

Owning Muthappan: The Lumpen Thiyya and Negotiations of Modernity

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Abstract

The historicized Thiyyas of North Malabar are elite, English educated and beneficiaries of British patronage in various ways. This paper argues how such a homogenized concept of Thiyya community is part of a mainstream discourse of modernity which is modeled on colonial concepts of progress, belief and rationality. It tries to look at how the community of devouts of Muthappan Theyyam, especially in Parassini Madappura, facilitates an understanding of the lumpen sections of the Thiyya community. This community of Thiyyas have been absent in the discourses of modernity of nationalism as well as the Ezhava community exhorted by Narayana Guru. Muthappan, the deity of several communities was appropriated by the lumpen sections of the Thiyya community as part of social mobility. The communist movement of the 1930s appropriated the Thiyya Muthappan as Communist Deivam, through which it legitimized Thiyya Muthappan as the real Muthappan. The desire for mobility of a caste community is made possible, but at the cost of other lower caste/tribe histories and presents.

Keywords: Muthappan, Theyyam, Community of Devouts, lumpen Thiyyas, Narayana Guru, Nationalist movement, Communist movement, Modernity.

Introduction

Muthappan Theyyam has been integral to the economic and social mobility of the Thiyya backward caste community in North Malabar.¹ Muthappan was co-opted by the lumpen sections of the Thiyya community, who quite different from the elite Thiyya subject of the discourse of modernity, resorted to believe in Theyyam rather than forms of worship legitimized and disseminated by Narayana guru, which was pivotal to guru's concept of a modern caste community. The Thiyya community which finds mention in various studies pertaining to the modernity of Thiyyas in/and North Malabar is quite often the elite sections of the respective community who benefited from modern education and British patronage. This section of Thiyyas became the representatives of the Thiyya caste and the proponents of a modern backward caste community as defined by Narayana guru. Theyyam, according to guru's philosophy, was one of the various symbols of primitiveness which ought to be eschewed for a caste community's transition to modernity. Muthappan Theyyam and the community of Thiyyas which evolved in and around Parassini Madappura, the

abode of Thiyya Muthappan, hence, is suggestive of an alternative, lumpen community of Thiyyas, which ought to be historicized. This paper would attempt to problematise the historicization of Thiyyas of North Malabar as a homogenous entity in the various studies pertaining to caste, class and modernity in North Malabar. It would look at how the Thiyya community in Parassinikadavu,² co-opted Muthappan, who is claimed ownership by other caste communities like Adiyas and Vannans, as part of its mobility towards a modern, secular, communist, backward, caste-community.

Theyyam, Muthappan and the Lumpen Thiyyas of North Malabar

Theyyam, is a ritualistic form of worship, where the elaborately costumed *kolakkaran* (the one who plays the *kolam* or *Theyyam*) moves into a trance, accompanied by music, whereby he (there is only one Theyyam, Deivakoothu, which is performed by women) is supposed to be transformed into a deity and an object of worship by all, irrespective of caste or religion. This form of worship is popular and distinctive to Northern Kerala, especially North Malabar. Starting from *Thulam pathu* (10th of the Malayalam month *Thulam*), or the months of October or November to May, North Malabar witnesses its Theyyam season. Gods are believed to appear on earth in and through Theyyams in ancestral homes, *kaavus* (shrines) and temples and bless the people out of their miseries. Among the hundreds of Theyyam performed in North Malabar, the Muthappan Theyyam stands apart for the various ways in which it transcends the spatial and temporal constrictions usually associated with Theyyam performances. Muthappan Theyyam, quite often performed by people belonging to the lower caste Vannan community in North Malabar, is worshipped as a secular and subaltern deity who eats fried fish, drinks toddy, is accessible to all, irrespective of their caste and religious affiliations and is performed in public and political platforms, be it bus stands, railway stations or even a political procession of the atheist CPI(M).³

Unlike other Theyyams, Muthappan does not operate through a medieval imaginary of an order built around caste, power, rank or status. He does not demand any prescribed services denoting hierarchy: no blacksmith is required to sharpen his weapons (his sword is blunt); a launderer is not needed to supply clean clothes; a village astrologer does not have to set an auspicious time for the performance of his rite; a carpenter is not required to make a sacred stool (Vadakkiniyil, 2010:136).

Y.V. Kannan states that Muthappan Theyyam, along with Puthiyabagavathy Theyyam were the only two Theyyams who could be performed on any day, “be it the coronation day or the death day of the *naaduvazhi*” (Kannan, 2007:18).

