MAPPING TRANSFORMATIONS:
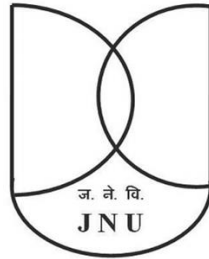# A STUDY OF VELICHAPPADS IN KERALA

*Thesis submitted to Jawaharlal Nehru University
in partial fulfilment of the requirements
for the award of the degree of*

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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DECLARATION

I, Gayatri Balu, hereby declare that the thesis titled **"Mapping Transformations: A Study of Velichappads in Kerala"** submitted by me under the guidance of **Dr.Lata Singh** in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the award of the degree of **Doctor of Philosophy** of Jawaharlal Nehru University is my original work. The thesis has not been submitted in part or full for any other degree or diploma of this University or any other university/institution.

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CERTIFICATE

We recommend that this thesis be placed before the examiners for evaluation.

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Dedicated to

Valli and Narayanikutti Amma,

Kalyani Velichappad and Padmavathi Amma,

and several unheard stories of our foremothers

Abstract

The thesis studies the *velichappads* of Kerala, primarily whose belief system is associated with the Kodungallur Bharani festival. Through ethnographic research on the lives of *velichappads,* the thesis seeks to interrogate and complicate the previously attributed meanings and symbolisms to *velichappads*. An interdisciplinary perspective is employed in the processes of exploration and analysis. Understanding *velichappads* as part of a historical continuum and socio-material reality forms the extensive aim of the thesis. The study concentrates more on the everyday lives of *velichappads* beyond the ritual enactment, employing gender, labour and caste as the key analytical categories. The chapters unpack each of these categories through multiple entry points. The study also looks at the effect of the larger social-political context in introducing newer meanings in understanding *velichappads*. The study's key sites were Palakkad, Kozhikode and Wayanad districts, in North Kerala and Kodungallur Kurumba Kavu during the Kodungallur Bharani festive season. The thesis establishes a dialectical interaction between the ritual practice, and the social and the material lives of *velichappads*. It sees the possibilities and needs to further sociological enquiries on possession experiences which sees the class and caste complexities of possession. The thesis contributes towards building literature on *velichappads* and addresses the invisibilities of lives of *velichappads*. The documentation of the seemingly inconsequential lives of *velichappads* then becomes a means of understanding several different interconnected facets of gender, caste, labour and traditions.

Acknowledgements

In the zillions of chances that make life and the present moment, how do we thank just a few? Well, this is an attempt, an earnest effort to remember a few people, who made this thesis a documented reality. The thesis wouldn't have existed without *velichappads*. *Velichappads* welcomed me to their world, shared with me most personal of their stories. Each of them became a teacher, a door to the world far beyond the mainstream. I do not want to pick the names of few *velichappads* here. Several names come throughout the thesis, and several other names go unmentioned in the thesis. Several of them remain as vague faces in memories, several of them in just a sight of ecstasy. I hope I get to rework and reproduce the work one day, at least in parts, to Malayalam. I also wish I get to take the work forward as collective, collaborative projects with the *velichappads*. This is only a beginning. My dear *velichappads*, I owe to you all, all of this thesis!

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Thanks, to every person I met during the field work process who contributed to the thesis knowingly and unknowingly.

Now, most importantly, Balusha. What would I have done without you both, seriously? Salutes to your parenting (or lack of it)! Thanks for letting me grow, flow and fly. Submitting a doctoral thesis now, we did it! Achan and Amma, this thesis belongs to you.

Contents

List of Abbreviations

CDB   *Cochin* Devaswom Board

KBSS   Kodungallur Bhagavathi Seva Sangam

KBVS   Kodungallur Bhagavathi Velichappad Sangam

KSS   Kshetra Samrakshana Samithi

RSS   Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh

SNDP   Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana

TDB   Travancore Devaswom Board

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Introduction

The thesis - *Mapping Transformations: A Study of Velichappads in Kerala-* is a research study primarily on the *velichappads* of Kerala. It is believed that *velichappad* shares elements of the divine when possessed and then becomes the path of the divine to humans (Caldwell, 1999; see also Kurup,1977; Namboodiri, 1989; Payyanad, 1998). Malayalam word '*velichappad'* literally translates as illuminators, which may mean the enlightened one or the one with the light.[1] *Velichappad,* according to Malayalam, *Sabdataravali,* is one who does *thullal* (dance/jump/heap) and gives oracles when possessed or in the presence of a deity (Nair, 1984, p.1083).[2] The ritual performance *velichappad thullal* of *velichappads* thus essentially means the 'dance of the deity'. The main subject of enquiry in the current research study is *velichappads,* whose belief system is associated with the Kodungallur Bharani festival. Kodungallur Bharani is a month-long festival that takes place in the Malayalam calendar months of *Kumbham-Meenam* (March-April) at the Kodungallur Kurumba Kavu also known as Kodungallur Bhagavathi temple at Thrissur district of Kerala.[3] The practice is historically located in the non-Brahmanical tradition of practices and sites of worship; however, the meanings it generates is far more complex today (Adarsh, 2013; see also Menon, 1967; Narayanan, 2017). Even though the definitions mentioned above offer a starting point, the current study departs from ascribing the meanings of *velichappads* and their practices to these definitions. Through ethnographic research on the lives of *velichappads,* I seek to question and complicate the hitherto attributed meanings and symbolisms to *velichappads*. Understanding *velichappads* as part of a historical continuum and socio-material reality forms a significant aim of the thesis.

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[1] The root word *vellicham* in *velichappads* means light or illumination. Combined with '*ppad*' the word means the person with light. Here *velichappads* and *velichappad* denotes plural and singular usage respectively.

[2] *Sabdataravali* by Sreekanteswaram G Padmanabha Pillai is considered as the most authentic Malayalam dictionary. A concise version of it by P. Damodaran Nair (1984) is used for reference here.

[3] The detail context setting of Kodungallur Bharani festival and situating *velichappads* is done in Chapter 1.

An interdisciplinary approach is employed in the processes of exploration and analysis. Interdisciplinarity, in the simplest sense, is understood as a form of dialogue or interaction between two or more disciplines (Moran, 2001, p.16). The approaches used in the research comes from fields such as gender studies, sociology, anthropology, history and politics. The interest of the study is not to ascribe *velichappads* into any single frame analysis, but to look at the lives of *velichappads* from multiple frames of analysis. Such an approach will not only offer a framework to study *velichappads,* but the framework can be employed to analyse social practices that are reduced to single prism analysis. The study thus concentrates more on the everyday lifeworlds of *velichappads* beyond the ritual enactment, employing gender, labour and caste as the primary analytical categories—these frames of analysis influence the methodological approaches, processes and findings. The attempt here is to develop an epistemology for the research that tries to understand the subject from multiple entry points.

Much of the scholarly attention of understanding rituals has been into interrogating the processes of transformations entailed in it (Gennep, 1908/1960; Turner, 1967, 1969; see also Bloch, 1992; Mitchell, 2009). The concept of transformations, as understood in the study, is not in the continuity of such studies. The concept of 'mapping transformations' here is used not as a means to understand the ritual, but to understand how intersecting structures offer meanings to the changes that happen in the lives of the *velichappads*. The ritual relates dialectically and transformationally to the realities around. The relation continues in their processes after the completion of ritual performance (Kapferer, 1979, p.3). The emphasis of the current study is on the everyday lives of velichappads. The study understands the multitudes of ways in which being a *velichappad* alter the individual and the structures that make it possible. The ritual in itself cannot be seen to hold the potential of transformation if not seen at the intersections of several other variables. The lives of *velichappads* looked at from the everyday experience of gender, caste and labour emerge as significant themes in the chapters.

How do we understand these intersecting structures, and how does it generate meanings for different *velichappads* differently? Moreover, is it possible to make sense of transformations without looking to the broader socio-political structures in place? Thus, transformations here do not show what the ritual enactment makes it possible for the *velichappads*, instead what transformations the existing structures make it possible for the *velichappads*.

Before going further into the methodological approaches, certain existing perspectives on *velichappads* is discussed in the next section. At the offset, it can be observed that there is a near absence of scholarly studies that have primarily focussed on *velichappads*. The existing literature discussed below is mostly confined to definitions and descriptive accounts, mainly concentrating on looking at the subject to be possession ritual. It is essential to understand the existing writings around *velichappads* and the understanding those offers, before venturing into the processes of ethnography of this research.

Velichappads: Existing Perspectives

As mentioned, the existing perspectives on *velichappads* are mostly confined to definitions and description of the ritual enactment. This section tries to interrogate the existing approaches to unpack the possibilities the area offers for expanding the scope of study on the subject. The studies were done on *velichappads* so far can be broadly grouped into two main approaches based on how they have defined and described *velichappads*.[4] Firstly, it is a folkloric approach wherein *velichappads* were studied for its cultural dispensations. The folkloric definitions of *velichappads* are mostly given by scholars from Kerala who are engaged in the study of folklore and culture (Namboodiri, 1989; Payyanad, 1998; Sukumaran, 2002). The second set of studies bases itself in the epistemological premises of anthropological studies (Caldwell, 1999; Fawcett 1901; Gentes, 1992; Seth, 1995). The clean distinction between these approaches is not possible, and several overlaps between the methods can be observed. The

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[4] Classification made by the author

studies reviewed here are more descriptive than exploratory. The existing studies have contributed to providing a lens in understanding *velichappads* and are essential in its regard. However, the departures from the existing studies will be discussed further in the next section, wherein I will also give a more detailed approach to the methodology employed in the study.

One of the earliest available descriptions of *velichappads* is provided by Fawcett (1901) in the Madras Museum Bulletin which was reproduced by Thurston (1909) under the head of *Velichchapad*[5] in his work 'Castes and Tribes in South India'. Fawcett had witnessed the ceremony in rural Malabar in a *Nayar* caste[6] neighbourhood. His account of the event falls into what we now understand as an oriental gaze; however, it remains significant as a historical document.[7] The description is a detailed account of him witnessing the ceremony.

> Far away in rural Malabar, I witnessed the ceremony in which the Velichchapad exhibited his quality. It was in the neighbourhood of a Nayar house, to which thronged all neighbours (Nayars), men and women, boys and girls. The ceremony lasts about an hour. The Nayar said it was a custom in his family to have it done once a year, but could give no account of how the custom originated; most probably in a vow, some ancestor having vowed that, if such or such benefit be received, he would forever have an annual performance of this ceremony in his house. It involved some expenditure, as the Velichchapad had to be paid, and the neighbours had to be fed. Somewhere about the

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[5] The spelling noted here is what is listed by Thurston (1909). There is difference in the spelling of *velichappads* across studies based on the pronunciation emphasis and transliteration employed.

[6] The Nayars historically has been understood as a warrior caste, formed the militia of the region and constituted the major portion of Malabar population (Logan, 2000, Vol I). Since the end of the eighteenth century, they gradually abandoned warfare. The majority of Nayars living in villages were landowners who supervise but rarely work the land and often combine this with white-collar jobs such as school teaching or working as clerks in nearby towns (Mencher, 1965, p.163). The subcastes and clans of Nayars employed in various different occupations, following diverse customs (Fawcett, 2004; Fuller, 1975). Mencher (1965, p.167) classifies Nayars into three major categories: the high-caste Nayars who either belonged to the military or served in some other capacity for Namboodiri Brahmins, Kshatriyas or Samantans; the intermediate group of Nayars, a small number who do not intermarry or interdine with the higher caste group and who perform various tasks for temples, that is, copper working, or making earthern ware; and finally, also few numerically, a group of low-caste Nayars who serve other Nayars as washermen, barbers and oil mongers.

[7] Orientalism is the way the west has created its other, its orient. Orient developed as the mystic other of the rational west through colonial writings (Said, 1979).

middle of the little courtyard, always as clean as a dinner table, the Velichchapad placed a lamp (of the Malabar pattern) having a lighted wick, a kalasam (brass vessel), some flowers, camphor, saffron (turmeric) and other paraphernalia. Bhagavathi was the deity invoked, and the business involved offering flowers and waving a light wick round the kalasam. The Velichchapad's movements became quicker, and, suddenly seizing his sword (nandakam), he ran around the courtyard (against the sun, as sailors say) shouting wildly. He is under the influence of the deity who has introduced into him, and he gives oracular utterances to the deity's commands. What he said I know not, and no one else seemed to know or care in the least, much interested though they were in the performance. As he ran, every now and then he cut his forehead with the sword, pressing it against the skin and serving vertically up and down. The blood streamed all over his face. Presently he became wilder and wilder, and whizzed round the lamp, bending forward towards the kalasam. Some deity, some spirit was present here and spoke through the mouth of the Velichchapad. This, I think, undoubtedly represents the belief of all who were present. When he had done whizzing round the kalasam, he soon became a normal being and stood before my camera. The fee for the self-inflicted laceration is one rupee, some rice etc. I saw the Velichchapad about three days afterwards, going to perform elsewhere. The wound on his forehead had healed. The careful observer can always identify a Velichchapad by the triangular patch over the forehead, where the hair will not grow, and where the skin is somewhat indurated. (Fawcett, 1901 in Thurston, 1901, p.360, vol VII)

Like Fawcett, several Gazetteers released in the colonial times were invested in the process of documenting cultural particularities of the colonised, mainly what they saw as unusual.[8] The descriptions by Fawcett more than anything conveys a sense of awe and

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[8] Census began in India in the year 1871. Along with this also began the work on the ethnographic survey of India and district gazetteers. Anthropologist in this scenario also became data collectors for the colonial powers

bewilderment in what he has seen. It is not to say the descriptions in these accounts are false, but they are not complete. Some aspects from the description hold even today, particularly when it comes to an understanding of how the deity enters the body of the *velichappad* and how the person behaves after he is possessed. The details of the ritual of possession remain very similar even today, whether it be the possession trance or the cutting of the forehead. However, the caste patronages and the spatial enactment of the *velichappad thullal* has changed over time. At the offset, it can be said that *velichappads* offering in the houses and moving around the village to perform in homes are not as a common sight today as it would have been in the times when Fawcett documented it. The practice today is mostly restricted to sites of worship and festivals. There exists no accurate account of how and when the practice would have begun.

Namboodiri (1989, p.4441) in his omnibus writing on the folklore of Kerala titled 'Folklore Dictionary' describes *velichappads* as representatives of the deity of *kavus* (sacred groves) and shrines. He remarks that when possessed *velichappads* dances and utters prophecies for the devotees. He also observes the presence of *velichappads* during other ritual performances such as *theyyattam* in North Kerala wherein one can see the *velichappads* and *thottams*[9] dancing together.[10] Further, he remarks that *velichappads* are found in the *kavus*

(Joseph,2018). Ethnographic Survey of India, as part of the Census in 1901, played a crucial role in defining the official view of caste.

[9] *Thottam* songs acts as a means in which the spirit of the deity manifests in the performer. The songs comprise of legends of the deity.

[10] *Theyyam/theyyattam* originated in North Kerala. It consists of dance, mime and music. It glorifies the beliefs of the ancient subaltern stories of assertion against dominance. The dance is accompanied by the chorus of musical instruments. There are over 400 different *Theyyams* each of its unique in its own ways. Performers wear decorative make-up and majestic costumes.

belonging to castes such as *thiyyas*[11] and *asaris.*[12] The author here points towards the origin

and prevalence of *velichappads* among the oppressed caste groups. He further points to the

presence of women *velichappads* in certain parts of Palakkad district of Kerala and in the *kavus*

in which these women are attached. In such places, the women themselves do the puja. He

further mentions that even though women *velichappads* are not seen in North Kerala, there are

women *velichappads* at the Naduvinkulangara in Kasargode district, the northernmost district

of Kerala. The author points out that during the festivities of Kodungallur Bharani all the

velichappads in the state reach Kodungallur. Thus, he highlights three key aspects of

velichappads. Firstly, the authors see the belief system to be located in the *kavu* worship

practices as opposed to the Brahmanical sites of worship. Secondly, the *velichappads* co-exist

with several other ritual practices in these sites of worship. Thirdly, the Kodungallur Bharani

festival holds an important place in the lives of *velichappads*. Each of these aspects is explored

in-depth in the current study.

Another scholar of folklore who has given a descriptive account of *velichappad* is

Raghavan Payyanad. He describes '*velichappedal*' in his seminal book 'Folklorennoru

Padyapathathi' meaning a 'Curriculum for Folklore' (1998). In his account Payyanad delves

further into giving a perspective on what happens to the *velichappad* when possessed. He

describes *velichappedal* as the process in which the power of deity enters the body of the person

and once possessed the person starts to shiver. The body of the person becomes an instrument

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[11]Ezhavas/Thiyyas constitute about 21.6% of the population. Thiyyas are reported to be the largest Hindu community according to the Census of India, 2011. Ezhavas are also known as *Ilhava*, *Irava*, *Izhava* and *Erava* in the south of the region; as *Chovas*, *Chokons* and *Chogons* in Central Travancore; and as *Thiyyar*, *Tiyyas* and *Theeyas* in the Malabar region (Nossiter,1982; Gough, 1961). Ezhavas are classified as an Other Backward Class by the Government of India. Ezhavas are believed to have migrated from Ceylon in the 1st century CE and were the initiators of coconut farming in the region (Pullapilly, 1976). Osella & Osella (2000, p.8) mentions that Ezhavas in the mid-nineteenth century of a small landowning and titled elite, and a large mass of landless and small tenants who were largely illiterate, considered untouchable, and who eked out a living by manual labour and petty trade. Ezhavas were one of the most oppressed castes who had to face severe practices of untouchability (Nossiter, 1982; Gough, 1961). Chapter 4 further unpacks the caste questions.
[12] Vishwakarma caste

of the deity. The author remarks that in the process the actual personality of the person disappears (Payyanad, 1998, p.77). The aspect that the personality of the person disappears when possessed posits gender as an entry point to understand *velichappads*. An aspect that prompts to think about the gender of a possessed person or what happens to the gender of the possessed person (Ram, 2013). These queries become more pertinent when looking at the possession of *velichappads* by goddesses.

Sukumaran (2003, p.38) observes that *velichappads* are usually seen as the representatives of Bhagavathi in *kavus*. However, sometimes they are seen as the representatives of male Gods as well. It is noted that once the deity enters, the person experiences shivering. Thus, the person becomes insignificant, and the body of the person becomes the instrument of the Goddess (Sukumaran, 2003). He further mentions that in the past, the quest to end the epidemics was the main reason why people worshipped Goddesses. It has to be believed that then the charge of ending epidemics was primarily taken over by the *velichappads*. Sukumaran gives a perceptive into the social history of the evolution of *velichappads* without exploring more about it. An association of *velichappads* with illness is explored at length in the current study. The author also looks into the travel undertaken by *velichappads* in contemporary times by mentioning the presence of v*elichappads* even at the Apollo temple in Delhi.

Caldwell (199, p.287) also defines *veliccappdtu*[13] as the oracle who becomes possessed by Goddess Bhagavathi. The author observes *velichappads* as the ones who dramatically represents the goddess to her devotees as a part of regular worship at the temples dedicated to Bhagavathi. She also translates the term as oracles and sees it as a unique institution in Kerala which is a reflection of the shamanic heritage of ancient south Indian religion. Enactments are felt through the bodily presence of the deity, and in essential form is a contact with the divine.

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[13] The author spells as *veliccappdtu*

She remarks that *velichappad*s have a special relationship to the goddess, sharing her substance when possessed by her, and functioning as her vehicle and oracle. The *velichappad* can both understand and control the power of the goddess (Caldwell, 1999, p.11).

Caldwell forefronts the caste dimension of being a *velichappad* and getting possessed. She observes that even though only Brahmin priests can conduct the worship of the goddess's enlivened image within the shrine, the oracle is always a male of non-Brahman (ordinarily Nayar) caste. Further, she observes that the temple authorities chose the *velichappads*, and the *velichappads* draws the goddess's power into his own body, and through this mediumship, enables devotees to interact intimately with the goddess outside the protected inner sanctum of the traditional Kerala Hindu temple (Caldwell, 1999, p.11). Further, she adds that oracles are the ones who mediates between the protected inner sanctum of the temple wherein only the Brahmins have an entry to, and other non-Brahmin devotees who are 'impure' to go near the deity. The oracles are considered 'impure' to enter inner sanctum and the sword handed over by the priests to the hands of oracle acts as a means through which the spirit of the goddess enters**.** Once the spirit has entered the body, the oracle moans and shakes his body. The oracle then runs out of the inner sanctum and through the temple courtyard, blessing people, answering questions and giving advice. Caldwell has forefronted the caste dimensions of being a *velichappad* here. As caste location, norms, and structures play such an important role; caste is an important entry point in the current research study. In the process, in the upcoming chapters, I attempt to lay out the complex experiences of caste as opposed to the simplistic narration provided by Caldwell.

Caldwell also makes certain assumptions that *velichappads* are exclusively male and makes some problematic assumptions about female *velichappads* of Palghat district whose belief is associated with Kodungallur Bharani. She writes,

The female oracles come to the Kodungallur Bhagavathi temple at Bharani and participate in the rituals of pollution, cutting their heads along with the male oracles. To my knowledge, no fieldwork has been done with these female oracles, who are reluctant to speak with outsiders. They may be the last of the female shamanic priests who perform important ritual roles in these tribal societies. (1999, p.25)

In the process of documenting *velichappads*, the author here falls into certain prejudices and analytical errors. It is highly erroneous to portray the women *velichappads* as such. The reason given for the absence of literature on women *velichappads* is the seclusion and isolation in which they live. The author here considers velichappads as mysterious unapproachable beings. The women *velichappads*, life stories, and everydayness of their lives form a significant part of the current study**.** Caldwell, however, provides a perspective towards looking at men *velichappads* to have modelled their behaviour on women *velichappads*, whom she remarks as female shamans.[14] Caldwell observes that the 'ritual power' moved away from the low caste ritual specialists and indigenous female shamans with the arrival of Brahmanical Aryan culture between the fourth and seventh centuries. Thus, the author here is pointing towards understanding the intersections of gender and caste. Further, the oracular representatives, *velichappads*, grow his hair long like a woman.[15] Author remarks that *velichappads* ideally does not have a moustache uses turmeric all over his body as women do, and dons the archaic ritual dress of a high caste female. The notion is that ritual representative of the goddess must be like a lady, but must not be a lady (1999, p.216).

Caldwell (1999, p. 171) also looks at the psychoanalytical aspects of the processes involved. She sees the act of cutting off the forehead of male *velichappads* as a symbolic act

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[14] Shamans are defined as ritual practitioners, in hunting-and-gathering societies who enter altered states of consciousness to achieve a variety of ends that include healing the sick, foretelling the future, meeting the spirit-animals, changing the weather, and controlling real animals by supernatural means (Clottes &Williams, 1998, p 19 in Francfort, Hamayon & Bahn, 2001)

[15] Referring to Thampuran (1936)

of self-castration, emphasising on the Bhagavathi's erotic and killing thirst. She remarks that *velichappads,* whom she interviewed described the cause of possession as 'spirits going inside' the body of the victim (p.175). The reaction is stupor, speechlessness and shivering and shaking, which in Malayalam is expressed as *thullal* or *urayal*.[16] The author refers to Obeyesekere (1977, 1981) to suggest that the shivering has an orgasmic quality, that releases sexual tension. She remarks it as uncontainable fury, leading to shivering and trembling, fits and possession. The state then manifests itself physically in fever, uncontrolled dancing, and jumping. She further suggests an underlying cognitive relation between certain emotions, their psychological manifestations, and spirit possession in *thullal*. Shiver fits and the possession are seen as the fierce goddess's signs of entering the performer and enlivening the ritual**.** The movement is seen as the form in which Bhagavathi reveals herself, and reflect the ambivalent powers of female sexuality (1999, p.215). The psychoanalytic perspective of looking at velichappads is not a critical enquiry in the current study.

The uncritical equating of velichappads to shamans is seen in other studies as well. Jenett (2005) observes the women *velichappads* ('veliccappatu') of Kodungallur Bharani festival as the remnants of an earlier tradition of women as ritual specialists, priestesses and shamans of the goddess. Gentes (1994) offers an ethnographic study of the Bharani festival, which uses the same perspectives. She describes *velichappads* at the Kodungallur Bharani during the festivities as,

> Many of the veliccappatus, who form a loose organisation of shamans or oracles
> are women, and as special initiates of goddess serve as her spokespersons to reassure,
> chastise, or predict the future for clients. Some have an intense personal charisma and

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[16] The author unpacks the meaning of *urayal*. As intransitive verb: 1. To solidify; to set; to get possessed of; 2. To liquefy; to ooze; 3. to sit, subside, reside. As a transitive verb means to 'to curdle; to coagulate'. She makes a range of metaphoric associations to the word *'urana tulluka'* used to describe the symptoms of possession and confirms the sexual connotations in the act. (Caldwell, 1999, p.176).

are able to heal and prophesy through inspired contact with the goddess. They are considered capable in varying degrees of reading her mood and desires and of channeling her ability to rid an environment of detrimental or inauspicious forces. The goddess is believed to cause smallpox when unhappy, and a family may call a veliccappdtu to prevent or cure this dread disease. A veliccappitu is present at most ceremonies of worship to Bhagavathi, whether in permanent temples or in temporary outdoor pantals like those traditionally constructed for the talikettukalyanam, a rite of maturation and signal of status change for young females widely practised in Malabar in the past. Hundreds of veliccappdtanmar[17] come to the Bharani Festival, many from Tamil-speaking areas. They travel in small groups of five to eight, usually under the leadership of a guru who trains them and guides their trances and relationship with the goddess's sword and other ritual symbols, such as the thick metal anklets tied around their legs. I saw the leader of one group taking the sword out of an entranced woman's hand as he calmed her. They stand out vividly in their striking red costumes and jingling bells on belts and swords. They dance, sing, and beat drums in a hypnotic rhythm. I observed more than one veliccappatu on the north portico of the shrine facing the sanctum of the goddess and dancing. They hopped and swayed back and forth with eyes closed, head tilted forward, rotating the upheld sword in hand, the long dramatic black hair swirling around the head. They seemed to be generating a trance experience and sometimes cut themselves with the sword. At other times, they sat and conversed in groups or walked in a very deliberate gait across the shrine grounds, tinkling all the while. Because of their relationship with the goddess, the veliccappatanmar is attributed a certain authority among the devotees and were in charge of restraining the crowd

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[17] Denoting *velichappads*

before this large group dashed around the shrine with their sticks and swords in the air (Gentes,1992, p.307).

The description gives a vivid account of *velichappads* at the Kodungallur Bharani festivities. The narrative is part of the anthropological study of the author on the Kodungallur Bharani festivities. Such studies stop at giving the descriptive account without furthering the enquiries on the subject. Similar descriptive method is employed by several other authors, particularly those who keep the meanings restricted to the performance aspect of *velichappads*. Seth (1995, p.119) describes the initiation of a temple *velichappad* thus,

> Once possessed, the velichapadu begins to put on the regalia of his calling. First, he drapes the long, blood-red cloth, the pattu, around his shoulders and waist, looping it in such a fashion that the two ends hang down in front. Around his waist, he throws the aramani, ara meaning waist, mani meaning bells— the great bell-metal belt with 32 jingling bells that can weigh as much as eight kilograms. Although he sometimes places the great metal anklets called chelambus, on his feet, it is much more usual for him to wear them as large bangles. Finally, he seizes the long-handled sickle-shaped sword, the val, the most powerful emblem goddess. Now in a deep trance, the velichapadu jumps up and down before the sanctum of the goddess who has possessed him. From his mouth comes a great shout, almost a howl—a sound that seems to come from deep within him. As he jumps, the aramani's bells jangling wildly, he shakes his head, bringing his long hair tumbling down. Only then will he turn and face the waiting devotees, his primary concern, as always, has been to acknowledge his deity.

Further, Seth (1995, p.117) looks at *velichappad thullal* as a movement that happens between God and Man, a chasm which she sees is unaddressed even by the most advanced 20th-century technology. She remarks that other than the ceremonial and religious duties entailed on the *velichappads*, there were also approached for healing persons infected with smallpox.

She suggests that the power enjoyed by the *velichappads* may have reduced with the arrival of Namboodiri Brahmins and the establishment of their religious hegemony. The priestly role of *velichappads* is now restricted to the temples and shrines maintained and patronised by the non-Brahmin castes.

      Velichappads are also called *komarangal* (singular- *komaram*; plural- *komarangal*) in several parts of Kerala.[18] The etymology of the word *komaram* comes from '*koman*' which means deity. Thus, *komaram* translates as one who becomes the deity. *Velichappads* and *komarangal* are mostly used as synonyms by the devotees.[19] Some scholars make a differentiation between the two and consider *velichappad* a formal arrangement at sites of worship (Klaari,2012). *Komarangal* is seen as people who become the goddess as part of rituals but otherwise lead everyday lives engaging in regular jobs (Adarsh,2013). It is also believed that in North Kerala, they are known as *komaram* and in south Kerala as *velichappad* (Sukumaran,2003). While in most writings both terms are used interchangeably. Woman *velichappads* in Palakkad district of Kerala are also addressed as '*Thambatty'* (woman of God) with respect.

      The focus of the studies mentioned in this section is primarily on understanding and describing the ritual enactment of *velichappad thullal* than understanding the *velichappads*. Such studies are necessary but inadequate too. The existing studies have looked at *velichappads* from the mytho- ritual perspectives or psychoanalytic perspectives. Overlooking of the social and material aspects in studies that focus on the performance have time and again contributed to a sense of othering, wherein people or culture that is 'mysterious' to one's own is examined

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[18] In the study the author is going with the word *velichappads* as it is the most widely used one. However, if the respondents have chosen to address themselves as a *komaram* then it is given primacy.

[19] All *velichappads* who were the respondents were asked if they see a difference between *komarangal* and *velichappads*. Other than two respondents, all *velichappads* responded saying both means same and is used synonymously. The two said *velichappads* are more of a formal arrangement at the site of the worship. During the course of the thesis writing special attention has been given to use the word *komaram/komarangal* when the respondent has used thus.

and simplified (Boddy,1994). The equating of *velichappads* to the ritual performance and thereby looking at *velichappads* only as performers of a possession ritual limits the possibilities of more critical enquiries.

