

Influence of Brahminic Hegemony on folk art Theyyam: Historical analysis of Theyyam myths and socio-cultural events in Northern Kerala

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Abstract

Theyyam is an art form that blends Tribal, Aryan and Dravidian elements. It is performed annually in the districts of Northern Kerala from October to May. The rich cultural history of Theyyam gives an insight into the cultural ethos and social reality from the 12th century AD. Theyyams are performed by the members of the untouchable castes. The performer after his transformation is seen as a 'god' by the people and at this point he transcends the boundary of the rigid caste system. 'Thottams' are the myths that are sung during the performance. This paper attempts a close analysis of the 'Thottams', which are unbiased but distorted sources of evidence that gives a portrait of the oppression faced by the lower castes during the 12th century. Theyyam as it is known today was shaped by various historical incidents and these incidents changed the manner of hegemony exercised by the higher castes over centuries. The major historical incidents that paved way for cultural reform in the state had their influence on Theyyam which helped the art form transform from a ritual into a theatrical performance.

Keywords: theyyam, thottam, brahminic hegemony, varna system, untouchability, renaissance

Introduction

Modern Theyyam developed in Kolathunadu during the reign of Raja Chirakkal. Kolathunadu was ruled by the Kolathiri dynasty which was established in 12th century AD. Kolathunadu comprises of the Northern districts of Kerala. The Kolathiri's were the descendants of the Mushika dynasty of Tamil Sangam age. Before coming to the history of Kolathunadu, it is essential to have an understanding of the history of Kallanthatt Kalari and the myth of Kunhimangalam, as these aspects are inextricably linked to the history of Kolathunadu. After getting the patronage from the Kolathiri dynasty, there was a proliferation of different types of Theyyam in Northern Kerala. A majority of the Theyyams during the 12th century developed the practice of animal sacrifice in the Theyyam ritual.

History of Kolathunadu and Influence of Brahminic Hegemony

According to Keralopathi history, there are records of Brahmin migration from the North. The change in the Socio-economic structure had a great impact in the history of Kerala thereafter as it influenced various spheres of life such as economy, politics, culture, art, society and a new interpretation of caste structure. There were initially 32 Brahmin villages in the Northern parts of Kerala. In Payyanur (Now part of Kannur district), there were 16 Manas (Ancestral house of a Brahmin family).

One of the most important Mana among the 16 is the Kunjimangalam Mana and the area under it includes Panachirra Kalari, Kallanthatt Kalari and Panavayal. Till the 13th century, there were tremendous socio-political events that took place in this region. The changes are linked with the various local myths in the region. The Kolathiri dynasty's power increased during this time because of spices trade. But according to the caste system, the Kolathiri's were not recognized as Kshatriya. To attain the Kshatriya title, a Yaga called the Hiranyagarbha

should be performed by the Brahmins. Udayavarman Kolathiri, the then Kolathiri approached the Brahmins to perform the Yaga for him. The Brahmins refused to confer him the title of Kshatriya and this refusal led to many battles and conflicts between the Kolathiri and the Brahmin. To resolve this problem, Udayavarman brought Brahmins from Tulunadu of Karnataka and gave them land and other rewards. The Karnataka Brahmins then performed the Yaga for the Kolathiri and conferred to him the title of Kshatriya.

There is also another myth that shows the conflict between Malayali Brahmin and the Kolathiri which is also linked with a particular Theyyam. In Kunjimangalam Mana, there was once an epidemic that killed almost all the members of the Mana except a woman and her son. Both of them left for river Kaveri to perform the rituals for their deceased family members. After performing the rituals, both of them came back to their homeland. From a hilltop, they were surprised to see that their Mana was invaded by the Chirakkal raja. The son led a battle to reclaim their Mana but was killed in the battle. The mother, grieved by her son's death, committed suicide. The spirits of the mother and son decided to avenge their loss by destroying the Chirakkal family but was stopped by "Madayikavilamma", the Kuladevatha (Clan Goddess) of Chirakkal raja. Chirakkal raja then elevated the mother as VeeraChamundi Theyyam. The myth regarding this Theyyam depicts the conflict between the Kolathiri and the Malayali Brahmins. The Tulu Brahmins from Karnataka were given the lands of Kallanthatt Kalari and a Mana called "EdaMana". This created greater conflict between the Malayali Brahmins and the Tulu Brahmins.

