

**EVERYDAYNESS OF A DALIT THEYYAM ARTIST: CASTE,
ECONOMY, AND LIFE FROM NORTH MALABAR**

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Requirements for the Masters of Arts Degree Examination in Sociology**

Submitted By

ARCHANA KRISHNA KC

Exam Code: 56018102

Candidate Code: 56022115004

Under the supervision of

Dr. Vinu Mol Devassy

Assistant Professor, Department of Sociology



Loyola College of Social Sciences

Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala. 695017

2022-2024

DECLARATION

I, Archana Krishna kc, hereby declare that the dissertation titled “**EVERYDAYNESS OF A DALIT THEYYAM ARTISTS: CASTE, ECONOMY, AND LIFE FROM NORTH MALABAR**” is based on the original work carried out by me and submitted to the University of Kerala during the year 2022-2024 towards partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Sociology Degree Examination. It has not been submitted for the award of any degree, diploma, fellowship, or other similar title of recognition before.

Place: Thiruvananthapuram

Archana Krishna K C

Date: 10/09/2024

Student Researcher

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

This is to certify that the dissertation entitled " **EVERYDAYNESS OF DALIT THEYYAM ARTISTS: CASTE, ECONOMY, AND LIFE FROM NORTH MALABAR** " is a record of genuine work done by **ARCHANA KRISHNA KC** , a fourth semester, Master of Sociology student of this college under my supervision and guidance and that is hereby approved for submission

Dr. Vinu mol Devassy

Research Supervisor

Department of Sociology

Loyola College of Social Sciences

Sreekariyam, Thiruvananthapuram

Recommended for forwarding to the University of Kerala

Dr.Nisha Jolly Nelson

Head, Department of Sociology,

Loyola College of Social Sciences,

Sreekariyam, Thiruvananthapuram.

Forwarded to the University of Kerala

Dr. Sabu P Thomas, S.J. Principal,

Loyola College of Social Sciences

Sreekariyam, Thiruvananthapuram.

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MA Sociology

TABLE OF CONTENT

GLOSSARY	3
ABSTRACT.....	8
CHAPTER 1.....	10
1.1. INTRODUCTION	10
1.2. BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY	14
1.2.1. IMPORTANCE OF THEYYAM IN NORTH MALABAR	15
1.2.2. HISTORY OF THEYYAM	16
1.2.3. THE CASTE SYSTEM.....	16
1.3. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM.....	17
1.4. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY	18
CHAPTER II.....	19
REVIEW OF LITERATURE.....	19
2.1. RESEARCH GAP	32
CHAPTER III	32
RESEARCH METHODOLOGY	33
3.1. TITLE OF THE STUDY.....	33
3.2. RESEARCH QUESTIONS	33
3.2.1. GENERAL QUESTIONS	33
3.2.2. SPECIFIC QUESTIONS	33
3.3. OPERATIONAL DEFINITION.....	33
3.4. RESEARCH DESIGN.....	35
3.8. RESEARCH METHOD.....	36
3.9. DATA ANALYSIS	36
3.10. LIMITATION OF THIS STUDY	36
CASE PRESENTATION ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION	38
4.1. CASE REPRESENTATION.....	38

4.1.1. CASE 1	38
4.1.2. CASE 2	40
4.1.3. CASE 3	41
4.1.4. CASE 4	42
4.1.5. CASE 5	44
4.2. DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION	47
4.2.1. INTRODUCTION.....	47
4.2.2. ECONOMIC ASPECTS	47
4.2.3. SOCIAL ASPECT	49
4.2.4. CASTE DYNAMICS	50
4.2.5. CULTURAL ASPECTS	51
FINDINGS, SUGGESTIONS, CONCLUSION	53
5.1. FINDINGS	53
5.2. SUGGESTIONS	54
APPENDIX - INTERVIEW GUIDE	61

GLOSSARY

Theyyam: A ritualistic performance art form from Kerala, involving dance, music, and costume, where performers embody deities or spirits.

Kavu: A traditional temple grove or sacred space in Kerala where Theyyam performances are held. It is often a place dedicated to worship and spiritual activities.

Keraleeyam: Likely refers to a program or event that showcases Kerala's cultural heritage, which may present traditional practices as spectacles. The term "Keraleeyam" combines "Kerala" with a suffix suggesting a focus on Kerala's culture.

Theyya kolams: Refers to the specific patterns or forms of Theyyam performances. Each Theyyam has its own distinct Kolam or style, which is tied to particular deities or rituals.

Ambala committee: The committee responsible for organizing and managing Theyyam performances, including financial arrangements and logistical support.

Dakshina: Offerings or donations are given to the performers or priests in the form of money or goods as part of the ritual. It is usually modest and varies depending on the temple and community.

Tharavadu: Ancestral home or family house in Kerala. Theyyam performances can be conducted in these traditional family spaces.

Sthanas: Sacred or holy places where Theyyam rituals are performed. It includes various types of divine spaces like Kavu and Kottam.

Kottam: A type of sacred space or shrine where traditional rituals, including Theyyam, are performed.

Kavukal: Large shrines or sacred spaces dedicated to Theyyam performances.

Mudaya: Specific ritual or sacred area related to Theyyam or other traditional ceremonies.

Ara: Another type of sacred space or area used for traditional rituals, including Theyyam.

Palliyara: A type of sacred area or shrine for performing traditional rituals.

Kalamezhuth: A traditional ritualistic art form in Kerala involving the drawing of intricate patterns on the ground using colored powders, often associated with Theyyam and other rituals.

ABSTRACT

This research explores the intersection of caste, economy, and daily life through the lived experiences of Dalit Theyyam artists in North Malabar, Kerala. Theyyam, a ritualistic art form deeply rooted in the region's socio-cultural fabric, is often performed by individuals from marginalized Dalit communities. Despite their crucial role in preserving this traditional art form, Dalit artists continue to face significant socio-economic challenges due to their caste identity. This study examines how the everyday life of a Dalit Theyyam artist is shaped by caste-based hierarchies, economic pressures, and cultural expectations.

The research employs in-depth interviews, and personal narratives, to capture the nuances of the artists' daily routines, their economic struggles, and their social interactions within the caste system. By focusing on the everydayness of their lives, the study sheds light on how Dalit Theyyam artists navigate their dual roles as revered cultural performers and marginalized individuals within their communities.

Through a detailed analysis of their work, relationships, and struggles, this research highlights the resilience of Dalit Theyyam artists in maintaining their cultural identity amidst adversity. The study also emphasizes the need for broader recognition of their contributions to the cultural heritage of North Malabar and addresses the socio-economic inequalities that continue to define their lives. Ultimately, this research contributes to the discourse on caste, economy, and cultural performance in India, offering insights into the complexities of living as a Dalit artist in a caste-driven society.

CHAPTER 1

1.1. INTRODUCTION

Kerala is often referred to as "God's Own Country." This is due to the state's rich historical and cultural heritage. Additionally, Kerala is known as the land of arts. Compared to other states in India, Kerala places a significant emphasis on various art forms. The history of arts in Kerala dates back to ancient times. Cave paintings dating back to around 6000 BC have been discovered in the Edakkal Caves in Wayanad. Arts have been an integral part of people's lives and are a vital aspect of Malayali culture today.

In Kerala, each religious community has its own unique traditional art forms. These art forms, rich in rituals and celebrations, can be broadly classified into visual arts and performing arts. The traditional art forms of Kerala include Kathakali, Mohiniyattam, Krishnanattam, Chakyar Koothu, Padayani, Theyyam, Panchavadyam, Thullal, Thira, Theyyattam, Garudan Thookam, Poorakkali, Pulluvan Paattu, Kathirukkala, Nritham, Poothan and Thira, Oppana, Mappilapattu, Daf Muttu, Kalamezhuthu, Vattappattu, Kolkali, Margam Kali, and Chavittu Nadakam. These are the distinct traditional art forms of Kerala.

Kerala can be divided into three regions: southern Kerala, central Kerala, and northern Kerala. Northern Kerala includes districts such as Kozhikode, Kannur, Wayanad, and Malappuram. Central Kerala comprises districts like Palakkad, Thrissur, Ernakulam, and Idukki. Southern Kerala includes Pathanamthitta, Kollam, Alappuzha, and Trivandrum. These three regions of Kerala exhibit a variety of differences in terms of their local culture, including language, customs, festivals, art forms, etc.

Kerala has a strong folklore heritage. In this area, folklore is an organic manifestation of people's attitudes and actions. In general, folklore can be characterized as the oral traditions of ordinary people who experienced marginalization during the feudal kings' rule. The majority of the Keralites' culture and legend is based on agriculture. The various processes of agriculture, such as planting, harvesting, pulling weeds, and sowing, each have their own customs. There are a lot of

songs and performances that go along with them. Kerala ceremonial folklore includes stories about Kanyar Kali, Padayani, Mudi yettu, Malavaiyattam, Theyyam, Kothamooriyattam, Nira, Puthari, and other characters. Four cultural regions can be distinguished within Kerala: Central Kerala, South Malabar, North Malabar, and Travancore-Cochin. It was governed by Kolathiris, Kolathunadu's, kings had codified taboos, customs, and folk performing arts. The Kolathiris even chose the dates for particular fertility rites and folk performances, the majority of which are being performed today. The dates of the Theyyam festivals are observed on the dates that the King originally set. A major theme in folklore is human fecundity. The Keralites frequently engaged in magical ceremonies to conceive. The majority of them are used to increase fertility in infertile women. 'Shadkarmas' and other mystical rites were also performed in this area. The people of Maranam (slaughter), Vasyam (enticement), Uchadanam (eradication), and Sthambhanam (obstruction) were major influences on black magical rites.

In the North Malabari Kavus (Shrine), caste was not a factor. Even now, only Hindus are allowed into the temples. However, in the Kavus, all people were welcome to the worship sites of the lower castes of Brahmins, regardless of their caste or faith. In the Kavus in North Malabar, there are still over 400 Theyyam performances. Theyyams are performed by over twenty castes. Everyone in the hamlet participates in the Poorakkali and Theyyam performances. There are also Muslim Theyyams performed. Thus, it is unequivocally true that North Malabar's folk culture is secular. In the Kavus and other public spaces, caste distinction is not respected during folk performances.

Folklore was used as a platform for political dissent during the British administration. A portion of the folk literature produced during the feudal era expressed protests and aspirations against societal injustice. The local chieftains' social tyranny claimed the lives of several Theyyam, including Thotumkara Bhagavathi, Palanthayi Kannan, Chathambali Vishakandan, and Pulimaranja Thondachan. Typical instances of this type of protest are Mappilappattu, Kolkkalippattu, Thottampattu, Poorakkalipattu, and Nattipattu. Some regions of North Malabar are home to semi-classical art Thullal, Kathakali, and Chakyarkooth, among other classical arts. However, despite industrialization and urbanization, folklore and other performing arts still thrive in this region. There are hundreds of Kavus where Theyyams are done. Fertility rites are still practiced here to some extent. North Kerala remains a folklore treasure trove. Thousands of tourists come here to observe and learn about the rich cultural diversity, folk performing arts,

straightforward, even folk-oriented lifestyle, and fascinating folk ritual tradition. (Kerala Folklore Academy, n.d.)

Theyyam is essentially a kind of dance that is both holy and creative. These days, Theyyam is an integral aspect of Hinduism, both in form and content. Its roots as a cult can be found in the customs and rituals of prehistoric times. It has undergone multiple evolutionary phases and has a history spanning over 1500 years. There are hundreds of deities in the theyyam religion, and many of them are now part of the larger Hindu trinity tradition. Numerous Gods and Goddesses of the Theyyam worship were heavily influenced by classical Hindu mythology.