Who are *velichappads,* and how do we make sense of their existence in the present times? Why and how do some people become *velichappads*? Are *velichappads* existing only in the spatiality of the ritual enactment? What is the reality of being *velichappads* beyond the space and time of ritual enactment? As a researcher, I felt motivated to think further with these probing questions that remain unaddressed in the existing literature on the topic. Understanding ritual enactment is only one aspect of *velichappads*. An exploration into the social and material lives of *velichappads* beyond the space and time of the ritual enactment gives further insight into the structures that limit and transform the individual. Recognition of *velichappads'* lives behind and beyond the enactment of ritual performance is the beginning of a dialectical process of engagement.

Methodological Approaches

The beginning of any research recognises the need for the research study and the contribution it would make to a particular field of study. A critical understanding of the relevance of studying *velichappads*, in the present times is understood through certain existing scholarship. In this research, I mainly look into the prepositions made by Gramsci (1971) and how he has highlighted the need for studying aspects of popular culture. Gramsci remains as one of the pioneering Marxists who studied culture and particularly folklore; 'folklore', a frequently used term in his writings.[20] Gramsci's analysis of folklore has to be read along with his writings on language, common sense, and religion. It has to be contextualised by his articulations on distinctions among folklore, philosophy, and science (Gencarella, 2010). The

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[20] Gramsci designates several practices such as superstitions, magic, alchemy, witchcraft, belief in spirits, popular moralities, proverbs, fables, certain motifs, conceptions associated with particular 'worldviews' etc as 'folklore' (Gencarella, 2010). Gramsci also sees popular songs, regional or popular literature as related to folklore as well.

attempt of Gramsci while writing 'Philosophy, Common Sense, Language and Folklore' was to overcome the separation between Marxism as a philosophy and people's actual consciousness. Gramsci saw that religion and folklore contain philosophies, and these philosophies cannot be detached from the history of philosophy, nor can culture from the history of culture.[21]

Gramsci reinforced through his writings that folklore must not be regarded as an eccentricity, an oddity or a picturesque, but must be earnestly studied. Folklore for Gramsci did not epitomise the primordial tradition handed down unaffected from the pre-modern world. Instead, he saw philosophy and modern science constantly contributing newer elements to the mosaic of tradition (Crehan, 2002, p.108). Further, Gramsci sees folklore as representing essentially oppositional culture, one that is in opposition with the official conceptions of the world. The critical relationship is between the dominant and the dominated, not between the traditional and the modern (Crehan, 2002). Gramsci points towards understanding the popular conceptions of the world to bring about a situation in which the hierarchies that exist between modern culture and the popular culture of folklore will disappear. He believes that the disappearance of an inequality that produces the differential perceptions of contemporary culture and popular culture will influence how popular culture is perceived. Gramsci argues that 'folklore' should neither be preserved nor rooted out. The need is a recognition of the positive aspects to 'bring about the birth of a new culture among the broad popular masses' (Crehan, 2002, p.109).

When a mass of people evolves to think coherently and in the same coherent fashion about the present real world, a philosophical event far more critical and original emerges. This is significant than the discoveries by some selected philosophical intellects, of a truth which remains to the property of a small group of intellectuals (Gramsci, 1971, p.325). Such an approach points towards a certain deep-seated notion in the study of culture; wherein one can

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[21] Note II at http://marxism.halkcephesi.net/Antonio%20Gramsci/prison_notebooks/reader/q11-12.htm accessed on 1 Dec 2020

see a genius explanation of life and history that are contained in these fragments of culture. Disintegrated collection of ideas and opinions of the common people demands to be seen as necessary as more scientific philosophies. He also sees that the weakness of doctrines of a selected group of intellectuals is that they are not able to create an ideological unity between the top and the bottom, between the simple and the intellectuals. The only contact with the 'common sense' can only make philosophy historical, observes Gramsci. Such an approach is indispensable to determine the new contemporary problems and also how the older problems should be analysed. Further, he adds, folklore should be studied as a 'conception of the world and life' implicit to a large extent in the determinate time and space strata of society and in opposition (also in most part implicit, mechanical and objective) to the 'official' conceptions of the world (or in a broader sense, the conceptions of the cultured parts of historically determinate societies) that have succeeded one another in the historical process (Gramsci, 1971, p.326). Gramsci observes that the conceptions of the world and life have followed one another in history as a confused agglomerate of fragments. Thus, studying this surviving evidence, adulterated and mutilated, are essential to the study of history.[22] A reflection on the persistence of cultural life of people even after conditions change.

These articulations can be extrapolated and applied to the current study. Studying the philosophies carried by *velichappads* and understanding the intellect in those is a means of understanding the knowledge produced outside dominant cultures. Such a study informs us as much about several facets of the present as it does about the past. What new knowledge will it produce when life worlds of *velichappads* are looked at as surviving evidence of the history that informs us more about the conditions in which their lives operate. Thus, in the study, as it is already mentioned, I depart from the picturesque aspects of *velichappads*, or the possession ritual of *velichappad thullal*. The research employs a trajectory that foregrounds the life stories

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[22] Further see Sarkar (1992)

of *velichappads* as told by the *velichappads*. The importance is given to understanding how *velichappads* make sense of their lives and meanings being a *velichappad* provides to them.

Interdisciplinarity, as understood in the study, does not discount the importance of studies rooted in disciplines. But it forefronts the possibilities by looking for the connectedness and disconnectedness among multiple disciplines while studying a subject. The primary challenge while studying a subject that is regional and local is naming and translations. The closest available translation of *velichappad* in English is Oracle. The Oxford English dictionary (1989) defines oracle as 'a priest or priestess acting as a medium through whom advice or prophecy was sought from the gods in classical antiquity'. In the research, I stick to using the word *velichappad* instead of translating. The category of oracle previously studied in anthropology comes with a specific set of meanings based on context and status. Several anthropological studies have used 'oracle' as an all-encompassing term that oversimplifies this phenomenon. Historically, people who were oracles were believed to be holding a high position in traditional communities (Pritchard,1937). However, the meanings associated with beings of whom we understand to be oracles change with place and time. Thompson (1979) remarks that anthropological studies of beliefs and rituals in earlier societies or contemporary African societies are insufficient in understanding more plural societies with multiple levels of belief and any such study on ritual should be historically positioned. It is essential to understand the regional specificities of the phenomena as the first step. Hence, one has to be cautious of meanings attributed to the tradition and community being studied if the word oracle is used. The assumption made here is that the non-translatability of a term is an answer to the need for methodological pluralities for understanding the phenomena. Anthropological definitions of rituals and beliefs can be made complex by bringing in approaches to study from other disciplines.

The research is cautious of attempts to group several of these practices as experiences of possession alone. The study thus draws inspiration from works across disciplines in understanding possession. Broadly, possession is seen as the control exerted by certain forces on the host body, which results in making the host bodies different and unusual. Lewis' (1966, 1989) argument that possession is a release of social tensions of the marginalised has for long dominated anthropological understanding on possession. A generic definition of possession fails at capturing the specificities of types of possession, its differences, depth of experiences of the possessed, and how those affect the life of the ones possessed. Janice Boddy in her paper 'Spirit Possession Revisited: Beyond Instrumentality' observes that phenomena we bundle as possession are part of daily experience, not just dramatic ritual. They have to do with 'one's relationship to the world, with selfhood- personal, ethnic, political, and moral identity' (Boddy 1994, 414). Boddy proposes for studies in possession that see possession to be about morality, kinship, ethnicity, history and social memory- which she considers as the touchstones of social existence. Possession, as understood in the research, is in the continuity of such definitions. Boddy (1989, 1994) has been commented for the efforts in bringing in more hermeneutic and interpretive approach to the studies (Ram, 2012).

Similarly, Ram (2013) observes that we learn to label certain phenomena as spirit possession, but it is not easy to capture the experiences in their respective contexts by a single term. Ram seeks the possibility of looking beyond the sociology of power to understand the academic analysis of gender and possession. Further, she problematises the assumptions made by the caste and class practices in the understanding of possession. Ram (2013, p.4) interrogates why the middle- class Indians, otherwise engaged in numerous traditional practices from yoga to Ayurveda and celebrating ritual observances that reinforce patriarchy- find traditions such as spirit possession wholly incomprehensible. She further asks if this is merely their distaste, or does it contribute as an active ingredient to the constitution of class. Also, she highlights the

importance of context that is imperative to make sense of phenomena such as possession. She (2013, p.5) writes, 'phenomena such as possession have rendered vulnerable to practical and intellectual forms of manipulation by being removed from their context.' She forefronts the importance of having different research methods suiting other research locations.

Nair (2017, p.36) observes that there exists benign neglect amongst the feminist scholars in engaging with questions regarding religion, particularly faith, piety and belief. However, when studying phenomena such as that of *velichappads*, one has to be very clear about questioning the uncritical attribution of status alterations and transformations of genders. In this light, I have chosen not to adopt a perspective that looks at possession by the goddess to be activated as a feminist subject simply owning to the gender identity attributed to the goddess as being female. I draw upon the work of Rajan (1998) who expresses her discomfort about attempts to glorify feminism that seems to be emerging from contemporary Hinduism fore fronting the figure of Hindu Goddess. She writes (1998, p. WS-34) that, 'the Hindu goddess- worship is radical insofar as the goddess is not inscribed in the mainstream of deities and her devotees are drawn largely from lower castes, women and even non-Hindus, thus clearing certain spaces of alternative belief and practice in the monolith of Brahmanical Hinduism.' The aspect as velichappads providing an alternative to the monolith of Brahmanical Hinduism is explored in the thesis; however, it detaches from attributing feminist traits to the goddess figure. In her paper, she identifies two strands of writings which sees Hindu goddess as a feminist. One is the South Asian discourses in the Western academia in which ideas such as this have alluded to Hindu nationalism, and another is a radical feminist strand in India deriving from an interpretation of Gandhian secularism. The uncritical engagement of feminist theologians to address the criticality with the figure of Indian goddess fails to see the complexities of the constitution of the goddess. She observes that the difference between

women as social beings and goddess is maintained without contradiction in a patriarchal society.

One notable study on possession is the work on Devi movement in Gujarat by David Hardiman. Hardiman (1987) on the Adivasi assertion in South Gujarat, gives a different aspect to the phenomena of possession altogether by bringing in a historical and socio-political perspective to it. Hardiman explores the social, economic and political context of the Devi movement rather than placing it in the divine as a domain of faith. Thus, what he does is to develop a political economy of faith itself. It is an in-depth study which finds inter-linkages of the movement with colonial law on liquor, land ownership, economic exploitation of money lenders, inequalities among Adivasis and Gandhian nationalist movement. The sense of moral responsibility that was brought forth through the movement is thus extrapolated to understand structural conditions. He rejects Sanskritization theories and focuses on dialectical approaches in unearthing the phenomena. This rejection is worth noticing as the demands made by the Devi movement can be seen to be that of a Sanskritization process. But such an analysis will only give a seemingly over-simplistic and inadequate point of view. Hardiman observes that movements such as Devi emerged in the historical period when contradictions became intense. It is thus a cultural synthesis which relates value to power. Appropriation and democratisation of values through possession was, therefore a way of fighting back. The Devi movement succeeded in attaining many things but did fade out quite quickly, and the impacts cannot be quantified. I am not attempting to equate the Devi movement to the experiences of *velichappads*'. However, the study offers a methodology to study the material base and socio-political reality from which rituals emerge. Similarly, Taussig (2010) in his study on the beliefs among the black peasants and labourers in Columbia sees how the modern parables exist in societies undergoing a transition from a pre-capitalist to the capitalist order. Taussig in his work

is invested in understanding the interweaving social history with the folk religion and its contemporary significance.

Understanding the lives of *velichappad* embedded in regional, gender and caste specificities will not only offer an in-depth study of *velichappads* but will also throw light upon social and material concerns in the study of culture. Scholars such as Sharmila Rege (2002) have highlighted the importance of forefronting the social and material questions while studying culture. Gender makes it possible inclusive analysis of intersecting structures of domination, difference and diversity (Rege, 2003b). Rege observes that the culturalist frame of analysis has wiped out the regional and caste-based forms of the popular and reduced all of transformative politics to 'cultures of resistance' (Rege, 2002, p.1038). *Velichappads* do not exist outside the structures and relations of domination. Very often, the attribution of subversion and transgression has resulted in seeing the practice as outside the logic of everyday. Rege (2002, p.1039) observes an exclusion of class and the materialist critique of capitalism from the agenda of such scholarship and the implications are critical for the academy and politics. The studies have concentrated on the rejection of modernity (Nandy 1983, Chatterjee 1994), the interrogation of modernity and the consumption of modernity (Appadurai 1997, Breckenbridge 1996). In Rege's study on *Lavani* and *Povada,* she brings back the attention to see how the forms and practices, have connections to the social and material conditions of Dalits and Bahujan. Thereby she sees how those relate to everyday lives, struggles and labour of people across different castes, classes and gender. Rege approaches the subjects rather dialectically to see how they are at once emancipatory and imprisoning, containing and resisting. The moments of discovery and rediscovery of the popular forms are especially focused upon to underline that the dialectics of cultural distinctions are produced and reproduced differentially for castes, classes and gender.

As a researcher, at the initial stage of approaching the topic, I was keenly aware of the absence of accounts on the lives of *velichappads* and limitation of meanings to the rigour of the possession ritual particularly those that occur during the Kodungallur Bharani festival. The festival itself offers a wide range of perceptions in the public sphere of Kerala, which is unpacked in detail in the first chapter. Kodungallur Bharani festival is marked by scores and scores of *velichappads* coming from different parts of the state to participate in the festival. The *velichappads* join in the festival for four-five days of the festivities and then return to their everyday lives. During the pilot fieldwork at the Kodungallur Bharani festivities, a pertinent question emerged. What are the lives *velichappads* lead beyond the Kodungallur Bharani festivities? The research thus began as a journey to discover answers to these queries. These questions can only be answered by going beyond the ritual act of *velichappad thullal* towards the everyday.

Every theoretical concept plays out in the everyday in significant patterns of work. [23] More than understanding how possession plays itself out in the everyday, it is essential to understand the everyday to make sense of this complex phenomena. Everyday here does not mean in-depth attention to every aspect of the life of a person every day. Rather, trying to make sense of the lives of *velichappads* beyond what the museumised in certain analytical frameworks, or framed in the photographs or the videos in circulation. The research follows a trajectory of *velichappads* from the level of the individual, to the family and then to the larger society they are part. Firstly, it sees how to understand family life of *velichappads* to the broader social life they lead. The meanings assigned by each *velichappads* in narrating their life stories is crucial in building a broader sociological understanding of *velichappads*.[24] Secondly, the changes are traced through three main analytical categories-

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[23] Further see Mini (2016) to see the notion of 'everyday' within the framework of a public ritual of Attukal Pongala
[24] Several studies have employed narratives as a powerful way of unpacking the complexities of ritual practices. For example, Anandhi (2013) through narratives of Dalits, upper castes, women social activists and the state,

gender, caste and labour. Understanding the continuation of ritual possession beyond the stage of enactment to the everyday social and material life of the possessed person can inform us about aspects of gender, caste and labour. The effort is to unravel the thought process initiated by specific existing epistemologies and connect those to my research journey.

Research Questions

- How are *velichappads* situated at the Kodungallur Bharani festivities? What meanings does the festival provide in understanding *velichappads?*

- What are the possibilities of understanding the everyday experiences of *velichappads* with gender, caste and labour as the key entry points for analysis?

- How does the social-political context shape the analysis and its impact on reshaping and reassigning of meanings related to the *velichappads*?

Methods and Fieldwork

Ethnography has a complex history of having developed through and adapted to several disciplines over the last century. For the same reason, ethnography does not have a standard, well-defined meaning (Atkinson & Hammersley, 2007, p.2). There are certain methods particular to ethnography which researchers employ based on the context and subject they study. Harding (1989) remarks that primarily there are only three methods of social enquiry: listening to informants, observing behaviour, or examining historical traces and records. These basics hold for the current research undertaking as well. In this section, I provide insights into the ethnographic methods employed in the research. Along with this, the section also provides an introduction to the fieldwork process.

The research gives importance to studying *velichappads* in their everyday contexts, rather than conditions created. Hence there were several sites of fieldwork for the research study, the main one being the Kodungallur Bharani festival at the Kurumba Bhagavathi Kavu.

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studies Mathammas a ritual practice of a Dalit sub-caste in rural Tamil Nadu. Here narratives act as a means to understand the complexities involved in conceptualising the caste patriarchy among the Dalits.

The site of the festivities was the entry point to the research and access to *velichappads*. Even though, data was collected from a range of sources, including documentary evidence of several kinds; participant observations, interviews and informal conversations were the primary sources of data. Data collection did not entail a fixed research design. Throughout the fieldwork, the initial interests and questions that motivated the research were refined, sometimes even transformed.

Interviews in ethnographic research as we understand range from spontaneous, informal conversation to more arranged conversations happening in arranged meetings. In the case of spontaneous and informal conversations, it is not possible to draw a clear boundary between participant observation and interviewing (Atkinson & Hammersley, 2007, p.108). At the festival, there were no particular criteria employed for selecting the *velichappads*. Over the three years of participating in the festival, I came into contact with several *velichappads,* and in-depth interviews were undertaken with those *velichappads* with whom a rapport could be built ensuring diversity in social and economic contexts. The *velichappads* with whom a connection was established often guided me to other *velichappads* understanding my research interests. Interviews were not done only with *velichappads*. Interviews with family members and other participants were undertaken, as the perspective, each offered was valued. The *velichappads* closely followed upon belong to Palakkad, Kozhikode and Wayanad districts, in North Kerala. Multiple visits were made to their homes, wherein their families also became important participants in the process. The organisation of *velichappads* invited me to several of their meetings and journeys, which allowed me to understand *velichappads* as an organised community. In addition to Kodungallur Bharani, participation in the festivals at the local shrines and *kavus* of the *velichappads* also was an important site of research enquiry. Throughout the processes, as part of research ethics, the information on the research study was

given to the informants.[25] During the stages of analysis, the in-depth interviews were treated as social products, and one was conscious to note the socio-material processes that generated them.

Ethnographic interviews are closer to conversations (Burgess, 1984). Instead, it is a conversation with the ethnographer having a research purpose. Interviews conventionally have been used as a method of data collection wherein the hierarchies between the interviewer and interviewee are established. In this approach, the interviewee is only seen as a source of information. In the course of the research, one has to be cautious of seeing an interview as an interactive process through which knowledge is produced (Anil, 2018). The life stories of *velichappads* belonged to the *velichappads,* and I as a researcher in most scenarios only had to be a listener. As a research which dealt with possession, I have been particular of not questioning or interrogating truthfulness of the possession experiences shared by *velichappads* during the interview. It was essential to be a humble listener. The priority was to understand the reality as experienced by the *velichappads*. The interactive process of the interview can only be ensured if the interview is flexible, whether it is the schedule or the interview guide. The interview guide here only acted as a means of arranging the conversation while noting the field notes.

It is an enormous task to put into writing all that came out of an ethnography. In the construction of a coherent account that does justice to the complexities of everyday life, I have given due importance to listing some parts as life stories. In many parts of the narrations, I have resorted to first-person accounts, trying to stay as close as possible to translation. The ordering of the narrations is done based on several themes to which the accounts furnish meanings and is presented through contextual presentations.

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[25] Ryan (2006) discusses more about the ethical concerns of participants being aware of the research project.

Structure of Chapters

Chapter 1

The chapter aims at situating *velichappads* in the current study. It is primarily a continuation of the Introduction chapter. Several of the factors touched upon in the introduction are elaborated in the first chapter in greater depth. It studies how the contextualisation of worship practices of *velichappads* in *kavu* acts as a means to situate the same in the non-Brahmanical tradition of social practices. Further, the understanding is expanded to unpack the activities at the Kodungallur Bharani festivities and the presence of *velichappads* in the space. Contextualising and situating *velichappads* association with Kodungallur Bharani stand as an imperative to develop the following chapters. It also explored how the myths and histories associated with the festival provides a historical approach to the study. It is seen how *velichappads* draw their meanings from the figures of Mother Goddesses. The songs with sexual innuendos sung at the festival popularly known as Bharani songs is unpacked in details to comprehend how it contributes towards the understanding of festival space. The chapter adds to the introductory chapter in providing a foundation to the articulations employed in the thesis in later chapters.

Chapter 2

Chapter two seeks answers to specific primary questions. How do we understand the journey of a person towards becoming a *velichappad*? What are the transformation processes and events involved in this journey? What are the particular life experiences and situations that contribute to this transformation? What are the possibilities of identifying certain patterns in the process? What are the intersecting structures in place that determine a person's complex journey towards becoming a *velichappad*? The chapter looks at the events and processes of becoming of *velichappads* in-depth, and certain patterns in these are mapped. The chapter looks at the structures of caste hierarchy and how it governs the process of becoming a *velichappad*.

Two critical patterns in the processes of becoming: the association of the practice with an illness and the inheritance of possession is intricately explored. Further, it is examined if gender and gendered mediations operate differently for persons of different genders. The chapter forms the basis for looking keenly into the domestic spaces of *velichappads* dealt in the next chapter.

Chapter 3

The chapter delves to understand the 'goddess' in everyday life. Chapter three enters the realm of the everyday domestic worlds of *velichappads* and mainly looks at the aspects of marriage and conjugality. The themes of marriage and conjugality are examined for comprehending the insights it provides to gendered underpinnings of the experience of being *velichappads* and unravels the interlocking structures of oppression. The experiences of men and women *velichappads* are looked at differently to develop a differential yet intersecting understanding of gendered underpinnings. The complexities of understanding possession which the experiences of men *velichappads* provide are looked in detail. How different and similar are the male experiences and female experiences concerning marriage and conjugality? What are the negotiations and conflicts in the process? Is there a possibility to develop a dialectical approach to understand these questions? The chapter intends to see how being a *velichappad* permeates the domestic by understanding the everyday being of a *velichappad* by addressing the questions mentioned above.

Chapter 4

Chapter four looks at how caste and labour that informs the being of *velichappads*. How do we make sense of the caste realities experienced by *velichappads*? How does the caste and labour experience problematise the assumptions on status alterations and status change? How do we comprehend the experiences of labour of *velichappads* as evidenced through their life stories? What new perspectives does it offer to understand the labour and labouring bodies of *velichappads*? It is explored how the lived experiences of the labouring castes and class inform

the lives of *Velichappads* today. The chapter develops on the articulations of *velichappads* themselves on how they see the practice through the prism of labour. The chapter follows in-depth the formation and functioning of an organisation of *velichappads* to understand the nuances of organising. The chapter intends to think towards labour historiography, which looks at *velichappads* that exist in the political economy of caste and labour.

Chapter 5

A basic premise in the chapter is that social practices need to be understood by looking at the socio-political structures as it exists today. What does it mean to be a *velichappad* in the present times? What are the new meanings being a *velichappad* generates in contemporary times? Has the ritual space of *velichappad* changed, and what are the factors that have contributed to the change? Can we look at any tradition ignoring the reality of the socio-political of the times? In a changing global world, what remains of traditions of this kind? These are some questions the final chapter of the thesis attempts to answer. The chapter captures the evolution of the sites of worship and explores if it can be seen as an evolution (natural or induced) to more puritan practice. The chapter intends to explore how the politics of the times and temple as a site of struggles gives meanings to traditions. The focus here is to see *velichappads* in the context of changing politics at the Kodungallur Kavu. Finally, it is observed how certain newer traditions invented in contemporary times changes the practice. The change in the representation of *velichappads* and meaning-making of *velichappads* in the backdrop of globalising cultures is also studied.

Chapter 1:

Situating *Velichappads*

The chapter aims to contextualise *velichappads* in the current study. An important attempt of the chapter is also to explore the possibilities of thinking about rituals, particularly of *velichappads* as surrounding the *kavu* tradition. Understanding traditions around *kavu* give alternate ways of understanding worship practices, contrary to the dominant narrative of cohesive, homogeneous puritan worship practices. Situating *velichappads* historically in *kavu* tradition is vital to understand the contemporary meanings of the tradition as well. The belief system of *velichappads* associated with Kodungallur Kurumba Kavu and the Meena Bharani festivities at the *kavu* is explored in depth. The thesis, as mentioned in the introduction, primarily follows the *velichappads* whose belief system is associated with the Meena Bharani festival at the Kurumba Kavu. Kodungallur Bharani here is the entry point to knowing *velichappads*. Beyond the ecstatic experience at the surface, an in-depth study of Kodungallur Bharani forms the path to understand *velichappads* and further in the development of research design employed in the thesis. This chapter goes more in-depth into varied facets of the Kodungallur Bharani festival and *velichappads* during the festivities. Understanding the spatial specificities of Kodungallur Bharani becomes imperative to situate *velichappads* in the current study.

1.1 Situating *Velichappads* in *Kavus*

The ritual practice of *velichappads* is historically associated with the worship practices of *kavus*. This section attempts to understand the particularities of *kavus*. It also underlines the distinctiveness from more puritan sites of worship. A *kavu* means a grove of trees or sacred grove,[26] in its simplest definition, is an area which is thickly populated by trees devoted to local deities or ancestral spirits that are protected by local communities through social traditions

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[26] See Nambudiripad, 1976 for details of Malayalam Lexicon

integrating spiritual and ecological values (Murugesan, 2016). Sacred groves are known in different names in India. 'Dev' in Madhya Pradesh, 'Deorais or deovani' in Maharashtra, 'Sarnas' in Bihar, 'Oran' in Rajasthan, 'Devarakadu' in Karnataka, 'Kavu' in Kerala and Tamil Nadu (Chandrashekara & Sankar,1998). Sacred groves began as a tree worshipping place as trees hold a high position in the human civilisation as a source of shelter and fire (Fergusson,1869). The institution of sacred groves dates back to the pre-agrarian hunting-gathering phase of human civilisation and is known to flourish in most parts of India (Kosambi, 1962). In a sacred grove, all forms of vegetation including shrubs and climbers are believed to be in the protection of the reigning deity and removal of even deadwood becomes taboo. Hence in the climax formation, it becomes the nearest to the origin of a forest in the present-day imagination (Gadgil & Vartak,1976). The sacred grove is majorly noted to be a place of worship of mother Goddess and has a particular relation with the feminine (Achutha Menon, 1943; Kosambi, 1962).[27]

Kavus were ritual centres for the 'lower castes' who were traditionally denied entry to temples, and who accordingly shipped in *kavus* with monthly rites and annual events (Freeeeman, 1999). A *kavu* did not have clear boundaries that marked the beginning of a puritan space nor in most cases did they have a sanctum sanctorum. Whereas, a *kshetram* or *ambalam* (temple), has a clear demarcation of spaces with purity and differential accessibility for different castes. Gurukkal (1991) establishes a definitive relation with these temples and the medieval agrarian system. Gurukkal observes that the temple was the centre of the formation of the landlord tenant relations, as well as occupational differentiation that led to the formation off the caste system. Temples thus acted as the locus for the spread of Brahmanical ideology, which was a pivotal force in establishing the social order and caste system (Ganesh, 2016).

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[27] Kosambi (1962) observes that secret rites were performed by sisterhood of priestesses in early West Africa among the Attoya tribe and any man entering the grove was required to join the sisterhood dressing like a woman for the rest of his life.

Vadakkiniyil (2014) sees the transitioning of names of sites of worships from *kavu, ara, kottam, maadam* to *kshetram* as a result of Brahmanical hegemony.

In present-day Kerala, based on ownership, there are three types of *kavus*: *kavus* maintained by individual families, groups of families and by the statutory agencies for temple management (Devaswom Board)[28] (Chandrashekara&Sankar,1998). The ownership and evolution of ownership of the *kavus* determine the nature of practices.[29] Gadgil & Chandran (1992, p.187) suggests that the clearance of sacred groves resulted in identifying wild woodland spirits and deities of the pre-Brahmanical societies with the Hindu god's pantheon. He adds that the practise has resulted in the installation of idols of Hindu gods in the groves or the deities of the groves are made minions of Hindu gods. Freeman (1999, p.238) referring to (Kalam, 1996) suggests that for decades there have been efforts by many 'tribal and lower-caste' worshippers to establish the kinds of higher-caste affiliations and improvements to their gods and ritual institutions. Many of the upper castes have been correspondingly policing the religion of the sacred groves against rituals involving sacrifice, liquor, possession, self-mutilation and so on. Menon (1994, p.45) remarks that many *tharavadus* had a few stone idols situated in a wooded corner of their backyards, where snake deities and other nature spirits were worshipped, which is termed as *kavus*. Further, Menon mentions that *kavus* were of various kinds. Still, generally, they were the focus of worship of a community within a region defined by the sphere of the overlordship of the dominant family or families managing the shrine. With authorities shifting permission had to be taken from the upper caste patrons and

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[28] Devaswom (Property of God) are socio-religious trusts that include members nominated by both government and public. They aim to manage Hindu temples and their properties and guarantee their smooth operation following traditional rituals and customs. The Devaswom system especially exists in Kerala, where most temples are either managed by Government of Kerala-controlled Devaswom or formed by private bodies/families. The possessions of each temple are considered to be the personal property of the presiding deity the temple. They are managed through a body of trustees who bear adherence to the presiding deity.

[29] Further discussed in Chapter 5

protectors of the institution for holding their rituals (Freeman, 1999). Traditions surrounding

kavu offers a counter-narrative to Brahmanical worship practices (Freeman, 2003).

