

## Sanitising the Profane

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## **Abstract**

The Kodungalloor Bharani festival is a yearly temple festival that takes place every March, in Kerala. The devotees who attend this festival are all lower caste Hindus and their yearly pilgrimage is peppered with music and dance. The festival is famous for the *theripaatu* songs composed of expletives. These are filled with expletives, innuendos and explicit sexual references and are sung by both men and women who dedicate these ‘filthy’ songs to the Goddess they adore. Over the years, there has been a movement to ban this festival and censor the *theripaatu*. The move to sanitize this festival has been spearheaded by a mainly upper caste Hindu crowd with very different ideas of what is sacred and what is profane and what kind of devotion is appropriate. Despite their efforts, this subaltern music has now entered mainstream Malayalam music and tunes of the *theripaatu* are now used in movies. Religious music has a huge audience in India and the sanitized versions of the *theripaatu* are a huge hit with the religious crowd in Kerala. This paper seeks to understand the struggle of the ‘original’ singers/musicians of the *theripaatu* to retain the form in the face of censorship and commercial compulsions. It explores the complex interstices of caste, subalternism and subculture as sites of resistance to the dominant social and religious behavioural codes, as it traces the passage of the *theripaatu* from the realm of the subcultural to the popular.

## **Keywords**

Folk narratives, caste, religion, goddess, subalternism, resistance.

*“The most controversial and widely discussed ritual of Bharani has been the singing of obscene sexual songs and slogans by the pilgrims. These describe the sexual organs of the male and female and narrate the sexual act in the most naked manner. They start singing all along the way and in the temple premises, though not inside the temple [srikovil]. There are usually men and women, of all ages, among the pilgrims, though the female sex may be less in proportion. I have not come across any records which may show that there had been any sexual orgy. The songs may or may not have religious significance. Some of them may be about Kali; others may be just simple sex.”*

-V.T Induchudan (Gentes, 1992)

The Kodungalloor *Bharani*<sup>1</sup> has become famous for its *theripaatu*. Literally translated, the *theripaatu* means “songs of expletives”. Almost every article that discusses the festival mentions the songs. Everybody I spoke to regarding the festival immediately associated it with the 'lewd songs'. When I first decided to work on the Kodungalloor *Bharani* for my research, most members of my family asked me if I was sure I wanted to continue with this research. “The songs they sing there are just plain offensive. A girl like you won't understand half the words, much less, understand

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<sup>1</sup> The Kodungalloor *Bharani* is a month long festival which takes place annually in March. The festival begins during the *Kumbhamasam Bharaninaal*. The flag is raised in the temple, signifying the beginning of *Kali's* war with *Darika*. *Thruvonam* is the day *Kali* is said to have actually fought *Darika*. The ritual of the *kozhikallumoodal* takes place during *Thiruvonams*. With the help of her retinue, *Kali* is said to have achieved victory over *Darika* on *Ashwatinaal* in *Meenamasam*. This is the day that the *Bharani* is celebrated. It is on this day that the *kavu teendal* ceremony takes place. The day starts with the *Ashwati pooja*, after which the different castes and groups assume their positions on their respective *avakasha tharas*. The *Raja* gives the signal for the *kavu teendal* ceremony to start. He generally gives the signal, on seeing a *krishnaparinda* or *Brahmini* kite. At his signal, the *Palakya Velan* first jumps and touches the temple wall. Then all the *vellicapadus* and other devotees start the *kavu teendal*. Flashing their swords and joined in what seems like a collective frenzy, they circle the temple. After circling the temple, they touch their sword to the outer bar on the temple wall. During the *kavu teendal*, the devotees also hurl pepper, turmeric and rice into the temple. The *bharanipaatu* are also sung as part of the *kavu teendal* ceremony. The following day, on *Bharaninaal*, a *pooja* takes place after which the temple is shut for seven days.

their meaning.” Considering the *theripaatu* is now synonymous with the Kodungalloor *Bharani*, it is surprising that the numerous C.Ds and cassettes based on the temple and the festival feature none of these songs. These music C.Ds and cassettes mostly feature versions of the less offensive songs sung during the festival, the *devi stotram*. What processes render the *theripaatu* visible and seek to invisibilise them at the same time? What deems the contents of the *theripaatu* lewd and unsuitable for public consumption? This paper seeks to understand the complex struggle that the ‘original’ singers/musicians of the *theripaatu* engage in to retain the true essence of the form in the face of censorship and commercial compulsions. It explores the complex interstices of caste, subalternism and subculture as sites of resistance to the dominant social and religious behavioral codes, as it traces the passage of the *theripaatu* from the realm of the subcultural to the popular.

### **What is the *Theripaatu*?**

The Kodungalloor *Bharani*<sup>2</sup> festival is one of the most important festivals in Kerala. For years, it was one of the only temples that allowed lower castes entry into the temple precincts. This was one of the earliest temple festivals with a predominantly lower caste crowd. During the *kavu teendal* ceremony of the festival, devotees from the lower caste communities were allowed to participate. M43N, a professor from Thrissur, who has worked on the festival, views this festival as a 'Dalit performance'. It is important to understand the ritual performance of the *Bharani* year after year as a 'cultural archive that carries and transmits knowledge in a deeply embodied way' (Polit, 2010). For the people who participate in it, it is not only a way to engage with their beloved deity, it also marks their engagement with their culture. It is an engagement that not only affirms their subcultural status but also celebrates it. While the festival also features *Nairs* and members from the royal family, it is largely a festival that is celebrated by the lower castes. The main castes that

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2 Since I wasn't able to attend the festival in March, I sourced the video footage of the festival from a local videographer. I analysed the footage before I went out into the field for my data collection. The footage of the festival was able to provide me with some details regarding the ritual processes that constituted the festival.

participate are the *Vannans*, the *Mannans*, the *Pulayas*, and the *Thiyas*. It creates a larger subcultural identity and also emphasizes the individual identities of the castes, through the *avakasha tharas* and the delineation of caste roles during the festival. The festival space creates a complex system of meaning, which draws from ritual performances and myths. It transgresses and celebrates the subcultural but at the same time emphasizes the distinctions and hierarchies that exist in the real world.

