to 12th of the Malayalam month of Makaram (December - January) every year.

After every 12 years, the ritual called Pallippana [8] (palli is divine and pana is song; Pallippana is divine song) is performed at the temple. After 12 Pallippana, a ritual called Vijayabali (Victory Sacrifice) is performed.

Ritual of Pallippana:

In Pallippana, major rituals are called Oattu and Muroattu. Oattu is performed by Velans during the day and Muroattu (Muroattu is Maru Oattu, that is, counter Oattu according to Dr. Ambalappuzha Gopakumar) is performed by Velathis during the night.

Velans participating in Oattu are classified as Kuuttatis and Puranatis. Kuuttatis perform the Oattu as per the directives of the ritual. Puranatis wear leaves of elanji, caps of pala and kuruttola (tender shoots of coconut tree), paint their faces and appear as buffoons. The Puranatis entertain the spectators, makes them laugh and divert their attention from the rituals being performed by Kuuttatis.

Legend of Pallippana:

There are many legends connected with the performance of Pallippana at Ambalappuzha Temple.

One of them is that the first Pallippana was performed by Siva. Due to workload, Vishnu became unconscious. To wake up and rejuvenate the Lord, Subrahmanya, the god of Astrology suggested that Pallippana should be performed. Velas are required to perform the ritual. The entire world was searched for Velas, but none could be found. Then Siva appeared as a Velan and Parvathi as a Velathi. They performed the ritual and Vishnu was revived.

It is believed that Puranatis are Siva's Bhutaganas. It is said that when Siva and Parvati performed the first Pallippana, the Bhutaganas acted as guards in the guise of Puranatis.

Songs:

The Saiva musical instruments, Para and Tuti are played when the songs are sung. All the songs begin with the praise of Siva such as *The Lord wearing the Moon / The Lord with the fiery eye/ The daughter of the Mountain, her son, Nandikesa and Ayyan / Please come and protect us.*

Performance of the Ritual:

To perform Pallippana, a special stage is constructed at Ambalappuzha. On the south east side of the temple tank, facing the stage, huts are constructed for the Velans who perform the rituals. Six huts are constructed at the front side. Cempakasseri, Koyikkal, Kunnankari, Eramunda, Nettasseri and Ambalappuzha are the six Kuuttati families entitled to perform the rituals. Behind these huts, other huts are made for Ganakan and Mannan. A special hut is made for Ambalappuzha Panikkan, who is an important functionary.

The head priest orders the Kuuttatis to start the Oattu. Uzhichal (caressing) is performed thrice during the day reciting Siva's names.

Performance of Muroattu:

The Velathis perform Muroattu. Muroattu begins as *A Velan who knows the truth/ Performed the pana and / recited the murayorttu.*

In Pallippana, Muroattu is more important.

During Muroattu, Maparatam Pattu is sung by the Velathis. The story is summarized as follows:

Bharata Malayi, a servant of Pandavas is worried that her husband, Bharata Malayan, has not returned since seven days. Losing her patience, she sets out along with her son, looking for Bharata Malayan. On the way, she sees him coming carrying a large bundle. Malayan tells Malayi that the bundle is full of gifts. Malayi questions him about the items in the bundle. Malayan replies that he performed Oattu at the place where his lords (Kauravas) and her lords (Pandavas) had assembled for hunting. The gifts were given to him by his lords for performing Oattu.

Malayi asks him whether any one died at the site of hunting. Malayan replies that five

stags and two deers were killed.

From this reply, Malayi infers that the Malayan has shadow-pierced the five Pandavas along with Kunti and Panchali.

Malayi becomes furious and shouts at the Malayan. Malayan had pledged that he will not harm Malayi's lords and Malayi had pledged that she will not harm Malayan's lords! Malayan has broken this pledge.

Malayi insists on performing the counter abhicara. Malayan tries to dissuade her. He offers her the diamond necklace which he received as gift. Malayi throws the necklace away saying that he can give it to another Malayi! Her son tries to pacify her. This further infuriates the Malayi. Saying that the son is like his father, she kills the son immediately.

