II

Narrative of a Theyyam Dancing Family
Part I

A journey of eight kilometers to the east of Thalassery takes you to Koorara, a village in Kannur District.

"Large expanses of undulating land, from punchapalam (bridge) the eyes could spot the Panoor Kunchipalli (a mosque) located beyond Mokeri paddy fields, from the courtyard of Kuniyil Veedu (a house name) which lies to the north of the village the illam's (name of a landlord family) pambinkotta (snake worship centre) in the distance was distinctly visible, the space in between taken up by the Koorara paddy field. The Konkachipuzha (river) meanders along. A silent witness watching over the village was the Koorara Kunnu (a hillock). A diminutive village with narrow paths. This was the picture of Koorara sixty years ago"\(^1\).

The village paddy fields were split when the Koorara road and the punchapalam was built. The view of the Mokeri paddy flats that lay spread out in the expanses before the Panoor Kunhipalli has ceased to be. Instead row after row of houses have sprung up. Although the vast stretches of paddy fields have become a thing of the past, the culture and heritage intertwined with the pastoral continue. These fields had shaped and nurtured the cultural spaces and the social ties of the communities here. For a bountiful yield from the earth a variety of ritual forms would be performed here. This farmland has been the space which was not limited to songs and the

beating of the thudi (small drum) but even Theyyams like Makkam\(^2\) have also been donned in an elaborate manner.

The illathe paambin kotta is the symbol of the Koorara’s authoritarian caste-feudal based social system. illathil thaazhe is an influential tharavadu. And the pambin kotta reminds the serpent worship and kaliseva\(^3\) of Kerala’s feudal tharavadus. A tharavadu located in a large expanse of land. Spread in this area were tharas and kottas (a slab built in stones and instilled the spirit of a deity) for serpent worship which were significant markers reminding of the control and power that resided in this tharavadu. It is observed that even today some corner of the garden of every respectable or dominant tharavadu is allotted for snakes. Those corners are held sacred, and a mud lamp is lighted there every evening with religious regularity. This tharavadu enjoyed the social authority over the locality of Koorara. They had invested with the control over the land and the traditional rituals practiced here. The locals often recall a situation to convey the position of power and plenty that the family was reputed for. It was said that at a time when a large majority in village lived under extremely straitened circumstances, the children of the illam played ‘chorum kootannum’ (children create the miniatures of a real home doing everything, like cooking food) using sugar crystals. The clear cut defining practices of caste in Koorara which fell to the lot of the subordinate castes was experienced under this illathu tharavzdu because the powers vested in them entitled them granted the authority to appoint the Thiyyas as tenants for the land and

\(^2\) One of the most popular mother goddess worshiped in north Malabar. The myth is related to a girl child, Makkam of Unnicherry couple in the family called Kadangotu. This is the tale of the tragic end of Makkam and her children. This Theyyam is worshiped for the bountiful yield from the earth and also devoted by the childless couples for blessings. See M.V. Vishnu Nambuthiri, Folklore Nikhandu (Kerala: State Institute of Languages, 2010), 150.

\(^3\) Snake worship is an integral aspect of worship pattern of Keralites irrespective of castes. Serpent forms are also very evidently visible in the Theyyam traditions too. To get a feel of how far these sorts of worship is integral to social and religious life of people of these regions, see T.Ramakrishna, Life in an Indian Village (London: T. Fisher Unwin,1861), 133-135; S.Raju, “Narratives, Signs and Social Order: Nagam and the People of Keralam,” Studies in History 7(1991):37-64; Chelnat Achyutha Menon, Kali- Worship in Kerala, Vol-1, (University of Madras,1959); also see, Edgar Thurston, Omens and Superstition of Southern India (London: T. Fisher Unwin,1912),121-136.
exercised the power to assign to the other lower castes down the line. The decline in the fortunes of this tharavadu is an indicator of the altered social positioning in the village.

Konkkachipuzha is the major source of water here. In the last eighty years the river has risen in furious floods thrice, say old timers; in 1930, in 1968 and in 2000. In the first one, the Attupuram region was washed away and a large number of homes destroyed. My father used to recall from memory the experience of rescuing the calves and kid goats from the flood waters in 1968. The word ‘Attupuram’ is self explanatory—conveying the geography of the land—‘the banks of the river’. ‘The people of Attupuram’ is how the residents of the area are referred to in the locality. In the 1930s homes were made using unbaked clay blocks. The ones that stood apart from these and were of stronger material belonged to the select leading family, the Nairs, and the better off Thiyya families. And, for this very reason a large majority of houses in Aattupuram succumbed to the rising waters of the Konkachipuzha in 1930. By the time the river rose again in 1968 most of the homes had been built of stronger material. After all, precautions and protection from the floods have to begin with the houses that stand on either side of the river.

Beyond Aattupuram, across the Konkachipuzha rising at a little distance from the river is the Konkachikunnu (a hillock) which had a kaavu whose presiding deity is the Konkachi Bhagawathi. I recall my father and grandfather speaking of the sacrifice of elephant that has been done here as part of rituals. The kaavu had witnessed no Theyyam dancing for a long time, but by the 1990s the kaavu witnessed a revival of the Theyyam ritual. Konkachi Bhagavathi is now an annual feature. The locals assign lot of importance to the Theyyams here. Konkachi is a river as well as the goddess.
Overlooking Koorara from the west is the Koorarakunnu (hill). The cashew trees in the plantations here attract the children who go to gather the cashews. In exchange for the stray cashews they would get enough money to buy themselves some sweets. Like the Konkachipuzha the Koorarakunnu also has a similar context. The Koorarakunnu Sree Chamundeswari Kaavu is here. The Kaliyattam here was conducted by the illathe thazhe Janmi tharavadu but was discontinued sometime ago. A revival of the practice was made possible in 1990 when Raktachamundi, the archetype of the Mother Goddess is propitiated as the Theyyam. The Theyyam festival at Koorarakunnu is something that is integral to worship life and an experience by people here.

The Mandamullathil kaavu was under the control of the Thiyya family. The kaavu emerged as a result of the coming together of a group of well-to-do Thiyya families\(^4\). The families had a number of offshoots and therefore were large in numbers with large tracts of paddy fields and land in the name of the kaavu. The agricultural wealth at their disposal was also a factor that enabled them conduct the Theyyam festival of their own.

The principal Theyyam at Mandola is the Angakaran\(^5\). A display of the martial prowess of the chekavars is a major content of the ritual practiced here. The festival at Mandamullathil kaavu always drew large crowds, far bigger than any other in the locality. The drumbeat from this kaavu could be heard in the village below and the villagers could determine whether the Theyyam had commenced performance. The local inhabitants identify the rhythmic beat in the Theyyam

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\(^4\) But some of the members of the family expressed their discontent in this opinion of the kaavu’s association with the elite in the family. They argue that some family like Ponon, were the initiators of the worship of Theyyam there and they are still lower classes of agricultural labourers. It is only recently the elite and well off in the family started intruding in the everyday affairs of the kaavu.

\(^5\) As the word denotes, it is a deity associated with fighting. May be an ancestor of the family who taught martial arts to the members of the family or fought for the family’s welfare and progress. The same form or Kolam is being performed in the kaavus called Dorothumal, Andaloor, Muzhikkara Chandrothu, and Kakkana Kottathu. All these kaavus are situated in and around Thallassery.
sequence enabling them recognize the entry of the Theyyam and the course of the ritual. The ritual practices here clearly indicate and proclaim the stature of the Thiyya caste, and the Theyyams performed communicate this standing during the course of the ritual. Most families in the area have a close link with the Theyyam and the kaavu. The Thiyyas form a major segment in the demographic profile of Koorara and this feature further enhances the importance of the festival here.

All important events are described in a manner such that it is associated with the Theyyam festival in Mandola kaavu, the latter becomes the point of reference. Births, marriages, deaths are usually pegged to either 'before' or 'after' the Mandola’s Theyyam festival days. For instance, the saying like "with this year’s Theyyam, my grandson will be twelve years old", thus making the event the point of reckoning. For the people of Koorara locality it is not limited to the practice of Theyyam but also a marker for major personal events. The following chapter will detail the festival in the kaavu where I was initiated into Theyyam dance and continue to perform those rituals. It is through this Theyyam festival and the kaavu that I observe and understand the transformations that are involved within the 'space’ and ‘time’ of the Theyyam in north Malabar sacred spaces.

