

THEYYAM: THE DESPISED AND OPPRESSED GODS

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PREFACE

Kerala is a land of arts and festivals. The art forms of Kerala reflect the customs and traditions that are indigenous to Kerala. State is notable for its different types of performing arts. Some of the popular art forms in Kerala are Kathakali, Chavittunadakam, Krishnanattam, Kakkarithinattakam, Koodiyattam, Thullal etc. Theyyam is one among them. Theyyam is a ceremonial dance which is joined by the team of instruments and vocals.

This project aims to study theyyam and the problems faced by the performers of this community.

This dissertation entitled Theyyam: The Despised and Oppressed Gods consists of three chapters. The introductory chapter deals with origin of theyyam, its evolution, and different types of theyyams. And the second chapter discusses the problems faced by the Theyyam performers and how it affects the social life of performers. The concluding chapter summarizes the whole aspects on Theyyam and the performers.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Kerala is famous for folklore which includes the elements from traditional lifestyle. Kerala has a rich tradition of folklore. Folklore in this region is an unforced expression of human behavior and thoughts. Folklore can be defined as the myth of common people who had been marginalized during the rule of feudal kings. Kerala's folk art is fully based on agriculture. The folk art of Kerala is broadly divided into two ritualistic and non-ritualistic arts. The ritualistic folk art can be further divided into devotional and magical folk art. The devotional folk art is performed to pacify certain gods and goddesses. Theyyattam is considered as a devotional folk art.

Theyyam is a ritual dance mainly performed in Kerala and Karnataka, India. It consists of traditional customs and rituals. It originated from the ancient art form known as kaliyattam (meaning dance of goddess Kali). The word theyyam or theyyattam is derived from dhaivam (god) and attam (dance), which means the dance of god. People consider it as a channel to a God and seek blessings from it. It is believed that Parashuram the sixth incarnation of Lord Vishnu is the god of theyyam.

People believe that theyyam is the dance of god, where they worship god, goddess, warriors, local spirits, tribal deities and even the Muslim character. The people who dress up as theyyam are called theyyam kolam and the dance performed by them is Theyyattam. Northern Malabar region, currently the Kasaragod, Kannur are the places where Theyyam is performed. Kolathunadu is the ancient name which is given to Kannur and Kasargod. Kannur district is known as the 'land of theyyam' as the majority of theyyam kolam are performed here.

It is performed more in the rural areas, as the presence of shrines and kavu. Kavu is a traditional name given to sacred groves, which is protected by the local communities, which is dedicated to local deities. Muchilot Bhagavathi, Puli Muthappan kavu, Sree Maavila kavu , Mallom Kollom temple, these are some popular temples where we can see these performances. Mallom Kollom temple in Kasaragod, is very famous for the Muslim theyyam where the hindu artists dress up as the Muslim character and reads the Quran and performs the Muslim traditional rituals. Ali Chamundi, Mokri Poker, Kallandhe Mokri and Bapuram, these are the some Muslim characters in the list.

There are evidence to prove that the traits of theyyam have originated from the Neolithic and Catholic age . This art is representative of Hinduism practiced by the tribal communities from an early age . Though Theyyam is a Dravidian artform it is sponsored by members of the upper class and ruling class families,the Nair tharavadu. The performers of theyyam belong to the indigenous tribal community which have an important position in theyyam. Malayar,panan Vannan and velan are the people belonging to the tribal communities.

Theyyam is performed on the basis of many customs. At first the performer is given an announcement and then the date of execution is fixed and the performer is informed. The Vellattam or thottam is the initial part of the performance. The performer together with his assistant performs the thottam in a light way without detailed customs and the Kolakkaran describes the origin and elements of other Theyyams . Chenda , Veekan chenda, Ilathalam and Kuzhal are the main instruments used in the thottam or thottam pattu . In order to perform the Vellattam the artist's face was painted and he had to fix a bunch of hair in his head. A majority of Theyyam possess Vellattam. Instead of Vellattam there is a process of receiving Podiyil . These all Vellattam and thottam are

taking place in the back stage. After finishing these rituals they appear on the stage with facial makeup of different patterns. The facial makeup is collected from nature, they are Karimashi , Aripodi and Manila . The ornaments and costumes vary according to each theyyam.

