

THEYYAM: BEYOND THE COLOURS, A GLANCE ON SOCIO-POLITICAL, ENVIRONMENTAL AND GENDER ASPECTS

Dissertation

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Preface

Theyyam is the most predominant, ethnic and traditional art form of Northern Malabar region in Kerala, the study is about the traditional, cultural, socio-political, environmental, gender, and mythical aspects behind the most vibrant and phenomenal art form. Theyyam is a part of several thousand-year-old traditions, rituals and customs. Theyyam is performed by the lower caste community and they also play an important role in each and every aspect of the cultural art-form, and Theyyam can be referred to as the representation of their life itself.

This project deals with different aspects, attributes of Theyyam and the influence of Theyyam over the culture of people as well as the socio-political disparities prevailed in the society and the emergence of *Theyyattam*, folklore and *Thottampattu* as a medium of protest against the evils of caste system. This project also points to the influence of Theyyam in breaking the religious and caste barriers prevailing. It also identifies the importance of women in Theyyam, gender factors and emergence of eco-feminism as part of Theyyam as well as its co-relation with nature and the turbulence against nature affects Theyyam. People irrespective of their caste, creed or culture, gather around the shrine during Theyyam, and thus the festival became the place of integration of diversified culture.

Declaration

I hereby declare that the dissertation entitled **Theyyam: Beyond the Colours, a Glance on the Socio-Political, Environmental and Gender Aspects** is a record of studies and research carried out by me under the guidance and supervision of **Mrs. Aparna Eswaran** and submitted to the Central University of Kerala in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the BA Degree in International Relations. No part of this dissertation has been submitted earlier for the award of any other degree, diploma, title or recognition.

Signature:

Name of Candidate: Gokul Gangadharan

Date:

Certificate

Certified that the dissertation entitled **Theyyam: Beyond the Colours, a Glance on the Socio-Political, Environmental and Gender Aspects** is a record of studies and research carried out by **Mr. Gokul Gangadharan** under my guidance and supervision and submitted to the Central University of Kerala in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the Degree of BA in International Relations. No part of this dissertation has been submitted earlier for the award of any other degree, diploma, title or recognition.

Signature:

Name and designation of Supervising Teacher:

Date:

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Chapter One

Introduction

Immensely diversified cultural background of Kerala has provided large varieties of cultural art forms. Theyyam festival is a ceremonial tradition which is often referred to as the “Dance of Gods”. It represents the folk culture of Kerala, especially in the northern Malabar region or the erstwhile ‘Kolathunadu’. The word Theyyam derives from ‘*Deivam*’ which literally means God in Malayalam. Theyyam is performed in the form of dance drama. Previously, only the temple priests and the higher castes were having the right to indulge in festivity, but their chains of monopoly was broken as Theyyam festival became a celebration of common man, regardless of their caste and creed.

Theyyam is an 800-year old celebration of divinity and devotion in the northern Malabar region of Kerala. It is a most visually impressive form of cultural enthusiasm among the people of different castes. With its root steeped in the age-old Dravidian culture of South India, Theyyam is a melange of dance, drama, music and mime. Though it has become a tribal festivity, the subject of performance is the glory of divine heroes and celestial spirits. The ceremonious dances accompanied by the chorus of such musical instruments as *Chenda*, *Elathlam*, *Kurumkuzhal* and *Veekkuchanda*. (Sourav Agarwal. *medium.com*, 2015)

Theyyam, which is also known as ‘*Kaliyattam*’ or ‘*Thirayattam*’ is celebrated each year in ‘*Kottam*’, ‘*Devasthanam*’, ‘*Kaavu*’, or temples across the

northern Malabar, predominantly in the Kolathunadu area, consisting of present-day Kasargod, Kannur Districts, Vadakara and Koilandy Taluks of Kozhikode, Mananthavadi Taluk of Wayanad . Theyyam is a sacred ritual performed to worship the Hindu Goddess 'Kali'. Theyyam is a depiction of ancient folk tales and it preserves and cherishes the folk culture. It is a mix of ritualistic dance and mime over music and is often perceived as fierce in nature. Performers represent the heroic characters with divine power. It is believed that immortal spirits enter into the mortal bodies to perform the ritual dance in front of the shrine or groves for the well-being of the society and the family. The devotees gather around the shrine in a belief to get showered with blessings of Theyyam or God on them and their family.

There are more than 200 forms and around 456 types of *Theyyakkolams*, which can be distinguished with the help of facial make-up, costumes, body make-up, headgear, unique ornaments and decorations. But only around 112 Theyyams are commonly performed and considered as important. Theyyam can be divided into 4 according to the behavioural features. That are *Bhagavathy Theyyam*, *Shiva-Vaishnava Theyyam*, *Maanushika Theyyam* and *Purana Theyyam*. Most varieties of Theyyam are performed by men, except for '*Devakkooth Theyyam*' which is the only one form performed by women. Even though less performed by women, most of the Theyyams performed by men are women Theyyam and each Theyyam has its own lore and legends. The resonating beats and frequency of *Chenda*, *Veekkuchanda* and *Elathalam* creates the perfect ambience for performing Theyyam and to dance according to the beats. The beats of *Chenda* differ according

to the different forms of Theyyam. Different forms of Theyyams include *Vettakkorumakan, Pulli Vettakkorumakan, Puthiya Bhagavathi, Valiya Thamburatti, Thai Paradevatha, Elamkolam, Muchilottu Bhagavathi, Vishnumoorthi, Kathivannoor Veeran, Veeran, Veerali, Wayanattu Kulavan, Padaveeran, Panjuruli, Kurathi, Gandakarnan, Kandanar Kelan, Chuvannamma, Thulli Perungali, Puliyoor Kali. Puliyoor Kannan, Bali Theyyam, Chamundi, Raktha Chamundi, Thee Chamundi, Kari Chamundi, Kaitha Chamundi, Kunnumal Chamundi, Madayil Chamundi, Visha Kandan, Nagakanni, Mutiappan, Kuttychathan, Gulikan, Pottan Theyyam, Thondachan, Muthappan, Thiruvappan, etc..*

The traditional art form of Theyyam was influenced and evolved from the tribal, Aryan and Dravidian cultural practices and it embraces the myth, dance, drama, art and architecture as well. In short, Theyyam is an integration of Aryan, Dravidian, and tribal or folk cultures. But to be more precise, the evolution can be traced as a protest against the social evils and injustice brought about by the caste systems and *zamindari* system prevailed in those days of Kerala society. Theyyam is predominant in Kolathunadu area and is also celebrated in some parts of Kodagu and Tulunadu of Karnataka.

Theyyam is a part of several thousand-year-old traditions, rituals and customs. The art work of Theyyam is performed by the lower caste community and they also play an important role in each and every aspect of the cultural art-form. And Theyyam can be referred to as the representation of their life itself. Usually, people belonging to communities like *Vannan, Malayan, Pulayar, Mavilan, Velan,*

Munnoottan, Anjunnoottan, Kopalar etc. performs Theyyam. The period of Theyyam is usually from 10th of Malayalam month of *Thulam* (October/November) and comes to an end by June.

Theyyam is a festival of social and communal harmony in which people enjoy and observe the traditional and cultural creativity of folklore. People irrespective of their caste, creed or culture, gather around the shrine during Theyyam, and thus the festival became the place of integration of diversified culture. Theyyam has even turned out to be a social get-together for many people in and out of the family where they meet as a part of their beliefs and customs and also to share happiness with each other regardless of the modern world hectic life. The venue of Theyyam has also become a place to refresh, revive and renew friendships and social relationships.

Theyyam is considered as an art of prayer where the devotees believe that their needs may get fulfilled through prayers in front of Theyyam. Devotees may approach Theyyam with the problems faced by them and their family as well as the social problems for getting solutions from the deity. Rice, turmeric, saffron, *tulasi*, green leaves, flowers and *bhasma* are distributed to the devotees as *prasada* of the deity.

Theyyam bestows *prasada* and blessings over the devotees without considering their caste or religion. *Aali Theyyam, Mukri Pokkar, Bapuran Theyyam* and *Aryapoonkunhi Theyyam* are the Muslim Theyyams. For *Mukri pokkar* Theyyam, the Hindu performer dresses like a Muslim and wears a cap and beard. After washing the hands and legs, the performer reads a small section of the Holy

Quran and performs *Niskara* (Namas). Thus Theyyam can also be considered a festival of religious unity and communal harmony.

Each and every aspect of Theyyam is closely related with the nature. Even today, naturally occurring items are used for the facial make-up, body make-up, and for making costumes and ornaments for Theyyam. Each Theyyam has unique facial make-up, costumes and ornaments. For Theyyams like *Thee Chamundi*, *Pottan Theyyam*, *Gulikan* etc., the lower part of the body of the performer is covered with coconut leaves whereas for Theyyams like, *Muchilottu Bhagavathi Vettakkorumakann* etc., clothes with eye catching colours are used, most specifically the colour red. For most of the kinds of Theyyams, the upper body remains bare and is painted using contrasting colours which is obtained from nature. The facial make-up and headgear used for Theyyam can be referred to as the robust form of creativity of man. Headgear or the headwear is the largest and most spectacular part of the Theyyam costumes. The headgears of certain Theyyams like *Valiya Thamburatti*, *Gulikan Theyyam* and *Elamkolam* can be as high as 50-70 feet. The headgears are made out of long bamboo sticks, wood, coconut leaves and flowers etc. The ornaments are made out of coconut husk, wood, metal and gems. The ‘*Kaavu*’ or the sacred groves where Theyyams are performed can be called as ecological hotspots because of the diversity of plant and animal species in those areas.

It is mainly the make-up, costumes and ornaments of different types of Theyyam which help to create the representation of an abstract quality of the mythological figures in the ancient tribal tales including Gods, Goddesses, Demons

and Spirits. The rich colours of the make-up and costumes provide a great feast to the eyes as well. Theyyam is a festival which can be regarded as a storehouse of creativity and arts of the common man rather than that of the privileged.

Theyyam speaks for the lower caste and the suppressed of the society and questions social evils and injustice prevailing in the society. The art form of Theyyam has helped them to be recognised by others and has improved their social standard and status-quo. It helped the lower castes to uplift themselves and express their needs and problems and also to prove others and themselves of what they can do and their importance in the society and also about their role in its functioning. Theyyam has helped their creativity and talents to be recognised along with all other standards. Theyyam has become a livelihood for a lot of people these days and is getting acceptance from all spheres of the society, even worldwide.

The varied dimensions of the Theyyam has been discussed extensively, that unravels a tradition and its consequent adaptations and reformulations according to the changing nature and social context of the form. Theyyam has been represented in many ways, as folk genre, art, festival, ritual, performance and dance. While anthropological and sociological works are mainly written in English as part of academic pursuits, folklorists had mainly documented oral literature, practices and history in Malayalam with a substantial content of descriptive notes.

Statement of Problem

1. There existed a society downtrodden by the evils of caste system, society being divided into different classes and the so called upper castes showing hegemony over

the lower caste and the life of the lower caste were so very miserable and filled with sufferings and sorrows, the chains of untouchability haunting over them and their lives being destined to live as a slave without any kind of rights. The dissertation discuss the significance of Theyyam and its effects over the society which was filled with such kind social and political discrepancies.

