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

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ABSTRACT Teeyam, 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 teeyam. Such divine powers are worshipped in ‘special kind’ of performance in sacred centers. The devotees and believers, who worship teeyam 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 teeyam. Each teeyam 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 teeyams like Chonnamma, lepalliteeyam, Kurikkal teyyam, Kuttychathan, Maruthiyoddan 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. Teeyam like Kuttychathan, Vishnumurthi, Muchilottubaghavathi, etc, reveal the economic pursuits of the society. So, over all, teeyam provides a real portrait of socio-political, and economic activities of this area.

Teeyam, 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 Teeyam 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, Teeyam is a magico-religious observance. It is highly conditioned by myth (1998: 70).

Such is the nature of teeyam and its powerful consequences. The very word teeyam 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; Namboodri, 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 teeyam. All taravâdu (group of families) worship one, or, more teeyam as their family god, and perform teeyam in natural settings, either in specially designed sacred centres or, in houses. There is comminity, as well as village sacred centres. Some are similar in appearance, and some others vary in size, shape and structure. Ara, palliyara, mādam, kalari, kazhakam, kāvu, 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 specialists disguise as teyyam of respective deity or many of their kinds. It gives the devotees a chance to see their teyyams 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-rural 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, Iyepalli teyyam, Kathuvanur veeran, Kurikkal teyyam, Kuttychathan, Makka pothi, Maruthiyodan kurikkal, Muchilottu bagavathi, Pottan teyyam, Palenthayikanann, 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, Iyepalli teyyam, Kurikkal teyyam, Kuttychathan, Maruthiyodan kurikkal, Muchilottu bagavathi, Pottan teyyam, Palenthayikanann, 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 sarvajnapoedam (throne of omniscience) met one Pulayan (chandala, an untouchable person of polluting low caste), and his women with children coming infront 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 tells 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, Chaladatara. 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 Kolathamadu, and his Nayars 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 tells 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 portrays 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 latter 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 arkadi (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, Mandhappen. He was born and brought up in a Tiyya family. Like Kari Kurikkal, he was much interested in kalarividya, instead of toddy tapping. 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, Kathuvanur 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 delights 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
cage performer only performs teyiyam according to the rules and norms framed by the upper caste. Once the local ruler, nāduvazhi 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 teyiyam

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Status</th>
<th>Varna / Caste</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nāduvazhi</td>
<td>Khatriya</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tantri</td>
<td>Brahmmin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kōyma</td>
<td>Poduvai</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uralanmar</td>
<td>Nair</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Celebrant/s</td>
<td>Caste Hindus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kalesakaran</td>
<td>Tiyya</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performer</td>
<td>Low castes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

At present, the kōyma (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 teyiyam. 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 Manivāni are called komaram. Oracles are only present in big centers. All teyiyams 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 kalvvara (yearly share of families towards their sacred centre), and also assist the officials to perform rituals 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 teyiyam celebratory, the kalasakaran is also present throughout the performance.

Another important teyiyam official is the performer. The execution of teyiyam is a group’s effort. As per their skill and aptitude each performer has given different duties to perform in different spheres such as, teyiyam kettal, tottam pattu, aniyarapani, and vadayam.

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

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

REFERENCES