Tandava and lasya are the two styles of Theyyam dance. Thandavam is the dance played by masculine (lord Shiva) and lasya is by feminine (goddess parvathi). The dancers show different kinds of graceful movements. Theyyam performance begins at dawn which lasts for three days. At first they recite a thottam song which helps them to kick start the dance performance. During this time pooja takes place. Aftermath the ilakolam arrives by reciting the chants varavilli . And then the deity appears to perform the dance. After finishing the Theyyam dance, the kuri is made up of turmeric and rice powder for the devotees and blesses them. The kuri made up of turmeric and rice powder is believed to have some medical powers which help to cure diseases and then in return the devotees give the Theyyam money and later the Theyyam removes the crown in front of the shrine.

There are about 456 different Theyyams. Majority of Theyyams are performed by the male artists . Devakoothu theyyam is the only Theyyam which is performed by female artists. Among the 456 types of Theyyams there are 112 Theyyams which are very famous .

Some of them are:

(1)Vishnu moorthi theyyam: Vishnu moorthi theyyam is popularly known as the vaishnava theyyam.This theyyam mainly includes the complicated rituals and performance.Even the drumbeats can be heard from very far distance. Here the theyyam narrates the story of Palathai kannan one of the great devotee of lord Vishnu.And this

theyyam also narrates the story of Narasimha avatharam the sixth incarnation of lord Vishnu.

(2) Sree Muthappan theyyam : Sree muthappan temple is comprised of two devine figures the Thiiruvappana or Valiya muthappan and the Cheriya muthappan .The valya muthappan is lord Vishnu and cheriya muthappan is lord Shiva.Each kolam tells their own stories Parassinikadavu muthappan temple is a famous temple of muthappan. Thiyya community performs the rituals Muthappan theyyam is annually performed.

(3) Gulikan theyyam: Gulikan theyyam represents the god 'Yaman'the Hindu god of death. Gulikan is believed to be the powerful warrior of lord Shiva The dance performed by gulikan is a complicated and fascinating one .In hindu mythology it is believed that everyone in this world is afraid of gulikan . The famous gulikan kavu is located in Nileschwaram.

(4) Padikutti Amma:It is believed that Padikutti Amma is the mother of Sree Muthapan. She got the status of a god when her son muthappan became a god Palarath temple near the parassinikadavu temple is the famous temple of Padikutti Amma. This theyyam is performed during the Malayalam month of meenam

(5) Kuttichathan theyyam: Kuttichathan is a broadly famous theyyam all around Kerala This theyyam is performed by the people who belong to the Brahmin community. The three prominent characters in Kuttichathan theyyam are Karim Kuttichathan, Poo Kuttichathan,Thee Kuttichathan. It is believed that Kuttichathan will fulfill the dreams of devotees if they make the chathan happy.

(6) Padamadakki Bhagavathi: This is performed in Koroath temple.

(7) Kathivanoor Veeran:This theyyam is played in the remembrance of Mandhappan , the great warrior.

(8) Manakkott Amma :She is a Nair woman who strongly opposed the caste system during her period. And she was killed as she rejected the caste rules .

(9) Chamundi Theyyam: There are three types of chamundi theyyam which are Madayil Chamundi, Rakta Chamundi, Kundora Chamundi. These are some of the Theyyam performed in Northern part of Kerala.

The people still believe in this art and its godly powers, which is the main reason why it exists in the community. In the midst of Theyyam the performer does many different kinds of dangerous activities like climbing the trees, jumping into water, playing with fire and even they walk through fire . While performing they do not feel any kind of pains or burns which is the reason why people believe they possess supernatural powers. This is one of the main reasons why people still believe in Theyyam. This project aims to discuss the problems faced by the theyyam performers and also how it affects social life.

CHAPTER TWO

PROBLEMS FACED BY THEYYAM PERFORMERS

Kerala has a rich heritage of artforms . The state seems to be a heaven for those who love dance, drama , music and festivals. All the artforms that are celebrated in Kerala are unique in nature to their own and create a wonder among the spectators. These artforms evoke a variety of emotions ranging from passion, love , kindness, compassion to joy, sorrow, grief and from anger, wonder, horror to fear, value , courage etc .Along with this , all these artforms have an impact on the social and cultural life of the state.

'Theyyam' can be broken down to mean 'dance of God' and etymologically speaking, it could come from 'daivam' meaning 'God' in Malayalam and 'attam' meaning 'dance' . During the initial days,theyyam festival was celebrated in sacred groves and in the households of upper caste people or known as tharavadu . This art form became popular in the northern Malabar region and it is celebrated from the month of October. This folk practice brings under its wide canvas , the various aspects of tribals and primitive religion. Mother Goddess (Bhagavathi) is the chiefly worshiped deity, who has different forms, along with ghosts and spirits.

