

Social Harmony Through The Art Forms: A Historical Enquiry On The Presence Of Muslim Characters In The Hindu Art Forms In Kasaragod

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Abstract

Kasaragod, in the northernmost part of Kerala, has a distinct cultural background, which came into being through a long historical process of synthesis of various cultures. Historically, the present Kasaragod was a part of the ancient Tulu Kingdom. Military expeditions and trade contacts from outside regions brought various communities into this area. Thus, it became a cultural hub of different ethnic groups and the 'Land of Seven Languages'. Religions like Hinduism, Christianity, Buddhism, Jainism and Islam significantly influenced the formation of the pluralistic culture of Kasaragod. The culture of the Kasaragod region has peculiar traits that are quite different from other regional cultures in Kerala. The languages, lifestyle, art and architecture, literature, faiths, and social consciousness bestow a distinct cultural identity upon Kasaragod. The traditional art forms in various communities played an important role in moulding a separate cultural entity in the northernmost part of Kerala. Kasaragod has typical art forms, such as Theyyam, Yakshaganam, Alamikkali, Poorakkali, Mangalamkali, and Kelepathram. Each item has its roots in the traditional beliefs of different community groups. Among the art forms of northern Malabar, Theyyam and Alamikkali have a significant role in promoting religious harmony. Both are performed in the ritual places of Hinduism, but the presence of Muslim characters is notable during their performance. This paper attempts to enquire about the Hindu-Muslim religious harmony and the working of secular aspects in the present Kasaragod.

Key Words: Pluralistic Culture, Religions, Rituals and Beliefs, Artforms.

Introduction

Theyyam is a popular ritual dance in north Malabar. This centuries-old ritual performance is a unique combination of dance, music and religious worship. It reflects the main features of a traditional tribal culture dating back to the early days. 'Theyyam' is a corrupt form of 'Daivam' or 'God'¹. There are around 450 Theyyams in north Malabar. Sakthism, Vaishnavism, and Saivism have a powerful role in the cult of Theyyams². Theyyams greatly resemble the 'Bhutas' performed in the regions of Karnataka³. The myths and legends of the Theyyam deities often relate to the local heroes and heroines. Theyyams are performing with various objectives. The Theyyattam or Kaliyattam festivals conducted in the sacred groves or family houses were mainly to bring prosperity and well-being to the families and villages. It is believed that if specific village or family deities were not propitiated through Theyyam performance, they could cause suffering and misery to the towns or communities. Theyyams are also conducted to cure or ward off certain diseases and epidemics. Certain people offered Theyyams for amicable solutions to family disputes, court cases and other similar problems related to acts of hatred or vengeance. The special Theyyams are conducted by an individual or a family when their prayer or wish is fulfilled as an act of gratitude towards the deity. For agricultural prosperity and the well-being of animals, certain Theyyams are performing as well before embarking on hunting expeditions. The ancient war heroes are also remembered and worshipped through the Theyyam performances⁴. The Theyyam performance has mainly three stages. The initial stage is called Thottam, the second is called Vellattam, and the third is Theyyam's actual performance. Native musical instruments like drums and cymbals are used in the Theyyam performance.

Kasaragod, the last formed district in Kerala, is the seat of various Theyyams. Theyyam is a subject with vast potential for detailed study and research. Each Theyyam has its own stories or legends behind its origin and performance. Discussing all the matters related to Theyyams at Kasaragod within a few pages is impossible. Mostly, Theyyam is the art form associated with Hindu mythology. However, certain Muslim Theyyams are performed in the Hindu ritual places at Kasaragod. As a mark of religious harmony, the Hindu people perform Muslim Theyyams like Ali Chamundi at Arikkadi near Kumbala, Mukri Pocker at Malome Kooloth near Vellarikundu, Kalanthan Mukri at Kamballur Kotta near Chittarikkal and