Velichappad thullal can be a standalone ritual, can be associated with other rituals such

as *kallam ezhuthu pattu*,[30] *theyyam* and other similar rituals at *kavus*. All *theyyams* do not have

velichappads, but important deities do have (Damodaran,2008). Menon (1994, p.54) remarks

that a week before any *theyyam* performance, the priest *(komaram)* of the particular shrine

visits every house within the presumed area of influence of the religious community. The

procession is received at each house with drumming and showers of the rite (probably an

enactment of the thunder which augured heavy rains and a good crop). Most of the deities

worshipped were believed to belong to oppressed castes who had suffered injustice at the hands

of the superiors (Menon, 1994, p.5). The author further mentions that the festivals were marked

by the performance of a ritual dance called the *teyyaattam* which retold the circumstances of

the outrage to an audience.

Further, Kavalam (1991) narrates the depleting category of *velichappads* who dance on

a single foot at *kavus* at Nilambur in Kerala known as eighteen and a half oracles, half because

the last one only has half a sword.[31] These oracles made pronouncements as representing the

deity and had a particular rhythm to the movement which only gained as they proceeded to fast

tempo. Even when they broke coconuts against their foreheads, cut their foreheads with the

sword or wore red hot iron chain on their bodies as a mark of self-torture, they never went out

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[30] The Kalamezhuthu is a forty-day ritualistic festival beginning with the first of Vrischikam (Scorpio). The kalam is a unique drawing also called '*dhulee chithram*' or powder drawing. The artist uses the floor as his canvas. Kalamezhuthu pattu is performed as part of the rituals to worship and propitiate gods like Kaali, Ayyappan or Vettakkorumakan. This ritualistic art is a common feature of *kavus*, temples as well as noble households. The kalams or drawings are erased at the end of the ritual to the accompaniment of musical instruments like ilathalam, veekan chenda, kuzhal, kombu and chenda. The figures drawn usually have an expression of anger, and other emotions. Kalam in the Kali cult denotes a floor painting of the Goddess. To mark the end of the ritual of *Kalampattu*, the figure of Kali is wiped out, starting from the feet upwards; the breast is kept untouched. The powder used for the painting of the breasts is then distributed as offering to the devotees (Kavalam, 1991).
[31] Kavalam (1991, p.31) mentions that the ritual is to Lord Sashtha, named Sashtha believed to be the son born to Lord Shiva and his consort Parvathy while they were hunting in forests.

of rhythm. The coconut that was broken was the contributions made by wealthy families of Malabar. It is noted that the oracle in such cases breaks the coconuts from the large heaps on both his sides with both hands and this nonstop operation continued for hours until the heap consisting of 12,000 nuts exhausted (Kavalam, 1991, p.31). This practice has depleted when the land legislations hit the landlords. Another *kavu* based practice which sees the presence of *velichappads* is *Patayani*. The ritualistic dance Patayani means the array of ordinary people and the practice is associated with *kavus* of central Travancore.[32] It is a festival for 28 days which concludes on the Bharani day in the month of Meenam (March-April). At *Patayani* the *velichappad* who is from the Nayar caste gets possessed and dances to the rhythm and officiates the ritual of uprooting and placing the flagstaff marking the beginning of the festival with the help of the villagers (Kavalam, 1991). Another critical association of *velichappads* is with various festivities surrounding *kavus,* an aspect which the current study majorly focuses on. As it already mentioned in the present study research, the *velichappads* who are associated with Kodungallur Bharani festivities and the Sri Kurumba Kavu or Kodungallur Bhagavathi Kavu (Figure 1.1) is the focus.

1.2 Kodungallur Meena Bharani

Kudungallur Bharani unravels itself in multitudes of ways. At first, it is the feeling of ecstasy of celebration, of the frenzied rhythmic dance of *velichappads* accompanied by the songs loaded with sexual innuendoes. The blood oozing from the foreheads of the *velichappads*, from the wounds self-inflicted with the divine swords, fills one with curiosity and bewilderment (Figure 1.2). However, beyond this Kodungallur Bharani holds the social histories of the undocumented masses. Further, into the experience of the festival, one is bound to question one's initial perceptions of celebration. Logan (2000) remarks that after Onam, the Malayalam speaking people's major festival is the Kodungallur Meena Bharani. Bharani is one

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[32] See Paniker (1986), Swart (2000) for more on Patayani

of the twenty-seven asterisms that marks the progression of days through the Malayalam months.[33] The Bharani festival begins during the lunar month of Kumbham on the Bharani day. Bharani star is represented by the symbol of a hearth or fireplace and by an earthenware. It is also seen as homologous to the female sexual organ, yoni (Tarabout, 1986 in Gentes, 1992). Each of the twenty-seven days of the festival is marked by different rituals (Chandran, 1992). The beginning of the festival is with the flag hoisting ceremony done on the Bharani day of Kumbham month. The day of culmination of the festival is the Bharani day of the next month Meenam. Thus, Kodungallur Bharani is considered as a month-long festival, even though the key festivities happen in a week. It becomes an important site to enter as festivities surrounding Kodungallur Bharani is the largest conglomeration of *velichappads* in the state. According to the Travancore Dewaswom Board, about five lakh people are coming for the festival in one week, and there is an annual increase of 20-30% each year and is also a source of significant income for the Devaswom Board.[34] There is believed to be at least twenty thousand velichappads who participate in the festival.[35] This particular festival is marked as the festival of *velichappads*. The space of Kodungallur Bharani becomes the primary space of entry for the current study of *velichappads*. The festival is also important because it brings the focus to belief systems surrounding a *kavu* and the rootedness of the practice to the *kavu* practices.

Kodungallur has an important place in the religious history of India (Adarsh, 2013).[36] Particularly, Kodungallur Bharani finds a place in several historical writings about Kerala.

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[33] The Malayalam calendar or the Kolla Varsham has been in place since CE 825. This calendar is referred to when most of our events and festivals are held. See appendix for the details of Malayalam months and corresponding English months.

[34] Oral estimate, Devaswom Officials, Interview, Kodungallur, March 2017

[35] Oral estimate, Shibu Swamy Velichappad, Telephonic Conversation, November 2020

[36] The ancient harbour of Muziris is believed to be located around the present day Kodungallur. Kodungallur hosts markers of the beginning of Christianity and Islam in the Indian subcontinent. Cheraman Mosque regarded as the oldest mosque in the Indian sub-continent is located at Kodungallur. However, despite the new emerging importance to the area through the Muziris Heritage Project, the museum of the Cheraman mosque is not developed enough. The Kerala state budget of 2017 allocated 50 crores for the Muziris heritage project. There was also an announcement of a Museum adjacent to Kodungallur temple in the budgetary allocations. During my visits I was often taken as a researcher studying Muziris. St Thomas Church is located at the old nearby port town of Azhikode. Azhikode now is seemingly an old and rusty place, the place a witness to many exchanges in history. The Church is a renovated structure and accommodates regular visitors. One can find shops in the area that are

Logan (2000) describes that earlier there was no temple for the Kodungallur Bhagavathi, there was only a platform attached to the pipal tree. Temple and the idol came much later, and the festivals began with the purpose of fighting epidemics. Thurston (1909, p.104) in his seminal work Castes and Tribes of South India writes about Kodungallar temple as a Tiyan pilgrimage[37] thus,

> The Bhagavathi temple at Kodungallur in Cochin territory on the coast is another favourite place of pilgrimage among the Tiyans. All classes of people, with the exception of Brahmans, undertake this pilgrimage. Everyone under a vow, proceeding to the festival, which takes place in February or March, carried with him a cock, which is beheaded at the shrine. Under the Perumals, pilgrimage to Kodungallur was somewhat compulsory. This temple was a fruitful source of revenue to the state, for not only the Tiyans, but the fisherman and artisan castes had their own temple in every tara in the land, and the Muppan-the Komaram-of each temple was under an obligation to contribute yearly gifts to the temple at Kodungallur. (Vol VII, p.104)

Even today, Ezhavas continues to be the most prominent caste among the devotees. Most velichappads also comes from the Ezhava castes. Iyer (1928) remarks that Kodungallur Bhagavthi as the guardian deity of Pulayas, and on auspicious occasions, certain Pulayas get possessed to become *velichappads*.[38] Panikkar (1900) gives one of the earliest available descriptions on the Kodungallur Bharani festival but written from the perspective of colonial historiography. Author's upper-caste view of looking at the festival as something that is despised is seen through the narrative. He remarks that the Brahmins are purposely excluded

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named as Craganore and Muziris, a transformation that is happening to the place with respect to the popularisation of the Muziris Heritage project. The place also happens to be indicative of the vibrant socio- cultural spaces that once existed and continues even today.

[37] Thiyya/Ezhava pilgrimage

[38] Pulayas were one of the most oppressed caste groups in Kerala and was engaged in agricultural labour. Jeffrey (2016) mentions Pulayas and Parayas as the ex-slave caste. Alexander (1968) remarks that Pulayas worshipped non-Sanskritic gods which later underwent transformation.

from participation in the pooja ceremonies as the extra sanctity that Brahmins might give would increase the power of the goddess to a dangerous extent (1900, p.107). Further, the pilgrimages undertaken to the temple during the occasion are potent enough to safeguard the pilgrims and their friends and relations from the dangerous attacks of cholera and smallpox. Hence thousands of people from Malabar participates in the festival annually. Panikkar gives a descriptive account of the festival and the details of the pilgrimage.

> Every family makes a point of undertaking this sacred mission. People arrange to start on it at an auspicious moment on a fixed day in small isolated bodies. Rice, salt, chillies, curry-stuffs, betel- leaves and nuts, a little turmeric powder and pepper, and above all, a number of cocks form an almost complete paraphernalia of the pilgrimage. These are gathered and preserved in separate bundles inside a large bag. When the appointed hour comes, they throw this bag on their shoulders, conceal their money in their girdles, and, with a native fashioned umbrella in the one hand and a walking stick in the other, they start each from his own house to meet the brother -pilgrims at the rendezvous.

> They cook their own meals on the way; which consist of the ordinary rice preparations and plenty of fish and flesh. Hundreds of gallons of arrack and toddy are consumed during the festivals. In short, you can hardly find a single sober pilgrim during their continuance. The pilgrims reach in their dirty attire. Their very words smell strongly of a mixture of arrack and undigested animal food. They bathe and have their meals again. The temple premises are crowded to overflowing (p.108).

Much of the practices have changed with the times. It is no more a pilgrimage, as Panikkar (1900) describes. However, even today Bharani festival is one of the sites of disruption which does not seem to follow the logic of the normative order of the society. Neither does it follow the conventional puritan perception of devotions.

Induchudan (1969) remarks that the festival attracts thousands of communities except Brahmin from all over Kerala. Further, there existed different days for people from different castes to arrive at the festival (Induchudan,1969, p.104). The practice even if may have had existed in the past is not followed these days keenly. Conversations with the devotees show that not everyone in the area is aware of who holds the rights of particular rituals. However, some rights are given to certain non- Brahmin caste groups and families in the festivities even today. It is the right of Kudumbi caste from Kunnamkulam, Thrissur to hoist the flag that marks the beginning of the festival. The Kudumbi are traditionally a Konkani-speaking farming community residing in Kerala (Schenk-Sandbergen, 1988).[39] Valath (1991) says that the main agricultural labourers in the islands around Kochi have been from the Pulaya and Kudumbi castes.[40] The Kudumbis consider Sri Krumba Devi of Kodungallur as their kuladevi (most devoted goddess).[41] Thus, the rights to hoist the flags that begin the festival lays with an oppressed community, a practice which devotees claim marks the rights.

After the flag hoisting, the second most important event that happens is the '*kozhikallu modal*', meaning covering the cock stones, which is the present-day symbolic representation of cock sacrifice. Kodungallur Bharani was also known as the Cock Festival of Craganore (Logan, 2000; Panikkar, 1900) mainly because of the practice of cock sacrifice that prevailed at the festival. Induchudan (1969, p.104) observes that the sacrifice of cocks commenced six or seven days before the Bharani day and cocks were sacrificed by their heads being severed by a sharp knife and the blood split on the two stones that stand covered with the sand outside the circumambulation around the temple. Now the actual cock sacrifice is replaced by certain

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[39] *Census Report of India*, 1961 – Volume VII, Kerala (p.210) states, "as to the fact that they were originally inhabitants of the area north Goa, there can be no doubt for the language, the ornament and the mode of dress of the woman show striking similarities with the present inhabitants of that area, proclaiming common origin. They are believed to have traveled by country crafts and landed at the sea port of towns Kerala which accounts for their concentration in places like Cranganore, Cochin, Parur, Kayamkulam, Alleppey, Purakkad and Quilon."

[40] The community is officially classified as being within the Other Eligible Communities (SC) by Kerala state Government. See https://bcdd.kerala.gov.in/communities/oec-list/ accessed on 10 November 2020.

[41] See http://www.kssonline.org.in/srikurumba.php accessed on 10 November 2020

symbolic acts. Earlier the sacrifice was commenced by a Nayar belonging to a house known as Kodungallur Bhagavathi Veetu, meaning Kodungallur Goddess's house, and the cocks sacrificed by the representative of the house was brought from the *tharavadus* of Thacholi Otenan and Karampilly Kurup in Malabar (Induchudan, 1969, p.104). Several historical accounts point towards the prevalence of cock sacrifice that earlier prevailed in the festival. Panikkar (1900, p.108) writes,

> The popular idea is, the greater the number of cocks sacrificed, the greater is the efficacy of the pilgrimage. Hence men vie with one another in the number of cocks that they carry on the journey. The sacrifice is begun, and then there takes place a regular scramble for the sanctified spot reserved for this butchering ceremony. Now, one man holds a cock by the trunk, and another pulls out its neck, and in the twinkling of an eye, by the intervention of a sharpened knife, the head is severed from the trunk. The blood then gushes forth in forceful and continuous jets, which is poured directly on a granite piece specially reserved. Then, another is similarly slaughtered and then as many as each pilgrim can bring. The same process of butchering is also taken up by thousands of others, and in no length of time, the whole of the temple yard is converted into one horrible expanse of blood, rendering it too slippery to be safely walked over. The piteous cries and death throes of the poor devoted creatures greatly intensify the horror of the scene. The stench, emanating from the blood mixing with the nauseating smell of arrack, renders the occasion all the more revolting.

The standpoint of the author has much to be problematised, particularly with his attribution of 'horror' to the scene. The author placing himself outside the ritual experiences finds the experience nauseating. The account can be seen as an indication of the prevalence of the cock sacrifice. Kesavan (1976), in his autobiography,[42] shares his experience of going for

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[42] C. Kesavan was the Chief Minister of Travancore-Cochin during 1950–1952. He was born in an Ezhava family in 1891 at Kollam in the then princely state of Travancore. Kesavan was influenced by Padmanabhan Palpu, the

Kodungallur Bharani at the age of seven (in the year 1898). He too mentions of heaps of cocks and goat sacrifice that used to happen at the Kodungallur Bharani.

Cock sacrifices and other animal sacrifices at the festival was banned in 1953, after the introducing of animal cruelty act.[43] The practice of cock sacrifice is replaced by '*kozhikallu moodal*'. The ritual happens at the Northside, near the lamp post of the temple. The two big stones known as the *kozhikkallu* (cock stones) is placed in a burrowed pit and then covered by a red cloth, by those from the Bhagavathi Veetu (*veetu* meaning house). The cock brought from the Thacholi Veetu is offered at the place, with no sacrifice. The area of laying red cloth holds significance throughout the festival. Many devotees over the festival's days lay a symbolic red cloth at the spot. It is important to note that in the earlier times this would have been cock sacrifice. The heaps of cloth piled-up is removed very often by the authorities. It is also a common sight to see the *velichappads* entering from the north side circumambulation space where the red clothes are laid. Immediately after the *kozhikallumoodal* devotees start singing the Bharani songs, the ceremony marks the beginning of the arrival of pilgrims and devotees from across the state. The people told me of the place that *kozhikallumoodal* marks the actual start of the festival. The festival is a spontaneous moment and catharsis of everyday passion and dreams, and something that is a laboratory and antithetical (Merrifield, 2006). Even though festivals drastically differed from the concepts of everyday, they are not separate from it. For

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social reformer who was a member of the Ezhava community and a founder of the Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana association. He became an activist for the Ezhava caste, advocating a better socio-economic position for them, and in the 1930s he suggested that they should leave Hinduism. He was a self-proclaimed atheist. Kesavan wrote an unfinished autobiography, consisting of two volumes that described his life up to the time of his political eminence.

[43] The Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Bill, was first in 1953, was passed in 1960. Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act (1960), criminalizes cruelty to animals, though exceptions are made for the treatment of animals used for food and scientific experiments. The act however makes a provision under heading Miscellaneous [Chapter VI, Heading 28]: 'Saving as respects manner of killing prescribed by religion: Nothing contained in this Act shall render it an offence to kill any animal in a manner required by the religion of any community.' (Accessed from https://web.archive.org/web/20140401222504/http://www.moef.nic.in/sites/default/files/No.59.pdf on 25 Oct 2020)

people in the area, beginning of the festival is marked when there is an influx of devotees. Space was reminding a carnivalesque.[44]

The queue to offer prayer at the sanctum sanctorum can run to a few kilometres. It is not easy to differentiate people who come only for the *darshan* in the days of the festivities from those who are part of groups of *velichappads*. A large number of devotees who come for the festival are Dalits, Adivasis and Ezhavas from North Kerala. Most devotees who come from the northern districts come in organised groups. They belong to the same family, locality, area or groups with claim to one *kavu* or site of worship. In the same days, the pilgrims throw to the inner confines of the temple, over the roof, small packages containing turmeric, pepper, dried prawns and other articles. Some also make/throw the offering of coins, coconut and live cock. With the continuous flow of devotees, spectators and *velichappads*, the place becomes a space of immense activity. Most devotees who come in the groups led by *velichappads* stay in the premises of the *kavu* during the entire span of the festivities. Some of those who are more affluent take room in nearby hotels. Sometimes those leading the groups stay at hotels nearby, and other *velichappads* along with their families remain in the premises of the temples. The area has also become primarily commercialised. Some families rent their premises for the devotees who come to stay.

Velichappads majorly starts reaching for Kodungallur Bharani mostly after Revathi, two days before the main Bharani day. *Velichappads* mostly enter the *kavu* premises possessed, and their priority is not to stand in a queue to offer prayers. *Velichappads* enter the space fiercely dancing and moving. The rhythmic movements continue during the circumambulation (Figure 1.3). *Velichappads* adorning red clothes with *pallival* (divine swords) in their hands,

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[44] Deriving the term carnivalesque from Bakhtin (1984), however the experience of Kodungallur Bharani cannot be fully conceptualised by the term. According to Bakthin, carnival has to be understood as not subscribing to any existing structures of state, Church or Priests but rather deferring from it. The opposition is not between different conceptual understanding of a commoner but rather between two opposing world views i.e a political conflict between official and the unofficial. Carnival is thus not a spectacle as everyone is a part of it and living in it not forgetting that the state puts temporal and state borders to it.

anklets and *aramani* (belts with bells), singing earthy songs, dancing, throbbing and circumabulating the temple and neighboring area becomes a common sight. It is believed that God enters the body of the *komaram* through the sword. The *komaram* then becomes God (Anil,2018). Induchudan (1969, p.108) describes *velichappads* at Kodungallur Bharani[45] thus,

> 'They wear a particular costume; this consists of a crimson cloth around the waist, with a metal belt having bells in it, anklets around the anklets tinkling with beads inside, bangles on his hands, also tinkling as the oracle moves, and a sword of a particular shape, something like a sickle in his right hand. He has long hairs untied, flowing at the back and his brows and his chest are painted with sandal, red vermilion and turmeric.' (p.108)

The colours that are prominent in the attire of a *velichappad* during the Bharani is red, yellow and white, the most notable being red. Yellow and red are believed to be the colours of the goddess, the colour of turmeric and blood respectively (Beck, 1969; Fueller, 1980). A standard white *mundu*(dhoti) with red cloth wrapped over it and upper cloth is the most commonly seen clothing in other places for *velichappads*. At Kodungallur Bharani the most common attire is a red saree draped in half. Anklets and waist anklets are also worn. All *velichappads* at the Kodungallur Bharani carries a sword. The *pallival*, divine swords are the main object of worships in shrines and *kavus* without an idol. The ornaments and the sword is made of brass. The swords are seen as the embodiment of the deity (Namboodiri, 1989). The sword in the hand of a *velichappad* is connected to the belief in the deity (Namboodiri, 1989). The sword of a *velichappads* in Sri Kurumba[46] *kavus* are in the shape of 9, and others carry a

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[45] Induchudan (1969, p.108) further observes that in the past to prove they were real spokesperson of Goddess they were supposed to work miracles and then become something like permanent officers of the temple. The legends go that to become a *velichappad* at the Kodungallur temple they should have lifted a very big granite stone singly and of having shown in his palm at one stroke scars of small pox. Now there is no permanent Velichappad for the Kodungallur temple.

[46] Kurumba is the sankritised form of an indigenous word used for Mariyamma or the goddess of smallpox. The word Kuru is known as small pox also. Sreekurumba remains as a Dravidian goddess exclusively in the shrines of Tiyyas and other communities (Kurup, 1977).

sword in the shape of 4 (Klari, 2002). Hair of the *velichappads* is left loose. Caldwell (1999) remarks that in Dravidian culture, it is understood as a source of sexuality and aggression being left open during the conduct of the rituals (Caldwell,1999). All *velichappads* are dressed in ways resembling goddess.[47]

During the peak of the performance, *velichappads* cut themselves with the sword on their forehead. This is seen as an act of ultimate closeness with the divine, which gives sanctity to the *velichappad*. Spilling of blood from the forehead is also considered an essential step in the becoming of a *velichappad*.[48] Some *velichappads* also give prophecies or give other utterances during the act. In the culmination of the act, they mostly fall unconscious. Though the *velichappad* becomes possessed in the act of impersonation of a divine spirit, it does not leave them in a completely unconscious state. *Velichappads* follow the rhythms, attempts for the perfection of movement even when in the state of possession. Sometimes these work as a vent of expressions of anger, anguish or sometimes pleasure. The myth is recreated with its mythical and ritualistic imagination.

The most significant event is also the event of the culmination of the festival, known as the *kavu theendal*, which happens on the Ashwathi day of the festival. The literal meaning of *kavu theendal* is often disputed and have implications on how the event is perceived. Theendal originates from the Malayalam word '*theenduka*' meaning to touch, to touch and pollute or to be affected. *Kavu theendal* is commonly understood as 'polluting' the kavu. Kuttikkad (2015) observes that there is an argument that the event was known as *kavu pookkal* (meaning blossoming the kavu) before the advent of Brahmanism. In Tamil, *theendal* (*tintal*) also means adorning, decorating, coming together etc. In everyday spoken Malayalam, *theendal* is also used to denote the menstruating period.

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[47] Off late one can also see great diversity in the dressing of *Velichappads.* Discussed further in Chapter 5 while talking about the changes in tradition.
[48] Vijayan (2008) remarks that blood is a symbol of fertility, the spilling of blood symbolises the washing away of sins.

On *kavu theendal*, the culmination of the festival is precisely twenty-seven days after the start in the lunar month of Meenam. Different groups assume their positions on their respective *aalthara* platforms in the temple premises after the pooja on the same day. Induchudan (1969, p.105) narrates the events on the day. The Atikal, a priest who is not a Brahmin but belongs to a particular sect of the priestly caste, performs the service of *thrichandanappoticharthal* which means the smearing of the idol with holy sandal powder. After the service when the Atikal come out the doors. The Valia or the Senior Raja of Kodungallur then gets on the eastern entrance of the peepul tree, standing in front of the east entrance of the temple and spreads out a green coloured umbrella. The Raja of Kodungallur thus gives sanction for the *kavutheendal* to commence even today, an act which marks the rights which Raja holds. The family of Raja enjoys privileges in several rituals, hierarchies are intact in seemingly subversive spaces. The space for recasting old into new is historically steeped in tradition and sanctioning of authorities (Lefebvre, 1947).[49] The moment the green coloured umbrella is spread, Palakya Velan, a representative from the Velan caste first touches the *kavu* and begins the process of *kavu theendal*. Surging masses, mainly Vadakkars (meaning people from the north), follow Palakya Velan in a frenzy, circumambulate the *kavu* and then retire. The devotees leave after going and taking a bath at sea. Following *kavutheendal,* the *kavu* is closed for one week. The closing of the *kavu* after the *kavutheendal* festival for seven days is seen as part of the menstrual cycle of the Mother Earth as well (Kuttikkadu, 2015).[50] The Kali according to the myth spends a week in peace and enjoyment, drinking, eating and singing in the company of devotees at *Pulakkavu (Keezhkkavu)* managed by the Pulaya caste,

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[49] Another significant organisation at Kodungallur Kavu is the *Onnil Kure Aayiram* (one less from thousand), a key decision-making body with functions attached to the Kodungallur Kavu. It is believing that *Onnil Kure Aayiram* is an age-old organisation having its origin in the myths attached to the temple. This organisation is believed to have held a significant function in maintaining the law and order of the place, in the name of Devi (Chandran, 1990). Only members of the Nayar caste have entry to this organisation, a significant point on how caste relationships are solidified. Logan (2000) makes references to several such warrior castes in protection of temples in Malabar Manual.

[50] The annual menstruation course of the goddess Kamakhya is worshipped in Kamakhya Temple, Assam (Singh, 2011).

which is located about 300 meters from the main Kurumba Kavu (Figure 1.4 & Figure 1.5). Induchudan (1969, p.108) remarks that the conception of pollution may have been a distortion included in the later times when the caste system and untouchability became rigid in Kerala in the middle ages. Further, he observes that *kavutheendal* have been misunderstood and misinterpreted as the touch of those castes who were believed to be 'polluting', in the demonic caste hierarchy.[51] The event can be observed to have an immediate dramatic shape, metaphoric content and social context to it (Geertz, 2000). In a transitional society from the traditional peasantry to urban elites, it becomes difficult to choose the meaning of a given symbol appropriate to a presented social context (Geertz, 1957). Following Scott (1990)[52] it may also be looked at from the perspective of 'hidden transcripts'; the hegemony appears as the 'public transcript' and could seem to hide various forms of disagreement and anti-hegemonic thought and conduct. The people in power do not see the ideas and visions kept below the surface by the dissenting groups and individuals. People may pretend to follow the domination, but they, in reality, are not, they maintain their cultural and social format beyond the perceptions of the powerful.

There is also an assertion of identity by the *velichappads* during the festivities. Like in the conversations, comments such as 'as an Adivasi, we have strict rituals, and Devi likes it' or 'as a person from the lower caste we are closer to the Goddess' or 'there are more women

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[51] Kerala had some of the most heinous practices of untouchability. Jeffrey (2016) observes that certain castes were held to be so impure that even the sight was seen as polluting the superiors. Thus, it was not simply untouchability, but unseeability that existed in Kerala. Francis (1863, p.392) mentions that in the 1920s, a low-caste man put 'his left hand on his breast, and his right over his mouth', if he dared to speak to his superiors, 'for fear his breath may pollute the air'. In the early 20th century orthodox higher castes considered themselves to be polluted if Ezhava came within ten or fifteen metres (Jeffrey, 2016).

[52] Scott (1990) talks about the resistance of subordinate groups in his influential work called the 'Domination and the Arts of Resistance' through a terminology 'hidden transcript'. Hidden transcripts are often used in discussions on power and resistance and describes forms of resistance and dissent that are kept out of those in power. These hidden transcripts only come into surface only during the times of conflict. His work gives examples of the slave society in 19th century US wherein on the surface the slaves appeared conforming to the slavery and being submissive to the orders. However, there were ways in which the slaves formed a community particularly in slave quarters was solidarity and cultures of resistance. The Blue music he says was an outcome of the hidden transcripts in American slave society.

oracles because women have more divinity in them'.[53] Among these what needs to be given particular emphasis is the presence of women *velichappads* in the crowd. The women *velichappads* are large in numbers at the festival. They are mostly middle-aged and older women. Women velichappads is seen to let go of themselves in frenzy and ecstasy. People, primarily me, in large groups, sing songs loaded with sexual innuendos around them (Figure 1.6). During the times of festivities, the women *velichappads* do not care who is watching them.

The women *velichappads* occupy public space with much authority. Women take over space in a state of possession; Sleeping in public, taking a bath in public, dancing uncaring of their clothes and the body in public. They can be a respected goddess in public. Sometimes they use those in their favour of freeing for a few days. It is also the only event in Kerala's public sphere wherein women come in these large numbers[54], let go of the inhibition, dance in a trance and own the space to become the ritual owners. Lefebvre (1947) sees rural festivals as events in which emotions flow freely, which are otherwise held back because of collective discipline and necessities of work.[55] A rural festival is a 'veritable nemesis of insurgent forms of modern alienation', he writes. In the paradigm of fests, the shackles of enslavement are loosened and are against bureaucratic domination and systematised ordering. The ownership of space, even though momentarily, draws a researcher's attraction. The groups are mostly led by a *Moopam*, a senior one which in almost all cases is a male. The structures are in place.[56] In the upcoming chapters, I further dwell into various aspects surrounding the being and becoming

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[53] Further explored in Chapters followed

[54] According to the authorities about 5 lakh people attend the festival every year nearly half of which is women. The number has been steadily increasing every year.

[55] Lefebvre (1947) studies the feast of fools of France which is characterized by inebriated orgies, risque dances, running berserk, abjection of church rituals etc.

[56] 1917 Mithavaadhi paper of C Krishnan notes that there were boundaries fixed for thiyyas at Kodungallur Bharani with iron fencing. However, during the Kodungallur festivities anyone could enter the temple (Kuttikkadu, 2015).

of *velichappads*. Here I explore further into the myths and histories that the pilgrims, particularly *velichappads,* hold close to.