**Part II**

The stratification of Indian villages on the lines of caste and occupation was significant for the social organization of a village community\(^6\). In the socio-cultural grid of the Theyyam in reality

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encompasses within its totality caste as an integral, visible and pronounced presence. Thus a large number of people live in keeping with the hierarchical order and are engaged in traditional caste occupations that have evolved as part of this social order. Based on the classification of caste, the status levels of castes and classes are central to the social and labour relations among the village community, which constitute its social structures of life.

The Nambuthiri–Nambiar families and its many offshoots as well as other Nayar-Nambar families exercised the rights of dominating their position as the ruling landed gentry. While families who were recognized as power centres lost a bit of the sheen as a result of the emergent social changes, strains of the older social order and its functions continue to surface in customs, rituals and practices followed in present times. By explicitly revealing that a person belongs to an erstwhile feudal family, members belonging to other castes are consciously or otherwise reinforcing the traditional social values of the past and endorsing it. In its present state therefore, the Theyyam and other ritual forms contain within its structures—the dominant and subordinate relations between castes and families that are extant in the society at least in the moments of the Theyyam festival or associated rites in the society. Through these practices, one could argue that a kind of reproduction of old social structures of distinctions venerate in these spaces of worship and rituals.

The Vaniyars (chakala Nayar) are a caste that maintains close ties with Nayar-Nambiar tharavadus. The ‘chakkatti Nayanmaar’, as they are commonly known, are a community that work on the press extracting oil from the dried copra. The first to receive the oil are the Nayar-Nambiar tharavadus and then it is distributed to the lower castes according to their requirements. There are few Vaniyar families in Koorara. The ‘chakku’ or oil press is made of wood. Oil is extracted by putting the dried copra through this. The Vaniyar families place the ‘chakku’ in a frond covered shed in their homes. It is not merely a tool used for an occupation, but it is the tool that signifies the specific occupation of a specific caste. Thereby, is closely aligned as an indicator of caste status. The caste-wise occupation of the Vaniyars is that of oil extraction and their caste’s most revered Theyyam is the Muchilottu Bhagawathi. In localities with a concentration of Vaniyars a Muchilottu is made and the Bhagawathi is consecrated as a goddess Theyyam—the Muchilottu Bhagawathi. In and around Koorara locality, a Muchilottu Kaavu can be found only in Panoor near Kooteri. For this reason the most popular kaavu for the Vaniyars is the Panoor Muchilottu Kaavu.

The Thiyyas of north Kerala are a dominant caste group. Toddy tapping, and coconut plucking are their main caste occupations. But, they have extended their capabilities to other occupations as well. The caste can be seen as a clutch of occupations. Thiyya homes form a large majority of Koorara’s population. Koorara, Aattupuram, Mokeri are densely populated with the Thiyya castes. I have mentioned earlier that Mandamullatil kaavu belonged to a Thiyya family. A large number of their relatives however work as casual labourers. The Thiyyas were engaged as leaseholders and

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7 It is not that I say that the Vaniyars still follow their traditional occupation. Younger generations of the caste are working in diversified occupations. Most of the youths in their caste in our locality work in military forces because of their physical fitness. But, older members of the caste still work in paddy fields, keeping domestic animals like cows in their homestead. The tool of their traditional occupation—chakku-used to see put idle in one side of the houses. Some would use the thick part of the wood for their household furnitures etc. For the ethnographic details of these groups of people, See Edgar Thurston, Castes and Tribes of Southern India, Vol.VII(New Delhi: Cosmo Publications,1975), 312-315.
tenants of the Nayar-Nambiar castes. The Thiyyas have an undeniable importance in the cultural character of the Theyyam. They deliver the tender palm fronds and the toddy required for the Theyyam. As Logan put it, the major settlements of the Thiyyas are from areas around erstwhile European settlements like the French influenced area of Mahe and the English locality of Thallassery\(^8\). The komaram (a priestly role) who performs during the Theyyam also belongs to the Thiyyas. The continuation of this practice is evident even to this day.

Below the Thiyyas are the 'kaavuthiyas'. The 'kaavuthiyammar' as they are commonly known, were engaged as barbers of the Thiyyas and as the caste that performed the funerary ceremonies. They do carry out these roles for the castes that come below the Thiyyas too. In Koorara, there is a small locality known as the 'kaathiyantavida', (place where these caste were settled) an area which still has some household of the caste who have now taken up jobs in the barber shops that have appeared on this countryside\(^9\).

Old timers in Koorara were of the conviction that traditional vocations were one of the means of identifying the caste of an individual and that it had to be hereditarily handed down. Today, the scene has altered completely: shunning the legacy of the past, members of the castes in Koorara have sought new occupations in new lands coming as it does with a different kind of job. But a total erasure of the signifiers of their caste identity through their Theyyams of the clan, has not happened because it surfaces itself through the family name, the place name, sometimes their profession itself.

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\(^8\) Logan, Malabar, 147.

\(^9\) To get a picture of the social changes around castes and their occupations, see, Adrian C. Mayer, *Land and Society in Malabar* (Oxford University Press, 1952).
Below these castes in the social order is the Chaliya. In an area known as ‘kadepremtheruvu’ they have a settlement. Unlike other castes, they live in a colony. Since they originally were residents beyond the kadavu (ferry point) near paathipalam the name ‘kadeprem’ was used. Weavers by tradition, every Chaliya home had its loom, the ‘maggam’, a kind of textile weaving machine. The yarn is soaked in water and put up to dry, after which it is laid out using a small instrument ‘nelli’, means the spinning wheel and from there to the ‘maggam’ on which cloth is woven\(^\text{10}\). Both men and woman were actively participated in their work like winding and weaving.

The Muslim community in Koorara are settled in close proximity to the mosque, a thickly populated locality which lies to the west of the Mandolakaavu. They have lived in close harmony with the social and cultural life in the village. Quite like the Hindus in the area the Muslims have also successfully been assimilated with the mainstream ritualistic practices. Nowadays, a direct involvement of the Muslims in this rituals of the Theyyam worship and its spaces have declined.

The Theyyam, sorcery, and traditional reciprocal exchanges continue with my family and the Muslims even today. The practice of exchange of gifts on the auspicious occasions of their religious festivals and ceremonies to our family as a kind of patron-client relations still continues to exists with them\(^\text{11}\). It is interesting to note that these kinds of social ties and practices with the various castes in Hindu folder is ceased to be. My father remembers Musilm women who used to

\(^{10}\) Around 1980’s each households of these castes had their own weaving machines installed on one side of their homestead. Now very rarely one could see those machines and weaving sounds in these settlements. There are a few cooperative initiative to revive this occupations, but with the coming of variety of ready made cloth even in the shops of the locality, these initiative become unprofitable. To get a broader nature on the weaving of this specific castes across Kerala, including some part of Tamil Nadu, see O.Krishnan Pattiam, Kerala Padmasaliya Samudayam (Kannur: Vinayak Publications,1997); for ethnographic descriptions, See L.K.A. Iyer, The Tribes and Castes of Cochin, Vol. II, (New Delhi:Cosmo Publications,1912), 115-118.

\(^{11}\) This could be considered as an aspect of the form and function of exchange in early societies. Such gifts are voluntary in theory but in practice they are given and repaid under obligations as outlined by Mauss. Here returns are materialised through the ritual services by the service castes. See Marcel Mauss, The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies (New York: W.W.Norton & Company, 1967)
be present during his ritual practices at home and in various nearby kaavus. They made offerings, 'sponsored' a Theyyam in their name displaying an attitude emerged out of an interdependent society, which transcending rigidities and thus embracing in a local practice of the majority castes and communities. That Theyyam was a sacred practice of the 'other' was never a part of the thinking among the Muslims in the past, but it has ceased to be so in present times. The numbers who are directly involved in the Theyyam are very few. The emerging strains of Hindutva philosophy seem to be getting transmitted to the ritual performance of Theyyam and the straitjacketing and rigidity that has surfaced within the Muslim religion is also a reason for the change that has impacted the assimilation that was visible between religious communities.