Theyyam gained its significance as a prominent art form in Kerala because of the ideology it tries to propagate. It is an artform which raises voices against the oppressed class in our society. The people who belong to the lower caste and communities are assigned to perform Theyyam. People from the communities of Vannan, Velan , Malayan and Peruvannann are the chief performers of this dance. The treatment of caste in theyyam makes it central to Kerala's socio-cultural ethos.

The people who belong to the theyyam performing community were treated as untouchables by the upper caste people, while the untouchability was prevalent in the society. On the contrary, while performing the theyyam, they are treated like God's,

even people belonging to the upper caste were bestowed to bow their heads before them. This is an extraordinary situation, for the people belonging to the lower class. Though momentary, these occur as a subversion of the caste system. This gives more social relevance to Theyyam as an artform. The folk songs attached to Theyyam are also very much entrenched in the dream of a society without caste barriers.

For instance the Pottan Theyyam, reversed by the Pulaya community, makes a pertinent and profound point during a performance.

"Ningal murinjalum onnalle chora,

Njangal murinjalum onnalle chora"

[When you bleed, the blood is the same,

When we bleed, the blood is the same].

(Indian Express)

Thus Theyyam is treated as a cultural war cry against the notions of caste hierarchies that were deep rooted in Kerala's culture. This artform raises questions on the barriers that existed between the lower and higher castes in Kerala.

Caste is highly prevalent in the myth and practices of Theyyam. Each theyyam performance one can see a mythical story. For instance, "Aypelli Theyyam" is one of the famous theyyam which depicts the story of a dalit boy who is short dead for not giving way to the local cheiftain. The story of a childless Thiyya woman who was murdered by the higher castes for reading religious texts is the story of "Thottankara Bhagavathi". These stories are examples which indicate people belonging to dalit breaking caste norms or barriers, while breaking such norms was considered punishable by the society. This is how Theyyam paved the way to present the oppression of lower

castes and communities in an artistic manner. Thus Theyyam as an artform has a huge impact on overthrowing the caste system present in the society.

Theyyam helped a lot to eradicate caste oppression from the society. But the question of anti-caste in the enactment of Theyyam is still relevant. One cannot say that this artform is anti-caste, because the artform itself is based on caste hierarchies. Apart from these it is mostly treated as ritual performance in Hindu kavus and temples. Therefore it can be stated that caste is still evidently present in this artform.

According to the words of Rajesh Komath an Associate Professor at the School of Social Sciences at the Mahatma Gandhi University Kottayam, "when the theyyam performance is over the artist is shown his place and relegated to the lowest rungs of the caste hierarchy quite visibly, reflected in the financial remuneration he receives and the attitude shown towards him by temple authorities and festivals organizers even today" . (Caravan, a journal of politics and culture)Komath who has also performed Theyyam in the past and belongs to the Malayan community, has remarked in his doctoral thesis that Theyyam communities were behind other castes in the region in terms of upward mobility across social hierarchies . This throw light into the fact that the artform is not free from the clutches of caste discrimination and caste based aggressions.

Theyyam-a folk art which expresses the injustice and oppression faced by the lower caste people is now being appropriated into the Brahmanical system, it seems ironic .The ritual performed in Theyyam is the only one which subverts the caste hierarchies present in the era of untouchability. The cruelty and exploitation suffered by the downtrodden is spoken in most of the myths of Theyyam.

The concept of 'Brahmanisation' or 'Sanskritisation' came out of the political agenda of religious facism has interpolated itself into the myths and rites associated with Theyyam. This can cause a major impact on this artform.

Theyyam is an artform which provides voices to the lower caste people or those who face discrimination. The social and political consciousness of the lower caste people who suffered evils of the caste system is the message this art form tried to provide. The advent of 'Brahmanisation' and 'sanskritisation' led to the dissolution of the message that it tried to convey. This resulted in the diminishing of the relevance of theyyam as an artform.

Another problem related to this attempt is that those who perform the rituals fail to understand how the nuances in the modification of myths establish the superiority of Brahmins Gods. By projecting the higher mythology above lower mythologies, they try to make the whole cult being appropriated in the Tantric system. Nowadays, most of 'kavus' are converting into temples and practicing daily offering of prayers. This inturn increased the importance of Brahmin priests in worship centers of lower castes. Thus the lower communities have lost their prominence in the kavus' this inturn affected the art form.

The approach of temple authorities and upper castes towards the theyyam performers after the performance is quite the opposite of while they perform the theyyam. According to the theyyam performers, once the performance was over, the artist was shown his place and relegated to the lowest rungs of the caste hierarchy quite visibly. The discrimination is not only evident in their approaches but also present in the payment of wages too.

