



Comrade Muthappan: Revisiting the Communist Appropriations of Muthappan Theyyam

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Abstract : *Muthappan worship today has transgressed from the rural and urban madappuras of Kannur district and crossed borders to the Malayali diaspora. The paper looks at this attained popularity of Muthappan which makes it a household name among the Theyyam divinities. The ritual patterns of Muthappan which finds its source from the mythology accords for its reach among the populace. The toddy drinking dancing god, the madappuras that host the ritual with smoked fish and cooked cereals foster an egalitarian divinity with its spatial and temporal attributes devoid of fixations. Muthappan due to its immense popularity, fails no short of appropriations. While most of the Theyyam forms are visibly under the threat of Hinduisation, I would argue that the appropriation of Muthappan happens bi-fold in north Malabar. Apart from the evident Hinduisation of Muthappan as incarnations of Vishnu and Shiva, which the paper does not keep in oblivion, there is also the motif of Muthappan being appropriated by the communist ideology. The paper examines the mythology of Muthappan Theyyam and its corresponding rituals which are validated by the communist ideology so as to appropriate Muthappan as a communist god and attributing “sakhavu” or “comrade” to its parlance.*

Keywords: Muthappan, Theyyam, subaltern, religion, myth, communist appropriation

The ritual worship of Theyyam forms an integral part of the religious, social, and political conscience of north Malabar. The germane understanding of Theyyam is crucial in discerning and comprehending the changing trends in the

social and political underpinnings of a region where religion and caste play a decisive role. Modernity and its tenets augmented the secularisation of Theyyam and as Dineshan Vadakkiniyil would argue, its consequent “devaluation” as an art or dance form decontextualised of its religious aspects led to the incorporation of Theyyam as the cultural icon of Kerala in its display of heritage (131). Dilip Menon would refer to Theyyam as a “folk dance... performed only in north Malabar” (189). His preference of the term “teyyattam” over Theyyam, suggests that “attam” or “dance” / “performance” is foregrounded. The attempts at secularisation of a ritualistic practice rooted in the worshipping patterns of the subalterns by endorsing the revolutionary aspects of inversions of hegemony forms part of the state ideology by and large. This paper does not attempt to decontextualise Theyyam from religion, rather it reads Theyyam from the vantage point of religion and how the subaltern understandings of religion are appropriated to the ideologies of the state and its imaginations. I would be looking at Muthappan Theyyam and how the secular state attempts to appropriate its mythology and ritual. The secular and democratic prospects of Theyyam and its model of alternate social order is not undermined in the course of this paper, rather I would be looking at how appropriate are the appropriations of Muthappan by the secular state from the perspective of caste.

Resistance and Maintenance of Caste

The spectrum of resistance that Theyyam internalises manifests as the physical embodiment of the subaltern speech acts. When the subaltern body attains the divine and dances around narrating atrocities unleashed by caste with its notions of contamination and purity, the prospect in itself becomes

one of positive affirmation to the question whether the subaltern can speak. The paper seeks to examine whether the mythological and ritual aspects of Theyyam fall within the ambit of the reversal of hegemony or are they consensual to the maintenance of hierarchies of caste. I would be looking at this contextualising it within the mythology and ritual of Muthappan and the appropriations of its cult which is defiant of all hierarchical dimensions by the progressive left of north Malabar.

Theyyam is largely understood as an inversion of caste hierarchies. Dilip Menon approaches *teyyattam* as “one of the strategies by which a living space is created by the dominated through which they attempt to stave off the exercise of arbitrary authority of those in power” (189). These strategies which he would call “symbolic strategies” are by means of which the lower castes assert their self-esteem and claim their lived space (189). While agreeing to the promising attempts of revisitations of caste that Theyyam offers, this paper finds that there is no erasure of caste rather there is a strict maintenance of caste wherein each caste groups maintain its hierarchical positions. I would argue that these “symbolic strategies” find their significance only during the Theyyam ritual following the culmination of which the performer pays his allegiance to the land lord who is usually a member of the upper caste (189).

Theyyam narratives contain episodes of caste contaminations, treachery, combat, death, and atonement of the lower castes orchestrated by the dominating caste ; where the atonement that ensues is an attempt towards appeasement generated out of fear of the dead. Theyyam performer adorned with costume and make up accompanied by percussion and

singing, in the backdrop of *kavu* or the sacred groves, becomes the physical embodiment of the hitherto abstract divinities. The gods of the subalterns are adopted and appropriated as the incarnations of Shiva, Shakti and Vishnu so as to match the local narratives with that of the grand narratives of the Hindu gods. Mannarakkal Dasan states , “The myths/legends of these Theyyams had no relation to the Hindu pantheon of gods yet the Brahminic interpretations have connected these myths to Hindu texts” (4). During the interviews conducted with the Theyyam performers, it was noted that the performers themselves while being aware of these appropriations, did less to resist this and today they themselves validate the homogenising idea of unification of Shiva, Shakti and Vishnu (Panicker 2022). The validation of the subaltern gods by the upper castes and religious community in general might be a reason for this vociferous compliance to appropriation.

