

Cultural Heritage Of Kasaragod: A Historical Overview

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Abstract

Kasaragod in northernmost Malabar is a land of cultural integration and socio-religious co-existence. As a border area of Kerala and Karnataka, the people of this region live with a peculiar cultural background, which is perhaps the mixture of many cultures that exist in both States. This composite cultural trait is reflected in people's whole lifestyles. The confluence of religions, castes, languages, rituals, ceremonies, customs and traditions made Kasaragod a land of diversity within a common culture. Almost all regions, communities, tribes and castes of this region have a series of rites, festivals, and priestly functions. They visualize an area where they live in harmony with the unseen forces of nature and win it on their side. The present study attempts to discuss all the rituals, ceremonies, customs, traditions, art forms and communicative systems of the people to understand the cultural entity of the society in Kasaragod.

Key Words: Culture, Rituals, Festivals, Art forms, Harmony.

Introduction: Kasaragod, the northernmost part of Kerala, is a cultural hub of the State. Several cultural festivals are celebrated here throughout the year. Kasaragod offers a veritable array of the performing arts, most springing from folk tradition. Though often related to religious rituals and mythological stories, they reveal very much the language of the ordinary people. Kasaragod has typical art forms like Theyyam, Yakshaganam, Thullal, Alamikkali, Poorakkali, Mangalamkali, Kolkkali, Oppana, Margamkali, and Eruthukali. Each item has its roots in the different community groups' traditional beliefs but upholds a society's cultural expressions. Discussions are needed for each art form to understand its influence on the cultural heritage of Kasaragod.

Theyyam: Theyyam is a popular ritual dance and art form in North Malabar. This centuries-old ritual performance is a unique combination of dance, music and religious worship. It reflects the main features of a traditional tribal culture dating back to the early days. 'Theyyam' is a corrupt form of 'Daivam' or 'God'. There are around 450 Theyyams in north Malabar. Sakthism, Vaishnavism, and Saivism have a decisive role in the cult of Theyyams. It dramatically resembles the 'Bhutas' performed in the regions of Karnataka. Theyyams are performed with various objectives. The Kaliyattam festivals conducted in the sacred groves or family houses aim to bring prosperity and well-being to the families and villages. It is believed that if specific village or family deities were not propitiated through Theyyam performance, they could cause suffering and misery to the towns or communities. Theyyam is also conducted to cure or ward off certain diseases and epidemics. For amicable solutions to family disputes, court cases and other similar problems related to acts of hatred or vengeance, the Theyyams are propitiated when the prayer or wish is fulfilled as an act of gratitude towards that deity. For agricultural prosperity and the well-being of animals, certain Theyyams are performed before embarking on hunting expeditions. The ancient war heroes are also remembered and worshipped through Theyyam performances. There is a close resemblance between Theyyams and Kathakali in make-up, costumes and the use of musical instruments. The Theyyam performance has mainly three stages. The initial stage is called Thottam, the second is called Vellattam, and the third is Theyyam's actual performance. Native musical instruments like drums and cymbals are used in the Theyyam performance. The Thottam Songs have made a significant contribution to Malayalam Folk literature. The languages of these songs vary from archaic Malayalam to Tamil to those with heavy Sanskritised vocabulary. The Thottam songs of Pottan Theyyam are famous as a satire on the caste system. The Thottams of Kathivanur Veeran give graphic details of the battle scene. The Thottam Songs are invocations similar to Kathakali songs, with the background narrative integrated with directions for performance. The Thottam songs contain descriptions of the myths and legends about the particular deities. Some Thottams have marvellous accounts of past events that unfold in front of us Scene by Scene, giving us meticulous details about specific place names, the forts, the type of weapons used in warfare and the tactics employed during those ancient days. In Tulunadu, the Thottam is

called 'Patdana'. As a part of the belief, the Mega Theyyam Festival, called 'Perumkaliyattam', is also celebrated grandly once every ten, 15 or 25 years. During this festival, hundreds of Theyyams appear at the venue. It is a grand festival wherein the involvement of all sections of people from a video area is ensured.