The present era which is defined as modern, sees theyyam as a caste occupation rather than an artform. The social life of theyyam performers is still marked by caste and untouchability. Though considered as a caste occupation, the performance is also seen as a custom or ritual with feudal overtones. This kind of notion develops in the mind of the public that those who perform the theyyam are obliged to the performance because they owe to it. This attitude of public affects the social life of performers because in reality these artists had to undertake huge financial, physical and mental costs which are often forgotten. Furthermore, they are subjected to violations and microaggressions on a daily basis.

One cannot think that these kind of discrimination existed only in the past because there are several incidents that shows the existence of discrimination towards theyyam performers. For instance one of the theyyam performers was humiliated in a cultural function that intended to honor him as recently as April 2021 in kunhimangalam village, in Kannur district. In that ceremony a Brahmin priest was supposed to present the honorary shawl and cover the artist with it, but he refused to do so and instead he just handed over the shawl to him without touching. This incident is a clear example of caste and social discrimination faced by the theyyam performers. The society on the eradication of caste discrimination, it holds and conducts several narrow minded practices.

This single incident addresses the humiliation faced by the theyyam performers in the present society .It is to be noted is that the issue died down immediately after making some initial furore in social media and neither a formal complaint was registered .The most important aspect of this issue is that it was easily covered up and was normalized. Neither the public nor the authorities has undertaken

any measures to bring justice to the humiliated artist. This shows the lack of support for the theyyam performers from part of the society.

The sacred groves or 'kavus' play an important role in Theyyam. The sacred groves hold religious importance to a large extent. The deities from their sacred groves are summoned to the performing man's body is the local belief behind the practice of Theyyam. These 'kavu's were protected for over centuries because of practice of theyyam. The advent of modernity and urbanization have resulted in the shifting of the presiding deities to temples . Because of the disappearance of sacred groves there occurred loss of biodiversity, rare medical plants and improved microclimate. The practice of theyyam is also facing a threat due to the disappearance of sacred groves, which led the artist to a vulnerable situation.

Theyyam is believed to be possessed by gods. During the performance of Theyyam, the artist is considered as a living god. It is believed that during the time of performance these artists possess some extraordinary powers and healing powers. Thus people approach him and tell their miseries to them as a practice of prayer and seek blessing from them. At that time everyone touches them irrespective of their caste. Even though they were considered as 'living gods ' they are not allowed to get into the temple 'sanctum sanctorum'. The reason behind is their castes because rights to get inside temple 'sanctum sanctorum' are only allowed to people belonging to the Brahmin community.

One of the major reasons that holds back the theyyam performers from protesting against injustice on the bases of their caste is the fear of being outcast from performance. Many oral tales can be found in the history of North Malabar region in Kerala about the theyyam performers being outcast or banned from performances. The

threat becomes more visible when performers raise any argument over their financial remuneration. The authorities who conduct theyyam use this threat as a measure for giving them low wages and to resist those artists who raise their voice against the injustice faced by them in financial and other matters.

Another important aspect regarding the discrimination towards theyyam is that the discrimination exist within the performing communities. For instance , while the theyyam belonging to the Nalkadya, Mavilan, Velan communities are supposed to perform outside the temple's courtyard at a certain distance from the temple, the theyyam from Vannan and Malayan communities has the privilege to perform right in front of the temple's courtyard. More interesting fact is that one cannot find any literal basis for this distance and discrimination in myths or anywhere else. This discrimination has been prevailing for a long time but still remains unquestioned.

While discussing about the discrimination faced by theyyam over the place of performance, it is important to mention the plight of Maari theyyam. The Mari theyyam was not supposed to perform in Madayi kavu, a famous temple in Kannur while all other theyyams were performed in the courtyard of Madayi kavu. The myth behind the Mari theyyam was that Mari and Mamaaya came from 'Arya Nadu' which means North India. These two Evil Gods secretly got into the wooden ship of the Goddess who traveled from the Aryan region to North Kerala. At valapattanam in Kannur both Maari and Mayaama got down and spread calamity in the region. Because of the unprecedented situation, the rituals in the temple also got postponed. In order to find a solution, an astrologer was brought to Madayi kavu. He observed the zodiac sign and found out that the village was conquered by both Maari and Mamaaya. To solve the issue they brought a traditional magician Polla, a pulaya youth to do the rituals the date and time was given to him to perform the rituals. In order to remove the evil Gods he

was asked to worship and perform rituals after the noon on the 16th day of the karkidaka month. In the consecutive days he performed it, the same theyyam wandered every node and corner of the village and removed the evil Gods. At the end of the ritual the Maari theyyam was sent in the waters of the river. According to the performers of Maari theyyam the right to perform inside the temple courtyard was denied not due to any untouchabilities. Besides, the temple authorities decided a fixed place for each and every theyyam long back. So they have got a place which is somewhat far away from Madayi kavu temple. It became a long tradition so the performers themselves were conditioned that they have no right to change the ritual.

