

Theyyam: Caste Reconstructed and Reinforced

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Abstract

One of the most interesting thing about the Theyyam tradition is the way it inwards the social hierarchy, at least on the surface. It was seen as a unique ritual where the higher caste people bowed before the people belonging to lower caste while the latter performed in the role of deities. This subverted by caste hierarchy even as it existed within the limitations of the caste system. Many of its myths spoke against the cruelty and exploitation suffered by the downtrodden. This paper talks about the caste hierarchy and it is here the status reversal happens to Theyyam. He(diety) calls out the landlords to kneel and lie down in the dust. The cast reconstructed for a limited period and again reinforced and the people are brought back to the social reality of the world

Keywords: caste hierarchy, folkart, dance form, prophecy, locale

Theyyam or Kaliyattam is a pattern of hero worship performed in Kolathunad, a territory comprising the present Malabar region especially Kannur of Kerala state. It is a ritual and a folk dance form supported by a vast literature of folk songs. Theyyam means deyvam or 'God'. And 'Attam' means dance. Thus Kalaiyattam becomes the God's dance. The land itself is known as the "land of looms and lores". In kannur and other places , Theyyam is also known as the Thira or Thirayaattam. There , the performance is conducted on a masonry stage called Thara and the word Tharayattam was probably changed into Thirayattam in course of time. The term Thirayattam itself may mean beautiful dance. According to folkorists, the cult of Theyyam evolved from the fertility rites of primitive agricultural societies. It is associated with the practice of worship of the mother-goddess, goddess of diseases, village-goddess, spirits, ancestors, local heroes, animals and trees. The roots of this folk ritual which combines dance, music and behind Theyyam deities involve local heroes and incidents, thereby making it a kind of historical documentation of society.

The rhythm of playing of these instruments varies from Theyyam to Theyyam

The continuous playing with measured interludes help to make the performance very interesting. According to the rhythm of instruments, the same instrumental players recite Thottams also of the particular deity. The Thottam or the song related to the particular Theyyam deity is recited by the player and by the singers in the background

The Theyyam dance is classified as Thaandava or the masculine and Laasya or the feminine. Both style are adopted in Theyyam according to the context and character of the deity. Inward, outward and circular moments with agile and light steps give these dances a more the more graceful style. The measures and steps the dancers correspond to the words of the song. The performer praise for the appearance of the particular deity. The prayer or murmuring is called orayal or Prophecy. He recites a few lines and request for the presence of the deity. When the Theyyam speaks during the time of bestowing blessings to the persons of different communities, the Kolam address them in symbolic terms referring to their caste. At the end of performance, the devotees donate coins to the shrine. Finally, the musical instruments are played once again and the devotees throw rice towards the Theyyam and he cast of the crown in front of the shrine

For his book *Nine Lives*, historian William Dalrymple visited Malabar and asked one Theyyam performer what the experience is like. The Oracle answered,

“You become the diety. You lose all fear. Even your voice changes. The God comes alive and take over. You are just the vehicle the medium. In the Trance, it's the god who speaks, and all the acts are the acts of God- feeling thinking and speaking. The dancer is an ordinary man but being is divine. Only when the address is removed does it end”. In olden times, the hierarchy of the castes was in existence. the higher caste like Brahmins Nairs where the leaders of society. the lower caste people from Vannan, Malyan, Pulayar , etc were untouchables.

There are so many other castes, which were also considered as lower ones. Among these castes were Vannan, Anjoottan, Munnottan, Velan , Koppalan ,Pulauan ,Mavilan and Thiyya cast only have the right to perform the Theyyam.

One of the most interesting thing about the Theyyam tradition is the way it inwards the social hierarchy, at least on the surface. Only the low caste, including the Dalit or Untouchables, have the right to be Oracles. The priestly Brahmin caste is excluded. Instead, Brahmin queues up to listen to inspired advice from the prophecy offered by the divine incarnation. The Brahmins even kissed the Oracle's feet. And they bow before the Untouchables. The Pottan Theyyam is a good example to realize the caste discrimination in the old period. This Theyyam asks Sri Shankaraachaaryar that “ 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's the difference between us” The Pottan

Theyyam is considered as reincarnation of Shiva who enlightened Shankaraachaaryar about the caste and class hierarchies in the society. Even between the cast inequalities in the olden period during Theyyam the lines of these imbalances were not shown. The members of privilege castes also are present during the performances and request the blessings from the Theyyam, which is performed by the lower caste members who were previously kept away as untouchables. Thus Theyyam did stand as the way for erasing the hindrances of caste prejudices, but unfortunately, the discrimination will come into play again after the Theyyam.

