3.1. Introduction.

Pulayas are aware that they are the original inhabitants of the place and this expressed in their myths and in their rituals. They are also aware of their social oppression. The myth of potten theyyam and pulimarijna Thondachan are some of the myths that directly speak of social oppression.

Pulaya's strong resentment against the sexual exploitation of their women by the powerful and the high caste also finds its expression in their myths. The myth of the chemmanakkali registers a direct attack on the powerful for exploiting their women. The high moral integrity of the pulayas is depicted in the myth of maruthiyodan gurukkal.

To grasp the overwhelming obsession of pulayas to express the protest against the social oppression, we should look at the terrible conditions of social oppression which they were subjected to in the pre-independent era, when untouchability was rigorously practised.
5.2. The Woebegone Condition of the Pulayas.

We have had a rapid look at the situation of the pulayas of North Malabar in chapter II. Summarized here below is the field work data supported by Fr. Taffrel (1981), the co-missionary and biographer of Fr. Caironi, the founder of the Christian community which is known as Chirakkal Mission. Fr. Taffrel (1981 : 38) says:

... They (Pulayas) were readily identifiable by their dark skin, their cringing submissiveness and their ragged dress. Their name expressed contamination which stained a high caste Hindu at the slightest contact with them. Even their footprints in the soil could "defile" the high caste people. An untouchable was obliged to shrink back from the path of an approaching caste Hindu lest his shadow should fall across his route and defile him.

As reported by the elder informants food and drinking water were another area where the Pulayas suffered most. Though they were non-vegetarian, they practically lived on vegetarian meals, i.e. just rice and chilly. Rice with water (kanji) was their food all the times of a day. In the landlords house where they worked, they were served only on the plantain leaves or in special mud vessels, called chatti or coconut shell (chiratta), which they were supposed to bring. They were supposed to keep the vessel in the courtyard and go way and wait at a prescribed distance until someone from the house put something in the chatti and went away to a prescribed
unpolluting distance. "No Hindu should eat in the presence of the untouchables, drink water drawn from the well by an untouchable, use utensils polluted by his touch" (Taffrel, 1981:38). Drinking water was a great weapon with which the caste Hindus persecuted the untouchables. The Pulayas had their own wells for drinking water.

It was said by several informants that the Pulayas were bought and sold in large groups during the celebration of feast at Madi Kavu every year. It was a kind of group auctioning where women, children and old, and adult were taken together by a joint-family of that illem. A young pulaya was evaluated as the worth of an ox. It is also said that the Madai Kavu originally belonged to the Pulayas, and was annexed by the high caste as usual is the case with most of the temples. That is the reason why the renowned temple even now is known as Kavu. There are some undeniable links with Pulayas and Madai Kavu. Even now the pulaya chief (polla) has some kind of rights (avakasam) in the kavu, and thudi, the typical pulaya drum is required for the functions in the kavu. For the celebration at the pulaya kottams oil lamp (deepam) has to be brought from the Madai Kavu.

Informants say that generally all the temples are closed for the Pulayas, they can come upto a
distance marked by a stone which is about three hundred meters away from the main entrance of the temple. "Pulayas body was polluting but not his coins as offerings" said many of the informants sarcastically.

Pulaya women are dark in complexion, and are very beautiful. At the time of conversion the pulaya woman whose employer took a fancy to, might be kept at home during the night. The social custom of Malabar of that time allowed these practices, particularly with the Muslims who are allowed by religious laws to have several wives. It is said that the pulaya hut (chala) had an extra 'bed' always for the high caste, particularly for the Muslims. The Muslims do not find anything unusual about having children by pulaya women. "... That was how a certain Muslim boasted to Fr. Caironi, that he had given the Church so many of his children born of the pulaya women" (Taffrel, 1981:39).