There are possibilities to change the discrimination towards Mari theyyam in order to do that one has to raise the voices but majority of folk remain passive. The case of discrimination towards Mari theyyam is contradictory on the account of the temple entry proclamation by the devotee Madaayi kavu Bhagavathi by late Sree Chithira Thirunaal Maharajan. The performers of theyyam have commented that beginning of caste discrimination would trace back to the time of immemorial.

In the Nalkathaya community, one enters 'theyyattam' at the age of five or six by performing Karkidaka theyyam 'Galinjan'. The story behind 'Galinjan' is that Lord Arjuna was on penance for arrows, during this time Lord Shiva and Parvati disguised themselves as hunters to test Arjuna. The Theyyam Galinjan represents Lord Arjuna. Lord Shiva as "Vedan" and Shri parvati as 'Aadi' is represented by the performers from Malaya and Vanniya communities respectively.

In order to perform Karkidaka Theyyam, Theyyam artists from respective areas gather together. During the performance, the theyyams representing "Aadi" and "Vedan" perform from the temple yard and Galinjan perform from outside the temple.

These discriminations are strictly practiced in temples and ancestral homes, rather than in houses. In these type of occasions, the child performer witness raw form of caste discrimination. Thus, from such a tender age the child gets subjected to caste discrimination and inequality from societies

The present kerala society exhibits double standards in the treatment of theyyam performers .Respect and reverence received by them is too low when compared with the other artists in the performance field .This is highly evident in the way theyyam performers are treated by the organizers. They even deprive from the basic amenities an artist had been given .For example, theyyam artists are not provided with proper dressing rooms. In most cases , the assigned rooms is covered with palm fronds that leak when it rains. When someone questions the organizers, they refuses this blatantly and argue that it was a part of ritual to keep them outside.Theyyam performers are bound by caste norms because the theyyam system often enforce hierarchies among hierarchies. So one can clearly understand that the performers get respect only when they perform the dance. Their position in society is still precarious when it comes to the discussion of their rights.

The reason which contributes to the unchanging plight of theyyam performers is their lack of ability to ask for the financial remuneration they deserve. The practitioners themselves have a notion that performing theyyam is their duty. According to history, the performers were paid in kind in the form of rice,grains, pulse etc .This was meant for performing the social function of healing and for worship. The performers also paid a certain amount of money too. This practice is still continued .But there is no fixed amount and it varies upon the theyyam performed,the nature of the temple and even the attitude of authorities.

Even if any performer would take an initiative to ask for more remuneration, the authorities act in an indifferent manner. They would call any other performer who is willing to settle for a low amount or sometimes they are even ready to cancel the program itself.

Sometimes the hereditary and tradition also pave the way towards low payment. Because when some artists of the younger generation ask for better remuneration, the committees get them down by justifying that their ancestors never demanded this much money so they do not have the position to demand it. The temple committees also use the tactics of bringing an astrologer to find some faults in the fasting and ritual performed by the artist when they demand for better remuneration. So they can use this as an excuse for bringing new performers who settle at their cost.

A theyyam performer undertakes a performance at a huge cost. But the remuneration they get for their performance is far low when compared to the cost they required for a single performance. The amount a performer gets for three theyyam in one day ranges from Rs 1000 to Rs 2500. In order to perform a theyyam, the performer requires at least five to eight assistants, including drummers and instrumentalists. Nowadays the drummer himself has to pay Rs 1000 for playing three days. Thus it is easy to assume how much a performer gets from the performance.

Theyyam, like all other performing arts, requires costumes, make-up and other accessories for the performance. This also requires money. Each theyyam requires intricate craft and accessories and it also requires a particular skill for making it. The accessories like headgear and anklets are made up of materials like silver, thus an item of which costs between Rs 28,000 to 30,000. This presents the expense a theyyam performer has to meet in order to perform.