2. In the patriarchal society, the other gender is always downtrodden and oppressed. In the societal system where the people worships Goddesses and female deities, where earth and nature is considered as mother and Goddess, the women are being denied of opportunity and are being subjugated and demoralised and the nature is getting destructed. So the importance given to nature and women in traditional art form like Theyyam which is a contribution by the patriarchal society is to be studied.

3. Sacred groves are valuable gene pools and the first major effort of the society to recognize and conserve biodiversity. As the southern migration as well as deforestation and planting of cash crops in the name of development in the Northern Malabar region has led to a major decline in the number of sacred groves where Theyyams are usually performed, in turn affecting the life of the people as well as the art form of Theyyam.

Significance of the Study

1. At present many of the young generations are strange to their own traditional customs and cultures. It is observed that they have transformed very much from the traditions and have adopted the customs and cultures of the surroundings, moving

towards a westernised way of life and culture. The traditional customs and cultures are gradually vanishing. The researcher is convinced that, it is important to study and preserve in records their valuable customs and culture.

2. Theyyams are affected by rapid social change caused by the migration from the south part of Kerala to the mountainous region of Northern Malabar boosting modernization, deforestation, globalization and other developmental activities and planting more number of cash crops such as rubber by destroying the rich ecological hotspots or *Kaavus* (sacred groves) where Theyyams are usually performed. These changes drag into a series of problems. In the process of cultural, social and religious changes, they have lost some of their traditional values. The researcher analyses their social, societal and environmental values as well as the customs, culture, religion and the way of life.

3. The significance of Theyyam in bringing up the social political and cultural changes in the society. And the importance given to female characters and deities in Theyyam and the resilience of this art form against gender discernments seen in the patriarchal society, social inequality and the caste system, which stood a symbol of protest against the social evils of untouchability and slavery, as well as its close relation with nature holds the significance of the study. Some of these facets of Theyyam are still remaining very important in the present day scenario.

Objectives of the Study

- To find out the cultural as well as socio-political dynamics of Theyyam or *Theyyattam*.

- To identify the different dimensions of Theyyam and how it stands as a symbol of righteousness and justice rather than being just an art form pleasing the eyes with its vividness aggressiveness and aesthetic beauty.
- To understand the *Thottampattu* and myths and lore of Theyyam and, to find out what it conveyed to the society as well as to review the changes that it brought in the society.
- To study how Theyyam emerged as an art form of the suppressed and the downtrodden and how it lifted the shadow of caste system and class consciousness that concealed over them.
- To research how Theyyam became a voice of the voiceless and a protest against the social evils prevailed in the society.
- To analyse the factor of feminism and the importance given to women in *Theyyattam*, *Thottampattu* and folklore of Theyyam as well as to find out how much Theyyam is related with the nature.
- To find out the role of Theyyam in bringing up religious unity and harmony among different community.

Research Questions

- How did Theyyam originate as a medium of protest against the socio-political evils and the ill effects of the caste system and hegemony that prevailed in the society?
- What was the role of Theyyam in the transformation of the society and how is it reflected in the contemporary social flux?

- How did Theyyam become a medium of communication between the different sectors of the society, between different castes, classes and generation?
- What are the myths, legends and *Theyyappattu* or *Thottampattu* that delineate the political aspects of communication?
- What are the different dimensions of Theyyam rather than just being a subaltern art form?
- How Theyyam and *Theyyattam* is co-related with nature and the importance of gender and women in Theyyam?
- How Theyyam holds its place in bringing the society together irrespective of the caste, creed and religion?
- What are the factors that forges a threat to the *Theyyattam* and to the sacred groves or *Kaavus*?

Methodology and Source of Data

The method of the study of the different aspects and the attributes of Theyyam and Theyyam performance are carried out by analysing the performance of Theyyam. As the researcher is resident of Kannur district and comes from a society where Theyyam is a most vital part the life and customs, the researcher is having a background in Theyyam as the festival is carried out in the Kaavus near by the residence of the researcher.

As a source of primary data, the researcher has made use of the data collected by interviewing and asking questions to the older people, including the

grandparents who is a part of this culture are having an immense knowledge about the Theyyam, its backgrounds and legends. The parents of the researcher also helped in the preparation of the dissertation as they are having some knowledge about the myths and legends of certain Theyyams and as they were born and brought up in a society where Theyyam was an undeniable factor of life. The researcher has also interviewed some of the Theyyam artists, for collecting data about the costumes, headgears and materials used for body and facial make-up.

The research was also carried out by analysing the *Thottampattu* of Theyyam and trying to understand the meanings and messages conveyed through *Thottampattu*. The researcher has also made use of secondary data sources such as certain books and articles in internet which includes studies carried out on different aspects and attributes of Theyyam.

Literature review

U. P. Santhosh. Theyyam Prakrithi Sthreethwam. 2011

In the book, U P Santhosh demonstrates how cultural performances like Theyyam can stage the social, cultural as well as political factors in ways that add to the more visible and traditional practices of popular politics and the social life of the people. Through the lens of performance studies, the book explores Kerala's transformation from a traditional to a modern world. The book studies how Theyyam and the nature in co related with each other how people lead a life completely relying on nature. Along with this, the book also studies the different aspects of Theyyam including its socio political, cultural and environmental factors as well as the element of

feminism and gender included in every aspect of Theyyam and its relation with nature, influenced by its background, lore, legends and *Thottampattu*, sensory locations and actions, and embodiment in general. Deeply theoretical and original, this book will interest students and scholars of Performance Studies, Cultural Studies and Socio- Political Studies.

Chandran Muttath. Thattumdalam. 2008

The book is a journey through the windward side of Western Ghats, meeting the performers who keep alive a tradition, the communities that draw strength from the protection of the Theyyams. Theyyam the ritualistic dance of Gods is very popular in Northern Kerala or Malabar. The traditional art form of Theyyam is a cumulative experience telescoping the history of people and it is a synthesis of tribal, Dravidian and Aryan cultural practices and impacts of the classism of religion and is a ritual bound performance of dance, music and religious worship. It is a ritualistic worship of an agrarian society and has an organic bonding with nature. At the time when symbols of modernity throw out folklore and ritualistic practices, Theyyam, the dance of the Gods, retains its linkages with the land and its people. A world of colourful fantasy, awesome spirits in the dark, men transforming as Gods, all of this is packed into the Theyyam. With colourful photographs and enlightening notes the book takes us to the world of Theyyam – the history, legends, the people who perform *Theyyakkolam*, different types of Theyyam, the locations where Theyyams are performed and much more.

Balakrishnan Koyyal. Folk Art Forms of Kerala. 2016

The book is an authentic and comprehensive volume on the folk art forms of Kerala. Trying to decipher the complex processes of the dynamics of a series of ritual art forms performed by folk and tribal communities, the book is designed with a precise and crisp text supported by potent and detailed images. The book documents hundreds of Theyyams with rich and colourful photographs captured by the renowned photographers of Kerala. An extensive bibliography and an elaborate glossary illuminate this work further. The book goes deep into the art and culture of Kerala and attracts researchers and visitors. Born in Cherukunnu village in Kannur district of Kerala, a village and a district known for its folklore and culture, Balakrishnan Koyyal is having an extensive knowledge in the field of folklore especially on Theyyam.

Bhawani Cheerath Rajagopalan, Rajesh Komath. Theyyam- The Other Gods. 2012

The book acquaints us with very many varieties of Theyyams, the performers who keep alive the tradition and the communities that have their identities rooted deep in this ritualistic art form. The book is equipped with the lore and performance of aweing *Muchilottu Bhagavathy*, the demonic *Vishnumurthi* Theyyam, the aggressive *Puthiya Bhagavathy*, fascinating *Kuttichathan*, *Kaitha Chamundi*... the list goes on. The photographs, truly transport us to those grounds where these Theyyams dance in its full majesty and fury.

Not just this, the book also enlightens us about the preparations including the make-up and the rituals associated with this art form. The

predefined performance space contoured by the venerating faces of the audience is captured in all its beauty and originality. The book also has a Theyyam calendar that gives information regarding various Theyyam performances in Kerala with details including time and location.

Dr. M. V. Vishnu Namboodiri. Theyyam. 2017

The book 'Theyyam' by Vishnu Namboodiri studies different dimensions of Theyyam. As a result of his studies, he comes into an assumption that Theyyam is the vestiges of history of a culture. He analyses the background of each Theyyam on the basis of the *Thottampattu* and the historical backgrounds including the folklore and legends. In the book, he states that the primary goal of performing Theyyam is for passing up of social good and social welfare, for creating a just and unbiased society where there is harmony, prosperity and the idea of brotherhood and oneness without any kind of inequality or disparity or discrimination. The book also studies about the *Kaavus* or the ecological hotspots where Theyyams are usually performed and the wide variety of flora and fauna in those regions, showing the resilient bond between Theyyam and nature and how Theyyams revolutionized the way of thinking of man against the prevailing inequalities and disparities. And the book deliberates the significance and value of Theyyam in the present day society.

Chapterization

The dissertation is having five chapters including the chapters of introduction and conclusion. The chapters are divided as follows

Chapter One is an introduction to the topic.

Chapter Two is the study of the origin of the art form of Theyyam and analysis of the different aspects and attributes of Theyyam and the influence of Theyyam over the culture of people.

Chapter Three is a critical analysis and study of the socio-political disparities prevailed in the society and the emergence of *Theyyattam*, folklore and *Thottampattu* as a medium of protest against the evils of caste system and providing way for social wellbeing, religious accord and communal harmony.

Chapter Four identifies the importance of women in Theyyam, gender factors and emergence of eco-feminism as part of Theyyam as well as its co-relation with nature and the turbulence against nature affecting Theyyam.

Chapter Five is the concluding chapter.

Chapter Two

Theyyam: The Origin, Aspects and Attributes

The primitive Keralites worshipped nature for better harvest and curing maladies and other deadly diseases. Earth, soil, agriculture, livestock rearing etc. are essential for survival. People believed that the food that they get through farming and livestock rearing are the blessings of God. So they started conducting harvest festivals to show the prosperity and to please the Gods. Along with this, they started to practice special kinds of dances and *Thottams* (prayers) and performed different types of *Kolams* (attires). They practiced these types of rituals for getting blessed for curing mysterious maladies and plights like cholera and small pox.

Most of the regional art forms of Kerala originated as a religious practice and worship to God. All these regional art form has proved to uphold the social unity and social emotions. Theyyam started as a dance along with prayers to please the Gods for providing them with all the prosperity. As the time progressed, it got modified and with the help of new musical instruments, the dance drama got new rhythms. The attires and attributes of Theyyam including the body make-up, facial make-up, head gears and body gears got new dimensions in accordance with time and was greatly influenced and evolved from the drawings, paintings and sculptures of ancient Dravidian and Aryan cultures. The drawings and sculptures found in Ajantha-Ellora caves, certain sculptures made in stones also influenced Theyyam.

The Chaturvarnya system prevailed in the primitive society of Kerala has also a hand in the origin of Theyyam. Dividing people on the basis of their colour, social status and jobs into 4 estates has led to formation of caste system and class consciousness. The creation of caste system lead to the formation of different types of social predicaments like untouchability and slavery. And the lower castes were not allowed to enter the temple premises. And they were destined to work in the fields of the so called upper caste people in order to feed the upper caste and getting hardships and starvation in return. And all these provided the base to the formation of Theyyam.

