

## **Teyyam and our times**

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**Teyyam** is a religion of the native people of North Kerala. The present socio-political situation of India especially in Kerala has considerable impact on the religious practice of Teyyam and the factors of vedic religion are getting prominence.

Teyyam is the sum total of the belief system, the mythology and religious factors regarding the local Gods and Goddesses. There are more than 300 Gods/Goddesses with their own mythology that narrates how a particular deity originated, its journey from place to place and how it got the right to have ritual performances in different shrines. How do the local God/Goddess affects the life of the people is the important part of the belief system. Mythology as well as belief system are latent in the minds of the people which are expressed through the ritual performances of the local God/Goddess.

In Teyyam deification can be in three ways: 1) Victimised heroes 2) Incarnation of the great God 3) Gods/Goddesses disguised in another form (man or animal), reached earth and they get children. Their off-springs becomes Gods. According to the belief no one knows where the God/Goddess is. But as and when they are called in proper way they appear. Each God/Goddess has its own form with elaborate costumes and headgear. The performer does – make up accordingly and through proper ritual the God's/Goddess's power appears in the body of the performer and he behaves as the God/Goddess. Shrine of Devata is known as *kavu*. But the presence of Devata is not always there in the shrine. On the wooden stool inside the shrine a red cloth is spread and on that, the sword of the Devata is kept. Rarely Devatas appear through trees. The power of the deity is not known to anybody where it rests; but, finally it has to appear in the body of the performer and it has to leave after the performance.

The sakti of the Devata is transmitted into the body of the performer through a long ritual procedure. Through the observance of *vrutha* the body of the performer becomes sacred to accept the power. This observance may be for a short period to days together. The performer accepts *kodiyila* consisting of rice, betel leaves, arecanut and five little wicks through which some portion of the sakti of the Devata enters in to the body

of the performer. Next ritual is *tottam* performance in which the performer in a simple dress recites *tottam* songs, the description of the history of the deity. *Varavili* is the first part of the verbal form of the *tottam*. In this he invites the deity to appear on the stool where the sacred sword is kept, to hear the praising songs and to be pleased. *Varavili* repeats two or three times. In between *tottam* songs are sung which is the elaborate description of the life history of the deity. At the end of *tottam* songs the sakti of the Devata possesses the performer. *Tottam* performance take place either in the evening or early in the night). By these acts the deity appears on the stool and little by little the sakti transfers in to the body of the performer by series of ritualistic acts.

*Varavili* repeats also at the beginning of the teyyam performance. The rice kept in front of the oil lamp is thrown to the deity and deity wears the headgear on the head another portion of the sakti of the Devata transfers to the body of the performer. During the performance the *veliccappad*, the oracle, hands over the sword of the *Bhagavati* to the performer after a long dance of the performer and the *veliccappad* face to face around the shrine. This is *Koodiyattam*. Handing over of the sacred sword is the moment that the transfer of the sakti

completes. At this juncture the performer becomes deity.

At the end of the Teyyam performance some how the sakti has to go back to the Devata. Giving back the sword, removal of the headgear, throwing rice to the sacred stool inside the shrine by the performer are some of the acts, which set the performer free from the sakti. *Theyyampadi Kudikootuka* is the last ritual in a teyyam performance. All the performers stand in a line, face to face to the *komaram* (oracle) and throw rice and betel leaves to the *komaram*. Then the main performer asks the *komaram* 'whether you have accepted the whole of the power of the deity that we had incorporated in our body consciously or unconsciously, possessed or not, through these one, two or three days?' Then the *Komaram* has to answer 'Yes'. This shows that the power of the deity enters in to the body of the performer even without his knowledge and this act takes place gradually through several acts. From *komaram* it goes to the sword and then to the sacred stool and finally it



Teyyam: A ritual associated with various local deities of Malabar region.

vanishes. The migration of the deity, the way it makes its presence felt, how it shows its fury and happiness etc. are unique.

The power of the deity is invited, it appears inside the shrine, gradually enters in to the body of the Teyyam performer through different mediums and through different ritual acts. In the same way it vanishes also. Contrary to this, the tantric system of worship in Hindu religion received and installed the power of the God/Goddess in the idol with a portion of the soul of the Tantri. Then it is tightened inside the idol with the help of mantra. Another ritual, *astabandhakalasa* is being done to tighten it in the eight sides. Hereafter the presence of the *Devata* is forever in the temple and devotees are able to worship it. The power of the *Devata* may diminish due to various reasons; getting damage to the idol, impurity and improper worship by poojaris. In that case different kinds of *Kalasa*s are needed to restore the Sakti. *Kalasa* is a kind of ritual in Tantric worship. To sustain the power forever daily worship is also needed. So, the tantric way of worship and the belief system behind it is entirely different from Teyyam.

Now-a-days the Hindu religious belief systems are getting incorporated in to the system of 'Teyyam' at many levels. New myths are being created in support of the higher mythology or myths take a new turn by introducing higher Gods in the Teyyam myths. In the case of the Teyyam muthappan, apart from the existing local myth a new myth that the deity is the union of Siva and Vishnu is prevalent today. There are Five tiger devatas in Teyyam and about their origin there is a myth. The myth as part of the hinduisation got a new interpretation that they are Siva and Parvathy disguised in the form of the tiger and their children.

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Gradually the belief system in Teyyam is changing and the tendency is more towards hinduisation. Installation of the devata in tantric system and inviting the god to appear and sending it back in Teyyam are parts of two different systems of worship and naturally they are in contrast. But surprisingly both these practices are part of Teyyam worship today more or less with equal importance. The native religion of North Kerala slowly undergoing the process of cultural osmosis with the impact of Hinduism as an organised religion. As a result Teyyam may assimilate in to the Hindu religion or Teyyam may take a new shape which is admissible to Hinduism also.

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