In most cases the amount for these accessories are taken from the performer's pocket. Unlike other art forms theyyam is performed at heavy risk like falling into fire, coupled with heavy movements etc. These movements may cause damage to the accessories they are using. Just like making accessories, the maintenance of these accessories are also expensive. Thus, in most cases the performer has to find money for meeting this expense too. Sometimes the performers are forced to take the ornaments of their wives and to take loans for meeting these expenses. This may lead them into huge debts.

According to the theyyam practitioners they get comparatively better remuneration for performing in family owned shrines than community owned shrines. These community owned shrines possess so much authority over the performers. They insist on the performers a kind of notion that it is their hereditarily entitled duty. The concept of hereditary duty made the performers bound to do the performance at any cost. Thus, it became easy for the community owned shrines to pay lower wages to the performers.

Apart from all these, theyyam performers undergo various health problems. Majority of the performers are of the opinion that health issues are a part of their performance and they are used to living with it. They may get burned while jumping into the fires during performance. Wearing heavy headgears and other accessories for so long causes health issues like bruises ,scars etc. For instance, a theyyam performer gets caught in the fire during a performance. All this proves that a theyyam performer lives with lots of health issues. So it will also affect their social living conditions because it becomes difficult for them to go for other jobs or even undertake the performance while suffering from all these health issues.

Consumption of alcohol is a part of ritual among most of the Theyyam performances. As per the studies, twenty two percent of Theyyam performers consume alcohol on a regular basis in order to overcome the strain. But this affects them to a large extent by making them addicts to alcohol. Arthritis is considered as a common illness found in performers. It is reported that thirty three percent are suffering from arthritis problems. Another health issue found in Theyyam performers is the difficulty in the blood circulation that gets affected due to theyyam frames being tied to different parts of the body. Thus it became clear that Theyyam performers are suffering from a number of health issues. More importantly there is no group or health insurance protection for Theyyam performers.

It is difficult for a theyyam artist to make their livelihood through the sole means of performance . This is mainly because of the low wages they get for their performance and the seasonal nature of these art forms. This artform becomes more alive during the festival seasons. Moreover, Its status as ritual performed in temples also prevents the staging of this artform for the purpose of entertainment just like other art forms. Most of the theyyam performers are also doing jobs other than this. This will also increase the burden an artist has to undertake for the performance.

Theyyam as an artform do not have as much popularity as other art forms. This can be easily understood from the fame and recognition a theyyam artist and artists from other performing arts attain. People would remember the famous Kathakali artist or those performing other artforms but theyyam artists are not remembered by people from his own locality. Until now there is no theyyam artists has been honored with the esteemed awards like the Padma awards while artists from other artforms receive. This is evidence which shows that the theyyam artists don't get enough popularity.

There is no support system available to help Theyyam artists during the fag end of the career. The performers do not get any benefit from the social security systems too. Theyyam artists receive only a meager amount of ₹800, as a financial support from the State Government of Kerala. This is not sufficient for the performers to meet this financial need. Thus the government should convert this present financial support as a monthly pension scheme. This kind of attempt from the government should be really helpful for the Theyyam performers. The government should provide at least ₹3000 as a monthly pension to all the Theyyam performers when they reach the age of 50 years irrespective of their financial status.

Apart from giving financial support, the government can also bring proper insurance coverage, risk allowance and medical insurance scheme. Performance of Theyyam is very risky and also involves tremendous physical execution and hardwork. Along with these insurance, providing educational scholarships to their children and contributory welfare fund may be advised for Theyyam artists. Thus bringing these kinds of support measures would help in the development of these communities to a large extent.

The lack of data regarding various aspects of theyyam performers' lives is also a major problem which prevents the development of these communities. According to the study conducted by Kerala Development Society , Delhi ,a socio economic research organization approximated, around one lakh theyyam performers in which the Vannan community make up thirty per cent. As per the study conducted among 200 theyyam performers, a major portion of the performers receives only basic education and very low income from the performance alone. Most of the performers own land less than five cents in rural areas and attain no benefits from social security schemes.

Theyyam do not possess a written document which gives an account of its rituals and the way of training. As a result, the training is highly dependent on the knowledge that is transferred from generations to the head of the families. Only the right information regarding the artform helps in the perseverance of various aspects of artforms and also maintaining its relevance in society. While transferring the information from one generation to another through oral means, the quality of information may get affected. Each explains the information according to what they might have get from their ancestors and their own attitude towards the rituals and customs also indulge into the information. As a result some important elements may get omitted and some other unnecessary elements may find their way on to it. This shows the importance of proper documentation of rituals and customs of the training methodology.

