

Teyyam is the Best Tool for Reconstructing the History of North Malabar

M. P. Damodaran

Department of Anthropology, University of Madras, Chennai 600 005, Tamil Nadu, India
Telephone: +91 44 25368778 Ext: 329 Mobile: 9840245078
E-mail: damodaran68mp@yahoo.com

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ABSTRACT *Teyyam*, one of the popular folk traditions in North Malabar, Kerala is famous for its vividness and the peoples' passion over it. The gods and goddesses, spirits, heroes and heroines, animals and ancestors are worshipped in the form of *teyyam*. Such divine powers are worshipped in 'special kind' of performance in sacred centers. The devotees and believers, who worship *teyyam* as god, certainly include all the four *varnas* of the Hindus. All the performers are akin to Scheduled Castes, the so-called 'untouchables'. The magico-religious ritual of North Malabar has attracted me more towards it not because of its wonderful world of fantasy but because of its references on real life actions. Myths and legends are the backbone of *teyyam*. Each *teyyam* tells us about his-story, the history of the North Malabar. And all these stories narrate the actions of life. For example, the story and performances of *teyyams* like *Chonnamma*, *Iepalliteyyam*, *Kurikkal teyyam*, *Kuttychathan*, *Maruthiyodan kurikkal*, *Muchilottu bagavathi*, *Pottan teyyam*, *Palenthayikannan*, *Pulimaranja thondachan*, *Vishakandan*, *Vishnumurthi*, etc, express glimpses of peoples' life and culture. Some of them point towards social discriminations, purity and pollution, and practice of untouchability. *Kathuvanur veeran* and *Makka pothi* narrate the family life. *Teyyam* like *Kuttychathan*, *Vishnurmuhu*, *Muchilottubaghavathi*, etc, reveal the economic pursuits of the society. So, over all, *teyyam* provides a real portrait of socio-political, and economic activities of this area.

Teyyam, one of the popular folk traditions in North Malabar of Kerala, is famous for its vividness, and passion of people, and it is admirable in nature. According to Kurup, *The Teyyam or Teyyattam is a popular cult in Malabar which has become an inseparable part of the religion of the village folk. As a living cult with centuries-old tradition, ritual and custom it embraces almost all castes, classes and divisions of Hindu community in this region* (1977: 5).

And, according to Damodaran, *Teyyam* is a magico-riligious observance. It is highly conditioned by myth (1998: 70).

Such is the nature of *teyyam* and its powerful consequences. The very word *teyyam* brings forth in the mind of a listener an enchanting and beautiful picture. Nevertheless, in the case of the people of North Malabar, the word has more than one meaning (Damodaran, 1998, 2005). It is an indispensable part of their religion, and they observe it as their guide and protector. The believers who hold its ire bear woes and its blessing gifts for their well being.

There are male and female *teyyams*. According to their nature, and myth in particular, it is possible to classify *teyyams* into different

types namely, *teyyams* of God and Goddess, Ancestors, Heroes and Heroines, Spirits and Devils, and Nature or Animals (Damodaran, 1998; Namboodiri, 1998; Pallath, 1995).

This was once the one and only important means of worship in this area, and at present, both the local deities, and some of the Hindu gods are worshipped and performed as *teyyam*. All *taravâdu* (group of families) worship one, or, more *teyyam* as their family god, and perform *teyyam* in natural settings, either in specially designed sacred centres or, in houses. There is community, as well as village sacred centres. Some are similar in appearance, and some others vary in size, shape and structure. *Ara*, *palliyara*, *mâdam*, *kalari*, *kazhakam*, *kâvu*, *kottil*, *tara* etc., are some examples for sacred centres. In these centres, stones or weapons are supposed to be representing the presence of deities, which is placed in such a manner under certain trees, elevated platforms or, *peedams*. A sacred centre may have either one sacred spot or, more than one, in which case the main-deity would be found at one spot, and the subordinate deities at other spots. Likewise, each sacred centre may have either a single deity or, a group of deities with the chief-deity. A subordinate deity of a sacred centre may be the chief-deity of another centre.