The Theyyam cult retains a number of ancient images of worship related to the mother Goddess, hero and hero stones, village goddess, serpent goddess, and animal God and goddess. In the worship of Theyyam, the God of Destruction, or Sakthi, is the model of Goddess Parvathi, the wife of Lord Shiva. The only myths and stories associated with some of these Theyyam Gods and Goddesses said that they descended from Shiva and Parvathi. There are a few deities connected to Vaishnavism or Vishnu. The themes of Theyyam unveil a vibrant fantasy world that provides a wealth of fresh perspectives on the social dynamics, familial conflicts, and superstitions prevalent in the medieval village community.

The human element and the historical basis of the tale were all too evident, even though the heroes and heroines appear to be semi-divine creatures. Though there are also Theyyams of Puranic deities, they are primarily types of hero worship in which the spirits of fallen heroes and martyrs are evoked through song, dance, and magical symbols, and the major events of their lives are replayed in an attempt to appease them.

These Theyyam heroes and martyrs are undoubtedly of the medieval kind, but the ritual's underlying beliefs and customs must logically date back to prehistoric times. Theyyam ceremonies typically occur in the precincts of temples and are deeply rooted in the worship of various deities, ancestral spirits, and heroes. Each Theyyam performance revolves around a specific deity or divine entity, embodying their characteristics, powers, and mythology. The rituals associated with Theyyam are conducted by a designated priest or oracle, who acts as a medium between the human world and the divine realm. Theyyam is not just a religious and cultural celebration but also gives the participating communities a sense of social and economic empowerment. The Theyyakkarans, who are members of lower castes and socially excluded groups, are admired and appreciated by the audience throughout the performances¹.

Theyyam originated from Kaliyattam. The indigenous tribal communities were handed over the responsibility to perform the Theyyam. These tribes included Malayar, Pana, Vannan, and Velan. Velan one of the Theyyam dancers is referred to in the Sangam literature. The Sangam traditions say that Velan was employed by the mothers of love-lorn girls to exorcise the malignant spirits of their daughters. All rituals described in the Sangam works and their commentaries are being observed by Velan and other dancing communities. The dance of the Velan community had taken new forms and developed into the present-day cult of Theyyam over a period of 1500 years. This uninterrupted continuity of sangam traditions makes theyyam a prominent religious system of north Kerala. Theyyam was essentially a Dravidian art form, although it was fostered by members of the ruling class and upper class. Additionally, because the Theyyam artists are from low-caste communities like Malayan or Vanaan, it has a novel notion. Even those from higher castes will be forced to worship the gods, who manifest as anti-racial activities in the guise of Theyyam.

Theyyam” means God in Malayalam. Theyyam is not temple oriented but it is performed in “Sthanas” (Kavu, Kottam) and “Tharavadu”. Kavu, Thanam, (Sthanam), Mundy, Ara, Palliyara, and Kottam are different divine places in which theyyams are performed. Moreover it is generally performed in open paddy fields, in the courtyards of Tharavadu or ancestral houses and sacred groves. Compared to other Indian Hindu temples, the wood sculptures that adorn the "Kavus" of worship are remarkably distinct in style. Frequently, a sword, carved stones, a stool, a piece of wood, or a mask are used to symbolize God. The traditional performers engage in ritualistic dancing while dressed in unique attire. The castes that are allowed to conduct this include Malyan, Vannan, Munnutan, Anjuttan, Velan, Kappala, Chingathan, Mavilan, and Karimbalan. The core of Theyyam is the conviction that the natural world—trees, rivers, hills, and animals, for example—embodies the presence of these deities. The actors frequently go to particular spots in the natural environment that are connected to the myths and stories about the individual gods and goddesses. This link to the natural world em¹phasizes the beneficial coexistence of humans and the environment an²d stresses the significance of protecting and honoring it.

A great deal of meticulous planning and preparation goes into a Theyyam performance. It typically takes place inside the bounds of sacred gardens, temples, or open spaces known as "Kavu." Large

shrines known as "Kaavukal" are built, and the necessary clothing, accessories, and makeup are purchased long in advance of Theyyam. Usually a male performer, the main role in a Theyyam performance undergoes a rigorous period of physical and spiritual preparation before the show. It comprises meditation, fasting, and carrying out certain rituals to cleanse the body and mind. The complex and exquisite makeup and costumes designed by Theyyam are utilized. The artist's face and body are painted in natural colors, creating elaborate designs that represent each specific deity. Feathers, traditional jewels, and other materials adorn the ornate, vibrant ensembles. The process of the artist transforming into the deity is visually appealing and adds to the overall aura and mystery of the performance. As a religious and social institution, it has a significant place in the cultural history of the region. Under the impact of Aryans the cult of Theyyam had changed substantially incorporating new trends and sub-cultures along with its tribal character.

1.2. BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Theyyam is a traditional ritual art form that originated in North Kerala, India, and is also practiced in parts of Karnataka. It's a sacred, mysterious folk ritual that combines theater, mime, dance, music, and worship and is considered a conduit to a god. Theyyam performances are free and open to the public and are usually held between dusk and dawn from October to April. The dates are chosen by astrologers using the local Malayalam calendar. Anthropological and sociological studies on Theyyam often focus on its role in the social and cultural fabric of Kerala. Scholars like M.N. Srinivas have explored Theyyam as a form of "ritual theater," emphasizing its function in reinforcing social norms and hierarchies. Theyyam performances, involving elaborate costumes, face painting, and trance states, are seen as a medium through which societal values and ancestral traditions are communicated and preserved.

Theyyam in North Kerala is also known for its elaborate rituals, colorful costumes, and rhythmic music, creating a mesmerizing spectacle that attracts both locals and tourists alike. It's a living tradition that continues to thrive, serving as a vital link to Kerala's rich cultural heritage. Casteism refers to the discriminatory attitudes and practices based on caste, particularly prevalent in India's social structure. It involves treating individuals differently based on their caste or social class, often resulting in inequality, oppression, and marginalization of certain groups. Despite legal efforts to eradicate caste-based discrimination, it still persists in various forms in Indian society.

Efforts to address casteism include education, social reforms, and legislative measures aimed at promoting equality and social justice (Meghana2024).

Casteism profoundly affects Theyyam practitioners from lower castes, restricting their access to various opportunities. Discrimination often limits their ability to receive proper training and participate in prominent performances, resulting in less recognition within the community. This lack of opportunity perpetuates a cycle of marginalization, as they are unable to showcase their talents and gain the same prestige as their higher-caste counterparts.

Social stigma is another significant impact, as lower-caste practitioners frequently face ostracization and prejudice from both their communities and higher-caste individuals. This social exclusion can damage their self-esteem and hinder their ability to form meaningful social connections, further isolating them within society.

1.2.1. IMPORTANCE OF THEYYAM IN NORTH MALABAR

Theyyam is a ritualistic dance form that's an important cultural symbol of North Malabar, India. It's deeply connected to Kerala's spirituality and is believed to be a manifestation of God. During the dance, performers use makeup and elaborate costumes to transform themselves into deities and mythical heroes. They believe that God enters the performer's body and that the performer is a visible representation of God.

An integral cultural symbol of North Malabar, Theyyam is a socio-religious ritual performed since remote times. The Kolathunadu area i.e., the North Malabar of today (comprising Kannur and Kasaragod districts, Vada-kara, Koyilandy of Kozhikode, and Mananthavady of Wayanad) is famous for this art form. Theyyam is otherwise known as *Kaliyattam*. Theyyam is a well-known ritual art form from North Kerala that brings the epic tales of our state to life. Dance, mime, and music are all part of it. It glorifies the beliefs of ancient tribes who placed a high value on the worship of warriors and ancestors' spirits. The ceremonial dance is accompanied by a chorus of Chanda, Elathalam, Kurumkuzal, and Vee Kuchinda musical instruments. There are about 400 unique Theyyams, each with its melody, style, and choreography.

In the life of the people in the North Malabar region, theyyam is an indispensable part of life. In the daily life of the people, in their political, economic, and socio-cultural activities, the deity

theyyam and the event Kaliyattam have crucial significance. Beyond obvious religious matters of customs, traditions, and worship, theyyam and Kaliyattam are an additional arena for more complex social dynamics as well. The event has incorporated its own economic relations existing between various participants. The people involved in the events actually represent several social groups, and being a Hindu religious event, caste plays a major role in it as well (Gopi2020).

1.2.2. HISTORY OF THEYYAM

According to the legendary Keralolpathi, Parasurama-sanctioned festivals like Kaliyattam, Pura vela, and Daivattam or Theyyattam are to the people of the North Malabar region. He also assigned the responsibility of performing the Theyyam dance to the indigenous tribal communities like Malayar, Panan, Vannan, and Velan. “There can be no doubt”, say Bridget and Raymond Alchin, “that a very large part of this modern folk religion is extremely ancient and contains traits which originated during the earliest periods of Neolithic, Chalcolithic settlement and expression” (The Birth of Indian Civilization 1968 p. 3039, and indeed, Theyyam is representative of a form of Hinduism (albeit non-Brahminical) having been practiced by tribal communities since time immemorial. This form of worship, often involving liquor and meat as offerings to Bhagawathi, Shiva, and Vishnu, co-existed with the Sattvic rituals practiced by Nambudiri Brahmins in temples. In fact, Theyyam was nearly always sponsored by members of the ruling class, such as Nair feudal chiefs, and achieved much prominence. Therefore, Theyyam festivals and Temple festivals were celebrated with equal vigor. Theyyam is an art form of the Dravidians. It has a revolutionary concept behind it since the Theyyam artists are from low-caste communities such as Malayan or Vanaan. Even the high-caste people had to worship the Gods in the form of Theyyam, so we can say it was against the then-caste system in Kerala.

1.2.3. THE CASTE SYSTEM

The region under study was once populated by semi-nomadic tribal people engaged in hunting and gathering, shifting agriculture, and pastoralism. The original occupants of the land were the indigenous people of the hills: pre-Dravidian tribes such as Pulayan, Mavilan, and Koppalan. They had their own tribal self-governance. The development of the Kolathiri kingdom and its hegemony along with the formation of caste groups all over the agrarian regions during the migration and settlement of Nambuthiri Brahmins subjugated and dominated the tribal self-governance. The

castes formed in the presence of Brahmins preserved the essence of their tribal living. We can still trace the elements of the tribal past in the castes of North Malabar (Thaniya 2016).

The intermingling of the aborigines with the migrated Aryans created a hierarchical caste structure in this area. The lower stratum of the community, including the toiling class of the untouchables, was forced to be aloof from the other sects of the community. Some kind of tribal democracy was followed by these lower communities in their organization based on particular deities and Stanams of their own (K.K.N Kurup 1973).

Theyyam, an ancient ritual art form from Kerala, India, is traditionally performed by specific castes and communities, including the Vannan, Malayan, Mavilan, Koppalan Velan, Theeya, Anthan, and Cherumar. These groups have been closely associated with Theyyam, particularly in the Kannur and Kasaragod districts. Although these castes play a significant role in Theyyam's continuation, other communities also participate. Efforts are underway to promote inclusivity and break down caste barriers to ensure the preservation and broader accessibility of Theyyam.

