

ANALYSIS OF CASTE AND FOLK ART IN NORTHERN MALABAR

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the function of Northern Kerala's Theyyam ritualistic performance as a means of social protest. Deeply ingrained in the region's cultural and religious traditions, theyyam gives members of marginalized groups—especially those from lower castes—the opportunity to briefly take on the identity of a deity. This ritual offers a symbolic reversal of power dynamics and challenges long-standing caste systems as a potent statement of social resistance.

The study looks at how these performances express social complaints and deal with caste oppression through the examination of particular Theyyam forms, like Pottan Theyyam and Devakooth Theyyam. The research also takes into account criticisms of Theyyam's revolutionary potential, raising the question of whether the ritual actually brings about lasting social change or just provides a short-term diversion from structural oppression.

The research claims that although Theyyam plays a vital role in publicizing social injustices, its impact on addressing the fundamental disparities of caste system is limited. It bases this argument on primary observations, a survey of the literature, and a sociocultural analysis. In closing, the study considers how Theyyam is both a place of resistance and a place where social norms are reinforced.

INTRODUCTION

ANALYSIS OF CASTE SEGMENTATION IN NORTHERN MALABAR

The Indian caste system, which dates to 1200 BCE, is frequently cited as the world's oldest continuously operating social structure.

This complex and multifaceted social hierarchical system, which is based on ideas such as "purity" of descent, birth-ascribed membership to occupational groups with hierarchically determined status, and the merit of one's karma and dharma, has harmed the socioeconomic advancement and psychological well-being of the lower castes in every way. It is justified by the mythical and scriptural doctrines of the ancient Hindu tradition.

Kerala's caste system was significantly more harsh than that of other regions of India.

Untouchability, slavery, exploitation, humiliations, discrimination, and the exclusion of lower castes were all practises that the state supported as being the worst and most despised aspects of the system.

Due to the that how strict the system was, there were harsh penalties for breaking these rules, as well as purification rituals, atonements, and other things. Lower caste members were subjected to severe social consequences, as well as deprivations of their basic necessities and rights, violations of their dignity, and other established customs.

It is a quintessential example of a fundamentally violent society because the systematic inequality and injustice were so deeply embedded and woven into the fabric of the social order that it permitted no dissident and protesting voices or debates.

Galtung's concept of "Structural Violence" states that it is defined as violence that has been imbedded in structures and a "culture that legitimises violence."

The most unpleasant result of such structural violence and subdued suffering was the lack of effective methods or treatments to express and externalise their trauma within the existing social order.

As the effects of trauma pass down through generations, members of traumatised societies may endure devastating loss.

Lower castes were trained to accept the hegemony of upper castes as deeply entrenched in a sacred philosophy, therefore they rarely expressed resistance or intolerance to the atrocities committed by those castes.

Lower caste members' pain and disempowerment were frequently sustained and exacerbated by the lack of any socially acceptable channels through which to voice their complaints, protests, and dissent, while they suppressed their irrational anger.

Trauma has a terrible impact on a person's functioning capacity when denied expression, healing, and integration, and it also stifles any sense of personal agency. Such repression furthers the victim's internal self-destructive process by rendering them powerless and increasing their sense of humiliation, shame, and helplessness.

One important aspect of trauma is the feeling of overload that the individual has because it affects their capacity to understand, analyse, and integrate the event into a structured and coherent narrative. Fragmented memories and a disconnection from one's body are frequent symptoms of a fractured sense of self and identity.

Trauma looks for a route out, as various academics have noted (Evans Campbell 2008; van der Merwe and Gobodo- Madikizela 2009).

Trauma victims frequently act out the pain by taking on the roles of the perpetrators themselves, whether out of misplaced aggression or a desperate attempt to reclaim their lost authority and control.

All forms of violence and oppression are connected, according to James et al. (2003), in that oppressive circumstances both cause and legitimise acts of violence.

Communities frequently use their distinctive customs and revered rituals to cope with group trauma. Their original intentions and functions are frequently concealed by the elaborate and tight integration of these rituals into their stories and lifestyles.

Rituals can be endowed with functional and symbolic qualities, according to a study by Whitehova (2012), even though sometimes people have trouble figuring out what those qualities might be.

Concentrating more intently on the discrimination against the Pulayan community. The pulayas might be recognised by their shabby clothing, black appearance, and groaning submissiveness. Their moniker implied contamination that would damage a high class Hindu with even the slightest contact. Even their tracks in the ground could "defile" the inhabitants of the exalted caste.

Although Pulayas were not vegetarians, rice and chilli were essentially their only food sources. Even at their workplaces, where they received specialised chatti or chiruta to eat meals, they had to rely on kanji.

For drinking water, the pulayas had private wells.

Every year, the Pulayas were transported and sold in huge groups during the feast at

Madaikavu. A young Pulaya was worth as much as an ox. Additionally, it is asserted that the Madai Kaavu was originally owned by the pulayas and annexed by the high caste, as is typical of most temples. That is the reason the well-known temple is still referred to as kavu. Even now, the Kavuvu rituals still require the thudi, the traditional Pulaya drum, and the Pulaya chief (Polla) has some sort of rights (avakasam) there. Oil lamp (deepam) must be transported from Madai Kavuvu for the celebration at the Puiyakottam.

