

Ecological Ethos of Teyyam Worship

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Abstract

The paper seeks to understand the interconnectedness of Teyyam, a ritual practice historically confined to the northern Kerala and the ecological embodiment of the groves/kavus of the region. Sacred geography of the Teyyam and the forms of Teyyam performed in sacred spaces are naturally and socially related to the lived places of various castes and ecological spaces of the groves. The paper also tries to make the distinctions of rituals or rites performed in these groves with that of Vedic or Brahminical rites performed in temples and argues that groves and the practice of Teyyam worship is more popular and invoke ecological ethos opposite to Vedic one which demarcate spaces of worship based on the graded inequality.

Key words: Sacred Grove, Ecology, Caste and Teyyam

Introduction

Sacred groves are considered to be ecologically inspired religious spaces or 'religiously inspired ecological ethos' (Freeman, 1999). Ecological concerns of human worship such as nature, trees, and forests are present in mythologies and *puranas* like Ramayana and Mahabharata. The grove/ forest were an integral part of one's life on the earth as part of attaining *moksha* (liberation) before entering into *sanyasi* (Hindu sage). The mighty *Hanuman*, *Vali*, *Sugreeva* and a vaster kingdom of monkeys were depicted in the Hindu mythologies as an essential part of the sacred and ecological concerning human beings and animals. A kind of religiously-inspired ecological ethos could be observed in all variants of Hinduism- Vedic and non-Vedic ritual structures and processes. A Hindu temple often protects groves/*kavus* as part of the sacred ritual extension as a divinity site installed in a tree or serpents. An idol of the serpent has also been worshipped inside the sanctum sanatorium in which scriptures and smrities were chanted and devotees were organized around an idol. Similarly, one can find out numerous forms of ritual-worship complexes within Hinduism across India in various times and spaces. The rivers, mountains, trees, fields, groves/*kavus*, possession

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mediated human bodies and dances, and singing with high pitched sounds of musical instruments and vocal recitations have been varied aspects of Hinduism.

The *teyyam*, a folk ritual practice in Northern part of Kerala, southwest India forms another aspect of the Hindu cult. *Teyyam* questions the hegemonic Hindu- Sanskrit traditions and voices the devotional story of the lower caste but falls mainly under the broader notions of Hinduism. The recitation and invoking the divine power of the deity to the body of the lower caste (untouchable) and transcending state of being God and goddesses blessing people across caste beyond caste hierarchies were also termed as a tradition of 'ritual reversal' (Turner, 1969), i.e., an untouchable man can become the god and question against the caste notions of Hinduism and at the same time be part of the larger tradition within it. This open and all-inclusive tradition of worship- that of man, nature, groves/*kavus*- *proposes* that Hinduism is not hegemonic but diverse as the human ecological relationship of man and nature is well connected with the patterns of worship.

Broadly, Hinduism can be viewed as Vedic and non-Vedic traditions. The former is a formal way of practising rites based on an idol. The main deity was the centre of the temple, and different other forms of deities could be seen in other parts of the temple premises but within a more prominent wall surrounding the temple. Various castes and sub-castes and their traditional customary rights as duties have been allotted, and they practice their role in a temple. The drummers will be allotted space, and they will be preparing instruments playing for the god. Some people will be making sandal paste required for the deity, later distributed as *prasadam* (blessed flowers/sandal paste). All practices within a temple are allotted to various temple caste (upper castes), and often they stay within or close to the premises of a temple. Specific deities' idols/images will be installed outside the more expansive temple wall, a space that is not restricted one where all people are free to worship these deities even without removing one's upper clothes (in case of male devotees).

The temple and its various spaces within it are well demarcated on the basis of hierarchy of caste and centring of deity (Tartakov, 2012). It is often dedicated primarily to an idol on which the temple is known for but other deities and its idols were worshipped as subsidiary gods and goddesses. Before opening temple to all castes by way of legislation only upper castes were allowed to enter into the temple. Among upper castes, only certain castes had hereditary right to do certain ritual in a temple. For example, Kerala Namboothiris (Brahmins) is allowed to do pujas (offering rites) and Marars are entitled to play chenda (drum). Therefore, temple is a restricted space for castes even within upper castes. A large section of people belong to lower castes were not allowed to worship in a temple maintained and controlled by the upper castes. Entering a temple was considered

as a violation of caste norms for which punishment was imposed. However, resources which were needed for the functioning of the temple were collected from the labour of the lower caste. The coconut, tender coconut and rice were provided by the lower sections. It is upon this social base that the temple economy was built.