The Agrarian practices that were followed by these two Brahminic communities were also different. The Malayali Brahmins followed the system of leasing out their lands to the Nair castes for tilling the land. The Nair caste will either till the land for themselves or till using labourers of the lower untouchable castes. This system was followed in Panachirra

Kalari and Panavayal which belonged to the Malayali Brahmins. In areas which belonged to the Tulu Brahmins, the Brahmins either tilled themselves or leased it to the Nair castes who will till the land for the Brahmins without employing labourers of the untouchable class.

The Tulu Brahmins practiced untouchability to a greater extent than Malayali Brahmins. A popular myth which depicts the untouchable practices followed by the Tulu Brahmins is as follows: A Tulu Brahmin was on his way through a paddy field near the Kallanthatt Kalari when he saw a woman working alone in a paddy field after the harvest. The Brahmin recognized the woman as a member of the Pulaya community and asked her to move from his way. The woman not only refused to move, she went back to her work ignoring the Brahmin. Enraged, the Brahmin threw a stone at her. But the woman broke the stone which was coming directly at her. The woman was in reality Kallanthatt Bhagavathi and it is said Kallanthatt Kalari today is the place where the stone broken by the Bhagavathi fell.

The conflict between Tulu Brahmins and Malayali Brahmins can be interpreted with the following myth. Kallanthatt Gurukkal and Panachirra Gurukkal of Kallanthatt Kalari and Panachirra Kalari were both envious of each other and frequently competed with each other to prove who is better than the other. Both of them were skilled Martial artists and magicians. Panachirra Gurukkal resorted to magic and insulted Kallanthatt Gurukkal, who follows a strict vegetarian diet, by transforming his food into meat and fish. Kallanthatt Gurukkal knew that Panachirra Gurukkal was behind this trick. Later, Kallanthatt Gurukkal performed his magic and transformed the food of Panachirra Gurukkal into faecal matter and urine. With this, both resorted to a peace treaty. In the peace treaty, both of them sat opposite to each other on either side of a plantain leaf and poured water along its stem. They then ate food in this single plantain leaf and secured peace between them.

A close analysis of this myth reveals the relationship between the geographical history of the region and the myth that are interlinked with each other. Both the Panachirra Kalari and Kallanthatt Kalari are divided by a man made canal which was built during a particular time in history. The real reason why this canal was built is still a mystery.

With the advent of the Tulu Brahmins, the lower castes suffered as they were isolated from paddy fields owned by Tulu Brahmins and the Nairs who were in charge of tilling the fields of Panachirra and Panavayal refused to take agricultural labourers who traditionally helped in tilling the fields of Kallanthatt before the arrival of Tulu Brahmins. The Nair caste, despite being of lower status, despised the lower castes and strictly followed the practice of untouchability to a greater extent than the Brahmins so as to attain respect from the higher castes. Many of the Theyyam myths portray martyred people of the lower castes who opposed the conventions of caste system and got killed as a result. In most myths, the Nair caste is seen as the caste which oppresses the lower castes to a greater extent than the Brahmin and Kshatriya castes.

The most important myth regarding Theyyam is the myth of Manakkadan Gurukkal. Manakkadan Gurukkal of Karivellur was a great scholar, Ayurvedic practitioner and magician during the reign of Chirakkal raja. The king decided to test Manakkadan Gurukkal and invited him to his palace. Gurukkal started his journey to the palace and on his way he had to cross the Valapattanam River. But when Gurukkal reached the river,