There are various narratives associated with Muthappan, derived from his *vachal* (utterances) as well as orally and textually transmitted myths. However all these narratives are unanimous in the way they refer

to the subalternity of Muthappan's life and how he stood and fought for the rights of the tribals and the lower caste communities. Y.V. Kannan's book *Muthappan Puravritam* elaborates on the socio political dimensions of Muthappan *vachals* which, according to him, reproduces (hi)stories of protest, especially during the rule of the Kottayam rajas in North Malabar. The book discusses how Muthappan could have been a tribal leader or who fulfills the desire for a tribal leader who maneuvered a tribal resistance against brahminism. By the thirteenth century, North Malabar including Wayanad had come under the control of the Kottayam kings. The Kottayam dynasty, also known as *Puranadu Rajavamsham*, was Brahminical in nature. As part of wielding their power effectively over the people, the Kottayam kings reinforced the hegemony of the Kshatriyas. This had a telling influence on the lives of the Adivasis in particular. During the reign of Harishchandra Perumal, the Adivasis had to bear untold miseries and discriminations. The rulers adopted a divide and rule policy whereby they created a hiatus between the villagers whose major source of income came from collecting wax, honey etc and the forest tribes who depended on the forest resources for their livelihood. Under the Kottayam kings, the forest tribes began to be denied basic amenities and services (Ibid: 20-27). The moment required a leader who would stand with the oppressed tribal communities and co-ordinate their resistance against the men in power. Muthappan, or the concept of Muthappan, fulfills this desire for resistance and revolt.

The *vachals* of Muthappan describe similar narratives of solidarity and compassion as Muthappan becomes one among the tribes and fought with them against an autocratic reign. There are *vachals* which describe how he became the midwife of an Adiya⁴ woman who was denied help because of being a tribal, how he became their doctor and treated poisoning, how he maneuvered an army of the dispossessed and led them in their fight against their despotic rulers, and conquered Harishchandra *Kotta* (fort) and helped take over the granaries and distribute food among the needy (Ibid: 20-27). Muthappan, as per this narrative stood for the tribal communities, and with them to fight for their rights to the land and resources which were seized from them.

Oral and printed myths on Muthappan reproduces (t)his subaltern and rebellious nature in various ways. A predominant narrative which has been reproduced in booklets, histories, devotional songs and Television serials associated with Muthappan describes him as a lost and found child who was bought up by a Namboothiri family.⁵ Muthappan was found abandoned on a holy rock (*Thirunettikallu*) in Thiruvanchira river by the childless Padikuttiyama, the wife of Ayyankara Nambuthiri, when she was going for a bath. She took the child home where he grew up as their child. However his camaraderie with those below his caste status becomes a matter of resentment among many in the family including the foster par-

ents, especially the father. Eventually Muthappan leaves home. He reaches Kunnathurpady, ⁶ makes himself visible before an Adiya couple, Chandan and his wife. Muthappan was believed to have stayed in a cave in Padi, for over thirty five years. Meanwhile he worked relentlessly for the upliftment of the oppressed communities, and stood for their rights whenever they had to face brutalities from the upper caste landlords. From there, Muthappan went to Wayanad where again he spent a few years in Nambolakaadu where he met Nambolakaadu Muthappan and together they worked for the hill dwellers in Nambola kaadu, Cheronkaadu and Munnadu. (Nair, 1996: 245).

Parassinikadavu in Kannur was Muthappan's next halt where he appeared before Thaliyil *Peruvannan* in the form of a fish caught in the Peruvannan's fish hook. (There are alternate narratives regarding how Muthappan appeared in Parassinikadavu – like the one which mentions an *ambu* (arrow) that was aimed from Kannapuram which went and struck itself near a Kanjhiramaram in Parassinikadavu and another one that mentions a *ponvigraham* (golden idol) that got caught in the hook of the Peruvannan who was fishing on the banks of Valapattanam river to quench his hunger). While looking for ways to cook the fish, Peruvannan saw a streak of smoke some feet away. He fries the fish on the burning coals and before having it, offers a portion as well as the toddy that he had with him, to Muthappan. This became a routine. Eventually, the routine assumed dimensions of a rite which, when the Peruvannan could no longer afford to continue, was bequeathed to the Kunnumel Thiyya family. Members of this family used to provide the toddy required to offer Muthappan (Ibid: 235-56). Later on, they became the overseers and owners of the place and came to be called Parassini Madappurayil family, the owners of Parassini Madappura, the Madappura of Thiyya Muthappan. Parassini Madappura is presently one of the most income-gathering temples of North Kerala as well as the most popular abode of (Thiyya) Muthappan.

We would now look at how a community of the devout consisting of lumpen Thiyyas (along with a public of other lower castes and religions) evolved around Parassinikadavu, a community which does not find mention in the histories of the backward caste community of the region. Such an absence is part of a casteist historical perspective which presents a homogenized Thiyya community, modeled on a Hinduised nationalist discourse on the one hand and an Ezhava-ised or Narayana guru exhorted community discourse on the other, as the subject of modernity.