1.3. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The core issue addressed in this research revolves around the socio-economic and cultural struggles faced by Dalit Theyyam performers, who experience a dual existence marked by reverence during ritual performances and marginalization in their daily lives due to entrenched caste hierarchies. Despite the spiritual significance of their roles, these performers remain economically vulnerable, receiving minimal compensation for the physically and spiritually demanding rituals. The persistent effects of caste-based discrimination further restrict their social mobility, as they are often treated differently based on their caste outside the ritual context. This research seeks to explore the complex intersection of caste, economy, and social life for Dalit Theyyam artists, particularly the tension between their revered status during performances and their marginalized position in everyday life. Additionally, the study will examine the hereditary right of Dalit communities such as the Vannan, Malayan, Velan, and Pulaya to perform Theyyam, despite the ownership of sacred groves or shrines by upper-caste groups like the Nair and Pothuval, or artisan communities like the Viswakarma. The research investigates how these performers navigate the limitations imposed by caste oppression, focusing on their economic survival during the months when the ritual is not performed, their sources of income, and the impact of caste on

their daily lives. By addressing the performers' pain, hopes, and challenges, the research aims to provide insight into how caste continues to define the destinies of Dalit Theyyam artists.

1.4. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

Theyyam is a unique art form that blends religious beliefs, art, and music. Theyyam is mainly worn by the lower castes of Hinduism. They have the right to tie Theyyam. This study would be an addition to the available literature on Theyyam, and similarly, this study could be helpful for policymakers to implement welfare programs for the Theyyam artists since they face severe financial, and socio-political crises.

The study of the daily life of a Dalit Theyyam artist from North Malabar, with a focus on caste, economy, and living, is significant for a variety of reasons. First, it examines the interaction of caste and cultural practices in the context of Theyyam, a deeply established ceremonial art form from North Malabar. By focusing on a Dalit artist, the study highlights the often-overlooked contributions of underprivileged people to this artistic tradition, while also investigating how caste dynamics manifest in such cultural venues.

Furthermore, the study offers light on the economic realities of Dalit Theyyam artists, looking at how caste-based discrimination and larger economic variables affect their livelihoods. This emphasis on economic concerns is critical to understanding the difficulties these artists experience in maintaining their profession and their daily lives. Furthermore, the study highlights the role of lived experience, or "everydayness," in establishing an artist's social identity. It investigates how daily practices, routines, and encounters shape the artist's sense of self and society, providing a more intimate and grounded understanding of the relationship between caste, economy, and cultural identity. The study adds to the larger fields of caste studies and cultural anthropology by providing a case study that connects cultural practice with socioeconomic realities, enriching academic discussions about how marginalized communities navigate their identities within both traditional and modern frameworks. Finally, this study acts as an advocacy tool, raising awareness about the ongoing influence of caste on people's lives in modern India and emphasizing the need for greater social inclusion and respect of underrepresented voices in cultural narratives.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

According to Damodaran (2009) in the study titled "*Identity through Nature-Man Interaction: A Synthetic Definition Based on the Theyyam Performance in North Malabar*," the research explores the relationships between caste, culture, environment, identity, and interaction as reflected in Theyyam performances. This article says that Kerala referred to as "God's Own Country," is well known for its distinctive customs, rich cultural heritage, and varied surroundings. The state's dynamic towns, breathtaking natural settings, and varied culture all emphasize how well its citizens and their environment get along.

The Theyyam tradition in North Malabar is a prominent example of this cultural tapestry. Theyyam is an essential component of the regional religious and magical traditions in addition to being a vibrant and compelling sight. Worshippers follow its rules and customs religiously, motivated by a combination of reverence and apprehension about its possible wrath as well as a belief in its ability to promote well-being. The unique quality of theyyam is its representation of the relationship that exists between people and their physical and social surroundings (Damodaran.,2009). The community's reliance on Theyyam as a kind of inherited science and culture is highlighted by this relationship. Despite having few technological resources, the people have a great deal of faith in Theyyam to look out for everyone's well-being. Through the development of a common identity and the reinforcement of social ties, this practice unites the community.

Ashly (2013), in the study on *Theyyam Kettu of North Kerala*, provides a comprehensive analysis of the Theyyam Kettu ritual, highlighting its profound cultural, social, and religious significance. Theyyam Kettu is a ritual where performers are transformed into deities through elaborate preparations, a process indicated by the term "Kettu," which means to prepare or dress. This ritual is performed from November to June in both private and community shrines, lasting up to seven days and nights. Each Theyyam serves unique functions, from fulfilling devotees' wishes to ensuring agricultural prosperity and addressing matters of birth, death, and marriage.

Historically, Theyyam Kettu has ancient Dravidian roots, evolving over centuries with various influences. It preserves cultural heritage and asserts social identities.

The diverse Theyyams serve specific castes, families, or the broader community, with community involvement being significant. Performances are scheduled annually or periodically, involving substantial preparations and costs, like the Grand Festival at Karippodi in 1978, which cost Rs 195,000 (\$24,000) and took 55 years to collect. Ashley's study underscores the intricate interplay of historical traditions, social dynamics, and religious devotion that characterize Theyyam Kettu. The detailed exploration highlights the transformative power and communal importance of this unique ritualistic performance, affirming its status as a vital and enduring practice in Northern Kerala.

According to Leela (2016), in the study *Goddesses of North Malabar: An Anthropological Study on Kinship and Ritual in North Malabar*, the connection between kinship and the ritual of Theyyam worship in North Malabar, Kerala, is examined. The study highlights that personal identity is deeply rooted in the *tharavad* (joint family system), which serves as the foundation for Theyyam roles and other social prerogatives. Theyyam, a socio-religious ritual, features various mythological, divine, ancestral, animal, serpent, and heroic characters, each with unique stories and physical forms.

The research investigates how changes in kinship systems, prompted by colonial legislation, have influenced society and ritual performances. The *tharavad* is identified as the dominant element in North Malabar, with Theyyam being a significant expression of religious faith rather than merely a cultural performance. Theyyam knowledge, maintained through stories and songs within the *tharavad*, has traditionally been passed down through generations (Leela.,2016). However, the disintegration of the *tharavad* has led to the loss of much of this collective knowledge, now preserved mainly by the elderly. The study utilized primary sources (unpublished and published records) and secondary sources, recording people's recollections to the extent possible.

In a study on *Pottan Theyyam: Gods Dancing On Earth*, Johna Rose (2016) points out that Theyyam is an ancient ritualistic art form that predominantly originates from the northern parts of Kerala. Deeply embedded in the cultural and religious fabric of the region, it is performed by

members of lower caste communities. During the performance, the Theyyam performers are revered as living deities, embodying divine spirits and connecting with the people on a spiritual level. This research specifically focuses on *Pottan Theyyam*, a sub-genre of Theyyam that plays a crucial role in challenging and dismantling caste-based oppression.

The central objective of this research is to explore how *Pottan Theyyam* serves as a powerful cultural tool for the lower caste communities to resist and eradicate the suppression imposed by the upper caste. By analyzing this particular form of Theyyam through the lens of Karl Marx's Conflict Theory, the research delves into the dynamics of power, inequality, and social conflict that are reflected in the performance. According to Conflict Theory, society is in a constant state of tension and struggle between those who hold power (the upper classes) and those who are oppressed (the lower classes). In this context, *Pottan Theyyam* becomes an act of defiance and a symbolic representation of social justice.

The performance of *Pottan Theyyam* portrays the resistance against caste-based discrimination and highlights the struggles faced by marginalized communities (Johna Rose., 2016). Through its vivid enactment, it subverts the traditional power hierarchy and provides a voice to the voiceless. The performer, while embodying a deity, asserts the dignity and strength of the oppressed, urging the audience to question and challenge societal norms that perpetuate inequality. The research also examines the broader impact of Theyyam on society, illustrating how this art form has influenced the consciousness of people over time and continues to be a catalyst for social change, challenging oppressive systems and promoting equality.

According to Anurag (2017), in the article *Influence of Brahminic Hegemony on Folk Art Theyyam: Historical Analysis of Theyyam Myths and Socio-Cultural Events in Northern Kerala*, Theyyam is an art form that blends Tribal, Aryan, and Dravidian elements and is performed annually in Northern Kerala from October to May. With roots tracing back to the 12th century AD, Theyyam offers insights into the cultural ethos and social realities of that time. Performed by members of the untouchable castes, the performer, after transformation, is revered as a god, transcending the rigid caste system. The "Thottam" are myths sung during performances, providing an unbiased yet distorted view of the oppression faced by lower castes. This paper closely analyzes these "Thottam" and explores how historical events influenced Theyyam,

transforming it from a ritual into a theatrical performance and altering the way higher castes exercised hegemony over

According to Rasna (2019), in the article *Discourse Analysis and Ritualistic Traditions: A Study on Theyyam Art Form Kerala*, the paper provides a critical analysis of Theyyam, a thousand-year-old ritualistic art form from Kerala. It emphasizes that the theoretical concept of discourse analysis, which holds a philosophical dimension, has not been extensively explored within cultural studies. Theyyam, an indigenous art form, has been the subject of numerous studies in folklore. These studies have produced a wealth of discourses concerning its historical development and current status as a folk ritualistic art form. Critical discourse analysis posits that discursive practices contribute to the creation and perpetuation of unequal power relations among social groups, such as social classes, genders, and ethnic groups. These imbalances are seen as ideological effects, where language and communication reinforce and reproduce societal power dynamics and inequalities.

In a study on *Caste-Based Oppression, Trauma, and Collective Victimhood in Erstwhile South India: The Collective Therapeutic Potential of Theyyam*, Ahammad (2019) examines how the oppressed lower caste members in Kerala, India, have endured decades of collective victimhood and trauma, which largely went unnoticed until socio-religious reform movements provided a platform for their expression. Without socially sanctioned channels to voice their injustices, the folk ritual of Theyyam emerged as an alternative for cathartic release. Theyyam often embodies themes of empowerment, dissent, and protest as performers channel deities, transforming the ritual into a temporary outlet for the collective rage and resentment of oppressed communities (Ahammad., 2019). This ritual has significant healing potential, offering a safe outlet for repressed trauma, both individually and collectively. The focus of this article is to understand Theyyam as a psycho-cultural phenomenon and explore the collective therapeutic dynamics it offers.

In the article *Beyond Sacred: Understanding the Historical, Socio-Political, and Cultural Dimensions of Theyyam*, Aparna (2019) notes that the term "Theyyam" derives from "Theivam," meaning God, and refers to an ancient socio-religious ceremony, also known as "Kaliyattam," performed in Northern Kerala. The performance is closely tied to the agrarian practices of ancient Kerala and is primarily considered a sacred dance of Kali, as implied by the name "Kaliyattam."

Theyyam, also called "Theyyattam," was traditionally performed by every village ("thera") and reflects the rich socio-cultural history of Kerala, dating back to the 12th century A.D.

This research article critically examines how Brahminical hegemony influenced and altered Theyyam's original intent to challenge caste hierarchies and social inequalities as a form of Dravidian resistance against Aryanization. It argues that this hegemony distorted the "Thottam" songs or myths sung during performances, thereby reshaping the cultural and social narratives of Theyyam. The paper also highlights how various historical events have impacted the evolution of Theyyam over time.

According to Gopi (2020), in the article *Representing Feminine Divinity: A Visual Ethnography of Kaliyattam in North Malabar*, the intricate portrayal of feminine deities is explored through the Kaliyattam ritual. This displays a visual ethnographic analysis of how female divinity is represented and celebrated in this traditional performance art. Performers, often from specific caste groups, undergo a physical and symbolic transformation into deities, donning elaborate costumes and makeup to embody the divine. This transformation is central to the ritual, which involves a series of traditional ceremonies in shrines designed to invoke divine presence and possession.