It can be presumed that even before Vedic temple were instituted in the midland of south India, there where worship centres of goddess and serpent in groves/*kavus*. The groves were maintained by the people of forests who were started worshipping their lived places as sacred spaces. As we have mentioned earlier, it has produced so many varieties of forms of worship among people close to the nature. Men were inseparable from nature, and grove became a sacred worship centre. Sabarimala² in Central Travancore is a classic example of this. Sabarimala is in the forest and many mountains have to be crossed to reach this grove. But later, the grove has been transformed in the form of temple where Brahmin priest acts as a principal priest and rituals have been sanskritised³. However, the devotees called as *Ayyappans* were largely from the lower sections of the society. Anybody can enter into this grove turned temple irrespective of caste and religion but as time passes, it is prohibited to the Muslims in practice. This is part of the processes and structures associated with temple- grove/*kavu* and communalising worship.

The grove, a naturally evolved sacred space and worship patterns has slowly shifted to a temple format removing non-Vedic practices in a possible manner without challenging the mythical and traditional content of the grove. The built structure of the grove has changed and a temple style of architecture such as building *srikovil* (sanctum sanctorium) etc were made into place. At the same time, temple premises adopt natural and ecological presence as it invokes the past and grove tradition. These two forms of worship centres and patterns are mutually exchanging forms and practices of worship as nature integrates all as one, a collective feeling of togetherness. What dominates and what subjugates in this process is not the question that we took up here for analysis. Temple Hinduism is a powerful abode of worship of the upper caste and grove/*kavu* form of Hinduism is a ritual practice of large sections of lower caste. Adivasis (Tribes) who live in forest, for example believe that the gods live in the top of the mountains. It could

² It is a grove later turned as temple located at Sabarimala hill within the conservative spaces of the Periyar Tiger Reserve in the Perinad village, Pathanamthitta district, Kerala, India. It is a pilgrimage site that attracts around 40 to 50 million devotees in a year.

³ It is a social process where lower castes emulate ritual practises followed by the upper castes to attain social mobility in a hierarchically rigid caste system. See for more details M.N. Srinivas, Religion and Society among the Coorgs of South India and Social Change in Modern India.

be Shiva⁴, but the same time Lord Shiva is worshipped in a Vedic form in temples. It can therefore be argued that Hinduism is not a single and hegemonic form of worship, but diverse which is mutually inclusive of Vedic and non- Vedic forms, processes and structures.

Sacred groves in North Kerala

A sacred geography of North Kerala spread between Vadakara in the South to Kannur and Kasaragod districts in northern Kerala. In Teyyam parlance, the geography of this cult spread between two rivers, Korapuzha in South to a little beyond the Chandragiri in the north, and between Arabian Sea in the West to the hills of Coorg in the east. Sacred groves in North Kerala therefore, spread across these places that is both the hill land, forest and the mid lands. Groves in these places are protected as a centre of worship, fear and *shakthi* (divine power). It is deeply rooted in the cult of *Teyyam* and *Bhutaradhane*⁵ and cult of serpent and fertility. As a space of religiously inspired ecological ethos, groves are well connected to the everyday life of the local people and their dreams of both material and supernatural aspirations. The local people are differentiated on the basis of caste and each caste has their caste specific deity and practices of worshipping for their fertility of land, prosperity of family and protection from the wrath of the gods. Groves are also concerns about the ancestors who paved way to them to lead a life of prosperity in the past. Groves/*kavus* are therefore, a sacred space of memorialising the dead in the form of protector or they are defied and installed in the groves, as resting place of deities. This applies to tribal communities too. The deities such as *panjuruli*⁶, *koragajjan*, *kurathi* were performed by themselves as deities in their groves in hilly parts of North Malabar.

The Teyyam is performed in parts of Coorg district of Karnataka state in the sacred groves as well. The population from the midland Malabar migrated to hill land for job brought their gods and goddesses to the migrated place and established the *kavus* in their settlement. The famous *Kathivannur Veeran*

⁴ Shiva (Siva) is one of the gods in Hindu religion and a member of the concept of holy trinity.

⁵ A spirit worship cult performed in Karnataka state, special to Tulu Nādu

⁶ The name *Panjuruli* suggest a ferocious wild boar. A wild boar that destroyed early farmers crop became a source of awe and irritation. The boar destroyed some crops and the affected person considered that it was the curse of the deity. This is one version of the origin myth of the Teyyam. *Koragajan* and *Kurathi* are son and daughter of Shiva respectively. These Teyyam are worshipped by Mavilan tribes and performed by Nalkadaya tribal group. The word meaning of Nalkadaya means dancers in *Tulu* language. See Rajesh Komath's final report submitted to Indian Council for Social Science Research, New Delhi in 2017, pp. 97-101.

