

Pottan Theyyam: Gods Dancing on Earth

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This research tries to analyse the reasons behind the theyyam performance and also how it leads to the eradication of the suppression of the upper caste over lower caste. Theyyam is an art form mainly found in northern parts of Kerala. The theyyam performers are considered to be deities during the performance. Theyyam is performed by the lower caste community of the society. This research analyses pottan theyyam which is considered to be an art form which eradicates suppression. The theory used is the conflict theory by Karl Marx. Also it tells how this art form has influenced people all throughout.

Keywords:-Pottan Theyyam, dalit community, conflict theory, eradication of suppression.

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Theyyam is a cultural art form mainly seen in the northern parts of Kerala. Mainly in the district of Kannur and Kasargod and also there are more than 450 theyyams altogether. Theyyam is an embodiment of protest. Tree worship paved way for the upcoming of the “*kavu.*” *Paala*”, “*Chembakam*”, “*Plaavu*”, “*kaanjiram*”, “*elanji*” and “*arayaal*” were the trees that were worshipped in “*kavus.*” “*Kavus*” are sacred groves. Theyyam is usually performed in these “*kavus.*” There are varieties of theyyam among which the pottan theyyam and pulimarinja theyyam are directly of the social oppression. Theyyam is mostly performed by the Dalits mainly the pulaya’s. They were vegetarians and survived on gruel. Theyyam was a protest against all the suppression they suffered. The performance is a symbolic of the protest. The most attractive part of theyyam is the dance, by male members of the lower community. These were people who were considered to be untouchables and considered theyyam as a medium to speak out social oppression imposed on them. This research will look into “Pottan Theyyam”. “Pottan Theyyam” is known as the “*manthra murthi*” or the God of people. “Pottan Theyyam” starts with “*thottam pattu*” which is the ballad song sung before the night “Pottan Theyyam” is enacted. This particular theyyam re-enacts those personalities who laid their life for a social cause. Pottan theyyam is not an entertaining piece of art to the spectators but it is seen as a deity by the people. This theyyam questions the caste discrimination. The questions raised by the pottan, questions the social norms and customs of the society. “Pottan theyyam” has a myth related to Sree Sankaracharya. It is believed that Lord Shiva appeared to Sree Sankarachaarya along with Parvathy Devi as dalits who were considered to be the untouchables at that time. Sankaracharya asked the “*pulapottan*” (Lord Shiva) and “*pulachamundi*” (Parvathy Devi) to move away from his sight as he did not want himself to get polluted by them. The Dalits resisted to move out of his way. Lord Shiva engaged him in a set of arguments in which the former exposes the insignificance of caste system which divides the humanity and civilizations into ridiculous bits. The Dalit (Lord Shiva) asks Sree Sankaracharya that if there is a cut on the body, blood will come out and the colour of the blood gushing out would be the same for all humans. So, where does the difference lie. After immersing Shankaracharya into a set of questions Shankaracharya then realizes that it was Lord Shiva who was testing him and so he realizes that all humans are the same and have to live in unity. This teaching was the main message that Shiva offered to Shankaracharya. Even now during the performance of this theyyam. The performer chants all this events in a ballad form just to spread the message of humanity. The ballad song is considered to be the first lyrical form in Malayalam that talks about

caste discrimination that prevailed in Kerala. When compared to other forms of theyyam, Pottan theyyam is different in the way of storytelling.

Pottan Theyyam is an art form which is a prerogative of the Dalit community. This research tries to analyse the reasons behind the theyyam performance and also how it leads to the eradication of the suppression of the upper caste over lower caste. This research also tries to answer how this art form theyyam act as a platform for the elimination of the suppression of lower caste., how has pottan theyyam enabled the upliftment of the lower community, what makes pottan theyyam different from other art forms, how has pottan theyyam helped in the development of the lower caste by maintaining control of the upper caste, and also how pottan theyyam helped to solve conflicts among different caste's of the Hindu community. By answering the above questions it can be understood that theyyam is considered to be a platform for the lower caste communities of the societies to speak out the violence against them. Through the documentary pottan theyyam by Jinesh Kumar Eramam, it can be analysed that even though theyyam is a prerogative of the Dalit community, it leads to the eradication of the caste discrimination which prevails in the society.

The concept that is taken for the analysis of the research is the “conflict theory of religion” which comes under casteism proposed by Karl Marx who is considered to be the main advocate of this theory. According to conflict theory, the upper caste kept control over religion and at the same time gave importance to the lower community.