My family exercised by virtue of its caste the role of sorcerer, witchcraft and casting off the evil eye or being possessed by spirit. They possessed the cherujanmam rights within the geographical area of Koorara and offered our service to those who sought it. Instances are also there of at least some Muslims approaching us for such remedial activities. Many seek my mother's help for such tasks and Muslim men and women are there who still rely on her and not reluctant to seek her support. There exist families who make offerings of oil for lighting the lamp in the gullikanthara in my home. But, they are a little apprehensive now and are inhibited about doing such things. Therefore, they do not reveal it. My father used to practice sorcery for treating people. Now we have none in the family who can carry out such things. However, the numbers who approach for such treatment have not totally dried up.
The Theyyam dancing castes are on the lowest rungs of the social strata. North Kerala has a number of castes in this category but Koorara has just the Malayan\textsuperscript{12}, Vannan\textsuperscript{13} and Velan\textsuperscript{14}. The Malayan engages in Theyyam, sorcery, rites of ridding of the evil eye and during months when Theyyam is not performed they also work at repairing umbrellas. The woman among this caste act as midwives. Even today they are engaged in such activities. The Vannans are washermen, they do tailoring besides performing Theyyam. The Velans engage in sorcery, magic, and traditional medicine. According to Velan of this part of region, they are first taken by Hannabikotta Mohammed to Kannur to fish for the community there\textsuperscript{15}. The social order in these villages are dictated by the interaction of these castes with others where there is a social transaction sustained by the dynamics of the traditional and hereditarily performed social functions and roles.

Among the local population the caste distinctions are pronounced and evident in their social relations. This social hierarchy is very obvious in the evolution of the social behavior based on occupation and caste. Koorara has five families who belong to the Theyyam dancing castes. The Malayan family here is ours. My father was known as Koorara Swaminathan. Deep rooted caste sentiments have prompted some to refer to him as 'Malayan Swami'. The local children from other castes used to address him in the same way and none felt it awkward that he was addressed as 'Swami'. I used to wonder kids of the locality call my father his name directly.

\textsuperscript{12} Malayan caste are performers of Theyyam, players of percussion instruments, do exorcism and their women folk were midwives in the village social structure of north Malabar. They are well known as local folk dancers, singers and musicians. See Mason, \textit{Socio-Musical Mobility}.

\textsuperscript{13} A caste who dances Theyyam. They were local tailors and washerman to serve the village society once. It is said that they are one group associated with the Thiyyas. This may be one reason that they mostly performs kolam of ancestors of Thiyya castes. As tailoring was their traditional occupation, the skill reflects in the costumes they make for the Theyyam. They use large quantity of clothes for the headgear of the Theyyam too.

\textsuperscript{14} Another caste who dance Theyyam, and practice exorcism. To get a comparison of the cult of Velan in Sangam tradition and Theyyam dance, See K.K.N. Kurup, \textit{The Cult of Teyyam}, 47.

\textsuperscript{15} L. K. A. Iyer, \textit{The Tribes and Castes of Cochin}, I (New Delhi: Cosmo Publications), 231-260.
Children, women and elders saw nothing wrong in using their names to address them. Although things have changed, it is not uncommon to see the other castes refer to the Theyyam dancing castes using the caste name. Among the Thiyyas it was common practice to refer to the husband as ‘Thiyyan’ and the wife as ‘Thiyyathi’. ‘Have you seen my Thiyyan?’ - was commonly heard being asked by a Thiyya wife when she turned up at local shops searching for her husband. Nayar-Nambiar would flaunt their caste in manner such that other castes would recognize and grant this. Using their family name or the caste's name along with their name is considered an imprint of the caste status and rank.

Koorara has gone through the traditional, social and economic changes but when it comes to maintaining the Theyyam within its original structure, then caste becomes an integral inalienable component. Only when the separateness between Theyyam and those who keep it alive is put in perspective can the social relevance and the cultural legacy be discerned. The unwritten code of customary practices and social restrictions have retained the discipline within the practice of Theyyam by the village community itself.

As I have already mentioned, my family is entrusted with the cherujanmam (lesser birth rights) in Koorara. Koorarakunnu, Mokeri, Aattupuram, Kadepremtheruvu are the immediate localities where all social services and caste functions to be performed by the Malayan caste is carried out by my family. This short historical description of my family is being narrated here to give a picture of the Theyyam and the social, cultural and traditional practices of the specific area. It is not my intention to describe the life of each individual in the family, instead, it is an unspooling of individual memories to transmit the conditions, circumstances and the particular rituals they performed in order to fulfill their hereditary function in the village. Each one sharing his
experience in his own words. When events are told in each one’s words there is the possibility of repetition because they are speaking on the same experience—the Theyyam—but it would facilitate to provide a cultural background to which the worship of the Theyyam is practiced and may impart social factual situation for the better understanding of the social space of the Theyyam.

This narration would help to explore the changes and go to the very root of these shifts at the lowest levels of society. I am trying to describe these lives, their past and present, in order to connect events in a meaningful way, to offer insights about their life experiences16. Their stories represent a social context which encapsulate in their personal experiences, which would in turn mark social and economic changes of this micro region or locality and the lives in it. Talking about these lives, are methodologically legitimated on the proposition that the biographical fragments, like history, is based on research, interweaves historical facts that reflects current nature of society and raises the complex issues of truth and proof17, which is a kind of making sense of individual experiences in writing about subaltern lives.

Part III

My home is situated sandwiched between the Koorara flour mill and the Koorara Lower Primary School. The spot is known as the millintemukku (the mill corner). Opposite the mill is a goldsmith’s shop. A little away from this is Vadakiyil Purushu’s anaadikada (shop for selling...
essential commodities). The houses that flank my home are over sixty years old. To the right of my home standing beside the road is a *chempaka* (frangipani) tree with a few Theyyam *tharas* (laterite slabs) with traditional lamps (*kakavilakku*) which has been there since my father's *karnavar's* (uncle) days, given as offerings to the Theyyam. Sorcery, and other related *pujas* were regularly performed at this spots. To the right across the road used to be a large piece of vacant land, now taken up by carpenter shops and houses. That plot is to this day referred to as 'malayantavida' (the Malayan's house). My father's family had initially set up their home, a thatched one there, and my grandmother and father lived there. There is a story behind the manner in which our family was evicted from the place.

The plot belonged to an educated and modern Thiyya family known as *Kinnaathi*. They had their extended families in Thallassery with members enjoying holding responsible positions and employed as assistants to advocates. They had various kinds of property and had also acquired large tracts of land. The *Kinnaathi* house sold the elevated land adjacent to the space occupied by my father's family. The new owners as well as the *Kinnaathi* family wanted to gain vacant possession of the land on which my father's family lived.

Our house was made of palm fronds and grass. One evening somebody set fire to the house. Those inside the house ran out to escape the fire and the house was gutted in no time. They thereby deprived us of the occupation rights that had given us that space. My father's uncle, their sisters etc., had been interred on this land. The *Kinnaathi* family dug up the area to create a

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18 It is to be noted that some of the Thiyya family had possessed large portion of land and thus elevated to the status of a local land lord—*janmi*. The english educated Thiyyas, especially in the towns have made tremendous change in their socio-economic status. For more details, See Mayer, *Land and Society*, 134; K.K.N.Kurup, *Adhunika Keralam: Charitra Gaveshana Prabandhangal* (Kerala: State Institute of Languages, 1982), 27-40.
laterite quarry and later sold the land to their family cook. During the course of the quarrying, skulls and skeletal remains surfaced and it hurt my father. These were of his kith and kin. This became a topic of discussion among the locals. On a higher elevation from this ground was a Thiyya home, that of the Kunnenkandy family. The lady of the house had revealed to my father, shortly before her demise that his house had been burnt down by the Kinnaathi family with the help of then aspirant of the place. My father who lacked the clout, personal, social or economic, just heard her, out of sheer helplessness. My father used to repeat the story to us.