The researcher highlights how the visual and performative aspects of Kaliyattam convey complex narratives of feminine divinity. The ritual's emphasis on detailed costumes, expressive dance, and symbolic gestures creates a vivid representation of goddesses and female spirits. Through this visual ethnography, the article sheds light on the cultural and spiritual significance of feminine deities in the ritual, emphasizing their role in maintaining and expressing local religious and social values.

In the article *A Post-Colonial Instance in Globalized North Malabar: Is Theyyam an Art Form?* Perira and Ziganshina (2020) question the adequacy of existing categorizations by examining definitions of art and folklore in the context of Theyyam. It also explores the motivations behind these classifications, considering the social and political power dynamics in post-colonial contexts.

The authors argue for an integrated and informed approach to understanding the cult of the Theyyams, emphasizing that post-colonial discourse, despite its advantages over colonial rhetoric, can be improved. This improvement involves acknowledging not only the obvious consequences

of colonialist cultural and political heritage but also the traces of local, more ancient or discrete influences that are interwoven with colonial impacts. Recognizing these influences can provide a more nuanced understanding of the present.

The example of Theyyams is specifically chosen to illustrate how power relations, which have persisted from pre-colonial times, manifest in local political discussions and are metaphorically inscribed into the ritual as tension and transgression. This case study highlights the complexity of cultural practices in post-colonial societies and the need for a comprehensive approach to their analysis.

According to Anil Gopi (2021), in the article *“Gods and the Oppressed: A Study on Theyyam Performers of North Malabar,”* the study explores caste and caste inequalities in Kerala, with a focus on the renowned religious ritual of Kaliyattam in Northern Kerala. Despite Kerala's high development, literacy, and secularism, caste remains a significant factor in the social and cultural life of its people. The study reveals that the caste system within Hinduism perpetuates hierarchies in status, power, wealth, and religious practices. An ethnographic investigation of Kaliyattam highlights the harsh realities of caste-based discrimination and exploitation in the region. Various communities involved in the ritual are compelled to follow strict customs, which are often economically exploitative socially unjustifiable, and inhumane. He explains the Hindu hierarchical system and Hindu ideology system. He says that Mainstream Hinduism, rooted in Vedic traditions, is the predominant form of worship in India, incorporating belief systems from the Vaishnavite and Shaivite epics. This widespread practice often influences and blends with regional folk religions, resulting in a predominance of mainstream Hindu practices. In Kerala, the arrival of Brahmins from the north significantly altered the local religious landscape, heavily influencing the indigenous folk religion (Anil Gopi.,2021). The establishment of 64 Brahmin villages, each with characteristic temples (kshetrams) featuring distinct physical and structural traits, marked this transformation. The belief and worship systems in these temples were based on the Brahmanic Vedic system, differing greatly from the local folk traditions. He conduct this study in Kannur, North Malabar. He starting with the sacred places or shrines where the event happens is the best source. This study gives a basic understanding of the specialty of the whole event.

According to Mohanan (2021), in the article *"Sounds from a Silenced Divinity: The Interaction of Caste with Music in the Theyyam Rituals of Kerala,"* the author analyzes the extent to which casteism influences the socio-political dynamics of Kerala. Through ethnomusicological analysis, the musical elements of Theyyam are compared to the forms of music practiced by the upper caste communities. The author concludes that knowledge, in essence, is a product of social hierarchy and forms of expressions are subtle representations of social discrepancy. This study is limited to a comparison of musical elements and instruments used by the different classes in society while performing the ritual art, Theyyam.

According to Saran et al., (2021), in the article *"Unveiling Theyyam: Exploring the Ritualistic Splendor and Cultural Significance of an Ancient Art Form in South India,"* Kerala, an Indian state, is home to the mesmerizing and colorful ceremonial art form known as Theyyam, which has its roots in local customs and culture. Theyyam, well-known for its ethereal and magical qualities, is deeply religious and culturally significant in the area. The word "Theyyam" comes from the Malayalam language, and it means "Deity" or "God." The core idea of a Theyyam performance is the conviction that angelic creatures exist and sometimes take up residence in the bodies of talented performers—also known as "Theyyam artists" or "Theyyam dancers." Through extravagant makeup, ornate costumes, and mesmerizing performances, these actors embody the roles of living gods and goddesses. This article provides a critical analysis of a traditional practice, focusing specifically on the ceremonial art form called Theyyam in Kerala

This study explains the origins and Historical Significance of Theyyam. The old tribal cultures and folklore traditions of Kerala's Malabar area are the origins of Theyyam. The customs and ceremonies related to Theyyam are thought to have been a part of indigenous societies' religious activities for more than a millennium. Theyyam's distinctive and timeless qualities are partly attributed to its rich history and cultural legacy. Theyyam is distinguished by its strong ties to the natural world and its veneration of ancestor spirits (Saran et al., 2021). The actors represent the souls of gods and goddesses, who are thought to exist in a variety of corporeal and invisible forms, as Theyyam artists.

Then the research explains the theyyam performance. There are a lot of spectators and admirers in attendance during the Theyyam performance. At night, the performance space is usually lit by bonfires and candles, creating an ethereal atmosphere. The background music for the show is just as captivating, with the lyrical sounds of wind instruments and the drummers' rhythmic beats filling

the space. Dance, theater, and rituals are all combined in the real performance. The performer, fully assuming the role of the deity, glides with grace and agility while executing intricate dance steps and motions that are meant to symbolize the deity's celestial characteristics.

Then this research explains that the challenges and future of the theyyam. Theyyam's sustainability is threatened by a number of issues in the modern era, despite its valuable cultural history. Urbanization, the omnipresent impact of globalization, and shifting social and economic dynamics are the main causes of these problems. To guarantee the sustained application and admiration of Theyyam, coordinated endeavors are required to tackle these hindrances and involve the younger cohort. A significant obstacle confronting Theyyam is the evolving social and economic landscape in Kerala. Younger generations may drift away from the traditional rural villages where Theyyam is strongly ingrained as they migrate to cities in greater numbers in pursuit of opportunity and work. Younger generations may find the demanding training, spiritual practices, and time commitment necessary to become skilled Theyyam artists less enticing because they are frequently pursuing modern educational and employment pathways.

According to Gayathri (2021), in the paper *"An Ecofeminist Reading of Selected Bhagavathi Theyyams in North Malabar,"* the study explores the ecofeminist perspective of selected Bhagavathi Theyyams, emphasizing the connection between nature and women in this traditional ritual. The study examines the concept of kavu (sacred groves) and its origins in tree worship ("vriksharadhana"), which evolved into kavu and kshetra (temples). It then delves into the association of women with mother nature, highlighting the parallels between women's ability to produce and sustain life and nature's nurturing role. The paper also considers the practice of idol worship ("pratheekaradhana") and how Theyyakkolam the ritual performance by humans—became an accepted custom of worship. Finally, the study analyzes the story behind the formation of deivakkaru (deities) to understand the performer's strength and significance during the ritual.

In the study *"Reading Theyyam as an Archive of the Subaltern Community of Northern Kerala"* by Divya and Sreejith (2021), the researchers argue that Theyyam is a ritual art form performed by Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in Northern Kerala, serving as a powerful socio-religious movement. Historically, it provided a platform for marginalized communities to voice their struggles and challenge the upper castes' oppressive attitudes. This performance art reflects

the trauma and victimhood endured by these communities under the deeply entrenched caste system. Central to Theyyam is *Thottam Pattu*, a form of ritualistic singing that narrates stories of suffering, spirituality, and resistance. Through these performances, Theyyam preserves and projects the spiritual and ritualistic practices unique to the subaltern communities of Kerala.

This research proposes to study Theyyam as an archive of the subaltern community by applying Gayathri Chakravorty Spivak's concept of the archive, as outlined in her essay *The Rani of Sirmur: An Essay in Reading the Archives*. Spivak's concept of the archive emphasizes the need to listen to the voices of the oppressed and understand their narratives from their own perspectives, rather than from dominant historical accounts.

The longevity and endurance of Theyyam can be attributed to its deep connection with religious beliefs, which has allowed the art form to survive and thrive despite ongoing challenges. The ritual art not only keeps alive the memories of the community's historical struggles under casteism but also celebrates their heroic figures and cultural identity. This research, therefore, seeks to analyze Theyyam closely, delving into its various elements, such as songs, rituals, and performances, to better understand how it serves as an archive of the experiences and resistance of Kerala's subaltern communities.

According to Mathew and Pandya (2021), in the article "*Carnavalesque, Liminality, and Social Drama: Characterizing the Anti-Structural Potential of Theyyam*," the study examines the cultural and ritual performance of Theyyam in Northern Kerala, highlighting its role as a reflection of resistance against the caste system and social oppression. Theyyam performances subvert social hierarchies, with the chosen deity symbolizing the collective outrage of the oppressed. The paper analyzes Theyyam through the lens of Richard Schechner's performance theory, exploring its anti-structural characteristics using Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the carnivalesque, Victor Turner's ideas on liminality, and the stages of social drama.

Bakhtin's carnivalesque describes the expression of antipathy towards hierarchy, while Turner's liminality emphasizes anti-structural elements. Social drama's deconstructive-reconstructive stages further illuminate the symbolic aspects of Theyyam. The findings reveal that Theyyam's performance is deeply rooted in anti-structural characteristics, with the performer undergoing

continuous identity transformation, symbolizing the temporal transition from oppression to an equivalent status with the dominator. This transition occurs through status reversal and inversion, showcasing Theyyam as a form of counter culture.

According to Komath (2022), in the article "*Ecological Ethos of Theyyam Worship*," the research aims to understand the relationship between the biological representation of the groves (*kavus*) in the area and Theyyam, a ceremonial practice traditionally limited to the northern part of Kerala. The living locations of different castes and the biological spaces of the groves are inextricably linked to the sacred geography of the Teyyam and the forms of Teyyam performed in sacred areas. The paper also attempts to distinguish between the rituals or rites carried out in these groves and the Vedic or Brahminical rites carried out in temples. It makes the case that Teyyam worship and groves are more common and invoke an ecological ethos in contrast to Vedic worship, which defines spaces of worship based on a hierarchy of degrees.

His research says that the sacred groves and their features and how to connect the Theyyam cult. The districts of Kannur and Kasaragod in northern Kerala are connected to Vadamuzha in the south by a sacred geography. According to Theyyam, the cult's territory stretched between the Arabian Sea in the west and the Coorg highlands in the east, and between the Korapuzha in the south and the Chandragiri in the north. As a result, sacred groves are dispersed throughout the hill country, forests, and midlands of North Kerala. Groves are guarded at these locations as centers of Shakti (divine power), dread, and worship. It has strong roots in the fertility and serpent cults, as well as the cults of Theyyam and Bhutaradhane. Groves, also known as kavus, are sacred spaces where the dead are remembered in the form of protectors or deities and installed as resting places for deities. This also applies to tribal communities. The local people are divided based on caste, and each caste has its own caste-specific deity and practices of worshipping for their fertility of land, prosperity of family, and protection from the wrath of the gods. Groves are also concerned about the ancestors who paved the way for them to lead a life of prosperity in the past. From a practical standpoint, any forest landscape is just a forest. The location may become a sacred grove as soon as it is used for a deity's rituals in the forest.

All caste and tribes have their own groves/kavus to invoke caste-specific deities to appease their ancestors (Komath 2022). In his research says, Theyyam Universe, then, is a ritual complex in North Malabar that incorporates elements of Brahminical/hegemonic, Vedic/non-Vedic, and

critical components against the oppression of lower castes and their members. It is impossible to claim that the North Keralan grove tradition is incompatible with temple worship when considering the contextual, ritual, and utilitarian aspects of grove and temple devotion.