It depends upon the outlook of the people who worship *teyyam*.

Performance, also a part of *teyyam* worship, is a unique customary practice, in which assigned specialist/s disguise as *teyyam* of respective deity or many of their kinds. It gives the devotees a chance to see their *teyyam*/s before them, from an approachable distance. The performance is either calendrical or, set according to the desire of the organizer/s. Various rituals are incorporated with the performance, starting from the beginning to the end. More than this, *teyyam* is also notable for its deeds. This includes dance, music, literature, eloquence, facial writing, engraving, and carving. It is impossible to see the above said aspects in such a combination, anywhere, and in any field, all around the world.

The devotees, who worship *teyyam* as god, belong to all the four *varnas* of the Hindus, possessing feelings of hierarchical stratification. And this system is working on the network consisting of three important and basic participants namely, the organizer, the devoted spectator and the performer. During the execution of *teyyam*, these active persons have their own specific roles to play. According to the *teyyam* tradition, the performers perform it, the organizers organize it and make needed arrangements, and the pious spectators watch and get relief by the force of their customary belief system. Any one can change his role, except the performers. In other words, the roles, the positions and the contributions of people are always changeable but, the performer remains the same.

All the performers are akin to the members of the Scheduled Castes, the so-called 'untouchables' such as, *Malayan*, *Vannan*, *Velan*, *Pulayan*, *Anjutan*, *Munnutan*, *Mavilan*, *Chingathan*, *Kopalan*, and *Karimpalan*. Among these, the *Malayan*, and the *Vannan* are not only the two principle castes, but also they are the chief performers of *teyyam* (Damodaran, 1998, 2005). Since there is no formal method, all the knowledge about it is passed on to the succeeding generation through mouth and ear, and performed by using the mentally stored ideas. Therefore, the religious-ritual of North Malabar, *teyyam*, has attracted me much, not because of its wonderful world of fantasy, but because of its references to real life actions. We can trace the ways of life and inter and intra-social interactions of man by studying *teyyam*.

The religious, economic, political, social, and cultural activities of man, and even the nature-

man interactions, in a 'given space and time', are much grappled with every aspect of *teyyam*. It is the pulse of the people that presents many incidences of social discriminations and suppressions, and protests in the whole history of mankind. I have the strong belief that struggle for existence, and survival is the real history of our society, rather than the descriptions of dynasties and their reforms. This also applies to *teyyam*.

The area witnessed continuous conflicts between man and man, and between man nature. The highly stratified society puts each and every one in different water tight-compartments, the castes. Due to the concept of 'purity and pollution', each stratum of the society is more or less remain isolated or separated from others. Thus, the social hierarchy, the feeling of high and low or, superior and inferior, is prevalent, and it provides special privileges to certain groups. Those who are at the bottom in the social hierarchy, become the target for brutal harassment and ill treatment by the superiors, who entertain them as 'animal-like' creatures, and let them to experience agonies and pains silently due to some socio-cultural reasons such as, poverty, ignorance, concept of purity and pollution, and poor organization. These poor and helpless people compress all their grief, and shed only 'tears and blood' while the others are enjoying life with all its joys. The victims of such evils, the heroic ancestors, who fought bravely against social evils were later converted into gods, *teyyams*. Further, certain *teyyams* themselves stand opposing social discriminations (Damodaran, 2005).

We can understand that these real stories, through the form of myths and legends, are the backbone of *teyyam*. Each *teyyam* tells us about his-story, the history of North Malabar. For example, *teyyams* like *Chonnamma*, *Iyepalliteyyam*, *Kathuvanur veeran*, *Kurikkal teyyam*, *Kuttychathan*, *Makka pothi*, *Maruthiyodan kurikkal*, *Muchilottu bagavathi*, *Pottan teyyam*, *Palenthayikannan*, *Pulimaranja thondachan*, *Vishnumurthi* etc., give a lot of information regarding the socio-cultural activities of man in the past (Damodaran, 2005; Namboodiri, 1998).