Theyyam is celebrated in certain temples, *Kaavus*, and in *Tharavadu*(ancestral homes) along the northern Malabar region of Kerala from Korappuzha of south to Kanjirott Kaavu in the north for the good fortune and richness of the villages and for the welfare of the villagers. The season of Theyyams start from 10th of Malayalam month of *Thulam*(October/November) and the aggressive, dynamic and vibrant *Kaliyattam*(dance drama) comes to an end by *Edavam*(May/June) after the commencement by the King of Nileschwaram.

It is said that there are 140 types of Theyyams. But actually more than 400 varieties of Theyyams are performed in northern Kerala and each Theyyam is unique. Each Theyyam has its own *Thottams* (prayers), dance steps, facial make-up, body make-up, head gears and body gears. The word Theyyam is derived from ‘*Deivam*’ which means God in Malayalam. Or in another way, Theyyam is the corrupt form of ‘*Deivam*’. According to Hindu mythology, there are *Deva* and *Asura*. *Asura* is the corrupt form of God and most of the Theyyam characters are

Asuras. Ancient heroes who died for some great causes and the spirits of ancestors are also worshiped in the form of Theyyam. Theyyam also circumscribes ancestral worship, tree worship, animal worship, village deity worship and Mother Goddess worship.

The traditions and customs of Theyyam is based on mainstream Hinduism such as the Shaktism (the worship of Goddess Durga), Vaishnavism (worship of Lord Vishnu, the sustainer of the universe) and Shaivism (worship of Lord Shiva, the destroyer of the universe). Goddesses are usually worshipped in the form of Bhagavathy (The Mother Goddess: Lakshmi, Saraswati, Durga/Parvati) and Thamburatty. Theyyams of Vaishnavism are *Daivathar* and *Vishnumoorthi*. Most other Theyyams deities are associated with Shaktism or Shaivism. Even spirits, animals, heroes and ancestors are included in this category. (Manjusha.*discoverindia.net*, 3-March-2016.)

The facial make-up or *mughathezhuthu* and body make-up is done using naturally obtained colours like *manayola*, *chayilyam*, *thirimashi* etc. The facial make-up of each Theyyam is unique and is known in different names. For example: *Prakkezhuthu*, *ambum pulliyum aanakkalum*, *kodumpurikam*, *mullezhuthu*, *maankannu*, *muriyehzhuthu*, *kuriyehzhuthu*, *kattaaram pully* etc.

Before the Aryans and the Dravidians came with their sophisticated versions of Hinduism, India had its own tribal religions, traditions and practices. Theyyam originated from such practices. However like other tribal religions, it eventually lost out to mainstream Hinduism. Even though

Theyyam is greatly influenced by Hinduism, its rituals are very ancient.
(Manjusha. *discoverindia.net* 3-March-2016.)

The art form of Theyyam is performed by Dalits or the lower castes. The mainstream Hinduism was always the religion for Brahmins and Kshatriyas. Brahmins had supremacy in all aspects of the religion and temples. Only the upper caste people were allowed to enter the temple premises and to take part in prayers. The lower castes were denied to have the right to enter into the temple or to do *Pooja*. But the lower castes patronised Theyyam as their own form of religion and worshipped it. People belonging to communities like *Vannan, Malayan, Pulayar, Mavilan, Velan, Chingan, Munnoottan, Anjunnoottan, Kopalar* etc. performs Theyyam.

It is believed that Theyyam will help us to acquire righteousness in our hearts and stands as a symbol of justice. The light from the lit torches that are tied to the waist, headgear and mouth of Bhagavathy Theyyams including *Agnikandakarnan, Puthiya Bhagavathy, Angakulangara Bhagavathy, Panaykkad Bhagavathy, Oyoolath Bhagavathy* are used in darkness to destroy the evils and to bring back virtuousness. Theyyams like *Padaveeran, Kathivannur Veeran, Kudiveeran, Thacholi Othenan, Kurikkal* etc. are considered as the spirits of ancestral heroes who were, once the greatest *padanaiks* or *senanaiks*(military heads) of different *Naattu Rajyams*(princely states). These Theyyams perform martial arts like *vaalpayattu* and *urumipayattu* for the revival of the old memories and to commemorate the rivalries between the members of the same family or between different families. There are even Muslim Theyyams which indicates

religious unity and induces secularism in the minds of people. Even though Theyyams are usually performed by males of lower castes, a Theyyam called *Devakooth* is performed by females which point out the fact that women are also capable and it redraws the old patriarchal ideology that women are always inferior to men.

Theyyams like *Kandanarkelan*, *Vishnumoorthi*, *Pottan Theyyam* and *Thee Chamundi* walk through flames in order to burn away the sins and to purify the souls and minds of the people and also to please the deity. All these Theyyams find solutions for the problems and difficulties of the devotees and the poor and sufferers. It is believed that Theyyams will be there to protect the devotees from all kinds of evils and malevolence and in every twists and turns and in every thick and thins of the life.

Theyyams performed by *Kopalar*, *Koragar* and *Mavilar* are different from that of other communities. These Theyyams use meat and liquor and these Theyyams are believed to have incredible and immense powers. During the days of festivals like *Pooram*, *Kalathil ari*, *Paattulsavam*, *Ottakkola Puthari*, *Sankramam* etc, certain deeds, rituals and cleaning activities are carried out in *Kaavus* and temples.

The art form of Theyyam has a lot of similarities with *Velan Veriyattam*, which was a part of *Sanghakaala* art forms. There is a saying that, Manakkadan Gurukkal was the one who reformed the art form of Theyyam from a tribal dance drama into a modernized art form. Till then, Theyyams were not much aggressive and vibrant in looks and lacked the decorative beauty that we see today. Gurukkal

revived the classical art form into a wonderful form of worship and patronage to God with the help of Kolathiri Raja (King of Chirakkal, Kannur). Kolathiris are the successors of Mooshika Rajas who ruled the northern Kerala in the first century AD. Kolathiri family is a part of Travancore Royal Family.

Recently, Dr. Sajeevan Azhikkode, who is a folklore researcher, has found out some old *thaliyola pramanam* (scripts written in palm and coconut leaves) which has writings about *Theyyamkettu* (performance of Theyyam), *niyamavali* and *koolu* (rules and regulations) of Theyyam.

Karivellur Manakkadan Gurukkal is considered as the *aacharya* (guru) of Theyyam. It is said that, as per the wish of Kolathiri Rajah, Manakkadan Gurukkal who was a great enchanter, charmer, illusionist and an expert in around 64 arts, was ordered to create and perform 140 kinds of Theyyam. It is said to be that he made this possible as he had performed this with tricks and charms from dusk to dawn. Even the well-satisfied king, fond of many art forms, advised him to perform and continue this new folklore with some changes, as the legends say.

In the *Thottam paattu* of *Vasoorimaala* (*Roga Devatha*), the resurrection of *Bhagavathy* (Goddess) from the ‘Third Eye’ of Lord Parama Shiva in Kodungallur *Kaavu* is described. *Kshethra Paalan*, *Dandan* and *Kandakarnan* Theyyams are believed to be the siblings and *Veera Bhadran*, *Uchitta Bhagavathy*, *Gulikan* and *Kutti Shasthan* Theyyams are believed to be the friends of *Vasoorimaala*. Theyyams like *Vellyamma Poti* (grand-mother), *Cheriyamma poti* (aunt), *Karinkaali Bhagavathy* (sister), *Kodunkaali Bhagavathy* (aunt), *Ottamulachi Kaali* (sibling) are said to come along with *Vasoorimaala*.

In the *Thottam paattu* of *Gulikan Theyyam*, there is a mention that Theyyam was originated in the southern part of Kerala, but practiced in northern part. And *Panans' Thottam pattu* claims that 108 temples in the north are dedicated to 39 *Devathas* (Theyyams). *Mavilar's Thottam pattu* says that *Sri Mahadevan* has created these 39 *Devathas* to help *Kaali* to kill *Dhaarikan*. Meanwhile, if *Mahadeva* has created Theyyam, then all the districts in Kerala would have Theyyams of their own. These kinds of questions even substantiate the fact that Manakkadan Gurukkal had created Theyyam. And he could be regarded as the sole reason behind creating Theyyam a traditional art form of worshipping Gods. The facial make-ups, body make-ups and headgears are considered to be the contributions of numerous artists.

These kinds of art forms like Theyyams are said to be present in our cultures from the ancient Aryan-Dravidian times and these were said to be the ones which held different tribes together, even though, each tribe had their own Gods and Goddesses. Theyyams have changed in its nature and forms as time passed in accordance with worship, *Thottampattu* and even human creativity.

Different Aspects of Theyyam

References on Theyyam are available in various old scriptures. According to the legendary Keralolpathy, Lord Parasuraman, who is believed to be the creator of Kerala was the one who contributed various festivals like *Kaliyattam*, *Puravela*, *Theyyattam*, etc. Native communities like *Panan*, *Velan* and *Vannan* were the ones who were considered to have provision of Theyyam dance.

Tamil literature of the Sangam period (till the 5th or 6th century AD) also mentions about a similar type of ritual performed by the *Velan* community. Theyyam might have originated at a time when people of Tulunadu, Munadu and Tamilnadu, besides their geographical proximity, shared a common social and cultural status. However, it is a fact that the ritual art form has undergone drastic changes through different phases of history before evolving into the present day form. (Koyyal Balakrishnan. *Folk Art*. 2016)

Since Theyyam seems to have its origin in various cults, the deities propitiated and worshipped may have a defied ancestor; heroes (including those who had died prematurely, unnaturally or being prey to social injustices), animals (serpents, tigers, etc.) characters drawn from Puranas, deities of various diseases, tribal and folk Mother Goddesses, forces of nature and anyone whose memory the society wished to cherish are the major characters of this art-form.

Each and every community in Kolathunadu has got its own place of worship. There exists a folk group (Nattu-koottayma) around each place of worship. *Kaavu* or *Kazhagam* gives leadership to this folk group. Theyyam is celebrated as the festival of these folk groups.

A variety of Theyyams exist namely Mother Goddess, *Manthra-murthikal*, Puranic characters, forest deities, animal deities, snake Gods, heroes, martyrs and those who fought against social evils, which are generally performed by various communities. There are a variety of ceremonies in Theyyam. The rituals start with the *Atayalamkotukkal*. An auspicious date for the Theyyam *Kaliyattam* is selected

and then the performer for each chosen. The word *Kolakkaran* meaning performer is derived from *Kolam*. The impersonator undergoes rigorous penance and training. The duration of such practice, which may prolong for over a week or so, depends upon various factors.

The preliminary ritual of a Theyyam performance begins with the invocation of the deity followed by the narration of the myth of that particular deity, which the performer is to perform. This is sung along with an orchestra with mostly the percussion instruments. *chenda*, *veekkuchenda*, a type of *maddalam*, *ilathalam*, *cheenikuzhal* (a small trumpet shaped wind instrument) are some of the instruments commonly used. Another instrument, *thudi*, is also seen to be in use, but only by the *Pulaya* community. The entire narrative unit is called *Thottam*. The duration of the *Thottampattu* varies from Theyyam to Theyyam. For Theyyams like *Katangottu Makkam*, it may prolong for over 10 hours. It is again divided into several distinct parts, where each one is sung for a particular purpose. Briefly these are *Varavili*, *Neetukavi*, *Thalavaritham*, *Sthuthikal Varavili* (again) and *Anchadi*. It ends with *Polichupattu*.