According to Geetha (2022) in the article "The Theyyams of North Kerala: The Little Gods of Little Kingdom," the Theyyam tradition is rooted in tribal beliefs, particularly in the reverence for ancestors and heroes. The performance of Theyyattam serves as a way to honor these heroes, who stood against injustice and sacrificed their lives to uphold virtues. The author further observes that Theyyams are non-Aryan conventions and divinities worshipped in Northern Kerala, but the rituals performed by both Brahmanical and non-Brahmanical are identical in nature and they do not feel that their Theyyams are inferior to the other. On a critical evaluation, it appears that the study is based on the historical perspective of Theyyams rather than discussing it from the performative level.

The cult of the theyyams is built upon the tribal belief in ancestors and heroes. The Theyyattam is a way of respecting heroes who stood against injustice in society and became martyrs for upholding virtue. The theyyams were the collective constructions of a society, and in the process imagination of many people was involved at many levels. The kolathiri had assumed authority over the theyyams of Kolathunadu as a patron and manager of theyyams in his realm. In this research says that, The theyyams' uniqueness and preservation of their native identity in many ways is their most notable characteristic. They don't feel inferior to other deities or engage in competition. They lack documented traditions and intellectual literature, and they are less Sanskritized. Theyyam worship incorporates some Vedic cult rites, but such objects never take center stage. They employ native methods of worship, which are different from those of the Brahmins. The majority of the Theyyattam involves blood sacrifice. The Theyyam cult sustains on immense faith the devotees place in them. Recently the Brahmins have also been given some authority over the kavus or stanams, but these also do not diminish the primordial nature of the Theyyattam. Over a long span of time, innumerable customs and rituals have been developed as a part of the Theyyattam which enrich the cultural aspect of rural life.

According to Reshma (2023), in the article "*Theyyam: A Performer's Journey of Transformation from Man to God*," the study explains that Theyyam, or Theyyattam, represents an artistic journey where performers transform from mortal humans into immortal Gods and Goddesses. It is a

resplendent melange of religious and artistic facets that elevates the aesthetics of both performers and spectators to greater depths. Though Theyyam is fashioned on the essence of tribal culture, it embraces many elements of ancient Hindu mythology. The entire Theyyam ritual is a metaphysical means, which is thought to have the power to summon the Theyyam deities, causing them to emerge with all exuberance. 'Thottam' songs, the ritual songs of the Theyyam, render the story of the deity propitiated in this ceremonial performance. The performer himself sings the Thottam songs so that he can get in the exact frame of mind and the necessary spirit of the persona he is presumed to embody. The aficionados observe the rites very closely as the performer performs before and along the shrine. The musical instruments are played in time to the performer's movements making the performance pious. Gradually, the performer becomes completely absorbed, evolved, and transcended into the realm of intangible powers of nature, impersonating the Gods and Goddesses through artistic acts and manifesting his supreme power by strange demeanor. The article examines the practices, traditions, impersonation, myths, and legends of Theyyam and some of its most popular forms and how this ritualistic art form has established a legacy across tribal and non-tribal cultures creating an identity for itself.

According to Anjali (2023), in the article *"Indigenous Knowledge for Sustainable Practices: Reflections on the Folklore Forms of Theyyam and Tolu Bommalata,"* UCLG (2010) highlights culture as the fourth dimension of sustainable development, emphasizing heritage, knowledge, creativity, and aesthetics. Folklore, a key aspect of human cognition and way of life, illustrates complex human existence and promotes a sustainable future through its cultural, social, and ecological lessons. This article examines two folkloric forms from distinct regions: Theyyam from Kolathunadu and Tolu Bommalata from Nimmalakunta. Theyyam, a ritualistic performance, is closely linked to tribal culture and embodies environmental, social, and cultural values. Tolu Bommalata, a shadow puppetry tradition, combines performing and visual arts. Using ethnographic methods, the study documents and analyzes these folklore forms, highlighting their environmental, social, and cultural values, and demonstrating a sustainable model in Indian folklore.

According to Sankar and Justine (2023), in the article *"Pandemic Theyyams: Can Tourism be a Life Saviour for the Artists?"* the research explores the profound impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on traditional performances, with a particular focus on the ritualistic art form of Theyyam in North

Malabar, Kerala. As the world adapts to a new "normal" during the pandemic, the virus has affected all segments of society, transcending distinctions of caste, color, religion, class, and gender. However, certain groups have borne the brunt of the pandemic more heavily. In Kerala, the pandemic has led to unprecedented consequences, especially in the realm of traditional performances, which combine ritualistic and labor aspects (Sankar and Justine 2023). These performances, integral to the cultural fabric of the region, have been indefinitely suspended, affecting both the artists and the communities that rely on these rituals.

The article examines the current state of Theyyam and its potential future trajectory in the context of the Covid era. It offers a unique perspective on how rituals, cultural expressions, and artistic performances in North Malabar have evolved across different historical periods, highlighting the resilience of these traditions. The role of the tourism sector, which has been significantly impacted by the pandemic, is also explored in relation to its support for these traditional art forms. Moreover, the article discusses the role of social media during the pandemic, which has emerged as a crucial platform for supporting ritual performers. Social media has facilitated the dissemination and popularization of the Theyyam tradition, helping to keep it alive despite the constraints imposed by the pandemic. This article provides a comprehensive overview of the challenges faced by traditional performances like Theyyam during the Covid era, the historical significance of these rituals, and the potential for adaptation and survival through modern avenues like tourism and social media.

According to Meghana (2024), in the article *"Role of Caste in the Lives of Theyyam Practitioners in North Malabar,"* Theyyam transcends caste barriers in North Kerala, fostering community unity and inclusivity. Performances, often held in sacred groves, village temples, and ancestral homes, are deeply spiritual experiences, seeking blessings for prosperity, health, and protection from evil. The elaborate rituals, colorful costumes, and rhythmic music of Theyyam attract both locals and tourists, preserving Kerala's cultural heritage. Casteism, or discriminatory practices based on caste, significantly impacts the lives of Theyyam practitioners, especially those from lower castes (Meghana.,2024). It limits their access to opportunities, subjects them to social stigma and economic disparities, and can lead to exploitative practices. Despite legal efforts to eradicate caste-based discrimination, it persists, affecting the social and economic well-being of marginalized communities.

2.1. RESEARCH GAP

This study addresses research gaps that could enrich the understanding of the theyyam artists' lives. While the ritualistic aspects of Theyyam have been explored, studies often neglect the intersection of Dalit identity with their performances, social mobility, and daily experiences. The economic marginalization of Dalit Theyyam artists, particularly in terms of caste-based discrimination affecting their livelihoods outside of performance seasons, remains underexplored. Longitudinal studies that track changes in caste dynamics over time, particularly in light of modernization and policy shifts, are also lacking. Additionally, the psychological effects of caste discrimination on the mental health and well-being of these artists, and comparative studies between Dalit and non-Dalit artists, offer opportunities for further research. Finally, the effectiveness of government and NGO initiatives in addressing caste-based economic inequalities and empowering Dalit Theyyam artists has not been thoroughly examined

CHAPTER III

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1. TITLE OF THE STUDY

Everydayness of a Dalit Theyyam Artist: Caste, Economy, and Life from North Malabar

3.2. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

3.2.1. GENERAL QUESTIONS

What are the social, economic, and caste pressures faced by Dalit Theyyam artists of the North Malabar

3.2.2. SPECIFIC QUESTIONS

- What are the societal challenges faced by Theyyam performing artists of North Malabar?
- Do they earn a sufficient amount of money for their living by performing Theyyam?
- How do caste dynamics influence the experiences of Theyyam performers in upper-caste temples?
- Do they receive any financial or other benefits from the Government?

3.3. OPERATIONAL DEFINITION

- **EVERYDAYNESS:** Everydayness is defined as the routine and recurring activities, interactions, and practices that constitute the typical daily schedule, rituals, social interactions, and economic activities of a Dalit Theyyam artist.

- **DALIT:** A socially marginalized individual belonging to the lowest caste group, traditionally known as "untouchables" in India's caste system. In this context, a "Dalit" refers to a person who identifies as belonging to this group, as recognized by social and governmental classifications.
- **THEYYAM ARTIST:** An individual who participates in and performs the ritual dance form of Theyyam, a traditional art form in Kerala, India, characterized by elaborate costumes and performances honoring deities. This can be operationalized by identifying artists who regularly perform Theyyam rituals and are recognized by local communities as Theyyam performers. These artists come from specific communities, often from lower castes, historically tasked with performing religious rituals for the community. The performance is hereditary, with skills passed down through generations. Theyyam artists undergo rigorous training, mastering dance, music, and ritualistic practices. They dedicate themselves to the art form, often beginning training at a young age. Their transformation involves elaborate costumes, intricate makeup, and intense physical preparation. During the performance, they are believed to become possessed by the deity they represent, channeling divine energy. For my study, I have selected five Theyyam artists belonging to the Malaya community.
- **NORTH MALABAR:** The geographical region located in the northern part of Kerala, India, encompassing districts like Kannur and Kasaragod, Kozhikode. This region has a unique cultural identity, shaped by a blend of local traditions, colonial influences, and the region's vibrant martial and ritualistic arts. North Malabar is known for its distinct folk arts, including Theyyam, Kalaripayattu (martial arts), and traditional folk music. The region has a rich history of resistance to colonial powers, especially the Portuguese and British, with strong ties to the ancient Kolathiri and Chirakkal royal families. The people of North Malabar speak a distinct dialect of Malayalam and have a strong sense of community, with a deep-rooted connection to their rituals, festivals, and traditions. For research purposes, North Malabar is defined as the specific geographic area where the Dalit Theyyam artist lives and performs, with boundaries established by local administrative divisions.

3.4. RESEARCH DESIGN

According to Bryman (2012), a research design serves as a framework for data collection and analysis, reflecting the researcher's priorities throughout the research process. In this study, a case study design was chosen to gain a comprehensive understanding of the Everydayness of a Dalit Theyyam Artist: Caste, Economy, and Life from North Malabar.

The **case study design** involves an in-depth exploration of a single social phenomenon. This phenomenon could be an individual, a group, an event, a community, or any other social unit. By focusing on a single case, this research approach allows for a thorough examination of intricate details that might be overlooked by other research methods. Central to the case study research is the emphasis on the complexity and uniqueness of the chosen case. Through a detailed analysis, this method aims to unveil the distinct qualities that make each case individual. In the context of this study, the chosen case is the Dalit Theyyam artists and the goal is to thoroughly analyze their experiences, challenges, and opportunities. The case study approach excels at capturing the complexity and subjective nature of the instances under consideration. This research explores the experiences and feelings of Dalit Theyyam artists to gain a full picture of their conditions. This research technique aims to better understand the problems and potential for Dalit Theyyam artists. The case study design allows the researcher to explore the diverse experiences of various Theyyam artists, including their distinct circumstances and influencing factors.

3.5. SOURCES OF DATA COLLECTION

Primary and secondary data were collected using appropriate methods and techniques. Primary sources include first-hand information from the participants. Secondary sources include journal articles, documents, newspaper reports, and records.

3.6. PILOT STUDY

Pilot study was conducted in the Onchiam Panchayat, Vadakara, Kozhikode district to understand the feasibility of the study.

3.7. AREA OF STUDY

Onchiyam Panchayat of Kozhikode District was chosen as the study area.