The property on which my house is now situated was taken by my grandmother from a rich Thiyya family from a place called Champad. Melallapil Chathu, was the owner of the land and my grandmother bought the land. The resources for the purchase of the land she raised from the money she earned from practicing her hereditary occupation of sorcery, sometimes black magical practices of ridding the evil eyes. Later, in 1977 the government legally granted her the ownership of those 9-1/4 cents of land as occupation right of the kudiyaan. My father has told me that some of the established Thiyya families particularly well to do members of the Mandolakaavu had helped my grandmother to buy this land. And this is likely because the duty of ridding the local community off the evil eye, practicing sorcery, witchcraft and dancing Theyyam etc was vested in my family which was the sole Malayan family here. In those days midwifery a primary function was considered more important than the Theyyam. It was the times when

19 My paternal grandmother (Ammini) belonged to a place called Kaitheri which lies to the east of Kuthuparambu. They were asked to relocate in Koorara by some of the Thiyya families at Koorara. So goes the background to our presence in Koorara.

20 See title deeds of the above land registered at Panoor sub-registrar office, dated 17.11.1976.

21 The evil eye is a look or some sayings on a person or thing, that is believed by many cultures to be able to cause injury or bad luck for the person or things at it is directed for reasons of envy or dislike. In order to ward off the evil eye, people still put drawing boards in front of the new houses or put a black ink mark on the cheeks of the new born child. Even today villagers come to my mother for certain ritual practices to ward off evil eye. For more on this belief, See Edward S. Gifford 1958. The Evil Eye: Studies in the Folklore of Vision (New York: Macmillan,1958); Alan Dundes eds., The Evil Eye: A Casebook (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992).

22 See Transfer certificate, Kuthuparambu Land Tribunal, dated 7.06.1977.
modern medical care was unheard of. There were no hospitals nor any gynecologist and it was the Malayan woman who was the midwife. Even after modern medicine and hospitals had arrived, Malayan women continued to be midwives to many families. People approach the Malayan woman to find out and clarify their doubts regarding pregnancy and its related problems\(^\text{23}\). My mother continues to be approached or asked to go to peoples’ homes to enquire regarding the condition of a pregnant woman.

Endowed with the skills to perform kuttiyedupu or midwifery and treating children, my grandmother’s family was known for it. My father’s eldest brother, Kunhambutty Panikkar\(^\text{24}\) whom we called ‘Moothappan’ was an expert in treating epilepsy. Even today when one participates in the Theyyam conducted in the areas around Kaitheri we can hear people talk about the expertise of this elder in treating epilepsy. But the Malayan had no right to demand any remuneration or a reward for any such services they carried out. This was considered as a caste occupation or obligation they were carrying out as part of their cherujanmam rights. I recall that whatever was offered to my father and grandfather by the homes they went to, was received with all humility and with their heads bowed. After receiving the ‘dakshina’ they wind up with ‘may you be blessed with all that is good’. As a relics of the past’s customary practices of the caste functions, these has to be practiced and continues till this day with its on timely alterations.

\(^{23}\) After the establishment of Hospitals in Thalassery and Kuthuparambu, which was around 1975’s many of the village midwiferies belong to the Malayan caste had been appointed as ‘Dais’. Still there are women working in these hospitals.

\(^{24}\) Panikkar is a title given customarily to the male members of the Malayan caste. This is to recognise his proficiency in imparting ritual services to the locality.
Part IV

To the eastern side of my home is a Thiyya house, that of Kumaran Gumasthan. His daughter, and her husband and their children reside there. Behind our house is the home of a Saliya family. My house is in between these two households. The relationship of my family with these two neighbour and to observe the nature of changes happened to these families and mine over the years may be an interesting aspect to locate changes that has taken place within the families and the individuals that make sense of the social memory.

Kumaran Gumasthan’s tharavdu is in Aattupuram. Gumasthan are adept at land deals, assessing the value and the changing markets. Naturally therefore, those engaged in such jobs usually have acquired lot of landed property. He had purchased the land to the east of my house for his daughter. Her husband had served the government in Mumbai. The couple had three children, two girls and a boy. A family with a comfortable economic standing.

In my childhood when mangoes and coconuts fell in their expansive compound the people from neighboring homes would be vying with one another to secure these. It served as our playground and also as an open area used by the neighbour for their ablutions in the absence of sanitation facilities. Proper sanitation came to ordinary houses in the village only after 1980s. Electricity was a luxury and a small number of houses enjoyed this luxury. It was while I was in my tenth class [in 1993] that the property to the East had a house put up. A single-storied concrete structure. Since this was a well-to-do family, the house had the convenience of a telephone and the luxury of a television. Sitting on their verandah we would watch television which was placed inside the house.

25 A clerk or an assistant of an advocate is called Gumasthan in Malayalam.
Televisions gradually acquired a pride of place in many homes but telephones still took time coming.

The Saliya family who resided to the west of my home, used to stay in the large deserted vacant ground that lay outstretched as far as the paddy fields. My father and mother had used the land for long years to cultivate plantain and pulses (thovara). Although my father was well versed in the Theyyam dancing he displayed an interest to go for other work. The subservience that was built into and imminent in the Theyyam dancer's stature repelled my father. He therefore tried his hand at farming as well as work on the loom, a Saliya's traditional occupation.

Even before I was born, Ramettan had bought the property to the west. His wife Padmini, we addressed as 'papiedathi'. They had four children, two boys and two daughters. The house of their interior comprised of just one large room. They had a 'maggam' (machine for spinning) which was used for weaving at home. As children we also would go and use the charkha for extracting yarn, a job that required deftness and delicate handling. Care had to be taken to ensure that the thread would not snap. Therefore, the moment we tried our hands on the charkha, Ramettan or pappiedathi would check us. White, black and red yarns, these when hung out to dry had a particular smell. The smell of the skeins of thread that were getting drenched, reminds one of the fertile earth.

Till I was in Class V mine was a single-room home. The front of the house had a cow dung smeared sit-out. A kitchen in one corner. The family which consisted of my parents and their four offspring slept in that space. A mat or two would be spread out and all found our space on it.
There was no discipline or routine that was followed as far as our meals were concerned. My father would go to the Kadeprem area for weaving, Amma going from house-to-house for ‘kuttiydukal’, weaving fronds etc. I remember being taken along when I was a very small kid. Later, I’d be left in the care of the brothers and sisters. In those times we children relied on Ramettan’s property as our playground where the ‘maggam’ and charkha were an attraction. If not this, we would go and play in the paddy fields. Ramettan's children and we were around the same age. They were our playmates. Most often the limited food we had was from their home.

It was only after my parents returned from work that something would be cooked at home. Mostly rice gruel or rice itself. The accompaniments would be taken from the neighbor. The moment the rice was ready, we children would be in a hurry to consume it, because the hunger was there. It was under such circumstances my mother used to say, if you are in such a hurry go to Ramettan's house and get something to eat with this. The mother who told the children that rice was on the fire when it was only a clay pot of water boiling, and children who dropped off to sleep waiting for the rice getting ready on the fire: many were the days that we spent in such a manner. Those were days of shortages in our locality, so the experience was not just mine. Thirty years ago the condition of homes where the wage earners were unskilled labour, the story would not have much variations.

Initially, my father used to hand over the wages he received from weaving, gradually it stopped. He took to drinking. My mother says that the income in the house was thrown off balance after my father started imbibing local brew. The wages my mother received for her labour weaving fronds and the food she got from homes was all used to feed six mouths. Besides, the income from the traditional practices also helped to some extent. Vedanpaattu is a ritual form where the members
of the Theyyam dancing caste went from house-to-house ridding the homes of evil spirits. The father and children with a thudi (drum) and one of them dressed as a Vedan would perform the task. In return they would be given rice, chilies, salt, cucumber and some small change. This practice helped alleviate the shortages that were experienced during the lean season, the month of Karikidakkam\textsuperscript{26}. I remember sifting the coins from the rice grains during my childhood. The bag would be emptied on to a mat. Then it was the task of the father and the children to separate the items which lay all mixed up in the bag. These coins have been of use to purchase the requirements even when I used to be in college. Towards the end of his life my father realised that people were no more keen to encourage this ritual form, so he discontinued the practice. The incident that triggered this decision is an eye-opener to the change that has come in the attitude of people as well as the public awareness.

As part of the usual routine of visiting houses during the Vedanpaattu season, my father entered one of the regular households. He was told, "You don't have to sing here". They did not believe in it. There are so many households and people who did not believe in supernatural or god. That my father accepted but, he could not accept what an elder in the family had to say.