Malayi starts the counter abhicara. She covers a dead body with a freshly made cloth and recites Sanjivani and other mantras and invokes all the gods. The gods appear and asks her what she wants.

Malayi says: I want the kompu mani (Horn bell?), Para and Tuti which were used by the Lord Mahadeva (Siva) when he became a Malayan! (Malayi is referring to the legend of Siva performing the first Pallippana.)

The gods are pleased to give these things to Malayi.

Taking the Bell, Para and Tuti of Siva, the Malayi proceeds to *daivam guru nadu* where the Malayan has kept the Pandavas bound by abhicara. She performs muroattu and revives the pandavas.

Note the significant deviations of this Maparatam Pattu from Mavaratam Pattu:

In the Maparatam Pattu sung at Pallippana, along with the Pandavas, Kunti and Draupadi are also shadow pierced. In the Mavaratam Pattu Draupadi is spared.

Malayi invokes the devas and requests for the Bell, Para and Tuti of Mahadeva for performing the reverse abhicara. This shows that the ritual at Ambalappuzha is closely related to the legend of Siva and Parvati performing the first Pallippana. Recall that Kuratti of Kuratti Thottam is referred to as daughter of Parvati. Thus the Velathi who performed the first Pallippana and the Kuratti who revives the Pandavas in Mavaratam Pattu are closely associated with Parvati. The involvement of Siva is most interesting.

Now we know why Maparatam Pattu (with emphasis on Nizhalkkuttu Pattu) is sung at the Pallippana ritual at Ambalappuzha Krishna Temple. The song is sung at the temple to revive the unconscious Krishna! Krishna being revived by singing the Maparatam Pattu turns out to be an interesting twist. Contrast this with the attakatha where it is Krishna who revives Pandavas.

5 Nizhalkkuttu attakatha

The Nizhalkkuttu attakatha was composed by Shri Pannisseri Nanupillai in July-August, 1925. Pannisseri Nanupillai has also composed three more attakathas (Bhadrakali Vijayam, Paduka Pattabhishekam and Sankara Vijayam). Nizhalkkuttu attakatha became very popular in Kerala and was even a text for the course of Bachelor of Arts, University of Kerala in 1978. The introduction states that the theme of the attakatha is the story of *Mavaratam Nizhalkkuttu Pattu* which is very popular in Kerala. The author felt that the story should become more popular among Keralites in a form other than *Velan Pattu*. From author's preface we read: "There aren't many Hindu homes in Kerala where Nizhalkkuttu Pattu is not conducted at least once a month to annul the effect of *abhicara* etc."

Characters in the order of appearance: Yudhishtira, Bhima, Arjuna, Nakula, Sahadeva, Sages, Draupadi, Garthavakthra, Duryodhana, Bhanumati, Messenger, Susharma, Bharata Malayan, Malayan's wife, his son, Kunti, Krishna.

Summary:

After the burning of the house at Varanavata, the Pandavas wander in the forest. They marry Draupadi; receive half of the kingdom from Dhritarashtra and Yudhishtira rules over it. Duryodhana tries to create trouble. Bhima comes to know about this and is enraged. He seeks permission from Yudhishtira to go to Hastinapura and kill the Kauravas. Yudhishtira consoles Bhima saying that Krishna will always protect them.

Some sages from the forest come to meet Yudhishtira. A rakshasa named Garthavakthra (One with mouth as deep as a pit) is preventing them from doing penance. The sages request Yudhishtira to protect them. Yudhishtira promises to send Bhima to the forest to protect them. Bhima meets Draupadi and tells her that he has to go to the forest. In the forest, Bhima challenges Garthavakthra. They fight and Bhima kills Garthavakthra. The sages bless Bhima.

Meanwhile, Duryodhana converses with his wife, Bhanumati. Then a messenger deputed by Duryodhana to bring the tantric Bharata returns and informs that the tantric will report in two days. Duryodhana directs the messenger to ask Susharma, king of Trigarta, to reach Hastinapura immediately.

Shortly, Susharma, the ferocious king of Trigarta arrives. Duryodhana informs Susharma that all his attempts to kill the Pandavas have failed. As advised by Sakuni, he has now summoned a great tantric, Bharata Malayan. Susharma should assess the power of this tantric.