Muthappan Mythology and Forms

Muthappan, one of the most popular and ‘democratic’ of all Theyyam divinities, contains in itself an egalitarian promise of a caste ridden social order. Muthappan Theyyam performed by the Vannan, Anjoottan and Munnottan castes, appears in two forms, Puralimala Muthappan commonly known as ‘Thiruvappana’ and Nambala Muthappan or ‘Vellattam’. Muthappan is performed in *madappuras*, literally meaning ‘mada’ or ‘cave’ and ‘pura’ or ‘home’, reminiscent of the archetypal abode of Puralimala Muthappan in Kunnathoorpadi. The oldest known Muthappan *madappura* located in Kunnathoorpadi, in the district of Kannur is recognised as the place where the divinity of Puralimala Muthappan was initially acknowledged for and worshipped

by the tribals. Kunnathoorpadi *madappura* hosts five forms of Muthappan – Puralimala Muthappan, Nambala Muthappan, Puthiya Muthappan, Purangala Muthappan, Naduvazhi Muthappan - during the annual festival (Kannan 21). This could mean that there could be more than two different identities for Muthappan, hinting at five different deities while no documentation of the same is available in the Muthappan *thottam*. The countless *madappuras* in and around Kannur district worship Puralimala and Nambala Muthappan which would call for scholarship for the disappearance or lack of presence of the other forms. The erasure or the absence of the five forms of Muthappan in the *madappuras* of the mainland is suggestive of the presence of different deities with the name Muthappan who may have lived during the same period of Puralimala and Nambala Muthappan or succeeded these two.

The two forms of Muthappan worship attain a singular parlance in the langue thereby cementing the Hinduthwa idea of the unification of the gods Vishnu and Shiva. Mannarakkal Dasan identifies that the worship of Muthappan and the two forms interpreted as the incarnations of Vishnu and Shiva are part of the larger Hinduisation process and the myth of Nambala Muthappan was added as a sub story and this finds no mention in the *thottam* (116). Accordingly Puralimala Muthappan, during his hunting ventures, accidentally struck an arrow at an anthill from which a saintly figure emerged. Dasan argues that this saintly figure is identified as the incarnation of Shiva and was appropriated and given the Hindu attributions (116). Y.V Kannan offers a possible narrative of Nambala Muthappan as an elderly person who lived among the tribals of Wayanad and strived for the mitigation of injustice (28). Dasan further notes that the five

gods primarily worshipped by the tribals as ‘Muthappan’ could be symbolic representations of various hill deities worshipped by the indigenous people before Hinduisation (116). Both Dasan and Kannan put forth the possibilities that a group of leaders addressed as Muthappan; namely Puralimala Muthappan, Nambala Muthappan, Andu Muthappan and Purankala Muthappan were worshipped by the tribals and this could have been later appropriated and merged with the gods of the mainland. The singular embodiment of ‘Muthappan’ hence suggests the permeation of Hindutva ideology in appropriating the subaltern gods.

Puralimala Muthappan and Unconditional Attribution of Divinity

Puralimala Muthappan’s divinity as narrated in the *thottam*, is not that of treacherous plots, combats, or death commissioned by the upper castes and the subsequent atonement. It contains the story of a foster child, found abandoned on the river bed, taken up by Padikkutti Antharjanam and adopted by the Brahmin Ayyankara family in Payyavur. But the boy grew up in defiance of the Brahminical ways befriending all people, going hunting and savouring fish alongside the tribals. The Ayyankara lord unable to contain the shame and contamination of caste inflicted by the adopted son, reclines to the interiors of the house. Outraged on accidentally hearing a conversation between his parents, the boy confronts Padikkutti whom he looks upon with high regard. With no attempts at reconciliation, he decides to leave home and the sight of the enraged boy’s fierce red eyes made the mother demand that the eyes be covered lest he would be a fearful prospect for the people. Muthappan’s journey thus commences from the

Ayyankara premises to the hilly terrains of Kunnathoorpadi and to the different regions of present day Kannur district and he is documented to have travelled through the hills of Wayanad to the south and to Coorg in the north (Kannan 26-27).