"Swami.....the situation is not like in the past. The ration shops are giving rice...'"

The Malayan would receive coins, rice and other things and by allowing the Vedanpaattu the home would be keeping ill-luck at bay. This belief had changed. Now they looked at the Malayan as one who went collecting these things and did not recognize it as a ritual was understood. And this disturbed my father. Under such circumstances he stopped his traditional function of doing the Vedanpaattu. The Kothamuriyattam, another ritual form performed in Malayalam month of

\textsuperscript{26} This is a month of heavy rain and therefore, joblessness.
Kanni\textsuperscript{27} also had a similar connotation of faith and sustenance. Even before Vedanpaattu stopped, Kothamuriyattam was stopped. In the 1970s almost all homes had cattle. Kothamuri is performed for the protection of the cattle and to bless them with improved yields. When homes with cattle started dipping and using them for working on fields also came down, Kothamuriyattam also stopped. It remind the fact that any form of folk ritual has a social function to perform. When those roles become untimely, slowly the significance of the social function of the folk rituals fade away.

We participated in such ritual practices along with our schooling. Therefore, our attendance in classes fell steeply during certain months. Since the teachers had some belief in Kothamuri and Theyyyam they would not check us for this absence.

Kuttiyedukkal, (midwifery) Theyyyam dancing, vedanpaattu, kothamuri are ritual services rendered by the Malayan by virtue of his customary cherujanmam rights. In return for this they are given rice and other food items as a matter of gift as a social function, something in return for the service rendered by the Malayan. For this very reason when there rose an occasion when we needed support and help it was always forthcoming from the village homes. This was recognized and accepted as a social commitment by the locals. Today, this practice of a quid pro quo or reciprocity happens only between my family and the Muslim community. They continued to give my mother clothes and other goodies that are made in their homes on special occasions. Now my mother does not visit their homes yet they continue to send her, her share for festivals and other celebrations.

\textsuperscript{27} Name of a Malayalam month, which is a period just after harvest.
Part V

The social and individual memories through the descriptions of the personal narratives would impart the nature of past's ritual practices and the customary rights and obligations vested with various social groups in a society. In the preceding parts of this chapter, I have narrated the nature of my locality and its sociality interconnected with the culture of the castes and the associated socio-ritual functions. An understanding of the sacred mapping of the Theyyam dancing territory and its significance as a sacred geography of the Theyyam, which has enabled to sense a common nature of the society and culture of the Theyyam rituals. However, the individual stories shed lights on the micro nucleus of the social context in place.

My mother ruminates on her times

My mother belongs to a place called Vadakkumpaatu near Perllasseri which lies beyond Kuthuparambu and close to Mambaram, in Kannur district. Born in 1947 on 13 March, her mother was called Mathu and her father Kunhambu. Although she was born in Perllasseri, she grew up in her father's home in Kootteri which is in Panoor. The family's name was Puthenpura and it was a joint family. Her father stayed with his two brothers and their families. Further the married children also continued to live here.
"Kunjettan that we call Kunhi Kelu studied up till the tenth class. Ammini chechi till the fifth. All of us studied in the Komalagiri Upper Primary School in Kooteri, the only school close by. I also studied till the fifth class. After Amminiechi was married off I was sent to stay with her and help her out. Her husband had no sisters, his mother had died early. Her husband was employed in the registration department. I was sent to stay with her to keep her company. Kunjettan got angry with father for having discontinued my studies. Life in Amminechi's home was fun. Those days Kunjettan was a compounder in the Kannur hospital. He was upset about my schooling.
having stopped. I stayed with her for five years. Since the family was not large like ours, Amminiechi’s house did not face shortages for food. That possibly was the reason my father asked me to go and stay with her.

My father popularly known as Kunhambu Panikkar was a music teacher. He had the harmonium that was played using foot pedals. He would play the nadaswaram\textsuperscript{28} well. His brothers went for staging and presenting plays. Although they did go to play for rituals and the Theyyam, their main vocation was directed towards music. While my paternal grandfather would perform Theyyam, his next generation did not take it up\textsuperscript{"}.

The village community referred to the father of my mother as Kunhambu Bhagavathar, and for this reason my mother’s family received a recognition quite distinct from other Malayan families. Beyond the awareness about the low caste status the knowledge of music helped gain a sort of respectability. He used to teach music lessons to pupils from various houses nearby. Kunhambu Bhagavathar’s family had about one and a half acres of land. There were two house built in typical Malabar architecture style called as Thenken Padinjitta\textsuperscript{29}. His elder brother Paithal had no children, so that his portion of land was also given to them. But he sold part of it to pay off some debts he had incurred. The second brother, Aandi, sold part of his property to a Thiyya family. What remains is a house which stands on twenty five cents.

\textsuperscript{28} One of the most popular musical instrument. This wind instrument is considered to be one of the auspicious played in almost all Hindu weddings and temples in south Indian traditions.

\textsuperscript{29} This style of architecture in building houses in north Malabar is very common. This is constructed on the basis of the certain principles that the main building must face the sun rise and yet inconsistently it is called the Padinyatta-pura, which is central chamber. On either side of it, forming two sides of the square, there are two rooms which is known as vatakkin and tekkka— the northern and southern rooms. This is in our locality is called Thekkina-padinjitta house. To get details of these architectural style of buildings, houses and its specificities, see Logan, Malabar, Vol. I, 83.
Remembering her father my mother said:

"Although father never donned the Theyyam, he had with him the costumes and embellishments used by the Theyyam. This he used to give out on hire. Quite often he would not get the hire charges. I remember father cleaning the accoutrements once a year. He used to play the chenda\textsuperscript{30} very well, and the Kootteri Muchilottu kaavu would draw large crowds, all keen to hear him"

Amma’s family had cherujanmam rights over a number of kaavus. She says:

"The new generation contest for getting control over to do rituals in these kaavus. For this reason even blood relatives grow bitter for each other. They quarrel over this customary rights to perform Theyyam".

"My father's elder brother's wife and my mother were known as good midwives. My mother used to say that for assisting a childbirth she would get twenty five rupees, rice, coconut oil, and coconut. When she shows the child to the father and other relatives, then she is given all this as offerings or ‘dakshina’. As a significant source of income it was customary to enquire about the skill of the Malayan woman in delivering babies and allied duties, when she was an eligible bride. This source played a major role in aiding the means of survival of the family. A singular way to keep starvation at bay. To ensure the daily meal, these duties were more beneficial than donning the Theyyam".

The Malayan women were experts at identifying the woman in the early stages of pregnancy. Either to seek their opinion or to call for their assistance in case of an emergency, it was common

\textsuperscript{30} A cylindrical percussion instrument used widely in the state of Kerala, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu for temple as well as other related festivals.
practice to keep them informed. This helped the Malayan women to seek advance payment to tide over lean months, with the assurance that it could be repaid when they start getting money for assisting childbirth.

"Those were times we mortgaged others pregnancies to raise money for our daily needs"

"I got married at sixteen. The brideviewing took place at the kootterikaavu Theyyam festival. The husband's elder brother Kunhambutty Panikkar and sister Mathuty came to see me. Then without much delay the marriage was fixed. I had not seen him before the marriage. He had come home to train in nadaswaram, but then I was with Amminiechi. My marriage took place at home. Normally the neighbours do not turn up at our marriages or deaths. So the preparation is done by the members of our family. Nearly a hundred people had participated. In those days the upper castes never turned up at such events in the homes of the lower castes. Even if someone did turn up, they would neither eat nor drink anything there. My marriage had the handing over of the pudava (new piece of cloths) and the thali. After my marriage I was not taken to my husband's tharavadu Kaitheri but to Koorara. Then the people staying in the Koorara house were my husband, his mother and her elder brother. Mother's brother Kelu Panikkar and his wife were the only Malayan family of Koorara. Kelu Panikkar was well known for his Theyyam as well as for the kalari (martial arts) skill and his wife Chirutha a popular midwife. They with their children lived behind the present day Koorara L P School. A small hut covered on all four sides with woven palm fronds. That is where Chirutha died. After her there was none to help with childbirth. In those times it was a source of tension when a locality did not have a midwife. And for this reason, Nellika Kittan Mash and C.P Kunhaapu, prominent members of a Thiyya family went to Kaitheri and brought Ammini Amma here. Along with her came her younger son, my husband. On being evicted from Kelu Panikkar's house he
moved to Malayantevedu where he build a small place to stay. That is where the family stayed for a long time. Since he defaulted in paying for the use of the land on which the house stood, for a period of three years, the Kinnaathi family set afire the house. It is after this that Ammini Amma bought this property on which the house stands".