In areas where the pulaya live among the muslims, children of the same mother have fathers as "uppas" (Muslim father) and acha (pulaya father) even now. The investigator himself had the experience of asking the father’s name of a smart looking christian boy. There upon the boy’s face fell, and his friend told me, "his father is not achan, but uppa".
The investigator is told that pulaya women consider it even now quite prestigious to have an unofficial Muslim husband mainly for two reasons: first, it is a recognition of her good looks. Secondly, the Muslim will look after his child by her, as well as the mother, even though she is the official wife of another pulaya. The official husband appears to be quite resigned to the fact of a Muslim sharing his wife, because he too gets fringe benefits of an economic nature. Is he really psychologically resigned, something we will discuss later in this chapter.

Enough has been written about the economic exploitation of the Pulayas (chapter II). Informants said that at the time of conversion all the Pulayas had to work compulsorily. Adults were given their wage only in the form of paddy and landlords made sure that it was just enough for the day. They had to unhusk it everyday after a full day’s labour; thus their night meal was usually delayed. It was a life which knew no leisure, Elders recalled. During the off-season they said, they really starved. The only way was, either to incur debt or to go to Coorg for work. Going to Coorg for work, Informants said, exposed them to another world where the land-lords were treating the labourers more fairly and paying them decent wages.
At the time of conversion the Pulayas were not allowed to use cloth above their waist. New amenities such as umbrella, shirt, dhoti, ornaments were not allowed to be used by the Pulayas. An incident was narrated to the investigator that a pulaya youth was beaten up by the high caste for using an umbrella, and destroyed the umbrella too. Beating up Pulayas for small little offenses was normal; even killing a pulaya went unnoticed. Killing and beating up Pulayas for sports were a practice of the time. Informants told the investigator that there were several cold-blooded murders of Pulayas. They named some of them. Killing of Pulayas was considered to be a right of the upper caste.

5.3. **Pulayas Myths - A Symbolic Protest against Oppressive System.**

We have seen in the introductory chapter that myths are legendary narratives, in the sense that they are in the point of transition between myth and history. Pulayas myths are quasi history of their protest against the social oppression.

Myths express the aspirations of the people and the collective ethos of the society. The myths of the Pulayas are not different. Almost all the myths of
the Pulayas embody their protest against the unjust social situation of their history. Let us examine some of them.

5.3.1. Potten Theyyam Myth.

*Potten* means literally, "deaf and dumb", "idiot", "loafer" etc. The myth of the *potten theyyam* is briefly as follows: The mystic Brahmin scholar, Sri Sankaracharaya was about to attain the highest stage of knowledge, "sarvajna peedam" (throne of omniscience). As he was walking with his followers from high-castes along a field he saw a *pulaya* untouchable (*chandala*), with his wife and eight children coming across. The *pulaya* was carrying his children on his shoulders, hips and hands. He had a toddy pot on his head. The *pulaya* was walking towards the Brahmin without bothering about the pollution that he may cause them. The learned Sankara got annoyed and perturbed by the recalcitrant behaviour of the *pulaya*. He is said to have shouted and abused:

You, *chandala* (lowborn) / Haven't you the sense recognise the learned from a distance
Those who belong to any/ of the four castes,
To sense the gait of a Brahmin instantaneously?
You have no knowledge of time
the past, the present and the future.
You have no caste/ You are beyond law,
You don't wash,/ You smell of fish and beef
You are naturals/ With no knowledge of God,
You seem to be bent upon / Obstructing our path
Abandon reckless venture/ You ignoramus.
With no idea of higher knowledge.
You, so mean, Devil of the first water
Get out of the way/ If you plan to defy
You shall be treated/ To a sound beating
Don't be standing on the path,/ You evil minded man

(Translated by K.M. Tharakan,
in Abraham Ayrookuzhiel, 1983:173)

Thereupon the pulaya picked up an argument with the
learned Brahmin and defeats him. The pulaya asks:

I have children in my arms / and a toddy pot (kalasam)
on my head.
Thorn and thicket on either side of path
How, then, can we give way to you?
When Chovar rides elephant, we ride buffalo
Why do you then, speak of a caste-difference?
When your body is cut what gushes out is blood,
When our body is cut what oozes out is blood
Why do you then, speak of a caste-difference?
When Chovar wears garland of lotus
We wear garlands of flowers
When Chovar dances bronze icon in hand
We dance taking the "prawns-vessel".
The same rice you prepare and the same rice we boil
Why do you then speak of caste-difference?
When Chovar breaks the coconut
and we break the coconut, the kernel we find is the same
When you are poked and we are poked what we get is blood
Why do you then speak of a caste-difference?
The plantain grow in our filthy-yard
becomes offering for your God
The Tulsi that grow in our garbage ground are offering
for your God where, then, is the difference, Chovare?

(Translated from the folk songs
recited during potten theyyam)

The learned Sankara understands he is not an ordinary pulaya and realizing his mistake he falls at
the feet of the pulaya and asks for pardon. Thus the
Brahmin realises the ultimate of all knowledge: that
there is no caste distinction - all humans are equal.
5.3.2. Pulimaringina Thandachan

Pulimaringina thandachan is a legendary figure of the Pulayas. One day a Nair from famous ‘tharavadu’ at Kunjimangalam dreamt that he should get a pulaya slave from Thiruvarkatukave, to cultivate his extensive paddy field. The Nair sent to Thiruvarkatukave and asked the chief priest (pidaram) for a pulaya woman to accompany him. Only Vellakkudichikurinji agreed to go with him. On reaching the tharavadu, she was first put up under a tree near the tharavadu and kanji was served in earthen vessel (chatti) and curry in coconut shell (chiratta) which she refused to take (these were the vessels used by the untouchables). Kunjambu Nair came to know about it and she was treated with respect giving kanji in brass vessel, plates used by the upper caste.

When it was time for planting the paddy, the Nair got for her a companion named pulaya Kurumpan. Kurinji at first did not receive him and gave him kanji outside her house. After some time their marriage was celebrated and a son was born to them. The child was named Kari. Kari showed a distaste for manual work at a young age itself. Kunjambu Nair understood that the pulaya boy was meant for higher things. He was sent to be trained under Chembadar
Gurukkal. Later on he was sent to different gurukkal to complete his training in kalari and other martial art. He learned all possible techniques (vidya) on earth and became a guru himself.

It is at this time the king of the Allalam Nadu was possessed by an evil spirit and he became insane. Men of the royal court tried several exorcists to get the spirit out. Finally the court requested Kunjambu Nair to send Gurukkal to drive away the evil spirit. Though at first he refused, on persuading he relented. The Gurukkal was promised half the kingdom. On his way to the king the gurukkal had several trials by the gurukkals of Allalam Nadu, but he won them all over by his magic power. God and Goddess like potten, Gulikan and Kurathi tried their tricks on him, he silenced them too.

In the process of driving away the spirits from the king, he in a dazed mood drank toddy (kalasam) from the hands of the Gurukkal, which was resented by the people of the court and they decided to teach the Karikkurukkal a lesson.

They refused to comply with the agreement, instead they put up additional demands on the Gurukkal that he should get the milk from the tiger. Gurukkal who knew the technique of taking the form of animals (odimariyal) readily agreed to it.
Before he went into the form of a tiger he instructed his wife to sprinkle water on him with a broom when he comes in the form of a tiger, for that was the technique to get back to the human form. When he returned after fulfilling the promise, his wife did not do as she was instructed instead, she got into the hut and hid herself, for she was utterly frightened seeing the deadly tiger. The *gurukkal* in the tiger form tried all tricks to get his wife to do what was required. At the end in sheer despair, the tiger got into the hut and killed his wife in anger and disappeared into the forest.