there were no boats in the region as the Chirakkal raja cleared the area of boats so as to purposefully block Gurukkal's journey. The Gurukkal knew that the king was trying to test him and using his hat, he crossed the river by rowing with his hands. When Gurukkal reached the palace, the king ordered the palace main door to close. Gurukkal using his magical powers forced the doors open and entered the palace. When the king saw Gurukkal, he was impressed and welcomed Gurukkal to have lunch with him. When Gurukkal entered the dining room, he saw that everyone seated for lunch belonged to the higher castes. According to tradition, after having lunch in a Plantain leaf, the lower caste people should fold their leaf and dispose it themselves whereas members of upper caste can leave their leaf to be picked by members of the lower caste. Manakkadan Gurukkal belonged to the Vannan community which is a lower caste and knew that he was going to be insulted. Before lunch, he went outside to pick leaves of ash Gourd which are edible and ate his food along with the leaves. The Chirakkal raja was extremely pleased with Gurukkal and decided to test him one more time. The king asked Manakkadan Gurukkal to perform all the Theyyams in a single night. During the night, Manakkadan Gurukkal performed all the Theyyams and the King respected him by conferring the title of "Gurukkal". The performance, face painting, costumes and Thottams of the 39 different Theyyams were prescribed by Manakkadan Gurukkal. In these various myths, we can see that though the conventions of caste system were followed strictly and untouchability practiced extensively, every caste took superstition and the existence of ferocious spirits seriously. The untouchable castes found their voice in such vengeful spirits and during the performance of Theyyam.

Complexities of the Caste system and its Influence during the Colonial period

Theyyams tell about the history of Malabar and more importantly the socio cultural activities of man during the course of history. Theyyams such as Iyepalliteyyam, Kathuvanur Veeran, Muchilot Bhagavathi, Pottan Theyyam, Makka Pothi, Vishnumurthi, Kurikkal Theyyam etc. portray the tensions between various communities. According to M.P Damodaran in his "The Malayan of North Malabar and their Teyyam":

"All the performers are akin to the members of the Scheduled Castes, the so-called 'untouchables' such as, Malayan, Vannan, Velan, Pulayan, Anjutan, Munnutan, Mavilan, Chingathan, Kopalan, and Karimpalan. Among these, the Malayan, and the Vannan are not only the two principle castes, but also they are the chief performers of teyyam." (Damodaran, 45)

Each of the untouchable castes mentioned above perform their respective Theyyams and are not allowed to perform Theyyams other than that. Among all the untouchable castes, the Malayan community enjoys greater privilege and freedom of performing various Theyyams. The myths of various Theyyams have references to real life actions and incidents. Analysing these myths will give an understanding of the intra and inter social interaction of man and also of the way of life. The caste conflict depicted in a majority of the Theyyams was not limited at the social level.

The Malabar region witnessed conflicts between man and man and also between man and nature. The influence of the Hindu Varna system created a highly stratified society and every community lives in cultural isolation from the other communities. M.P Damodaran also points out the stratification of the society in a very explicit manner:

“Due to the concept of ‘purity and pollution’, each stratum of the society is more or less remain isolated or separated from others. Thus, the social hierarchy... provides special privileges to certain groups. Those who are at the bottom in the social hierarchy, become the target for brutal harassment and ill treatment by the superiors, who entertain them as ‘animal-like’ creatures, and let them to experience agonies and pains silently due to some socio-cultural reasons such as, poverty, ignorance, concept of purity and pollution, and poor organization...the victims of such evils, the heroic ancestors, who fought bravely against social evils, were later converted into gods, teyyams. Further, certain teyyams themselves stand opposing social discriminations” (Damodaran, 2005).

For Example, in the myth of Pottan Theyyam, Sankaracharya, a mystical Brahmin scholar got into a verbal conflict of wits with a Pulaya who was actually Lord Siva. The Pulaya then cut his flesh to show that his blood is the same as Sankaracharya’s and that all men are equal. Pottan Theyyam addresses the complexities of the caste system in a very objective manner. The Theyyam would either sit or stand and talk to people about the futility of the caste system. The Theyyam resists the notion of caste and exhorts people both of the upper and lower castes to think in a more rational way.

As mentioned before, in a majority of the Theyyams, the deities personified are in reality victims of caste oppression. For example, consider the myth in which a Thiyya boy was murdered by a member of the Nair caste. When the Nair individual returned to his house, he saw that all his cattle had died under mysterious circumstances and his family members inflicted with some strange disease. Upon close analysis, we can see that this myth is only partially twisted. The collective guilt consciousness of the society is a major factor responsible for elevating the status of the victim into a Theyyam deity. Misfortunes can happen to anyone at any point of time but the society has a tendency to relate misfortunes to sins committed in the past.

