



ORIGINAL RESEARCH PAPER

English

THIRUVATHIRA : AN AMALGAMATION OF THE ETERNAL FEMININE INTO THE EVERLASTING NATURE

KEY WORDS: Rituals, Birth Stars, Dasapushpam ,fasting ,penance, Ecofeminism

Meera K S*

Former Guest Lecturer BPC College Piravom. *Corresponding Author

ABSTRACT

This paper aims to analyse a typical ritual of the Kerala community in India, Thiruvathira, and its impact on the womenfolk who follow this ritual. There was a female centred patriarchy existed in Kerala. The matriarchal system of Nair community is a strong proof for such a legacy. Being an exclusively woman centric festival of Kerala, Thiruvathira ceremony enables the female community to be placed in a sublimated harmony with nature. This paper meant for a study based on the strong relation between woman and nature in the performance of Thiruvathira. It also deals with the importance of women in their counterpart's life like the nature which makes the human life prosperous.

Kerala is a store house of myths, rituals, artforms, which make this tiny land a 'God's own country'. India is well known for its unity in diversity where Kerala adds a pleasant hue and pattern in the cultural scenario of the great Indian civilization. Rituals and festivals in Kerala are exclusively based on its agricultural seasons prevailed from the time of yore. There are three 'aandaruthi-s' or seasonal divisions in Kerala. In the first season Onam harvests its crops while in the third one, Vishu is the reaper. The middle one or the second season is the time of tubers and the harvester is Thiruvathira. Thiruvathira is an ambiguous term in the cultural context of Kerala. It is the seventh star among the twenty seven birth stars of Malayalam calendar. Another notion of the term is a typical art form that practised by the woman folk of Kerala. Thiruvathira festival is a Hindu ritual, especially celebrated by the Namboothiri-Kshathriya-Nair and other Ambalavaasi or temple servant communities in Kerala. For the last two decades its colour is faded away due to the busy life and other mental detachment to it from the part of the regular practitioners. Nowadays it regained its real splendour and became popular among the other Hindu sects. COVID 19 has definitely a bad impact on the whole world even though it provided sufficient time for the human community to think of their prosperous past. Being a completely woman centric festival it gives importance to the nature, who is a universal symbol of female community.

There are numerous myths and beliefs regarding Thiruvathira in various parts of Kerala -Malabar, Kochi, and Travancore. There are some differences in the corresponding stories but the exercises are almost one and the same from the north to the south. Thiruvathira star in the month of Dhanu (December- January) is the birthday of Lord Shiva. The day of reunion between Shiva and the daughter of the great Himavan , Sree Parvathi who is the reincarnation of the self mortified Sathi, who was the daughter of the pride Daksha. After Sathi's mortal departure Shiva attained the form of Dakshinamoorthy who looked towards the south and started strong meditation or Thapassu. In order to support the reborn Parvathi to wake up Shiva from his contemplation , Kamadeva, the Indian version of Cupid sent his flowered arrows towards him. The infuriated Shiva opened his Third eye and Mallikabaana or the Kama was burned into a handful of ash. By Seeing the sole devoted Parvati, his mood was immediately changed and the continuous prayers of Kama's wife Rati, resulted in the spiritual rebirth of her husband. Thus the birth and death of Kamadeva has a special relevance in this day. These are the normally spoken tales about Thiruvathira.

Devaki Nilayangod in her *Antherjanam: Memoirs of a Namboothiri Woman* , there are many details of Thiruvathira and other inner secrets of Namboothiri woman's life. Smt. Rajeswari Antharjanam of Cherumanal Mana recollects her past Thiruvathira celebrations in her illam. This typical festival is entirely related to both women and nature. Although the penance and fasting in these days are for their spouses and the family, that practice purifies both the inner self and the outer physique of the particular person. There is a systematic

pattern and order for the ceremony. An important aspect is Thudich kuli or take a bath by rhythmically splashing the water at the wee small hours .It starts from the star Revathi and repeats in the following days of stars Aswathi, Bharani, Karthika, Rohini, Makayiram and at last in the early morning of Thiruvathira. Before taking the first dip, the ladies sing a 'Gangayunarthu pattu' or a waking song for the sacred river Ganges. Every water body is considered as divine and this action is a strong proof of worship of nature. After taking the bath, a paste of turmeric and castor bean is applied to their body. Turmeric is good for skin and castor bean is a strong remedy for rheumatism. The next part is Thevaram or the worship of local deities. In the Malayalam novel *Agnisaakshi* authored by Lalithambika Antharjanam, the ninth chapter entitled 'The fate of a generation' depicts a pictorial representation of the prosperous Maanamballiman's Poothiruvathira celebration of Devi and Unni. Poothiruvathira is the very first Thiruvathira day of the newly married couple. The narrator of the novel Mrs.Thankam Nair recollects the Poothiruvathira day of her brother and sister in law.

'Edathi (Devi) the heroin of the festival was how pride and light headed with happiness! She takes a dip in the pond in early morning by splashing the water and sing;

Thiruvathira in the month of Dhanu,
Birthstar of the Lord Shiva...
Let us dance and let us sing,
Let us splash the water and take a bath...

After the splutter ,she put on a golden thread bordered white clothe , filled eyelids with kajal , forehead with sandal ,and decked with a garland of Indian doab. The narrator admits that she wished to kiss her Edathi in such a heavenly attire.'

Like the heroin of the novel these women adorn themselves with a pure white cloth, kajal, sandal, the Indian doab and all of them are part of a healthy life. As a major poet of Sangam literature, Madurai Asiriyar Nallanthuvanar recorded the theme of women's splashing in the river Vaigai, in his work *Paripadal*.