Theyyam is performed mainly in three phases. Which are *Thottam*, *Vellattam*, and Theyyam. *Thottam* is performed with simple costumes. The myth behind each *Kolam* is narrated through the *Thottampattu*. The *Kolakkaran* also participates in the *Thottampattu* along with the accompanying artists. In some places, female members of the performing community also take part in this. There are different types of *Thottam*, *Thottam*, *Ucha Thottam* and *Anthi Thottam*. For some deities, *Thottam* is performed more than once. *Vellattam* adorns a heavier

costume compared to that of *Thottam*. *Vellattam* is performed only for a few deities. The conclusion of the *Thottam* or the *Vellattam* gives way to the initiation of Theyyam. Beautified with elaborate costumes, including a headgear, the Theyyam has intricate facial writing.

Facial and Body writing

The beauty of the intricate facial writings of the Theyyam lies in the fact that it uses only natural colours. *Chayillyam*, *kari-mashi*, *arippoti*, *manayola* are used for facial writing. The facial writing depends much upon the character and the nature of the deity. There are different nomenclatures for such writings. *Olikannu*, *Shankumvairddalam*, *Kuriyezhuth*, *Theppumkuriand* *Kattarampulli*. Different forms are also drawn on the body of certain Theyyams according to the aggressiveness and acrobatics involved in the performance. The facial make-up of each Theyyam is unique and are drawn by the *Madayan*, the eldest and most experienced person and a former performer of Theyyam. Some of the Theyyams like *Valiya Thamburatti* and *Wayanattu Kulavan* uses false eye made of silver to cover the eyes of the performer and *Pottan Theyyam* and *Gulikan Theyyam* masks instead of facial make-up. The body writings of each Theyyam also differs from one another. And naturally obtained substances are used for body make-up as well. Red, yellow, white and black are the commonly used colours for the facial and body make-up.

Costumes

The costumes of Theyyam reflect a rich tradition of practices which were prevalent in particular areas. Influences of native as well as foreign patterns are visible in the costumes. A resemblance or a mix of various cultures can be observed in Theyyam costumes. The costumes of Theyyams are rich in vibrant colours and will attract devotees and people in a look. Red is the most commonly used costume colour for most of the Theyyams, because of the aggressiveness and effervescence of the colour. Yellow black white and orange are the other colours that are usually used for making the costumes. For Theyyams like *Vishnumurthy*, *Theechamundi* and *Pottan Theyyam*, light green tender coconut leaves are used instead of red clothes as the Theyyams come in contact with fire and heap of red hot charcoal during the performance to get protection from the burns. Most of the materials used for making the costumes of the Theyyams are naturally obtained substances even though use of some synthetic materials are visible these days as its easily available in markets than the naturally obtained substances these days.

Muti or Head Gear

Different types of head gears are used for Theyyams. They are *Vattamuti*, *Thirumuti*, *Valiyamuti*, *Poomuti*, *Chattamuti*, etc. Each *muti* is designed to suit the character of that particular Theyyam. The head gear is prepared by using a variety of materials. For tall and large *muti*, light materials like branches of wood, areca nut stem, etc., are used. Heavy metals like brass and silver are used on for smaller head gears. Sometimes, leaves and flowers are also used as a decoration to the head gear. The size of head gears or *muti* varies according to the Theyyam. The

muti of Valiya Thamburatti performed in Kalarivathukkal Temple of Kannur district is around 50 feet tall and the Theyyam is accompanied with other 40 Theyyams with *muti* having a height around 40 feet. The *muti* is made of long areca nut and bamboo stem covered with clothes having vivid colours, mostly red. Some of the Theyyams like *Gulikan Theyyam* is having *muti* made of tender coconut leaves.

Use of Fire

Use of fire in the form of *Choottu Pandtham*, *Meleri*, etc., is a part of the performance. Huge heap of fire (*Meleri*) is an important element involved in the rites of Theyyam like *Theechamunchi*. *Puthiya Bhagavathy* and *Pottan Theyyam*. The performer will run and jump through the heap of fire and red hot charcoal during the performance and Theyyams like *Pottan Theyyam* will lie above the red hot *Meleri* and the tender coconut leaves protects him from burns. The performer will be in a complete state of spirituality. *Choottu* is a form of torch used to light up the area. Another intention of using these torches is to glorify the costumes of the Theyyam glittering at its best in the lighting. Gigantic torches are also used on some rare occasions.

Kaliyattam and Perumkaliyattam

In the normal course, Theyyam or *Kaliyattam* is conducted once a year. In some *Kaavu*, Theyyam festival is conducted only once in twelve years or so. Such occasions are conducted in a more elaborate manner and are called *Perumkaliattam*. A number of Theyyams are performed in the same *Kottams*. In most of the *Kaavus*

and *Kottams*, Theyyams are conducted for days during the season, starting from the fortnight and lasting for 3 to 5 days depending on the number of Theyyams performed.

Poothavum Thirayum in Palakkad district; *Thira* in Kozhikode and Malappuram districts; and *Bhoota Kola* in South Karnataka have similarities with the Theyyam ritual.

Theyyam rather than being just an art form, it was a way for the artists and performers to earn their living. During the olden days, Theyyam performers completely relied on upper caste houses for food. As Theyyams are performed usually during the summer season, which is the time of joy and harvesting, for those who rely on Theyyam, during the other seasons including the rainy season, they really struggle to survive for getting the meal for the day. So they really have to depend on the kindness of other upper caste people who has storage of grains, so they go to the houses of the upper class people in the form of *Vedan Theyyam* and waits outside the house to collect food grains. But this have changed in the course of time and the artists who performs the Theyyams started to get indulged in other works during the off time or the monsoon season, and performs Theyyams during the seasons, earning their living and have become self-sufficient.

Theyyam performance can be regarded as a space for the reunion of the suppressed and oppressed, an art form which is a medium through which they can speak out and protest against the atrocities that they face without any fear, a place where they can gather in the form of protest, to fight against their destitutions and where they can directly speak to God and worship their favourite deity, and it was

the only way to express their thoughts and feelings and aggression through *Thottampattu*, musical instruments and with vivid and fearsome performance. But moreover Theyyam these days Theyyam have become a place for the family reunion of different people, to share their joy and happiness. Now a days, Theyyam has become a festival of prosperity, communal harmony, religious unity and good fortunes.

Chapter Three

Theyyam: Protest Against the Social and Political Disparities

Before fifty years, almost every village in northern Kerala were self-sufficient. There persisted a caste system which was on an upper to lower class basis. The occupational status of people were based on their caste as each caste was assigned with certain jobs. All the villagers including *janmis* and peasants was a part of this system. Even though caste system still prevails in the modern day society, the occupation of an individual is no more determined by their caste. *Theyyattam* can be said as an instance which commemorates these kind of systems prevailed.

The, landlords including *Purohiths, Brahmins, Warriar, Maarar, Nambiar, Nair* etc. were the elites and one who was having ownership over land during that time and the *Theyya, Vaaniyan, Chaliyan, Maniyani, Aasari, Moosari, Kollan, Thattan, Kaniyaan, Mukkuvan, Vannan, Malayan, Munnoottan, Anjoottaan, Velan, Koppalan, Pulayan, Maavilan* etc., who were the lower castes and the peasants with no kind of rights over land were having and each of these castes certain occupations assigned with. For example, people belonging to *Maarar* caste were the one who play *Chendamelam* in the temple during festivals or during some special occasions.. The occupation of most of these upper castes were in a way or another related with temple, whereas the lower caste who were under the shadows of untouchability, who were denied entry to the temple were mostly peasants. The people belonging to *Aasari* caste were timber workers, *Maniyanis* were builders, *Mukkuvans* were fishermen, *Kollans* were iron workers, *Thattans* were gold workers etc.

Just like every other folklore, Theyyam was the creation of an ethnicity or a group of people rather than the creation of an individual. And even if all these castes can be considered as different kind of groups, *Theyyattam* cannot be done by a caste only by its own. Theyyam is not complete without the involvement and participation of all these groups and ethnicities including Muslims.

Castes like *Vannan*, *Malayan*, *Munnoottan*, *Anjoottaan*, *Velan*, *Koppalan*, *Pulayan*, *Maavilan* etc. which were considered as the lowest among the Shudras were having no kind of ownership or rights over the land or property. They lead a life completely relying on the other upper caste and anything and everything that they had were considered as the gifts given by the upper caste. They were given food in palm leaves and water in coconut shells by the upper caste. But still, when it comes to the *Theyyattam*, they were having some rights or '*Cheru-janmavakasham*'. Even today, the permission of a *Kolakkaran* (artist who performs Theyyam), called the *Janmari*, who is having this '*Cheru-janmavakasham*' is needed for performing certain Theyyams on some special occasions. Today, these kind of systems and beliefs only prevails in *Theyyattam*. Though these people were discriminated by the upper caste in the name of their race and untouchability, during the Theyyam performance every one including the upper caste and elites stands in front of the performer with folded hands.

Theyyam reflects the social status of the cultural zone in which caste was an important player. The irony is that many of the *Theyya-kolam* is aimed to mark a protest against social injustices including caste hegemony, untouchability, and inequality which existed in those days. *Pottan Theyyam* is one of such

performances. Drawing the story of Puranic sources, *Pottan Theyyam* narrates the conflict that is said to have occurred between Lord Shiva and Shankaracharya. The *Mari Theyyam* and *Puli-maranja Thondachan* narrates the stories of how the lower caste (particularly the *Pulaya* community) were assigned with the difficult task of curing deadly diseases of those times, by the upper caste. Such *Kolams* were attempts by the folk community of lower caste to register their world view.

Pottan Theyyam

Pottan Theyyam is a vivid, lively and colourful ritualistic dance which comes in the traditional art form of Theyyam, and is an essential part of the cultural mores of North Kerala. It's a form of resistance, symbolizing goodness that would wipe out the social evils in the community.

The '*Thottampattu*', the prologue chants by the Theyyam performer, believed as the teaching and blessings of the Almighty, keep the spectators in a mood of devotion and ardour, in a gesture of hands folded.

Social satire

The Theyyam re-enacts in ritualistic expressions the life of those people who had laid down their life for a social cause and is termed as a social satire. *Pottan Theyyam* is not at all an entertaining piece to lure the spectators, but the manifestation of the powerful deity to the believers. Even though it is a deity worshipped by all communities, the '*Pulaya*' and the '*Malaya*' castes have close affinity with the deity as they trace a strong bond with the Theyyam. And the Theyyam is performed mostly by the *Pulaya* community.

The Theyyam stands as a strong symbol against the caste system and inequality prevailed. It strongly opposes the system of untouchability. The Theyyam stands as an icon of protest against the wicked kind of caste and class systems. The *Pottan Theyyam* gives voice to the voiceless and an arena to perform their anger and protest against the evils of untouchability and slavery, it gives voice to the subjugated to speak out the social evils that plagued over their freedom and



Fig 3.1. Pottan Theyyam

the sufferings of the people who were denied of all kind of rights, it was the voice of the people who was having nothing other than poverty and starvation. It was the

voice of the people who were destined to work like slaves for feeding the so called upper class and getting nothing in return other than discrimination and subjugation.