1.2.1 *Mother Goddesses*

Velichappads at Kodungallur Bharani worships and identifies themselves with many variations of mother goddesses. Rao (1973) remarks that nature worship gradually evolved to honour Mother Goddess, which later also got transformed to Shakti worship from where belief system around several local goddesses arose. The Mother Goddesses are addressed with several names (Kurup, 1977). The site of Kodungallur Bharani represents the political and religious journey of Kodungallur, which is connected by the fact that there are two stories of Kannaki and Kali as the goddess of the temple of Kodungallur. The *velichappads* are supposed to be the spokesmen of the goddess, at present that of Goddess Kali, are a form of self-torture and shedding of blood (Induchudan 1969, p.108). Induchudan (1969) considers *velichappads* as part of the blood sacrifice practices associated with Kannaki cult. According to the story of Kannaki in Chilapatikaram, a Pandyan king had butchered thousands of goldsmiths for pleasing Kannaki. There are no records available to confirm if any human sacrifice ever happened in Kodungallur. However, some devotees believe human sacrifices used to occur at Kodungallur *kavu*.

The legend goes that the Chera[57] king built the temple in his capital Vanchi[58] , present-day Kodungallur in honour of Kannaki. Kannaki is the main character of Elango Adikal's Tamil classic epic Chilappathikaram. Kannaki possesses the mythical imagination of Tamils and others in the subcontinent for more than fifteen hundred years now. Illango, the younger

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[57] The Cheras established themselves as an important poer in Kerala in the early centuries of the Christian era. They followed the collateral system of succession (Kuttuvazhcha) according to which the eldest member of the family, wherever he lived, whether at Vanchi, Karur or Tondi, ascended the throne. An outline of the of the history of the first Chera princes is furnished in Patittupattu (Ten Decade), and this remains the document of reference for historians to access the period. (Menon, 1967)

[58] The terms Vanchi and Karur (Karuvur) is used as synonyms in Tamil works while describing Chera capital.

brother of the Chera King, Cenkuttuvan (2nd C. C.E), took the story of Kannaki and Kovalan from the oral tradition and put it into writing. As an epic Chilapathikaram, as part of Sangam[59] literature, broke away from the domination on Sanskrit. The main protagonist in Chilappathikaram, Kannaki has far penetrated the socio-cultural fabric of South India (Choondal, 1978).

There are several rituals in Kerala that directly address the story of Kannaki and Kovalan. There is a ritual act called 'Darika Vadham' which is performed by people belonging to the Paraya community. This is mainly seen in places around Palakkad, Malappuram, Thrissur districts and happens in Bhadrakali temples (Klari, 2012). There is another ritual named Kovilan Kuthu that happens in Palakkad performed by Adivasi community Irular which mainly narrates the story of Kovalan and Kannaki. Another ritual called Kannyarkali which again tells the story of Kannaki is an agricultural festival that happens in places such as Kizhakkencheri, Vadakkenchery, Kuzhalmandham, Chittilanchery, Kuthanoor, Alathur, Nenmara, Koduvayoor, Chittor etc. in Palakkad district. The members sing the ritual songs known as Kannaki thottam and Manimanka thottam of the community known as Manan and Pulayar. The songs deal with the story of Chilapathikaram, with many variations sung. The songs give an insight into the social situation that existed in Kerala in which inhuman treatment was meted out to certain castes (Kavalam, 1991, p.104).

A summary of Chilapatikaram is given here.[60] At the time of the story, South India was divided into three kingdoms, Chola, Pandya and Chera (Kurup,1977b). The incidents in the epic start in the Chola empire, continue in the Pandyan Kingdom and end in the Chera empire and divided into Pukarkanda, the Madurakkanda and the Vanchikkanda respectively. The epic is focused on the life of Kannaki and Kovalan, two ordinary people from the merchant class

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[59] The Sangam age comprised of the first five centuries of Christian Era. Kerala during this period formed larger unit of Tamilakam.

[60] Taken from multiple sources. See Dhandayudham (1975), Pandian (1993), Sreenivasan (1982).

and their journey through love, deception, anger and redemption. Kannaki and Kovalan belong to Peruvanigar Kudi, a merchant community of that period (Kurup,1977). The main thread of the story revolves around Kovalan, the son of a wealthy merchant from Pukar who married Kannaki, described as the 'beautiful' daughter of another merchant. At the same time, there was a dancer named Madhavi in Pukar. Kovalan leaves Kannaki, falling in love with Madhavi, on whom he gradually spent all his wealth. Kannaki lived in great sadness in the absence of Kovalan and did not wear ornaments, or neither smiled in his absence. In the absence of Kovalan, Kannaki was advised by the saintly lady Devandi that all the suffering Kannaki faced resulted from some sin committed in their previous life and advised her to go and worship the God of Love. Kannaki refused to do this, stating that for a faithful wife, there shall be no other deity than the husband she has married. One day Kovalan, while listening to a song, realises his wrongdoings, leaves Madhavi and returns to his wife Kannaki, who then forgives and accepts him. He ultimately incurred with heavy loss in his trade and finally asked Kannaki to protect him. Madhavi then learns how her mother had exhorted money from Kovalan, regrets and returns all the money to Kovalan's dad. She then retires to a Buddhist nunnery. Her daughter, by Kovalan, is the protagonist of another great Sangam Tamil epic, *Manimegalai*. They then move to Madurai (located in present-day Tamil Nadu), with a hope to revive the trade and regain the lost fortune. They arrived at Madurai on a busy day. Kannaki is put under the women in a cow's herds colony as Kovalan set out to sell one gold anklet in the city. When Kovalan attempts to sell his wife's anklet, the local goldsmith who had previously stolen the Pandyan queen's anklet, brought the anklet before the Pandya king and made the king believe that it was his queen's lost anklet. The king straightaway passes the orders of beheading Kovalan even without finding out the truth. On hearing the demise of her husband Kovalan, Kannaki collapsed on the ground. After she regained consciousness, she was seized by an intense fever of anger and vengeance at the injustice penetrated on an innocent man. Enraged at the injustice,

Kannaki walked into the king's court and broke her anklets to prove the innocence of her husband. Her anklet was filled with emerald, while the queen's anklet was filled with pearls. The king lost his life, and his queen died shortly too because of the disgrace and guilt. After this, Kannaki went out into the streets of Madurai, tore off her left breast in a fury, unable to quench her anger. The entire Madurai burned down in her curse. At the same time, Goddess of Madura appeared before Kannaki and explained to her the reasons for the happenings. She attributed it to the deeds of her previous birth. In Chilappatikaram, one can see that Kannaki undergoes a radical transformation. The silent and modest Kannaki throughout this entire poem now unleashes the full fury towards the end. She confronts the king, establishes the righteousness of her cause and proves her husband innocent. After fourteen days, she enters the Chera kingdom. Hearing about the glorious story the then reigning King of the Chera empire decided to erect a memorial for her.

R Parthasarathy (2004), the translator of Chilapathikaram to English sees it as an epic tradition which subverts the androcentric bias of epics and one that displaces the semi-divine warrior and the heroic ethos that surrounds him with a mortal woman who is eventually transformed into divinity. The most popular belief on the origin of the temple is based on the myth of Parasurama building the temple for Kali for protection from the demon Darikan. The site has transformed into an ever-changing arena of identity crisis and identity assertion. Menon (1967) remarks that Ilango Adikal was a Jain prince who lived at Trikana Matilakam, which was a famous centre of Jain religion and learning. Kurup (1977) also cites Jain religion as the main inspiration for Illango adikal to compose Chilappatikaram, and it has become a book of general education based on the theory of Karma and its reaction. The author was conscious of two types of cultural currents of his days- the classical and the folk and attempts to integrate those currents of folk religions with religions of the elite- also giving a vivid description of Aryanisation (Kurup, 1977). It consists of different categories of information, history merging

into myth, caste customs, the spread of Brahmanism, religious rites, military lore and descriptions of city and country, thus elating itself to a category of seminal text. The worship of chaste woman was prevalent in the Sangam period, and there has been deification of folk heroines throughout in South India. The legend of Kannaki had influenced many folk songs composed to worship several other goddesses in Kerala, thus incorporating the Kannaki story in the broader Kali cult or Sakti cult in the region. People coming for Kodungallur Bharani also go to other temples and sites of worship within the area. One such is the Thiruvanchikulam temple. The temple is believed to the place where Kannaki had arrived after the destruction of Madurai. Siva has the main idol here. This temple holds much significance for the *velichappads* visiting Bharani.

The Kali worship in Kerala is associated with the story of Darika.[61] The stories of Kali in Kerala are interconnected with several different local stories and myths. There are several variations of the Kali- Darika story in circulation in written form and among the devotees.[62] One of them is given here.[63] Darika, a demon, after deep ascetic practice, secured strength and invincibility. He received a particular blessing from the Brahma. According to the Brahma's blessing, a drop of his blood would reproduce thousands of Darika and no 'man' could kill him. The troubled people affected by the plunder of approached Siva for some resort. A massive flaming form of Kali emerged from the third eye of Siva with the mission to destroy Darika. Unsuccessful in a battle to kill Darika, Kali disguised as an old Brahmin woman and went to Darika's wife Mandodhari, who knew the secret mantra. After tricking her into sharing the mantra, Kali returned to the war after this. Vetalam spread her giant tongue over the battlefield, consuming Darika's blood as Kali cut off his head. Mandodhari got angry and began to do penance in revenge. Siva appeared and gave her a few drops of sweat from his body,

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[61] Variations of Kali include Mahakali, Bhadrakali, Bhairavi, Mahisarumardhini (Hastings, 1918)
[62] See Aiyappan (1931), MacDaniel (2010), Mascetti (2003), Mohanty (2009), Thampuran (1936)
[63] The most common narration by the pilgrims

saying that the person she sprinkled the sweat drops would suffer from smallpox. She threw the sweat drops at Kali to take revenge for her husband's death. Instantly Kali fell on the floor, and she got smallpox on her body. Hearing Kali's cries for help, Siva created Ghantakarnan from his ear wax. Ghantakarnan licked his sister's body to remove smallpox, but could not touch her face, which remained scarred. The frantic Kali returned to Kalilasam, holding Darika's head in her left hand. On seeing the ferocious goddess, Siva attempted to calm her asking her to dance upon his naked body and release her temper. Doing this, she was satisfied.

Bhattacharya (1996) observes that the valorous fight of Devi against the asuras was the most that could be given to the struggling people, symbolically, in the historical period wherein these stories emerged. Achutha Menon (1943) remarks that there would not be a single Hindu community who would not have worshipped one or the form of Kali, and set a worship site for the deity. Several Kali concepts in Kerala such as Ottamulachi, Pillatheeni has got to do with the non-Brahmanical tradition of the state. Achutha Menon (1943) observes that the worship place of Kali are *kavus.* This contrasts to *kshetram*, which is the key worship site of Vishnu and Siva (Kuttikkadu, 2005).

The devotees may address the goddess in various names of mother goddesses, Bhagavathi being the most commonly used. Bhagavathi is rarely depicted in mythology or iconography as being the consort of a male deity but stands on her own (Caldwell, 2003). Most communities in Kerala worship her in their distinct ways ranging from simple possession rituals to more orchestrated Sanskritic rituals. Menon (1967) observes Bhagavathi as a Hindu deity who was assimilated from the Jain pantheon. Many ritual traditions associated with the worship of Bhagavathi reflect particular social histories of Kerala (Caldwell,1999). Caldwell (2001) describes Bhagavathi as a fierce Goddess who became the predominant deity of the martial temple-owners in erstwhile Kerala, such that each king had his local installation of the goddess. She was considered to be a guardian matrilineal ancestor and protector of his family's political

interests. Kinship relationships were often ascribed to the different Bhagavathi and this according to her reflected actual networks of the political alliance through marriage. Propitiation of one's own local Bhagavathi ensured the power and success of the kingdom and its dependents, Caldwell suggests.

Thurston (1909) mentions that even though the Sakti worship was in degeneration in the period (of writing) in every *tara* (platform), there is a Bhagavathi temple for Tiyans, where Tiyans officiate as priests, which Thurston denotes as *komaran* (*velichappad*). He describes *komarams* as clothed in red, and embellished with red sandal paste mixed with turmeric. Further, he remarks that, Bhagavathi is always associated with various jungle spirits or gods, whose *komarams* always wear black. In addition to this, Thurston observes that in the worship practices of Panars, *velichappads* had a crucial role to play mainly concerning giving oracles. Thurston (1909, Volume VI p.69) writes about Kattu Bhagavathi or Bhagavathi of woods worshipped by Paniyan. He observes that the shrines in her honour are to be found at most centres of the caste. They contain no image, but a box with clothing and jewels presented to her by the devout. An annual ceremony lasting a week is held in her honour, at which the *komaram* and a kind of priest, called Nolambukaran, take the chief part. The *komaran* dresses in the goddess' clothing and the divine afflatus descend upon him, and he prophesies both good and evil. Further, he talks about Bhagavathi and *velichappad* when discussing the Paraiyars caste as well. Thurston remarks that a few days before the festival, a piece of cloth is given to the *velichappad*, accompanied by others with drums and fife and a basket. The *velichappad* then goes to every Nayar house daily for seven days and receives presents of paddy, wherewith to cover the Kodungallur Bharani festival's expenses.

Kurup (1977b) studies the deification of Kannaki and the connections with Kali in-depth. The Kali worship had been popular during the period of Cilappatikaram. The author of Cilappatikaram mention the story of Darika as being pierced in the chest by a goddess. The tale

of Darika is not described in Puranas. There are many folk songs in Malayalam language wherein the Darika story has grown and circulated in oral tradition. So, it has to be believed that the Darika story was popular in Kerala before the advent of Brahmanical Hinduism and the new version on the story may have been invented in the Aryan context. In Kerala, the tradition of Kannaki was merged with the popular cult Bhagavathi (Kurup, 1977b). Thus, Kurup observes that the worship of chaste women must have developed as a cult and later merged with the Bhagavathi cult in Kerala, including the Sreekurumba. The settlement of Sreekurumba at Craganore in all probability shows the royal patronage to the deification of Kannaki by the Secon Cera rulers. Under the patronage, the deification of Kannaki was completed. In South Kerala, she was elevated to the status of Bhadrakali and in the north as Sreekurumba.

Chandran (1992) observes that *velichappads* could have been the religion of Dravidians in ancient India. Siva and Shakti were the prominent deities then. What we see today as *velichappads* in Kerala could have been a phenomenon which had spread out. Further, he observes that the *velichappads* is a non-Aryan phenomenon and only non-Aryan Gods and Goddesses are believed to have *velichappads*. Narayanan (2017) mentions that *velichappads* are representing Kannaki, who enters the Chera kingdom after burning down Madura in her wrath. He further mentions about the belief among *velichappads* that the first *velichappads* have its origin in prominent Nayar *tharavadu* in Kozhippara of Palakkad district. The belief goes that a senior member in the family experienced a particular possession of Bhagavathi and he rushed to Pilappalli *tharavadu* in Kodungallur where she was given a sword to cut the forehead, and thus he became the first *velichappad*. Chandran recollects of trying to trace the family during his fieldwork for the book. No member of the family is alive is what he found out.

It is noted that the Kodungallur *kavu* and Bhagavathi earlier had its *velichappad* who was permanently attached with the *kavu*. The last *velichappad* was in the year 1082 Karkkadakam 12 (Malayalam Calendar), and the name of the then *velichappad* was Vadakkekkattu Thekkinikkattil Kumar Panikkar. For a new *velichappad* to take charge requires the sanction of Kodungallur Thamburan and 'Onnil Kure aayiram'. Mithavaadhi a paper by C Krishnan in 1917 reports about the absence of a Velichappad at the Kodungallur Bharani *kavu* after the demise of the then *velichappad* eight years back that means in the year 1909. There has not been a new selection of *velichappad*. Many *velichappads* claimed to be the next one in the *kavu*. However, according to the old tradition, they have to prove that they got smallpox in one hand and it also got cured within a short time. This could not be done by anyone (Kuttikkadu, 2015). While it would be difficult to assess and confirm which myth goes with the devotees coming to the sight, one can claim that there is a goddess figure that attracts the devotees to the temple site and that the rituals and rites are centred on the life and sexuality of the goddess.

1.2.2 *Kodungallur Bharani Songs*

The area around the Kodungallur *kavu* during the Bharani festivities is marked by *Bharanipattu*[64] meaning *Bharani songs,* the songs marked by sexual innuendos sung in the temple premises mostly during the peak days[65] of the festival. A typical Bharani song would go as,[66]

> *The roof of the penis is of bronze,*
>
> *The roof of the vagina is of stone.*
>
> *When I opened her vagina,*
>
> *It is as red as a brick.*

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[64] '*Pattu*' meaning song in Malayalam. Also known as *theripattu* meaning abusive songs
[65] The last three days are the peak days, Utthratadi, Revati and Aswati asterisms
[66] Recorded in March 2018 and translated by author

Amme Bhagavathi,

She needs milk from a thousand penises.

To do Amma,

We need a penis as big as a flag post.

Kodungallur Amma is angry,

But if you sing this,

she will shed her anger.

Amme Bhagavathi,

Please shower blessings in my tongue.

Songs are raw sexual expressions sung in the most unsophisticated colloquial Malayalam. Themes vary from descriptions about the goddess, myths surrounding the temple to the everyday life of people. Decades back, when pilgrims used to come in the group by walking from faraway places, they used to sing the songs for kilometres till they reached the temple (Panikkar, 1900). Over the years because of opposition from people in the area, singing of sexually loaded Bharani songs is being restricted to the temple premises. Though *Bharanipattu* echoes around the *kavu* on the day of *Kozhikkallummoodal*, it does not happen rigorously until the last three days of the festival.

This song as the lines indicate includes a description of sexual organs, the sexual prowess of the goddess and why it is important to sing the song. Goddess is a sexual being here. Devotees have different explanations on the origin and persistence of the Bharani songs. The most common explanation is that Kodungallur Amma likes the songs. Devotees refer to the liking Bhagavathi has for the songs and the sexual desires which she has. Devotees believe that the songs please the goddess and this is how they get her blessings. Another belief is regarding how Kodungallur Amma sat in the idol as a deity when she was strictly told to do so. 'Bhagavathi was asked to sit. She did not sit. After that they said '*koothachi, erikku*/ Slut, you

sit', that is when she sat in the idol', says another devotee. Some others relate it to the histories of conflict. 'It is the conflict with the Northerners and fisherfolk that they are talking about', says another devotee. Some say it i/s the symbolism of war Kodungallur Amma had with Darika. Some also relate it to the myth surrounding the festivities and says Darikan, the one Amma killed in a battle, was driven away by these abuses. There is one lead singer who sings the song and others singing the chorus "*thaanaro thannaro*". Kuttikadu (2005) suggests that '*thannaro thannaro*' developed from '*thannara njanara*' meaning 'who are you, who am I' which denotes immateriality of existence. Every two lines are followed by the chorus 'thannaro thannaro' and is accompanied by the beats of two sticks against each other.

Songs, particularly folksongs can be reservoirs of unsaid expressions (Raheja, 2003). One prominent understanding of Bharani songs is around Aryanisation[67] and the spread of Brahmanical Hinduism in the area. Kodungallur was believed to be a renowned Buddhist[68] centre in the past, and with the spread of Hinduism (Menon,1967), the Buddhist monks in the area were driven away. Showering abuses and throwing meat were the primary tactics employed for the same; these abuses later became the Bharani songs. Buddhists then migrated to North Kerala and are believed to be present-day Dalits. Scholars note that this tradition may have continued and changed its form over the years to become what it is today (Sekhar,2010). Singing is a major feature of the Dalit social world (Mohan, 2017). The same is cited as a reason for presence of large number of Dalits from North Kerala in the festivities. V T Induchudan observes that the temple belonged to a cult of Hinduism called the Pasupata cult (Induchudan,1969). The cult teaches five categories for the release of the soul from bondage,

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[67] Aryanisation of Kerala was affected in subtle manner. It ended with submission of the local Dravidian races to the superior intelligence and administrative skill of the Brahmins from the North (Menon, 1967). Brahmin immigrants established Hindu temples on a large scale with the view of popularising religion. All non-Aryan dieties and practices were accommodating in the Hindu fold. The Dravidian Goddess Kottavai was accepted in the form of Durga, Kali and Bhagavathi and absorbed into the Hindu pantheon (Menon, 1967, p.92).

[68] Menon (1967) suggests that Buddhism eventhough disappeared from Kerala left behind last impressions in ceremonies and forms of worship. The images, processions, utsavams etc associated with popular worship in Hindu temples in Kerala are said to be a legacy of Buddhism.

one of which is *vidhi* or rule. According to *vidhi,* one has to engage in 'indecent' acts so that the indecency attached to such actions may be overcome. The songs may also have some magical association a belief system, the meaning of which is lost and changed over the years. Chandran (1992) voices a similar opinion. He says it is a festival which challenges the material possession and songs denote the triviality of human lives. Here songs describing the activities around sex and intercourse becomes a form of devotion. Narayanan (2017) suggests a recent origin for the ritual of singing songs with sexual innuendos. The *kavu* area was an army camp, and the army men used to sing songs loaded with sexual obscenities. This gradually got transformed to become a ritual surrounding the *kavu*. If this has to be right one has also to believe that the practice is not very old. One has to agree that there has never been one meaning to Bharani songs. Its purposes and implications have changed with time and people. The following piece is an indication of how new songs are created responding to particular circumstances. The reference here is to the increased policing and the banning of animal sacrifice.[69]

> *How beautiful Amma is,*
>
> *There are people to do Amma.*
>
> *I am bowing down to Amma,*
>
> *The most powerful.*
>
> *There are police to take care of her,*
>
> *There are other people to take care of her.*
>
> *For Amma's celebration,*
>
> *It seems there is no more animal sacrifice.*
>
> *She destroys the curses of your enemy,*
>
> *She destroys the ill Gods.*

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[69] Recorded in April 2019. Translated by the author.

The songs are sung in the *kavu* premises, and the nature of the song differs considerably based on who sings it. It is interesting to note that devotees who come as organised groups sing 'clean' songs instead. Such groups can be identified by equal participation of men and women. The women and men are in possession and dance along. Here the songs mainly describe the power of the goddess, her victory over the evil, the festival, myths surrounding the rituals etc. with occasional sexual innuendos. Some of these songs do not have any sexual innuendos. Certain organisations of the *velichappads* had passed a resolution to stop the singing of 'obscene' Bharani songs at the site of the temple. Their rationale for the same is the misusing of the songs by the drunkards in the area. They say that the temple and the *velichappads* get a bad name because of this. Drunk men also sing songs. Even though some devotees consume alcohol during the festivities, this category of people who sing the songs in a complete inebriated state may include those who have come to the festival only to sing the songs. Here the songs are loaded with a description of sex, abuses and obscenity. Such groups are all-male groups, and if women happen to be there, the lyrics change in such a way as directed to the women.

At the same time, the songs need to be complicated by nuanced analysis around gender and caste.[70] The leading singers of the songs are hardly women. Some women sing the songs that come as printed in the books titled 'Bharani', which are devotional. Women are part of the chorus, playing a more passive role with no control over the lyrics of the song. Thus, there exists a gendered dimension to the songs as well. A large number of devotees who come for the festival are from oppressed caste groups. But that does not mean it is the same people who sing the song. Here it is again important to remember the classification of devotees mentioned above. Most devotees who are coming from the northern districts come in organised groups. They belong to the same family, locality, area or groups with claim to one ancestral sacred

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[70] Further see Chapter 5

grove. These are a mixed group of men, women and children. Here the *bharanipattu* sung are the ones which are conventionally devotional. The songs loaded with sexual abuses and innuendos are sung mostly by men travelling alone to the festival or drunk locals in the area. Many claims that locals in the area buy alcohol to pilgrims and make them sing the songs in the inebriated state.

The nature of the song has been changing over the years to become what it is today. A lot of exchanges have taken place to the songs historically. Bharani song is an oral tradition. Contentions around the Bharani songs is based on a premise of the tradition not being dignified. However, here it is essential to look further into what is noble tradition and what is not. Vijayan (1985), a Marxist theorist and also a native of Kodungallur writes,[71]

> Our ideas have plummeted to think that description of war and murder is acceptable and description of the human birth process is terrible. Hence the description of war by Ezhuthachan is respected, and the songs which sing about the pleasures of childbirth and fertility is regarded as abusive. War is good. But birth is obscene. Any suggestions about birth from genitals to childbirth are improper. Our ancestors did not have such beliefs. That is why once in a year festival like Holi, Bharani etc. which celebrate this 'abuses' is celebrated. This is a licentious break, a cultural break. It can be a Christmas eve. A New-Year eve. Holi. It is a break to do anything. In these breaks, we are also worshipping the origin of humankind which we forget to celebrate otherwise. Such rituals were part of tantric religious beliefs such as Sahajiya. Buddhists, Hindus, Christians and Muslims used to follow Sahajiya. To bring prosperity by drinking and showering abuses was it's characteristic. There were such communities in Kerala, Bengal and across the globe. The belief is on one goddess and many devotees. A material concept of one woman being with many men. It is to celebrate in an

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[71] Translated from Malayalam by the author

inebriated state. The common mass believes that the purpose of alcohol is to repress sadness, evoke sexual urges and to give a sense of eternity. Thus, Kodungallur Bharani is a coming back to human nature as a collective.

On similar lines, Radhakrishnan (2014), in her work about the Bharani songs, draws a comparison with *Lakshmi Sahasranama*[72] and Bharani songs. Author observes that *Lakshmi Sahasranama* is loaded with sexual innuendos as much as a Bharani song. However, the former being Sanskrit is considered as the most sacred and the later as profane. Kodungallur Bharani and the songs to a great extent unsettles this clear division of the sacred and the profane in faith. Thus, it evokes thoughts of a different understanding of the nature of religious practices altogether. Bharani songs can be looked at as an expression of anger. A celebration of the 'indiscipline' and 'ungodly' in the puritan space. The spirituality here is not of Brahmanical Hinduism.

1.2.3 *Space and the Spectator*

In regular times, the space surrounding the Kodungallur Kavu transforms into a place of get-togethers in the evening, mainly of men. It transforms in a certain sense to an open park and a place of rejoicing and relaxation. The site but transforms completely during the Bharani days. As it nears the peak days of the festival, one can see the space transforming itself to one of the intense activities and incessant crowd flows (Figure 1.7). A week before the festival *kavu* rises itself to an upcoming festival. Small traders, hawkers and artisans from across the state occupy the premises surrounding the temple putting up their makeshift shops. The shops include those selling sweets, music and video CDs, food items, accessories, toys etc. The devotees, while returning from the festival, carry with them gifts brought for their near and dear.

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[72] The Lakshimi Sahasranama is the thousand names of the Hindu mother goddess (Tagare, 1958).

Kodungallur Kavu during the festivities also hosts those occupied in different forms of traditional labour forms. One of them is the number of women who come from other parts of Kerala who does palm reading and card reading. They find places in the premises of the *kavu* as the peak days approaches and stay there until the completion of festivities. These lone women live and sleep there, along with the small caged parrots. They continue with their work much into the dark in the light of the candles they carry. Another section of labour that we see is those who sing *pulluvan pattu.*[73] They are also seen in a group of two. Even though predominantly women, some men can also be found along with them. They also occupy the premises of the kavu as the festivity approaches and sings to drive the omens away on payment. The transformation of place to be one of intense economic activity and thus the political economy of the festival is a study in itself. Kodungallur is also an intensely politically volatile place; an aspect dealt more closely in the last chapter of the thesis. One can find posters and banners put up by several political parties and caste organisations welcoming the devotees and particularly the *velichappads* to the festival. These posters carry imageries of *velichappads* in their fierce forms.

The role of the spectator in the festivals holds significant importance.[74] It is the spectator along with every other participant of the festivals that makes meanings of the festival (Cremona, 2007). There are scores of men, rarely women who come from nearby places to watch the Kodungallur Bharani. They come to the festival to primarily witness the Bharani songs and the performance of *velichappads*. Bharani songs and the act of the *velichappads* is also an entry to the non-normative for these spectators. Coming for the Kodungallur Bharani is a yearly activity for many of them, and one can find many faces at the Bharani each year

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[73] Pulluvan Pattu is a form of serpent worship performed by the pulluvar caste of Kerala. Pulluvan Pattu is accompanied by different musical instruments made by the community - the one stringed violin known as the Pulluvan veena, the Pulluvan kudam, an earthen pot with a string fastened to it, Pulluvan mizhavu and cymbals.

[74] See Fabiani (2011), Sauter (2007)

who exchange a glance of familiarity. Most of them are devotees as well. However, it is also a common sight to find men who travel to Bharani to witness Bharani songs and seek perverted pleasure from giving money and making people sing it for them. Capturing of every moment of the experience by these spectators on mobile makes Kodungallur Bharani all the more a spectacle in the age of mobile phones.

There are different perceptions of the festival by the people in the area. A sense of othering of those who come to the festival is very evident among some residents of Kodungallur. Before the peak days of the festival began, I got in conversations with the people in the area every time I attended the festival. Almost everyone evoked a sense of 'Otherness'. Like a 'They' who comes from northern Kerala to take over the place and we let go of it for some days. It is 'Their' festival which is aggressive and rude and 'we' do not participate in it. A woman I met once in a bus told me, 'Even though I am from Kodungallur, I have never gone for Kodungallur Bharani. My husband goes for Bharani. Women usually do not go. Lower caste people come from North Kerala for the festival.' This gives us an understanding of how Kodungallur Bharani is perceived and the prejudices attached to it. Kodungallur Bharani is looked at as something to be despised of by many. There is also a constant comparison that is made with the *Thalappoli* festival, which happens in January.[75] The *Thalappoli* festival is one such festival which follows the normative order of the puritan temple festivals.

Bharani festivities are screened on local cable network, and this has become a means for many to watch the festival. One trader in the area once told me that Kodunagllur Bharani is a primitive form of celebration with much aggression and is a harvest festival.[76] However, he feels the government should further explore the options of tourism during Kodungallur

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[75] Thalappoli is a a traditional ritual procession carried out by women. The Thalappoli festival at Kodungallur Sri Kurumba Kavu happens in the month of Makaram (January–February). The four-day Thalappoli begins from the evening of Makara Sankranthi with religious rituals. It is celebrated mostly by people of Kodungalloor and adjacent areas. Processions with elephants, Panchavadyam, Paandi melam etc. are performed. Cultural programmes and fireworks are other highlights of Thalappoli.
[76] Interview, Kodungallur, March 2017

Bharani. He also mentions that men *velichappads* have mostly feminine features, and some of them are transgender persons. The sense of othering was strongly felt in him when he said that the place is given away for some days to them. He also says that the nearby Cheraman mosque used to be a Siva temple earlier and that is the reason why the *velichappads* visit the mosque during the festival time. The opinions expressed here are explored in a more profound sense in the thesis. However, it is essential to note that the perceptions of the festival are not homogenous as well.