Madappuras and Temples: The Historicized Elite Thiyyas of North Malabar

Thiyyas are a prominent backward caste community in North Malabar, numerically, culturally and politically. Considering them an *avarna* community in Kerala, the mobility that they have achieved in the various indices of modernity is noteworthy and of interest to the historians. However the historicization of Thiyyas in various texts tends to document

the caste community as a homogenized entity, a community of people who were economically, socially and culturally well off compared to the Ezhavas of South Kerala. C. Kesavan, the Ezhava chief minister of Kerala from 1950 to 1952, after travelling to Malabar and meeting the Thiyyas there, asserted:

Ezhava bourgeoisie, then, were more in Malabar. Seeing the condition of Malabar, it is my firm conviction that if there is the support of the ruling class, any community has only such weaknesses as would disappear soon. (2010: 171-173).

This observation taking into consideration the elite Thiyyas, made Kesavan conclude that the distinction between the Ezhava and Thiyya communities was more or less economic in nature.

Bhagyasheelan Chalad, in his *Kannurinde Kalvilakkukal*, enumerates the contributions of the Thiyya elite to the social and cultural modernization of North Malabar. The book gives details about the Thiyyas who were proficient in Sanskrit, Ayurveda and Astrology, writers like Potheri Kunjambu, who wrote the novel *Saraswathy Vijayam*; 'Uruvancheri Gurunadanmar' viz, Punathoor Raman Gurukul, Madai Mandan Gurukul, and Kakkuzhi Kunhappa Gurukkal who were wealthy enough to own schools; Ayurvedic scholars like Uppot Kannan, who translated the Ayurvedic text *Ashtangahredayam* into Malayalam; Keeleri Kunhikannan, considered to be the father of Indian circus, as well as the various other Thiyyas who contributed to the educational, administrative, medical and scientific realms of North Malabar as early as the twentieth century. (2009: 27-41) Majority of the Thiyyas who are featured in this book as the lamps of Kannur are those who owned land, educated in English and patronized by the British.

The assumption that the Thiyyas of North Malabar were a single homogenous group of elite backward caste was the main reason for the initial skepticism of Narayana Guru regarding the need for a temple for Thiyyas in North Malabar. When Varathur Kaniyil Kunjhikannan approached Narayana Guru to construct a temple for Thiyyas in North Malabar, Guru shared his doubts about the need for such a temple as the Thiyyas there had English education and were well versed in Sanskrit, many being Vedantis and Brahmasamajis (Smaranika, 2016: 32). "Wouldn't they ridicule me telling that someone came from somewhere and dug a stone there?" (Smaranika, 2016: 32).

Dilip M. Menon's *Caste, Nationalism and Communism in South Kerala, Malabar 1900-1948*, is a prominent study which attempted to construct the rise of the elite, middle class Thiyya community of North Malabar. Menon describes how a new elite was born out of the colonial and missionary presence in North Malabar.

The Basel Evangelical Mission, established in Switzerland in 1815, began its activities in north Malabar a quarter of a century later, establishing a network of elementary and high schools by the end of the nineteenth century. The Thiyyas were among the first to join these institutions and a significant minority had subsequently worked their way into the colonial administration as tehsildars, lawyers, pleaders, sub-judges and up to the ranks of deputy collectors (1994: 64).

Thiyya families dominated entrepreneurships, banking, toddy and arrack business, weaving and tile factories etc (64-65). Menon's "community of worship" was "a religious culture shared by both upper and lower castes but understood and appropriated differently" and "was composed of dominant Nayar and Thiyya tharavadus and the other castes who lived around the shrine and worked on the lands of the tharavadus or performed specialised services for them" (40).

Based on such a concept of religious culture, Menon describes three different notions of community formed around sites of worship:

First, there were festivals centered on the tharavadu-shrine complex, which emphasized interdependence and obligations. Secondly, there were pilgrimages to shrines which emphasized the possibility of interaction as equals despite differences in caste status. In the third form of worship, there was a direct recognition of the skewed balance of the relations of power between tharavadu and cultivators. Lower caste victims of upper caste authority were deified in certain shrines and thus, the limits of authority were defined to an extent (1994: 41).

However, Parassini Madappura, or Madappuras, controlled by Thiyya families, where a community of devouts, consisting of a lumpen majority, was formed around the worship of Muthappan Theyyam, do not find mention in this community of temples and shrines.

Madappuras are the sites of worship of Muthappan Theyyam where the rituals are officiated by Thiyyas.⁷ In other words "temples that worship Muthappan came to be called Madappuras" (Nair, 1996: 237). The term Madappura is associated with mada (cave). "The first such home (pura) was the one built aside the mada in Kunnathur Padi where Muthappan is supposed to have sat in meditation for several years" (Kannan, 2007: 86). (Pura is the term used by Thiyya caste and certain other OBC communities including the Muslims in Pazhayangadi to refer to their homes). Although Kunnathur Padi is considered to be the first Madappura of Muthappan, Parassini Madappura has developed to become the most popular, most visited and most income gathering Madappuras of Muthappan. There are more than hundred such Madappuras in North Malabar (Ibid: 116), which includes railway madappuras and fisheries madappuras, where Muthappan is the presiding Theyya kolam and Thiyyas, the madayans. Chirakkal T. Balakrishnan describes these Madappuras, as "the sites of worship which

are not dominated by Brahmins” and states how the majority of backward caste communities in Malabar have some kind of a relation to Madappuras and Podikalams ⁸ (Balakrishnan, 1996: 254). The study of Madappuras and the community of devouts formed in these spaces are quite important in understanding the history of mobilization and modernity of the Thiyya backward caste community in North Malabar, as well as that of the region, North Malabar.