After some time the king of Allalam Nadu became possessed by the evil spirit again. According to the *rasi* it was found out that the spirit of the *gurukkal* possessed him. The king decided to worship the *gurukkal* by performing his *theyyam* every year. This *theyyam* is known as *pulimarijna thondachan*.

As all legendary narratives are, *pulimarinjna thondachan* also is an amalgamation of two or three myths beautifully blended to convey one message. In this myth too a pattern is found of a protest. From the very beginning to the end the protest against the discrimination is focused through a chosen *pulaya* woman *vellikudichikurinji* and a chosen *pulaya kari*. The demand for justice is hesitantly and partially
granted always to be oppressed as and when fresh opportunities arise. Finally when the Kari Gurukkal was denied humanity, he does not take it submissively, he goes into the extreme violence of killing the agent that denied him humanity out of fear.

5.3.3. Chemmanakali

The myth of Chemmanakali expresses the protest against the sexual exploitation of Pulaya women by the powerful and the high caste, especially the Muslims. The expression of aggression is extremely violent; and yet, as it were, to temper it, the theyyams, Muslim and the Pulaya woman, are performed together as a note of reconciliation. In any case, the message is clear, that the Pulayas, though, powerless, do not tolerate the exploitation of their women.

Chemmanakali is not a theyyam dance, but a kind of dance drama. It is a very unique art of the Pulayas. It is a combination of two or three myths. It starts with the common immigration myth. The myth briefly goes like this: Annapurneswariamma of Ariyar Nadu dreams of Kolath Nadu. She started in a ship with thousand sutra children, thousand konkani children, choti children, mavilar, pallichamar and ezhillethammamar. Caught up in a typhoon the ship
was about to be wrecked. The captain of the ship found out through rasi that evil spirits such as mari and marimayam have taken possession of the ship. Some people got down at Anchuthengu. When the ship reached Azhikal, the ship (kappal) got farther damaged and the oil lamp (nilavilaku) was thrown into the sea as an offering to save themselves. Thus all the people got down and ran helter-skelter, in different directions in total confusion. Some went out asking for clothes to cover their nakedness.

Karakathiri Chotian Ambu travelled towards the west to the mountains and was spotted by Maylan Kannan, the supervisor of Devathiri thampuran. On questioning, Chotian Ambu explained all that had happened and happily took up the work of cutting wood in the forest to clear the field for cultivation. The work was done and the harvest that year was plentiful but the thampuran did not give anything to the two who toiled for it.

Disgruntled, as they were, they left the forest and came down to the fishermen at the Chala coast. Chotian Ambu went into the sea for fishing and caught 10kg of fish with which both Kannan and Ambu went to market. Both of them got fully drunk and while crossing a country bridge they fell down. Accusing each other, they fought between themselves and
Chotian Ambu was stabbed to death. The wife of Chotian Ambu was at that time with child. Kannan took pity and started looking after her.

While Kannan was away looking after the field. Mammu Mappila, an itenarent buyer and seller of dry coconut, fowls and eggs, happened to come to Kannan's hut. Seeing that Kannan was away in th forest he asked Mavilathi, whether he could "come at night" she happily agreed to the request. Mappila came at night and they were sleeping together. The Ancestor Spirits and Tharavatu Daivamgal got annoyed and told Kannan in a dream that the Mappila is "eating up the cot and the bed". At first Kannan did not take it seriously. When a second time it was told he understood it and took the sword and torch (choottu) and went home.

On Reaching, he recited the sleep inducing mantra to put them to sleep; and by "lock opening mantra" he opened the door. He reallized that what was told in the dream was true. He killed his wife and Mappila with one stoke of his sword (kathi) and set fire to the hut and reduced them to ashes.

The spirits of Mappila and Mavilathi joined with the spirit of Chotian Ambu started attacking people especially, the women. Through the rasi they came to know that these spirits should be appeased
through perpetuating their kolam through theyyam dance. Unlike other spirits, these obey pulaya Gurukkal more than the other magicians of other caste.