Theyyam during the Colonial period

During the colonial period, Theyyam faced criticism from both foreign and native. Theyyam were considered as a barbaric ritual filled with superstition. It faced criticism from the English East India Company and there was also a ban on Theyyam which was only partially observed. This ban was removed in the 1900s due to various reasons. The colonial administrators and other officials of the British empire in India condemned Theyyam. According to a colonial missionary Henricks William Wiser:

“Thirayattam or Theyyam is a cult found in North Malabar. In English this can be called Devil Dance. [...] Thirayattam is destructive and is worth to be destroyed. The rowdyisms, inhuman and barbarous behaviours and immoral actions that are in and near the kaavus [shrines] and which are prevalent

at the time of these festivals are innumerable and beyond description. When we understand that animal sacrifices, immorality and drunkenness are indispensable that elements in this cult, this should not be suffered to continue even for a moment” (Wiser, 27-28).

From this we can see that the colonizers view Theyyam as an art form that is corrupt, outdated, evil and inhuman ritual which included sacrifices that are barbaric. In the 19th century, the British imposed a ban on Theyyam, but it was removed in the early 20th century.

In a Theyyam performance, every caste in the society plays a major role in organizing it. Thus Theyyam is a cultural performance in which all castes of the society participate and is associated with the collective cultural identity of the entire society. In the mid 19th century, the British Royal Army in India introduced the Enfield rifles that were greased with the fat of pig and cows. The army consisted mostly of Indian Sepoys of Hindu and Muslim religions. Eating cow’s meat is a taboo for the Hindus and the cow is a symbol of awe and respect for them. For the Muslims, eating the meat of pig is Haram (An Arabic term meaning forbidden) for them. This enraged the whole of the Indian society and resulted in the First War of Indian Independence which united all sections of the society against the British. The war resulted in sever casualties on both sides and heavy loss to the British. The British were almost ousted from India. The Colonizers then learnt the danger of questioning the cultural elements that unite the society as a whole. In *Political Economy of the Theyyam: A study of the time space homology*, Rajesh Komath pointed out that:

“The missionaries who arrived with their proselytizing zeal during the colonial times relied on the same argument to wean away the people of north Kerala from such practices. In places like Kuthuparamba, Thalassery and Panoor, they went from house-to-house convincing the locals about the inhumaneness and the retrograde character of Theyyam and snake worship”. (Komath, 165).

The ban on Theyyam, a performance collectively owned by the society, had the potential to instill the essence of rebellion in the minds of the natives. But even when the ban was removed, many British officials still condemned the cult. According to a British official Fred Fawcett, who was the Superintendent of Government Railway Police, Madras and Local correspondent of the Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland:

“The poor old man who represented this fearful being, grotesquely terrible in his wonderful metamorphosis, must have been extremely glad when his three minutes” dance, preparation for which occupied all the afternoon, was concluded, for the mere weight and uncomfortable arrangement of his paraphernalia must have been extremely exhausting” (Fawcett, 1901).

The colonizers thought of Theyyam as a performance as essentially devil dance and worship of evil spirits. In some Theyyams, there are rituals that appear terrifying and barbaric to the civilized mind. For example, in Chamar Theyyam, a Theyyam that is not so popular involves eating of live animals after the performance. This Theyyam is an unnecessary practice but broadly generalizing all the Theyyams under the same

category is unfair and discriminatory. A majority of the Theyyams are performed in order to maintain a cultural identity.

Sree Narayana Guru, was a social reformer who tried to uplift the lower castes through cultural reformation. He played an important role in Kerala renaissance and also in the upliftment of the Ezhava community. Sree Narayana Guru vehemently opposed most of the Theyyams in Northern Kerala which involved animal sacrifice and led a movement which exhorted the lower castes to stop worshipping evil deities and consumption of toddy. However the impact of this movement was partial and failed to gather popularity in Northern Kerala, but it had its impact on the renaissance and cultural reformation of the whole of Kerala which was in turn instrumental in affecting a change in the performance of Theyyam.