The first day of fasting is Makayiram and this day's penance is for the sake of the whole family especially the children. The celebrated preparation of this day is 'Ettangadi' which is a holy dish meant for Lord Ganesha, Shiva-Shakti ,and the Moon god. It is made up of the eight seasonal tubers like *kachil* (purple yam), *chena* (yam), *koorka* (Chinese potato), *nanakizhangu* (lesser yam), *cherukizhangu* (lesser yam), *cheruchemu* (lesser colocasia), *valiyachembu* (colocasia), and *madhura kizhangu* (sweet potato). The tubers steamed with horse gram cook in jaggery syrup and garnish with banana, sesame and sliced coconut. Fasting is practised by abstaining from the rice based food in the Makayiram and Thiruvathira days. So the more rich Ettangadi chuttu nivedyam helps the ladies to maintain their stamina. Avoiding pure water is another custom commemorates the trick of Sree Parvathi to get rid of the holy river Ganga from the lock of

Shiva. Women drink only tender coconut water in these days to please Parvati by avoiding Ganga. In reality it is a means to maintain the glucose level in their body. In the article "Carnavalesque in 'Thiruvathira' Festival of Kerala: A Socio Cultural Study", the authors propose the following idea by stressing feminine strength.

'On the day of thiruvathira, a wife is no longer a timid submissive weak sex, but a fair sex capable of prolonging her husband's life and maintaining his prosperity and wealth.'

Chewing with three (betel leaves, scented areca nut, and lime pasted with ghee) is another step. Get rid of sleep is the major aspect of this ritual. For that women sing and perform Thiruvathira dance. Chewing is meant for the ease of vocal chords because betel leaf is a medicine for that. This day Thiruvathira dance is for a short time. The end of the Makayiram star they wear makayirappoovu (Koduveli) or scarlet lead wort on their hair. The second day's celebration is starting with the usual bathing. After that both the married women and the maiden adorn their hair with Dashapuspa or the ten medicinal flowers on their head. They are mukkootti (Biophytum Sensitivum), thiruthali (morning glory), karuka (Indian doab), valliuzhinja (balloon plant), Krishna Kranti (slender dwarf morning glory), poovankurunnila (little iron weed), muyalcheviyan (lilac tassel flower), nilappana (golden eye grass), kayunyam (false daisy), cheroola (mountain knot grass). In *Agnisakshi*, there is a description of how Dashapuspa are shed down from Edathi's hair.

The Western ghats of Kerala is a treasure house of medicinal plant heritage and its indigenous system of Ayurveda. Dashapuspa constitute a group of ten potential herbs which are culturally and medicinally significant to the people of Kerala. In the *International Journal of Pharmaceutical Sciences and Research*, a group of research scholars identifies that "these plants are therapeutically very active for various diseases and ailments. Many of them are traditionally used from time immemorial". Thus the 'poochoodal' or flower adorning ceremony is of therapeutic value. The day time is merely for food preparation like 'thiruvathira puzhukku', which is also very rich and serves with wheat soup and a dessert like arrow root ghee, reveals the agrarian culture of Kerala.

There are one hundred and eight betel leaves for a married woman to suck its juice within the whole day of this celebration. In some areas one hundred and one betel leaves are taken for this. The following is an excerpt from *Agnisakshi* -

Edathi took the one not one betel leaves and went in search of Ettan (husband)... An important aspect of Thiruvathira is to prepare the holy betel leaf dedicated for Parvathi, and give it to the husband - who is the sole beneficiary of the penance and fasting.

In her widely accepted book *Woman and Nature*, Susan Griffin points out an age old belief

It is decided that in birth the female provides the matter (the menstruum, the yolk) and the male provides the form... And it is written in the scripture that it is out of Adam who was the first man was taken Eve.

Although highly modernised and foreword, the Western societies also marginalise women and give her a second rank. Being an eco-friendly festival, Thiruvathira is a fusion of femininity into nature and naturalness into females. Unlike the Western notion of man's dominance over woman's secured life, this ritual enhances the opportunities for women to protect their husband's life through their meditated exercises. In this rare occasion of Thiruvathira, women even during their menstruation can take part unlike other Hindu ceremonial practices. As Mr. Daly, an ecofeminist opines that

women are the first hand victims of the degradation of nature because of their close association and dependency on it. Every bit of this ritual is a blending of woman, who is a miniature of the super soul of the Universal woman, that is Nature. The term ecofeminism may raise the question in our mind as to why women and nature are connected to each other, thus denoting a scope to study the relation between women and nature. Even though a process meant for their spouses, Thiruvathira fasting and penance resulted in the ultimate purgation of the soul and a rejuvenation of their physique. This celebration's beauty lies in the power and glory of the eternal feminine and the everlasting earth.

REFERENCES

1. Varghese, Jiny k. "Dasapuspa: The Traditional Uses and the Therapeutic Potential of Ten Sacred Plants of Kerala State in India": *International Journal of Pharmaceutical Sciences and Research*-Vol. 1, Issue 10, 2010.
2. Antherjanam, Lalithambika. *Agnisakshi*: Trissur: Current Books, 1976
3. Daly, M. Cyn/ *Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism*. Boston. MA: Beacon press, 1978.
4. Devagi, Nilayangode. *Antherjanam: Memoirs of a Namboothiri Woman*: New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2011.
5. Prakash, Athira. & S. Sudheesh. "Carnavalesque in Thiruvathira Festival of Kerala: A Socio Cultural Study"; *International Journal of Informative and Futuristic Research*: Vol. 4: Issue 1, 2016
6. Griffin, Susan. *Women and Nature: The Roaring Inside Her*: New York, 1978
7. Bhatath Vaartha, 8 January, 2021