3.8. RESEARCH METHOD

The present research employs a **qualitative research** approach. Qualitative research emphasizes a profound comprehension of the subject matter, highlighting its intricacies and particulars. In this study, the aim is to gain a comprehensive understanding of the Everydayness of Dalit Theyyam artists, focusing on their caste, economy and life. To gather data, an **interview** method was selected, and a **semi-structured interview schedule** was employed. This approach allows for flexibility while ensuring that key topics are covered. By engaging participants in conversations, the research seeks to capture their narratives, insights, and perspectives. This qualitative approach provides a platform for the participants to share their stories and experiences in their own words. By employing in-depth interviews and purposeful sampling, the research endeavors to uncover the unique narratives of these Dalit Theyyam artists.

3.9. DATA ANALYSIS

The data was examined thematically. Thematic analysis of Dalit Theyyam artists examines qualitative data to uncover common themes such as caste, economy, and life in their storytelling. The thematic analysis enables researchers to explore the diverse experiences of these Theyyam artists. Thematic analysis of Dalit Theyyam artists' narratives offers an analytical approach to gaining valuable insights. Researchers can gain a comprehensive grasp of the challenges, strengths, and dynamics of Theyyam artists by delving into their stories, emotions, and experiences.

3.10. LIMITATION OF THIS STUDY

This study offers valuable insights into the relationships of caste, economy, and daily life of Dalit Theyyam artists. However, this study has several limitations as it focuses on a specific geographic region that is North Malabar, which restricts the generalizability of its findings to other regions.

Moreover, as the study mostly depends on subjectivity, the personal narratives may introduce bias and reduce the analysis's impartiality. The study is mostly focused on male Dalit Theyyam artists. Finally, a more interdisciplinary approach to this research would help take the perspectives from sociology, anthropology, and economics to present a broader perspective of the problems Dalit Theyyam artists confront.

CHAPTER IV

CASE PRESENTATION ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

4.1. CASE REPRESENTATION

This research explores the everydayness experience of Dalit Theyyam artists in Onchiyam Panchayat, Vadakara, located in Kozhikode, the researcher used snowball sampling to select five cases from this region, to examine the relationship between caste, economy, and daily life of Dalit theyyam artists and In this chapter, the researcher used pseudonyms to represent the cases.

4.1.1. CASE 1

The researcher personally engaged with an interviewer named Gangadharan, aged 57, started his act of Theyyam for the first time at the age of 11. He belongs to a Malaya community, and therefore, he gives much importance to Theyyam in his life. Gangadharan is a well-known Theyyam artist. Other Theyyam Artists look up to him with respect. Theyyam is a clan occupation. According to him, *“Theyyam is ritually tied by holding on to a part of the clan's work”*.

He also worships God at home. Theyyam is performed in all Hindu kavus and temples irrespective of caste, which is why the Theyyam artists from the Dalit community have been making Theyyam in such places since ancient times. Therefore, they have not faced any caste problems in the present times. He says that he is treated with respect by the temple authorities. *“I have heard that my ancestors experienced this caste discrimination”*. He claims, *“Unlike other Theyyam communities, tying of Theyyam is a hereditary right given directly by lord Siva and Vishnu”*.

Theyyam is performed in a specific period for each kavus. From January to April and after his life depends on other works. *“I experienced many financial problems in my childhood and many times went to perform Theyyam on foot. when we going to perform Theyyam, the amount given by the Ambala committee is not enough for us many times. The money they give us is not even ready to buy jewelry and clothes for us”*. He faces many financial crises during the COVID

period. *“During that time my family also faced financial difficulties but my son has a job we have escaped some financial problems”*. He states that he does not experience any physical difficulties when performing Theyyam, but notes that most accidents tend to occur during fire-related Theyyam, particularly while tying elements involving fire. *“People look at us as a god when we tie theyyam and they give us a lot of respect”*. He also discusses the work situation of Theyyam artists, explaining that most of them engage in regular jobs once the Theyyam season is over. Those who work in government or office jobs typically take leave during the Theyyam season to participate in the performances.

He observes that the current generation's children from these communities are showing interest in this field, even though economic hardships are a significant challenge. He also clarifies that he is not affiliated with any folklore-related organizations.

Because they present us to the public as spectacles, an example of that is the Keraleeyam program, and they give a lot of honors to those who aligned with this type of organization but we don't need this kind of honors because we see theyyam as a ritual art and not as an object of spectacles.

They have not received significant financial assistance or supportive policies from the government. Such policies and financial aid would be highly beneficial, particularly for the poor and marginalized among the Theyyam performers. Many Theyyam artists have suffered accidents during performances, resulting in long-term injuries that have left some bedridden. These artists, who dedicate themselves to preserving this cultural and spiritual tradition, often face severe hardships, especially without adequate healthcare and financial support.

Elderly Theyyam performers, who have devoted their lives to this art form, would greatly benefit from government assistance. As they age, many of these artists struggle with health issues and a lack of income, making it difficult to sustain themselves. A policy that provides financial support, healthcare benefits, and pensions could significantly improve the lives of these artists, ensuring that their contributions to preserving this rich cultural heritage are recognized and valued

4.1.2. CASE 2

Prabhash is a 36-year-old Theyyam artist, and his main job is as a Pharmacist; he belongs to the Malaya community and has been involved in Theyyam since the age of 14. He says, “I see tying Theyyam as a blessing, and there is no better luck than being a goddess in a country.” *I have never faced any caste problem from any temples but they don't take proper care of us we don't get food or water sometimes only in temples does this kind of act happen.*

During his childhood time, he had to skip a lot of class hours while he was going to tie Theyyam. *However, God has given me a good job now. I am satisfied with this.* He says that he can manage both the work and the time during the season of Theyyam and that he does not see any financial difficulties. He had financial issues during Covid time. He's not going to tie Theyyam at this time has caused mental and economic difficulties. Many Theyyam artists are facing financial issues but they don't talk about it. He says that When going to perform Theyyam, the income is very low at times. Payment is made according to each Theykolams. That means we do not get *an income commensurate with our suffering from the Ambala committee members.*

“I am not a member of the folklore organization, although many Theyyam artists from other parts of the region. The reason I'm not a member is that this organization promotes the performance of Theyyam in many different places, but I believe that Theyyam should not be seen everywhere it is a sacred ritual practice. My stance is that Theyyam should be experienced in its traditional setting. As a result of not being a member, I am often denied certain approvals, but I do not need these approvals. I have great respect for Theyyam. While this organization offers many recognitions to its members, I am instead a member of another Theyyam artists' organization based in Kozhikode district.”

The government does not provide any special benefits to the artists. He says that giving such favors will help the backward people in the sector to come forward.

The younger generation loves to perform Theyyam, and no one shies away from this tradition, which is passed down as a hereditary right. Prabhash says that children observe the Theyyam

performances of their elders, imitate them at home, and eventually begin performing Theyyam themselves as they grow older. *“I used to watch my father perform Theyyam and often imitated him. When I was young, I would accompany my father to the kavus. Everyone looked on in awe as he performed. People would go to my father not only to seek his blessings but also to express their sorrows.”*

He says that Over the years, I have explored the different forms of Theyyam, each representing a different god or goddess, each with its own unique rituals and significance. This exploration has taught me that Theyyam is not just a cultural expression but a profound spiritual journey that connects us to something greater than ourselves. Through Theyyam, I have found a path to understanding my place in the universe, a way to honor my heritage, and a means to serve my community.”

4.1.3. CASE 3

Jithesh is a 34-year-old Theyyam artist and a government employee. He has been involved in Theyyam since the age of 15. He sees Theyyam as divine in his life. He belongs to a Malaya community. He belongs to a family that has traditionally tied Theyyam. As a child, he saw theyyam as a very powerful deity and had many experiences with Theyyam *“I grew up watching my father and grandfather perform Theyyam, and from a young age, I was drawn to the powerful presence they embodied. The first time I performed Theyyam, I was just a teenager, and it was one of the most intense experiences of my life. The preparation itself is a sacred ritual painting my face, donning the elaborate costume, and tying the headdress.”*

“ When I step into the role, I feel a transformation; it’s as if I’m no longer myself but the deity I’m representing. The moment I enter the kavu (sacred grove), there’s an energy that takes over, something beyond human. The drumming, the chants, the flickering oil lamps—all of it becomes part of the experience. People come to me with their hopes, fears, and grievances, seeking blessings or solace. It’s a profound responsibility, and while the physical demands are immense, the emotional and spiritual weight is even greater. After each performance, I’m exhausted but also deeply fulfilled, knowing I’ve upheld a tradition that’s not just performance but a living, breathing connection to the divine.”

He did not face any caste problems in any temples but he has heard that people from the past have had such experience. He said that there is no caste discrimination in the present society. As he is a government employee, he does not go to all the temples in all seasons but only at certain times. In the past, my father and grandfather were compensated mainly with offerings of food, grains, or small amounts of money. While the situation has improved somewhat today, the payments we receive are still modest, especially considering the physical and emotional demands of the work.

He says, *"The COVID-19 pandemic was a devastating time for me and many other Theyyam artists. Our art form relies heavily on public gatherings, and with the restrictions and lockdowns, all performances came to a sudden halt. For months, we were unable to perform, which meant no income at all. The festivals and rituals that sustain us financially were either canceled or severely limited in scale. This not only affected our livelihood but also our connection to the spiritual practice that gives our lives meaning."*

He says that since he has a government job, he only goes to tie Theyyam in the kavs where he has the right to performing Theyyam. Jithesh says, that some young individual do participate during the Theyyam season, balancing it with their education or other jobs, but few are willing to dedicate themselves to it full-time. He worries that this might lead to a decline in the number of skilled performers in the future. Despite these concerns, he remains hopeful that with greater awareness and support, including financial incentives or government assistance, more young people will be encouraged to pursue Theyyam as a meaningful and sustainable part of their lives. They have no government support to this field.

4.1.4. CASE 4

Vibeesh He is 35 years old, He performed theyyam for the first time at the age of 15, He says theyyam is a ritual art done by their forefathers and therefore he gives it its own importance, so he gives a lot of importance to theyyam in his life. *"Growing up in a family where Theyyam was more than a tradition it was a way of life I was immersed in its sacred rituals from a young age. Watching my father and uncles don the divine costumes and embody the deities, I was captivated by the sheer presence and power they commanded. Their performances were not just acts of devotion; they were embodiments of the divine itself."*

When I first stepped into the role of a Theyyam performer, I was still a child, yet the gravity of the ritual was palpable. The preparation for the performance was as meticulous as the ritual itself. Applying the vibrant makeup, and donning the elaborate costume and headdress, I felt like I was transitioning into another realm. In the mirror, I didn't see a boy; I saw a vessel of divine strength.

Entering the kavu (sacred grove) for the first time as a performer was a profound experience. The atmosphere was thick with the scent of incense, and the rhythmic drumming seemed to resonate with my very soul. Amid the glow of oil lamps and the chants of the community, I felt a profound shift within me. I wasn't merely performing; I was embodying the deity. Each movement, each gesture, carried a weight of spiritual significance that extended beyond my own comprehension.

As the ritual unfolded, people approached me with their prayers, seeking blessings, protection, and healing for their loved ones. The responsibility was immense, and I could feel the collective faith of the community resting on my shoulders. The role is demanding—physically, emotionally, and spiritually—but it is also deeply fulfilling. By the end of the performance, I am exhausted but filled with a profound sense of purpose and connection. Each performance reaffirms that Theyyam is not just an art form; it is a sacred bridge between the ancient and the contemporary, between the human and the divine.”