However this lumpen community of devouts has often been overlooked in the histories of modernity of the Thiyya community (and) of North Malabar. The community of devouts refers to the lumpen public of devotees formed as part of the worship of a Theyyam in Muthappan Madappuras, a mode of worship considered primitive and uncivilized. It refers to a public which was not considered modern enough to be enumerated as a Thiyya community in/by the discourses of modernity of the caste community or the region of North Malabar. It was a community which was not conjunctural but consequential, inscribed as it was in the philosophy of Muthappan myth. Muthappan symbolizes the desire to uphold solidarities and disturb tyranny:

He has the ability to unite people as a class or He is a being of the moment, of the event, of the situation, of the ongoing and multi-linear flux of existence, overcoming any boundary, hierarchizing, starting force or potency that might rise up in his path (Vadakkiniyil, 2010: 146).

While historicizing the Thiyyas of North Malabar as a heterogenous community, we can document them as a lumpen community whose modernity was prompted through a pattern of worship judged primitive and uncivilized by mainstream discourses of modernity.

Mainstream Discourses of Modernity and the Absent Lumpen Thiyya Community

The historicization of the elite Thiyya as the representatives of the community in North Malabar may be seen in relation to two mainstream discourses of modernity – the Ezhava community reform movement headed by Narayana guru and the nationalist movement during the early twentieth century. For Narayana Guru, progress ought to be modeled on the English (cited in Methala, 2015: 148). Temples ought to propagate such a philosophy:

Those who go to temple would bathe and become clean. They would think about God. They would breathe fresh air. By practicing bhajan and fasting, some would purify their body and soul. For some, their beliefs would even cure diseases. If all these are possible how can I say that temples are not required?” (Ibid: 136).

For Guru, toddy, opium, marijuana, tobacco etc led to inebriation and thereby belonged to the category of alcohol. (*Smaranika*, 2016: 208).

For Narayana Guru, temples were meant for the holistic development and progress of people, especially those who were kept away from temples because of having born in an avarna community and hence impacting their very sense of self respect. Dr. Palpu describes the purpose of temple construction in Guru's philosophy:

Temples and Mutts have been of great help for the progress of this (Thiyya) community. Such institutions have not only catered to the religious needs of the people, but they also have enthused them in many kinds of good deeds. Through their help, people differing in social position and character have become united with a sense of equality. Thus feelings of brotherhood and mutual love have been engendered in them. Temples have been helpful in making ordinary people act with rectitude and a sense of morality. These are verily institutions, which propagate religion as well as moral conduct. They are also intended to give craft based and specialized kind of education and training. The community's resources are conserved by them to be utilized for its well being as well as progress. These institutions owned by them have become the means to assert the self-respect of this community, which has been thoroughly ruined by long years of social persecution. These temples are intended to be accessible to members of all castes, lower as well as higher. (Sreenivasan, 1989: 65-66.)

In the pre independence period, castes from the Thiyyas downwards were barred from going to temples in North Malabar. However the presence of Madappuras and *Kavus* facilitated unrestricted pathways as spaces of worship. It is in such a context that Parassini Madappura ought to be seen. The Madappura was there in Parassinikadavu before the project of constructing temples for Thiyyas in Malabar like the Jagannatha temple (in 1908) and Sundereshwara temple (in 1916) in Thalassery and Kannur respectively as part of modernizing the caste community. Parassini Madappura in that sense might have been a temple belonging to a lumpen Thiyya community who were not as visible as the Thiyyas, modernized as an outcome of colonial modernity.

Narayana Guru's activities aimed at reformation of a caste based society and his consecration of Ezhava Shiva was based on his experience of the not-yet-enlightened primitive Ezhava communities whom he was familiar with in the princely states of Thiru-Cochi. They were incapable of thinking of self respect considering the kind of caste based discriminations they had to go through. According to Y.V. Kannan, in a region under direct British rule, the folk mode of worship called Theyyam had led to a different social formation of backward caste community. Probably the rituals associated with Theyyam might have looked primitive for a person like Narayana guru prompting him to introduce a different form and structure of worship in Kannur (Kannan, 2007: 82).

When it was decided that temples be built for the avarnas and pujas done by avarna pujaris and that one should maintain personal hy-

giene it was forgotten that in the *thanams*, *palliyaras* and *kazhakams* (Non- brahmanical spaces of worship) of the avarnas, they themselves performed the pujas and that the *kolakkaran*, *anthithiriyar*, *velichapadan* and the *koottayikaran* maintained personal hygiene not only in *Palliyaras* but also in homes and other public spaces” (Ibid: 82).