*Teyyam*⁷ is known as hero of Coorg. *Manappan* a Tiyya (intermediate caste) youth well versed in *kalari* (martial art), the art of using weapons, protected the land from the atrocities of outsiders, who later defied as the god. The myth of this *Teyyam* narrate a story of mid land migration to the hilly Coorg as well as the *dramatis personae* (Propp, 1975) of the hero.

Wayanatu Kulavan, another Teyyam cult widely performed in Northern Kerala has an inseparable relation to the sacred grove. It is also believed to be an ancestor of the Tiyyas a dominant intermediate caste. It is mythically re-memorialising hunting- gathering economy and the Teyyam is well versed in archery and hunting animals. The man-nature dependency for livelihood and that it become a site of grove and worship. As part of a rite called *bappidal*, the *Wayanatu Kulavan* goes to the forest and hunt animals with a group of *Tiyya* warriors. Bringing hunted animals into the grove and cooking it in the *kavu* is part of rites of passage (Gennep, 1909) of the *Teyyam*. The cooked meat would be shared to the devotees gathered in the grove as graceful offering is called as *bappidal*. This is still practiced in North Malabar groves. It often enters now into the conservative spaces of the forest department and kill animals of rare species which later became a site of conflict between environmentalist, devotees and the forest officials. *Kaithachamundi* is another *teyyam* which go around the locality of *kavu* and pluck pineapple plant and pineapple fruit. The *teyyam* brings these to the ritual site of the grove. All these natural and ritual complexes in relation to sacred grove and forest therefore are ritually and culturally embedded.

A typical narration of grove/ *kavu* in North Malabar painted thus:

“In the mid night shadows of a forest clearing, bounded on one side by a small stream and a moon lit paddy field, and on the other by the darkness of a rubber plantation and a green canopy of coconut palms, lit only by a bonfire and a carpet of flickering camphor lights, a large crowd has gathered, silhouetted against the flames. Most have walked many miles through the darkness to get here. They are waiting and watching for the moment when, once a year, the gods come down to earth and dance.”

“... for twenty minutes now a troupe of six sweat-glistening half naked, dark-skinned Dalit drummers have been raising their tempo; the insistent beats they are rapping out on the goat-hide chenda (drums) with their small, hard tamarind-

⁷ The warrior *Teyyam* who originated from *Kathivannur* is also known as *Mangat Manappan*. The cult is propitiated to ensure success in disputes, both civil and criminal.

wood drum sticks are getting gradually yet distinctly louder and faster and more frenzied. The song telling the myth of the god about to be incarnated has been sung, and in front of the shrine, at the centre of the clearing, the first of the dancers had just been possessed, seized by the gods, as they put it. Now he is frenetically pirouetting around the clearing, strutting and jabbing, unsheathed sword in one hand and bow and quiver of arrows in the other.” (Dalrymple, 2009 p 29)

The sacred grove could be built in paddy field, forest and for that matter any open spaces for the ritual performances of the *Teyyam*. However, there is a noticeable dip in the nature of such groves/ *kavus* which are now morphed into temple like structures either with the built concrete structures or a make shift arrangements.

Any forest landscape is only a forest for a common-sense view. As soon as the same place use for ritual processes of a deity in the forest, it could turn as a sacred grove. But in the process of constructing temple in midland as Brahminical form of centre of worship temple maintain a ritual connection with the diverse nature of grove for instance, a ritual performance of *Teyyam* in remote forest could be connected with the temple in terms of getting a consent for beginning the *Teyyam* practice. A lamp lit from the temple is usually carried to the groves as a symbol of carrying *Sakthi* from the temple. Similarly, there are reciprocal relationships between a temple and a grove especially in the context of *Teyyam* worship. *Teyyam* cannot be defined as a deity of the lower caste alone. There is a ‘community of *Teyyattam*’ (Menon, 1993) required for the whole ritual processes of the *Teyyam*. All castes in the locality have an obligatory function to provide for a grove in the form of mobilising resources. This is a kind of moral economy of the *Teyyam* festival. For instance, as toddy tapping community, *Tiyyas* have a customary right to provide toddy required for the *Teyyam* ritual. The ownership of groves/*kavus* are also diverse. All caste and tribes have their own groves/*kavus* to invoke caste specific deities appeasing their ancestors. *Teyyam* universe is therefore a ritual complex of North Malabar that consists of aspects of Vedic /non- Vedic, Brahmanical/hegemonic as well as critiquing elements against caste dominance and atrocities done to the lower castes. Taking this contextual, ritual and functional dimension of the worship of the grove and the temple, it cannot be argued that the grove tradition in North Kerala is opposite to temple form of worship.

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