Theyyam's performance played a decisive social role for the oppressed and tribal castes. They were empowered to speak of the injustice suffered by them because of the arrogance of higher castes. There are endless stories of the Perils sustained by ignoring the dictates of Theyyam. Even today, when the caste system is much less relevant, devotees, regardless of their caste or social standing, display tremendous respect in the presence of Theyyam. The men of the traditional lower caste groups Malayan, Vannan, Mavilan, Pulayan, Koppalan/Nalkadeyar and Velan exclusively perform Theyyams. Certain Theyyams have to be performed by artists belonging to specific castes. For instance, the Theyyams like Vairajathan, Vettaykorumakan, and Kshethrapalakan, are performed by the Vannans, while the Malayans perform the Pottan Theyyam and Visnumoorthi. Physical training is an essential aspect of the preparation for performing certain Theyyams. For this, Theyyam artists are given tough training in Kalari Payattu, the martial art of Kerala.

Kasaragod district is the seat of a variety of Theyyams. Theyyam is a subject with vast potential for detailed study and research. Each Theyyam has its own stories or legends behind its origin and performance. Discussing all the matters related to Theyyams at Kasaragod within a few pages is impossible. Theyyam is primarily an art form associated with Hindu mythology. However, certain Muslim Theyyams are performed in the Hindu ritual places at Kasaragod. As a mark of religious harmony, Muslim- Theyyams like Ali Chamundi at Kumbala, Mukri Pocker at Vellarikundu Koolome, Kalanthan Mukri at Kamballur Kotta near Chittarikkal and Ummachi Theyyam at Mekkattillam near Nileshwaram are performed by the Hindu people. Their presence indicates the advent of Islam and the resulting Synthesis by the Muslim Community in this part of Kerala, reflecting the confluence of different religious traditions and beliefs. These Muslim Theyyams played a vital role in promoting communal harmony at Kasaragod. The cult of Theyyam is very primitive in origin. It is a popular cult in Malabar, which has become an inseparable part of the religion of the village folk. This folk

dance's ritual aspects and artistic forms fulfil ordinary people's religious aspirations and aesthetic imagination.

Yakshagana: Yakshagana is a musical dance drama played on the open stage. It is one of Karnataka and Kasaragod's most essential folk theatres, which has brought fame to this region. Every village in Kasaragod taluk is familiar with this art. The term 'Yakshagana' is often defined as the songs of the Yakshas, the sub-deities under Lord Kubera in Hindu mythology. It is also believed that Yakshagana is a dance performed by the Yakshas or the sub-deities under Kubera to please Lord Shiva, the God of destruction. Some scholars often connect Yakshagana with the 'Bhuta' worship in Tulunadu. It has a close resemblance to Kathakali in Kerala. Yakshagana is also known as Bhagavathattam, Avatharattam, Dasavatharattam, Bhagavatharattam and Thalamadhalam. But Yakshagana was initially known as 'Bayalatta'. The stories of Yakshagana were drawn from Ramayana, Mahabharata, Bhagavatha and other mythological episodes of Hinduism. The main attraction of Yakshagana is the stagecraft, where characters like Gods, Demons, and Saints are presented in a supernatural atmosphere, and the audience is carried to a fantasy world. Instruments like drums, cyclones, and harmonica are used in Yakshagana's performance. Yakshagana is composed in the Kannada language. The text of Yakshagana is called 'Yakshagana Prasanga' and is narrated in sets of songs. 'Viratparva', written in 1564, is regarded as the most ancient work among the available texts of Yakshagana. There are about a hundred tunes of music (Gagas) in Yakshagana. The performance of Yakshagana starts and ends with the prayer of Lord Ganesha. Parthi Subba at Kumbala is considered the 'Father of Yakshagana' and is often called 'Yakshagana Vatmeeki'. Kotta Sivarama Karanth, Mudrapadi Eswarayappa, Bannuru Narayana Bagavathar, Sangayya Bagavathar, and Chandragiri Ambu were the critical personalities who propagated Yakshagana at Kasaragod. It is generally considered that Yakshagana is a total theatre because it has everything of a performing art. It entertains and enlightens both the learned and the illiterate.

Yakshagana is presented through puppets and is known as 'Yakshagana Bombeyatta. It is an art form of Kasaragod that reveals the aesthetic sense of the people of Northern Kerala. String puppets and rod puppets are dressed in colourful costumes according to the character in the story. Bombeyatta is controlled from a curtain chamber, especially when put up behind the

scenes. Musical instruments, just like Yakshagana, are also used. Different puppets enact different characters in the storytelling through dialogues followed by songs. Sri. Gopalakrishnan at Pulikkunnu is the one who preserves this Yakshagana from extinction.