Taking all these into consideration Y.V. Kannan describes Muthappan as a social reformer whose resistance against Brahmanism and casteist discriminations had started decades before the reformist movements of Narayana guru (Ibid).

Varathoor Kaniyil Kunjikannan, who was instrumental in bringing Guru to Kannur in order to construct a temple, had to convince him that the community as a whole was not as modern as Guru thought them to be, “consisting of Sanskrit scholars, English educated members etc.” He describes about the not yet civilized Thiyyas in their community:

Swamin! Despite Vedanta and Brahmasamajam no one has been able to save or stop those believers who still follow the devilish and detestable worship rites. The community still lies oppressed in drinking, animal sacrifice and primitive idol worship. If there was at least one temple, with the satvika form of worship, people could go there freely, bathe, enter the temple and pray (*Smaranika*, 2016: 33).

When Guru expressed his surprise at the presence of such primitive worship patterns in such a “civilized rajyam ruled by the Whites,” Kunjikannan continues, “Yes Swami...the queen has declared they wouldn’t interfere in religious matters. Since the savarnas expect to see the others continue to degrade themselves through such forms of worship, they encourage such worship patterns of the avarnas” (*Smaranika*, 2016: 33). Hearing this, Narayana Guru gives in to Kunjikannan’s request for a Thiyya temple in Kannur.

The need for a temple for the community is raised despite the existence of Parassini Madappura, managed by a trust consisting of Thiyya families. Interestingly the Madappura is less than twenty kilometers from Pallikunnu in Kannur, where the new Thiyya temple was to come up. References to processions from Parassini Madappura to Sundereshwara temple during its opening in 1916⁹ and to Kottiyur temple prove that the Madappura existed before any idea about constructing modern temples for Thiyyas. Mukundan P.M., former Madayan of Parassini Madappura, while talking about the secular public in the Madappura refers to the eight hundred year old egalitarian tradition of the Madappura which the Madayans are very particular about even today.¹⁰

However, normative standards of progress and modernity must have prevented Parassini Madappura from qualifying as a temple of Thiyyas. This includes the idea about Theyyam as a primitive form of worship. Its interpretation as a devil dance by orientalist scholars was reproduced by native discourses of modernity, be it the nationalist movement or the

Ezhava communitarian movement. The worship of a Theyya kolam, the rituals of the Madappura, which included giving toddy as prasadam ¹¹ to the devotees etc, were irrational, unscientific and superstitious to the spokespersons of Western models of progress and modernity. Dilip Menon quotes how Kottieth Krishnan, K. Chanthan and a few others associated with the new Thiyya temples, founded the Kerala Labour Union in 1918 for toddy tappers who had decided to give up their profession, how the Jagannatha temple became the centre of rehabilitation activities and how the Union explored the possibility of setting up a business for dealing in jiggery made from sweet toddy (1994: 76). Needless to say, it was the Guru's model of temple and modern forms of worship that found support from the nationalist Congress movement, for whom the temple entry movement was not just a way to forge "a consolidated Hindu identity and to discourage conversions which was engendered by disabilities enforced by the caste system," but more importantly to recover from the loss of image that associations with the Malabar rebellion of 1921 had bought in its wake (Manmathan, 2013:65). Theyyam, as a form of worship wouldn't have qualified as a modern form of worship as per Western notions of modernity, neither would it have benefited a nationalist movement which was bent on validating Hinduism as the standard religion of modernity.

Parassini Madappura, Thiyya Muthappan and the Mobility of the Lumpen Thiyya Community

Parassini Madappura and Muthappan have been integral to the making of a modern community of lumpen Thiyyas, for whom Theyyam worship was not a primitive mode of worship but a means for upward mobility. Parassini Madappura, the most popular of Thiyya Muthappan Madappuras, is often cited as an exemplary space of secularism by providing an abode of worship to people irrespective of caste or religion. The temple is also popular for the food which is served to any number of devotees who visit the temple, on a daily basis, free of cost and irrespective of caste and religion. Free meals, served twice a day, apart from the tea and prasadam consisting of green gram and coconut pieces are major attractions of the place. The Muthappan Theyyam, like several other Theyyams, is not a vegetarian but rather is quite particular about being offered toddy and fried fish. Before the taxation policies tightened their grip over toddy sales, toddy was given as prasadm to the devotees. The Madayan, the eldest Thiyya member of the Parassini Madappurayil family, officiates over a set of rituals which incorporates people belonging to various lower caste communities (like Vanans who performs the Muthappan kolam and Malayas who are entrusted with the music which accompanies the Theyyam performance). A Muslim family in Mattool and a Dalit family in Morazha were/are entrusted with traditional rights like bringing the groceries and paddy respectively to be used for the annual Puthari Maholsavam. Fish was supposed to be bought by a family belonging to the Valluva community. These are suggestive of imagining a republic of bahun Muslim communities in and through

these Madappuras which goes along with the egalitarian philosophy of Muthappan myth.