Bharata Malayan, a performer of *abhicara* reports. At the gate, Susharma stops Bharata Malayan. Malayan tells him that he has killed a few kings earlier by nizhalkkuttu (piercing shadow). When Susharma challenges, Malayan makes him unconscious and enters the fort. Malayan approaches Duryodhana after adopting the disguise of a civilized man. He thinks it is inappropriate to enter the palace otherwise.

Duryodhana orders Malayan to kill Pandavas by piercing the shadow. Malayan refuses

saying that both Pandavas and Kauravas are kings to him. Also Krishna is with the Pandavas, hence he will not be able to do so. Duryodhana threatens to kill him. To avoid the work, Malayan demands things such as lamp of sun, plate of moon, measure of darkness, eggs of elephant, arrows of Rama, twentyone leaves of water etc., which are impossible to get. He also demands that Dussala (Duryodhana's sister) should be sacrificed in the *abhicara*. This enrages Duryodhana. He suspects that Malayan is trying to avoid the work by giving excuses. He repeats the threat to kill him if Malayan does not perform the task. Malayan promises to perform the *abhicara* using available things.

While performing the *abhicara* of *shadow piercing*, the Malayan looks at the black (Anjanam) stone. He is surprised that the shadows are not visible on the black stone! Realising that if this *abhicara* is not successful, the king will kill him, he prays to the gods to help him. Then he sees the shadows along with Krishna. He is deeply worried and prays to have mercy on him. Then Krishna's shadow disappears. Malayan realizes that his aim is accomplished. He prays for pardon saying that he was forced to do the task.

After killing the Pandavas by *shadow piercing*, Malayan is praised by Duryodhana who gives him many gifts. On the way back, Malayan thinks that he has committed a sin and how he can face his wife.

Seeing him unhappy, his wife asks the reason.

Malayan tells her that on the way he saw a deer with five does and he killed the does by em *abhicara*. The worried wife further questions him. Malayan admits that he was forced by Duryodhana to kill the Pandavas by *nizhalkkuttu* (piercing the shadow).

Hearing this, the wife is devastated and enraged. She tells Malayan that he will also experience Kunti's grief now. She kills her own son and rushes to see Pandavas. Seeing this Malayan falls unconscious.

Kunti finds her sons dead, suddenly. She cries out and prays to Krishna to help her.

Krishna appears. Kunti is relieved to see Krishna. Krishna touches the Pandavas and revives them.

Then Malayan's wife arrives. Krishna asks her why she has come. She tells Krishna that Malayan was threatened and forced by Duryodhana to kill the Pandavas by *nizhalkkuttu* (shadow piercing).

Krishna tells her that he knows everything. Killing her own son was an extreme step. Her son will live again. There will not be any hatred towards Malayan. All these were caused by Duryodhana.

Yudhishtira and Kunti praise Krishna. Krishna assures Kunti that he will always protect Pandavas.

Krishna further says that those who listen to this story will not be affected by *abhicara*.

6 Variations on Variation

The *abhicara* episode in four different contexts as summarized above have variations. The most notable one is the *absence* of Krishna in Kuratti Thottam and the two Nizhalkkuttu Pattu. The attakatha is the latest and some of its *modifications* compared to the other two texts are self-evident as appropriate for the literary text for a classical performing art (Kathakali). For example, the introduction of Garthavakthra, Susharma etc. is to have a variety of *veshams* which is almost mandatory for a Kathakali play.

Since all four narratives are associated with performances (ritual/classical theatre), it is important to record the details of the performances of Kuratti Theyyam, Nizhalkkuttu Pattu and Nizhalkkuttu Kathakali, to gather further insights. We are told [10] that the performance of *abhicara* on Kathakali stage is rich in details. In this context it is also important to study the versions of Nizhalkkuttu Pattu sung by the Malaya community of northern Kerala.