"In that single roomed house, Amminiamma, my husband and I lived. Since there was a verandah (small sit out) outside, even if there as not much space inside, they could lie down outside. Even today this must be the most inconvenient house in the area. There were no toilets in house and all including the women relied on paddy fields and open grounds to relieve themselves"

"Amminiamma was a short and very heavy person. She'd drape a veshti\(^{31}\) on her torso and drape a single mundu\(^{32}\). It is in her memory that people call the Theyyam sthanam here as 'Ammini kaavu'.

"When I came here after marriage I was rather young. New place, new people. The unwritten rule those days was that once you are married you continue to stay with the man come what may. One could not keep going to their natal home off and on. There were reasons for this. One was that running the home and preparing the food was the woman's responsibility. Secondly, as a traditional duty I had to accompany Amma for kuttiyedukal (child birth). And thus I got busy".

"I had no knowledge of how to go through the process of bringing a child to this world. Since this work had to be continued after Amma's lifetime, I started accompanying her six months after marriage. The first was Nani's near the home. The early things I did was to make the mother to be apply

\(^{31}\) A rectangular piece of unstitched cloth.

\(^{32}\) The habitual white waist cloth of Kerala.
coconut oil that had been sanctified through a chant. Amma taught me how to chant. I started this task rather reluctantly. The child's cord was cut using a knife that had been put in boiling water and then is used to snap the cord……."

"When cutting the cord a tumbler is turned and beaten with a stick, done to remove the fear in the child. That tumbler is then given to the midwife. After this the child is given a bath. The household gives the coconut oil and soap. What remains of it is also meant for us. In the presence of a five wick oil lamp, a measure full of rice, after dipping gold in tender coconut water, and reciting a sloka, the water and gold is given to the child. After this the child is presented before the family members. People who come to see the child give some cash. Thrice I accompanied Amma as a helper, after that I started going on my own and doing it on my own".

"Amminiamma used to take care of the household and the expenses incurred therein. For a single delivery we would be given twenty five rupees, but some days would see two or three such cases. Sometimes it would be six or seven too. Besides this, people would come home to meet Amma. To remove the evil eye, and to tie sacred thread etc., there would be requests. Some would expect my mother to accompany them to their homes to carry out these things– thachumanthram, is how this is defined".

"A grid would be drawn with bhasmam, in the absence of which ash would be used. The person who is under the spell of an evil eye is made to sit with her feet stretched out before the grid. A lamp, a full measure, raw plantains, flattened rice, puffed rice, jaggery and candy would be spread out and kept covered. A broom is made from the dried leaves of an elanji (bullet-wood) tree which are tied to a stem of the tree. This is then used to beat the person from the head to the inner foot. After this and some chants, salt, chillis, mustard seeds, tiny green chilies and paddy are taken in
circular motion around the person twenty one times. These are then thrown into a fire that is made outside the house. In those days people placed great faith in all this. Even the Muslims used to get this done. They would borrow the bell metal lamps from the neighboring Hindu homes. They also would come to remove the evil eyes and tie the sacred thread. Amma taught me to do all this. There are people who still come to seek my services for such tasks”.

“These sort of practices are carried out on cattle too. Those were times when every home had at least two cows. So also goats and poultry were needed in most homes. Even to this day people do use ropes that have been put through the sanctifying chants on cows which show changes in behavior and refuse to stir out of the cowshed”.

“In those times none would offer dakshina for such services. Nowadays there are fewer people practicing this, but those who come give at least twenty rupees. Nowadays people behave as if they have no faith in any methods. When they fall ill, they go to the doctor as well as come to me for the sacred thread and ash”.

“In the month of Kanni we go from house to house doing Kothamuri and receive rice and other things in return. People had a belief in this. From 25th Kanni to 10th Thulam is the period for Kothamuriattam. In Panoor where I was brought up, it was the men who went for Kothamuriattam. But here even the women are active. On the first day we go to Nambiar homes. This is to be sung only in the Nambiar, Vaniya and Thiyya homes. Kothamuri is not sung in the Saliya, Asari, Musari caste’s homes. In Karikidakam month the Vedan goes to all homes beginning with the Nambiar and downwards. If the caste order is changed people make their unhappiness known”.
"In Kothamuri the face of a cow is fastened to the waist, usually done by boys and sometimes by the girls. Their face coated with chayilyam, the eyes drawn with collyrium, with white dots demarcating the eyebrows. There would be special accessories too. They tie around their waist a band made of cane which can be slipped on to the torso through a circular space made for this. The torso is draped in red cloth the paniyans (comedians) also accompany the Kothamuri. It is to avert the evil eye on the Kothamuri that the paniyan also dresses. The paniyans have a vanchi (skirts) of tender palm fronds and the ears will have artificial one made of carving in a wood piece, while some also wear a mask. My daughter Rejina has performed Kothamuri for many years. So also my son Babu and Rajeevan. We'd be five or six in number and the moment we are seen some homes give a mandiri (mat) we sit on that.

"Beside the lamp was kept a measure of paddy for next planting season. Rice and coconuts also would be there. Two kinds of gurusi, red and black (the lime and turmeric solution for the red colour and burnt paddy husk powdered into black is the base for the black gurusi) used during the dances of Kothamuri are also kept there. The drummers seek permission to start beating the drums. Once the permission is granted the Kothamuri starts stepping out from the doorstep of the house. The paniyans were also there. My husband's elder brother Kunhambutty Panikkar was the one who played the drum. He could also sing with others singing along. After completing the singing, the red gurusi is poured in the cattleshed and the black gurusi is poured on the opposite side. For an auspicious beginning a coconut is cracked followed by the emptying of the paddy meant for seedlings are emptied into the granary (pathayam). The kolam is performed to seek prosperity and plenty both in the forthcoming season as well as ample yield from the cattle. After the kothamuri the householders offer

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33 In Malayalam it is also called Kumkumam (Vermillion). Vermillion is a vivid red to reddish-orange colour widely used in face painting of Theyyam.
paddy and rice. The *paniyans* sing and dance once again. The *kothamuri* is offered *dakshina* and then follows it up with a similar offering to others in the group”.

"After a round of the *Nambiar* homes the *Thiyya* houses would be the next halt. There are *Thiya* homes where we have gone for long years at a stretch and we sing only in such places. By afternoon we return home, cook the food for the meal. There was no time to rest and recoup my energy after the long walk taken in the earlier part of the day. Absolutely sapped of energy and extremely hungry. I turn to the work in the kitchen because *kothamuri* times are also occasions for relatives to come over. Their wives and daughters also help. The dried twigs and sticks picked up from the vacant grounds nearby, dried frond are the fuel. We did not have a kerosene stove those days”.

"From 10\textsuperscript{th} *thulam* to the end of the month of *medam* is Theyyam season. While the *Koorara* area was part of our *cherujanmam* rights, I would have to go to *Panoor* and also to *Kaitheri*, my husband’s home during the Theyyam season. The months before the Theyyam season begins is one with heavy work for the women. The mental anguish, the strains and frustrations of a Theyyam dancer affect the members of his family too. My husband used to take on the mantle of the *palayikaavil Kanttakarnan*, a performance that was held high by the locals. With 16 flares fastened around the waist, with a huge imposing headgear, the Theyyam which appeared at midnight created awesome fear in the people. Both the dancer and those who assist in the donning of the costume have to keep awake till the grand entry takes place. The flares have to be handled with care. On one occasion the length of the *panthams* were shorter and thus the heat from the flare hit the face and body more intensely and in case of a strong wind blowing it can lead to burns. This is a way to cheating the dancer. Fortunately his elder brother recognized this mistake and replaced these
flares. The Theyyam stepped into the performing space. He had corns on his sole which troubled him and therefore never walked barefooted. But, for Theyyam he was particular to adhere to the demands of the ritual, appearing barefoot. Quite contrary to the reluctance of those who appear as Kanttakaran to mount the peedom, (sacred seat) but my memory has retained vividly the sprightly manner in which he ascended the peedom with the 16 flares in place".