This research primarily functions on understanding how these caste dynamics in the northern region of Malabar led to influencing and formulating the folk art known as Theyyam and hence further function as a means of revolt for the oppressed sections of the society to express themselves.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theyyam is a customary practice in Northern Kerala with deep cultural and historical importance, according to earlier research. Academics have investigated the ways in which Theyyam functions as a social expressive tool as

well as a religious activity, especially for underprivileged groups. Lower-caste performers are given the opportunity to temporarily change into gods and challenge societal hierarchies through this ceremony.

Theyyam has been examined in a number of studies as a social protest tactic, underscoring its capacity to challenge accepted societal norms. Scholars have observed that when members of marginalized populations perform Theyyam, it represents a symbolic reversal of power relations. These works highlight the dual function of ritual in upholding and contesting the status quo.

The article cites analyses by academics such as Pappan Mash and Dr. Rajesh Komath. Children's participation in Theyyam performances is criticized by Dr. Komath, who contends that exposing young children to ceremonial customs could limit their chances for a more comprehensive education and foreboding in contemporary society. It is contested by Pappan Mash's critical perspective that Theyyam is actually not so revolutionary. He contends that the ritual merely offers a transient reprieve from caste-based oppression and that its ability to effect long-term societal change is limited since social inequalities reinstall themselves following the performance.

METHODOLOGY

The firsthand observations of Theyyam performances serve as the basis for the paper. The first-hand account of experiencing Theyyam, complete with rituals, costumes, and audience reactions—all of which are essential to comprehending the ritual's cultural and social significance.

The research critically looks at particular types of Theyyam as social protest, such as Devakooth Theyyam and Pottan Theyyam. This entails dissecting the rituals' sociopolitical meanings, the performance's components, and the effects on caste and social hierarchy.

The study makes reference to earlier academic works on Theyyam, including criticisms of its revolutionary potential offered by different researchers. The present study is better placed within the larger scholarly conversation about Theyyam and social revolt thanks to the literature review.

Theyyam is interpreted in the research as a ritual that both reflects and challenges social systems through the use of an anthropological and sociological lens. It takes into account how the ritual symbolizes the voices of underprivileged communities and acts as a cathartic outlet for social tensions.

CONCLUSION

Integrating dance and theater components into ancient ceremonies, the impact of collective pain can be neutralized and diminished.

Sociologists and anthropologists claim that the Theyyam ritual acts as a cathartic release of repressed collective social tensions and frictions caused by the paradoxes and injustices of a caste-ridden society by emulating a celebration and putting participants into a trance.

Rituals have psychological foundations that explain their cathartic effect, their spiritual experience, and the terror they inspire in onlookers.

The subject of "Photographing Theyyam" by Balan Nambiar is the theyyam performance. He asserts that the performer experiences a spiritual transition in order to become divine. The artist sticks to tight drum rhythms while praising his supporters regardless of gender or caste. Many see this as a forum where they may talk to God about anything that's bothering them and beg him to solve all of their problems.

Highlighting the significant role that theyyam forms like Devakooth and Pottan theyyam play in serving as a vehicle for social protest or revolution, the research for this paper included reading an article by H.D. DEVAGOWDA that refuted the notion that Devakooth theyyam is a type of theyyam. He asserts that it stands alone as a distinct art genre. It differs from theyyam in that Devakooth does not follow the majority of the ritualistic rituals found in other theyyam.

Varavilli is a significant part of the theyyam. It's a method of summoning the gods' spirits.

Devakooth does not have this process. There are no Vakuriyadal, Vazhipad, or Mookuradharshanam in Devakooth theyyam.

According to Devagowda, the most intriguing detail is that the Devakooth form lacks the thalapore, which is a crucial component of the theyyam form that consists of 21 stones, as well as the chilanka and padhasaram on the feet.

The paper by H. D. Devagowda asserting that Devakooth is not a type of theyyam in and of itself eliminates the revolutionary component underlying the assertion that Devakooth is the feminine theyyam that empowers the dalit women.

Devakooth theyyam, which is distinct from other theyyam forms, can be viewed as an artistic expression that empowers dalit women and functions as a vehicle for social protest in and of itself.

The "conflict theory of religion," a type of casteism, was developed by Karl Marx, who is seen as the idea's main proponent. According to the conflict hypothesis, the higher caste elevated the lower caste while retaining control over religion. J.J. Pallath, in "Theyyam Myth: An Embodiment of Protest," uses the evolution of the Pottan theyyam to illustrate his claim that all people are created equal. Everyone is connected by the bond of brotherhood. He looks into the myth using a method that is all his own to show how equal everyone is in the world. Theyyam is seen as a way for them to express their protest against the violence that results from caste prejudice.

Speaking with Pappan Mash, who has written articles about Theyyam and its people, gave me a more fascinating look at Theyyam. He contended that Theyyam isn't revolutionary in the slightest because it merely gives the lower caste a fleeting sense of power before they revert to the status quo and surrender to the upper class following the performance.

The fact that Devakooth, a 14-year-old kid compelled to do ritualistic dance, isn't even a kind of theyyam— theyyam is a form of diversion from tyranny—calls into question the ability or potential of theyyam as a form of social protest. The pottan theyyam stories and ballads, along with what they stand for, demonstrate the impact the art genre had on uplifting a certain marginalized community.

At a time when oppression and atrocities were occurring more severely and intensely, Theyyam's impact was revolutionary and significant. However, as time goes on and hegemony and oppression methods change, it's important to take into account more severe and intensified methods of revolution as well as a higher level of social protest.

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