In *Political Economy of the Theyyam: A study of the time space homology*, Rajesh Komath argues about the influence of the Marxist ideology on Theyyam:

“When Marxist ideology struck roots and took shape as a movement it Managed to bridge the gap that was surfacing within the communities because the local communities were drawn to the ideas of the communist movement ... In the final reckoning, to forge social progress and achieve an egalitarian society to obliterate the community-caste centred disparity, the party that directed its energies to boost the working classes had to reject the Theyyam ... Such an ideological viewpoint mocked Theyyam and what it represented... The Theyyam performing castes belong to the lowest rung in the social ladder, so also the Thiyyas who believe in Theyyam and sorcery. The fears of the Communists hinged on the fact that the Thiyyas were a dominant caste in north Kerala and it would not be a very politically wise approach to treat Theyyam with contempt” (Komath, 166).

The left wing communist party also criticized Theyyam only to a certain limit. The communists believed Theyyam to be a form of caste oppression. But they never persisted strongly in their arguments because the communist ideology believed in the upliftment of the lower castes and their party was supported by the lower castes. But in the 1940s and 50s, the left wing parties considered Theyyam as a form of resistance and more importantly as a political weapon. Such perception helped Theyyam lose its historical context in the following decades and the ritualistic dimension of the Theyyam transformed into an artistic dimension.

Theyyam in the Contemporary era

In post-independent India Theyyam continued to be considered as an evil cult by a majority of people in Kerala till the late 20th century. This can be attributed to the colonial legacy. The missionaries who established their trade during the 17th century introduced modern education in the state and this type of education is followed in India even today. In the early 20th century, the educated new generation of the lower castes obtained jobs in the colonial administration. Bible studies were part of the educational system and it propagated that Theyyam is an outdated, uncivilized ritual practice.

According to the studies conducted by K.K.N Kurup, at one side, the Thiyya community had well educated, intellectually capable individuals among them, but on the other side, they

faced the complexities of the caste based discrimination prevalent in the society. The government officials of the Thiyya caste tried for a social reform of their caste. Thiyyas offered toddy and blood as offering during a Theyyam performance. These educated individuals wanted to reform this situation and their efforts helped in creating a mindset that was against the Brahminicized Hindu religion.

In the 1960s and 70s, Theyyam Kolams were introduced as part of left wing rallies. In the 1980s, Theyyam was first performed outside the Kaavu on a stage as part of entertainment in a left wing organized meeting. In 1968, Theyyam Kolams appeared during a stage show organized by the Kerla Sangeetha Nataka Academy. The academy organized the first seminar on Theyyam in 1977 and published the first books on Theyyam in 1978. In the 1990s, Theyyams started to appear as part of temple festivals across the state. The left wing parties aimed to separate Theyyam from its caste context.

The following is an excerpt by a foreigner Philip Sarilly who witnessed a Theyyam Kalam as part of a May Day rally organized by the left wing CPI (M) in 1981:

“... (May Day Rally) featured Theyyam dancing after speeches were made against capitalism, corruption, and suppression. The plan to show Theyyam dancing was a conscious, well thought out attempt to strip the ritual of its efficacy by demonstrating that it could be performed out of the context without rituals, priests or offering. The Communist party hope to show, contrary to the villager's belief, that there would be no anger from the god, no consequences, Theyyam could be performed for fun. At the end of the dance instead of calling important high caste members from the audience to come up and receive blessings, as a deity would do in the ritual context, he called local communist party members over the microphone (...) The organizers of the rally told me they would like to see Theyyam performed as an art form as something enjoyable to watch detached from any kind of belief system. In their view, poverty, the continuing presence of a caste system, and the manipulation of the masses by an upper cast elite, is intimately bound with the performance of and belief in rituals, which keep the proletariat passive and dependent on a force outside themselves” (Philip, 200).

The notions of caste and untouchability wore off during the late 20th century. This was mainly due to the high literacy level in Kerala. In the 1990s, Kerala was the only state in India with a literacy rate above 90%. The lower castes prospered more in the state and the hegemony exercised by Brahmins started to disappear. The opportunity of gaining education and jobs helped the lower castes to become aware of their rights. Theyyam during the recent times evolved as an academic discipline. It is now considered as an indispensable cultural art form that is associated with the cultural identity of the state. It started to appear in youth festivals and also started to feature in the National Games as part of Keralite culture.