"While the Theyyam was a closer to god presence/godlike for the believer, for the members of dancer's family and blood relatives the feeling was one that was a mix of devotion and anxiety. Your father, your son, they are the Theyyams, the only prayer is that no harm comes to them in this fire play".

"When it was lean season for the Theyyam dancing, he would go to the Kadeprem theruvu to engage in weaving. He came home for lunch and returned to work till evening. In the early years he never used to drink brew. In fact he had smashed a bottle that had been brought into the house by his elder brother. Then things started going wrong. There was an arrack shop in Kadeprem theruvu. The workers on the way home would stop to take a drink. He also started drinking. He stopped giving money to run the house".

"Recourse to the brew was often taken to give vent to his anger against a person. What remained of the anger would be taken out on the members of the family. I have received the brunt of it. My first child, a son, was born a year after my marriage. When Babu was five years old, Rajeev was born and five years after that, a daughter, Rejina is born. And three years after that, Rajesh. In all these years I had to take care of the children, go as a midwife, and other traditional tasks. Only then would we have enough to survive on".
"Once under the influence of alcohol he would behave badly with the children. They could not study. If they reacted strongly he would use abusive language. He would fling all the cooked food out. Sometimes I would hide all the food in the shop nearby. Sometimes he'd locate that and throw it out in the fury. I was unable to prevent him from throwing out what was made for the children. It was only during Onam and Vishu (two festivals) that mutton was bought at home. I would ask the children to come and sit for lunch after a bath. But, he would turn up. Then I'd be running desperately, trying to save the rice and curry. I have been pained on innumerable occasions, by the inability to give the children any curry and rice!"

"It was probably in 1987 that we reconstructed the house as per the Indira Awaz Yojana Scheme of the government. One day the Gram Sevak came home and told us that we were entitled to Rs 9,000 as per the scheme and the house had to be built soon. He (husband) was very happy about this facility but there was no money for all this. Whatever was there got spent in alcohol. The old house was demolished completely and we salvaged a few door frames and some bricks from it. After the house was brought down, the family—my husband, myself and children—lived in pappichechi's home for a month and a half, till the new construction came up. A small verandah, a small room soon after that, two rooms and a kitchen was made incurring debts and taking a bank loan. This house had no bathroom or toilet. It was later in 1994 that a toilet was constructed. A year after the well was dug. So, now we do not have to carry water from the neighbours wells".

"In 1985 I got a job as an Anganwadi (ICDS) helper. I would earn more money if I went to assist deliveries but felt that a helper in the Anganwadi was a better option. Moreover, time passes rather easily since I'm with little children. Those who belonged to the Scheduled Castes get these jobs..."
easily, was told to me by Kaniyan Kumaran, neighbour and a political activists. It was his efforts that helped me get the job. The Anganwadi is 3 kms from home. The salary those days was fifty rupees. Everyday my husband would admonish me for taking up such a low paying job" 

"In the Anganwadi the work load and responsibility were equally heavy. There were 65 children. Controlling them was no easy job. But time just flew. I have to leave home at nine in the morning. Prepare kanji and payar (rice gruel and green gram a pulse preparation for their meal), which is served by 12.30 pm. To seat them in an orderly manner is no easy task. There would be some among them who need help and have to be fed. Then in the evening they are given broken wheat upma, which is also prepared by me. Since I like singing songs, in the free time I teach them some of the songs. On certain days the teacher would be absent because she has to complete her paper work at the Kuthuparambu office. On such days it was a dual responsibility, cooking and taking care of the children. Nowadays it is a tough job to get. The salaries have been hiked, and the number of children has dipped".

"It was in 1996 that the negotiations for the marriage of my daughter were set in motion. Bearing in mind my experience I was keen that she should get a husband who would not drink alcohol. The proposal came through a chendakaran (drummer) who came to Mandolakaavu. My husband took the initial steps. The boy does not drink. That was a great thing. His sister was yet to get married. They suggested that Babu, he was of marriageable age, be the groom for their daughter and their son would be given for Rejina. Therefore it was fixed in that manner".

"Even as the event drew close nobody had given thought to the financial angle. Nothing is like old times. It has changed completely. With the changing times our marriages had become very expensive. A feast on the
day before the marriage and another on the following day. All those who fell in the cherujanmam area had to be invited. We borrowed money from individuals and the bank. The marriage was conducted. Since ‘kuripayattu’ was still in vogue some assistance came that way, thus helping us conduct the marriage well. This practices are good for families like us. Although no interest is involved in this arrangement, a sort of financial obligation is very much built into this. Years later the payattu remains. Rajeevan is still repaying through payattu the amount received at the time of the marriage too. Rajeevan has borne the responsibility of the family. He took the financial liability of his marriage. He works as a private bus cleaner and conductor respectively."

Eldest Son, Babu Remembers

"I was born on 4th February 1965. I studied at the Koorara Lower Primary School up till class five, and then in the Mokeri East Upper Primary School at Paremmal, then in Panoor High School. I used to do well in studies till the seventh class, after which my schooling was derailed due to financial constraints at home. I would go to school after taking the previous day’s rice which had been left in water overnight. No lunch in the afternoon. When terribly hungry I'd go home to my mother's house by walking around 3 kilometers and have something. When I return in the evening there would be nothing at home. Lucky if I got something. To be frank it was exasperating".

Kuripayattu is a manner of money lending which is based on trust and does not involve any interest on the borrowed amount. The requirement of money is intimated to a local teashop and the local community is informed. Those invited to attend the payattu handover their contribution which is listed on the spot. Later, when any person who has made such a contribution requires financial support, he makes a similar payattu and the money is returned with a little extra added to the initial amount.
“Every academic year, we children from the Scheduled Castes received the lump sum grant in August. A month prior to this I purchased books from the school’s book store. Once I receive the grant the price of the books would be paid and keep the rest. When in dire need for money I would sell the books. Under such straitened financial conditions I gave up my studies. There was yet another reason for this decision of mine. There was a bus owner by name C.P. Kunhappu, an influential Thiyya in the area. He purchased a lorry and his son Sanutty was the driver and my friend too. I used to bunk classes and go on the lorry. When my father came to know of this my father showered C. P. Kunhappu with abuses. This reinforced my decision to continue to go in the lorry”.

“My father and I would very often get caught in furious arguments. There were many days he kept me out of the house. My mother would serve food from the rear door, quite unknown to my father. My mother was upset about the way my life was turning out. The Malayan caste was seen as a low caste and therefore treated with derision. A large majority here were Thiyyas and Saliyas. My father was close to the Saliyas. They held in respect the Vedan, and Kaalan, two forms of ritual dances that we performed, even to this day. Although my father is no more, they continue to share the warmth. My paternal grandmother was a midwife and she too enjoyed respect among the locals, something we also enjoy as a spin off. “If Amminiamma is there I have the courage” is something I have heard a lot of women say.

“It is customary to go to the husband’s home, of the lady who has just had a baby, to intimate them about the childbirth. The midwife usually has to go. My father accompanies as the male escort. Cloth, cash and a feast are offered respectfully and these people are seen off”.
“The month of karkidakam is when the vedanpaattu takes place. My father's brothers, Kunhambutty Panikkar and Kunhikannan would land up with their sons, Sivan and Murali. We were of the same age and therefore these were days of fun. Vedan is sung for prosperity. With a headgear, the decoration for the neck 'kazhuthilkettu', sandal paste on the forehead and large wooden tops to decorate the ear, a palm frond bag and a mask of the cow we played around. Father's brother would be the first to sing thatti paaduka is what this is called. A valamthala chenda and illathaalam as accompaniments. Mother, grandmother all of them would be there. The first halt was Naamathe Kurup mash's home, where we were well received. After the song is over we are offered tea, a must by them. We spend about two hours in each home and sing songs for prosperity and ward off evil spirits through a chanting, and sing this specific lines that 'where Kothamuri cow visited and blessed, there could see increased number of cows and other domestic manila, then we go to the next home.