The singing of the *bharanipaatu* is an integral part of the *kavu teendal* ceremony. The *bharanipaatu* are a set of songs, some with explicit sexual references, sung to propitiate the Kodungalloor goddess. The *bharanipaatu* has two distinct strands - the *devi stotram* and the *theripaatu*. The *devi stotram*, the more widely understood strand, praises the kindness and glory of the goddess. Some of these songs deal with the various conquests of the Goddess and others deal with her origin. The *theripaatu*, or songs with explicit sexual content, on the other hand, praise every aspect of the Goddess, especially her sexuality. The idea of the *theripaatu* is, to construct the Goddess as something of a hyper human - her anger is earth-shattering, her kindness can heal and her sexuality is raw and powerful. None of this is of course reflected in the name, *theripaatu*, which roughly translated, means songs composed of expletives. The general discourse around the *theripaatu* is that these songs are 'lewd' and vulgar. There has been a proliferation of several videos and discussion threads on the internet where the *theripaatu* tunes and phrases have been used by youngsters to sing songs which are composed of expletives. These versions of the *theripaatu* are not the songs sung by the devotees during the festival. This coupled with the censorship of the *theripaatu*, has rendered the devotees hesitant to share them with outsiders. Only one of my respondents was willing to share the *theripaatu* with me. Two respondents stated that personally, they did not sing the *theripaatu* and only sang the *devi stotram*. Another respondent refused to sing the song out of its ritual context – the Kodungalloor *Bharani* festival.

## **For whom and why?**

The Kodungalloor *Bharani* is an interesting site where several histories and narratives intersect. Each story changes the nature of the festival. As a festival dedicated to *Kannagi*, the *Bharani* is a different festival from the festival dedicated to *Kali*. The story also changes depending on the social location of each participant and each story draws its meaning from the storyteller's context.

One of the first stories I heard about the origin of the Kodungalloor *Bharani* was in M.J Gentes' paper – “Scandalizing the Goddess at Kodungalloor” (1992). Gentes contends that the *Bharani* festival was born out of a tactical move on the part of the Hindus in the area to usurp Buddhist property. Some of the narratives posit *Kannagi* as the primary deity of the Kodungalloor temple. *Kannagi* or the cult of the Goddess Pattini has been long associated with Buddhism. Sadasivan states in his book that the *Chera* king *Chenkuttavan* built a structure to consecrate her memory in the presence of *Gajabahu*, the king of Ceylon. This could be the Kodungalloor *Bhagavathi* temple. *Kannagi* is the heroine of the famous *Cilappatikaram*<sup>3</sup>. Legend has it that *Kannagi* and her husband *Kovalan*, lived in Madurai. *Kovalan* spent most of his time with a local courtesan. However, after he lost all his money, *Kovalan* returned to *Kannagi* and asked her for help. *Kannagi*, the virtuous wife, gave him her anklet to sell. *Kovalan* took this anklet to Madurai to sell it. At the same time, the queen's anklet went missing and *Kovalan* was charged with robbery and put to death. When *Kovalan* did not return, *Kannagi* went looking for him. Her search brought her to Madurai, where she learnt of her husband's fate. Furious, *Kannagi* went to the royal palace and showed the court the other anklet in the pair and proved her husband's innocence. In her grief, *Kannagi*, the virgin widow, cursed the city by ripping her breast and flinging it at the city and the city went up in

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<sup>3</sup>*Cilappatikaram* is a Tamil epic written by Elangovan. *Kannagi* is the central character of this epic. In the story, *Kannagi* is a virtuous young wife whose husband, *Kovalan* was wrongfully killed by the king of Madurai. When *Kannagi* hears of her husband's death, she curses the city and flings her right breast into the city. Her curse sends the city of Madurai up in flames.

flames. *Kannagi* is said to have then walked toward Kerala and come to Kodungalloor. V.T Induchudan, in his book, *The Secret Chamber* (1969), also alludes to a secret chamber within the recesses of the temple, where *Kannagi's* remains are stored. While the priests deny this version of history, most devotees believe in the possibility of the goddess being *Kannagi*. As a shrine to Tara or as a shrine to *Kannagi*, the temple could have been a Buddhist shrine to begin with. Another interesting point that Sadasivan (2000) raises in his work is that Buddhists in Kerala did not build too many stupas or other structures. They chose to conduct several of their meetings in the open air, in small groves, or *kavus*. The Kodungalloor temple is also known as the *Sri Kurumba Kavu*. The *kavu teendal* ceremony at the *Bharani* then may have originated as a Brahminical move to usurp the Buddhist shrine. *Teendal* has several meanings in Malayalam. One of its most contentious meanings is to pollute. Sadasivan (2000) and Gentes (1992) believe that Hindus in the area threw meat and alcohol into the Buddhist monasteries; anything that desecrated the sacred space of the Buddhist shrines. They are also believed to have harassed the Buddhist monks and nuns by constantly hurling sexually explicit abuses at them. While devotees and priests deny this possibility, other scholars believe that this was indeed possible. Once the land was usurped and the Buddhists driven out, these acts of vandalism were slowly subdued and co-opted into the festival of the *Bharani*.

Another school of thought believes that after destroying Madurai, *Kannagi* is said to have walked from Madurai to Kodungalloor, where she is said to have attained *samadhi*. The Raja of the time built a temple to her and captured her '*shakti*' in the deity he installed. Over time, it was thought to be unnecessary for two female *shaktis* to exist separately and *Kannagi's shakti* was invoked and moved to the deity at the main Kodungalloor temple. When the *theripaatu* are sung for *Kannagi*, the songs are meant to arouse the Goddess and to provide an outlet to the young widow who was unable to consummate the marriage with her husband. The ritual is not intended for the devotees' arousal alone; it is intended to "manipulate the emotion" (Chaniotis, 2010) of the Goddess. Much like 'the earth in the hot dry months of the summer season' (Caldwell, 2003), the Goddess is

assumed to be in heated – either because of her status as a sexually unfulfilled widow or because she is a warrior just returning from the battlegrounds. The songs along with the other rituals of the *Bharani* festival are intended to help cool down the Goddess.