He says that he has not experienced any discrimination on the basis of caste and that they have only respect for the temples as they become a god and the temple committee prepares all the facilities when they go to perform Theyyam. He said that he always views other theyyam communities with respect and some differences can be seen in all theyyam communities, because these differences are seen in their dressing, performing Theyyam, then rituals.

“As a Theyyam artist, the physical demands of the art form are both daunting and transformative, leaving an indelible mark on my body and spirit. Each performance requires not just mental and spiritual readiness, but also a profound physical endurance that few outside our tradition fully understand.” He says *“The negative aspects of the physical strain are undeniable. Preparing for a performance begins long before I step into the kavu (sacred*

grove). *The costume itself is a formidable challenge: layers of thick fabric, vibrant with color, are wrapped tightly around me, and the towering headdress, often weighing several kilograms, is balanced precariously on my head. The makeup, while beautiful and significant, can feel suffocating after hours in the heat and humidity. Once fully dressed, the weight of the ensemble is considerable, straining my neck, shoulders, and back.*”

He experiences financial difficulties at times and the main sources of income is money from performing theyyam. *“In many cases, the income I earn from performing Theyyam is far from sufficient to cover the cost of living, especially considering the time and effort required for each performance. The preparation alone involves hours of meticulous work, from creating and maintaining the elaborate costumes and headdresses to rehearsing the intricate movements and rituals. These costs, combined with the travel expenses to different temples and communities, can add up quickly. The payment for performance often comes in the form of Dakshina (offerings), which is usually modest. The amount depends on the temple, the deity I am embodying, and the community’s resources. In some cases, the offerings might include food, clothing, or other necessities rather than money. While these gestures are deeply appreciated, they don’t always translate into financial stability. Despite the financial challenges, the sense of purpose and fulfillment that comes from performing Theyyam is something money can’t buy. It’s a calling that many of us would follow regardless of the financial rewards because the role we play is vital to the cultural and spiritual fabric of our society.”*His opinion that the government has not given any special benefits to the theyyam artists so far.He believes that this kind of government policies will help the theyyam artists to move forward.

4.1.5. CASE 5

Ajay Gosh is a 42-year-old theyyam artist. He belongs to the Malaya community. He is a painting worker and does astrology.He says,

“As a Theyyam artist, Theyyam is not just a part of life; it is very important in my life. To me, Theyyam is more than a performance or a cultural tradition it's a sacred duty and a living connection to the divine. Each time I prepare for a ritual, I am reminded that I am not just a

performer, but a vessel through which the gods communicate with the people. Seeing Theyyam in my life means understanding that it is both a gift and a challenge. It requires sacrifice physical, emotional, and sometimes financial but it also provides a profound connection to my culture, my ancestors, and the spiritual world. It's a path that not everyone can walk, but for those of us who do, it is a journey of deep significance. "Ajay has many experiences related to theyyam and theyyam kett is hereditary to them.

"My family deeply rooted in Theyyam tradition, my childhood experiences were intimately connected with the art form, shaping my adaptation to it in profound ways. From a young age, I was surrounded by the vibrant rituals, colorful costumes, and the rhythmic beats of the drums that define Theyyam. Watching my father and uncles transform into deities during performances, I was mesmerized by their ability to command respect and convey deep spiritual meaning through their presence. My earliest memories are filled with the excitement of preparing for festivals and performances. I would eagerly help with tasks like arranging costumes, mixing the traditional makeup, and even learning the intricate dance steps and rituals. This hands-on involvement from such a young age helped me absorb the nuances of Theyyam naturally. I learned to appreciate not just the physical aspects of the art form but also its spiritual significance and cultural heritage." He have faces many social experiences. Theyyam is socially related one. Theyyam artists social experiences is differet.

"As a Theyyam artist, my social experiences are deeply intertwined with the role I play in the community, and these experiences are shaped by the profound respect, responsibility. In our community, Theyyam artists are held in high esteem. Socially, I am expected to uphold the values and traditions that Theyyam embodies. This means living in a way that reflects the spiritual purity and discipline required by the art form. My behavior, both in public and private, is often scrutinized, as people see me not just as an individual, but as a representative of the divine figures I embody. This can be both empowering and challenging, as there's a constant pressure to live up to these expectations.

As a Theyyam artist, my financial experiences are a blend of both challenges. my primary source of income comes from Dakshina, which is the offerings given by the community or the temple. The amount I receive can vary greatly depending on where the performance is held

and the financial condition of the local community. Sometimes, the offerings are modest, reflecting the limited resources of the community. This variability in income means that my earnings can be inconsistent, often making it challenging to cover my living expenses reliably. Preparing for a Theyyam performance involves significant costs for us. Maintaining and repairing the elaborate costumes, headdresses, and makeup requires a lot of ongoing investment. These expenses can add up quickly and are usually covered out of my own pocket, which affects my financial stability. On top of that, traveling to different performance sites further strains my finances, adding to the overall financial burden. The irregularity of my performance schedule and reliance on community offerings often lead to financial instability. There are times when performances are less frequent or when the community's financial contributions are limited. This variability means I can face periods of financial uncertainty, making it challenging to maintain a steady income.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, my experience as a Theyyam artist was deeply impacted by the restrictions and challenges posed by the situation. The suspension of performances due to restrictions on gatherings led to a significant loss of income and disrupted the vital process of maintaining and passing on our tradition. Financial strain increased as the regular income from Dakshina and community support dwindled, while the ongoing costs of maintaining costumes and headdresses added to the burden. Health and safety concerns also emerged as close-contact performances were not feasible under social distancing guidelines. Despite these challenges, the pandemic highlighted our community's resilience and adaptability. As a Theyyam artist, I've often felt the absence of government policies and support tailored to our needs. Despite the deep cultural significance of Theyyam, we frequently find ourselves overlooked when it comes to government recognition and financial assistance. Ajay Ghosh is not affiliated with any folklore-related organizations.”

4.2. DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

4.2.1. INTRODUCTION

According to Braun and Clarke (2006), thematic analysis is a fundamental method in qualitative research that requires a clear definition and description. Thematic analysis is a popular tool for qualitative research. The researcher analyzes data to uncover recurring themes, ideas, and meaning patterns. During data analysis, the researcher identified the following themes and cases.

THEMES

ECONOMIC ASPECTS

SOCIAL ASPECT

CASTE DYNAMICS

CULTURAL ASPECT

4.2.2. ECONOMIC ASPECTS

The experiences of five Theyyam artists reveal the deep economic challenges inherent in maintaining this traditional art form. The seasonal nature of Theyyam performances, typically held between January and April, results in irregular income, pushing many artists to seek supplementary work during the off-season. However, these additional jobs are often financially unstable. For example, Gangadharan recalls childhood hardships such as traveling on foot due to a lack of funds, highlighting the inadequacy of compensation from temple committees, which frequently fails to cover the costs of performing. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated these challenges by halting performances and income, leaving artists with minimal government support and no financial safety net. This situation is particularly dire as Theyyam artists age, with the absence of financial aid, healthcare benefits, and pensions leaving them economically vulnerable.

For some, like Prabhash, who balances Theyyam with a steady job as a pharmacist, the financial strain is somewhat alleviated, allowing participation in Theyyam without severe financial stress. Yet, even for those with other sources of income, the low and inconsistent earnings from Theyyam remain a significant issue. Case 3 Jithesh, who holds a government job, echoes these concerns, noting that while his steady income provides stability, the modest compensation for Theyyam does not reflect the physical and emotional demands of the art. He is particularly concerned about the future of Theyyam, fearing a decline in skilled performers as younger generations are reluctant to commit to the art full-time due to its financial instability. Despite these challenges, both artists prioritize the sacred nature of Theyyam over-commercialization, avoiding certain folklore organizations that might offer financial gain but compromise the ritual's integrity.

Vibeesh and Ajay Ghosh further illustrate the economic struggles of Theyyam artists. The costs associated with preparing and maintaining elaborate costumes, rehearsing intricate rituals, and traveling to various temples often outweigh the modest Dakshina or offerings received, making financial stability difficult to achieve. Ajay Ghosh, in particular, highlights the variability of income, which depends on the financial condition of the local community, further complicating financial planning. The pandemic only intensified these issues, suspending performances and cutting off income streams, forcing artists like Ajay to rely on the resilience and adaptability of their communities. Across all cases, there is a consensus on the need for greater government support, including financial assistance, healthcare benefits, and pensions, to help these artists sustain their cultural traditions while achieving economic security.

4.2.3. SOCIAL ASPECT

The social experiences of five Theyyam artists Gangadharan, Prabhash, Jithesh, Vibeesh, and Ajay Gosh reveal a profound connection to tradition, spirituality, and the challenges of preserving this sacred art form. Each artist belongs to the Malaya community, where Theyyam is regarded as a hereditary and divine duty. Despite the historical caste discrimination faced by their ancestors, all five artists report receiving respect and reverence from their communities and temple authorities. Gangadharan, for example, is highly respected by both his peers and the public, who view him as a divine figure during performances. However, they also highlight the ongoing social and financial challenges Theyyam artists face. Prabhash and Jithesh, who balance their Theyyam responsibilities with stable jobs, manage to avoid severe financial strain, yet they still grapple with the low and inconsistent income from performances. The pandemic exacerbated these issues by halting performances, leading to significant financial and spiritual disruptions for artists like Jithesh. Despite these challenges, all artists remain deeply committed to preserving the sacred nature of Theyyam, often avoiding commercialization by distancing themselves from certain folklore organizations. They emphasize the importance of passing the tradition to younger generations, noting the enthusiasm of children in learning and imitating their elders. However, they express concern about the future, as fewer young people are willing to commit to Theyyam full-time due to its financial instability. The artists also stress the need for greater government support, including financial assistance, healthcare, and pensions, to help sustain this vital cultural tradition. The lack of such support leaves Theyyam artists economically vulnerable, especially as they age. Yet, despite these challenges, their dedication to Theyyam remains unwavering, driven by a deep sense of purpose, spiritual fulfillment, and a commitment to their cultural heritage. They believe that with proper recognition and support, Theyyam can continue to thrive, preserving its spiritual and cultural significance for future generations.

4.2.4. CASTE DYNAMICS

The caste dynamics within the Theyyam tradition, as experienced by artists like Gangadharan, Prabhash, Jithesh, Vibeesh, and Ajay Gosh, reveal a complex interplay between tradition, respect, and ongoing challenges. All five artists, from the Malaya community, emphasize that while they no longer face overt caste discrimination, the historical context of caste still influences their experiences. Gangadharan, for example, is treated with respect by temple authorities today, but he acknowledges the caste-based obstacles his ancestors faced. This respect for Theyyam artists across caste lines reflects a shift in social attitudes, with the ritual transcending traditional caste boundaries. However, subtle forms of neglect, like inadequate provisions during performances as noted by Prabhash, suggest that caste dynamics persist in more nuanced ways. The economic challenges faced by these artists are significant, with financial instability remaining a common thread. Despite the spiritual and cultural importance of Theyyam, the modest compensation they receive often does not cover the costs of performing, reflecting an ongoing marginalization tied to their caste heritage. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated these issues, halting performances and further straining their financial situations. Artists like Jithesh and Vibeesh, who balance other jobs with their Theyyam duties, highlight the struggle to maintain both economic stability and cultural integrity. The artists' deep commitment to preserving Theyyam in its traditional context underscores the tension between maintaining cultural purity and navigating modern socio-economic realities. While there is a growing respect for Theyyam artists, the lack of government support and recognition exacerbates their financial hardships, particularly for those from marginalized backgrounds. This ongoing economic marginalization can be seen as an extension of historical caste-based inequalities. The artists call for targeted government policies and benefits to address these challenges, ensuring that their cultural and spiritual contributions are recognized and supported in meaningful ways. Thus, caste dynamics within Theyyam are evolving, with the tradition serving as a bridge between past divisions and a more inclusive future, yet still influenced by the socio-economic realities tied to caste heritage.