Myth behind Pottan Theyyam

The myth behind the '*Pottan Theyyam*' is traced to Sree Sankaracharya. While he was preparing to climb the '*Sarwanjha Peedam*', considered to be the throne of knowledge, Lord Siva appeared disguised as a *Chandala* (Dalit), with the intention to test his knowledge and sincerity. Lord Siva came as '*PulaPottan*', accompanied by '*Pulachamundi*', Parvathi Devi and '*Pulamaruthan*', his minister Nadikesan. Sankaracharya asked them to get out of his way as there prevailed untouchability. '*Pottan*', who was Lord Siva in disguise, engaged Sankaracharya in a series of arguments. Lord Shiva disguised as *Chandala* asks Sankaracharya, "If there is a cut on the body, the blood will come out and the blood of mine and yours will have the same colour. So, what is the difference between us?" Sankaracharya then realizes that it is Lord Shiva who is examining his knowledge and kindness towards the humanity. "It is the same blood that flows through our veins and we all are human beings; as we have to live in unity." This teaching was the main message that Shiva offered to Sankaracharya.

Even now during the *Pottan Theyyam* performance, the performer chants all these teachings aloud to spread the message of humanity. There are a few other myths too in the emergence and performance of *Pottan Theyyam*.

Traditional costume and performance

A part of *Pottan Theyyam* performance is enacted on fire. When the Theyyam starts to perform, he is believed to be strengthened by the spiritual power of God and starts to perform by lying and dancing on the fire. He is in a frenzied stage, dressed in strands of tender coconut leaves tied around the body. The Theyyam throws himself into the red fiery heap of burning logs. By lying on the red hot firewood, he is paying his devotion to God and struggling to laugh. Obviously this traditional art form is an awesome performance and the devotees believe that God is destined to bless his people through *Pottan Theyyam*.

In Kannur and Kasaragod Districts, *Pottan Theyyam* performance is a religious ritual and is being performed in many temples annually. It is believed that *Pottan Theyyam* will bring prosperity to their region. There is also a belief that this special art performance has the divine power to wipe out troubles and bring health and wealth. Hence people regardless of caste and religion take part in the rituals in their ancestral homes or nearby temples.

Plagued by social evils

Thottampattu, the opening song of *Pottan Theyyam* performance in the old Malayalam jargon tells in a satirical story of a province that had sunk in caste and cult evils. It satirizes the social discrimination that exists in the modern society too. It is a teaching in a harsh tone, to the higher class, who had behaved badly to the lower class in the past. *Pottan Theyyam* performer chants that blood is red and all beings are the blessed gift of God and not to be diversified and fragmented by the caste systems. Moreover, the *Thottampaattu* of *Pottan Theyyam* is considered to be

the first lyrical form in Malayalam that talks aloud against the caste discrimination that prevailed in Kerala.

The Thottampattu of Pottan Theyyam performed by the *Pulaya* community is as follows.

“Polika Polika polika daivame, Polika polika daivama

Adiyi vechoru ariyum polika, Kathichu vechoru deepam polika

Ooru polika ulakam polika, Naadu polika nagaram polika.

Elaya Nokkan elapillerumilla, Kalikale nokkam kali pillerumilla

Arullathipolee punchakku kaval, Kavalai ninnathathu pottanaanallo-

*Puncha varambathu kaval nilkkunneram, Angunnoru chovare varavu
kanunnu*

Chorvare kute oru macherum undu, Macheru koode oru elenkoil undu

Elenkoyile kutiyoru thandnum undu, Thandayante kuteyoru koyilum undu

Varambathu pottane kandoru neram, Orathu paranju chovaru thanum

Vai thettu vay thettu chinnapulaya, Vai thettu vay thettu chinna pulayi

Ukkslu kuttindu thalayilu kallundu, lppuram mullundu appuram katundu

*Pinneppuram nangalu vai thirivandu, Aanappurarmkeri chovaru
pokumbam*

*Pothin puram kerī nankalum pokunnen, Pinnenthū chovvare kulam
pisakunne*

*nankale kothyalum chora thanne chovare, Pinneynthe neengal kulam
pishakunnen...”*

(Koyyal. Folk Artform of Kerala. 2016. Page no.209)

The *Thottampattu* of *Pottan Theyyam* is a verbal, but a vivid portrayal of the dark side of the caste system prevailed in the society and it raises a strong voice against the social evils and injustice on the basis of the caste and skin tone of man. It puts a strong fight against the wretched system of untouchability prevailed and against the behaviour of landlords towards the peasants and tenants. It portrays the sufferings of the people living in the lower levels of the society and also warns the so called upper castes or elites or the fair skinned people who leads a life of extravagance by eating the grains cultivated by the peasants and the people downtrodden in the names of their castes and skin colour that their sufferings will one day lit up and turn into fire and swipe away every social evils, plagues and injustice that is prevailing the society making the world free from the clutches and shades of caste system and bringing up the entire society under one community, that is the human community. It strongly portray out the idea of equality and oneness.

In the *Thottampattu* of *Pottan Theyyam*, *Pottan Theyyam* representing the lower caste people asks the upper caste elites with a lot of pain in disguise that, “If God created both of us in the same way with the same colour of blood, then why

he created the caste system and created divisions between us? Then why he separated us on the basis of colour?” it severely questions the unequal system where the peasants were denied all kind of rights, the system where they were not even considered as human beings, the system where they were not even allowed to walk through the streets, the system where they were not allowed to enter into the temple premises or walk through public roads, the system that gave them only sufferings and torture, which stood as a hegemon, taking away all their rights and making them work like slaves for feeding the so called elites and in turn giving them only mishaps and starvation.

Remembering the Great Figures

There are also Theyyams performed for commemorating the great personalities and figures including great and fierce warriors who were very talented with their unconquerable abilities and fortitude, who has fought and won great wars for the state and its people who died due to their misfortunes falling prey to cheatings and play of dirty politics. There are Theyyams of just and innocent people who lost their lives due to the wrong doings and immoralities of the biased and prejudiced society.

Vishnumurthy Theyyam:-

The *Vishnumurthy Theyyam* is performed as a protest against the cruelties and depravities of the upper caste people towards the lower caste people and it severely criticises the greed and wrong actions of the society. The legends of *Vishnumurthy Theyyam* is as follows

The most popular part of the *Vaishnava Theyyam* is the depiction of *Vishnumurthy*. It is associated with Nileshtar and Mangalore. It tells the story of Palanthai Kannan, a great devotee of Lord Vishnu. Palanthai Kannan, a native of Nileshtar in his boyhood, tried to pick mangoes from a mango tree owned by Kuruvat Kurup. Without considering his age or the thirst for food, Kuruvat Kurup and his bodyguards beat him and drove him away from Nileshtar. After that incident, Palanthai Kannan went to Mangalore and took shelter in a Vishnu temple there. When there, he obtained the blessings of Lord Vishnu and years later, he returned to his homeland, Nileshtar. On the way, Palanthai Kannan stayed one day in Moolapally in the house of a black smith and rested in the Kanakkappalli Anikkil Tharavadu. Then he proceeded to Kundon Kadavu and leaving his *Olakkuda* [umbrella] and *Churika* [shield], went to Kadalikulam [a pond] for taking bath. Within a short time the news of the arrival of Palanthai Kannan spread in the all across Nileshtar. Hearing the news, Kuruvat Kurup and his men came to the Kadalikulam and killed Palanthai Kannan. The God Vishnu who accompanied his ardent devotee Palanthai Kannan was provoked and destroyed everything near Kuruvat tharavad. Kuruvat Kurup was frightened and called an astrologer. He identified the presence of God and advised Kurup to a make a *Kettikkolam* for lord Vishnu and built a shrine for the God. Kuruvat Kurup and his family members build a shrine for the god Vishnu by carrying stones by themselves and also made a *Kettikkolam* for the God. That time onwards, he became known as the *SVishnumurthy* and began to reside in Vaikundeswara Temple, Kottappuram, in Nileshtwaram.



Fig. 3.2 Vishnumurthy Theyyam

Puthiya Bhagavathy:-

There are also Theyyams of other great people who were considered to having divine knowledge and power, who cured deadly diseases and mysterious maladies plighted during that time. Theyyams like *Puthiya Bhagavathy* are performed for protecting the devotees from deadly diseases like small pox, dangerous fevers and plagues etc.

The myth behind *Puthiya Bhagavathy Theyyam*:- *Puthiya Bhagavathy*, was originated from the Holy Fire (*Homakundam*). The lord Mahadeva was a happy living in heaven with his two daughters (*Chirumbamar*). They were born from the third divine eye of 'Lord Mahadeva'. Suddenly fatal disease spread out there and most of the members fell ill including 'Lord Mahadeva'. He decided to send his daughters to the earth and ordered his courtiers to conduct a kind of ritual called *Homam* (sacrificial fire) to eradicate the all evils. The *Patteris* were doing the rituals. It is believed that the Goddess Bhagavathy emerged from the fire and everyone narrated the situation prevailing there and the condition of the people and the purpose of eradicating the diseases. They offered fresh hen's blood to Bhagavathi to quench her thirst and as a miracle all evils and the chronic diseases disappeared from the destiny. It was described that further she came to earth in Kolathnadu (North Malabar) and blessed the people for a healthy peaceful life. To commemorate the divine power of the deity the then Chieftain of Kalathnadu 'Chirakkal Raja' ordered to perform '*Kolam*' and '*Thira*' (Theyyam Performance) of Bhagavathi and now-a-days most of the shrine in North Malabar perform this Theyyam.

Bhairavan Theyyam:-

The performance of *Bhairavan Theyyam* is a great incursion against the activities and the treacherous and unfaithful behaviour and doings of the Yogis or the elites and their uncouth activities as well as their abuse towards other people even after sawing all the things heaped by the hardwork of other people. The legend of the Theyyam is as follows.

Bhairavan Theyyam is a divine God of '*Pananmar*' and had a magical background. *Bhairavan Theyyam* is a favourite God of '*Pananmar*' and had an impressive myth regarding the deity. It is said that, 'Cheruthandathi' who is Cheruthandan's wife could not conceive a child and was following a strict meditation and fasting for forty one days by worshiping the God. During fasting she made an offering that she would feed thousand 'Yogis' in the Monastery. God 'Adinathan' blessed her and he made her prayer fulfilled by giving a male child 'Cheeralan'. Seven years old 'Cheeralan' had his primary education and before sending him to higher studies they decided to gratify the divine offerings they made. 'Cheruthandan' visited the Monastery for inviting the 'Yogis' but he was astonished by seeing the reckless and immoral scene there and he cursed them. Irritated 'Yogis' pledged to take revenge by demanding the blood and bone of 'Cheeralan' for the feast. Helpless 'Cheruthandan' had to obey them and he killed the young 'Cheeralan' and served to 'Yogis'. When they start to eat them all could see the bones were trembling from their vessel. They were all frightened and decided to conduct a *pooja* and to gratify the God. But the thing was quite different and they saw 'Cheeralan' emerging from the fire pit along with some other deities like *Agni Bhairavan*, *Yogi Bhairavan*, *Sakthi Bhairavan* and *Adi Bhairavan*. 'Yogis' decided to worship all these deities as their divine God.

Commemorating the Great warriors

The legends of *Kathivanoor Veeran* and *Kandanar Kelan* depicts the story of great and powerful warriors who lost their lives due to their misfortunes and cheating by others. These Theyyams are performed with acrobatics to venerate their

greatness. These Theyyams are performed as tribute to commemorate the great souls.