This paper does not intend to establish Thiyya community or Parassini Madappura as a timeless abode of classless, casteless secular republic. On the contrary it attempts to historicize the modernization of the lumpen community of Thiyyas around Parassini Madappura in accordance with the socio political developments in the region. Although the emergent community of Thiyyas in Parassinikadavu had resisted Ezhavisation through its distinctive community built around the worship of Muthappan Theyyam, the implications of this resistance have undergone transformations, assuming Brahminical dimensions as well.

The demand for a separate identity from the Ezhava backward caste community has been a persisting one for the Thiyya community. Sreebitha notes that the Kochi Ezhava Samajam was renamed as Thiyyar Mahasabha in the yogam held in Palluruthi in 1927 on the request of one C. Krishnan, a Thiyya (2018: 148). From the Thiyyar Mahasabha to the non political Thiyya Mahasabha, formed recently (in 2010), for the protection of the rights of the Thiyyas and its separate caste identity, there has been a growing sense of dissatisfaction on the part of the Thiyya community for being counted along with the Ezhava community.¹² Several groups which had been formed like Uthara Kerala Thiyyar Sabha in Cheruvathur in the 1930s, Thiyya Mahasabha in Calicut in the 1980s etc were engaged in activities related to the welfare of the community. The community of devouts of Muthappan theyyam, by its very practice of rites judged as primitive, steers away from the frames of a modern Ezhava community (as well as that of the modern Thiyya community of North Malabar). It asserts its distinctive Thiyya identity by virtue of its worship of Muthappan theyyam. However this assertion of distinctive identity has transformed into an assertion of caste superiority, especially over the lower caste communities. This may be seen in the present discourses around Muthappan. Muthappan, from being an icon of Thiyya mobility has now become one for asserting Thiyya superiority.

This accounts for the way in which Muthappan is being reproduced and legitimized as Thiyya Muthappan, and Parassini Madappura the real abode of Muthappan.¹³ Wikipedia, for instance describes Muthappan as Sree Muthappan, a Malabar Thiyya deity commonly worshipped in the North Malabar region of Kerala and Coorg region of Karnataka, India. Muthappan is the principal deity in the ritualistic Theyyam dance (Muthappan Theyyam) performed in the famous Parassinikadavu Temple. The ritual performer of Muthappan Theyyam belongs to the Vannan community while the puja rituals and rites for Muthappan are performed by the Thiyya community.¹⁴

There are around twenty five Muthappan community group pages in the Facebook. Almost twenty of them are Parassini Muthappan pages.

And in pages named Muthappan, what is described are rituals associated with Parassinikadavu. Kunnathoor Pady, despite being the *aaroodam* of Muthappan is not a page one often comes across. Several Muthappan organizations outside Kerala are associated with Parassini Muthappan. For instance, the Pisri Sri Muthappan Charitable Foundation in Pune annually celebrates Parassinikadavu Sri Muthappan Vellatta Mahotsavam. Sree Muthappan Seva Samithi Ajman Indian Association organizes Puthari Maholsavams from 2015. This is how the story of Muthappan is given in their site “The traditional story of Parassinikadavu Muthappan describes the background of the deity.”¹⁵ Muthappan becomes synonymous with Parassinikadavu Muthappan. The very concept of Railway Muthappan evolved in relation to Parassini Muthappan. The labourers who were expelled from their jobs go to Parassini and pray to the Muthappan there following which their prayers are heard and their jobs reinstated. In return they construct a Muthappan temple near Kannur railway station.¹⁶ Muthappan becomes reincarnated as Parassinikadavu Muthappan and the principal deity of the Thiyya community.

The various histories of subaltern resistances and victories associated with Muthappan are sidelined and invalidated as part of this co-option. The narrative of resistance against Kshatriya dominance of the Kottayam kings by Adivasis, exhorted by Muthappan, which is described by Y.V. Kannan as “the earliest of Nelleduppu protests” (2007: 28) in Kerala, narratives that describe Muthappan as a Parayan chini, an Adivasi leader with evidences based on the symbols of Theyyam according to Vadakkiniyil Dinesan (2014: 114), stories of how Muthappan was the kuladeivam of Vannan community and how Muthappan appeared to the Peruvannan as a Ponvigraham (golden idol) that got hooked in his fishing rod as a means to help his family from dire poverty,¹⁷ are narratives that are sidelined and are under threat of being branded as not authentic enough. The threat of inauthentication, has also led to certain tribes having to legally prove their tribal identity as may be seen in the case of the Adiya tribe in Kunnathurpady.