'Pattayath Puthiya Bhagavathi kavu',Pappinisseri in Kannur was a shrine owned by the Thiya community which had an incident of untouchability in 1986. The Vannan community was the traditional performer of the temple. Once there occurred a quarrel between the trustee members of temple and the theyyam performers regarding the remuneration. As a result the trustee brought a Malaya community man to perform Puthiya Bhagvathi theyyam. According to theyyam customs it was against their tradition and ethics. At last the issue was settled by the political parties. This incident exactly shows the position of theyyam performers in asking for their remuneration.

There are so many other incidents similar to the above mentioned one. For instance Madakkad Raman Peruvannan from Ezhom performed Muthappan Vellattam theyyam in Nirichan Gopalan's house belonging to the Pulaya community in 1994. After this performance Raman peruvannan was not allowed to perform in Cheerumba Kavu Temple which belonged to the Thiya community. Infact , he was the right holder to

perform theyyam but he was denied his right to perform in a house which belonged to a pulaya person. Even though Raman got a favorable result from the special Court for the other backward castes, he did not perform in that Temple again. All these are pure examples of discrimination towards theyyam performers.

Though theyyam is regarded as a folk art, it always goes in association with temples. But, temples have no agenda to consider the threat faced by the theyyam practitioner. They donot have any data regarding the number of theyyam practitioners and their remuneration has not been collected and combined.

Theyyam performers do not have any unification among themselves, which also affects their social condition . The rifts and ideological differences within the performing communities are quickly pointed out by some performers which prevented them from a general unification. People from different castes,backgrounds and with different opinions belong to theyyam communities. This is the major reason they cannot stand unified when problems arise . This prevented them from expressing their numerical strength and was forced to be reckoned with. Nowadays there came organizations like UMTAASS(Uthara Malabar Theyyam Anushtana Avakasha Samrakshana Samithi). During the COVID 19 pandemic organizations like UMTAASS started to help theyyam performers by demanding financial support from the part of the state .

Several changes are taking place in the system and societal place of theyyam with passage of years.The advent of social media also contributed to the development of the theyyam community. Nowadays one can see so many theyyam groups and pages on social media. Despite all this the social life of theyyam performers remains unchanged.

CHAPTER THREE

CONCLUSION

Even in the modern age, caste discrimination and aggression towards lower session of the society is still a burning issue. The trace of this situation is highly evident

in the various parts of the society. Theyyam is a devotional folk art which is performed by the native performers with the help of vocals and some instruments. It is a unique form of art which is a combination of religious belief, art, dance, and music. It is performed for forty minutes which is fully devotional both in its spirit and presentation. Dancers perform with adequate fasting and devising the whole dance program as a dedication to God. It is not only considered as a dance but also a practice which is composed of twin elements of art and religious devotion. Though the male artists are more prominent in the field of Theyyam, younger girls under ten and women above forty also perform Theyyam. There are different customs associated with different practices like the worshiping of spirits, legends, trees, goddess of diseases, serpents, village deities and so on.

The Theyyam dance is a team effort. A group of people associated with Theyyam performance includes the artist, makeup artist and the prop makers. Each group is composed of twelve to fifteen persons including the artist or performers. And there are costume decorators, face painters, craft makers, lamp carriers, makeup men, singers, assistants and instrumentalists. Makeup and craft are an inevitable part of theyyam. Therefore makeup artists and craftsmen should possess a high talent and experience in this field. All the members in the team are experienced in all activities in the performance. The same performer can do all other activities such as makeup, craftwork etc. The prop makers are allotted with works of making skirt and waist dresses made of bamboo and coconut shells and then covered with red colored cloth.

Theyyam is an art form where we can see caste oppression. Mainly the offering is done by the local communities and it is performed by the ancestral house known as 'tharavadu'. Though it is performed in sacred groves and tharavadu, the performers are from the lower caste community.

Maari theyyam is one of the best example which describes the casteism in theyyam. Only the Pulaya community has the right to perform Maari Theyyam. All other Theyyams are performed by the Malayan and Vannan. The Pulaya community is considered as the lowest community which exists in the society which means people who perform the maari theyyam are considered as the most backward community among the theyyam performing community. A large number of Theyyam performers are not ready to break the customs and rituals as they are bound to it. Even Though the performers are not ready to break norms and rituals , some changes have occurred. For example, earlier the drummer of Malaya community was restricted to enter inside the boundaries of the temple and later this discrimination was eliminated after the accomplishment of Land Reform Act of 1960. Inorder to overcome the problems of discrimination theyyam community itself take the initiative to raise their voice against the it.