7 Concluding Remarks

Just like the rest of India, Kerala also has its share of Mahabharata episodes with local flavour, which lie outside of Vyasa's epic. Do they have any links with other regional variations? For example, in the Mavaratam Pattu, Bhima after being poisoned, ends up in Nagapura (city of snakes) where he marries a girl. In Vyasa's Mahabharata there is the episode of Bhima's rejuvenation by the Nagas in the netherworld (omitted in the Critical Edition). In Ref. [2] we read that in the Assamese Mahabharata of Rama Saraswati, there is an episode of Bhima fighting with nagas in the netherworld (same episode also occurs in Bengali versions [1]. Speaking of Kuratti, in Hildebeitel(1988) [4], we find that there is one *Terukkuttu* play called *Draupadi Kuravanci*. In this play, during the stay in the forest Draupadi disguises as a Kuratti and goes to Hastinapura and engages in fortune telling to collect fresh grains. So it turns out that both in Tamil Nadu and Kerala we find some connections between Kuratti and Mahabharata even though the episodes have nothing in common. Investigations into what prompted such regional variations outside the Sanskrit Epic could be richly rewarding. Hopefully folklorists in Kerala could unearth and profitably study such episodes with epic connections in Kerala oral/ritual traditions.

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Glossary

- Abhicara Black Magic.
- Attakatha Literary text for Kathakali play containing slokas and padams. The language used is generally Manipravalam, a mixture of Sanskrit and Malayalam.
- Kuratti (Kuravan) Female (male) members of the Kurava community.
- Malayan (Malayi) Male (female) member of the Malaya community.
- Nizhalkuttu Shadow piercing.
- Pattu Song.
- Velan (Velatti) Male (female) member of the Vela community.
- Velan Pattu Song sung by members of the Vela community.

References

- [1] See the article, *On the First Bengali Mahabharata* by Shri Pradip Bhattacharya available on the internet at
- http://www.geocities.com/harindranath_a/maha/variation/kabism.html
- [2] See, for example, W. L. Smith, *The Burden of the Forest: Two Apocryphal Parvans from Vernacular Mahabharata*, ROCZNIK ORIENTALISTYCZNY, T. LIV. Z 1, 2001, pages 93-110). We thank Shri Pradip Bhattacharya for making a copy of this article available to us.
- [3] M.V. Subramanian, *The Mahabharata Story: Vyasa and Variations*, Higginbothams (P) Limited, 1967.
- [4] Alf Hiltebeitel, *The Cult of Draupadi 1. Mythologies from Gingee to Kurukshetra*, University of Chicago Press, 1988; *The Cult of Draupadi 2. On Hindu Ritual and the Goddess*, University of Chicago Press, 1991. Also see *Rethinking India's Oral and Classical Epics. Draupadi among Rajputs, Muslims and Dalits*, University of Chicago Press, 1999 by the same author.
- [5] Based on the information given in the book, *Kuratti Thottam*, Study and Commentary, Dr. M.V. Vishnu Nambudiri (1999), distributed by Current Books.
- [6] *Uttara Keralattile Thottam Pattukal*, compiled by Dr. M.V. Vishnu Nambudiri, published by Kerala Sahitya Akademi, (1981). We thank Shri Venu Edakkazhiyur for making available to us a copy of this book, which is currently out of print.
- [7] Based on the text given as a part of Mavaratham Pattu, given in the book, *Malayalattile Pazhaya Pattukal* by P. Govinda Pillai, pages 226-229. Xerox of pages 226-229 provided by Prof. Vattapparampil Gopinatha Pillai from a copy available at Sahitya Akademi, Trivandrum.
- [8] Based on information given in the book *Ambalappuzha Srikrishnaswamy Kshetram* by Dr. Ambalappuzha Gopakumar, Chapter 10, Pallippanayude Porul (Meaning of Pallippana), Ambalappuzha Srikrishnaswamy Kshetra Vikasana Trust (2000).
- We thank Prof. Vattapparampil Gopinatha Pillai for providing a copy of Chapter 10 of this book.
- [9] *Nizhalkkuttu attakkatha*, Pannisseri Nanu Pillai, first published 1926, second edition, 1978, published by Pannisseri Sreenivasa Kurup. We thank Prof. Vattapparampil Gopinatha Pillai for making a copy of this book available to us.
- [10] Private communication from Shri Nellyyotu Vasudevan Nambudiri, famous Kathakali actor (October 2003).