Some others hold a nuanced perspective on the festival as well. One of the inmates of the hostel I stayed in Kodungallur once told me that the festival is basically of the oppressed, hence the distinctiveness of the festival.[77] Now there are means of purifying and popularising the festival. It is only in the recent past that the people who belong to the area have started taking up the festival, being part of the organising of the events. Also, she says one reason why the people in the area began owing it up is because of the revenue it generates in the area during the time of the festival. A family living in the area told me that they avoid coming to the *kavu* side during the festivities mainly because of the crowd and rush in the area.[78] Most of the roads leading to the *kavu* have a roadblock. The Bharani songs are too much for them to handle they say. They also feel the place has Buddhist history and the festivities marks the aggression of the oppressed against their oppressors. The reality today is that Kodungallur Bharani remains as the site of celebration and worship for the ex-untouchable castes of Kerala.

1.3 Towards Everyday of *Velichappads*

'Them, those who have come from the hills and the coastal area; the ones who have grown from mud and sand; the ones who have written the geographic history of Kerala; the ones who are coming to see their mother for generations. They change the bitterness of life for centuries to anger; they resurrect from their tiresome; they overcome the

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[77] Interview, Kodungallur, March 2017
[78] Interview, Kodungallur, April 2017

loneliness that history has given to them with body and words.' (From the documentary 'The Flaming Faces' by M S Banesh)[79]

The short documentary directed by MS Banesh documents the flaming faces of *velichappads* and captures scenes before their arrival to their departure after the festival. For the *velichappads* coming to Kodungallur Bharani is not an annual pilgrimage alone. It is an outcome of anticipation for a year. *Velichappads* undertake a year's toil and sweat to see their mother goddess. They return to their daily lives after a short period of festivities. Several *velichappads* mentions about their year's wait for the festival in their narratives. The wait for the next year's festival begin as the current year's festival ends. During the festivities, one can see several older women who come from mainly Palakkad. For a regular devotee at Kodungallur Bharani, it cannot be grasped how much of these histories and myths resonate with them. Some devotees refer to one or the other histories or stories, sometimes even contradicting each other. But many others come for the festival year after year, as a pilgrimage. Valli is sixty-nine years old. She says she had started coming for Kodungallur Bharani at the age of fourteen with her father, and now she comes with her husband. They do not have children, and the husband still goes for MGNREGA work, that is the means of survival. Husband says he started working as a daily wage labourer when the income was only one rupee. Now it has become 800 rupees. But he cannot do strenuous work now. In all these years what has not changed is their visit for the Kodungallur Bharani. They have only broken the tradition for one year.

Kodungallur Bharani festival is not the only space for a researcher to research the everyday of the *velichappads*.[80] *Velichappads* in festivities are mostly in a state of possession,

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[79] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LccuRg5QKQs accessed on 13 November 2020. Original narration in Malayalam. Translated by the author.

[80] After the *thullal* and associated rituals the *velichappads* usually rest in the *kavu* premises and are around until the festival is over. It is during this resting time that one gets to talk to them. The primary challenge one faces while attempting to get response from a woman *velichappad* is similar to challenges in other research endeavors. In most cases there is always a male member in the group who takes the lead in the conversation.

and in relaxation times, they are immersed in prayers. The resting is only a buffer to another initiation. So, tracing back the *velichappads* to their families, their day jobs, to their villages, to their communities gives a perspective that the site of a festival cannot offer. Through the course of the research, I came across several life stories that exemplified this assumption. Vijayan Moopan of Sulthan Battery of Wayanad district is a *velichappad* who has been coming for Kodungallur Bharani ever since he was a kid. Kodungallur Bharani and certain other festivities are the only times when he becomes a *velichappads*, and then he gets immense reverence from all the believers, including his landlord. Vijayan Moopan, as a Dalit, has experienced a little social mobility in his generation and now wants to educate his children. Being a daily wage labourer is his income and the offerings he gets as a *velichappad* adds to it. Devu Velichappad of Palakkad district who is from Ezhava community has also been a *velichappad* for decades now. She has some property in her ownership, and she works in her field and the field of others as well. With a small shrine next to her house, people come from as far as Tamil Nadu sometimes for doing some pooja and listening to her oracles. She is separated from her husband because of 'compatibility' issues. The story of separation from a partner was a recurrent pattern in many other stories I heard. Kalyani Velichappad, passed away last year after living a long life of 97 years out of which for seventy-five years she lived a 'possessed' life. Kalyani Velichappad too lived a separated life from her husband and said the entire world is her family, and every one her children then why is there a need for her own family. Subadra Velichappad who never got an opportunity to get married as she was made to choose between family and goddess, now longs for a company in old age. Jithu Velichappad has left being a *velichappad* as the temple authorities did not accept him at his local shrine since he was an adopted child. They had problems with him cutting forehead and spilling blood during the possession. He now works for the protection of *kavus* and against the puritinisation

of the practice. Haritha, who has been going to Kodungallur since she was a child, is an ardent devotee of the Bhagavathi and got possession traits before a few years. Her family, along with other *velichappads*, has convinced her not to be a *velichappad*. Shibu Swamy, who is a graduate in history, belongs to an Ezhava family who has got mobility because of being a *velichappad* for generations. He, before a few years, took the initiative to organise *velichappads* and formed an organisation for the same. The organisation is now aimed at bringing together the *velichappads* spread across the state and also organise several events. One significant demand of the organisation was pension for *velichappads* who are old and cannot any longer serve God. Some *velichappads* who were not happy with the organisation has formed another organisation which is closer to Sangh Parivar as well. Some *velichappads* have filed a case against Devaswom Board for declaring the post of *velichappad* in a temple as a hereditary post. These are just a few of the countless stories and narratives which I came through during my fieldwork. Many of the life stories come in detail in the chapters. These narratives reassured that the transformations that the practice offers cannot be understood without understanding the larger structures in place.

1.4 Conclusion

Kodungallur Meena Bharani and *velichappads* belong to a tradition of worship practices that have grown around *kavus*. Understanding the historical evolution of *kavus* is also then historicising the practices of *velichappads*. The meanings and implications of Bharani festival have changed historically and which history resonate with whom cannot be grasped with certainty. An unambiguous reality of Kodungallur Bharani is the thousands of *velichappads* who come in groups, celebrates in all reveries for a few days of the festivities and makes space a unique conglomeration. Kodungallur Kurumba Kavu and Meena Bharani festival at the *kavu* acts as space which lays the foundation of many of the practices followed by *velichappads*. The practice remains deeply rooted in the worship of Mother Goddesses, with

overlapping myths and histories. Much of the scholarly articulations of the festival has been centred around the Bharani songs. However, the festivities cannot be easily categorised into a space of subversive or transgressive celebrations, particularly from the axes of caste and gender. The caste hierarchies are maintained intact in the practices along with certain caste assertion of oppressed castes. Also, the decisive actors and spectators of the festival are men despite women *velichappads* occupying considerable ritual space in comparison to other sites of worship. The lives of the *velichappads* are however needed to be studied beyond the festivities of Bharani festival. After the festivities, they return to the realities of their everyday lives, which is also a complex web of negotiations with divinity and everydayness of being. It can be said that much of the discussion in the thesis begins where the festival ends.

Chapter 2:

The Becoming

One of the primary enquiries of a study that attempts at mapping transformations of *velichappads* ought to be to understand the becoming of a *velichappad*.[81] Here the term becoming is used to indicate the complex journey and events that one has to undergo to be named a *velichappad*. An inherent understanding in the question 'how does one become a v*elichappad*' is a distinction that is made between the everyday being of a person and a divine being of the person, however, overlapping and intersecting it may be. *Velichappad,* when seen as a ritual, is not something that has a written and homogenous set of rules of performance, acts or form. So, the journey of each *velichappad* is unique in its way. This understanding acts as a premise when trying to unravel the processes of becoming. The chapter while seeking answers to a set of questions that will unpack the becoming of *velichappad* is cautious of not to generalise the reasons but at the same time mapping specific patterns in the process. The intersecting queries that drive the chapter are the following, how do we understand the journey of a person towards becoming a *velichappad*? What are the transforming processes and events involved in this journey? What are the particular life experiences and situations that contribute towards the becoming? What are the possibilities of identifying specific patterns in the process?

The research process revealed that there exists no rigid protocol that is followed in becoming a *velichappad*. Nor there are any written attributes for the same. Though some patterns can be mapped across, the travel of each person to become a *velichappad* is different based on their social location and the particularities of the place they belong to. Most

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[81] In the entire process of becoming a velichappad there is a lot that is happening in the cognitive and psychological realm which is extremely important to understand. The current chapter do not look in-depth into the psychological aspects. See Cohen (2008), Klass (2004), McNamara (2011) for more on psychological aspects of spirit possession. Klass (2004) brings together anthropology, psychology, psychiatry and philosophy in his work on spirit possession. McNamara (2011) integrates history, psychology and neurobiology in his study. Further, even though the study does not seek the genuineness of spirit possession experience, the approach to not also go into the literature on the psychological experiences of velichappads is a shortcoming.

importantly, it has to be noted that as everything exists in the realm of faith for the key respondents, i.e., the *velichappads*, it becomes a careful process to unpack it without condescending the faith of the person in possession. When listening to stories of *velichappads* and their journey of becoming a *velichappad* one can understand that several intricacies will challenge the very simplistic idea of possession that is embedded in the meaning-making of *velichappads*. Thus, understanding the becoming of a *velichappad* is then understanding who becomes a *velichappad* and why they become a *velichappad* as well.

Before going further into the chapter, the life narrative of Kunjali Velichappad is discussed briefly to exemplify the intricacies and journey that underly the becoming. There are several brief narratives from the ethnographic fieldwork that will picture in the course of the chapter. However, Kunjali's journey is given at the onset to understand why it is essential to see the trajectories of lives within the context of their immediate lifeworlds. Narrative traces beyond process of becoming, which demonstrates the repeated emphasis to the journey in addition to the event. The details in the narrative also inform certain key aspects elaborated in the chapter.

Kunjali Velichappad: "……When you have a desire, it happens."[82]

I first met Kunjali Velichappad during the Kodungallur Bharani festivities.[83] The interaction then was very brief and limited by the crowd of the festivities. I had brief contact with the group of *velichappads* and devotees headed by Kunjali Velichappad as well then. After a few months, I got in touch with the Kuttan, son of Kunjali, in a desire to have a more extended interaction with her. Thus, I met Kunjali for the second time in her house at Sulthan Bathery of Wayanad district of Kerala.[84] The home with no road connectivity is located in a village where the primary source of income for people comes from agriculture and related activities.

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[82] The narrative style of using first person account and snippets of first-person account as subheading draws inspiration from the works of Alexievich (2017).
[83] Kodungallur Kavu, March 2018
[84] Sulthan Bathery, Wayanad, July 2018

It was not difficult to find the house as people around knew her as a *velichappad* in the area, also known for having a small shrine attached to her house. When I reached, she was alone in the old, dilapidated house and had not gone for work that day because of ill health. Kunjali, who is seventy-six years old now, has been a *velichappad* since she was fourteen years old. She works as an agricultural day wage labourer. She currently lives in her house alone with her son and family living nearby. In our interaction which lasted for a day time, she talked a lot about her life, her family, her becoming and being a *velichappad* et al.[85] Throughout the interview Kunjali was very keen to speak in detail and depth of herself and her beliefs surrounding velichappads. As an energetic person now inhibited by her age-related illness recollects many incidents from her past with much precision.

The real name of Kunjali is Devaki, but no one in the area knows her by the name Devaki. Her family had immigrated to Wayanad decades back. Everyone she knew in Wayanad started calling her *Kunholle* meaning, younger one, which later became Kunjali. Now all her records hold the name Kunjali. Kunjali's family was originally from Chottanikkara (in Ernakulam district). She has great pride in talking about her family and their erstwhile high status. She says the Chottanikkara temple was given to her great grandmothers and the temple was like their ancestral home.[86] It is her eldest uncle who first migrated to Wayanad in the year 1948. He was a *komaram*[87] at the Kodungallur Kavu. The family of Kunjali later followed the uncle and migrated to Wayanad as it had become too difficult for the family to survive in Chottanikara with not many resources. Wayanad was seen as more fertile land wherein the family could survive as compared to Chottanikara. Kunjali was six years old when the family

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[85] Kunjali Velichappad, Interview, Sulthan Bathery, July 2018. Holistic content of interviews and interactions of all respondents are cut across chapters and arranged thematically. Interviews were conducted in Malayalam and translated to the best of author's effort.

[86] Several rituals in Chottanikkara holds similarity to that in Kodungallur Kavu, both having a variant of Bhagavathi as the main idol.

[87] As explained in the introduction komaram here is used as it was so mentioned by the respondent. In the course of the interview it was asked to Kunjali is there is a difference between komaram and *Velichappad*. She responded that both are the same.

resettled to Wayanad. Now not many remains of the initial migrants. Of all the people who had migrated only her uncle's son remains now.

The recollection of Kunjali of the migration history is traced by many in the context of Wayanad. Kerala had witnessed settler migrations from its southern regions (Travancore and Cochin) to the northern regions (Malabar) between the first and third quarters of the twentieth century (Tumbe, 2012). The people came in search of greener pastures escaping their misery and mostly to work in the plantations. The migrants converted the forest areas to paddy field and plantations (Joseph, 2002), something which Kunjali implies when she talks about Wayanad having more resources. However, it is not just families that moved to Wayanad. They took along the social remittances and memories of their faith.[88] The family carried with them the belief attached to the temples of Bhagavathi such as Chottanikkara and Kodungallur Kavu.

After moving to Wayanad, the family stayed near a temple at Konnampatta (name of a place) and owned around 23 cents of land. The temple had a lot of devotees coming in during the Bharani festival season. Kunjali grew very close to the temple activities. It is also during these times she met her *Gurunathan,* meaning spiritual teacher who was from Puthussery of Palakkad. Kunjali remarks that her Guru belonged to a place in Palakkad wherein people had great '*shakti'* in them. It was through her uncle who was a *komaram* Kunjali got in touch with her Guru more. Her Guru was also an astrologer. Kunjali became a helper for the Guru. However, her father had tried to control the association of Kunjali with her uncle and Guru. This did not deter Kunjali. Kunjali felt a lot of love from her Guru and happily obeyed his orders. The Guru took her wherever he went and was very fond of her. Kunjali says that she had started addressing the Guru as *Achan* (father). Kunjali says that her Guru has never called her anything other than *mole* (loving address for girl child), till his death. She took care of him when his children never did. Kunjali says if she has something to eat, something for survival

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[88] See Levitt & Lamba-Nieves (2011), Levitt (1998) for more on social remittances. Further see Oommen (2016) for the interrelation of faith and social remittances.

now, she owes it to her Guru. Kunjali also clarifies the caste association between her and her Guru as a reason for their bond. She says, 'they belonged to *Thiyya* caste, *Panakkara Thiyyas*. I belong to *Cheramanmar* caste. We are both sides of the same coin. Cheramar[89] is the group of Cheraman Perumal.'[90]

Associations with the Bhagavathi temples near their ancestral homes and the contact with her Guru gave Kunjali insights to several different aspects of devotion. Despite the difference from her family, Kunjali, became close to her Guru and her uncle, who was a *komaram*. Palakkad is one place wherein *velichappads* are a common aspect of Bhagavathi worship. Her Guru coming from Puthussery in Palakkad made her familiar with elements that were not earlier clear for her. Moreover, it is essential to note the connection she makes to the Guru, who is from a similar caste group like hers, both erstwhile untouchable castes. Several of the impactful possible influences mentioned here would have culminated at her becoming a *velichappad* at an early age of fourteen. She talks about the experience of her *vettitheliyal*.[91] *Vettitheliyal* is the culmination event and is widely believed and accepted as the final event in the becoming of *Velichappad*. The event is crucial as it is one process that everyone who wishes to be a *Velichappad* has to go through. She recollects,

I had my *Vettitheliyal* when I was fourteen years old. For *Vettitheliyal* we have to go for three years continuously for the Bharani festival at Kodungallur Bharani. All these three years one has to go after '*kulichu malayidal*'.[92] There is also a *kettu*[93] we have to go with. There will be a lot of people. In Kerala, the only way any person can become a priest is by going to Kodungallur. There is no other place for Hindus to be

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[89] 'Cheru' means mud or clay or soil and 'Makkal' means sons, which together means the sons and daughters of soil or land.

[90] Ruler of Chera dynasty who is believed to have the Kodungallur temple for Kannaki. Elaborated in Chapter 1.

[91] Discussed in detail in the next section

[92] Which literally means wearing the devotional chain after taking bath. Taking bath here denotes the purification that one has to go through and maintain during the course of the penance.

[93] The kettu, meaning the baggage primarily contain agricultural produces

so. We usually put the *maala*[94] on Kumbha Bharani, and after proper ritual observance for a month we go for the festival. At the Kodungallur Bharani, we will not realise what we are doing. We do not realise in what ways Devi enters the body. Some people cut their forehead, and some people do not. It is for those two days in a temple, i.e. *Revathi* and *Aswathi* days a *velichappad* becomes a *Vaidikan*.[95] Other days you are not allowed to do what you do in those days. The sword which we carry weighs two and a half kg. Only people with good divinity can use the sword and dance with it. The spirit has to enter the depth of the body to lift the sword. We have to stand there and waiting for the spirit to arrive. It is unbelievable energy and cannot be expressed in words. It feels like a blue body in the light of the sun entering your depths from the heights of the Banyan tree. Like the light in an operation theatre, the light shines on your face. That is when you get *darshanam*.[96] Immediately we go to *thambran*,[97] and receive the sword from him and cut oneself on the forehead. After cutting, the *thambran* applies the turmeric on our foreheads. Once it is over, we will not know or remember how we cut the forehead. We then take a bath in a pond named *udrakulam*. Only the next day after when we take a bath at Guruvayoor temple[98] we realise we have cut ourselves on the forehead. The realisation of being a *Velichappad* settles in slowly. We do not know anything. We do not remember anything. We do not know where the divination comes. There are a few who cut without *darshanam* as well. They are drunk and do it. We do not drink.[99]

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[94] Meaning beaded chain here.

[95] Vaidikan here meaning a priest of a higher order

[96] Darshanam means the sight, the presence or the shiver in this case.

[97] Meaning the people who hold rights in *vettitheliyikkal*.

[98] Guruvayoor Sri Krishna temple is a very popular temple in Kerala. The temple is located in pilgrimage route of Bharani that most devotees who come to Kodungallur during the festivals also make it a point to visit Guruvayoor temple as well.

[99] Interview, Sulthan Bathery, July 2018

Kunjali has a clear memory of the day she became a *velichappad*, which was three years after she continuously visited Kodungallur Bharani and exhibited traits of possession. Her narration is rooted in the faith and belief she had in the process and the goddess. Forgetting what happens in a frenzy and recollecting the details of it later is a trait that was seen in several other narratives as well. However, further, in the conversation, she says that the desire to be a velichappad was a vital factor in the journey of her becoming. Even though she does not analyse how and when the desire inculcates in a person, a study ought to connect the seemingly disconnected dots. She says, 'at fourteen years when I became a *velichappad* I did not know I was going to become one. But I had a huge desire. When you have a passion, it happens.' Even then she feels there were attempts to attribute that she is possessed by the evil spirits and not by the goddess. Her association with the guru and the respectability guru enjoyed prevented her from being attributed as an evil spirit. Else the trajectory of a young woman possessed by 'evil spirits' would have been very different. She remembers that during the time of *vettitheliyal,* there were efforts from her family members to tell everyone that the evil spirits possess her. However, the reputation of her uncle, who was *komaram* came to her rescue. The ones who conducted *vettitheliyal* were convinced as she was the niece of Devan Komaram and it can only be Devi who possesses her. She says, 'cut on my forehead was heard in all the worlds. Newspapers carried the photo and were noticed by all. I do not have to lie.' The extra effort taken by Kunjali to prove the truthfulness of experience by giving the proofs of the intensity of her experience is a reflection on how she thinks she will be misunderstood or disbelieved.

The time has changed from what it was at the time of her becoming a *velichappad*. Her Guru died long back, and the temple he had built from where she got the trigger and from where she developed a devotion is in dilapidated shape. She complains that none of the children of her Guru took any initiative in protecting the temple after his death. However, she believes the

children of Guru had to go through several difficult experiences of illness in their life because of their callousness in looking after the temple. Kunjali was not given the charge of the temple despite being a *velichappad*. She was told that only when one of the children of the Guru becomes a *komaram* will they take over it. Now she does not have any authority at the temple. Reminiscing a lost time, she recollects, 'as I mentioned earlier, we had a lot of reputation back in Travancore. When Tripunithara Raja's crown went missing, it is our family that showed the way to find it. We have a lot of energy and divine strength. But we do not have any wealth. I am worried after my death what will happen. Who will take all this up? None of my children has done *vettitheliyal*.'

Kunjali's narrative indicates that it is not a onetime incident that has made her a *Velichappad*. As a family who migrated from Travancore to Northern Kerala, i.e. Wayanad in the late 1940s, they had to go through a lot of hardship concerning attaining financial stability, which she still has not acquired. She came from a region and family which had a close association with the Chottanikkara Bhagavathi temple. Her family's association with a temple very similar to Kodungallur Kavu that is Chottanikkara temple also has contributed to an internalised closeness to the figure of Bhagavathi. Two important figures in her life made it possible for her to involve rigorously with temple centred activities – her guru and her uncle, who was a *komaram*. Her caste position became an important reason for her to get connected to the Guru. The association with the Guru of another oppressed caste is where she finds an inspiring figure. It is also thought-provoking to see how she equates *velichappads* to the priesthood and sees this as the only way in which all Hindus can attain priesthood. She has seen the behaviour of a *komaram* from her childhood through her uncle. She has inherited understandings of the same. Narrative of Kunjali and several other points towards the need for a holistic approach in the study.

In a study of the becoming of a *Velichappad,* it is essential to see the journey of life in a rounded way than abstracting it to an event of liminality.[100] This is not to say the possibility of becoming; the *Vettitheliyal* is less significant. Observations and articulations around *Vettitheliyal* form the substantial part of the chapter as it allows us to understand the plethora of dynamics that are involved in the becoming of *velichappads*. In addition to understanding *Vettitheliyal* in-depth, several patterns and interconnections that emerge concerning the journeys of becoming are noted. Two main interconnections are discussed in the chapter in detail. Firstly, the interconnection of becoming and inheritance. Secondly, the interconnection of illness and becoming. It is also seen that gender becomes a crucial factor in giving acknowledgement, acceptance and support in the process. So, the gendered mediations in the process also are discussed in detail towards the end of the chapter. The intense interplay of caste, class and gender in the becoming and being of *velichappads* becomes explicit in the course of the chapter.

2.1 *Vettitheliyal*: The Cut to Illumination

The culmination event of becoming a *Velichappad* is called *vettitheliyal,* which can be loosely translated as '*Cut to Illumination*'. *Vettitheliyal* is the coming together of two Malayalam words – *vetti* and *theliyal*; v*etti* in Malayalam means 'cut' and *theliyal* can mean illuminated, getting clear or light (Nair, 1984). Thus, the term implies the process in which a cut brings about light or illumination. *Vettitheliyal* is testing the truth of the possession. There is not a written set of procedures to *vettitheliyal,* but its norms exist in an oral tradition.[101]

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[100] Gennep (1908/1960) considers liminality as the second stage in the ritual process, after separation and before incorporation. Gennep sees it as a vital part of transformation which rites of passage attempt to achieve. In the middle stage of the ritual that are expected to cross a threshold which marks the boundary. This marks the boundary between the world they are leaving behind and the social world the ritual prepares them for. This may be marked by making the person walk over a step or a line on the ground or jump over a barrier or to walk through a door (Nye, 2004, p.146). Tuner (1967, 1969) developed the argument further to see the liminal stage as an expression of anti-structure, expressing opposite of what is normal. Authors such as Bynum (1984), Grimes (2000), Lincoln (1981), has criticised the universality of the concept of liminality.

[101] What is described here of *vettitheliyal* are compiled from the information garnered from different participants in the process including *velichappads* and my own observation.

Vettitheliyal is unpacked here from the standpoint of different participants in it, including the *velichappads*, the caste power structure explicit in it, the gender dynamics and other power dynamics comes as a part of it.

The current study concentrates on the *vettitheliyal* that happens at the Kodungallur Kavu as part of the Kodungallur Bharani festivities (Figure 2.1). *Vettitheliyal* can be broken down into three fundamental stages.[102] Firstly, the person who has shown tendencies of possession, in most cases someone destined by the family (or others) to be *velichappad* has to express shivering/dancing/heaping on reaching the Kodungallur Kavu during the festivities. A person who has not shown any previous instance of possession also goes to reverie during the festivities. As one enters the temple from the main entrance of the Kodungallur Kavu, there is a huge pandal that leads to the main sanctum temple. On the right side of this pandal as one enters one can find groups of men who sit in groups and holds the right to conduct *vettitheliyal*. In all the years I visited, I have seen four such groups consisting of four to five men; however, the number is not fixed. The people who conduct the *vettitheliyal* are addressed by devotees as the Panikkars, referring to the caste name. The surname Panikkar is used by several communities.[103] The Panikkars referred here are members of certain selected families who has the rights to do *vettitheliyikkal*. The Panikkars who is in charge of *vettitheliyikkal* is considered to belong to the upper caste in the caste hierarchy.[104] These spots where the Panikkars sit draws crowd, who come mainly to watch the *vettitheliyal*. Those who experience possession in the

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[102] Classified as stages by the author for an ease of understanding. The event is not seen in these stages by the devotees or participants, rather as one continuous process.

[103] The title was usually conferred on those who are proficient in Kalari and majority of them belonging to Nair, and sometimes Ezhava communities. It is also noted Christian families were bestowed with Panikkar title for exceptional works mostly with regards to warfare and administration. Thurston (1909, Vol. VI, p.72) notes Panikkar as meaning teacher or worker, has been recorded, in the Malayālam country, as a title of barbers, Kammālan, Mārān, Nāyar, Pānān, and Paraiyan. In former times, the name was applied, in Malabar, to fencing-masters. Francis (1901) notes Panikkans as weavers, agriculturists, and traders. Kalasi Panicker, Kalari Panicker and Kaniyar Panicker falls in the government category of Other Backward Classes as opposed to Panikkar who come as a subcaste of Nairs, who is classified under the category of General (GoK, 2013).

[104] More detailed account on the Panikkars comes later in the chapter under the head 'Sanctions and Caste Hierarchies.'

form of shivering or other bodily movements must do so in front of Panikkars. The next stage is the truth-seeking process, which is the second step. At this stage, the truth of the possession by the possessed is sought by the Panikkar. Those who want to be *velichappads* has to prove through *vettitheliyal* that the Goddess, Kodungallur Amma possess them. They are asked some questions during *vettitheliyal* as to who has possessed them. Several other related questions are invited as well to check the integrity of the possession. It is for the Panikkars to decide whether it is Kodungallur Amma in their body. If the Panikkars are convinced about the presence, the *pallival* (divine sword) is handed over to the person with which they have to cut their foreheads and spill blood, which is the third stage. The movements of possessed become much more ferocious, the forehead is cut and blood spills marking the completion of the process. They are proven to be a *velichappad* only when blood spills from the forehead. Following this, the newly ordained velichappads rests their head on the lap of the Panikkars. Turmeric paste is applied in plenty on the forehead of the velichappads to stop the bleeding. The Panikkars are then given *dakshina* mostly in cash by the newly ordained *Velichappad*. They then wash themselves up immersing in the nearby pond and later comes to take blessings from the Panikkars. After the process, some of the Panikkars keep the details of the person who has newly become a *velichappad*. But this cannot be considered as an exact figure on the number of *Velichappads*. Instead, the number is kept for the calculation of their income. There is no data available as such on the number of velichappads ordained each year. However, it could easily run to a few hundred.

The necessary steps of becoming a *velichappad* have to be followed wherever the *Velichappads* are having their *Vettitheliyal* from, even if it is not the Kodungallur Kavu. The ones who have the right to conduct the process will differ from place to place according to various belief systems. Sometimes *vettitheliyal* also happens in the other temples, smaller shrines or *kavus* where other velichappads guides the process. There is a division among the

velichappads and believers on whether it is acceptable to ordain in places other than Kodungallur Kavu. Hence, *vettitheliyal* from elsewhere is not widely accepted among the *velichappad* community unless the *velichappad* who hands over the sword is a widely accepted person.

During my visits to Kodungallur Bharani, I have observed and watched the birth of many new *Velichappads*. Included here is a descriptive account of one such *vettitheliyal*:[105]

The place where *Vettitheliyal* happens is crowded as it was the Revathy day of the festival. A woman in the early fifties comes near the Panikkar. Her hair is loosely tied. There is a white cloth tied around her waist. Her husband accompanies her. She offers prayer at the Panikkar, and the family conveys their intuition that she might become a *velichappad*. She is slowly entering possession, now moving forwards and backwards, shaking her hands and then gradually her body. There are other women around who are in between coming and seeking blessings from the Panikkars. After moving so for twenty seconds suddenly, her movements become faster. She now starts jumping up and down and lifting her hands as in praying to God. She cries loud and shouts "*Amme*". She now lies on the lap of the Panikkar, who is sitting on a platform. The movements are repeated for some time. After a few seconds, the head Panikkar hands over the sword to her. On receiving the sword, she moves more heavily and shouts more loudly. There are two men on both sides of her now trying to control her. She is moving, jumping beyond the control of these men now. She is now lying down with the sword. The men try to lift her. Then she again jumps up. She now cuts her forehead hard enough that the blood oozes out. Two men forcefully take away the sword from her. The blood flows down through her face. She lies on the lap of the head Panikkar. Turmeric paste is being applied on the wound to control the blood flow. Her

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[105] Field Notes, Participant Observation, March, 2017

husband is beside her. Husband is being told that after this they have to go to the pond for bath and come back in wet clothes. An assistant of the Panikkar takes down her name. The family then give some money to Panikkars. After a while, she comes back taking a bath. Talks to Panikkars for some time. She is now a *velichappad*. Her wait to be one is finally over.

