



VOICES OF THE OPPRESSED: ROLE OF THEYYAM IN DISMANTLING CASTE HIERARCHIES IN NORTHERN KERALA

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Abstract

The ritual performance of Theyyam in Northern Kerala is a cultural mechanism that neutralizes caste barriers in the ritual sphere. Theyyam is a transformative process based on the traditions of marginalized communities, where performers transcend caste identity and become deities that even upper-caste devotees submit to. The purpose of this paper is to analyze how Theyyam challenges the hierarchical caste structure, establishing a ritual space for equality, conserving countercultural narratives, and supporting Kerala's cultural awakening, emphasizing case studies of major Theyyam deities.

Keywords:

Theyyam, caste system, Kerala, ritual performance, cultural awakening, marginalized communities.

Introduction

Kerala's culture has a strong connection to caste hierarchies and the fight against social exclusion. Folk performances, like Theyyam, became counter-cultural spaces where marginalized communities asserted

themselves, while temple rituals were dominated by Brahmanical traditions. Theyyam, a ritual art that is performed mainly in the Malabar region, is a social institution that symbolically defeats caste stratification. This paper examines the role of Theyyam in dismantling caste boundaries and its importance in Kerala's cultural awakening.

Methodology

The use of a historical-analytical approach is combined in this study.

1. Theyyam practitioners' oral histories, temple records, and ritual songs (thottam pattu) are the primary sources.
2. Secondary sources – Scholarly works by K.K.N. Kurup's book on Folk Rituals of Kerala, G. Venu's book on Ritual Theatre of Kerala, and articles on caste and performance studies.

The historical background of Theyyam

Ancient Dravidian tribal religious traditions, which focused on the worship of ancestors, nature spirits, and heroic figures, are the origins of Theyyam. The performance of rituals occurred in sacred groves (kavu), open-air spaces where marginalized groups were allowed to participate without Brahmanical restrictions.

Temples in Kerala became centers of both ritual and political power as Brahmanical Hinduism expanded during the early medieval period (8th-12th century CE). The Brahmanical pantheon incorporated many local deities, but Theyyam remained a folk tradition that was performed by non-Brahmin communities like Vannans, Malayan, Velan, and Pulayan. Local landlords (*janmis*) supported its survival, but marginalized groups had the right to perform, which gave them unique ritual authority.

The myths of Theyyam are also a reflection of social struggles. Dalit heroes, women wronged by feudal lords, and martyrs who resisted oppression are commemorated in many narratives. Theyyam's cultural platform of justice for the oppressed was established by transforming them into deities.

Scholars have a liking for K.K.N. Kurup describes Theyyam as a counter-hegemonic tradition, which symbolically inverts caste hierarchies. The arena of Theyyam, where ritual possession erases social status, is where Rich

Freeman points out that performers can transcend their caste. Theiryam became a way of resisting and surviving, preserving an alternative social vision long before Kerala's modern reform movements.

Case Studies of *Theyyam* and Caste Neutralization

Name of <i>Theyyam</i>	Myths / Origin	Performed By	Social Message:	How it Neutralizes the Caste
<i>Muchilot Bhagavathi</i>	Woman Scholar falsely accused by Brahmins, Self-immolated, later deified.	Marginalized Castes	Critique of Caste-Gender Oppression.	Brahmins Bow before Lower-caste performers embodying the Goddess.
<i>Pottan Theyyam</i>	Social Rebel who mocked Feudal arrogance and Caste Discrimination.	Vannan & other Castes	Satirical attack on upper - caste dominance.	Ritual speech Empowers lower - caste performer as voice of divine justice .
<i>Vishnumoorthee Theyyam</i>	Thulu Brahmin deity absorbed into Theyyam Tradition.	Non-Brahmin Performers	Blends Brahminical Deity into folks Tradition.	Lower castes control ritual authority of a Brahminical God.

<i>Kuttichathan Theyyam</i>	Illegitimate Son of Brahmin and lower-caste woman , killed for Caste Purity.	<i>Malayan & Pulayan</i> castes	Exposes violence of caste purity Rules.	Outcast becomes a Universal deity worshiped by all castes .
<i>Gulikan Theyyam</i>	Servant of Yama, fearsome deity worshipped for protection.	Vannan & other castes	Symbol of divine justice and inevitability of death.	All castes equally submit to his authority.

Source : Compiled from Kurup (1973) , Venu (2000) , Freeman (1985, 1999), and Oral Traditions.

Results

Reversing roles in ritual practice.

The ritual inversion of caste hierarchy is what stands out most in Theyyam. Performers from marginalized castes, who were once considered ritually impure, temporarily become divine incarnations. They break the logic of untouchability by having landlords and Brahmins bow before them. Ritual's ability to create an alternate reality is demonstrated by the temporary suspension of social order.

Ethnic ritual space

The village shrines (k^{<unk>}vu) are transformed into spaces of equality during theyyam festivals. As spectators and devotees, men and women from different castes sit together. The fear of pollution disappears as everyone receives offerings, blessings, and divine counsel.

The preservation of subaltern narratives.

Ritual songs (thottam pattu) and myths are used by Theyyam to preserve the memory of social injustice and resistance. The Muchilot Bhagavati Theyyam recounts the Brahminical suppression of a female scholar, while Pottan Theyyam portrays the critique of upper-class arrogance. Through performance, marginalized voices can survive, as demonstrated by these results.

Continuity and relevance are essential

Theyyam remains socially relevant in Northern Kerala, even though modernization has taken place. The divine counsel of the Theyyam oracles is still trusted by people across castes today. The performance leads to a moral universe that transcends caste boundaries.

Discussion

1. Ritual inversion as a social critique.

Ritual is viewed by anthropologists like Victor Turner as a space for social inversion. The reversal of caste order is criticized by Theyyam in their example. Theyyam symbolically questions caste legitimacy by allowing marginalized performers to represent deities.

2. The subaltern voice belongs to Theyyam.

The Subaltern Studies approach (Ranajit Guha) suggests that Theyyam is a voice for the oppressed. Brahmanical texts contain narratives that are silenced, as highlighted by the myths of Kuttichathan or Muchilot Bhagavati. The hegemonic order is rebuked by the subaltern voice.

3. Comparison with other Kerala rituals

Theyyam's ritual power is democratized, unlike the hierarchical Brahmanical temple rituals. Compared to Kathakali or Kutiyattam, which were historically performed for elites, Theyyam is performed by and for common people, making it unique as a tool of social critique.

4. Contribution to Kerala's reform movements

The values enacted in Theyyam were a precursor to modern social reform. Theyyam's message of equality was amplified by leaders such as Sree Narayana Guru and Ayyankali. Kerala's 20th-century awakening is based on the cultural foundation of the ritual.

5. Contemporary Relevance

Theyyam has taken on two roles: sacred ritual and cultural performance due to tourism and globalization. Despite this, the symbolic challenge to caste is still present. The discussion demonstrates how ritual can function as a living critique of inequality. **Conclusion:**

Theyyam is not just a ritual; it is a cultural practice that represents resistance, equality, and justice. Marginalized communities are empowered and caste hierarchy is challenged through myths and performances. Ritual space can be used to neutralize caste oppression, as demonstrated by the case studies summarized here. Thus, it plays a vital role in Kerala's cultural awakening, preserving the voices of the oppressed and inspiring social transformation.

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