Among these, *Chonnamma*, *Iyepalliteyyam*, *Kurikkal teyyam*, *Kuttychathan*, *Maruthiyodan kurikkal*, *Muchilottu bagavathi*, *Pottan teyyam*, *Palenthayikannan*, *Pulimaranja thondachan*, *Vishakandan*, and *Vishnumurthi* are the best examples, which present the role and status, social interactions, the relevance of the feelings

of high and low, and the depth of 'purity' and 'pollution' concepts.

So, let me try to make a humble attempt to look at the *teyyams* as presenting the life-actions of past, by discussing with you the stories of the above mentioned *teyyams*.

Pottan teyyam

The *tottam* (narration of the origin and myth) of *Pottan teyyam* reviews the conversation between a *Pulayan* and *Sankaracharya* regarding 'purity' and 'pollution'. Once, the mystic Brahmin scholar, *Sankaracharya* attempted to attain the highest state of knowledge *sarvajnapeedam* (throne of omniscience) met one *Pulayan* (*chandala*, an untouchable person of polluting low caste), and his women with children coming in front of him. According to the local custom and practice, the *Pulayan* and his company must keep away from the way of a man of high caste, particularly a Brahmin. But, the *Pulayan* did not move away. It provoked the great scholar, *Sankaracharya*. Thereafter, they exchanged a long verbal dispute, through which *Sankaracharya* learnt a lesson from the *Pulayan*. The latter demonstrated and proved that all human beings were equal, and the concept of high and low was a false concept. *Sankaracharya* realized his mistake. He fell at the feet of the disguised Siva, and begged for pardon.

My observations on *Pottan teyyam* over years reveal the fact that it directly speaks of social status, role, and social hierarchy. It also discloses the conflict between the high caste and the low caste over the concept of 'purity and pollution'. Thus, the whole dialogues between *Sankaracharya* and *Pulayan* portray the foolishness of social hierarchies and untouchability, and confirm the 'universal truth' that 'all men are equal'. The casting also made significant contribution by consciously putting the *Sankaracharya* and the *Pulayan*, both incarnations of Siva, in opposition to prove the simple fact that 'all are equal'. So, *Pottan teyyam* tell us about the behaviours of men in North Malabar.

Chonnamma

Even though a Brahmin family brought up *Chonnamma*, she was not willing to observe purity and pollution. Her Brahmin parents punished her over this, so she left the house.

Afterwards she came to be worshipped as a *teyyam*. Her story recounts the fact that the violation of rules regarding 'purity' and 'pollution' propelled punishment. Another interesting occurrence uncovered in this story is that a couple, *Kuravan* and *Kurathi*, who were untouchables, sold *Chonnamma*. The Brahmins had no hesitation to adopt *Chonnamma*, a child born to untouchables! Likewise, this story tries to expose not only the opportunism of high castes but also, the nonsense of 'purity' and 'pollution'.

Iyepalliteyyam

One *Ayikottaramana Embranthiri*, a Brahmin, owned a large field, *Chaladutara*. The Pulayas did all the works in this field. Once the *Embranthiri* had taken care of a boy, a Pulayan by name, *Pithari*. The boy was assigned to look after the field. One day, while *Pithari* was playing, *Kolathiri*, the king of *Kolathunadu*, and his Nayers came across the boy. Unfortunately, he was shot dead by the King because he was unable to keep the 'pollution distance'. His master *Embranthiri* also was shot dead by the same king. The assassin suffered from several misfortunes due to his unjustifiable action. He and his family later got out of the trouble through worshiping the boy *Pithari* as *Iyepalli teyyam*. This *teyyam* tell us about the status, and the role of individuals. It also reveals about the threat and treatment received by the poor untouchables from powerful persons.