One unforgettable sight was to watch the husband supporting the women through the process. The family plays a crucial role in the process. Before going to certain critical aspects in the process, I am here flagging another element that is unfamiliar in the Kerala public which is the closeness and intimate gestures shared by the women who come to become *velichappad* and Panikkars. The expression of intimacy is quite deep and not otherwise seen in the Kerala public sphere wherein it is yet unfamiliar to show any public displays of affection. There are men also who come for *vettitheliyal,* but intimacy is differently expressed in the case of women. It has to be pointed out that it is not just the *velichappads* who express their familiarity with the Panikkars. Some women devotees come to the Panikkars to share their worries during the Kodungallur Bharani, who talks to them and share the same intimacy. They stand near the platform where Panikkars sit and talk about their troubles. Most of them cry during the process. Some of them hug or lay their head on the lap of the Panikkars. Panikkars here are people who listen to their sorrows and worries. These could be women who have already become *velichappads* as well. The expression of the closeness to Panikkars is far more intimate during the process of the *vettitheliyal*. During *vettitheliyal,* the women are seen to be hugging the Panikkar, comfortably resting their head on the lap of Panikkars. These expressions happen with the family members and other members in the pilgrimage group besides them, in support. The divinity here makes something very unusual to the Kerala public sphere possible.[106] The

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[106]   Another scenario to note is of Mata Amritanandamayi, who is also described as the 'hugging saint' (Mercer, 2012). Mata Amritanandamayi Devi, was born in the southern Indian state of Kerala in 1953 and is famous for the 'healing power' of her hugs. She was once asked by an interviewer why she hugged people (as she was said to have hugged thirty million people to that point), she described it as a natural act of motherhood

physical intimacy also becomes a means through which they experience a real connection with the divine.

2.1.1 *Understanding Intricacies: Competition and Reluctance*

Two peculiar interconnected traits seen during the *vettitheliyal* are discussed here which throws light into the complexities that entail the becoming. I name these two traits as competition and reluctance, referring to the willingness of the participant in the *vettitheliyal* to become a *velichappad*.[107] It is a common practice that the becoming of a new *Velichappad* is pre-decided by a family (or the group). There are several different reasons why families decide that a particular person will become a *velichappad*. Primarily it depends on the 'symptoms' a person shows as it approaches towards the festivities or in general in the past years. They may have shown tendencies of possession in the past. It might also be the case that they have been told by an astrologer or any other significant person that a particular person has to be *velichappad*. There might even have been the willingness of individual family members attached to a *kavu* to be *velichappad*. Finally, for some being a *velichappad* is considered as inherited from parents and other family members. There could be several different reasons why these pre decisions happen. However, at the site of *vettitheliyal,* this pre-decision is challenged mainly in two different ways which are termed here as competition and reluctance.

Competition here refers to the conflicts that arise at the time of *vettitheliyal* within the members of family or a group as to affirming who shall become a *velichappad*.[108] This happens when two or more persons simultaneously enter a trance and expresses interest to proceed to the *vettitheliyal,* and in most scenarios, only one person can become a *velichappad*. The reverse

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(Pandya, 2016, p.415). This stands as another important example of intimacy expressed in public validated by faith.

[107]These constructs were developed after multiple interactions with different participants and also closely observing the *vettitheliyal* process over three years of festival. The terminologies came up in the vocabulary of the respondents.

[108] The devotees come for the festival families, extended family, groups comprising of those coming from a region etc.

happens when there is no willingness among the ones pre-decided by the family or the group to participate in *vettitheliyal* and refuses to show any reflection of possession or refuses to cut their foreheads. This non-willingness of the participant is termed as reluctance. Exploring the reluctance and thus their non-becoming then is a part of understanding the becoming dialectically. Moreover, understanding competition and reluctance help in making sense of mediations discussed later in the chapter.

Competition, as mentioned primarily happens when two or more from the same family or a group enters trance in front of Panikkars. In most cases, Panikkars take cognisance of the family before giving the sword to the person for *vettitheliyal*. This leaves the different participants in confusion and results in disturbances within the family when they have to arrive at a quick decision concerning deciding who should be the *velichappad*. The following is a descriptive account of such a scenario:[109]

It is the Revathi day of the festival. It is the day when there is a maximum number of people who approach the *aalthara* for *vettitheliyal*. At about noon, two women in their fifties approach the Panikkar of Vadakkedath family sitting at the *aalthara,* which is very close to the temple. When they approach the aalthara, they are already in a trance and moving their body vigorously. Both women are wearing saree, and their hair is loose. They both jump up and down for some time. Then both of them almost together goes to the lap of one of the persons sitting there, Jayan Swamy and holds him. One woman then makes a howling noise calling out loud *'Amme'*. Now the other woman immediately keeps her head on the lap of Jayan Swamy. She is still jumping up and down. She then lifts her head. She is still close to Jayan Swamy and is opening her hands and jumping up and down. Now the other woman is moving behind her and is not able to come forward. Jayan Swamy now calls a male member of the family in his

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thirties, and asks was not the one next to him who was supposed to *thullal*. He then says both of them are in a competition, and if both of them become *velichappad,* it will only result in a further clash. The woman nearer to Jayan Swamy again keep her head on his lap and holds her hands across him. Jayan Swamy keeps his one hand over the woman. The other woman who is behind her now comes closer and is more rigorously jumping up and down. Jayan Swamy has kept his other hand on her head and is trying to control her. He is now trying to talk to her. She then tells was not it told to her that this year she would become a *velichappad*. She then jumps up and down uncontrollably. Jayan Swamy now takes a stick in his hand and tries to reprimand her. Then talks to the family again. The family then tells that they had no idea she is going to get possessed. The other woman now tries to get up from the lap of Jayan Swamy. But because he is sorting the case with the other woman, he pulls the woman down to the lap again. Meanwhile, he sprinkles water on the second woman. He then holds his hand strongly on her head and then pulls her hair to subdue her. This continues for close to a minute; water is again sprinkled on her. He now lifts the woman on his lap by pulling the hair and then keeps the other woman whom he is trying to subdue next to her. Now she is almost subdued and moves to a side and is still in a slight trance. Jayan Swamy then talks to the family again. All this while the family was by the side and was looking at all this. Jayan Swamy then says the woman still in a trance could be a *velichappad*. To which the family agrees. It is the male members of the family who agreed to it. Other older women in the family were standing by the side. The woman now in a trance becomes more vigorous and says it has been three years now she has wanted this. This year she will not leave before becoming one. She is now calling *Amma* in between and lying on the lap of Jayan Swamy and getting up at intervals. She cries, opening her hands *Amme Deviye*. The other woman now is standing on the side. Jayan Swamy confirms again

with the family before giving the sword to cut her forehead. He then gets down from where he is sitting. He has a stick in hand. The woman now moves closer to the Shankara Panikkar. They then ask the family to stand around and sing Bharani songs. They start singing the *thaanaarro thannaro* song. Her movements now become more according to the rhythm. After thirty seconds, the head Panikkar gives the sword to the woman with both the hands. She takes the sword with the right hand, cuts her forehead multiple times. Two men are standing on both sides with sticks, one of whom is Jayan Swamy, to control her. After she cuts her forehead a few times, Jayan Swamy stops her to see if there is the blood that has oozed out. He confirms it. Then holds the sword with both his hands and the head Panikkar takes it away from her. She then lies in the lap of the head Panikkar. The family members are behind her, all women to support her now. Water is sprinkled on her. Turmeric paste is applied, she thanks both the Panikkars and in slight overt movements of the body moves back. She is taken to the pond for bathing. Jayan Swamy then calls the other woman whom he had subdued and was standing behind. She is very sad and goes to him when he calls. He then tells her that it is not time for her to be a *velichappad* and tells her not to be sad about it. She is listening to it. Then he calls her family and her son and asks to take care of her. She then moves away with them. She is visibly exhausted and is lying on the shoulder of her son. Then they move away to the crowd. All of this gets over in less than eleven minutes. Within no time another woman arrives there for *vettitheliyal*. This space continues its endless activities (Figure 2.2).

The family and the Panikkars in charge of *vettitheliyal* plays a crucial role in deciding who can be a *Velichappad* and when. One does not just get possessed and become a *velichappad*, and hence *vettitheliyal* becomes a significantly mediated practice by the patriarchal structures. All the Panikkars are men, and family members who take the final call

are mostly men. It can be seen that how the process of *vettitheliyal* becomes a contestation between two women in the same family. However, as much as we know that family plays a determining role, it cannot be established what factors operate in selecting one woman over the other. The tensions during the process of selection of one woman over the other is an indication of tensions that sustain in familial relationships and the hierarchy that exists between women in the same family. During the process, both women clearly express their interest in becoming *velichappads* and how they were assured the same. One woman clearly announces that she has been waiting to be a *velichappad* for three years now and would not leave without becoming one. In the end, she is the one who becomes. This can be connected to the narrative of Kunjali earlier in the chapter wherein she said if there is a desire, then one can be a *velichappad*.

Competition is a trait which is generally seen among women and rarely among men. These episodes of competition during *vettitheliyal* is not a rare phenomenon. One of the senior *velichappads* narrates his experience of seeing several such incidents. He says that there was a *velichappad* who was old and becoming weak. When she turned about seventy-five years, it became physically exhausting for her to continue being a *velichappad*. She went and told the Panikkar that as she is old, she wanted her niece to take over. The niece in no time started 'jumping up and down'.[110] Then another woman in the family also started 'jumping up and down'. The *velichappad* who was narrating the incident told me that he had to intervene then as a senior *velichappad*. He called aside an elder member in the family and warned them if the process continues, it might result in a further disturbance in the family. He told them they would not be even able to go back to the same bus they had come in. He then called mother *velichappad* aside and consoled her. He advised that she is only seventy-five and she can continue for some more years as a *velichappad*. So, they decided to put off the idea of having a new *velichappad* in the family. The *velichappad* who intervened sees that the ego drives these

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[110] As used by the *velichappad*.

situations in families. Even though this a common attribute among women, he recollects another incident in which both sons of a younger brother of *velichappad* started *thullal*. In such situations, senior *velichappads* are called for compromise. He says that whenever such a problem arises, it is dealt with much care so that it does not affect the family's harmony. He says that as a senior *velichappad,* he talks to such families separately and mainly makes it a point that drunk people do not get the sword. Thus, a priority by all actors in the process is to mitigate any situation of conflict.

The pertinent question is, where and why the competition originates. Also, why is that the sense of competition described is seen more among women than men. One direct answer could be that, for a believer to become a *velichappad* is a joyful step of divinity wherein you become closer to the goddess. This alters the perceived sense of self, making it more reverent. A direct correlation of it is the changed status in society and particularly within the family. Being a *velichappad* becomes a sign of power and empowerment in symbolic terms, however temporary it may be. Each of them has something material or immaterial to be achieved in becoming a *velichappad*. Competitiveness the women show can be a reflection of their position in the families and a quest to alter that. The understanding developed here is further fleshed out in the part of the current chapter discussing gendered mediations. Further, chapter 3 explores specific aspects of the meaning-making of *velichappads* in the context of families.

As competition is seen among those who want to be *velichappads,* there is also a sense of withdrawal. As we see there is a sense of competitiveness to become *velichappads,* there is also a sense of reluctance that comes in being the *velichappad* even if the situation demands. Given below is one such scenario:[111]

Two brothers from the same family approach the platform where Panikkars are sitting. The younger brother in his fifties and the elder is in his sixties. They have

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[111] Field Notes, Participant Observation, March, 2018.

already brought anklets, sword, waist anklets, everything a new velichappad may need. They present everything to the Panikkars. It was already pre-decided by the family that the elder brother will do his *vettitheliyal* for their ancestral shrine. The process of *vettitheliyal* begins. The family is surrounding the elder brother and waiting for him to start his trance. But nothing happens. The family is asked to sing the *thaannaro thannaro* song. Jayan Swamy, as one conducting this then places his hands over the elder brother and tries to get him to trance. Nothing happens. He keeps his hand over him for a few minutes again. The elder brother folds his hands and prays. After a few minutes, because he shows no signs of possession, he is asked to go to the temple pond and take a bath and come. Meanwhile, other *Vettitheliyal* activities at the platform continue. The elder brother comes back after about ten minutes with his family. Water is sprinkled on him. But nothing much happens. The family is asked to sing songs louder. The family continues to sing louder. The elder brother now moves a bit. But this cannot be considered, says the Panikkar. Both the Panikkars are now trying hard to make him get into a trance, asking him questions and provoking him. There is no reprimanding as they do for a woman. The elder brother is still not moving. The family is now in confusion. The Panikkars say he may not get trance. The family has come prepared for a *velichappad*. They ca not go home without one. Now the younger brother is told maybe he is the one who may get possession. However, he has come least prepared for this. Because the Panikkars said he then goes to the temple pond takes a bath and comes back. The elder brother is on the side now assisting the younger brother. The same process is repeated. After several minutes of assertion from the Panikkars, the younger one starts moving a bit. First, the movement is very feeble. Then it becomes louder and faster. He starts howling and crying the Goddess' name. He is given the sword. He cuts himself, becomes a *velichappad*. The elder brother then assists him.

Reluctance here needs to be broken down into two aspects. It can be observed that some of those who wish to be velichappads find it difficult to cut their foreheads. In this case, even if there is no reluctance to become velichappads, the act of self-inflicting the wound is a difficult step for the selected ones to cross. The cajoling, persuasion and sometimes the instigation did by the Panikkar in charge acts as a trigger in most cases. Some of those who wish to be velichappads, maybe shivering and heaping, fails to cut their foreheads even after persuasion. However, that reluctance can also be a general reluctance by the person to become a velichappad; wherein one can see a hesitation in engaging with any aspect of the process. This is what was observed in the method described here.

The elder brother here shows an evident reluctance in the process, which resulted in the younger one doing the *vettitheliyal* and becoming a *velichappad*. It is the limitation of the work that one cannot tell with assurance on the factors that would have contributed to pre deciding the elder one to be a *velichappad*. In Kerala, there are ancestral shrines maintained by families who in the past might have had *velichappads* in their families. For a younger generation, it is not an easy process to be *velichappad* and continue with their lives. Families are caught in the mix of religiosity and modernity that they are compelled to go ahead to find a *velichappad* in the family even when no one is prepared for it.

The impact of being a *velichappad* is being perceived in conflicting terms is what one understands looking at competition and reluctance as co-existing aspects of *vettitheliyal*. The existence of conflicting elements of competition and reluctance in *vettitheliyal* contributes towards the becoming of *velichappads* as a dialectical process. The continuous development of this dialectical development of competitiveness and reluctance in the becoming of a *velichappad* is making it the possible discovery of devotion for the person. Several different factors mediate these dialectical developments, and these factors are elaborated in the upcoming sections, to understand *vettitheliyal* as spaces of negotiations and mediations.

2.1.2 *Sanctions and Caste Hierarchies*

Explanations by far on the *vettitheliyal*, the final act of becoming, has shown the crucial role played by the Panikkars in the process. It is commonly understood that some families belonging to Panikkar caste has the right to *vettitheliyikkal*, the act of conducting *vettitheliyal*. This creates a clear hierarchy of who can sanction a person to be a *velichappad*. This part tries to understand the role played by the Panikkars from the perspective of caste hierarchies and its sanctions.

As explained in the initial chapters, most of the *Velichappads* belongs to the oppressed communities. A particular understanding of *Velichappads* at Kodungallur Bharani see it as a form of an assertion of the oppressed in the sacred space (Kuttikkadu, 2015 & Adarsh 2013). However, every act of Kodungallur Bharani is clearly defined by caste and caste roles (Induchudan,1969). So is the process of *vettitheliyal*. The pivotal role in the sanctioning of *velichappad* is played by Panikkars, who are considered to be higher in the caste hierarchy. Becoming a *velichappad* gives subversive possibilities concerning caste and gender.[112] However, it is in the structural framework of the caste system that everything is operating. The structure is maintained clearly at the rights which the Panikkar caste enjoy concerning the ceremony of *vettitheliyal*. It is men who are from the Panikkar caste who has the authority to decide who can become a *velichappad* and who cannot. The hierarchies are not rigid concerning caste hierarchies in *vettitheliyal* ceremonies that happen in ancestral shrines, kavus or other local worship places. But those *vettitheliyal* are not considered as the 'true' *vettitheliyal* by many believers. A *velichappad* who has his temple and belongs to Ezhava caste once shared

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[112] Dilip Menon (1993) in his study on Teyattam uses the idea derived from Pierre Bourdieu of symbolic power to understand the moral community surrounding Theyyam in Northern Malabar. Teyattam has to be seen in the larger context of an existing reality of reinforcement of hierarchy through everyday actions and customs. Here transmission of culture is not a passive process. He sees the space surrounding Teyattam as transgressive and one that creates self-esteem for the oppressed castes. Hierarchy and propriety are suspended for that space. He also brings in the example to Kodungallur Bharani festivals to exemplify his analysis. Within the ritual the social order is turned upside down unlike other temple festivals the hierarchy is maintained intact. He suggests about the carrying over of the attitude beyond the 'privileged time' of the performance. The roles adopted during carnivals or festivals such as this widens the behavioral option of people here particularly that of the oppressed caste.

that, 'Even though I constructed my temple we do not do *vettitheliyal* from there. There are certain houses like Pilappalli Vadakkedath house[113] where the Bhagavathi *chaithanyam*[114] exists. It is not right to *vettitheliyal* from own *kavus*. But some people do not follow this, and they do *vettitheliyal*; as a result, they experience difficulties. In many different ways, one can become a *velichappad*. There is *chaithanyam* possible in many different ways. The power and prosperity of the goddess are in Kodungallur Kavu though.'[115]

The power enjoyed by the Panikkars is rooted in the rights enjoyed by Pilappalli Vadakkedath family whose ancestral house is adjacent to the Kodungallur *kavu*. The *vettitheliyal* process has no connection with the temple worship activities like many other activities during the Bharani festival at Kodungallur Bharani festival. At the Kodungallur Bharani, there are families of Panikkar caste who are in charge of the process of *vettitheliyal*. These families claim that they have got the rights from their forefathers. The right to *vettitheliyalikkal* belongs to three-four Panikkar caste families, and each of these families claims they are the true legacy to take over the functions. However, what is widely accepted is the right which the Palappilli Vadakkedath Tharavadu[116] has concerning conducting the *vettitheliyikkal*. The myth goes that, it was the members of the Pilappalli Vadakkedath Tharavadu who gave food to Devi when she returned after the war that killed Darika. Many had refused to provide food to her, and it was a woman in the Vadakkedath house who gave food to Devi. Hence the belief is that Devi came and sat inside the house in a room (Chandran, 1992). This is the widely held belief for the authority they share for *vettitheliyikkal*.

Rajan Vadakkedath is the rightful heir of the Pilappalli Vadakkedath Tharavadu now. The sanction comes from the devotees and as well as from his own family. Pilappalli forms a

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[113] Pillappalli Vadakkedath is the name of the house which holds special rights in the Vettitheliyal
[114] Meaning prosperity
[115] Interview, Mani Velichappad, Palakkad, Feb 2019.
[116] Tharavadu meaning matrilineal household. The name of the tharavadu is Pilappalli Vadakkedath.

matrilineal system of inheritance.[117] Before Rajan Vadakkedath it was his uncle, Sethu Madhava Panikkar who enjoyed the rights. The members of the Vadakkedath family who have ownership over the *vettitheliyikkal* may or may not be *velichappads*. Sethu Madhava Panikkar is believed to be by devotees one of the finest *Velichappads* who lived in recent times.[118] I was shared by a *Velichappad* the story of Sethu Madhava Panikkar becoming a *Velichappad*.[119] Sethu Madhava Panikkar was a doctor in Apollo Hospital, Chennai before becoming a *velichappad*. It is said that he rarely participated in the temple activities then as he was not a believer. Sethu Madhava Panikkar comes into the picture of being a *velichappad* and a prominent person in the festivities with the passing away of his uncle. The story goes that when his uncle passed away, he drove the car from Chennai, his workplace then and reached Kodungallur. He participated in the rituals very hesitantly as he was not a believer. He went back to Chennai but could hardly concentrate on his job. He then had to return to his ancestral house, which is at Kodungallur. On returning, once he reached the temple premises, he jumped out of the car and went to the pond of Kodungallur Kavu. After taking a dip in the pond, he emerged in the fury of a *velichappad*. He since then continued to be one of the most prominent *velichappads* until his death.

Unlike his uncle, Rajan Vadakkedath is not a *Velichappad*. He says they belong to Nair caste thereby indicating the caste superiority to most of the *velichappads* who come from oppressed castes.[120] He says that the Vadakkedath Tharavadu is the *moola* (core) *tharavadu* when it comes to the belief systems of Kodungallur Kavu and *velichappads*. The actual Pilappali house is in Malabar. Now the key person from the Vadakkedath family who is in crucial charge of *Vettitheliyal* is the nephew of Rajan Vadakkedath named Shankara Panikkar.

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[117] For more on matrilineal system of inheritance in Kerala see Arunima (1995 & 2003), Jeffrey (2004) and Kodoth (2004)

[118] As opined by the *Velichappads* and other devotees.

[119] Chandran Velichappad, Interview, Kodungallur, Feb 2018

[120] Interview, Kodungallur, February 2017.

He, along with his team, sits at the traditional *aalthara* very close to the sanctum of the temple. Rajan Vadakkedath who lives in the Thrissur town, 30 km from the temple, comes to the ancestral home adjacent to the temple for ten days a month. People in the locality has different notions and understanding about the Vadakkedath Tharavadu as well. One of them who runs a shop in the compound of the temple says that even though the core place of *velichappads* is Vadakkedath, they have a curse from the Bhagavathi for stealing jewellery of Bhagavathi long back.[121] He says that is why the current heir is visually challenged, and his son, who is thirty-eight is still not married. He says there are not many left in their family to take forward the tradition.

At the same time, there exists no consensus on the authority of one person or a group among the different groups of Panikkars who sit for *vettitheliyikkal* as well. It is not readily accepted by various groups that the Vadakkedath Tharavadu has the complete authority for *vettitheliyal*. Four teams sit for the *vettitheliyal*. However, the prominence is for the one directly linked to the Vadakkedath temple. According to Mukunda Panikkar, a member of another group who sits at the temple for Vettitheliyikkal they are the only people who have the right to do the *Vettitheliyal* now and others are not the true ones.[122] Other teams who sit there has been given transferred rights. He says that two families have the rights for *vettitheliyikkal*, Therodam tharavadu and the Pilappali tharavadu. It is through the matriliny that the authority is transferred to the next person. The person who will take over Mukunda Panikkar, Sasikumar is also seen next to him to learn about it during the festivities.

Mukunda Panikkar was working in Gujarat, and he started coming for the *vettitheliyikkal* about seventeen years back. He claims that over two thousand[123] *velichappads* he has done *vettitheliyikkal* of. He says that some other members of the other teams keep the

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[121] Shop Owner, Interview, Kodungallur, March 2018.
[122] Interview, Kodungallur, April 2019.
[123] Rough estimate. Not the exact figures.

list only to calculate the money they have got and nothing else. He says it is impossible to maintain any list in all the frenzy. He believes that *velichappads* has to come to Kodungallur Kavu and particularly the Panikkars for the *vettitheliyal*. Other than coming and doing the *vettitheliyal* people also come to return their swords which is no longer used. During the process of *vettitheliyal,* some questions are asked, and they have to answer the questions to get the sword. Previously people who have *vettitheliyal* from the place also comes there for taking blessings.

The concrete structures of caste for the process of *vettitheliyikkal* is also witnessing some minor alterations. The study of Vijayan Swamy[124] as the key person in the *vettitheliyal* ceremony indicates that with networks a certain rigidity of caste structure is altered with the help of networks and friendships. Vijayan Swamy is from the Ezhava caste which is now doing *vettitheliyikkal,* and he is popular among the devotees with an added suffix of Swamy meaning God to his name. A very well-known *velichappad* says that Vijayan Swamy had made some useful contacts with those in charge of the *vettitheliyikkal. He* was their assistant for years and finally took control. The said person was a disciple of Sethu Madhava Panikkar, who was a well-known *velichappad* and rightful heir to do the *vettitheliyal*. Sankaran Panikkar is the rightful heir to Sethu Madhava Panikkar and also his nephew. Vijayan Swamy, who started as his assistant then became the main charge later. Vijayan Swamy is quite influential now. Vijayan Swamy handing over his visiting card to devotees is a ubiquitous sight.[125] One narrative of how Vijayan became influential is that he was with an organisation of *velichappads* earlier as the Joint Secretary.[126] Later he was removed. The by-law of the organisation did not permit Vijayan to continue in the organisation as he was not a *velichappad*. But membership in the organisation gave him enough status to associate with Sankara Panikkar with whom he

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[124] Name changed
[125] I attempted interview with Vijayan Swamy but was denied citing his busy schedule.
[126] As told by an office bearer of the organisation, Interview, Feb 2019

shares a strong bond. This can be considered as a minor exception to the otherwise rigid role caste plays in the *vettitheliyal* ceremony.

The caste hierarchy for the rights enjoyed by the Panikkars remains unquestioned among the *velichappads*. Instead, the *velichappads* consider Panikkar as the representation of the goddess herself. Several *velichappads* acknowledge them as the ones who bring them closer to the goddess. They are held in high reverence. Vadakkedath house is considered as the home of the goddess. This is why groups of *velichappads* station on the premises of the house during the days of the festival. The Vadakkedath family through the process has garnered immense social and cultural capital.

Caste hierarchy is not the only structure of domination that is at play here. As mentioned, the family of Panikkars follow matriliny, but no woman from the family holds charge of conducting the *vettitheliyal*. The rights are vested upon the male members of the family, and they play a pivotal role. This is true for several other rituals that happen at Kodungallur Bharani. The women *velichappads* doing several of the rituals by themselves in their local shrines submits to the rights of the male Panikkar at the *vettitheliyal*. The decision on verifying the truth of the possession is vested upon male members. The authority is drawn from the structures of caste and gender. Caste dynamics and gender dynamics in the processes of vettitheliyal has to be looked at together, with intersectionality. The submission is to the patriarchal power sanctioned by the caste hierarchies.

2.2 Illness and Becoming

Even though the journey of becoming for each person has non-homogenous trajectories, certain patterns can be mapped. One such pattern is the strong interconnection between illness and becoming, to be more precise illness and possession. The section is developed through the narratives of *velichappads,* and the illness here mostly referred by the *velichappads* is smallpox. It is also observed that illness is not a standalone reason for becoming a *velichappad.*

Illness is coupled with several other factors such as the family history of association with the worship of Mother Goddesses and other mediations that become clearer through the narratives. Given below are three selected accounts wherein the *velichappads* have shared the story of becoming and how the illness they endured has played a significant role in the process.

Padmavati Amma: '*…Now I am only scared of thunder, strong winds and heavy rains.*'[127]

I first noticed Padmavati Amma during the Kodungallur Bharani.[128] It is rare to see women leading the groups of velichappads as the leader of the group. Padmavati Amma was one such rarity. She was blind and an albino, but none of these stood in the way of her rigour. She is sixty-seven years old and has been a *velichappad* for thirty-two years. She has never been to school. Padmavati Amma never got married, neither did her brother who was mentally ill. She is now supported by her sister, who lives with her family nearby. She lost her sight when smallpox hit her at the age of five. However, the illness in her recurred even after she was cured the first time. She collects,

> Smallpox did not have any treatment then. Then the only treatment available was divine treatment. If there were no divine intervention, I would not be sitting here now. I was so unwell when I had smallpox. It is my *gurunathan* who cured my body. The name of my *gurunathan* was Krishnankutti Asari. He is no more. It is he who cleared my body of all impurities. He purified my body; I became a *velichappad*. He was also an astrologer. He had already told me that I may become a *velichappad.* Once we take the *pallival,* we have to go to the Kodungallur Kavu for three consecutive years, and in the third year, we could become *velichappad*. It was at the age of thirty-five years that I took *pallival*. I had taken penance for forty-two days before doing the *vettitheliyal*. During the *vettitheliyal,* when we cut our foreheads, it is Devi who is wounding us; it is the killing of the Darika. We will not have any memory of what

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[127] Padmavati Amma, Interview, Palakkad, August 2018.
[128] In March, 2018.

happens. Devi comes with all her force.[129] Gopalakrishnan was the Thamburan of Kodungallur Kovilakam when I did my *vettitheliyal*. Puthusseri Swamy was the *velichappad* who had conducted the *vettitheliyikkal*. I was cured from Kodungallur Kavu.[130]

Padmavati Amma, however, used to go to Kodungallur Kavu from a very young age as her father and grandfather were believers there. She has memories of walking and going from her home in Palakkad even after there were bus services to the place. Her father used to get possessed. Padmavati Amma, however, is the first *velichappad* in her family. Her father stopped believing in the goddess seeing her fall ill continuously. But, Padmavati Amma has never discontinued her yearly pilgrimage for Kodungallur Bharani other than for the year her brother passed away. She reaffirms,

> I can remember before I became a *velichappad* how unwell and sick I was. I was afraid at night; there was a constant fear. *Thattakathu Bhagavathi* cured my illness.[131] After becoming a *velichappad,* I have not fallen ill at all. Now I am only scared of thunder, strong winds and heavy rains.[132]

Devu Thambatty: '…Devi shows a lot of illness in us to bring us close to her.'[133]

Devu Thambatty, who is sixty-five years old, now says that she realised there is Devi in her at the age of seven (Figure 2.3 & Figure 2.4). This conviction in her is attributed to an incident that happened at the age of seven. She and her younger sister had gone to a pond to take a bath. Later she got drowned in the pond. She says that she struggled for almost one hour and was calling out for help. It was around twelve in the noon, and she continuously called *Amme*, referring to her mother. She believes it was a goddess who came and pulled her out then. After

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[129] As she tells this her body shivers
[130] Padmavati Amma, Interview, Palakkad, August 2018.
[131] Referring to Kodungallur Bhagavathi
[132] Padmavati Amma, Interview, Palakkad, August 2018.
[133] Devu Thambatty, Interview, Palakkad, Oct 2017

the incident, she wanted to go to Pazhani temple to *pray*.[134] But she could not do it because of the lack of money. She also recollects how smallpox and the suffering she endured then as a reason for her becoming a *velichappad*. She says,

> At the age of sixteen, I had smallpox. It was treated. Then I had itchiness in all my private areas for which I went to the hospital. But because of recurring illness, someone advised us to go to Kodungallur Kavu. We then prayed to Kodungallur Amma without going to the temple, and there was no illness for almost two years. After two years, I started getting sick again. I had prayed that I would go to Kodungallur and but never went. There were only six days left for Bharani of that year. I left for Kodungallur without much planning or thinking. If I die, I will die there was the thought. I felt like eating many things on the way. People with me bought me everything I wished to eat. We reached there at noon, and we slept at *aalthara*. I was sleeping on my father's lap. My hunger pangs did not stop. I had lunch. The place was as crowded as it is now even then. Then there were not many younger people who got possessed. I then asked the *Adikal* to see who has possessed me. *Adikal* asked me to take a bath in the pond at a particular time. As per his instructions, I took a bath several times. Then all that I remember is a *velichappad* with me bringing me up from the pond. Later on, when I was aware, I realised I had cut myself and blood had flown.[135]

Devu Velichappad now believes all the illness she endured was only a means of Devi to bring her close to the goddess.