The Thiyyas did not look on this practice with much respect. Some ask to sing, others say we should not sing. Others don't light the lamp. When I see all this I feel disgusted. Understanding their dilemma we somehow get done with what is to be carried out and leave the premises soon. We don't recite kothamuri in the afternoon. Once we are home, the costumes are removed and we are back to play. Father and the elder uncle take a swig, trying to explain it away as a requirement to relax. We would be able to take food by three only. The following day, early morning after the ablutions, the face painting starts once again. So goes the Kothamuri phase in the year”.

“My first Theyyam dancing was near Kuthuparamba in Modapathur village, which has a Kuttichathan madam or sthanam. This is where my father's elder brother's second wife belonged. I donned the Kuttichathan. In the same village I became Vishnumurthi in the Chandroth kaavu. The Theyyam
which I started then continues to be performed. Every year I am Vishnumurthi in the Koorara Mandamullathil kaavu. A tradition, a duty and obligation, all this is fulfilled when I continue this performance. It is painful to stop something that has been handed down by earlier generations. When the Theyyam is seen in complete form it has an appeal but the body experience intense pain. None reveal this. Because, a person who is transformed into God declares he is in pain it will be declared that he is not assuming godly status. The chilambu is a heavy anklet that is used and very integral to the Theyyam's costume. When the Theyyam moves, the anklet jingles. In an ambiance resounding with the sound of the anklets people watch the Theyyam. Once these are removed the ankle and the toes are badly sore. Sometimes these become festering wounds, calling for hospitalization. Same is the case with the thalapaali headgear which is tied tight and firm so that it can withstand the weight of the other things that are used as decorations and make the whole thing heavy. The nerves get compressed giving a dizzy feeling. Often the dancers start drinking to overcome this pain. The large headgears take their toll on the performer's back and knees. Thus the attempt to transform from human to god hurts one's own body and causes grievous damage. For those conducting the Theyyam festival, this is not an issue. This is a ritual where their ancestors are worshiped, therefore they are unconcerned about the downtrodden Malayan's body and the thought rarely ever crosses the mind. Moreover, they will argue to reduce the remuneration and fix it within the old customary rights and obligations framework. This could be prevented by us to a greater extent now a days".

Rajeevan recollects

"Father had prompted me to keep away from the Theyyam environment. Rajeevan, don't take to Theyyam, it would be better if you took up some other job. Yet, as a child I have accompanied my father and also performed
the rituals associated with it. Yet, I did not meld completely into the world of Theyyam. Within the dire financial condition I strove hard and completed my class ten. For the Pre-degree course I joined the government Brennan College, Thallassery. Since my score in Maths was good I chose it as my subject in college. The educated people here at my village also advised me on these lines.

To stave of this impoverished condition I must take up some job, that was my wish. With some money I would be able to overcome the problems of the sibling. So, I thought. One day during the course of a conversation with a friend we decided to run away from home. Our neighbour, Ramettan and his wife pappiedathi's eldest son Prakasan was the one who gave the idea. We reached Thallassery railway station. To meet the expenses he had managed to get hold of somebody's gold chain. When I reached Calicut I lost the confidence. I returned to my home. Prakasan continued on his journey”.

"By the time I reached home. The news that Prakasan was missing had spread. We were young children. His relatives searched for two days. They received information that he was with somebody in Thrissur. He was working as a carpenter in Kaniyan Babu’s shop. He beckoned me one day, took me to the by lane beside the flour mill and beat me up. He accused me of having sent Prakasan from the village. It hurt me. I did not tell anyone at home all of this. They had come to know of this, but were in no position to question the action. The whole plan to leave home was purely Prakasan’s idea. I did not have the strength, hence I returned home and he continued. I remained to hear the admonishments of the local people"

This event taught me a few things. I decided to take up a job and work. Since I took up the financial responsibility of the home, I could educate my younger brother. I gave the necessary financial support and encouraged him to study. He displayed interest in going for higher studies and I was particular that he had to be encouraged. He has completed his
post-graduation and now is a lecturer in the University. He tried and worked hard for it and that is the reason for his success. My elder brother does not stay in Koorara now. He has built a house on the piece of land his wife received as her share of property. I therefore have the cherujanmam rights of the Theyyam in Koorara. I do not know much about this. I manage to organize people and Babu come to appear as the Theyyam in Koorara. I have become active only very recently in this area. I have bought a kurumkuzhal (double reed pipe instrument) and trained myself for it. What my father and his earlier generations have been doing for the community I have been continuing. The kaavu owners display a sort of distancing even today. I often wonder why this is being continued. The burden of tradition ties me down. Be it as a Theyyam or as an accompanying drummer, the remuneration is poor. A day's wage is not even considered necessary. The kaavu owners behave, as if we are obliged to complete this task. In 2012, a drummer was paid Rs. 1200/ for playing the drums for three days from early morning to all night: the compensation for playing such a heavy piece of percussion one that is hung from the neck. This is not just a job. This is a skill acquired through practice and handed down traditionally. It has more value than plain unskilled labour. The kaavu owners who choose not to see this are adopting an exploitative posture. The drummers are reluctant to come to the kaavu. If they continue with this attitude I will be compelled to withdraw from the task vested in me by virtue of my cherujanmam rights happened to be on my shoulders”.

Summary

What we get out of these narratives are the poignant stories of individuals in a Theyyam dancing family and the work they put in while doing or enacting the Theyyam in varied kaavus. It explore more on the lives of these members, rather than their appearance as a awesome spectacular
Theyyams before the devotees. This chapter gives us what is there inside the home and the mentality and status of the lives who take the roles of the village gods. It is very evident that the Theyyam dancing castes had a specific cultural context in which they tied together closely which is associated with the customs and practices of the old social structures, that continue to work among them. This is termed as a kind of traditional customary ties. While other castes who had similar traditional ties with the upper castes *tharavadus* could break those ritual ties with the help of the socio-religious movements or with the progress in the educational fields. This makes us to propose an argument that the lack or failure/presence or absence of socio-religious movements from the part of the Theyyam dancing group and the fact that they had clear-cut ritual functions in the traditional order and were more clearly integrated into the ritual relationship with the upper caste families and *tharavadus*. Further, it was observed that the *Thiyyas* were able to break this kind of ritual relationship (in their case it is not clearly placed) and thereby they were able to trace a different trajectory of social progress and could engage in diversified occupations apart from their caste defined jobs and obligations.

The Theyyam dancing group’s social and economic activities were largely linked to the performance of ritual functions for *savarna* groups. Further, they emphasized their closeness to upper castes, and continued to value the ‘occasional inclusion’ in *savarna* society that was granted to them on account of their ritual status. This helped them to create neither caste nor class consciousness, which is necessary for a social group to attain social and economic capitals or to develop a distinct identity with which to bargain for progress. The Theyyam dancing castes were deeply implicated in *savarna* society through the ‘occasional inclusion’ granted to them via the ritual functions they performed for the *tharavadus*. It is important to see that this was not simply labour- in the sense of activity producing a material surplus. On the contrary, the Theyyam
was considered to possess supernatural powers that ensured the overall well being of the tharavadu. Thus the value attached to such activity was certainly far above the value attached to simple labour.

But in the case of the Thiyyas they were not ritually integrated, but rather economically integrated for most part, through agrarian relations. It helped them to diversify their occupation and to acquire the necessary social capital to enter into various socio-political movements. Further, they were able to successfully critique and shake off the (relatively minor, when compared to the Theyyam groups) ritual ties which bound them to the upper castes. The strict presence of sacred mapping for enacting ritual services even in these days and these set of social groups work within its old framework. If they could tie off their traditional bond with older procedures of system, they could ask for respectful position as ritual dancers and gain cultural and symbolic capital in the field of ritual functions and worship. Theoretically, it was argued that those sections of society, who have attained cultural capital, would easily able to tap other capitals—social and economic capital—simultaneously. But, in this case of Theyyam dancing groups, they could gain a cultural capital but which is read and seen in the framework of premodern caste rubric of purity and impurity. This is the aspect which prevent the group to enter into other realm of attaining capitals. The notion of caste and its perception followed over the periods still active in the everyday life of the society that prevent these groups of people to attain economic capital even with the endowment of cultural and symbolic capital as ritual functionaries of a society. Next chapter unravel the more detailed descriptions or discovering individual constituent of life of the researcher as the dancer of the Theyyam.