In J.J. Pallath's “Theyyam Myth: An Embodiment of Protest”, he points out by quoting the evolution of the pottan theyyam that every individual in this earth are equal. All are bound by the chain of brotherhood. He in his own way analyses the myth to show that every individual is equal in this world. Theyyam is seen as a protest against the violence they undergo due to caste discrimination. This art form reflects the attitude of the pulaya's to their own life. The theyyam performers are seen as deities because the word theyyam means “God”. When theyyam is performed the performers are considered to be deities. At this time, the people from upper caste also come to receive the blessings from the theyyam performer. Also, the people from upper caste tell their problems to the performer who gives them support. At times, conflicts among people are also solved due to the involvement of the theyyam. According to Diane Daugherty, in her article “Fifty Years On: Arts Funding in Kerala Today” theyyam is seen as mere art form for the production of tourism. The author says that the theyyam performers struggle to make a living out of the performance. The performers have to work in other areas to make a living for their family apart from the struggles they undergo during the performance. In the documentary “Pottan” by Jinesh Kumar Eramam, speaks about the divinity of the pottan theyyam which is lost when the art form is seen as just a mere a tourism product. Apart from all the struggles undergone by the performer they have to be experts in martial arts as well. In the article “Photographing Theyyam” by Balan Nambiar focusses on the performance of the theyyam. He says that the performer undergoes a change in spirit to attain a state of divinity. The performer performs according to rigorous drum beats and blesses his devotees without any discrimination of the caste and gender. People consider this as a platform to say all the problems to

god and wants god to resolve all their conflicts. The artist conserves the art form with much care, dedication and devotion. No individual dares to question the rights and privileges of the theyyam performers. Even though the performers belong to the lower community at the time of performance they attain a higher position to the community. People from every caste patronises the performance. Many were unaware of this particular art form, even in south Kerala this art form was not known. It is through photography and presentations that people became aware of it. In the article “Theyyam Kettu of Northern Kerala” by Wayne Ashley mentions about importance of the art form theyyam for people of upper caste as well. They are performed in *kavu*'s which is owned by joint family or individual families. The performance is offered to deities for fulfilling the aspirations of the devotees. The performance undergoes a lot of preparation such as isolated stay, fasting and involves lot of prayers. In the article “Images of Transgression: Teyyam in Malabar” by Dinesan Vadakiniyil speaks with respect to theyyam performance. He says that earlier theyyam was seen as a barrier to the development of the country. It was believed that theyyam was based on myths and stories of the uneducated section of the lower caste. And, the performers were paid according to the performance of the theyyam. Theyyam was not given any importance in the Indian society. In the Review done by Peter J. Claus mentions that theyyam is considered to be a typical art form which is central to non-Brahmin community particularly in the northern parts of Kerala. This kind of art form need professional mediums into whose bodies the deities are welcomed. The narration involves the details of the past heroic deeds and also professes upon their protection and the support the deity would provide. Also, the role of the low caste performer and the high caste organizations. The performances offered are dramatic and artistic. According to Gay Morris in his article “Dance Studies/ Cultural Studies” he says that a dance succeeds only if it has a significant role to play. In context with the documentary “Pottan Theyyam” the performance has a very significant role to play as the performance is accompanied along with drama and a song in ballad form.

The “pottan theyyam” performance is mainly based on the suppression of the lower caste. That is clearly understood during the narration of the “thottam pattu” which is the song sung during the performance. As mentioned earlier, theyyam is the prerogative of the lower communities of the society. But this discrimination is taken away when the performer performs theyyam. While performing, the performer moves to a higher strata and becomes eligible to even render blessings to the upper caste society. The people from upper caste come and seek blessings from these performers. After the performance gets over, the performer then is just considered to be an individual from the lower caste and is given no respect. With respect to K.G. Kannabiran, in his article “We the Other People” he mentions that the caste discrimination still prevails in India and also the people from the lower community are known as “the other.” Also, the discrimination has shifted to a national level. Violence against the lower communities are still unabated. The art form theyyam is considered to be platform where the people from minor communities react against the violence done against them. Theyyam is an art form which should be preserved as a religious art form and should be encouraged. But earlier, theyyam was

considered to be a barrier for the development of the country because some educated people believed that it is just a mythical belief of the lower caste people of the society.

The dressing style of the pottan theyyam attracts every viewer. Every theyyam performers have different costumes. Also, different theyyams have different costumes. All of the theyyams have different ways of wearing it. The theyyam performers do fasting and a lot of prayer service is done before wearing their respective dresses. The dresses are given to the performers by the priests after the prayer ceremonies. In the documentary, *Pottan Theyyam*, the dress is given to the performers by the *shaanthi* (priest) after the prayers. This scene throws light on the conflict theory by Karl Marx. That is, the priest who belongs to the upper caste helps the performer to wear the dress and also bows down to the performer assuming the performer to be the deity. Here, upper caste people helps the lower caste to remove the subjugation in their minds by placing the upper caste in the position they are in.