Muchilottu bagavathi

This *teyyam* portraits about the life of women folk. A Brahmin girl was forced to commit suicide because of the harassment of others. As a brilliant and learned person, she dominated the males in the society in scholarly discussions. The envious scholars had woven a plot to trap the girl. Soon, during a scholarly discussion, she was asked to answer about which was the highest among the *Navarasas*. She said *Kamarasam* was the best or, primary one. It gave a golden chance to her rivals to blame her. They asked, "How can an unmarried girl talk about *Kamarasam* without a real experience in sex?" So, they excommunicated her by accusing that she had pre-marital sexual experience. The expelled girl wandered, and later on committed suicide by burning herself. She was turned into a *teyyam*. This was so because, women were ill-

treated by men. Men dominated over them and they were suppressed. Therefore, the women always occupied a similar social status, remind silent like the untouchables, who were exploited and utilised as tools, and isolated from the main stream-life. To redress and to remind the agonies and pains experienced by women, the society made use of *teyyam* such as, *Muchilottu bagavathi*.

Pulimaranja thondachan

It tells about a tragic story of a *Pulayan* by name, *Kari*. Unlike his parents he was much interested in learning, especially in *kalarividya*. Since he was an untouchable, he was not permitted to learn anything. But, by the help of his master, *Kari* disguised his identity. He visited all the 18 *Kalaris*, where *Kalarividya* was taught. From *Chothiyan Kalari* he learned the trick of 'metamorphose'. After learning all lessons, he returned and becomes a popular magician. He was honoured as *Kurikkal* (proficient person, *guru*).

At that time the king of *Halladam* was suffering from mental problems. Many tried to cure him but, were not successful. Finally, they invited *Kari Kurikkal*. He diagnosed and cured the 'disorder' of *thampuran*, the King. But, without giving any reward they wanted to cheat him by asking him to bring *pulipal* (milk of leopard/tiger) and *pulijeda* (hair of leopard/tiger) to the palace. The unhappy *Kari* returned home. Before disguising as a leopard, he had given direction to his wife to perform certain actions, i.e., when he came as a leopard she should pour the *arikadi* (water used to clean rice before cooking) on his face, and immediately beat on the face with a broomstick to recover him from his transfiguration. He then said farewell. The leopard collected all the necessary items and submitted them to the *thampuran*. Thereupon, the transfigured *Kari* went to his wife for getting back his original form. But unfortunately, she feared and refused to open the door. The provoked leopard broke into the house and killed her, and disappeared. Shortly, the *thampuran* got madness due to the fury of *Kari Kurikkal*. Thereafter, he came to be worshipped as a deity, *Pulimaranja thondachan*. This tale gives substantial informations about the caste-ridden society.

Kathuvanur veeran

Similarly, *Kathuvanur veeran teyyam* presents the family life of a legend hero,

Mandhappan. He was born and brought up in a *Tiyya* family. Like *Kari Kurikkal*, he was much interested in *kalarividya*, instead of toddy taping. So, it made his father angry, and later on he left the house and stayed in his uncle's house, where he fell in love with a girl, *Chemmarathi*. Soon he married her. The married life of this hero was not a happy one because, his wife always blamed and discourages him without any reason. He later fed up with the family life and involved in the war against the *Kodakans* troop, and was killed in the battlefield. Even though, she ill-treated her husband, *Chemmarathi* loved him much. So, she ended her life by jumping into the heap of fire in which her husband's body was cremated. The hero of this story turned as a *teyyam*, *Katuvanur veeran*. The story depicts the family life with all its affections, joys and pains.

Makka pothi

It also speaks about the tragedy of a housewife. She lived in *Kunhimangalam* (in Kannur district) in her family house, along with two children, her brothers, and their wives. She was well cared of by her brothers. It created jealousy and hatred in their wives. They always tried to separate their husbands from her. At last, they accused her and her morality, and told them that she had immoral connections with a man, who often supplied them with coconut oil. Without any clarification, the misguided brothers murdered their own sister, and her innocent children. *Makkam* and her children transformed to *teyyams*. This *teyyam* gives a picture of family life with all its delight and tears.