It is ironical, however that Theyyam, the folk art which express the injustice and oppression faced by the lower caste people is now being appropriated into the Brahminical system. It was seen as a unique ritual where the higher caste people bowed before the people belonging to lower caste while the latter performed in the role of deities. This subverted by caste hierarchy even as it existed within the limitations of the caste system. Many of its myths spoke against the cruelty and exploitation suffered by the downtrodden. But when the members of higher caste arrive for the blessings, they are given VIP status and a separate space to watch the performance. They are the first one to get the blessings of the deity no matter how many lower caste people are waiting to touch their native God. Yes, Theyyam can be seen as the turning of the social order upside down but only for a limited period you wearing a specific season. The famous literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin's Carnival also shows a similar idea. Bhakhtins was interested in the great carnival of mediaeval Europe. He saw them as occasions in which the patriarchal, legal and ideological authority of both the church and the state invert a temporary during the anarchic and liberating period of the Carnical.

According to the status, one enjoys in the social world One is specially positioned during the performance. The Brahmins occupying a space further away from the shrines, the Nayars being next to the hierarchy, occupy a raised platform covered by a tiled roof closer to the complex. The performers socially lower than the Thiyyas occupy a space at the back of the compound. Now, this categorisation are not rigid but are still valid and practised by the community. The cast hierarchy is maintained in the Theyyam performance in the famous Kalarivathilkkal temple can be an example of this. The diety of the shrine is the fierce form of Bhadrakalii. Kalarivathukkal bhagavati is considered as the mother of the ancient martial art kalaripayattu and hence the name. This shrine is administrated by Malabar Devasom board and classified as a temple. The irony is in the fact that the right to performer the Theyyam of Bhagavati belongs to Vannan Caste and huge Thirumudi of the Kalarivathukkalamma carried by them. But the people of Malayan cast and even the performer with the Thirumudi, are not allowed to enter the temple, but because the temple belongs to Chirakkal royal family who were once ready to marry off their princess to another famous Muslim family called Arakkal. The Untouchables remain untouchables for ever. Therefore, the ritual is conducted outside the compound even now.

We cannot neglect the empowering aspects of Theyyam completely. There are certain ways in which the lower caste people become the leaders of the particular space and time. For Example;

the Pottan Theyyam abuses, rebels, and even physically mal-treat the highest authority with an unusual aggressive temper. It is here the status reversal happens to Theyyam. He calls out the landlords to kneel and lie down in the dust. This language becomes very cutting, bordering on obscenity, at times playing the role of comedian, at times that of a divine person, at times he continues to amuse the crowd. Theyyam becomes the superior during the course of the performance. All the others are considered as children and equal. The Theyyam performer speaks about the frustration and resentment of the community. The social Norms are relaxed in which the whole celebration is given an air of enchantment. This is what happens in 'Pottan Theyyam' performance. In any performance, the playful nature is integral to the liminal stage. In Pottan Theyyam there is a mixture of playfulness and seriousness. The Pottan speaks out nonsensical things which would make the devotees laugh at the same time what he says will be taken seriously. His jokes are cutting and penetrating social criticism, scaring the people is playful. Even at the serious moments of playing with fire, he tries to make people laugh. In the status inversion role, he is enacting the collective wish of people he represents. In this way it breaks caste hierarchies and other discrimination till the end of the ritual act. But there are certain underlying caste politics also working which goes according to the favour of the upper caste.

The animals associated with each Theyyam are also symbolic while the upper-class got accomplished by some animals such as a cow (being the most sacred), tiger, lion, peacock and elephant that are also considered as sacred, some animals are also associated with the lower caste God. In the Muttappan Theyyam, the pattern is after the horn of a buffalo. The dog is a constant companion of Muthappan. Animals of lower hierarchies are associated with people of lower caste. But one can see how even certain neglected animals are also considered as important in the rituals of lower caste. In Parasinikkadavu Muthappan Temple wondering dogs are a usual sight. These animals can even enter inside the compound of shrine and sit anywhere they want. Stray dogs are treated with respect by everyone who visits the temple. Parasinikkadavu Shri Muthappan Temple is the only place in Kerala by people from any caste and religion can visit for worship at any time.

Bhavani Cheerat's Book Theyyam: the Other Gods, is an indication of how othering is done in the very title of the book. This is how mainstream narratives construct Theyyakkolams as the 'other', both of the lower caste nearby reinforce the status of goats of the upper caste as the 'self'. The context of the Theyyam has undergone changes in the modern world. The committees are taking charge of particular shrines and commercializing the rituals. But still, there are some who value the traditions and take part in the rituals because it brings together people of different communities to celebrate their culture and evoke a shared experience among them. The Theyyam provides temporary freedom, strategy of national inclusion, to the oppressed sections to openly protest through the performers scathing criticism against the atrocities of the caste system. But after he has appeared as the Theyyam, bless the people, take an office headgear, shut his

costume, Remove the headband, then he ceases to be a person who deserves recognition as an ordinary individual and is again related to the lower state of caste hierarchy. This is the irony that comforts between our society. The cast reconstructed for a limited period and again reinforced and the people are brought back to the social reality of the world

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