Poorakkali

Poorakkali is a vital folk play of various Hindu castes in Malabar. The play's source was the destruction of Kamadeva, the God of Love, by God Shiva's wrath. The performance occurred on the Pooram days in the Malayalam month Meenam (March-April). It begins on the day of the Karthika asterism and ends on the day of the Pooram asterism. Various Hindu temples observe the Pooram festival for those nine days in Kasaragod. As a part of this festival, the men Perform Poorakkali, in which the Panikar sings a couple of Songs, and other artists in the chorus repeat the same line by walking and dancing with noisy and rhythmic movement around the lightning lamp. The singing and dancing gradually gain pitch and momentum. The entire performance is divided into 18 divisions or 'ragams', also termed 'niram', each ragam being distinguished by its own time and rhythm. The men wear loincloth, with red and black colour, during the time of performance. Marathukali is an exciting and competitive play in Poorakkali. It is a friendly rivalry in which all the words in the song will be interpreted and questioned. The topic may be the episodes of Vedas or epics, as well as grammar and the prosody of the Malayalam and Sanskrit languages. Many scholars have pointed out the essential features of Poorakkali Songs, including the linguistic and literary aspects. The members of the Thiyya, Maniyani, and Saliya castes of the Hindu religion mainly perform the Poorakkali.

Mangalamkali: Mangalamkali is a musical dance folk performed mainly by the Mavilan and Vettuvan Castes in the hilly regions of Kasaragod. It is an art form played primarily during the time of the marriage of the scheduled community. The participants dance according to the song and the sound of the musical instruments. The performers mostly use peculiar musical instruments called Thudi. The Mangalamkali songs sometimes give vivid pictures of hunting, day-to-day life and family relations. But there is no reference to marriage customs. These songs are mainly composed in Tulu and Malayalam languages. There are several

songs in Mangalamkali. They are the Pantalpattu, Kozhipattu, Purlipattu, Chennupattu, Koomanpattu and Maninangare.

Keleepathram: Keleepathram is one of the art forms that existed in the cultural life of Kasaragod. The story of the origin of Keleepathram is associated with the begging and wandering life of Lord Shiva to avoid sin from cutting off the head of God Brahma. Keleepathram has a remarkable resemblance to the figure of Lord Shiva. It visited all the houses in the morning as a part of begging. The members of the Yogi caste in Kasaragod perform this art form.

Kolkali: Kolkali is a folk art played by different community groups throughout Kerala. It is also known as Kolattam or Koladipattu. In ancient times, it was an art of the women. The origin of the art is connected with Vishwakarma, the Sculpture of Gods, who made sticks measuring twenty-one fingers from the Sami tree (chasmata) and gave them to Lord Krishna. He gave the sticks to the Gopikas (women who pasture the cows), who started to play with them. Later, the low castes made it their art and used to play during the festival seasons. The Muslims in Kerala also play this folk art. The Mappilas in Malabar Islamicised this art by changing the Hindu devotional songs to Islamic style. They start their Kolkali with prayers to Allah, Prophet Mohammed and Sufi Saints. Like the Hindus and the Muslims, the artists in the Christian religion in Kasaragod also play Kolkali. However, there are slight variations in the song and play according to the regional and racial differences. Kolkali is closely related to the Kalari System, which developed in the regions of Kasaragod. For instance, Karinthalam Kalari, Kummanar Kalari.

Alamikali: Alamikali is an art form organised by the Hanafi Fakirs, among the Muslim Community, who came to the regions of Kasaragod as the soldiers of Tipu Sultan. They were also known as the Turkans and Sahibs. After the death of Tipu, they became the securities of the Eachikanam family at Kanhangad. Though the Muslims conducted the Alamikali, its actual performers were the men in the Hindu religion. Alamikali is closely associated with the stories of the Karbala battle or the 'Muharram' festival celebrated by the Muslims. The performers of Alamikali are painted black with white dots on their bodies and wear archaic forms of cloth, caps and ornaments. During begging, the Alami artists played dances according to the songs and music from a small bell and stick in their hand. Their performance ended on the 10th day of

Muharram in the Muslim calendar. On that day, the performers met before a fire pit and conducted their own customs and ritual practices. The Alamikali was one of the necessary art forms which upheld the Hindu-Muslim harmony in the regions of Kasaragod.