Kalikkappattu which narrates Puralimala Muthappan's ventures to Kunnathoorpadi and beyond contains evidence of the initiation of Muthappan worship. Elaborating on Puralimala Muthappan's encounter with Chandan, the toddy tapper of the Adiyani tribe of Kunnathoorpadi, Muthappan's fondness for freshly tapped toddy and his climbing the palm upon which Chandan had kept his toddy pots, is narrated entirely in its banal significance. On seeing someone beneath the palm tree and his toddy pots emptied, Chandan confronts the intruder, seldom aware of the divine potentials that the man embodies. This speech act of Chandan enrages Muthappan and he, in his fury, cursed Chandan whereby the tribal is turned to a stone. Chandan's wife or *Adiyathi* recognises Chandan turned to a stone alongside a man whose divine attributes is at once recognised by her. In her attempts to appease the divine she offers him *puja* at her 'pura' or home (Kannan 101-102). Hence began the first ritual worship of Muthappan with toddy, cereals and smoked fish. This offering which forms the ritual foundation for Muthappan Theyyam is referred to by the name *Payingutti*, where "payam" would mean toddy and "kutti" would mean a container made of bamboo or mud (40).

It is here that the paper seeks to intercede and problematise the perceived empathy of Puralimala Muthappan with the tribals giving way to total apathy at the sight of a tribal claiming his rightful livelihood. Chandan's

petrification and the regaining of his physique only after the penance his *Adiyathi* offered I argue, is the supersession of the subaltern conscience that Muthappan as a Theyyam divinity entails. The most circulated legends of Muthappan elucidates a polemical response to the question of the speaking subaltern. Hinduisation of Muthappan fixes the episode of Chandan into the labyrinth of myths and lores where the defiant subaltern is rightfully cursed and punished by the avatars of the Hindu gods thereby extracting subjugation and penance. That the outspoken shall be corrected and contained by the gods is maintained in these fixations. I would extend this and argue that the *thottam* of Muthappan contains the facet of a divinity that was ‘inherently’ bestowed upon him rather than an extracted one even though there is a narrative evidence of abstraction. Keeping in mind the rationale of *thottam* where the deity is exalted unconditionally for its divinity, what I found rather unsettling with the narrative is the identification of Muthappan as the champion of subaltern cause right from boyhood and its antithesis in the extracted subjugation of Chandan. I suggest here that the caste into which Puralimala Muthappan was born remains obscure and despite the overt renunciation of his Brahminical inheritance, Puralimala Muthappan maintained the domination over the subalterns owing to the privilege into which he was adopted. The *thottam* and the legends expound Puralimala Muthappan’s ‘inherent’ divinity whereby Muthappan is identified not as a subaltern god but rather the man-god who became the subaltern’s god.

The *thottam* further narrates about how Muthappan continued to live in the present day Kunnathoorpadi making a cave his home, which is maintained till date at the Kunnathoorpadi Muthappan Madappura. Living alongside

the tribals Puralimala Muthappan with the popularity and divinity bestowed, worked for enunciation. *Ayyanthottam* narrates that he used to participate in the hunting missions and urged the tribals not to settle for the lesser meat of the boars while the major chunk was rightfully presented to the feudal lords who never participated in the hunt (Kannan 90-91). This boar hunting scene finds its manifestation in the ritual where Muthappan takes his *villu* or bow and aims at a coconut symbolic of the wild boar to be hunted.

Narrative Absence of Nambala Muthappan

The mythology of Muthappan as narrated in the *Kalikkappattu*, *Ayyan thottam*, *Polichupattu* and *Pattola* centres on the life and expeditions of Puralimala Muthappan. It is interesting here to note that while the narrative significance is attributed in its entirety to Puralimala Muthappan, it is Nambala Muthappan who attained immense popularity among the households and beyond. This interchange or unification of identity has reached a point wherein the believers and the performers are seldom concerned about the perceived incongruence in the manifestation of Muthappan *thottam*. I would argue that the Hindutva appropriation of Muthappan as incarnations of Vishnu and Shiva is largely the reason for the unification of identities. This agenda of Hinduisation is kept under erasure by the communist appropriations and thereby the identity of Muthappan, out of the two, is adopted and gets deferred.

Nambala Muthappan is not recorded in the Muthappan *thottam*, rather his story becomes muted and insignificant. Puralimala Muthappan migrates to the present day Wayanad and he is said to have met Nambala Muthappan, senior to Puralimala Muthappan by age, who eventually became his

associate (Kannan 28) . The facial make-up suggests an evidence for this substory where in Nambala Muthappan wears a white beard while that of Puralimala Muthappan is a black one hinting at the considerable age difference. Theyyam scholars like Y.V Kannan add that Nambala Muthappan was a popular leader among the tribals of Wayanad and that the comradeship between the two had given rise to a mobilisation of the tribals at Puralimala who eventually conquered the fortress of King Harischandra Perumal of Chera dynasty, the granaries were then taken control of and distributed to the tribals (Kannan 28). While this episode gets documented in the *thottam*, the association with Nambala Muthappan does not find a narrative evidence. The event which is nowhere a documented historical fact calls for the need of Theyyam mythologies to be understood and documented as subaltern historiographies. The *thottam* further refers to Puralimala Muthappan taking control over the province and ruling it for a period of twelve years. The episode which is a manifestation of the subaltern aspirations is like an organised tribal insurgence aimed at the sabotage of caste hierarchies. While acknowledging the significance of the tribals united and the following uprising , this paper sees the event as contributing towards the communist identification of Muthappan as the leader of the subalterns without whom the tribals would remain disunited.