However F60P was the only interviewee, amongst those I interviewed, who stated that the *theripaatu* was meant for the Goddess. “The poor thing has had to stay away from any physical intimacy for so long. Imagine what would happen to people like you and me if we had to go that long without physical intimacy? If we are allowed to want it, it's only fair that we do this for our Goddess every year.” Another devotee, F47I, who also subscribed to the *Kannagi* story believed that the *theripaatu* are not sung for a young, sexually unfulfilled widow but instead were meant for *Nalachan* – a friend of *Kannagi* and *Kovalan*. Once, *Kannagi* and *Kovalan* were travelling, they stopped enroute at *Nalachan*'s place. In the middle of the night, while *Kovalan* was asleep, *Nalachan* propositioned *Kannagi*. *Kannagi*, who knew the duties she had to fulfil as an incarnation of the Goddess, asked *Nalachan* to come to Kodungalloor at a certain time, where she promised she would satiate his desire. Much later, after *Kannagi* had burned down Madurai and arrived at Kodungalloor, *Nalachan* came to claim what he had been promised. F47I said that *Kannagi* (the Goddess at Kodungalloor now) transformed *Nalachan* into a stone and rooted him to one spot. However, every year to keep her promise, she called upon her devotees to sing songs to satiate *Nalachan*'s desire. The other recipient of the *theripaatu* is considered to be *Bhadrakali*. M57M and his wife F47M, sing these songs to *Bhadrakali* who is believed to have been returning after winning a war with *Darika*, the demon. They said that they did not sing the *theripaatu* and only sang the *devi stotram*. They also kept reiterating that the *theripaatu* were not meant for the Goddess. M57M kept referring to the goddess as *uttami*, the perfect one. He stated that the Goddess was above all this. None of the practices that could be described as *adharmā* were actually dedicated to her. Those practices are meant for her retinue of ghosts - her army of *bhootams*. Everything considered immoral and polluting - the animal sacrifice, the consumption of alcohol and the singing of the

*theripaatu* – are all offerings meant for her army comprising of ghosts like *Achumedalan*. However, they are willing to indulge in *adharma* to appease their Goddess and her army.

*The Brahmins are too caught up in their fabricated notions of purity and pollution to truly surrender to the Goddess. The Goddess does not want their bland devotion. She needs fire. She needs madness. She wants alcohol, blood and sexual release. Only we, from the lower castes are willing to take on the label of 'polluting agents' to appease the Goddess. (M57M)*

The *theripaatu* are also an important offering in the Tantric tradition. The Kodungalloor temple is believed to follow an amalgamation of *Samayacharam* and *Kavalcharam* traditions of worship. One of the most important systems of *pooja* within these two traditions is the *Panchamakaram pooja*. Under this, there must be five offerings for every worship - *malsyam*, *mamsam*, *maithunam*, *mudra* and *madyam* (fish, meat, sex, grain and alcohol, respectively). Most of these offerings are represented symbolically and the *theripaatu* is the symbolic representation of the offering of sex.

The wife of a Tantric *Acharya*, from Wayanad explained why the *theripaatu* were symbolic offerings of *maithunam* or sex in Tantric worship. Sex has a special place within Tantra. During an orgasm, the *Mooladhara chakra* in the body opens. At this moment there is a surge in the *Kundalini shakti*, which unites with the Shiva energy in the *sahasra*, the crown. This is the closest one can come to spiritual bliss in our body-centric form of existence. In Tantra, this energy is a launch pad to connect with a larger, cosmic *shakti*. Her explanation for the *theripaatu* was that, talking about sex, simulating it, often tricks the body into setting up a similar energy flow. “It's why we watch pornography, isn't it? Why we discuss sex. Something about uttering the words and constantly talking about it, helps us capture a small amount of what we feel during intercourse itself. It's the same with the *theripaatu* as well. Talking about it and chanting it in a rhythmic way, in a collective, helps the body release the same energy. In a collective, it is more powerful. Energy can be transferred. It's an amplification of anything an individual can singularly feel. It's why there is such

frenzy. It's why some people faint.”

### **The hypocrisy of taste**

The *theripaatu* may be sung for a variety of reasons but one thing is clear: each *theripaatu* is sung out of great devotion for the goddess. They are not sung to denigrate the goddess, but sung out of devotion and respect. This brings us to the question of why these songs are labelled as *theri*.

The branding of these songs as ‘*theripaatu*’ embodies the moral standards of the upper castes, who are not part of the festival. Those who participate in the festival are uncomfortable with the label ‘*theri*’ used for these songs. They argue that these songs are intended to elevate the goddess to a superhuman level, not to abuse her. But the term has stuck – articulating an attitude of disdain and in turn, strengthening the widely-held belief that these songs are nothing but abuses hurled at the goddess under the guise of a religious tradition. And since ‘abuses,’ particularly ‘sexually explicit abuses’ are impure, these songs are to be shunned.

In popular culture, Kodungalloor has become synonymous with *theri*. In a popular Malayalam film titled, *Chocolate*, starring Prithviraj and Roma, Roma starts hurling abuses at Prithviraj one night. This prompts Prithviraj's friend to question whether she hails from Kodungalloor. Upper caste discourse around the festival has always demonized the *theripaatu*. A quote by L.K Anantha Krishna Iyer, in Gentes' work on the Kodungalloor *Bharani*, echoes this disdain.