Kathivanoor Veeran or Mangad Mannappan:-

The story of origin goes in this fashion. A person called Mannappan who hail from Mangad, in Kannur district and belong to *Theeya* caste, later became divine and performed as Theyyam widely known as *Kathivanoor Veeran*. Mannappan was born to Kumarappan and Chakky couples. The naughty nature of Mannappan leads him to be a headache for the family. One day Mannappan was forced to exile from his home and travel towards the Kodagu currently known by the name Coorg.

Though he had set out along with friends, they intoxicated him and thus Mannappan was set alone. Mannappan, with the help of a female called Chemmarathy found his relative in Coorg and got settled there.

Mannappan started living by farming there and became an able youth farmer. When it became time for the marriage, Mannappan decided to marry the female whom he met on his way to Coorg, called Chemmarathy. Soon, they got married. Mannappan used to travel long distance for the farming jobs he had. Chemmarathy used to argue with her husband when he came home late.

One day warriors in Kodagu area started war on the area. Chemmarathy challenged the strength of Mannappan to fight the warriors. She openly announced that Mannappan would not be able to survive a battle. Mannappan was an able warrior. He set out for the war and continued his way to battle field. Mannappan

fought with all his experience and the enemies fled. On his way back, he found that one of his fingers and finger ring were lost in the battle field. Mannappan went back to battle field to fetch them back. Kodagu warriors were hiding in the battle field and they adopted unfair means to end Mannappan. He was killed in the battle field by unethical manner. Mannappan's relatives gathered and decided to burn him in the graveyard. Chemmarathy who could not bear the demise, gave up her life along with the burning body of Mannappan. And thus Mannapan and Chemmarathy were considered divine and performed as Theyyam. *Kathivanoor Veeran* was the name given to this Theyyam. *Kathivanoor Veeran* Theyyam is widely acclaimed for its physical and acrobatic performance. *Kathivanoor Veeran Theyyam* is usually performed during the night time or early morning. The courtyard where *Kathivanoor veeran* is performed will be decorated with a special basement, called *Chemmarathy Thara*. Above this a lot of decorations are done using the stem of banana plant. *Vellattom* of *Kathivanoor Veeran Theyyam* will be displaying a lot of *Kalari* steps.

Kandanar Kelan:-

Kandanar Kelan was a warrior. The story is that, once Kandanar Kelan was out hunting in the forest when suddenly the forest caught fire. Finding no other means of escape, he climbed a tree. This tree was also the home of two snakes. The fire consumed the tree, the snakes and Kandanar Kelan. Wayanat Kulavan, another warrior god was passing by the burnt forest when he saw the image of Kandanar Kelan in the ashes. With his bow he traced out Kandanar Kelan and gave him life. The Theyyam is an embodiment of the Kandanar Kelan and how he shows his anger

towards the fire for burning him up. The Theyyam very prominently has two snakes drawn on his chest that depict the snakes that perished with him in the fire. *Kandanar Kelan* runs through the fire dressed in his silk and wearing metal anklets, perhaps the only Theyyam to do so. The rest of the Theyyams who interact with fire like the *Uchitta Bhagavathy* wear costumes made of tender coconut leaves. *Kandanar Kelan Theyyam* is performed yearly at the 'Nambiar Makkuni Tharawad' at Azhikode, Kannur district. Regularly, the *Kandanar Kelan Theyyam* is performed as a part of the *Wayanat Kulavan Theyyamket Utsavam*. There was an interesting ritual in olden days. Hundreds of hunters would go to the nearby forest and capture large numbers of animals. The hunted animals were cut into pieces in front of the *Kandanar Kelan Theyyam*. The *Marapilarkal* ritual attracts thousands of people. The Theyyam then would leap over a huge pile of dead animals.

Wayanatt Kulavan

The most energetic and lithe warrior Theyyam, *Wayanattu Kulavan* is performed by the artist wearing a false eye which makes him partially blind. The lore of the Theyyam says that the Theyyam was cursed by Lord Shiva to become blind because of his incorrect doings and was sent to earth. The tales and performance of the Theyyam can be said as a platform that removes the blindness created by the tendencies of people to do wrong and erroneous actions and their greedy deeds and stands as a symbol of virtuousness indoctrinating people with noble and worthy conducts to take them away from the shadows of evil and depraved deeds.

Wayanatt Kulavan can be considered as one of the most furious and acrobatic Theyyams which are performed. The ferocious state is expressed in a comical way. Theyyam is usually performed with a bit of holy alcohol called Toddy. *Wayanatt Kulavan* is believed to be originated when Lord Shiva and Parvathi took the form of Hunters. The tale of origin is associated with Lord Shiva and Parvathi. Once they were travelling through forest called Madhuvanam. *Madhu* means Toddy (Alcohol) and *Vanam* means Forest. Lord Shiva used to consume the toddy that used to drip from the trees (During those days, toddy used to drip from the bottom of the trees). Parvathi disliked this habit. One day when Shiva went for the intake, he found that the toddy which used to drip from the bottom had gone upwards. This agitated him. Shiva became furious. This trick was in fact done by Parvathi Devi. In order to fetch the toddy, Shiva created a divine person, by tapping on his thigh. This divine person is considered as the son of Shiva, Son was assigned the task of fetching toddy from top of the tree. He got on top of the tree and started having the toddy himself. Lord Shiva warned him not to have toddy from Madhuvanam. The son ignored the warning and continued the consumption. Lord Shiva became angry with this and cursed the son to go blind. Later he was provided with "False Eyes" and sent to earth to protect the people. It was in Wayanad where he first descended on the way to earth. He was thus called Wayanad Kulavan or Wayanatt Kulavan. Wayanatt Kulavan who was destined to fetch toddy for Lord Shiva had a lot of followers and *Theeya* caste seems to be originated in this way. *Wayanatt Kulavan Theyyam* is usually performed during the night time with the aid of light generated by lighting the dry coconut leaves torch(chootta or choott) During the first journey of *Wayanatt Kulavan Theyyam*, the torch gets lit off and Theyyam

threw the torch as well as the silver eye(False eye). The place where the torch and the silver eye fell is now a holy place and *Wayanatt Kulavan Theyyam* is usually performed yearly at this place. Hunting is an inevitable act in *Wayanatt Kulavan Theyyam* performance.

All these Theyyams are performed for social good and the lore, legends and *Thottampattu* of all these Theyyams in a way or other is a depiction of the hardships and sufferings of the just and innocent people who are being deprived and downtrodden by the unjust and partial society and the systems and raises its voice in a harsh and a solid way aiming to drive away the shadows of evilness piled over the society and to bring out a world free from all kinds of immoralities, corruption and wickedness for creating a fair, unbiased and unprejudiced society introducing a strong feeling of oneness in the minds of each and every spectator.

Mappila Theyyam

Another striking feature of the Theyyam ritual is its secular influence. Though mainly a ritual by Hindu lower-caste communities, almost all communities take part in the *Kaliyattam*. In many places, the Muslim community also takes part in it. Nirkilakadu Shrine (Kasargode district), Kamballur Kotta Nair Tharavadu, Arikadi Bhagavathy Kshetram (Kumbala), Pulikkunnu Ivar Bhavathi Kshetram (Kasargode), Mauveni Kovilakam Devi Kshetram, Koolom Bhagavathy Kshetram (Maloth), Pekatam Kshetram (Thrikarippur), Koorankunnu Kshetram (Pazangode in Cherukunnu village of Kannur district), etc., are some of such shrines. There are also a variety of *Kolams* called *Mappila Theyyam*. *AliTheyyam*, *Kalanthan Mukkri*,

Ummachi Theyyam, *Ettikulathu Neythiyar Beevi Theyyam*, *Bappuran*, etc., are some of the Mappila Theyyams performed in these shrines. Mappila Theyyakkolams are usually performed by *Mavilan* community. And most of the Mappila Theyyams are associated with myths of *Chamundi* Theyyams.

The myth of the Mukkri Pokkar or Kalanthan Mukkri Theyyam is as follows

Kallambur Kotta Tharavadu is one of the oldest Nair family home located in Kallambur village in Kasaragod district. The tharavadu (ancestral family home) was more than 700 years old and the family was having around 15,000 acres of land starting from Kodagu district of the present day Karnataka to Perumbatta, Kasaragod. A huge granary was also there near to the tharavadu for storing the food grains including cereals and pulses harvested from the fields. During those days, almost all the people relied on the tharavadu for food grains as most of the people worked as peasants in the fields owned by the tharavadu. The entire area near to tharavadu was thick forest and only a small area of land owned by the family was used for cultivation and the main crop cultivated was paddy. For that reason, it was very difficult for the family members and peasants to reach outskirts of the land and they had to walk through the forest for almost 3 hours to Payyannur for getting a medical help in emergency conditions or if somebody got ill. So the family was having a storage of huge variety of medicinal herbs within the granary which could be used for curing diseases. So the entire population of that area relied on the family for medicines as well. There was a small shrine of Goddess Bhagavathy near to the tharavadu and *Kari Chamundi* was the deity and the shrine was considered as the

guardian of the tharavadu and locals. *Kari Chamundi* Theyyam was performed every year for the welfare of the people and the family members.

Once, Sainudheen and his friends reached Kallambur for the propagation of Muslim religion. They were welcomed by family members of the tharavadu and was given all the facilities to them including a shed for carrying out their prayers and other rituals. As they were non vegetarians and whole of the entire village was vegetarians, they bought a small area of land for lease from the tharavadu near Pulingottu River for harvesting fish from the river. The tharavadu members also built them a mosque and gave all assistance for the Muslims to carry out the Uroos (festival) in the mosque. And the date for carrying out the Uroos festival each year was only declared after getting permission from the senior most member of the tharavadu and this is still followed even today.

After the death of Kalandan Mukkri, who was one of the member of Muslim family who was having a close relation with the tharavadu, as a tribute to him, his Theyyam was also performed along with the *Kari Chamundi* Theyyam in the Bhagavathy shrine. Even today *Mukkri Pokkar* Theyyam is performed in the Kallambur Tharavadu shrine. *Mukkri Pokkar* Theyyam performs Niskara (Namas / prayers performed by the Muslim community) and Aazan (prayers chanted loudly from the mosques)

The Mappila Theyyam performed in Koolom Bhagavathy temple in Kannur district is also having a similar kind of story. The Theyyam is considered as the soul of Koyi Muhammed who was killed during an accident while he was cutting a tree which was considered to be having the holly essence of *Mala*

Chamundi, the deity of the temple, and tree fell above his body. And after this incident, his Theyyam was also performed along with the *Mala Chamundi* Theyyam.

This shows a great sign of secularism and respect towards other religions that the people had during those times. Even though Theyyam is a ritualistic art form and mostly related to Hindu mythology and ideologies, the entire village community, crossing the barriers of caste and creed, take part in these rituals and the festival.