Subadra Velichappad: '…When I became VP, my mother had fainted. I was very young. She could not see me like it.'[136]

Subadra Velichappad who became a velichappad at a young age recollects,

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[134] Referring to the temple at Pazhani.
[135] Devu Thambatty, Interview, Palakkad, Oct 2017
[136] Subadra Velichappad, Interview, Palakkad, February 2019

I was in the fourth standard when I got *vasoori*. I was seven years old then. We were living in a tiny house back then. The entire family that is my four brothers, two sisters, father and mother, used to live there. Usually, the brothers and father slept outside the house. Sisters with my mother slept inside. So, when in a small place I got chickenpox we had to be extra careful as the entire family lived there. I was covered with leaves that are used for roofing when I got *vasoori* for the first time. It got cured, but then after seven days, I got it again. Even my younger sister got it then. My head was covered with pox. I used to lie in a slab in the house. People asked me to allow me to cut my hair. Those were the times when *velichappads* who used to roam around and take blessings from homes before going to Bharani. That is how *velichappads* used to go for Bharani before. One of the *velichappads* asked me to cut my hair. But in anger, I started shivering. That is how it began after a few days that I got cured of the pox and then went to Kodungallur Kavu as a regular devotee. Two years I went like that. In the third-year my mother got *vasoori*. We took her for Kodungallur Bharani. After I took a bath in the pond, I directly went to the *aalthara* and then I went to *thambran* asking for the sword. I was only nine years then. So, at the age of nine, I did the *Vettitheliyal*. I had no awareness of what is happening then. It was when I was about fourteen years old that I started realising that I was a *velichappad*. I did not even take a bath every day then; I did not even maintain myself clean. But I never felt I did not want to be a *Velichappad*. When I became *velichappad,* my mother had fainted. I was very young. She could not see me like that.[137]

From the narratives, it can be inferred that there is a direct correlation between the experience of illness, mainly smallpox and becoming a *velichappad*. The co-relation is made by *velichappads* themselves in most of the cases and particularly in the three cases noted here.

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[137] Subadra Velichappad, Interview, Palakkad, February 2019

The traumatic experience of illness is coupled with several other factors, and all of this has cumulatively contributed to them being *velichappads*. The experiences in the family and perennial poverty have contributed to them making sense of the situation of their illness differently. Padmavati Amma got smallpox at a very young age of five years. However, she became a *velichappad* twenty years later coupled with the harrowing experiences which not only had to deal with her blindness but the mental illness of her brother as well. For Subadra Velichappad as well the conditions in the family repeatedly comes when she refers to the consequences of her illness. There is an underlying current of their low socio-economic situation in all their lives. Under these environments, they are introduced to Kodungallur Kavu and Kodungallur Amma through different means. For Padmavati Amma, the acquaintance started early in her childhood through her father and grandmother, which she reminisces. When her father lost the belief in the goddess because of the difficulties in life mainly to do with her blindness and her brother's mental illness, it is the figure of Guru which took her closer to the goddess. The Guru even made an early prediction that she will become a *velichappad*, an impactful projection as we may understand now. Devu Thambatty, also in the influence of others, arrived at an understanding that Kodungallur Amma would cure her illness. Subadra *Velichappad* shares how the travelling *velichappads* affected her. So, their connection or reconnection with Kodungallur Kavu was made possible through the presence of one or more people in their lives who guided them there. There is a social and material circumstance that existed in which there was no possibility of seeking any other cure for their illness. When Padmavati Amma says there was only divine treatment available for the illness and divine intervention was her only way out it tells more about the life she lived then and the limitations of that period. Devu Thambatty voices that because they had no money, there was no other way other than to follow the devotional cures. Thus, the effect of illness has to be understood at the conjuncture of other factors as well.

The experiences of illness acted as an impactful episode that contributed to the becoming. This indiciation is also coming from women in a particular age group. These are the women who had their *vettitheliyal* in the 1960s and 1970s, rarely early 1980s. The medical history establishes this period as a time when maximum cases of smallpox infection were reported from India. However, even though the narratives say small poxes, one may not go by the assumption that these were the cases of small poxes alone. A lack of awareness on chickenpox made people believe they were prone to the earlier known deadly disease that is smallpox. A report submitted to WHO in 1976 indicates the vast instances of chickenpox infection in Kerala in 1975 (White, 1976). The report sees how there is a peak in the infection in January, February and falls off in April. March- April are the months of the Kodungallur Bharani festival. A devotee with utmost belief in goddess is bound to believe in the role of goddess in curing the illness.

The strong association of smallpox and goddess worship in India is already well established (Arnold, 2017; Aiyappan, 1931; Egnor, 1984; Nicholas, 1981). It has been said that the existence of temple for the deity of smallpox dates back into the history of India and is also an indication that the presence of the disease in India dates long ago in history (McNeill, 1976). There are no records available to map when this interconnection exactly began. However, it is written that as early as the sixteenth century there were two interpretations of smallpox in India, one was based on biological with appropriate therapeutic interventions, and the other was the conception that the disease was divine intervention. One of the Goddess, which was widely believed to cure the illness was Sitala, and hence the worship of Sitala was considered indispensable to the treatment of smallpox (Nicholas, 1981). Sitala is not a common name for the goddess in the Southern part of the country. Still, the implication here is that the association of illness mainly smallpox to a Goddess figure as the curative and afflicting agency has a history that goes to the ancient times. Many writings consider the fierce and hot goddess as a

cause of the illness and not the cure. Yellamma is one such group of Goddesses in northern Karnataka which is associated with sickness. Here various diseases and illnesses are attributed to the stormy winds send by the Goddesses. The powerful Goddesses are seen to have the power to send out insects to the atmosphere, which causes illness (Bradford, 1983). Kalpana Ram (2012, p.209) in her study on possession in Tamil Nadu, observes how the marks of the pox on one's body are akin to possession in that they testify to another form in which the devotee is 'claimed', imperiously and in often unpleasant ways, by the goddess, as one of her beings when she is in her 'hot', volatile state. Tarwick (1984) remarks that the sores are described as the 'pearls' or 'kisses' of the goddess. In the seminal work of Philippus Baldaeus (1996) titled 'A true and exact description of the most celebrated East-India Coasts of Malabar and Coromandel; as also of the isle of Ceylon' published initially been in Dutch in 1671 and later translated to English describes the relation of Bhadrakali to smallpox in Malabar and to the temple of Kodungallur which he describes as the 'Pagode of Craganore'. He elaborates myth concerning the Bhadrakali's association with smallpox in the book, which indicates the mythological connection dates back to centuries.

The presence of the subsidiary deity called *Vasurimala,* which is translated to English as 'garland of smallpox' at Kodungallur Kavu in the form of a crude and vague figure is according to legends one of the main reasons for the association. The story of Vasurimala is told in the dramatic ritual Tiyyattu which is retold by V T Induchudan (1969) in his seminal work 'Secret Chambers'. The myth described makes references to vasoori or smallpox. The story goes thus, in the fight between Kali and Darika, the former was on the point of defeat, when Mandodari, the wife of Asura, went to Kailasa and worshipped Siva to save the life of her husband. However, Siva did not appear before her, but Parvati, the wife of Siva, taking pity on her, gave her perspiration of Siva. Parvati asked her to utilise these in the best possible manner. Mandodari returned to the scene of fight with these drops, but on arrival, she found

that she was too late and Darika had already been killed. Mandodari found that Kali was already on her way to Kailasa carrying the severed head of Daruka. Mandodari took vengeance by throwing the drops of sweat upon Kali which at once turned into smallpox. As this terrible disease attacked her, Kali fell exhausted and weak. Siva at once came to know about this mishap and created a *bhuta* (demon) from his ears who was called Karnakarna (Karna meaning the ear). This *bhuta* proceeded to the spot where Kali was lying and began to lick on her body to wipe away the swollen skin. He succeeded in removing all eruptions from all over the body except the face. Kali appears, did not allow him to lick her face, because, after all, she was his sister, born to the same father. Therefore, the eruption on her face remained as a permanent feature. In the ritual dance-drama of Tiyattu, the actor who plays the role of Kali makes up her face to show these eruptions. As soon as Kali recovered from her disease, she got hold of Mandodari and broke her bones, so that she could not move. Mandodari's eyes were also injured so that she could not see. Kali then cursed her: you may not be able to harass humanity hereafter. Further, according to the story, Mandodari was then called Vasurimala (Induchudan,1969, p.10). According to the report, Vasurimala is a harmless deity not capable of injury to anybody. In many other stories of Kali, as discussed in the previous chapters, Vasurimala does not picture in so much.

Panikkar (1900) in his work on 'Malabar and Folk' tries to understand the various religious belief of people in Malabar making explicit references to Craganore, now Kodungallur. He writes the following regarding the connection of smallpox and Kali,

The goddess Kali presides overall infectious diseases, such as cholera and smallpox. She has a number of daughters located in different parts of the country with delegated powers which are exercised within certain specified areas, subject to the authority of Kali herself. When smallpox and cholera are epidemics in any locality, these goddesses meet together at the people's request, and after proper propitiatory

ceremonies have been performed, they together drive the devils and free the country from their merciless devastations. When a man is attacked with smallpox, the goddess of his locality is invited by special offerings to his house. She manifests herself by leapings and shoutings in the body of her human representative, who, with the sword, he holds in his hand, and the red cloth that he wears round his waist, and the metal belt with small bells hanging thereon and fastening the dress drives away smallpox demons and saves the patient from death. Year after year, these goddesses visit the houses situated in their respective jurisdictions. One important annual event connected with the worship of Kali is the Cock-festival at Craganore, the abode of this goddess. (Panikkar, 1900, p.172)

Thus, historically one can see how closely smallpox was associated with the figure of Mother Goddess, and it was not different for Kerala, particularly Kodungallur Kavu. The associations and stories have gone down in oral traditions for centuries with many regional variations to it. They have got embedded with social histories of that region.[138] From the narratives and the literature, one can conclude that the immediate association which *Velichappads* make with illness and becoming a *velichappad* is part of a historical journey of stories and myths, coupled by the social conditions they are located. There was an imagined collective trust that developed in the divine interventions, and divine interventions were the only way they could seek any help out of their traumatic experiences.

2.3 Inheritance of Goddess

In the social embeddings of stories and myths, there is also the understanding of inheriting the becoming of *velichappad*. This inheritance is not understood as an inheritance of possession but as the inheritance of the goddess. For the goddess to stay, another family member must become possessed with the death of the *velichappad*. In certain other cases when

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[138] Further see Pati & Harrison (2001), Pati (2001) to see the connection of social history, illness and medicine.

the *velichappad* becomes too old to perform a new member takes over. The co-relatedness of inheritance and becoming is another pattern one deducts from the narratives of *velichappads*.

Santhosh is thirty-four years old now and resides at Kuthanoor village of Palakkad district, a place very well known for having many *velichappads*.[139]Santhosh became a *velichappad* at the age of twenty-two after the death of his father. He used to be goldsmith before he became a *velichappad* and still does it in part-time, also goes as a driver for private vehicles when required. His father used to be a *velichappad.* After the death of his father, there were frequent deaths in the family. The family believed this was because of the wrath of the goddess of not having another *velichappad*. Santhosh thinks that before the funeral rites of the dead *velichappad,* a new person from the family has to become one. Santhosh had shown instances of possession even before the completion of funeral ceremonies of his father. Later he did his *vettitheliyal* from Kodungallur Kavu and became a *velichappad*. The region Santhosh belongs to, the community of *velichappads* around the region made his becoming of a *velichappad* an unavoidable inheritance. Santhosh is not an isolated case. It is a fact that most of the *velichappads* have someone in their family who were *velichappads* before them, from whom they had inherited. It most cases the inheritance is through a matrilineal lineage. However, there is a greater probability that the son of the *velichappad* takes over.

Shibu Swamy is a well-reputed *velichappad* in the state and is the founder office-bearer of an organisation of *velichappads*.[140] Shibu Swamy who hails from Palakkad belongs to a known Ezhava family. The family attributes much of the economic and social mobility they attained from being ex untouchables to what they are today to Thayu Velichappad, who is grand aunt of Shibu Swamy. Thayu Velichappad was a well-known *velichappad* in the state in her times (Figure 2.5). She never got married. The responsibility of taking ahead of the family tradition of having a *velichappad* in each generation fell upon Shibu Swamy who had started

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[139] Santhosh, Interview, Palakkad, February 2019
[140] Shibu Swamy, Interview, Palakkad, October 2018

showing instances of possession even before the passing away of Thayu Velichappad. Shibu Swamy who was hoping for a good job after his Masters in History thus became a *velichappad*. Shibu Swamy recollects, 'My marriage was supposed to happen twelve years back. But my grandmother fell ill then. My grandmother on the death bed told me to concentrate on being a *velichappad*. That is how I took charge.' Both the siblings of Shibu Swamy are well settled, one is working in Australia, and another one is an engineer working with the government. Their partners are equally established in their professions. Despite knowing there could have been an alternative future for him like his elder brothers, he continued to be a *velichappad*.

In the case of Shibu Swamy and Santhosh, family acts as a force that mediates them to inherit the being of a *velichappad*. But in the case of Mani Velichappad who is also from Palakkad, it was different despite him wanting to be a *velichappad* from a young age.[141] The father of Mani Velichappad was also a *velichappad*, but he had to face several conflicts from the family before he fulfilled his desire of being a *velichappad*. He recollects that he had started expression tendencies of possession at the age of seven. However, since he was still in school, his family insisted that he continue his studies. Even if he wishes to be a velichappad, it can be done once his tasks are done. However, when he continuously fell ill, his family was forced to take him for Kodungallur Bharani. The Panikkars then told that he is possessed by Bhagavathi. Thus, he did his velichappad at the young age of twelve. Since then, he has strived to take his studies and being a *velichappad* together.

The opposition to Mani Velichappad came from his family because he was still a child when he did *vettitheliyal*. However, later on, the family accepted. He considers his *gurunatha* (woman teacher) as a significant influence in his life. His gurunatha, Vellakutti, was a close acquaintance of Thayimuthiyamma, who is the grand aunt of Shibu Swamy. Mani Velichappad firmly believes one has to get the possession from their childhood or it should be hereditary.

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[141] Mani Velichappad, Interview, Palakkad, February 2019

He also says that his family accepted him later on as his father was also a *velichappad.* He also says that acceptance becomes difficult when you have no other *velichappads* in the family.

As in the narratives, the intricacies of inheritance are different for each *velichappads*. For Santhosh, it naturally came into him after the death of his father even before the pyre burned out. For Shibu Swamy, it was a decision he had to take when his grand-aunt in the death bed requested him to do so. For Mani Velichappad, the being of a *velichappad* had a deep impact that he wanted to be one at the age of twelve. All of them are very wilfully *velichappads* now. Santhosh is a driver, a goldsmith and a *velichappad*, as being a *velichappad* alone does not provide his sustenance. The family of Shibu Swamy has a history in which they have got immense social and economic mobility because of the presence of an eminent *velichappad* in their family, that is Thayu Velichappad who is the grand aunt of Shibu Swamy. For the family who is known by their *velichappads,* carrying it forward to the younger generation is a means of sustaining the reputation of the family. Mani *Velichappad* even though attempted to take his studies and to be a *velichappad* together, he, later on, decided to give importance to being a *velichappad*, which he willfully embraced. The familiarisation to *velichappads* and *velichappad thullal* from a very young age ought to have an impact on all of them. Gender plays an important role in determining who inherits. Even though some velichappads have told that the mode of inheritance is matrilineal, the reality is far from it. When children take over, inevitably, the male child is given preference over the female child to be a *velichappad*. In most cases, women members are discouraged even. The men who want to become velichappads, particularly in contemporary times has resources and structures that support their claims and desires. These intricacies can be further unpacked by looking at the gendered mediations that happen in the processes of becoming.

2.4 Gendered Mediations

The discussions on becoming by far have established one detail clearly: that the becoming is evidently and exceedingly a mediated process, with mediations operating actively and passively. The actors of mediations, the reason for mediations and the modes of mediations vary. From the rights which the Panikkars and other *velichappads* enjoy in the *vettitheliyal* to how family or social location operates alters the understanding that becoming is a non-mediated process. One aspect of the mediations that are elaborated in this section is the gendered dimension of the mediations that happen. Gendered mediations happen at all stages of the becoming process.

There is a general acceptance among the devotees that anyone can become a *velichappad* if they prove their worth irrespective of their age or gender; in reality, it is far from true. Many times, the women who identify with being possessed and expresses interest in becoming a *velichappad* is prevented from being one. There is a control that is exerted on unmarried women from becoming possessed, and the same command is not seen among unmarried men. The interests young unmarried girl shows in being a *velichappad* is subdued mainly by the family members with the help of other *velichappads* and experts. I term this as the 'limits of possession.' Among the *velichappads,* there are interpretations of why there exist these limits to possession. Ganapati Velichappad says that there is no age to become a *velichappad*, and one forgets oneself in the process.[142] But many a time when unmarried women show character traits of the *velichappad,* they are discouraged. In all cases of a *darshanam* the family is asked for agreement. He says that if it is before marriage, there is a strong chance that the marriage does not work. Thus, families have problems even when young women become *velichappad*.

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[142] Ganapati Velichappad, Interview, Kalpetta, October 2017

Family plays a crucial role in deciding whether someone in their family ought to be a *velichappad* or not. The control exerted by the family is immense when the woman who shows the desire is unmarried. There are two reasons given by families for this. Firstly, the prospectus of women getting married diminishes when she becomes a *velichappad*. Secondly, there is bound to be problems in a family life when the woman is a *velichappad*, particularly in the early years of marriage. The families are referring to the differential power play that may develop in such cases. This angst is not seen in the case of men. There is a limit put for religiosity, ritualism and possession when it is a woman. These limits begin to seize after the woman is married and has children. The tensions around the sexuality of women are evident. This is further explained with the narratives of two young women and their experiences.

Sowmya is eighteen years old, and her mother is a *velichappad*.[143] They are from Palakkad district. She has been regularly accompanying her mother and her mother's group comprising about thirty people for the festivities of Kodungallur Bharani ever since she was a kid. The place of festivals is like a home for her, she says. Sowmya has completed a course in a civil survey and was doing a temporary job. Now she has left the job. She said that during last year of the festival she had shown character traits of possession. But her family members through certain rituals had made it sure that she would not get possessed as she was still a virgin and unmarried. Here the reasons why families object becomes more transparent. The tension is around the effects that becoming a *velichappad* may have on sexuality. Sowmya recollects that her mother had earlier shared with her a similar story of her becoming a *velichappad*. Her mother had seen a *velichappad* in herself at the age of twelve. Mother's father then subdued it because she was not married then. Sowmya says, 'my grandfather then prayed to God to take it away from his daughter. Immediately after marriage, my mother again started showing traits. My grandfather assured my father that he had given only the daughter and not a *Bhagavathi* to

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[143] Sowmya, Interview, Kodungallur, March 2017

him. The grandfather then prayed that until his death that my mother should not get possessed.'

Very clearly there has not been a shift in perceptions across two generations- that of hers and her mother's. However, her mother became a *velichappad* after the death of her grandfather. Very strangely, her mother started showing character traits of possession the very next day after her father's death and later became a *velichappad.* The devotees who come along with her mother has ultimate belief in the strength of her mother. Her mother has not lost the belief in the goddess and her power even when their family is in financial misery, Sowmya says. In the case of Sowmya and her mother, it is the family which played a crucial role in the process of becoming or rather non-becoming. However, the gendered mediations do not restrict itself to families. Several other actors come into play as well.

Understanding my research endeavours, certain velichappads asked me to meet Haritha as her desire to become a *velichappad* has been kept at bay, taking into account her future I was told. On meeting Haritha, she gave me a descriptive narrative of her journey of not-becoming a *velichappad* and its effect on her life. Haritha is a twenty-two year, and her journey of not becoming a *velichappad* is narrated here.[144] Haritha grew up as the eldest of two children. Her father is a driver and mother work in an organic seeds shop. She grew up listening to stories of Devi from her grandmother and has been a devotee since her childhood. Haritha had started going to Kodungallur Kavu regularly about ten years ago. She visits the temple with her family. However, she recollects that her first visit to the temple was not with her family. It was when she had gone for an excursion from school. She requested her teachers for a stop at Kodungallur, and her teachers agreed. After reaching home, she started noticing specific changes and illness in her. She says,

> After reaching back home, I fell very sick. We checked at multiple hospitals, and none of them could diagnose my illness correctly. I missed classes for weeks. So,

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[144] Haritha, Interview, Palakkad, February 2019

my family decided we will go to Kodungallur once. By then people had started making association of my illness to Kodungallur Amma. I was showing signs of shivering once in a while. Thus, my mother, my grandmother and I went to Kodungallur Kavu. I was in the seventh standard then. I did not do *vettitheliyal* then. I was asked to swear and pray that I would not become a *velichappad* in twenty years until I am married and settled. I agreed after much hesitation. I cried a lot then. My mother compelled me to swear so. I fought with my mother and cried continuously. After all the pressure I did declare in front of the goddess as they had asked me to.

However, once they had returned, her mother got ill and was bedridden for twenty days, she says. The next year when they visited Kodungallur Bharani, Haritha again showed tendencies of *thullal*. After that, her family gave in to her desire for yearly visits to Kodungallur Bharani. As per the belief, in the third year of the visit, she was supposed to be a *velichappad*. However, that is when we see another actor in the mediation process. This time it was a senior velichappad who stopped her desires. She narrates, 'at Kodungallur Kavu I did *urayal* as expected. But he caught me immediately. He stopped me from taking the sword. My mother cried and narrated to him my story. He pulled the sword from my hand. He did not allow me to cut my forehead, which would have been the culmination of the process of being a *velichappad*. Ever since that year, I go every year for Bharani and sit at his *aalthara* during the entire span of the festival.'

Haritha says, initially she was too disappointed about not becoming a *velichappad*. But she says that the Devi is always by her side whatever happens. Even now, when she goes for the Bharani festival, she experiences traits of possession, but that is when she goes there. Her family for the said reason is cautious of her visits to the temple. They do not try to stop her, though. She visits Kodungallur Kavu with her family and sits in one of the *aalthara* for the entire span of the festivities. She says that her family is still troubled when she goes for the

Kodungallur Bharani. Haritha says that the actions of her family and senior velichappads makes sense to her lately. She is happy that she was stopped, though sometimes it pains her. She says,

> Now I understand that at fifteen years I was stopped because I had a lot of life left to live. There is a lot of work to be done in life. If I become a *velichappad,* there is a lot of rituals that have to be followed. With my menstrual cycle, it will not be easy for me. But, strangely, during Bharani times, I have never had my periods. I pray to Devi for postponing my periods.

Haritha says that it is for time to tell if she will ever become a *velichappad*. She is aware that if ever she becomes a *velichappad,* she will have to take care of the ancestral *kavu*, which was taken care of by her grandmother. However, for now, the days of Kodungallur Bharani and visiting the temple is a source of great rejoicing for Haritha.

Haritha's narration is a clear indication of several different factors that influence the becoming of a *Velichappad* and the coming together of several factors earlier discussed in the chapter. In the case of Haritha, the family has played a vital role in stopping her from becoming a *Velichappad*. There is a fear of goddess that cannot prevent the family members from completely stopping Haritha from being an ardent devotee of Kodungallur Amma. At the same time, they can control her enough from becoming a *velichappad*. Whether she gets possessed by the goddess is not enough reason to become a *velichappad*. Shibu Swamy, the General Secretary of Kodungallur Bharani Velichappad Sangam (KBVS) an organisation of *velichappads,* also plays a pivotal role in convincing Haritha not to become a *velichappad*. He says that if Haritha had reached the Panikkars when she was in *thullal,* she would have done her *vettitheliyal*. Shibu Swamy is particular that agreement of family members is a must be in agreement when doing the *vettitheliyal,* and he suggests that younger girls should avoid being *velichappads* as their lives are complicated after it.[145]

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[145] Shibu Swamy, Interview, Palakkad, January 2019

Despite all this, there exists several *velichappads*, particularly women *velichappads* who hails the importance of women *Velichappads* and forefronts the need for their presence. The answers to the reason for such a presence varies from rootedness in the understanding that Amma trusts women to be *velichappads* to how women feel free in their expressions of being a *velichappad*. Kalyani *Velichappad*[146] reasons thus, 'Women are more *Velichappads* because Amma calls women more. It is Amma's interest. There is a difference between men and women. Women have more power. Amma is on women. Amma trusts women. She does not trust men so much. That is why there are so many women.' Women *velichappads* share about the authority they have at the Kodungallur Kavu. Sometimes one gets the most simplistic of the response such as on which Thankam Velichappad, 'You tell me where else can us women move our body like this and dance in a trance.'[147] The reasons and articulations vary, what remains is an urge to be in a position of assertion and authority, which their everyday lives fail to provide them.

The experiences here of *velichappads* can be extrapolated to studies from other regions as well. Ram's (2012) work on afflictive possession in South India, studies the forms of afflictions that are understood as possession in the state of Tamil Nadu. She discusses how all types of possession was devalued and marginalised in the discourse of Indian modernity. In rituals, possession is singled out, and many other associated features in the phenomena are overlooked. Particularly studies of possession historically have devalued women's possession and almost always associated it with marginalised cults (Ram, 2012, p.204). She makes a distinction between male ritual possession and the female afflictive possession. The former is seen as an integral part of 'profession' anticipated by spectators. The female afflictive possession is seen as the outcome of disjuncture between the body of habit and body of moment. This is not similar to body and spirit. She exemplifies it with saying how movements

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[146] Kalyani *Velichappad*, Interview, Palakkad, October 2017
[147] Thankam Velichappad, Interview, Kodungallur, March 2017

of female possession, such as dancing and singing, are very much part of a childhood that was forced to put away (Ram, 2012, p.219).

Even when a woman identifies to be possessed for it to get the ritual sanction of being a *velichappad* needs several mediations, else it remains as an affliction and is 'subdued' as the narratives establish. The reason for this is the fear of women becoming a public subject of *velichappad* before fulfilling the 'prime' responsibilities in a family. The difference between women as social beings and goddess is maintained without contradiction in a patriarchal society (Rajan, 1998). The 'divinity' is put at a halt or asked to wait until these familial responsibilities are gratified.

2.5 Conclusion

The chapter is an attempt to understand the becoming of a *velichappad*. The becoming is unpacked not only through the events of becoming of *velichappads,* but also through several intricacies involved in the journey. A descriptive account of the final event of becoming known as the *vettitheliyal* gives the sense of the intensity of devotion in *velichappads* that results in cutting open once own forehead to spill blood. The spirit of belief makes the physicality of the event possible. In addition to descriptive accounts, nuances in the event were discussed to understand the event as one with several negotiations and hierarchies. Competitiveness and reluctance among the persons who appear for *vettitheliyal* questions if the possession is only happening in the realm of divinity or whether the divinity is coupled with several other factors that govern the everyday lives. Caste and gender hierarchies operate in deciding the becoming of *velichappads* at various stages in the process. There exists a superior caste authority, who is always a male, to approve of the possession as the rightful one and not of the evil powers. A Brahmanical puritan order of worship need not necessarily guide the assertion of velichappads after they become. However, the graded inequalities of castes that functions in the processes

need to be flagged.[148] The acceptance of possession as inherited has to do with not only the feudal patronages they are rooted in but also the social and economic mobility achieved by the families. The interconnection with illness is rooted in social history and political economy of the land during the times of occurrence of illness. The only recourse available from the illness was of divine intervention. Embeddedness of stories and myths in the region, and exposure to same from childhood has had a profound impact on the lives of *velichappads*. Finally, the mediations that happen in the process of becoming is gendered and establishes the limits of divinity raising questions on the sexual tensions in the lives of *velichappads*.