*“The abusive language, it is believed, is acceptable to her and, on arrival at the shrine they desecrate it in every conceivable manner on the belief that this too is acceptable. They throw stones and filth, howling volleys of opprobrium at her shrine.”*

L. K. Anantha Krishna Iyer (Gentes, 1992)

The language is not lewd. The idea is not to desecrate the Goddess. M50B, a priest at the temple, states that the very name *theripaatu* signifies an upper caste bias. “The *Lalita Sahasranamam* is almost as explicit. Several Sanskrit *shlokas* are sexual. But none of them are labelled *theri*. Is the

distinction being made simply because these songs are sung in Malayalam slang and those *shlokas* are in Sanskrit?” An article in the weekly magazine, Tehelka (2010), mentioned how in a society as repressive of women's sexuality as Kerala was, the *theripaatu* was an anomaly: “*These songs deal with the sexuality of the Goddess and humans and emphasize sex as part of natural life, while deriding sexual hypocrisy – especially of upper caste women. The songs make it clear that sexuality is not only natural, but is also present everywhere.*”

The biggest difference between the Sanskrit texts and the *theripaatu*, as pointed out by the priest, is the language. While texts like the *Lalita Sahasranamam* and the *Geeta Govindam* are written in Sanskrit – traditionally the language of the Brahmins and the upper castes – the *theripaatu* are sung in various dialects of Malayalam. The difference in language also indicates the differences in the social circumstances of the different communities. The use of imagery in the *Lalita Sahasranamam* is in stark contrast to that used in the *theripaatu*. Some of the references made in the *Lalita Sahasranamam* are metaphysical in nature and the more material references liken her body to jewels. The Goddess is defined as the epitome of delicate beauty and as a divine consort. In the *theripaatu*, the primary role of the Goddess in the *theripaatu* seems to be that of a Mother and the songs set up a Mother-child relationship between the Goddess and the devotee. The song asks what the devotee can offer the Goddess who has taken care of her like her mother, considering their poverty. “*How am I to offer this (rice) mixed with stones, charcoal and fibre? My husband! Drink up the gruel, as we have to go on a journey. How am I to drink this gruel full of stones, charcoal and fibre?*” The *theripaatu* is linked to a reality outside of itself. As Suzanne Cusick puts it

“*Music (like sex . . .) is first of all something we do, we human beings, as a way of explaining, replicating, and reinforcing our relationship to the world, or our imagined notions of what possible relationships might exist*” (Cook, 1998, 117)

As a folk tradition born out of the lived realities of the communities that participate in it, the *theripaatu* evolves with time to incorporate new elements, new stories and new realities. These songs are a part of the oral history of these communities and unlike a text like the *Lalita Sahasranamam* these texts are not pinned down. Since these are not static texts, they change every year, from person to person, from situation to situation. Some devotees write down the songs for reference but there is no one authentic *theripaatu*<sup>4</sup>. The song not only describes the devotees' relationship to the land, their link to farming and agriculture and their poverty, it also speaks of the devotees' attitudes towards the censorship of their songs and its enforcement by the police. The lines “*Policu makkale pulaydi makkale...Kodangalloor ammade punje thalli*”, question the kind of repressive state apparatus being used to enforce the ban. The violent imagery of the last lines, could be read as the rape of the Goddess at the hands of the State and the rape of their faith and devotion. (O Police, sons of harlots! Are your mouths stuffed with penises? If the policemen rule over the state, they can also rule our houses. Brought a bamboo with thousand shoots and pushed it into Devi's 'wetland'.) Another respondent conveyed that Swami Bhoomananda<sup>5</sup>, the religious leader

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4 Even the *theripaatu* I have included in this paper is meant as a reference and not as a standard text for the *theripaatu* that are sung.

5 Swami Bhoomananda Teertha is the head of the Narayanashrama Tapovanam. In 1988, along with a few other *sanyasins*, he formed the Hind Navothan Prathishtan – a society aimed at a cultural and value oriented consolidation of Hindu society. This body was formed as a response to the grave disorders and violations that they felt were taking place under the name of Hinduism and people started approaching them with issues. The campaigns against the *Elavoor thookam* and the *Panchavadyam Seva* in Guruvayoor have been campaigns attacking discriminatory (in the case of Guruvayoor, the discrimination was on the basis of caste) and exploitative temple practices. There was also a campaign against a co-operative society which had opened a hospital ward on the temple grounds. On hearing of the 'obscene songs' being sung at the Kodungalloor *Bharani* festival, a campaign was launched to stop this practice. However, there were also four other rituals that were found to be problematic in this festival which were also attacked along with the movement to censor the *theripaatu*. These were the rituals which were considered discriminatory and demeaning were those of the *kozhikallumoodal*, the *kavu teendal*, the *trichanandachartu* and the distribution. Even the *theripaatu* I have included in this paper is meant as a reference and not as a standard text for the *theripaatu* that are sung.

Swami Bhoomananda Teertha is the head of the Narayanashrama Tapovanam. In 1988, along with a few other

who spearheaded the campaign to censor the *theripaatu*, had also featured in the *theripaatu* one year. The *theripaatu* convey the devotees' affection for their goddess while simultaneously making a strong socio-political statement against the encroachment of upper class morality on their expression of this affection.

This censorship of the *theripaatu* by the upper castes, supported by religious organizations like the Narayanashrama Tapovanam and political organizations like the BJP, is a telling statement on the attempt to imagine Hindu society in a particular way. Speaking with regard to the phenomenon of the *Makara Jyoti*, Swami Bhoomananda said, “*I also do this because I do not want Hinduism to become a joke globally. It is in this spirit that I said the Makara Jyoti in Sabarimala is false. Man-made as opposed to the belief that is a celestial event. Nothing should be done to hijack the devotion of the many that come to Sabarimala every year. Mistaking a man made phenomenon for a divine event reduces Hinduism to a joke in the face of the world.*” Bhoomananda's attempt is to re-imagine Hinduism as providing a cultural, spiritual and moral unity to Hindus, both in India and abroad. While Bhoomananda refrains from moving this into the political arena, what is interesting is how political parties like the BJP also support the ban on the *theripaatu*. Caldwell notes that the BJP also tried to have the *theripaatu* banned in 1993, which coincides with Bhoomananda's own movement to get the *theripaatu* banned. While Bhoomananda distances himself from the RSS, citing their lack of moral leadership, he supports and has the support of the BJP. L.K Advani's