The communities which perform the Theyyam are still considered as a marginalized community and they are facing aggressions and discriminations on a daily basis. The caste which still remains as an important part in the Theyyam because the artform itself is based on the caste hierarchies. Apart from an artform, Theyyam is still treated as rituals and customs related to Hindu temples. This sole concept prevents the theyyam from gaining its popularity as an artform.

This concept also affects the staging of Theyyam. Other artforms like Kathalali are not bound to a certain place for its performance, it can be staged other than temples. But when it comes to the case of Theyyam, it can be performed only in its designated place. This affects the recognition of this artform and also affects the social lives of those performing this artform.

The unavailability of written documents for training new artists is another major problem faced by Theyyam. At present, the training is conducted by transferring knowledge from the head of the family to the younger generation by oral means. In order to share the various aspects of theyyam especially its songs and stories it has to be recorded. Therefore, collecting data regarding various aspects of Theyyam seems important for the further development of Theyyam.

In the present scenario, there exists a conflict between the new and the old generation of dancers. Because there is a divide between the old and new school of thoughts. Educated artists from the new generation have started modernization and commercialization of this artform. They hold a new movement from the current confined enactment to a more open and wide panorama; it will create more spaces for the artists which in turn popularized the artform. At the same time, the old school of artists do not want to change the traditional set up. This orthodox attitude of people also affects the development of Theyyam.

Lack of ability to ask for better remuneration is another problem faced by the theyyam community. Even today, Theyyam performers receive low payment. According to the studies conducted by a Dutch Scholar, 'Erik De Maaker', the low payment given to the Theyyam performers are normalized among the performing community itself. Even in the present society, the payment they receive ranges from ₹ 2500 to ₹3000 for the performance of three days. According to the life expenses of today's society this amount is too low to meet their ends.

As mentioned in the previous section, the reason which prevents this community from asking for better remuneration is the threat of being 'outcast' or banned from performing for questioning traditional caste norms prevalent in a village

or locality. This is why the majority of performers are afraid to raise their voice against the oppression they face in the community.

Apart from the problems related to caste and financial matters, the community also faces health problems. This also affects the social life of the Theyyam community. Health of theyyam performers deteriorates after their long run in their performance. This is because of some strict rituals that the theyyam dance performers have to undergo. Some Theyyam performers need to fall in the fire as part of their performance or use fire bowls around their body; this causes injuries to Theyyam performers. It takes eleven to even thirty six hours to get a theyyam kolam; this makes it difficult to have food or water. As a result their bodies become too weak. Also the performance can last more than 12 to even 24 hours, because of these too theyyam artists are not able to take food or water at the right time which puts a huge strain on their body which causes serious health issues on Theyyam performers. Many of the performers rely on alcohol to overcome the strain of the body. This leads to the addiction of alcohol. One of the common health issues found in theyyam artists is hypertension. Theyyam performers use heavy eye makeup which later causes vision problems in theyyam performers. Arthritis and Rheumatism are some common health issues found in Theyyam performers. This is caused due to their long term run in performance especially during festivals.

These kind of discrimination towards performers can only be eradicated by bringing the whole community together and improving their social life by giving them the financial remuneration they deserve. In order to develop the plight of theyyam performers and the art form, the government institute should take measures to overcome the problems of performers. Theyyam plays an important role in the cultural history of Kerala; therefore it is important to sustain this artform with all its elegance.

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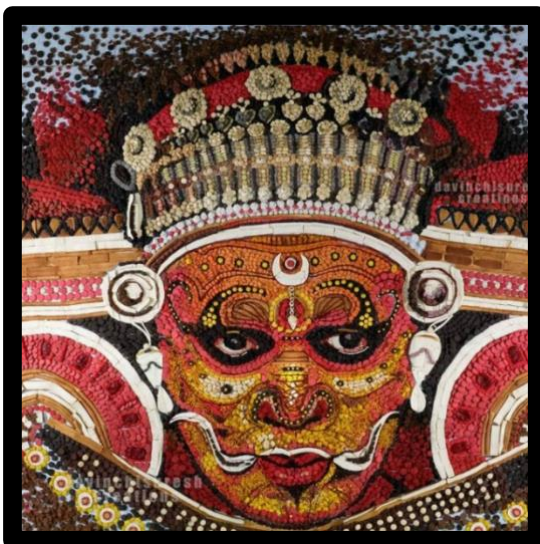
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APPENDIX 1





Vishnumoorthi Theyyam



Rakthachamundi Theyyam

APPENDIX 2



Sreemuthappan Theyyam