



Role of Castes in the Lives of Theyyam Practitioners in North Kerala

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ABSTRACT

Kerala Theyyam is a traditional ritualistic art form native to the Malabar region of Kerala, India. It combines dance, music, and drama, often depicting stories from Hindu mythology. Theyyam performances are characterized by elaborate costumes, vibrant makeup, and intense drumming. It's deeply rooted in the culture and religious practices of Kerala's communities. Theyyam, a popular ritualistic dance form in Kerala, often reflects the social structure including caste dynamics. Casteism plays a significant role in Theyyam as it dictates the selection of performers, their roles, and sometimes even the portrayal of deities, reflecting the social hierarchy prevalent in the region.

INTRODUCTION

Kerala is a beautiful state in southwestern India known for its lush greenery, backwaters, and rich cultural heritage. It's often referred to as "God's Own Country" due to its natural beauty .

Theyyam is a traditional ritualistic art form native to the northern part of Kerala, particularly in the Malabar region. It's a vibrant and colorful performance where performers, usually men from specific communities, embody divine or ancestral spirits through elaborate costumes, makeup, and dance. Theyyam showcases a unique blend of mythology, folklore, and spirituality, and it's a significant part of Kerala's cultural heritage.

North Kerala, particularly the Malabar region, is renowned for its vibrant Theyyam traditions. Theyyam holds immense cultural and religious significance in this region, with numerous temples and communities hosting elaborate Theyyam performances throughout the year.

In North Kerala, Theyyam is not just a form of entertainment but a deeply spiritual experience. It's considered a way to connect with the divine and seek blessings for various aspects of life, including prosperity, health, and protection from evil. The performances often take place in sacred groves, village temples, and ancestral homes, adding to the mystical atmosphere. One notable aspect of Theyyam in North Kerala is its inclusivity. Unlike some other parts of India where caste plays a significant role, in North Kerala, Theyyam transcends caste barriers. People from all walks of life, irrespective of their caste or social status, participate in and attend Theyyam performances, fostering a sense of community and unity.

Theyyam in North Kerala is also known for its elaborate rituals, colorful costumes, and rhythmic music, creating a mesmerizing spectacle that attracts both locals and tourists alike. It's a living tradition that continues to thrive, serving as a vital link to Kerala's rich cultural heritage.

Casteism refers to the discriminatory attitudes and practices based on caste, particularly prevalent in India's social structure. It involves treating individuals differently based on their caste or social class, often resulting in inequality, oppression, and marginalization of certain groups. Despite legal efforts to eradicate caste-based discrimination, it still persists in various forms in Indian society. Efforts to address casteism include education, social reforms, and legislative measures aimed at promoting equality and social justice.

Casteism can significantly impact the lives of Theyyam practitioners, particularly those belonging to lower castes or marginalized communities. Here are some ways it can affect them:

1. ***Access to Opportunities:*** Discrimination based on caste can limit the opportunities available to Theyyam practitioners from lower castes, such as access to training, performance opportunities, and recognition within the community.
2. ***Social Stigma:*** Practitioners from lower castes may face social stigma and ostracization within their own communities or from higher-caste individuals, affecting their self-esteem and social interactions.
3. ***Economic Disparities:*** Caste-based discrimination can result in economic disparities, with lower-caste practitioners often facing barriers in accessing resources, financial support, or patronage compared to their higher-caste counterparts.
4. ***Exploitative Practices:*** In some cases, Theyyam practitioners from lower castes may be subjected to exploitative practices, such as unfair wages or working conditions, perpetuated by higher-caste individuals or patrons.

5. *Limited Representation:* Casteism can contribute to the underrepresentation of lower-caste Theyyam performers in mainstream cultural platforms, hindering their ability to showcase their talent and preserve their cultural heritage.

Despite these challenges, many Theyyam practitioners from marginalized backgrounds continue to persevere and contribute to the preservation and promotion of this traditional art form, often advocating for social inclusion and equality within their communities.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Diaspora, religion, and identity: the case of Theyyam in the Indian diaspora [Ajaya K Sahoo, Surabhi K 2022] This article argues that when the Theyyam is performed transnationally, the true essence of ritual art form changed compared to its performance in the original settings and thereby opens up for commodification.

Caste-based Oppression, Trauma and Collective Victimhood in Erstwhile South India : The Collective Therapeutic Potential of Theyyam: [Shyma Ahammed 2019] This article makes an effort in this direction-the focus is on understanding Theyyam as a psycho-cultural phenomenon and the collective therapeutic dynamics that it offers.

Theyyam: A Performer's journey of transformation from man to god [VR Reshma, S Angelin Sheeja] The article examines the practices, traditions, impersonation, myths, and legends of Theyyam and some of its most popular forms and how this ritualistic art form has established a legacy across tribal and non-tribal cultures creating an identity for itself.

A Historical Study of Theyyam [P Vennila 2019] Theyyam festival is conducted to commemorate the supernatural powers of the deities or legendary figures worshiped by the people gathered in the temple known as 'kavu'. Theyyam festival is held only once in a year is believed that the artists who perform this theyyams are the personification of deities.

Myth as a Symbolic Narrative: A Study of the selected myths of Malabar Theyyam cult [Shilpa M Chandran] The myths are stories justifying the deification of the downtrodden people which is an uncommon occurrence. At the same time, they act as symbols representing the sufferings of these people and how they function as resistance narratives. These myths can also be read as weaved stories that can act as a shield to protect the oppressed community from the tortures of the aristocratic group.

CONCLUSION

This research will reveal the inferiority and insecurities faced by the Theyyam artists of Kerala due to casteism. Theyyam is often glorified for being an artform of the oppressed communities, thriving in secularism and unity.

Being the border district between Kerala and Karnataka, Kasaragod has a mixed population of Malayalam and Tulu speakers. The Theyyams performed by two Tulu-speaking communities-Nalkadaya [SC] and Mavilan [ST] are not allowed within the premises of temples in the district.

In September 2018, a Theyyam artist protested against the Dalit entry ban by entering the temple through the front entrance, causing a huge furore.

Reference

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