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*sanyasins*, he formed the Hind Navothan Prathishtan – a society aimed at a cultural and value oriented consolidation of Hindu society. This body was formed as a response to the grave disorders and violations that they felt were taking place under the name of Hinduism and people started approaching them with issues. The campaigns against the *Elavoor thookam* and the *Panchavadyam Seva* in Guruvayoor have been campaigns attacking discriminatory (in the case of Guruvayoor, the discrimination was on the basis of caste) and exploitative temple practices. There was also a campaign against a co-operative society which had opened a hospital ward on the temple grounds. On hearing of the 'obscene songs' being sung at the Kodungalloor *Bharani* festival, a campaign was launched to stop this practice. However, there were also four other rituals that were found to be problematic in this festival which were also attacked along with the movement to censor the *theripaatu*. These were the rituals which were considered discriminatory and demeaning were those of the *kozhikallumoodal*, the *kavu teendal*, the *trichanandachartu* and the distribution of the *variyaari payasam*.

presence at the National Summit organized by the Foundation for Restoration of National Values, headed by Swami Bhoomananda, and his support for the cultural unification of Hindus as espoused by Bhoomananda, show that there is a similarity in the way the Hindu nation is constructed by both groups. What this calls to attention is that, in this newly imagined Hindu nation or Hindu community, there doesn't seem to be any place for lower caste culture. The *theripaatu* is constructed as a symptom<sup>6</sup> of upper caste morality, one against which the newly imagined Hindu society is constantly inventing itself.

This leads to a homogenizing of religious beliefs and cultural practices, across castes and communities. This proselytizing mission privileges a certain upper caste, middle class understanding of religion and culture. Anything that then doesn't fit in with this vision of Hinduism must then necessarily be censored.

### **The threat of technology**

*'A work of art has meaning and interest only for someone who possesses the cultural competence, that is, the code, into which it is encoded.'* (Bourdieu, 2006, 323)

My interview with the respondent, F60P was conducted at my granduncle's house, in Kerala. F60P was accompanied by her husband, who happened to be inebriated at the time and so my grandaunt insisted on sitting through the interview with me. Of all the devotees I managed to speak to, F60P was the only one who was willing to talk to me openly about the *theripaatu*.

Respondents M57M and F47M, both stated that they sang only the *devi stotram* and not the *theripaatu*. By this time I had asked around for the *theripaatu* for almost a year and had chased several false leads. It was a difficult task acquiring the *theripaatu*. Except for F60P, all my other

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<sup>6</sup> Symptom as defined by Slavoj Zizek is, "a particular signifying formation which confers on the subject its very ontological consistency, enabling it to structure its basic, constitutive relationship towards enjoyment (*jouissance*), then the entire relationship [between the subject and symptom] is reversed, for if the symptom is dissolved, the subject itself disintegrates" (Chow, 1994).

respondents refused to share the lyrics of the *theripaatu* with me. When I finally met F60P, I was thrilled that she was willing to share the lyrics with me but my grandaunt was anything but pleased. What followed was a hilarious exchange between my grandaunt, my respondent and me. Since my Malayalam is weak, I needed my grandaunt to note the lyrics of the song, as the respondent was reciting it for us. My grandaunt, less than pleased, asked this lady to move to the backyard, away from the neighbours and the drivers who were standing in the front. Once we moved to the back, F60P began singing the song for me. At several points, she stopped and asked me whether I knew what she meant. My grandaunt would quickly jump in at moments like this and say, “She's a girl from a good family. Of course she doesn't know these things!” F60P, unfazed, replied with a twinkle in her eye, “Well, if she doesn't know what this implies, it is up to people like you and me to educate the girl, isn't it?” While my grandaunt looked on disapprovingly, F60P went on to explain some of the acts mentioned in the *theripaatu*.

However, in the other interviews, there was a distinct attempt to try to shift the locus of sexuality to a source other than the Goddess, insisting all the while that the Goddess was above all of these base cravings.

What is classified as *adharmā*? Based on my interaction with the three families and a basic understanding of their economic and social standing in their respective villages, the three respondents (M57M, F47M and F47I) seemed to have a better social standing in their villages than the fourth respondent. The first three were considered 'respectable' in their villages, even by those outside their castes. These three respondents were also better off economically than F60P. The husband and wife duo in the first interview were a mason and a house maid respectively. However, after marrying their daughters and son off, both of them had stopped working. Both their sons-in-law hold government jobs, while the daughters have taken up stitching work. Their son is educated and a local electrician. F47I is a local oracle. She is consulted by people in her village on various matters. She is also part of a committee for organizing *vellicapadus* and trying to secure rights for

them. F60P and her husband work as daily wage earners. She was the oldest devotee I had interviewed. She seemed to have no aspirations to a middle-class morality, as opposed to the other respondents. The first three respondents and their use of language and myth to explain the presence of the *theripaatu* might be seen as an essential appropriation of upper-caste discourse in the process of Sanskritization. While this might or might not be a conscious move, the process of reassigning meaning to the sacred and the profane, marks a move from one kind of consciousness to another. What is interesting is that F60P seemed to vocalize the silences in the discourses of the first three respondents. The first three also spoke of the *Kannagi* story and mentioned Kali's mood after the *Darikavadham*. However, after they narrated these stories, they consciously changed the recipient of their ritual offerings.

The creation of new myths and new explanations for the *theripaatu* is part of the larger movement to re-imagine the *Bharani*. Bhoomananda describes the *Bharani* as a space where the devotees give in to a “vulgar indulgence in lewd singing”. Post Bhoomananda's efforts to get the festival banned, there has been a ban on the singing of the *theripaatu* outside the space of the temple grounds. This has coincided nicely with the emergence of *bharanipaatu* in the religious music genre in Kerala. In this process of crossing over into the realm of the popular, the *bharanipaatu* has become subject to the structures imposed by the culture industry. In the first place, the industry ensured that none of the recordings included the ‘offensive’ *theripaatu*. Only the innocuous *devi stotrams* were available in the recorded versions. F47I stated that most of these CDs<sup>7</sup> contained a mixture of hybrid and authentic music – a mixture of both *devi stotrams* sung by the people in the festival as well as songs manufactured for the purpose of consumption. The culture industry has to bear in mind that the recorded versions will be consumed not just by the lower castes, but by devotees of the Kodungalloor goddess from the upper castes as well. Including the dirty *theripaatu* in these