Saliya Porattu: Porattu is a crucial performing art among the Saliya Caste in Kannur and Kasaragod District. The performance of porattu is associated with the pooram festivals in the temples. It is believed that the port originated from the legendary stories regarding the war between Ilamkutty Swaroopam and Allada Swaroopam on the question of a place, namely 'Manikyakallu'. According to the story, the battle ended with the victory of Ilamkutty Swaroopam with the help of Chamundi, one of the critical Theyyam in north Malabar. The members of the Saliya Caste perform the story of the battle. The Attakkanam Pothi or Ashtakundam Bhagavathi, Vazhappothi, and Chekon are the critical characters in Porattu. Mappila is present in this folk art, which signifies religious harmony. The role of almost all the castes in the Hindu religion is also performed. The performers of the Porattu openly insult all the traditional and contemporary events without considering their social and cultural value. The Saliya Porattu started on the day of the Karthika asterism at Pilicode Theru and ended on the day of the Pooram asterism at Payyannur Theru. Perhaps Saliya Porattu is a satirical art form that existed mainly in the regions of Kasaragod, where open criticisms were made to purify society.

Kathakali: Kathakali is a world-famous dance drama in Kerala. It is the developed art form of Ramanattam made by Kottarakkara Thampuran as retaliation to Zamorin of Calicut. The peculiarity of the Kathakali is that the actors do not speak in it. They act through gestures (mudra) and facial expressions according to the background music. The actors wear ornaments and headgear and are painted with faces in different colours that match the respective roles. If Yakshagana is prevalent in the Kasaragod taluk, the Kathakali spread in most landlords' families in Hosdurg taluk. Perhaps the upper-class people were the chief exponents and spectators of Kathakali in Kasaragod District.

Ottam Thullal: Ottam Thullal is a form of solo dance in which one actor wears colourful costumes, as in Kathakali, and recites dance songs to accompany drums and cymbals. Kunjan Nambiar started it as a retaliation against the Koothu performed by the Chakiar.

Like other parts of Kerala, Ottam Thullal was also spread in the regions of Kasaragod. The upper class mainly promoted it here. However, it was a popular art form in the area. One of the essential features of the Thullal art in Kasaragod was the presence of the 'Marameedan', who came to the scene when the Thullal actor took a rest.

In addition to the art mentioned above, several other folk arts and folk songs are prevalent in the regions of Kasaragod as a part of the people's religious beliefs. Art forms such as Eruthukali of the Mavilas, Malayankettu, Aadivedan, Onatharu, Patayeru, Kothamooriyattam, Thiruvathirakkali, Parichamuttukali, Oppana, Duffu Muttu, and Margamkali are familiar to the people of Kasaragod, but most of them lost its glory. Apart from these, Hero worship, Tree worship, Spirit worship, Animal worship and snake worship exist in Kasaragod. Along with the major festivals like Onam, Vishu, Deepavali, Navarathri, Ramzan and Christmas, the people of different religions celebrate and observe all the ritual customs for their virtue. The Durga Pooja, Malaramba Pooja, Gondula Pooja, Ganesh Pooja, and Uroos are some of them. The Buffalo Race and Cock-Fight are the two popular recreation items in Kasaragod. The former was connected with agricultural operations, and the latter was organized as a part of the festivals in the temples.

Conclusion: Kasaragod is popularly known as the "land of seven languages". Languages like Tulu, Kannada, Malayalam, Konkani, Hindustani, Marathi, Byari and Kotava are prevalent in different parts of the district. Several oral and written literature have been produced in these languages. Perhaps the Communication system varies from region to region according to the language the people use. Variations in religious beliefs, modes of worship, art forms, and languages make Kasaragod a land of diversity. However, harmonious relations still exist throughout the district, which is evident from the participation of the people of all levels in the rituals and festivals of the district. The Muslim presence in the Hindu festivals and vice-versa is one of the unique features of Kasaragod. The festivals of the district acted as a prime device for promoting social cohesion, with the presence of various art forms, rituals, languages, religious beliefs, customs and traditions, a composite culture developed in present Kasaragod through the mutual interference of the people from different communities.

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