Communist Appropriations of Myth and Rituals

The paper identifies that the mythology of Muthappan, its reception and undertones, attains validation of the communist ideology of north Malabar. Leftist intellectuals interpreted the myths of Theyyam as living evidence of class exploitation (Dasan 133). Drawing from the mythology of Puralimala

Muthappan as narrated in the oral narratives, namely, *Kalikkappattu*, *Pattola*, and *Ayyanthottam*, I argue that it maintained and circulated the idea of an egalitarian cause spearheaded by a leader and the socialist democratic ideas formed a staple for the communist validations and attributions of the deities. The communist appropriation of Muthappan is a selective appropriation deliberating upon the more radical episodes in the *thottam* whereby the narrative evidence of maintained caste hierarchies is obliterated.

Dineshan Vadakkiniyil identifies Muthappan as an exemplar of modernity that stands in opposition to the state practice by virtue of marginality and outsider status of the deity (131). While agreeing to the point that Muthappan is a deity devoid of temporal and spatial fixations, which is in not adherence to the Brahminical worshipping patterns, what I found rather interesting was how the appropriation of Muthappan as Hindu gods was naturalised in Vadakkiniyil. Even when resisting the communist appropriations of Theyyam and its subsequent ‘devaluation’ as an art form, Vadakkiniyil’s stance with regard to the myth of Muthappan cursing Chandan, I argue is the acceptance of the inherent hegemonical position of Puralimala Muthappan maintained by caste. Vadakkiniyil argues that the offering made out of reverence for Muthappan’s divinity is a “gift” and that the “gifts to Muthappan are outside a discourse of purity and pollution” (138). I would consider this argument in the context of maintenance of caste hierarchies and as a cultural memory of subordination incurred upon the Adiyar tribe. While smoked fish, cooked cereals and toddy seldom conform to the notions of the ‘purity’ of offerings, there is the underlying notion of subordination and hegemony in attempts to appease Muthappan and Chandan’s subsequent release.

This paper finds that Muthappan is not outside the state as Vadakkiniyil would argue, rather Muthappan and the idol formation is within the state and its maintained caste formulations.

The patterns of Muthappan worship which commenced from the offerings made by the *Adiyathi* as *Payingutti* (offerings made with cooked cereals, smoked fish, and toddy) serves as the initiation of the rituals of Muthappan Theyyam. This ritual had been conducted till today and apart from the Kunnathoorpadi Madappura, where the member of the Adiyar tribe offers *Payingutti*, it is the male member of the Thiyya community that conducts the same. The *Payingutti* which is antithetical to the notions of ‘purity’ is what makes Hinduisation of an extremely popular ‘god of the mass’ rather difficult. Nevertheless I would argue that the communist validations of *Payingutti* address the stipulations of class while the hierarchies of caste is acceded.

Conclusion

The paper problematises the perceived inversion of caste hierarchies that Muthappan Theyyam envisages by virtue of its rituals and mythology. The most popular myth of Muthappan Theyyam - the episode of Chandan- is the one that is remembered and circulated with its trails of caste hegemony kept in oblivion. I argue that the inherent contradiction in the subaltern ethos when Chandan is punished is conveniently taken for granted by the communist ideology of north Malabar. The superiority of the life and activities of Puralimala Muthappan in the *thottam* and his achieved acceptance and divinity cannot withstand the negligence of the fostered Brahminical identity that he was brought into the renunciation that ensued. There is also a

significant valorisation given to a looming leadership owing to which the subalterns can attain their cause, suggesting the undertones of a communist uprising . This leadership assumes the grand narrative, whereby the subaltern still remains a muted entity into which voice of protest is prompted and hence finds articulation which is antithetical to the episode of Chandan. The caste fury demonstrated in Theyyam is incorporated to class fury by the left forces and thereby they manage to evade the reality of caste peculiar to the Indian context (Dasan 109). The incomplete or inadequate comprehension of Muthappan's mythology and rituals whereby the question of class is cogitated and that of caste is adjourned, the communist identification of Muthappan with the attributions of “*sakhavu*” or “comrade”, I argue is an appropriation done for convenience.

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