Recently KIRTADS (Kerala Institute for Research Training and Development Studies of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes) denied caste certificates to the Adiya tribe of Kunnathurpady, on the grounds that they worship Muthappan Theyyam, who is the deity of Thiyyas. Since they perform/worship Muthappan Theyyam they are Thiyyas and hence cannot be issued the Adiya tribe certificate the argument put forward by KIRTADS. The Adiya tribe has been stripped off their constitutional privileges and are waiting to be proved by KIRTADS that they are actually tribes and don't belong to the Thiyya community.¹⁸ The Adiyas are the tribes living in Kunnathurpady, described in the Vachals as the *aaroodam* of Muthappan before he went to Wayanad or Parassinikadavu. The Muthappan performed/worshipped in Kunnathurpady has its own regional specificities. It is for instance the only place where an Adiya male accompanies the Muthappan

kolam as komaram. Pady, similarly is one of the very few places where women belonging to the Adiya community are allowed to be part of performing puja for a deity. The 1950 presidential order conferred scheduled tribe status to Adiya community and became mandatory that Adiyas have to be included in the Scheduled tribe list irrespective of the place they live anywhere in Kerala.¹⁹ However a study by a KIRTADS official in 2012, it was established that Adiya community exists only in Wayanad and hence the tribe with the same name in Kannur was not authentic. Also they worshipped Muthappan, who is the deity of Thiyyas and hence cannot be conferred ST status. This denial of tribal identity to a community on the basis that they worship Muthappan who is a Thiyya deity is one of the various ways in which the co option of a deity by a backward caste community can lead to the erasure or invalidation of other lower caste/tribal community histories, pasts and presents.

The claiming of Muthappan as a Thiyya deity has other consequences which relates to the rights taken away from the person or community who performs Muthappan. Balakrishnan Peruvannan, who belongs to the Kandathil tharavadu and who has been performing Muthappan kolam for forty five years in Parassinikadavu tells ²⁰ that there have been various changes and restrictions imposed on him as a kolam performer as well as a person belonging to a Vannan community who had been conferred certain rights in Parassini Madappura. The family of the Peruvannan who performs Muthappan is entitled to be provided with all things except water in the occasion of events like marriage happening in the family. Nobody remembers this anymore. After the Thiruvappana a certain proportion of money that is offered by the devotees, that is one of three kindis of offering from the bandaram, is entitled for the Vannan who performs the kolam which is not followed now. The secular philosophy inscribed in the myth of Muthappan has been interrupted and intervened in by the modernized Thiyya community in various ways.

The legitimization of Thiyya Muthappan of Parassini Madappura as the real Muthappan may also be attributed to the secularizing drive on the part of the communist movement in Kerala. As far as the Communist movement, which began to assert itself in North Malabar in the 1930s, was concerned, Theyyam, especially Muthappan Theyyam, was not something that could be ignored. Theyyam was the form of worship for a majority of the lumpen communities of the region, the mobilization of whom was indispensable for the insipient political movement. The appropriation of Muthappan Theyyam as an embodiment of socialist values by the communist movement of the region ought to be seen in such a context. In fact Parassini Madappura and Parassinikadavu served as major extended centres for disseminating and establishing communist ideology.

In his book *Kannur Kotta*, K. Balakrishnan points out the significance of the Parassini Madappura family Vaddakkayil tharavadu in es-

tablishing the progressive movement in Parassinikadavu. In the chapter “The Story of How Kannur Turned Red?” Balakrishnan talks about the forming of left movements in North Malabar and the role of the Thiyya families in it. From serving as the best hide out spots for the communists who had to be hidden away from the MSPs to the formation of cultural associations like the Parassinimuthappan Nadaka Sangham, Sri Muthappan Kathakali Sangham, Poorakali Sangham etc through which communist thoughts were disseminated to the rest of Kannur, Kerala as well as to various other Indian states, the Thiyya families, who were also the trustees of the temple had played a definitive role (Balakrishnan, 2008: 67-72). However along with the dissemination of communist ideology, what also got circulated and marketed through these cultural organizations was the idea that the real, socialist Muthappan, was the Thiyya Muthappan of Parassini Madappura. Thiyya Muthappan became synonymous with the socialist Communist deivam or vice versa, reproducing and validating the identity of Muthappan as Thiyya. Reproducing Thiyya Muthappan as a socialist Communist deivam conveniently helps to forward the class-ist form of communism (Shyma, 2014)²¹, which doesn’t address the issue of caste. Moreover it guarantees maximum membership and participation (as cadres if not leaders) from the lumpen Thiyya community (numerically the largest caste community in North Malabar) in the communist party (CPIM) in Kerala.

Conclusion

Muthappan Theyyam, and its worship have been consequential to the social, economic and political mobilization of the lumpen Thiyya community of North Malabar. However the modern Thiyya community that has evolved in and around Parassini Madappura may be seen to be an extension of a larger globalised, Brahminical society, despite claims to an egalitarian, secular community of devouts. The appropriation of Thiyya Muthappan as Communist deivam makes the Thiyya community complicit in a discourse of class-ist communism which considers it inconsequential to address caste and religious lives. The legitimization accorded by a class-ist discourse helps the backward caste community’s appropriation of Muthappan assume a casteist dimension, which may be seen in a way in which various histories and presents of lower caste/tribal communities have been erased or misrepresented.