4.2.5. CULTURAL ASPECTS

The Theyyam tradition, deeply embedded in the cultural and spiritual fabric of the Malaya community, is a sacred practice that transcends mere performance, embodying the divine essence of the gods themselves. Gangadharan, Prabhash, Jithesh, and Ajay Gosh each offer a unique perspective on this art form, reflecting its profound significance as both a hereditary ritual and a vital link to their heritage. For Gangadharan, Theyyam is a divine right passed down through generations, representing a living connection to Lord Shiva and Vishnu, with every performance meticulously preserving ancestral rituals and cultural practices. His commitment to the tradition underscores the deep respect and responsibility associated with embodying the divine, despite the financial and physical challenges inherent in the practice.

Prabhash, balancing his roles as a pharmacist and Theyyam artist, highlights the duality of Theyyam as both a spiritual blessing and a significant personal sacrifice. His experiences reveal a dedication to maintaining the ritualistic purity of Theyyam, resisting the commercialization that might dilute its sacred essence. Despite occasional neglect by temple authorities, Prabhash's commitment to his craft remains unwavering, fueled by the profound spiritual journey and cultural connection that Theyyam offers. His financial struggles, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, reflect a broader challenge faced by many artists, whose incomes from Theyyam often fall short of covering their living expenses.

Jithesh's narrative emphasizes the divine and transformative nature of Theyyam, shaped by his early experiences watching his family perform. His role as a government employee limits his participation to specific times, yet he remains deeply connected to the art form, which he views as a powerful conduit for spiritual and emotional fulfillment. Jithesh's concern about the decline in full-time performers due to financial and practical challenges highlights the urgent need for increased support and awareness to sustain the tradition. His reflections on the impact of the pandemic further illustrate the vulnerability of Theyyam artists to economic and social disruptions.

Ajay Gosh's story provides a comprehensive view of the cultural and financial dimensions of Theyyam. His lifelong immersion in the tradition, influenced by his family's deep-rooted

involvement, underscores the sacred duty and respect associated with the art form. Ajay's experiences reveal the social and financial complexities faced by Theyyam artists, including the variability in income from community offerings and the substantial costs associated with maintaining elaborate costumes. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on his livelihood highlights the precarious nature of the art form, with disruptions to performances exacerbating financial instability.

Collectively, these narratives paint a rich picture of Theyyam as a sacred, transformative art form deeply intertwined with the cultural and spiritual identity of the Malaya community. Despite the challenges of financial instability and the physical demands of performance, the dedication of these artists to preserving and honoring their heritage remains a testament to the profound significance of Theyyam in their lives. The lack of government support and the rejection of commercialization emphasize the need to maintain the ritualistic purity of Theyyam while ensuring that artists receive the recognition and assistance they deserve.

CHAPTER V

FINDINGS, SUGGESTIONS, CONCLUSION

5.1. FINDINGS

The experiences of Theyyam artists reveal significant economic and social challenges in maintaining this sacred tradition. Theyyam performances, typically held between January and April, result in irregular income, pushing many artists to seek additional, often unstable, work during the off-season. Artists recount enduring financial hardships due to inadequate compensation from temple committees, which frequently falls short of covering performance costs. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated these difficulties by halting performances, leaving artists with minimal government support and no financial safety net. This lack of support is particularly severe for aging artists, who face economic vulnerability without financial aid, healthcare benefits, or pensions.

Some artists manage to mitigate financial strain by balancing Theyyam with stable jobs, though they still contend with low and inconsistent earnings from performances. Despite the stability provided by other sources of income, the modest compensation for Theyyam does not adequately reflect its physical and emotional demands. There are concerns about the future of Theyyam due to declining interest among younger generations, who are deterred by its financial instability. Many artists prefer to avoid commercialization, prioritizing the ritual's sacred nature over potential financial gain.

Economic struggles are further highlighted by the costs associated with maintaining elaborate costumes, rehearsing rituals, and traveling to various temples, which often exceed the modest offerings received. The variability in income, influenced by the financial conditions of local communities, complicates financial planning. The pandemic has intensified these challenges, underscoring the resilience required to sustain the tradition. A common theme emerges: the urgent need for government support in the form of financial assistance, healthcare, and pensions to help

artists navigate economic and social difficulties while preserving the cultural and spiritual integrity of Theyyam.

The caste dynamics within Theyyam reflect a shift from overt discrimination to subtler forms of neglect, influenced by historical contexts. While artists report respect and reverence from their communities and temple authorities, caste-based obstacles persist in nuanced ways. The ongoing financial instability, exacerbated by the pandemic, highlights economic marginalization tied to caste heritage. Artists call for targeted government policies to address these challenges and ensure that their cultural contributions are recognized and supported. This evolution of caste dynamics within Theyyam demonstrates the art form's role as a bridge between past divisions and a more inclusive future, yet still influenced by socioeconomic realities tied to caste.

5.2. SUGGESTIONS

Theyyam artists face many socio economic challenges, a multifaceted approach is necessary to ensure the sustainability and integrity of this sacred tradition. Theyyam, a ritual art form deeply embedded in the cultural and spiritual life of the Malaya community, faces pressing issues that undermine its preservation. The artists who perform Theyyam encounter irregular income, financial instability, and a lack of adequate support, which complicates their ability to maintain and pass on this ancient practice. To mitigate these challenges and support the artists who uphold this cultural heritage, several key measures are recommended. These include government intervention to provide targeted financial aid, healthcare benefits, and pensions, stabilizing income through standardized compensation, promoting and preserving the tradition without compromising its sacred nature, encouraging the training of younger generations, and addressing caste dynamics to ensure equity and respect for all artists. Implementing these suggestions will not only provide financial and social stability for Theyyam artists but also help sustain the cultural and spiritual significance of Theyyam for future generations.

Government Support and Financial Assistance: There is a pressing need for government intervention to provide financial aid specifically tailored to Theyyam artists. This support should include regular subsidies to supplement income during off-seasons and financial assistance to cover essential costs such as costume maintenance and travel expenses. Establishing a dedicated

fund for Theyyam artists could alleviate financial strain and offer a safety net, particularly for aging artists who lack financial security.

Healthcare Benefits and Pensions: Implementing healthcare benefits and pension schemes for Theyyam artists is crucial. As many artists age and face increasing health issues, access to affordable healthcare and a reliable pension plan would significantly improve their quality of life. Government-sponsored health insurance and pension schemes could ensure that artists are supported in their later years, reflecting the cultural value and respect afforded to their contributions.

Stabilizing Income: Efforts should be made to stabilize the income of Theyyam artists. This could involve creating a standardized compensation framework that ensures fair remuneration for performances, regardless of local community resources. Regularizing payments and providing a minimum guaranteed amount could help artists better manage their finances and reduce the economic uncertainty associated with their work.

Promoting and Preserving Theyyam: While many artists prefer to avoid commercialization, promoting Theyyam through cultural preservation programs could enhance its visibility and appreciation without compromising its sacred nature. Government and non-governmental organizations can collaborate on initiatives that highlight the cultural significance of Theyyam, attract tourism, and create opportunities for educational programs that engage younger generations.

Training and Succession Planning: Encouraging the training of younger generations in Theyyam practices is essential for the tradition's continuity. Providing educational grants, apprenticeships, and workshops could foster interest and dedication among youth. By ensuring a steady pipeline of skilled performers, the tradition can be sustained and its cultural richness preserved.

Addressing Caste Dynamics: Recognizing and addressing the subtle caste-based challenges within the Theyyam tradition is important. While overt discrimination may have diminished, ensuring that all artists are treated equitably and receive the respect they deserve is vital. Policies and practices that promote inclusivity and equity within the tradition can help mitigate the impacts of historical caste dynamics.

5.3. CONCLUSION

Theyyam highlights both the profound cultural significance and the pressing challenges faced by its practitioners. As a sacred art form deeply embedded in the spiritual and cultural fabric of the Malaya community, Theyyam represents a living tradition that bridges the divine and the human. However, the economic and social difficulties encountered by Theyyam artists underscore the urgent need for systemic support to ensure the tradition's continuity and integrity.

The findings reveal that irregular income, financial instability, and inadequate compensation are major concerns for Theyyam artists. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated these challenges, further straining the already precarious financial situation of many performers. Aging artists face additional vulnerabilities due to a lack of financial security, healthcare benefits, and pensions.

To address these issues, it is crucial for government and non-governmental organizations to provide targeted support. This includes establishing financial aid programs, implementing healthcare and pension schemes, and creating a standardized compensation framework to stabilize income. Additionally, promoting Theyyam through cultural preservation initiatives, fostering the training of younger generations, and addressing subtle caste dynamics can contribute to sustaining the tradition while ensuring equity and respect for all artists.

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APPENDIX - INTERVIEW GUIDE

EVERYDAYNESS OF A DALIT THEYYAM ARTIST: CASTE, ECONOMY, AND LIFE FROM NORTH MALABAR

Personal life

1. Name
2. Age
3. Marital status
4. Education
5. Profession
6. Place
7. Members of the family
8. How many children
9. Income class
10. Caste category

Theyyam related questions

1. How long have you been practicing Theyyam?
2. How were you introduced to Theyyam?
3. How long have you been practicing Theyyam?
4. What roles do you typically perform
5. How has your family's tradition influenced your involvement in theyyam?

Caste and Social Identity

1. How does your identity as a Dalit influence your experience as a Theyyam artist?
2. Have you encountered any caste-based discrimination within the Theyyam community or during performances?
3. How do you think your caste affects how people see and treat you in the Theyyam community and in society?

Economic Condition

1. Can you describe the financial aspects of performing Theyyam? How do you sustain yourself financially?
2. What challenges do you face in terms of income from Theyyam, and how do you manage your daily expenses?
3. How did the COVID-19 pandemic affect your economic situation and your ability to perform Theyyam?
4. Are there any support systems, such as government assistance or community support, that help you manage your finances, or do you rely entirely on income from Theyyam?
5. How do you balance Theyyam with other forms of employment, if any?

Cultural and spiritual Aspects

1. What does Theyyam mean to you personally, both as a cultural practice and a spiritual experience?
2. How do you prepare physically and mentally for a Theyyam performance?
3. How do you perceive the spiritual significance of Theyyam, especially as someone from a marginalized caste?
4. How does your community view your role as a Theyyam artist? Are there specific expectations placed upon you because of your participation in this ritual?

Challenges and Opportunities

1. What are the biggest challenges you face as a Dalit Theyyam artist? How do you overcome them?
2. Have you noticed any changes in the way Theyyam is practiced or perceived over the years? How have these changes impacted you and your community?
3. What are your thoughts on the younger generation's involvement in Theyyam? Are they interested, or do they face different challenges?
4. What kind of support do you think would be most beneficial for Theyyam artists, particularly those from marginalized communities?
5. How do you see the future of Theyyam, especially in relation to caste and economic conditions?

Government Support

1. Do you feel that there is adequate government or institutional support for Theyyam artists? If not, what kind of support do you think is needed?
 2. Have you ever been involved with any organizations or movements aimed at supporting Theyyam artists or addressing caste issues? If so, what has been your experience?
 3. How do you think policies could be improved to better support artists from marginalized backgrounds, especially those who practice Theyyam?
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