The narration in the documentary *Pottan Theyyam*, mentions many other instances where the upraisal of the lower community of the society by the upper community is been portrayed. The people from the lower community and upper community used to share same boats where it can be analysed that there was an interdependence on each other. Likewise, the flower garland was prepared by the lower community and that was used as an ornament for the deities in the temple. This can be seen as the upper community of the society remaining in their position and helping out the lower community for their upliftment.

In the documentary, *Pottan Theyyam*, the part which shows people receiving blessings from the theyyam performers clearly makes the idea of Karl Marx's conflict theory clear to the audience that the upper class community of the society remaining in their social position give the lower community a promise for the upliftment of the lower community. At the time of the performance the performer is given due respect and are treated as Gods. Even people from the upper community of the society worship them as deities and give due respect during the time of the performance. Which also means that the subjugation of the lower caste gets vanished.

In the documentary, *Pottan Theyyam*, according to the words of Dr. A.V. Vishnu Namboodiri, Pottan Theyyam is the only art form which eradicates the suppression of the upper caste over lower caste. He gives examples of various places. In Ramanthalli village, Pottan Theyyam is the most important theyyam in *Meethele Illam* (house of a rich upper caste). He says Pottan Theyyam is considered to be a deity by all the caste people. Also, he gives an example of another village called Adaiyidam village, in that village a *Perruppai Illam* (house of the upper caste) gives much importance to *Pottan Theyyam*. The theyyams are performed in the compound of the *illam* and the performers are treated as Gods and given much respect. According to the conflict theory by Karl Marx, there is a bond between the upper caste and the lower caste. The upper caste people arrange platforms to the lower caste to perform and consider them as deities.

People who belonged to the Dalit community who were also known as "the other" take the position of God as soon as they get into the performance of theyyam.

The problems of the people are shared to the theyyam and people find solace in the words of the theyyam. The words of the theyyam performer are considered to be the divine words of the God. Theyyam helps resolve social conflicts prevalent in the society. In this situation, there is a bond being created through the medium of theyyam. That is even the people from the upper caste come to the people of the lower caste that is the performer to find solutions to their problems. Here, the suppression of the lower caste is being taken away and a sense of equality is being established.

Pottan theyyam is considered to be a platform where the suppression of the lower caste is spoken aloud during the performance of this particular theyyam. It is believed that the character of the performer undergoes changes and is considered to be a deity. The performer dances and sings aloud the suppression faced by the lower caste people of the society through the ballad sung. Also through the ballad the performer reminds the people of the upper caste that all of them are humans and there is actually no distinction between them. This art form acts as a platform that eliminates suppression. This can be proved through the ballad song that the performer sings. Comparing pottan theyyam to other art forms, pottan theyyam is the only art form that eliminated suppression from the society and brings in peace and harmony. This theyyam has also enabled the upliftment of the lower community. Pottan theyyam instils in the minds of the listeners that it is time for the lower community to speak out their suppression and speak out against the violence they undergo. This helps the lower caste people to raise against the violence they suffer.

Pottan theyyam is different from other art forms because it puts thoughts to the minds of people regardless of the caste. Even in the present scenario, this theyyam helps in the development of the lower community by maintaining control of the upper caste. If we take examples we can see that the theyyam is performed in collaboration with the upper caste as well. The theyyams are performed either in the temples or in the *Illams* where the upper caste people dwell.

During the performance of the pottan theyyam, people from different castes come and share their problems to the deities that is to the performers who are considered to be deities. Problems among families, societies, castes and sometimes individuals are shared to the theyyam performer. At times, problems and conflicts are solved with the involvement of the theyyam performers.

Even though "Pottan Theyyam is a prerogative of the Dalit community. The performance of the "Pottan Theyyam" can be seen as the only art form which eliminates the suppression of the lower caste when compared to other art forms. This elimination of the suppression is proved when the people from upper caste receive blessings from the performer and asks the performer who is then considered to be a deity to solve the conflicts among the families. Also, the suppression is eliminated when the people from upper caste arrange a platform for theyyam performance to take place. Pottan theyyam is performed only by the lower castes of the society. This theyyam came into being when the lower caste people were too tired with the suppression they faced. And came out with the true fact that all human beings are equal. There is no difference among human beings, all are the same. The narration of this theyyam focusses on the questions raised by the Dalits to Sree Sankaracharya

about the discrimination which is of no worth. It also says that all humans are the same. It eradicates the suppression of the lower caste through its narration of the ballad.

This research limits to pottan theyyam as an art form which eliminates suppression of the upper caste over lower caste and the reasons behind the suppression of the lower caste. The costumes, seasons of performance, the places of performance, the types of performance, the temples or the *kavu*'s where the theyyam is performed etc. can be taken up for further studies.

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