Notes

1. North Malabar, along with South Malabar was an administrative unit of British India under Madras Presidency till 1947 and later a part of Madras State till 1956. On 1st November 1956, following the States Re-organization Act, the region, along with the Kasaragod taluk of South Kanara district was merged with the erstwhile princely states of Cochin and Travancore to form the modern state of Kerala. Today, North Malabar refers to a region in Kerala, covering the districts of Kasargode, Kannur,

Mananthavady taluk of Wayanad district, Koyilandy, Vatakara taluks of Kozhikode district and Mahe.

2. Parassinikadavu is a town in Anthoor Municipality, Kannur. A much sought after tourist destination in North Malabar, the town is known for its Parassini Madappura, Snake park and Vismaya amusement park.
3. Muthappan Theyyam is fondly referred to as the communist *deivam* (god), and is used in the various political platforms of the professedly atheist CPIM (Communist Party of India- Marxist) in Kerala, as an embodiment of the values of socialism and a classless society.
4. A tribal community in north Kerala.
5. Although different texts have narrated the Muthappan myth with variations of various kinds, in relation to his travels, his friendship with Chandan, his stay in Kunnathurpadi, how he appears in Parassinikadavu etc, they remain unanimous about one detail, which is regarding Muthappan's birth. The anonymity associated with Muthappan's birth remains the same in the majority of these texts. Probably it was because there was no need for clarity. In other words, this anonymity is quite significant considering that it helps retain Muthappan as a *deivasankalpam* which no one community can claim and one which includes the unity and resilience of many caste communities.
6. The first *Madappura* of Muthappan is supposed to be in Kunnathoor Padi, Kannur district. It is the Adiya tribal community who worship Muthappan here.
7. Madayans, belonging to the Thiyya community, are entrusted with the rights to officiate over the major rites associated with Muthappan Theyyam, except that of *Thalikkal* or the cleansing ceremony for which the services of the Namboothiris are taken.
8. A place where Muthappan can be performed. A podikalam qualifies to become a Madappura after 12 years, after the required rituals are performed.
9. A souvenir published by Sundereshwara Kshetram (Kannur Sundareshwara Kshetra Mahotsavam, 2016) mentions about a *kazhcha* (a procession) that came from Parassini Madappura in the occasion of the inauguration of the temple in 1916.
10. An interview with P.M. Mukundan Madayan; <https://youtu.be/pCNXGK8NlxQ>; accessed on 15/11/2018.
11. A devotee remembered his father telling him that toddy used to be given as *prasadam*, a practice which was stopped after the revision of tax policies on toddy.
12. <http://www.newindianexpress.com/states/kerala/2018/apr/12/resentment-brews-as-thiyya-community-of-kerala-demand-distinct-identity-1800262.html>; accessed for information on Thiyya Mahasabha.
13. Another narrative that is frequently being revisited to assert Thiyya superiority is the history associated with the Thiyya royal dynasty in Eruvassery in North Kerala. Kambil Anandan, in his "Kerala Charithra Niroopanam: Athava Thiyyarude Pauranikathvam," claims that Thiyyas are not a community who have come from Srilanka or those who have a

Buddhist past as described by various other historians. Rather, Thiyyas belong to the Adiravida community, a community consisting of several migrant communities who have come to live in the geographical region which was later on linguistically reorganized as Kerala. This theory along with the history of royal ancestry attributed to the Thiyya community makes Anandan an oft quoted historian by Thiyyas in facebook pages on Thiyya.

14. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Muthappan>; accessed on 14/04/2018 for details regarding the online representation of Muthappan.
15. <http://www.sreemuthappanasevasamithi.com/aboutus.php>; accessed on 14/04/2018 for details regarding Muthappan performances abroad. .
16. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m3rdbjXu0gE>; accessed on 13/04/2018 for details regarding railway Muthappan.
17. Kannettan, from the Vannan family Thaliyil Tharavadu, says that the story of the arrow is false and in reality it is the place where Muthappan had appeared as ponvigraham to solve the problems of starvation and poverty of Thaliyil Peruvannan and his family. According to Kannettan this place was later on transformed into the place for Madappura and the place that was rightfully theirs was occupied by the Thiyya family who were only given the Madayasthanam. The kula deivam of Vannan community, Muthappan, was later on appropriated by the Thiyyas. Kannettan says and adds that the place for the madappura determined by his grandfather remains to this day unchanged. Interview with Kannettan. 12/05/2018.
18. As per a highcourt ruling, they are being issued certificates until the KIR-TADS study gets completed.
19. Dhanya K.R. "How KIRTADS Erased Adiyas by Confering Muthappan to Thiyyas." <https://www.azhimukham.com/offbeat-how-kirtads-ousted-adiyan-tribe-from-st-schedule-report-by-kr-dhanya/> .
20. Based on conversations with Sri Balakrishnan Peruvannan, Parassinikadavu. 11/05/2018.
21. A communism that was based on class identity at the cost of caste and religious communitarian identity, which ultimately led to the highjacking of the communist movement by Nairs and Nambuthiris while the lower castes were used as stooges as well as to fill in the martyr slots.

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