Ummachi Theyyam at Mekkattillam near Nileschwaram.⁵ Among the Muslim Theyyams, Muslims and the Hindus worship the 'Ali Bootha' of the Ali Chamundi Daivastana at Arikkadi near Kumbala. Legend says that Ali was a Muslim merchant from Diu Island and settled in Tulunadu (Tulu Kingdom) for business purposes. He was also familiar with 'Mantravada' or magical powers. He soon turned into a nuisance for the womenfolk of the area. The women prayed to the deity Chamundi to save them from the wily Ali. However, the 'Tayitha' or 'Urku' (talisman) that Ali wore protected him from harm. Finally, one day, as Ali passed by Chatrampalla, a pond, he saw a woman bathing. The woman called out to Ali to join her in the pond. It is said that while preparing to step into the water, Ali removed the talisman, and the woman seized the opportunity to kill him in the pond. The people believe that the woman was an incarnation of Chamundi. However, following Ali's death, the locals faced many problems attributed to his dissatisfied soul or 'Pretha'. They believed that the ritual of 'Prethochchatane' (destruction of evil spirits) helps to solve all problems. Hence, the people started to perform Ali Theyyam every year to please Ali's soul. The Chatrampalla, the pond where Ali was supposedly killed, is still there. An umbrella-shaped rock formation and rock sandals are seen near this pond. The people who believe in Ali Bhootha attribute him with great powers and say all requests made through him will be fulfilled in a year. People encountering problems come to the 'bhootha' for solutions. Many devotees of the Hindus and the Muslims present in the temple during the annual festival claim that Ali Bhootha is the most powerful one who has solutions for all. During the festival days, Muslim and Hindu devotees offer chickens and jasmine flowers to Ali Bhootha. The temple here is also popularly known as 'Pade Ali Bhoothastana'. The Ali Bhootha is also called the 'Karyakaran' of Chamundi Bhootha, which roughly means 'secretary' of Chamundi Bhootha. Mukri Pokker is one of the few Theyyams, which has a Muslim central character and is performing at Malome Kooloth, a Hindu ancestral temple near Vellarikkundu in Kasaargod. The performer comes with an artificial white beard, traditional attire, and chants verses from the Holy Quran. The story goes that Pokker was an able youth with martial arts skills from Ullal. He was appointed caretaker by the family head of Malome Koolome (a prominent house and family in Kasargod). The head of the family soon favoured the able and efficient Pokker, but it also brought him, jealous enemies, because of his closeness to the Malome family head. His detractors

plotted a scheme to destroy Pokker and killed him through an encounter. Later, as a penance and as a result of consultation with astrologers, it was decided to hold a Theyyam in the name of Mukri Pokker and Chamundi. There is another story which says Pokker fell in love with a girl from the Molome Koolome, which was the reason for his destruction by the head of the family. The Chamundi Theyyam, who is performing along with Mukri Pokker, is supposed to be this girl. It is believed that it was Pokker himself who told the head how to kill him, as he did not die after being stabbed repeatedly. The Theyyam performance of Mukri Pokker is considered a divine manifestation and is consulted by the Muslims and Hindu villagers for solving their issues. Kalanthan Mukri is one of the critical Muslim Theyyam performing in the Kamballur Kottayil Hindu Tharavadu near Chittarikkal in Kasaragod. According to legendary stories, Kalanthan was the Muslim priest at the famous mosque in Pulingome near Cherupuzha. He was familiar with sorcery and traditional medicine. People were attracted to the service of Kalanthan and had forgotten their tutelary deity, Chamundi. The angry Chamundi killed Kalanthan from the nearest river. The death created serious problems for the rural people. Therefore, they started to worship Kalanthan in the form of Theyyam. The performance of Kalanthan Mukri Theyyam starts with the religious customs of the Muslims, and the performer speaks in the local Muslim language. The Hindu and Muslim devotees offer paddy and white clothes to Kalanthan Mukri to fulfil their desires. From the analysis of Maappila/Muslim Theyyams, we have seen that the Muslim characters are devoted and perform as Theyyams. Not only males but some Muslim females are also performing as Theyyams. One such Theyyam is Ummachi Theyyam at Mekkattillam near Nileswaram. Yogyiar Theyyam, a martial arts expert and skilful fighter, gets converted to Ummachi Theyyam at the end of their performance. According to the local belief, Yogyiar was the protector of the royal family in Nileswaram. A Muslim female was assigned the task of extracting rice from the field. Rice was supposed to be divine and clean as it was used to serve God in the temple. One day, the woman was accused of having spoiled the divine nature of rice and was beaten to death by using a stick. Evil things started to happen in the area, and people were afraid. The analysis found that the female needed to be performed as Theyyam. As a part of the worship, the Yogyiar Theyyam, at the end of its performance, wears a pardhah and covers the face. Then, start to separate the maize from the rice traditionally since ancient