Chapter Four

Theyyam, Women and Nature

Women in Theyyam

A striking feature of Theyyam is the presence of large number of female deities. Many of such deities are drawn from the folk life the area. In almost all shrines and Kaavus in the Northern Malabar region, female deities are worshiped mainly. The story or the myth, performance, *Thottam* songs, costumes, etc. give a rare insight into the life of women of those days. So it is understood that in Theyyam performance women characters were given equal or more importance even though the performance is usually carried out by men. India being a patriarchal society where male domination is seen everywhere, in every field and every aspect of life and women are always oppressed and always being objectified and considered as inferior to men in every fields making them more concerned about their inability than their abilities making them more weak and those who stood against this pattern of patriarchy where either being disregarded or have become prey for the social evils. It was the same all the time. And being in a society downtrodden by caste system, the women who are living in the lower levels of the society or the peasants, constituting the lower castes are dual oppressed. They are oppressed by the ties of caste system as well as they are oppressed for the reason that they are born as a female. They are oppressed by the men of upper castes and by the men of their class as well.

The myth of Muchilot Bhagavathy Theyyam is a vivid portrayal of the sufferings of a girl who was member of the elite upper caste family.

Muchilot Bhagavathy

Muchilot Bhagavathy is the source of immense knowledge and prosperity. There are several stories about her. Some believe that she emerged from the sweat of Lord Shiva while he was performing his dance *Thandava*. According to another more popular story, she was a Brahmin virgin who possessed a great knowledge of Vedas. None could match her skills in rapid arguments and counter arguments. One day Peringellur Mootha Gurukkal, a well-read Brahmin and his disciples, challenged the *Naaduvazhi* (local ruler) to beat them in a discussion about the Vedas. The *Naaduvazhi* sought the help of this Brahmin girl. People were amazed to see a little girl trying the challenge a group of well-known scholars. The arguments went on for two days. Every question thrown at her was answered very skilfully by the girl. Her arguments and counter arguments stunned the Gurukkal and he became envious of her and started to fear that the girl might pose a big threat for him. Hence they hatched a plan to trap the girl. When it became clear that they were going to lose, they decided to trap her somehow.

They asked her two questions: What is the most excruciating pain? What is the greatest pleasure? The Brahmin girl could not see through the traps that were set off for her. To the first question she innocently replied 'labour pain' and to the second question she replied 'erotic pleasure'. This is exactly what they wanted to hear. The Gurukkal asked her how she could give these answers with such firmness. She being a virgin couldn't have known either. They claimed that she was not a

virgin. She was expelled from her own house. This painful experience proved too much for the young girl to bear. She left her home and walked towards the north, hungry and tired. She finally reached Karivellur Shiva temple and prayed to lord Shiva standing on burning coals. At the same time a *Vaniya* was passing by with a pot of oil. She asked him to pour oil on to the coal. He did as requested and the girl disappeared in the ensuing fire.

This Brahmin girl become a Goddess and descended on earth. She reached Pernijallor and entered Muchilodan Padanayars home and drank water from Muchilodan's *Manikkinar*(sacred well).

Kadangode Makkam

The tragic story of *Kadangode Makkam* and her Children were really heart touching and sensational. The myth is related to a girl child who was born in Kadangode family of Kunhimangalam. 'Unni-chery' couple had twelve children. But they were depressed of not having a girl child. After long years of continuous offering to the devotees, a girl child was born to the couple and she was named as Makkam. She had been blessed with the love and care from the whole family. Moreover, she was blessed with immense beauty. As she was brought up, they educated her properly and she was married one of her relative. She had two children 'Chaathu and Cheeru. Being one and only sister for twelve brothers, she and her children had been blessed and cared by her brothers and parents. 'Kadangode' family a lot of assets and properties and thus the wives of the brothers became scared, as they thought that all the properties will be taken by Makkam and her children. They got jealous of Makkam, for getting much love and care from her

brothers as well her husband. They all together planned to curse her and finally to expel Makkam and her children from the family. They were waiting for a chance to deceive her. Once, as all the brothers went a war, Makkam was left alone in the home. During that time, there came a *Vaniya* guy called Emman to the house with gingelly oil as an offering to the almighty. He entered the house and kept the oil inside the house with the permission of Makkam. Her brothers' wives saw this and cooked up a story between Makkam and Emman.

When The brothers came back with a great victory in the war but they became surprised and desperate after hearing the bad news from their wives about Makkam, But except one brother of Makkam, named 'Kuttiraman' and his wife 'Chinnani' never believed this made up story. The furious brothers (except Kuttiraman) decided to kill her and all the brothers decided to go for "Kottayam Vilakku", a festival along with Makkam and her children and decided to kill them on the way. During the journey she was told about the divine magic lamp inside a well which is quite a long away. But she could fore-see the fate and what was going to happen and prepares her mind to face the contingencies going to happen. After visiting 'Kalarivathukkal' temple they walked a long distance along with the small kids. They reached a place called 'Ammu Parambu', as the kids felt hungry and thirsty, they asked for water. Makkam said her brothers that her kids felt thirsty and requested to arrange water for them. By pointing a dirty pond nearby, the older brother replied Makkam to take enough water from there. After hearing this, she became depressed and said 'no', in a lower but intense voice. Suddenly saw a house called 'Chala Puthiya Veetil' and she decide to get water from there

and she reached there with her kids. An old lady, was sitting in front of the house, the old lady became sad and sympathetic after seeing the pathetic condition of kids and Makkam. The old lady went inside and gave enough milk for her children instead of water. They drunk the entire milk and make the vessel empty. Makkam removed all her ornaments and kept it inside the vessel and gave it to the old lady who was good enough to give milk to her children and told her that she would take it back on her return. They continued their journey and reached a place called 'Mambaram Palam' (bridge). The brothers showed Makkam a well and told her to watch inside the well properly to see the magic lamp blinking. When she looked in to the well, they beheaded her children and her and dumped their body in the well. A *Mavilan* boy was watching this and they killed him and also dumped his body in the well. Fortnight, all the brothers reached their houses. After hearing the tragic death of Makkam and her children the wives of the brothers became very happy. But soon after, the Kadangode house caught on fire, burning lights began to fall from the sky and except Makkam's younger brother Kuttiraman and his wife Chinnani, the fire ate everything

After this incident, the family members of the old lady who gave her milk decided to perform the Theyyam of Makkam and her kids as they felt some kind of divinity around their house. To commemorate this incident, the Theyyam of Makkam and her children are performed in the Chala Putiya Veedu once in every year during the month of February by the Mavilan community.

The legends of both *Muchilot Bhagavathy* and *Kadangode Makkam* depicts the importance of gender equality. In the society where the other gender is always

subjugated and oppressed, The legends of these Theyyams stands as a foray of protest against the wild and barren behaviour of the patriarchal society which does not allow the dreams and abilities of the other gender to blossom. Both Theyyam honours the great lady figures who had indomitable intelligence and great willpower, who stood like an unbreakable wall with all their strong determination and strength of will against the storm of subjectivity and sufferings, who lost their life falling prey to the monstrosity of the politics of the patriarchal society.

Eco-feminism

It is believed that all these female deities and Theyyams evolved from the heritage of worshipping female Goddesses. Other than the worshipping of female deities and great warriors, there are Theyyams performed to please Nagas or snakes and certain animals. As most of the *Kaavus* where Theyyams are performed are a part of the forest and home to a large number of flora and fauna, it was essential for the people to worship the forest and its creatures for getting protection from snake bites and other stings.

In every society where the worshipping of female deities prevailed, the people were having a contented life closely in relation with nature and by protecting it. They considered the nature and the earth as their own mother. In countries like Babylonia, Egypt, Estonia, Iran, Armenia, Mexico and Peru etc., the earth is and the nature is regarded as mother just like that of in India. In certain countries Goddesses or female deities are worshipped in different names like, Dimeter, Persephone, Attis, and Ishtar etc. (Santhosh. *Sthreethwam*. 2011)

Along with the worship of female deities, the worshipping of male deities also began in the world afterwards. And the world slowly began to move from a matrilineal society to a patrilineal society and hence there arose a male dominated system where females became subjugated and downtrodden. And thus, it in turn affected the relationship between nature and human beings and men began to dominate over the nature as well. The Aryans were following a patrilineal system of worship. It is believed that the concept of 'Amman' in the southern Indian society led to the worshipping of female deities in the Kerala society. And all over India, the female deities are known in different colloquial names. There are over 120 Bhagavathy Theyyams performed in the Northern Malabar.

The term eco-feminism was introduced by French writer Franois de Ubon in 1974. Eco-feminism came as there arose certain similarity between the exploitation and threats faced by women and the nature. When we look at the word 'ecology', or the terms like 'bio' and 'environment', it is very clear that these terms are very much related with women. According to Susan Griffin (eco feminists), "the human life will reach in an equilibrium only if the nature and women are protected." The Gaia Hypothesis introduced by the former NASA scientist Dr. James Lovelock states that "the earth is not a mere ball of rock and soil without a soul, it can think and make changes to itself according to the conditions." Or The Gaia hypothesis in a scientific way can be termed as an ecological hypothesis proposing that "the biosphere and the physical components of the Earth (atmosphere, cryosphere, hydrosphere and lithosphere) are closely integrated to

form a complex interacting system that maintains the climatic and biogeochemical conditions on Earth in a preferred homeostasis.”

In the primitive society, the tribes were leading a life considering women as a symbol of nature, and women were considered as fields where men saw the fields. Pooram which is a festival that is still prevailing in Northern Malabar region of Kerala and the festival was conducted for better harvesting of crops. The festival which is conducted in the month of April as a part of the tribute towards the *Kamadeva* (the God of love) by the young girls by making figures of *Kamadeva* using mud and gobar and putting flowers. The festival is also known the festival of flowers. The game called *Poorakkali* which is a crucial element of the festival, which is a kind of dance performed by the women during those days, are performed by men these days and the reason for this conversion is easily understood, as the change in the structure of society into a patriarchal one, from a society where female deities were worshipped and the nature was considered as mother, to a society where male is dominated in all aspects of life controlling the wealth and agriculture.

Theyyam and nature

The life of villagers in Northern Malabar completely relies on farming, mainly on paddy cultivation. They worshipped paddy fields and agriculture. Earlier, there were two methods adopted for cultivation. One method was by cutting down the forest and putting fire to it, which doesn't need an external source of water and fertilizers. This method was commonly known as '*Punam Krishi*'. The other method was by planting crops in the bare land and by providing sufficient water

and fertilizers from the nearby sources. But today only the second method prevails. For a better yielding of crops, Theyyam is performed. The villagers believe that they will be showered with blessings of God and their crops will be protected.

Punam Krishi was done only once in every twelve years and the crops cultivated was paddy, pulses, lentils, vegetables, etc. *Punam Krishi* always provided the farmer with a higher yield. Cultivating in the forest was often adventurous and moreover, very dangerous too. They always feared the attack of wild animals and some mysterious maladies. So the farmers always prayed to their deities with great devotion for protecting them from those misfortunes. They always prayed to Lord Ganapathy before starting cultivation in order to avoid any mishaps during the entire process of agriculture.

After the harvesting of crops, Theyyams were performed in the paddy fields. Now, this type of Theyyam performance is rarely seen. During the beginning of cultivation and at the end of harvesting, these types of ritual arts are performed to please the Gods and to show their gratitude towards the deities.