The focus of the myth is to protest against the sexual exploitation of pulaya women. The story reflects the general picture of pulaya life. In the beginning of the immigration there was total confusion which was followed by economic exploitation of the Pulayas. The habit of the low-caste, drinking and quarreling, is portrayed in the story. In short the story reflects the entire pulaya life.

5.3.4. Marudiyodan Gurukkal

The myth of the maruthiyodan gurukkal speaks of the high moral uprightness of Pulayas as well as the craftiness and the wickedness of the high caste. Killing of outstanding Pulayas for sport was a custom of the time. But the integrity and courage of such people are celebrated through theyyam. By a spontaneous folk device, the theyyam, the Pulayas made eternal the memory of those whom the high caste tried to wipe out from their collective memory.

Edakulam, Thalakkulam, Puthiyidam and Puthillem royal families did not have slaves (Pulayas) to work in the fields. The puthillem thampuran brought a
slave, Kunjiviruthan from Chelerry Kooloth. He was given special training in 'kalari'. Cheriyakuttiakkamma, the royal namboothiri girl fell in love with Kunjiviruthan. She tried in vain making advances several times but the pulaya boy consistently refused. When she was refused several times her love turned into anger and she decided to take revenge on him. She complained to her father that Kunjiviruthan tried to seduce her.

On hearing this, Puthillem thampuran decided to kill Kunjiviruthan. The thampuran got around some Nairs and created a situation to pick up a fight with him. While Kunjiviruthan was measuring out rice the thampuran went on finding fault with the measurement. Kunjiviruthan lost his temper and threw away the bushel, thereupon the Nairs pounced on him and killed him.

That same night the Puthillem thampuran was possessed by the spirit and he became mad. In the rasi it was found that it is the spirit of Kunjiviruthan that possessed him and they decided to worship him by his theyyam. This theyyam is known as Maruthiyodan Gurukkal.

5.4. HP Myth and History

We have said some time earlier that myths are
quasi history, history defined as hagiography. In the case of theyyam myths hagiography is formulated in the form of myth. We discuss briefly some of the examples of history in the sense of hagiography in the theyyam myths.

In the legend of the origin of Kolathiri kingdom in North Malabar, it is said that three women — one shaktriya and two sutras — came in a ship and got stranded in the sea. The king Cheraman Perumal married them all. The son in the Shaktriya woman was made king of Eli under the title of Elibhupan (king of Eli Kingdom) (Gopalakrishnan, 1984: 355). Arrival of women in a ship is the common myth of the place (chaptr II) and all the caste trace their relation to this immigration myth.

In the history of British occupation of Malabar, there are battles in which British lost to the local combined force of Nairs and Muslims (Gopalakrishnan, 1984: 365f). In the myth of the vattian polla, the combined forces of Nairs of Chirakkal and Muslims of Arakkal fighting against the British is described. In the battle the British lost to the local force due to the deceptive devices of the clever pulaya, vattian polla who was leading the force.

In the myth of the Potten theyyam, the caste discrimination and the protest of the pulaya against
the distinction is highlighted in reference to Sankaracharia, a historic figure. The theyyam myth thus, reflects the authentic history of pulaya life and struggles.

5.5. Conclusion

The four myths mentioned above are just representative myths chosen from the numerous myths of pulayas. reflected in them we see the attitude of the Pulayas to their own life and people around them. Pulimarinjna thondachan speaks of a very high self esteem Pulayas maintained of themselves. It is not very unusual for a people who in their ordinary life never once experienced power and authority have lived in such fantasy of authority. In the myth of Chemmanakali, they register resentment against the high caste, and powerful people exploiting their women. The high moral integrity of the pulaya is depicted in the myth of the maruthiyodan gurukkal and he was prepared to pay the price for the stand he has taken. Potten theyyam is the indisputable stand the pulaya community took against caste distinction and the condemnation of caste system.