days in Kerala. The cult of Theyyam is very primitive in its origin, and it is a popular cult in Malabar, which has become an inseparable part of the religion of the village folk. This folk dance's ritual aspects and artistic forms fulfil the religious aspirations and aesthetic imagination of ordinary people. The performance of Muslim Theyyams indicates the advent of Islam and the resultant synthesis brought out by the Muslim community in north Malabar, reflecting the confluence of different religious traditions and beliefs and the spiritual harmony that existed during those days. Alamikali is an art form organized by the Hanafi Fakirs in the Muslim Community, who came to the regions of Kasaragod as the soldiers of Tipu Sultan. They were also known as the Turkans and Sahibs⁶. After the death of Tipu, they became the securities of the Eachikanam family at Kanhangad. Though the Muslims conducted the Alamikali, its actual performers were the men in the Hindu religion. Alamikali is closely associated with the stories of the battle of Karbala or the festival of 'Muharam' celebrated by the Muslims. The performers of Alamikali are painted black colour with white dots on their bodies and wear archaic forms of cloth, caps and ornaments. During begging, the Alami artists played dances according to the songs and the music from a small bell and stick in their hand. Their performance ended on the 10th day of Muharam in the Muslim calendar. On that day, the performers meet before a fire pit and conduct their customs and rituals. The Alamikali was one of the necessary art forms which upheld the Hindu-Muslim harmony in the regions of Kasaragod. Several folk plays and religious customs like Kolkali, Saliya Porattu, Uroos, also brought social harmony to northern Malabar. Kolkali is one of the folk arts played by the low castes people of the Hindu religion during the festival seasons. The Muslims in Malabar Islamicised this art by changing the Hindu devotional songs to Islamic.⁷ They start their Kolkali with prayers to Allah, Prophet Mohammed and Sufi Saints. Like the Hindus and the Muslims, the artists in the Christian religion in Kasaragod also play Kolkali. However, there are slight variations in the song and play according to the regional and racial differences

Saliya Porattu is a satirical art form of Kasaragod, in which open criticisms were made to purify society. The performance of Porattu is associated with the Pooram festivals in the Hindu temples. It is believed that the Porattu originated from the legendary stories regarding the war between Ilamkutty Swaroopam and Allada Swaroopan on the question of a place, namely 'Manikyakallu'⁸. According to the story, the

war ended with the victory of Ilamkutty Swaroopam with the help of Chamundi. Every year, the members of the Saliya caste in Kasaragod perform the battle story by wearing different masks. The Attakkanam Pothi or Ashtakudam Bhagavathi, Vazhappothi, and Chekon, are the critical characters in Porattu. Apart from the traditional Hindu characters, the Mappila character is a mark of religious harmony in this folk art. The Porattu performers openly insult all the conventional and contemporary events without considering their social and cultural value.

Apart from these, the worship of the Hero and Spirit prevails among various religious groups in Kasaragod ⁹. Along with the major festivals of Kerala like Onam, Vishu, Ramzan and Christmas, the people of different religions celebrate and observe all the local minor ritual customs for their virtue. The Buffalo Race and Cockfight are the two popular recreation items in Kasaragod, and the presence of all religious groups is significant. The former is connected with agricultural operations, and the latter is organized as a part of the festivals in the temples ¹⁰.

Conclusion

Kasaragod is popularly known as the “Land of Seven Languages”. Languages like Tulu, Kannada, Malayalam, Konkani, Marathi, Byari and Kotava are prevalent in District ¹¹. Several oral and written works of literature have been produced in these languages. Perhaps the communication system varies from region to region according to the language used by the people. Variations in religious beliefs, modes of worship, art forms, and languages make Kasaragod a land of diversity. However, harmonious relations throughout the district are evident from the participation of the people of all levels in the rituals and festivals. The Muslim presence in the Hindu festivals and vice-versa ¹² is one of the unique features of Kasaragod. The Muslim families in some villages actively cooperate and offer offerings to the Hindu shrines. The Hindus also co-operate with the Muslim rituals like Uroos or Nerchas ¹³. The festivals of the District acted as a prime device for promoting social cohesion. The mutual interference of the people in different communities and various art forms, rituals, languages, religious beliefs, customs and traditions help to develop a composite culture in present Kasaragod.

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