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<sup>7</sup> The CD referred to for this study was *Palakya Velan*, which is a collection of songs based on the *Bharani*. It was directed by Abdul Gaffoor and produced by Nethra Associates. Apart from this, songs which have been uploaded on youtube were also referred to.

versions would in all likelihood keep these castes away from them, and therefore deprive the industry of considerable revenue. Market forces have therefore decided that the *theripaatu* is unfit for pan-Malayali consumption. By sanitizing all elements that make these songs a powerful vehicle for collective catharsis, the culture industry has served up a more widely consumable version of *bharanipaatu*, one that lends itself better to an individualized, atomized engagement with the music. In fact, this undeclared censorship has had an effect on the devotees, many of whom have internalized the censorship and now censor the *theripaatu* by clanging their swords loudly every time an 'obscene line' comes up. The intrusion of technology into the space of the *Bharani* – the presence of cameras and sound recorders – has led to the devotees understanding that they are now performing for an audience larger than themselves. This has further abetted their self-censorship. Even the language of the original *bharanipaatu* has been modified to suit the needs of the culture industry. While the language of the original songs is rooted in the local dialects of the people who produced them, the recorded versions use a pan-Malayali lexicon that can be understood by a majority of the target audience. The commodification of this music has also rid it of its political overtones. The recorded versions use standard lyrics based on static texts, quite unlike the actual *bharanipaatu*, which weaves in strands of political resistance into the main themes of the songs. For instance, the critiquing of the efforts made by mainstream groups to censor the *bharanipaatu*, reveal how the devotees negotiate their social realities. Many songs feature the police and Swami Bhoomananda as central figures. None of this can, of course, be accommodated in versions that are produced for mass consumption.

By alienating the music from the people that produce the music, the popular music industry also changes the way many devotees negotiate their identity through this music. The removal of these songs from their ritual context destabilizes the text. As Andrew Leyshon, David Matless and George Revill (1995) point out “*the separation of music from ritual and its emergence as a commodity associated with the bourgeois concert hall is linked to the commodification of musical knowledge.*”

(426).

This commodification of knowledge also places power in the hands of a few, as opposed to the more widely dispersed collective ownership of these songs before they are commodified.

In Kerala today, it is very difficult to access the lyrics of the original *theripaatu*. This has allowed urban youths to step in and create their own versions of *theripaatu*. These are simply songs with explicit sexual references that have nothing to do with the Kodungalloor goddess, or sacred Tantric rites. These versions, uploaded on the internet, lend credence to the view that *theripaatu* contain nothing but mindless obscenities. F47I was highly nervous about letting me record my interview with her, later telling me that so many people have recorded the *bharanipaatu* on their phones and uploaded these songs without any reference to the context, that ritual performers of the music are now squeamish about the intrusion of technology. In popular discourse, there is no acknowledgement that these songs on the Internet have nothing to do with the *theripaatu* sung by the *vellicapadus*.

*The denial of lower, coarse, vulgar, venal, servile – in a word, natural – enjoyment, which constitutes the sacred sphere of culture, implies an affirmation of the superiority of those who can be satisfied with the sublimated, refined, disinterested, gratuitous, distinguished pleasures forever closed to the profane. That is why art and cultural consumption are predisposed, consciously and deliberately or not, to fulfil a social function of legitimating social differences. (Bourdieu, 2006, 325)*

The *theripaatu* changes and questions the very notion of what constitutes the language of the sacred. It democratizes it and in doing so, it makes the space of the sacred a more accessible space. It is within the field of the *theripaatu* that I believe lies the greatest possibility for subversion, a gendered, caste based subversion. It is here, that women are staking claim to the freedom of sexual

speech in public. The concept that women from good families do not occupy public spaces and indulge in public utterances of sex is something that is constantly challenged by the devotees who attend the *Bharani*. The speech though incited by religion and driven by devotion, may not even be born out of a conscious political need to subvert the sexual mores of Malayali society, but by the mere act of publicly making a spectacle of that which is considered most private, the devotees pose a resistance to Kerala's carefully regulated system of sexual speech. Can the *theripaatu* be understood as a discourse on sex and sexuality that lie outside Brahmanical systems of power? Can the discomfort with the *theripaatu* stem from the fact that Brahmanical and puritanical Hindu regimes have not accounted for it in their organized and sanctioned discourses on sex and sexuality? Or is it possible that even though the *theripaatu* is factored into the existing systems of power, a discourse sanctioned by 'mainstream Hinduism', the growing discomfort of the upper castes with this phenomenon, is a signal that this discourse has long outlived its utility? Many scholars suggest that the *theripaatu* began when lower castes were instigated by the Brahmin *Namboodiris* to sing lewd songs that would drive out the Buddhist monks from Kodungalloor. A sexual speech designed to be coarse and vulgar. But one that seems to have grown into something much beyond its intended purpose. The *theripaatu* featured in this research also lashes out at the police. Referencing the times the police have barricaded devotees, during the height of Swami Bhoomananda's censorship campaign. The *theripaatu* has the potential to be something more than a mere festival song. It is inherently political. The inclusive nature of the music enables whole communities to participate. The *theripaatu* is also largely part of an oral tradition. It has no fixed texts or canons. A lot is left to the interpretation of the singer/performer. This facilitates innovation and additions and subtractions to the song, every year.

But the twin onslaught of commercialisation and censorship has in many ways stripped the *theripaatu* of its possibilities. A form of cultural imperialism is imposed on it, that invisibilises certain facets of the songs and renders visible only what is convenient and non-threatening to the

established order.

## **Conclusion**

The Kodungalloor *Bharani* festival is loud and frenetic. It is the celebration of *Kali's* victory over *Darika*, the celebration of the harvest season and the celebration of the Goddess, *Kannagi*. It is a loud and joyous celebration of a culture that grapples with the spreading silence every year and this is particularly evident in the space of the *theripaatu*. The Kodungalloor *Bharani* is a rapidly changing space and its negotiations with Hindutva politics, upper-caste distaste and technological interventions, have greatly changed the ways in which power and resistance are performed in the space of the *Bharani*. By looking at the ways in which the participating castes negotiate with modernity, the processes of Sanskritization and how they constantly forge new identities for themselves, it is possible to understand how they negotiate the threat of silence.