In the 21st century, Globalization caused Theyyam to be commercialized. Both the government and corporate companies see Theyyam as a commercial product rather than has immense potential for contributing to the development of the tourism industry. According to Sree Harinayar in his *“Theyyam Charisma”* portrayed the plight of Theyyam in the present age:

“The glorious art form (Theyyam) has to be received to boost the tourism potential of Malabar, particularly North Kerala, which is the womb of several cultural traditions, including the ancient Dravidian Civilization. This will also help in the growth of the tourism industry in Kerala and thus give a big boost to the economy as a whole” (Harinayar, 2005) [10].

Such arguments as above shows how Theyyam is treated today. The Government sees it as a commercial product that produces more profit for the state by putting less investment. But not to cast a dark shadow on commercialization, the art form has reached the global stage and is identified with the rich heritage of Kerala. The Government is now funding and promoting Theyyam performances and they had already established two schools for teaching the art of Theyyam. In the colonial period, Theyyam was seen as “Devil Dance” and an obstacle in the path of development. But in the recent times, it is perceived as an art form that has the potential to bring in development in the state.

Conclusion

The paper has analysed the various aspects of Theyyam by tracing its history and more importantly the historical significance of the socio cultural aspects of the art form. Theyyam deities are people who are victims of upper caste oppression and because of the collective guilt consciousness of the society they are deified into a Theyyam god. An analysis of the costumes will reveal that the colour red is more prominent than other colours and the red stands for rebellious anger. The costumes are made to be huge and marvellous in appearance so as to help the performer attain the transformation state of divine. A majority of the Theyyams advocates for a rationalistic interpretation of the varna system. Tales of caste oppression can be found in the Thottam songs of the Theyyam.

Theyyam, is the only one art form where the boundaries of the caste system disappears for at least a few moments. The higher castes stand in devotion and respect for a Theyyam deity once the performer reaches his zenith. Though the high caste may regard other non-performers as untouchables, they show respect towards the performer during his performance. The transformation of the performer occurs when he looks at himself through a mirror and identifies himself as god.

The caste oppression that the lower castes faced can be traced through an analysis of the various myths that are associated with Theyyam. The history of Kolathunad is inextricably linked to the myths and the events that occurred in its history have influenced Theyyam to a great extent. It was during this time that a major reform took place in the matters regarding Theyyam performance. In some Theyyam myths such as Maari Theyyam, the Aryan deities play an evil role. They are always seen to cause chaos in the land. These Aryan deities might be associated with the Brahmins because most of the Brahmins came from North India and the process of Aryanization of India was completed during the 5th century BC.

In the colonial period, the missionaries treated Theyyam as “Devil Dance” and prohibited the worshipping of evil deities and the practice of Black Magic. The missionaries were only successful in converting a few low caste people in North Kerala and introduced modern education. The movement of social reform led by Sree Narayana Guru also condemned the practice of Theyyam and called it an outdated ritual that should be abolished because of the presence of animal sacrifice and

consumption of toddy. The Marxist ideology also took off in similar lines but refrained from criticizing it mainly because of political consequences.

The members of the lower castes had the opportunity to gain western education and a few of them secured government jobs. This group aimed for a reformation of their caste and also the Theyyam ritual. They were successful in bringing about an end to the barbaric acts that were prevalent in Theyyam performances.

The left wing parties then used Theyyam as a way of achieving an egalitarian society in Kerala. Theyyam rose to prominence in the 1960s and its fame reached the global market in the late 20th century. The notions of caste and untouchability wore off during the 1990s because of the high levels of literacy and Theyyam began to be recognized as part of Kerala’s cultural identity. Many seminars were conducted to study Theyyam and books were published in order to give the public an awareness about Theyyam.

From the 21st century onwards, globalization has caused Theyyam to be recognized as a commercial product. The government gave incentives for reviving Theyyam so as to make it an added attraction for the tourism industry. When Brahminical hegemony on Theyyam is analysed, many movements of socio historical significance have affected it. Before colonization, Brahminical hegemony was exercised to a great extent. Western education had its influence in bringing an end to untouchability and notions of caste. But social reform wouldn’t have been possible if it was not for the native social reform movements. The role of Brahminic hegemony has diminished and Theyyam has now shed off its notions of caste and has transformed from a ritual into an art form.

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