Most of the Theyyams are closely associated with agriculture, hunting and animal husbandry. One such Theyyam which is also known as the hero of *Punam Krishi* is *Periyat Kandar Theyyam*. The legends of this Theyyam talks about a man called Kandar, who went to the mountains to do *Punam Krishi* along with his three nephews. While his nephews were working, Kandar sat down under the shade of a tree and started chanting the lines of a book that he had. The nephews were very fond of his chanting skills and wanted to be like him. As their uncle took a nap under the tree, one of them

took the book and tried to chant the lines just like his uncle. But he failed miserably and was not able to control his anger for not being able to chant the book. So, with the help of his axe, he thwarted the book into pieces. Only after that he thought of the outcome when his uncle gets up. He was scared and wished that his uncle would never wake up again. So he burned his uncle alive while he was at sleep along with the book. After this incident, mishaps and maladies spread in the area. So it was decided to perform his Theyyam. And the people of *Mavilar* caste performed the Theyyam. (Sreedharan A. *Chilambitta Ormakal*, 1997).

Gods in Sacred Groves

The sacred place where Theyyam takes place is known as “*Kaavu*”. *Kaavu* is the traditional name given for sacred groves. These sacred places are given religious and cultural importance as it is believed to be the resting place of the deities. There will be a pedestal within the *Kaavu* which is imagined as the divine position. So the entire atmosphere of *Kaavu* is filled with divine spirit and positive energy.

Although the name is commonly referred to as sacred forests, the *Kottam*, *Mundia* and *Ara* of Kerala were worshiped as it is a place of great spiritual value. In these parts of Kerala, there are also *Kaavus* associated with Goddess worship and serpent worship. The retention of holy forests is not just the identity of Kerala but the cultural identity of our country. In various states of India, there are holy places in different names. Devarai in Maharashtra, Devarkad in Karnataka, Orance

in Rajasthan, Kenri, Sarana in Bihar are some among them. The *Kaavus* in Kerala are mainly concentrated at sea level.

Beliefs and Elicitations

Although the sacred groves in Kerala have been reduced in number today, the main reason for the total elimination is the spiritual belief that the communities are holding and the prohibitions and taboos that exist in its constituency. The massive increase in population and rapid urbanization are the main reasons for the decline in the number of *Kaavus*. In recent times, believers have cut down trees in the forest, making them more accessible, and for making the *Kaavu* and temples so beautiful so that the area of sacred shrines has reduced. This does not happen at some places as there are some restrictions based on faith. The efforts of environmental activists have also saved some of the *Kaavus* and sacred groves.

It is believed that entering into the *Kaavu* and using them for personal purposes will result in God's anger and will in turn result in adversities and misfortunes. And there even exists a lot of superstition-lore about certain *Kaavus*. There are only a few sacred shrines in North Malabar, where some folk values exist. In Thavidassery Kaavu (near Payyannur) which is one of the five most sacred divinities in Kerala people are only allowed on the day of *Samkramam*. In this region, the Thavidassery Kaavu still stands without danger due to the strong faith of people. There are more than 120 *Kaavus* in Kannur, Kasaragod districts of Kerala with many flora and fauna including rare medicinal plants.

It is estimated that about 200 species of plants are kept within 10 cents in the extent of 60 acres. Among these about 150 varieties are found as herbs. There are also 90 species of birds including twenty varieties of migrants and 76 species of butterflies in eight categories. About 12 species of mammals and 20 varieties of reptiles are also seen here. (U P Santhosh. *Theyyam Prakrithi Sthreethwam*. 2011)

Worshipping Trees

A culture that conveys Goddess in the trees and in beasts can be called as a part of the importance that the Indian society has given to the environment and nature. Tree Worship is part of the Keralite culture and is a continuation of this Indian tradition. There are special lores which show the presence of Goddess in *Theyyattam*. Goddesses are present in two ways. One is permanent called “*Sheshipedal* (remnants)” and the other is temporary called “*Olivalaral* (littering)”. The ‘Remnants’ are worshipping Goddess in *Kaavu*, *Mundya*, *Ara*, *Kottam* etc. At the same time, *Olivalaral* is worshipping the trees and animals. The tree worship has survived in all ancient civilizations. The Europeans worshiped the oak tree. In ancient times there were many penal laws against deforestation. Some of the trees were related to certain beliefs of various groups. It is believed that some of the Goddesses live on the trees or on the leaves of the tree. So they worship the trees in their forests.

Chembaka Maram (plumeria tree) has a special significance in the northern Malabar region because of the presence of *Gulikan Theyyam*. Neem tree has been

worshipped since it is believed that *Kaali* is formed from it. Keralites believe that Goddess is located in *Ezhilampaala*.

In Kerala, before climbing a tree it has been a custom to get the blessing from the tree. And once when the tree has to be cut, the person apologises to the tree. Cutting down the sacred trees was considered a sin during the ancient times. In ancient Kerala, Holy place were surrounded by trees and herbs with great medicinal values. Banyan tree, *Chembakam*, Fig tree, *Koovalam* tree, *Ezhilampala*, *Parijaatham* etc. are being considered as Holy trees.

Theyyam and Trees

Relationship between trees and Theyyam are inseparable. The rural people in the Northern Kerala have faith that all trees have the presence of Goddess. Therefore, even if trees have to be cut down as it is needed for *Theyyattam*, they will pray to the Goddess to move out of the tree. The legends and the beliefs prove that the presence of different Theyyams are found in different trees and plants. Some examples are:

1) *Muthappan*:- The divine presence of Lord Muthappan is first seen in *Kanjiram* (Snakewood tree). A person of *Vannan* caste, while fishing, saw a bright Golden arrow on the Snake wood tree at the bank of Parassinikadavu River. When he conveyed this to others, they found that it is due to the presence of Lord Muthappan and that place was hence meant for Lord Muthappan and *Muthappan Oottum Vellattam* used to take place even now.

2) *Muchilotu Bhagavathy*:- It is believed that the divine presence of *Muchilot Bhagavathy* is seen in *Karimbana*(palm tree).

3) *Gulikan Theyyam*:- the presence of *Gulikan Theyyam* is seen in *Chembaka Maram*.

It can be easily understood by studying the life and the background of the lives of the people to whom which Theyyam is a part of their life and the surroundings where Theyyams are performed, that these people live in a close harmony with nature. They live by completely understanding the nature and the environment as well as they relies on the nature for carrying out their day to day life and routines. The deities of Theyyam has control over the people as well as nature as every aspect of Theyyam is closely in relation with nature and its aspects, as everything that is used in Theyyam was obtained from nature and Theyyam was mostly performed in *Kaavus* or the natural ecological hotspots.



Fig. 4.1 Theyyam standing beside a dried up pond (the photo got special jury mention in the Kerala state photography competition 2017) -

Source: www.keralacm.gov.in

There is a saying that “*Kaavu theendiyal kulam vattum, ninte kulam mudiyum*” which means that if the sacred grooves or the hotspots gets destroyed, it will lead to severe drought, the ponds will dry up and the generations will wither away. The above photo substantiates the harsh reality. So it is of at most importance that the sacred groves must be protected for saving the human race from falling into another nightmare of severe drought.

As a result of immigration of the Christians from the southern part of Kerala, the area of forest and the number of fauna in the mountainous region of Malabar, especially Kannur got a decline. This has also affected the tribal groups in the area and also put an end to the *Punam Krishi*. Thus it weakened the bond between the nature and the natives and a number of Theyyams which they performed got disappeared as the natives were forced to live in colonies where they started to forget their rich and vibrant tradition and art form. People immigrated from Thiruvithamkoor (currently known as Thiruvananthapuram) and Kottayam bought acres of land from the Malabari landlords who were having a huge area of land under them, for a cheap rate and started cultivating cash crops like rubber and cashew by cutting down the forest in the deeds of having huge profit as well as vast deforestation in the name of development in these areas which lead to the disappearance of ecological hotspots and sacred grooves in the forest along with the traditions and culture of people who were evicted from their homeland. But still, *Theyyattam* is having a crucial role in protection of a number of sacred groves in these regions from the clutches of foreign invasion, which helps to keep the customs and traditional art form of Theyyam known to the younger generation without losing its glory.

Chapter Five

Conclusion

The current generation does not follow the measurements and calculations used by the ancient people to give colours and shape to Theyyam. Every Theyyam has unique facial make-up, costumes, ornaments, head gears and body make-up. Every Theyyam is connected with a myth. Theyyam can even enchant atheists with its power and vividness.

The essence of nature shapes up each and every aspect of Theyyam or in another sense; both Theyyam and nature are two sides of the same coin. The beauty of Theyyam and nature are beyond words. The materials used in every aspect of Theyyam are derived from nature. The make-up which is done by lying on bed made by laying tender coconut leaves on the ground connects the body and mind of Theyyam artists to the nature. And the *Kaavus* where Theyyams are conducted are great ecological hotspot and all these shows that nature and Theyyam are very much related and mutually depended on each other. And Theyyam these days are having a huge role in protecting the sacred groves from external human invasion.

Man worshipped nature before Theyyam came into practice. As time progressed, people began to worship symbols carved out of stones, wood and metals. After a series of thoughts, they identified that symbols cannot show the emotions, so man himself wore the avatar of Theyyam. Theyyam with the escort of beats and intonations of *chenda* and *thudi* in the background performs mesmerizing and vigorous dance. History and manuscripts became *Thottam Pattu*.

Theyyams are performed for social good and the lore, legends and *Thottampattu* of all these Theyyams in a way or other is a depiction of the hardships and sufferings of the just and innocent people who are being deprived and downtrodden by the unjust and partial society and the systems and raises its voice in a harsh and a solid way aiming to drive away the shadows of evilness piled over the society and to bring out a world free from all kinds of immoralities, corruption and wickedness for creating a fair, unbiased and unprejudiced society introducing a strong feeling of oneness in the minds of each and every spectator.

Practicing of Theyyam helped to create strong bonds between different castes and creeds. Thus it helped to loosen the ties of discrimination and subjectivity on the basis of race and gender. Theyyams which are performed by lower caste began to practice even in the *illams* (mansions) of the elite Brahmins. *Mappila Theyyams* (Muslim Theyyams) which chants the lines of Holy Quran by entering into the temple shrine and performing Namas. Theyyams that visited Mosques spread religious unity and avoided the discords between different religions castes and creeds. The farmers and the elites joined hand in hand to create a new culture and history.

Even though Theyyam is a ritualistic art form and mostly related to Hindu mythology and ideologies, the entire community, crossing the barriers of caste and creed, and religion take part in these rituals and the festival with great feeling of oneness and joy. And also made the hegemon of the caste system banish as the vibrancy and the respect towards Theyyam made the people even from the so called

upper caste and elites to worship and to stand hands folded with devotion during the Theyyam performance.

So *Theyyattam* is having a wider dimension than just being an art form pleasing the eyes. It stood for gender and social equality giving importance to both genders. It raised a strong voice against the caste system prevailed in the society and the atrocities and oppressions by the so called upper castes and elites against the people who were browbeaten in the society. Theyyam stands as a foray of protest against untouchability and slavery and puts up a fight for getting back their denied rights, most importantly the right to live like a human being and also against the wild and barren behaviour of the patriarchal society which does not allow the dreams and abilities of the other gender to blossom. As in course of time, the entire system had changed and the people from the lower castes and the downtrodden are getting more and better opportunities in every field of life and the role of art forms like Theyyams in bringing up these kind of changes to the society and undeniable.

But the art form of Theyyam still holds up its relevance and significance in the society rather than shrinking into a sphere of an just an art form with aesthetic beauty, even though southern migration and destruction of the ecological hotspots and *Kaavus* as well as the new generation moving away from these kinds of traditions, in search of new and more westernised way of life poses a threat to these rich traditions.

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