Similarly, all the *teyyams* express such stories regarding the society, culture, etc. Apart from the myths, legends, and performance, the interactions, status and role of each individual during each performance also need attention, since they tell about the then prevailing social system, and social structure of North Malabar (Damodaran, 2005).

Now, I would describe the status and the roles played by different castes and individuals, which I think, had high significance.

I already mentioned that all the Hindus of North Malabar worship *teyyam*. The villagers are divided into segments by caste-system. The whole function of *teyyam* performance is controlled by the upper castes. They hold all the key positions in the organization level. The low

caste performer only performs *teyyam* according to the rules and norms framed by the upper caste. Once the local ruler, *nâduvazhi* or *tampuran*, was considered as the supreme authority. Under him the *tantri* (priest) played a significant role by giving orders to the performance. He also introduced the rituals.

Table 1: Social hierarchy in terms of *teyyam*

Status	Varna / Caste
<i>Nâduvazhi</i>	Kshatriya
<i>Tantri</i>	Brahmin
<i>Kôyma</i>	<i>Poduval</i>
<i>Uralanmar</i>	<i>Nair</i>
Celebrant/s	Caste Hindus
<i>Kalesakaran</i>	<i>Tiyya</i>
Performer	Low castes

At present, the *kôyma* (representative of the ruler) is placed below *tantri*, who looks after the rules and regulations framed by the *tantri*, with the help of *uralanmar* (village council).

The celebrant makes necessary arrangements and the performer performs *teyyam*. Among the celebrants, there are specialists such as, oracles, caretakers of sacred centres, and volunteers. Each one has to do certain fixed duties. The *velichapadu* or *komaram* is the oracle, who has to perform rituals on important occasions. The oracle of the *Tiyya*, *Kollan*, *Asari* and *Musari* are known as *velichappadan*. And of *Vaniya* and *Maniyâni* are called *komaram*. Oracles are only present in big centers. All *teyyams* do not have oracles but only a few important deities have oracles. *Kuttayi* is a selected group of men (number ranges from 2 to 9), who collect the *kalvara* (yearly share of families towards their sacred centre), and also assist the officials as volunteers in sacred centres. Only *Tiyya* caste is appointed as *kuttayi*. In some sacred centres, particularly in the northern side, a few persons are selected and appointed as *kolkar* or *kayatukar*. They are assigned to protect the paddy fields from the cattle.

Kalasakaran is unavoidable. A member of the *Tiyya* family is appointed as *kalasakaran* in a particular locality on the basis of heredity. He brings tender coconut leaves, leaf torch and liquor. Like other *teyyam* celebratory, the *kalasakaran* is also present throughout the performance.

Another important *teyyam* official is the performer. The execution of *teyyam* is a group's effort. As per their skill and aptitude each performer has given different duties to perform

in different spheres such as, *teyyam kettal*, *tottam pattu*, *aniyarapani*, and *vadyam*.

The caste known as, *Kanniyan* serves as a traditional astrologer and umbrella maker. The females of *Vanathan* serve as the washerwomen to the upper caste celebrants. The female of *Vannan*, *Vannathi*, extends her service as a washerwoman to *Tiyya*. The *Kollan* gives his service by polishing the weapons of *teyyam* in the sacred center. In short, each and every caste of this area is linked directly or indirectly to *teyyam* by performing certain prescribed duties based on service-return, *jajmani system*.

This discussion on *teyyam* provides a clear picture of the socio-cultural behaviour, and activities of people in North Malabar (Damodaran, 2005; Kurup, 1977; Namboodiri, 1998). Since, *teyyam* portrays every aspect of life in different ways, we can utilise it as a reliable tool for the reconstruction of our 'real history'.

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