Hinduism in the popular imagination has always faced the threat of the homogenizing forces of various groups, those that try to project Hinduism as a single, monolithic entity. To do so, is to cast these other voices as noise and to systematically try and muffle the voices of those whose 'Hinduisms' do not comply with the blueprint of this imagined Hindu community. This is especially in a time, when we perform our identities not only for a local or national audience, but for a global one.

In the celebration of the *Bharani*, we see the resistance that is being offered to these attempts at imposing a silence, through the ways in which the opposition is made a part of the perceived 'noise' (the inclusion of the police into the *theripaatu*). But even the smallest drop of silence can spread like an unwieldy ink stain. The self censorship of the *vellicapadus* when they sing the *theripaatu*, the absence of authentic *theripaatu* from popular cassettes and CDs, the internalization of the idea that their practices are against dharma, is slowly muzzling the voice of the Kodungalloor *Bharani*. The idea of this paper has been to celebrate the polyphony of voices that come together in the

*Bharani* and to lay bare the silences and revel in the sounds of this festival.

**Bio-note**

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## Appendix

<b>Table 1</b>	
<b><i>Theripaatu</i></b>	
<b>Malayalam Version</b>	<b>English Translation</b>
<i>Amme bhagavathi, thamburatti</i>	Oh Mother Goddess, your highness
<i>Enne kaathu thunakkanam thamburatti</i>	Please take care of me and protect me
<i>Amminja paalu valarthiya ammakku</i>	What shall I offer as a gift to you who has
<i>Enthoru nercha kodukkandathu</i>	nurtured me with your breast milk?
<i>Kallum karikkatta katta naaraanado</i>	How am I to offer this (rice) mixed with stones,
<i>Engane nercha kodukkandatho</i>	charcoal and fibre?
<i>Eruthaka kanji kudichende bhartaave</i>	My husband! Drink up the gruel, as we have to
<i>Pokum vazhikkulla yatravayalle</i>	go on a journey.
<i>Kallum karikkatta katta naaraanado</i>	How am I to drink this gruel full of stones,
<i>Engane kanji kudikkandathu</i>	charcoal and fibre?
<i>Valla theripaatum pachayil padanam</i>	Sing some obscene songs,
<i>Allengil devikku kopamanu</i>	If not, Devi will be angry.
<i>Vazhakka thodum idakadannu devi</i>	We have to cross the plantain stream and the
<i>Bharanikkulavum idakadannu</i>	<i>Bharani</i> pond
<i>Endu paranjaalum ammakku</i>	Whatever you say, we have not brought the
<i>Pallivaal matram kondannithilla</i>	‘sacred sword’ for you mother!
<i>Amme bhagavathi thamburatti alle</i>	O Goddess, your highness,
<i>Kaathu thunakkane thamburatti</i>	Please look after us

<i>Naadaya nadu vilayadi ponnittum</i>	We have danced through many lands,
<i>Bhutaganangalum deviyalum</i>	The demons and the folks of the goddess
<i>Policu makkale pulaydi makkale</i>	O Police, sons of harlots!
<i>Ningade vaayil kunnayaano</i>	Are your mouths stuffed with penises?
<i>Naadinte adhikaram police nanengal</i>	If the policemen rule over the state, they can
<i>Veethinu adhikaram policcinu</i>	also rule our houses
<i>Aayiram kambulla eyni kodannithu</i>	Brought a bamboo with thousand shoots and
<i>Kodungalloor ammade punje thalli</i>	pushed it into Devi's 'wetland'.
<i>Valla theri paattum pachayil padanum</i>	Sing some obscene songs,
<i>Allengil ammakku kopamanu</i>	If not, Devi will be angry.

<b>Table 2</b>	
<b>Excerpts from the <i>Lalita Sahsrnamam</i></b>	
<b>Sanskrit Lines</b>	<b>English Translation</b>
<i>Kameswara prema rathna mani prathi panasthani</i>	She who gave her breasts which are like the pot made of precious stones and has obtained the affection of the God of Love
<i>Nabhyala vala Romali latha phala kucha dwayi</i>	She who has two breasts that are like fruits borne on the creeper of tiny hairs raising from her belly.
<i>Lakshya roma latha dharatha samunneya madhyama</i>	She who is suspected to have a waist because of the creeper like hairs raising from there

<i>Sthana bhara dalan Madhya patta bhandha valithraya</i>	She who has three stripes in her belly which looks like having been created to protect her tiny waist from her heavy breasts
<i>Kamesha gnatha sowbhagya mardworu dwayanvitha</i>	She who has pretty and tender thighs known only to her consort, the God of Love
<i>Sakthi koodaiga thapanna Kadyatho bhaga dharini</i>	She whose portion below hips is the vessel of divine energy
<i>Ramana lampata</i>	She who is interested in making love to her lord
<i>Vilasini</i>	She who enjoys love making

### **Respondents' Categories**

I have categorized my respondents' on the basis of their association with the festival. In doing so, I have three categories. They are –

- Devotees who participate in the Festival
- Others associated with the Festival
- Scholars who have worked on the festival

Except for Swami Bhoomananda Teertha, whose views on the Kodungalloor *Bharani* are publicly available, I have not disclosed the identities of my respondents. The respondents have been cited by using the following details – their gender, their age and their caste. The first letter is indicative of gender, followed by their age and then the first letter of the caste they belong to. Below, is a full list of my respondents.

*Devotees who participate in the festival –*

**F47I**

Gender – Female

Age – 47 years

Caste – *Izhava*

Occupation – Oracle; also part of an association trying to safeguard the interests of the *vellicapadus*

**F60P**

Gender – Female

Age – 60 years

Caste – *Paraya*

Occupation – Daily Wage Labourer

**M57M**

Gender – Male

Age – 57 years

Caste – *Mannan*

Occupation – Mason, Carpenter

**F47M**

Gender – Female

Age – 47 years

Caste – *Mannan*

Occupation – Washerwoman, Maidservant

*Others involved with the festival -*

**M50B**

Gender – Male

Age – 45 years

Caste – *Brahmin (Adikal)*

Occupation – Priest, Lawyer

*Scholars who have worked on the festival -*

**M43N**

Gender – Male

Age – 43 years

Caste – *Nair*

Occupation – Professor

## **Glossary**

**Avakasha Thara** – the tharas assigned to specific families from North Malabar during the Kodungalloor Bharani

**Acharya** – a teacher or guide

**Achumedalan** – one of Devi's retinue of bhootams

**Adharma** – that which is against dharma or righteousness

**Adikal** – a sub-caste of the ambalavasi Nair community of Kodungalloor; Brahmins who are lower in the hierarchy because they use materials like meat and alcohol for worship

**Ashwatinaal** - the first star in the Malayalam calendar

**Asura** – demons, generally considered aggressive and greedy

**Bhadrakali** – same as Kali

**Bhagavathi** – mother goddess

**Bharani** – the second star in the Malayalam calendar

**Bharanipaatu** – songs sung during the Kodungalloor bharani festival

**Bhootas** – spirits or beings who accompany Shiva and Kali

**Chaitanyam** - divine presence

**Cheran Chenguttavan** – One of the most famous Chera kings, during whose time, the Kodungalloor temple is supposed to have been built

**Darika** – one of the asuras (demons) killed by Devi

**Darikavadham** – the slaying of the demon Darika by Kali

**Devi** – goddess

**Devi stotram** – Sanskrit devotional songs in praise of the mother goddess

**Elangovan** – the author of the Cilapatikaram

**Elavoor thookam**- a practice observed in the Elavoor temple, of hoisting a devotee by a hook on his/her back; done for wish fulfillment

**Izhava** – a lower caste, traditionally agricultural labourers

**Kali** – the mother goddess in her fearsome aspect

**Kannagi** – the central character of the Tamil epic, Cilapatikaram; she set the city of Madurai on fire to avenge the killing of her husband and then moved to Kodungalloor where, according to one legend, she became Kodungalloor Bhagavathi

**Kavalacharam** – another mode of worshipping the mother goddess; this is said to be more tantric than Samayacharam and uses the panchamakara materials in its worship

**Kavu** – sacred grove

**Kavu Teendal** – the ritual of ‘polluting the temple’ during the Bharani festival in Kodungalloor

**Kodungalloor** – a temple town near Ernakulam known for the Kodungalloor Devi Temple

**Kovalan** – son of a wealthy merchant of Kaveripattinam, who was Kannagi’s husband in the Tamil epic Cilapatikaram

**Kozhikallu** – the stone where animal sacrifice was offered earlier

**Kozhikallumoodal** – the ritual covering of the stone in the Kodungalloor temple courtyard where roosters were earlier sacrificed, with red silk

**Krishnaparinda** – the Kite which has coppery wings and a white breast

**Kumbhamaasam** ---the seventh month of the Malayalam calendar

**Kundalini** – coiled energy found at the base of the human spine

**Kurumba** – the name of the mother goddess in Kodungallur

**Lalita Sahasranamam** – a Sanskrit hymn enumerating the thousand names of the mother goddess  
in the form of Lalita

**Madhyam** – liquor

**Maithunam** – sexual intercourse

**Malsyam** – fish

**Mamsam** – meat

**Mannan** - a lower caste comprising washermen and washerwomen who used to wash clothes of  
menstruating women specifically

**Meenamasam** - the eighth month of the Malayalam calendar

**Mooladhara** – lowermost chakra

**Mudra** – grain

**Nair** – a caste in Kerala

**Nalachan** – a friend of Kovalan and Kannagi for whose benefit the theripaatu are believed to be  
sung

**Namboodiris**– the Brahmins of Kerala

**Palakya Velan** – a member from the caste, Velan, who starts the Kavu teendal ceremony

**Panchamakaram** – refers to the five substances used in tantric worship: madyam (liquor), mamsam  
(meat), matsyam (fish), mudra (grain), maithuna (sexual intercourse)

**Panchavadyam** – an orchestra of five instruments that originated in the temples of Kerala; the five instruments are: four percussion instruments (timila, maddalam, ilathalam and idakka) and one wind instrument (kombu)

**Paraya** – a lower caste, traditionally part of the servile class

**Pattu** – silk

**Pooja** – mode of worship

**Prithviraj (actor)** - a popular male actor from Malayalam and Tamil movies

**Pulaya** – a lower caste known for their music and craftsmanship

**Raja** – king

**Roma (actor)** - a popular female actor from Malayalam movies

**Sahasra** – crown

**Saktya worship** – a form of Mother Goddess Worship associated with tantric traditions

**Samadhi** – a spiritual state of consciousness in which the person experiences oneness with Brahman (Universal Spirit)

**Samayacharam** – a mode of worshipping the mother goddess in which rituals are visualized and performed mentally; according to the brahmanical tradition, this is a lower form of worship

**Shlokas** – a Sanskrit verse form

**Shakti** – the primordial mother goddess; divine feminine energy

**Srikovil** – the sanctum sanctorum of a temple

**Tantra** – a system of religious practice in which the seeker seeks enlightenment by uniting the female energy in one's body with Shiva's energy field

**Teendal** - pollution; spreading

**Thara** – the platforms built around individual trees in the Kodungalloor temple courtyard

**Theripaatu** – songs containing sexually explicit content

**Thiruvonam** – a star in the Malayalam calendar

**Thrissur** – a town in central Kerala

**Thiyas** – a lower caste who are also Izhavas

**Trichandchartu** – the ritual of anointing the goddess with sandalwood on Ashwatinaal; symbolic of dressing her wounds after her battle with Darika

**Vannan** – a lower caste comprising washermen and washerwomen\

**Variyari payasam** – a porridge made out of certain medicinal grains and used as an offering to the Kodungalloor Devi; symbolic of her period of convalescence after her war with Darika

**Vellicapadus** – oracles who throw light on the will of the goddess while in a trance; they generally strike their heads with a sacred sword when they are in this state

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