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[148] For further on graded inequality of castes see Ambedkar (2002)

Chapter 3:

The Domestic Worlds of *Velichappads*

The phases in the lives of *velichappads* cannot be seen in discontinuity. One stage in life leads and contributes to the next, as so for everyone else. This interconnection and continuity of life journey act as the basic premise for venturing into the current chapter from the previous one. The last chapter discussed in detail the processes of becoming a *velichappad* and ended at a note on several mediations that happen in the process. The current chapter follows the discussions on gendered mediations and family by entering the realm of the domestic worlds of *velichappads* and particularly looking at the aspects of marriage and conjugality. The chapter needs to be seen in continuity of the journey of becoming, with several factors discussed in the previous chapter holding in this chapter as well.

By understanding the domestic worlds of *velichappads,* the attempt here is to depart from approaches that aimed only at examination and simplification of obscurities contained in ritual possession. The focus is shifted to the everyday lives of *velichappads,* who belong to working-class families.[149] The proposed enquiry outside the boundaries of the ritual space locates *velichappads* in their 'everyday' to understand the fullness of the human experiences of *velichappads*. The chapter thus attempts to understand possession beyond the ritual enactment and seeing beyond the sensory presentation of possession to understand the gendered underpinnings mainly with a focus on the domestic worlds of *velichappads*. Marriage and conjugality are two themes explored in depth in the study.

Domestic worlds as an entry point to understanding *velichappads* will contribute towards making sense of their world in varied different ways.[150] It prompts us towards thinking

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[149] Understanding the everyday life is an important aspect of studies focusing on gender. Domosh & Seager (2001), Jeffery (2018), Pohl, Borrie & Patterson (2000), Riessman (2000), Radhakrishnan (2009) to cite a few examples.
[150] Miller (2001, p.15) observes quite poetically that if home is where the heart is, then it is also where it is broken, torn and made whole in the flux of relationships, social and material.

about the conflicting relationship between divinity and gender in the modern world. It points towards divergent and intersecting societal limits of possession for men and women. Feminist discourses have for long engaged with the category of the private domestic spheres as much as the public sphere (Fraser,1990; Keats & Scott, 2004; Landes,1998). The critique of dichotomies of private and public has remained vital in feminist writings and struggles as it is indispensable in understanding the very production and construction of femininity and masculinity (Abraham, 2010; Rosicki,2012). This, in turn, is a political process of unpacking the structures of power embedded in institutions such as family which makes up the fundamental unit of society. The analysis of domestic can be seen changing with changing character of social questions concerning changes in political economy. 'Experience' then becomes an essential aspect of understanding the private (Habermas,1991). A need to articulate and politically generalise the personal experiences of oppressed and marginalised groups that originate in societal ostracism or social conflicts, as experiences of injustice, was seen as a significant influence in political and social transformation (Wischermann and Muller, 2004). In the chapter, substantial importance is given to the experiences of *velichappads* and most of it is shown in the first-person narrative. The narratives, in itself, contain a huge repository of articulations around the themes mentioned above.

The domestic worlds of *velichappads* are gendered. One follows the understanding that a society which is structured by caste and class, using the category of gender provides insights into the interlocking structures of oppression and gendered nature of social stratification (Rege, 2003). Gender is seen as produced through range of socio-cultural and material practices, institutional- ideological discourses, and the practices of daily life (Niranjana, 2001). The chapter in the course of gendered underpinnings thus provides insights into interlocking structures of oppression. Being a *velichappad* essentially means being a Goddess when

possessed or the mediator of the goddess.[151] The goddess, women or men, then belongs to a particular domestic space with defined roles according to the imbibed social norms. The study aims at understanding the impact of possession in families and how the very meaning of *velichappads* changes through negotiations that take place within families. This bringing together of themes will pave the way to understand the social, cultural and economic meaning-making of possession in a household, particularly a rural working-class household. A critical look into the domestic lives of *velichappads* is also a study on everyday of the lives that seemingly exist outside the borders of normative narratives of gender. Unpacking and understanding gender here becomes a means to ask unsettling questions and pave the way to alternative discourses to look at tradition and gender beyond binaries of agency and indoctrination. Thus, gendered experiences are seen as constructed and negotiated in the domestic space and private worlds of *velichappads* that gives a fresh perspective in understanding what it is to be a *velichappad*.

Experiences of women *velichappad* and experiences of men *velichappads* are dealt as two separate sections to develop a differential yet intersecting understanding. The experiences of women *velichappads* are discussed first followed by the experiences of men *velichappads*. At the same time, the focus on the experiences of men gives a more in-depth insight and nuance in the studies on gendered dimensions of possession which has otherwise majorly focussed on the experiences of women.[152] The chapter explores the experiences of *velichappads* by thinking along with the structures of change that limits and transforms *velichappads*. How different and similar are the male experiences and the female experiences for marriage and conjugality? What are the negotiations and conflicts in the process? Is there a possibility to develop a dialectical approach to understand these questions? The chapter intends to see how being a

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[151] In the belief system that is studied. See Chapter 1 for more
[152] For studies that concentrated on women and possession, see Alpers (1984), Bargen (1997), Constantinides (1985), Ong (1988), Keller (2005), Lewis (1966), Rausch (2015), Wilson (1967) et al.

velichappad permeates the domestic by understanding the everyday of being a *velichappad* by addressing the problems mentioned above. The themes that have emerged in this paper came out through multiple in-depth interviews, observation and informal interaction done primarily with *velichappads* and their families.[153]

3.1 Domestic worlds of *Velichappads*: Experiences of Women *Velichappads*

Women's roles in a family are as much defined as it is in society. The class location realises the gendered roles of women velichappads in addition to an ascribed status that is inherited based on the caste. The families of *velichappads* looked into here are rural working-class families wherein the means of employment in these families are taken up by more than one member that makes economic sustenance possible and forms a social reality in which the family exist. In several families, the women could be engaged in wage labour or another kind of income-generating activities in addition to being a *velichappad*. A woman member in the family adorns several different defined familial relationships with each member of the family, maybe as a mother, a daughter, a daughter in law, a wife etc. Thus, there are several different identities that a woman member in the family's juggles with everyday. Access to space each of these roles is marked clearly by the social norms. A woman *velichappad* after becoming one enters to this framework of well-defined spaces. Domestic space here is not thought as a void or an empty place but somewhat intangible, an invisible backdrop which enables the very definition of material bodies (Niranjana, 2001). It is to this defined space that a possessed identity of the goddess, that of a *velichappad* enters unsettling several of these spatial boundaries. Keeping this as a reality, how do we then make sense of experiences of women *velichappads*. This section is developed through the narratives of women *velichappads* to

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[153] During the course of the field work one could not overlook a certain pattern that is emerging when *velichappads* talked about their life and that is how the questions for the chapter developed. This pattern had to do with the compromises and conflicts through in their private worlds.

unpack the complexities that women *velichappads* experience, particularly concerning marriage and conjugality when the boundaries mentioned above are unsettled.

The experiences of women *velichappads* seek to answer the following questions. What are the interventions that happen to prevent an unmarried woman from being a *velichappad*? Why are such interventions made? What happens to the prospectus of marriage if one becomes a *velichappad* before getting married? How marital life is affected when one becomes a *velichappad*? Why do some *velichappads* choose a life without marriage? What are the responses of children and extended family when one becomes a *velichappad*? The experiences of women *Velichappads* discussed here are divided into two sections. The first section tries to understand through the narratives the complexities involved when women become a *velichappad* or show propensities of becoming a *velichappad* before they are married. Some of them remain unmarried once they become *velichappads*. The second section address the marriage question from three facets: firstly, the negotiations that happen in the life of women *velichappads* when they are married, other conflicts in the marital relationship and the stories of separation from partners.

3.1.1 *Goddess or marriage?*

Gender of the person possessed plays a crucial role in the becoming of *velichappad* and experiences of the being of *velichappad*. One key aspect which was discussed towards the end of the previous chapter is young unmarried women are discouraged from being a *velichappad* even if they show tendencies. There is a general acceptance among the believers and *velichappads* that anyone can become a *velichappad* at any age. All that matters is how much one has imbibed the power of the goddess. In reality, it is far more a complex and gendered process. The interest young women show in being a *velichappad* is subdued mainly by the family members with the help of other *velichappads* and experts. There will be many difficulties if a *kanyaka* (virgin/maiden) becomes a *velichappad* is a consensus among

velichappads.[154] The prospectus of women getting married reduces if they become a *velichappad* is a belief held commonly by *velichappads*.

Young women are smaller in number compared to young men at the Kodungallur Bharani, and same in the case of the visibility of young women *velichappads* in general. There exist factors that discourage young women from being *velichappad.* Some mediations happen against their wilfulness to be one. In the previous chapter, I had discussed the case of Haritha in detail wherein we saw that she was discouraged from becoming a *velichappad*. The main reason why Haritha was discouraged in being a *velichappad* was also that she is a young unmarried girl. In the case of Sowmya (discussed in the previous chapter) as well it is no different.

Among the *velichappads* as well, there are interpretations of why there exist these limits. Ganapati Velichappad of Wayanad district is a *velichappad* for thirty-six years. He lives with his family and two children.[155] Ganapati is the guru of a group now and leads a group of thirty people during festivities. As a guru, he is also one person who takes important decisions during the becoming of a *velichappad*. He says that there is no age to become a *velichappad*, and one forgets oneself in the process. However, many times when unmarried women show character traits of *velichappad,* they are discouraged. In all cases of a *darshanam,* the family is asked for agreement. If it is before marriage, there is a strong chance that the marriage will not work. He says families have problems when young women become *velichappad*.

So, when unmarried women experience such traits, they are discouraged by other *velichappads*, Panikkars and families. Ganapati Velichappad says that he has 'rectified' and changed many families that had collapsed because a woman was becoming *velichappads* at a young age. What is interesting to note is that mother of Ganapati Velichappad was a known *velichappad* and a Guru who used to take a lot of people along with her, especially when going

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[154] As told by several *velichappads* and devotees through several accounts.
[155] Ganapati Velichappad, Interview, Wayanad, March 2017.

for Kodungallur Bharani.   She was an influential person who had brought together many people. Ganapati Velichappad proudly says his mother was the only woman from Wayanad who was a *velichappad* in those times.[156] At a very young age, he was exposed to rituals and practices through his mother. He does believe that ancestors play a pertinent role in one becoming a *velichappad*. The figure of the known *velichappad,* who was his mother, does not affect his opinion on the forced limitations on younger women. Could this be considered as an intergenerational shift in perception? However, the view which Ganapati holds is something which is widely held among the *velichappads* and the believers. Several girls are held back by their families from becoming a *velichappad*.[157]

The tension around marriage and sexuality is apparent. Can a young woman become a divine being before she becomes a sexual being? How will then that divinity affect her realisation of sexuality? These were lurking questions in the narratives of *velichappads*. The measures are taken so that the possession by a divine body how much ever godly it maybe does not affect the fulfilment of the designated roles of a woman, particularly the sexual roles. The difference between the 'woman' and the 'goddess' is very distinctly maintained. It is seen that even if women become *velichappads* in later stages of marriage, they should not become one in the early stages and not definitely before marriage. The divinity here has set boundaries which are not allowed to cross the sanctity of marriage and conjugality. The goddess is 'let' to enter only at a point when the marriage has matured in years, possibly after the reproduction of a lineage. There is a limit to the possession, which translates as a limit in seeing possession as an agential act.[158] The scepticism of agency here is not speared by secular criticism of religious understanding of agency as Veer (2008), and many others may argue. Bracke (2003)

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[156] This is the claim of the respondent.

[157] Even though I came across many such names only the ones I have had direct interaction with is included in the chapter

[158] From the 1990s onwards, studies of women and religious movements became increasingly focused on women's agency (Bracke, 2008).

argues that evacuating structural constraints and conditions from the very notion of agency only produces a poor understanding of the agency. The focus here is to understand the complexity, ambiguity and transience of religious traditions as they come into contact with competing ideas about women, gender, family and sexuality (Avishai, 2008, p.429). The life narratives discussed in the chapter points to the complexity of attributing agency to acts of possession overlooking religious structures and its uneasy intersection with the familial norms.

Sometimes women do become *velichappads* in much younger age-defying their families or some time without knowing what is happening to them. Some of them remain unmarried for their life, grappling with loneliness in later stages of life. The life narrative of Subhadra Velichappad throws light into what happens when a woman becomes a *velichappad* before they are married, and they are forced to choose between goddess and marriage. I had seen Subhadra Velichappad at Kodungallur Bharani over the years of my visit there before I got a chance to meet her and talk. Subhadra Velichappad being a prominent and founding member and now the President of Kodungallur Bhagavathi Velichappad Sangam (KBVS) is a known person among the *velichappads* from Palakkad district. She gets central space in many of the processions during Bharani. I met Subhadra Velichappad at her home at Mattukkadu, Palakkad for the first time in Feb 2019 (Figure 3.1). I had to make a few attempts before she finally agreed and was free to meet. Her main reason for refusal was that she was alone at house and as a lone person from the family residing in the ancestral home all the functions in the nearby places have to attended by her. She emphasised about being alone at home time and again in our conversations on the phone. When we met, we talked for almost an entire day on many different issues concerning her, *velichappads* and also general issues.[159] After the first interaction we met again in two days, wherein I travelled with her and a group of other *velichappads* to visit ailing *velichappads* and for an event. Even for the Bharani in April 2018,

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[159] One common experience during interviews is that longer and truthful conversations are possible when you meet *velichappads* alone.

she shared her experiences. The interaction with Subhadra *Velichappad* gave deep insights on developing perspectives discussed in the current chapter. Given below is a small part of the interaction that throws some light into the conflicting worlds of *velichappads,* including Subhadra *Velichappad.*[160]

Subhadra Velichappad: "…There we were asked if we need God or Marriage."

Subhadra Velichappad was in her sixth standard when she became a *velichappad.*[161] She had to stop her studies from the sixth standard as she was constantly taunted at school for being a *velichappad*. However, she says she never felt she does not want to be a *velichappad*. She is fifty-two years old now and has been a *velichappad* for forty-three years. She has never missed going for Kodungallur Bharani other than for the years in which her father and elder brother died. Subhadra Velichappad never got married. She was the sixth child in a family with seven children. All her elder brothers are dead now. She has a younger sister who was very adamant about not getting married until Subhadra Velichappad did. However, at the age of thirty-two, her younger sister also got married. Subhadra Velichappad who lives alone in her ancestral home recollects the reasons for staying unmarried,

> When I was young, I had got some marriage proposals, and one had almost got finalised. But I fell sick a week before finalising the marriage. Then my father took me to Kodungallur and *Adikal*. There we were asked to choose between god or marriage. We chose marriage. Then we were asked again whether we needed *komaram* or marriage. They then added that even if I got married, the relationship would not stay. This incident happened when I was eighteen years old. But when I was twelve years old, another astrologer had told even if I got married; it will not last. After this incident, I have not taken any effort to get married. All my siblings got married. Now I do feel

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[160] Subhadra Velichappad, Interview, Palakkad, February 2019.
[161] The becoming of Subhadra Velichappad was discussed in Chapter 2, under the head 'Illness and Becoming'

that I do not have anyone. I started feeling so after my mother died. My neighbours are also not cooperative. I am not sad that I did not get married. But I miss a partner.

The passing away of her mother was an incident that left Subhadra Velichappad much lonely. However, much of the trouble experienced by Subhadra Velichappad comes from the treatment meted upon her by society. Subhadra Velichappad shares all the troubles an unmarried middle-aged woman experience living alone. She adds,

The people around think I am sexually frustrated. So, they always annoy me and disturb me. At night they throw stones at my house. My neighbours disturb me. Sometimes I get a call from *velichappads* when they are drunk to talk unnecessarily. When people come to listen to oracles, some people around say those are my 'clients', and I am making money by it. Those are the times when I feel bad about *Bhagavathi*. After being there with her throughout, why do I get these names?

Subhadra Velichappad adds that her becoming a *velichappad* was not a conscious decision, neither by her nor her family. She was a child when she became *velichappad*. Her family never liked it. They were in much pain when they saw blood spilling over her face. The family even wanted her to end-all of it. Her staying unmarried was also a reason for her family's discomfort. She says,

My parents were sad that I was not married. I still get marriage proposals. But when we have joined the goddess and become one with the goddess, we cannot do all that. Others may have ninety-nine percent worldly feeling. For us, it is ninety-nine percent Godly feelings. These days most *Velichappads* are married, but they do have a lot of problems in the family. It is a fact.

Subhadra Velichappad is now an active member and current President of Kodungallur Bharani *Velichappad* Sangam (KBVS). Being part of the organisation makes her look at her problems as not just her own. Instead, she can see a pattern in the lives of velichappads,

particularly concerning marriage and family. She even takes the initiative to arrange a marriage for fellow *velichappads*. She continues,

I took the initiative for the marriage of Shibu Swamy, the Secretary of KBVS because I know it is essential. We need a partner. I know him through Thayu Velichappad, his matriarch. Now after KBVS we got to see a lot more people. When we listen to their stories, our worries go away. Many people, after becoming *velichappad* discontinue being one. They are very irregular in going for Kodungallur Bharani. People who become *velichappad* after having children have lesser problems. Becoming a *velichappad* before getting married complicates life. You ask as many *velichappads* as you want, they will have some issue with family. My worry is my loneliness. I wish for a partner.

Subhadra Velichappad is, however, worried about who will continue this tradition in their family. Her family members are very particular that the practice of velichappads does not sustain in their family. She shares her concerns,

My sister's daughter, who stays in Bangalore with her family, got possessed last year when she had come for the local pooja here. They did not even come this year because they were scared whether she would get possessed again and did not want to get possessed. She has two children. She is thirty-one now. Afterwards, they even came and gave a lamp to Bhagavathi telling they do not need possession in the family again. No loved ones want to see us cut our forehead and get wounded right. She does not want anymore to get possessed. I do not want anyone in my family to become a velichappad. I have taken care of fifteen grandchildren in the family, and none of them likes even to see me as a *velichappad*. Even if I have not delivered a child, I have brought them up with love and care. Hope they will remember all this? But there has to

be someone here to light the lamp every day. Everyone gets sick towards the end of their life.

I will never complain to Devi. She gave means to my food. The marriage of my siblings happened because of her. So, until I die, I will continue all this. All my elder brothers have passed away. My younger sister is not talking to her husband for six months now. Naturally, people will ask why all this is happening despite my belief. But I have not lost my faith.

The narrative of Subhadra Velichappad goes through a lot of different but related trajectories. Here journey of becoming of a *velichappad* has parlance with many themes discussed in the previous chapter whether it be the illness of chickenpox, poverty and influence of figure who guided them to Kodungallur Bharani festivities and temple. A child's becoming of a *velichappad* and the tensions it brought to the family is clearly stated here wherein she says she had no clue of what had happened or was happening. Her parents were clearly against it. Her parents were not wholly in agreement or at peace with their daughter being a mediator of the goddess. This may not sync easily with the standard logic of a religious society. There was a flip side to the status and recognition she got as a *velichappad*. She had to give up on education at the primary level. Notably, the call was taken not to get married.

What makes marriage of velichappads so complicated? The reasons for the same comes later in her narrative, wherein she discusses the tensions surrounding marriage and sexuality, wherein she tells that *velichappads* to have more 'godly feelings'. The 'godly feelings' here is presented against 'worldly feelings.' One has to look deeper into whether the lack of sexual desires occurs naturally or is imbibed through the religious norms. *Velichappads* do not belong to an ascetic tradition with celibacy as a norm.[162] However, Subhadra Velichappad was asked

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[162] Many scholars have noted that celibacy is a concept which has social, psychological, medical and religious significance in Hindu society (Carstairs, 1958; Kakar, 1982, 1990; Obeyesekere, 1981; O'Flaherty, 1973; Spratt, 1966). However, with respect to *velichappads* there is no written account which marks celibacy as a norm.

to choose between marriage and goddess. The tension that exists is social tension in seeing the mediator of the goddess also as a sexual being.[163] Or rather a goddess even as a sexual being. The celibacy here is forced upon the velichappads through multiple actors.

The loneliness she endures now is an everyday reality which she is coping. Is loneliness a phase that *velichappads* endure like many others or an everyday reality? She understands this and takes the initiative for the wedding of a fellow *velichappad*. The struggle of Subhadra Velichappad is also the struggle against a perception of being considered a person who is 'loose'. A term attributed to any woman who is not in the guardianship of a man and is stretching certain boundaries of being a woman in a society with stringent gender norms and marked spaces of her living. The struggle is not against the outside world alone but against the male *velichappads* as well, who calls her at night drunk. She emphasises that no one in the family wants to take all this forward. She is in an everyday battle to overcome all this and is asserting herself through certain channels of ventilation, in this case, particularly the organisation, Kodungallur Bhagavathi Velichappad Sangam. She takes immense pride in the fact that she has built up and nurtured her family. Whatever happens, she has not lost belief in the goddess, a great source of her strength.

Like Subhadra Velichappad, one can see many *velichappads* who have never married. One of the main activities the organisation of *velichappads* undertakes is to take initiatives for taking care of the older destitute *velichappads*. In one of my journeys with the members of the organisation, I got to meet two such *velichappads*. One of such visits was to the house of Lakshmi Amma. Lakshmi Amma, in her eighties known for her witty nature, was alone at home when I visited. Her nephew, who stays with her, had gone for work. The moment she saw the group of *velichappads* she said, 'I am not dead yet', taking pun at how older

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[163] It is noted that sexual lust and desire are regarded as volatile, dangerous, and chaotic by many in South Asia (Edwards, 1983; Kakar 1990; O'Flaherty, 1973 & 1980; Obeyesekere, 1976, 1981; Spratt, 1966). The question of sexuality of a woman who is possessed causes tension in much more magnitude.

velichappads like her is forgotten. Most parts of the conversation of hers with the fellow *velichappads* had to do with how no one visits her these days. Despite having mentored many *velichappads,* she finds no visitors. Much older than Subhadra Velichappad, Lakshmi Amma now longs for visitors, who respects and knows her as a *velichappad*.

The section tried to unpack the narratives on why women are discouraged from being *velichappads* before they get married. Also, it endeavoured to understand the tensions of women *velichappads* who live without companionship and their tryst with the loneliness. The next section ventures into understanding the negotiations and complexities that happen in the lives of women *velichappads* who get married. *Velichappads* who get married and have a family have different stories to share. Several similar undercurrents run parallel in all these narratives.

3.1.2 *Marriage, Conflicts and Negotiations*

Once a senior male *velichappad* shared his experiences of solving disputes in families which has a women member of the family as a *velichappad*. He said, 'women might get *darshanam* after getting married and having children. It is challenging for a marriage to work then. Once they are *velichappad,* they cannot have any relationship of a husband and wife. Husbands thus will have a bad time. Women enter a different world which is disconnected from worldly pleasures. To get a husband who understands this is very difficult. There are instances in which the husband becomes an alcoholic. There are regular fights, and there is no peace in the family.'[164] The underlying sexual tension indicated by the *velichappad* cannot be differentiated from what was discussed in the previous section. The responsibility of having a stable family falls on the woman member in a patriarchal society. But here the women member is a mediator of the goddess, who enjoys a special status attributed by religious beliefs. The lack of sexual desires of woman *velichappad* is suggested as a reason why marital relationships

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[164] Interview, Wayanad, October 2017

face trouble. Do the problems arise, particularly because the woman is a *velichappad*? How do we make sense of the assertion that women velichappads exhibit in conjugal relationships?

Rarely does husbands of women velichappads talk about the tensions they experience in a marital relationship. However, meeting Supriya Komaram and her husband Chandrashekaran[165] with their cooperation in the study became a source of some sharp insights into the complexities involved. They reside in an interior village of Wayanad district with two children who are both in school-going age. I met them in their rented house near Meppadi during the heavy monsoon season. The monsoon was the worst in the history of Kerala and particularly in the history of Wayanad. A few weeks after meeting them, they had to leave their house because of flooding. As a poor working-class family, their lives had been one with a lot of struggles.

Other than the struggles of survival, Supriya Komaram and her husband Chandrashekaran had their struggles in coping with the fact that Supriya Komaram is a *velichappad*. Supriya Komaram says that she had shown the traits of becoming a Komaram at an early age of twelve years when she had gone to Kodungallur Bharani with her mother's sister. Then immediately before marriage when she was sixteen years, she started showing traits again, which went unnoticed. After marriage, she started getting illness and could not conceive for long. When they asked an astrologer, what is happening, it came up that maybe they have to do a forty-one days ritual at Chottanikkara. But her husband did not listen to her when she said this, and she started getting possessed more frequently. She started having many other issues such as memory loss, and the husband wanted to leave her. The husband's family was also instigating him to do so. Chandrashekaran says that he was helpless, 'Supriya used to fall unconscious in a split of a second. We got married in 1992. This pattern of behaviour started in 1993. I did not know how to respond. I did not know what the reason was for her

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[165] Interview, Wayanad, Oct 2018.

behaving such'. Supriya says it was the husband's father who was instigating him to get separated. Then they tried to find out the reason why she was behaving such. But once they understood that the reason for her behaviour was possession by goddess, they could not ask her to leave the marriage.

Supriya did *vettitheliyal* six to seven years after their marriage. The husband needed to agree with her becoming a *velichappad*. A matter reinforced by her husband; how crucial it is to have the sanction of the family. Supriya and Chandrashekaran say that nothing is possible without the husband's permission, mainly when it involves doing many rituals at different places and many people coming to the house for several practices. Her being a *velichappad* has led to several changes in the household which the family has adjusted. Supriya Komaram believes one reason why there are more women becoming *velichappads* is that women can be purer and can abstain from alcohol consumption. Abstinence is not possible for many *komarangal* such has her cousin, a *velichappad* cannot resist alcohol consumption, Supriya says. She now feels maybe it was wrong for her to marry. Her husband also agrees with her. But then she reasons out that if Kodungallur Amma possesses one you can marry as Amma was also married. She adds that Amma took the form she did because her husband was killed, referring to the Kannaki-Kovalan story. She underlines that what is most needed in the process is the cooperation of the husband. They also have two children who truly believe in the goddess. They say that the opposition of her dear ones mainly comes from the perception that being a *velichappad* is a means to make money. However, Supriya and Chandrashekaran still work as daily wage labourers for sustenance. A certain level of financial stability that was attained by her family because she was a *velichappad* was also a factor for the acceptance. This aspect is discussed at depth in the next chapter.

Chandrashekaran is a supporting husband for Supriya to be a 'Goddess'. Along with this, Supriya has to fulfil familial responsibilities as well. The initial thoughts of

Chandrashekaran to leave her was subdued by the fear of leaving a 'Goddess'. The goddess becomes the factor of fear that makes him loyal and committed to the wife who is possessed, a non-normative wife. Supriya Komaram time and again reasserts how important it is to have the support of the husband to be what she is. The figure of the husband is very prominent even when one may believe that in a religious schema of understanding, there could be nothing above the 'Goddess'. What comes from the narrative are clear indications of difficulties of being a *velichappad* despite the status change it brings to the person as a divine being. The divine being here is at conflict with the family, particularly in the marital relationship. These difficulties are not talked or discussed when one discusses *velichappads*.[166] If the family is now in a stage of acceptance after some tumultuous years, it is only because of the fear the 'Goddess' instils in a religious community. The economic reality of the family acts as a strong reason why Supriya gets support from husband Chandrashekaran.

Conflicts in the family comprise more than the tensions in a conjugal relationship. The disputes which women *velichappads* have with the in-laws because of their changed status is another reality. The particular mobility and status change the daughter-in-law get by becoming a *velichappad* do not smoothly go in families. Even for Supriya Komaram, there was an underlying tension she had in dealing with her in-laws. The narratives of Thankam and Rajamma, both *velichappads* provide further insights into this. Thankam of Thrissur and Rajamma of Palakkad both had to shift their houses to a different place because of opinion differences with their husband's family. Rajamma had become very sick before she became a *velichappad,* and her husband did not want her to die. Rajamma has three children, two sons both in marriageable age and one daughter who is twenty-eight years now who has two children. Both sons are doing carpentry job, but both of them are alcoholic and because of which they do not have any financial stability. She says her husband could have hardly done

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[166] During the course of the work, I was repeatedly told by several *velichappads* these aspects are not talked about when thinks of *velichappads* and that being a *velichappad* is not easy.

anything to prevent her from being a *velichappad*. She says that if her husband had asked her

to be something else, she would be dead by now. For one year she had no outside support. The

next year she met Padmavati Velichappad, who then provided her guidance.[167] She had to hear

a lot of allegations regarding being a *velichappad* after marriage. Rajamma talks about the

conflicts she had,

> We should be careful not to have any thoughts. Now for the past three-four
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> years, I do not have any ideas at all. My husband's family also had issues with me
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> taking authority as *velichappad*. They did not want to respect me. They were with me
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> for four to five years. Then they stopped giving me support. They were not okay with
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> people coming in for *oothal* and *kettal*.[168] Strangely, I did not get any respect from the
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> house, and my neighbours gave me all the support and respect. I had to run away from
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> there finally. Family support is very crucial. Also, there should be support from a larger
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> collective.[169]

The family's discomfort was not only with her becoming a *velichappad* but also the

spaces she accessed because of it. People were coming to meet her and consult with her raised

questions about whether she is in the 'right' path. She also indicated the general withdrawal

from sexual thoughts that do not deem fit for a *velichappad*. She pledges the importance of

family support and expresses the pain in not getting that support. Strength of her belief and her

association with other *velichappads* has made her stay firm on being a *velichappad*.

Thankam Velichappad[170] is a *velichappad* in her fifties who is from Thrissur district of

Kerala. In addition to the familial conflicts, her narrative also indicates how *velichappads* deal

with their children's resistance. Thankam Velichappad and her family have recently shifted

their house to a new locality. She does not encourage many people to come to her new home

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[167] See Chapter 1 for narrative of Padmavati Velichappad
[168] Refers to tying a thread on the hand that is believed to weed off evil forces.
[169] Rajamma, Interview, Palakkad, July 2018.
[170] Thankam, Interview, Thrissur, July 2018.

for offering prayer. In the last house, she used to have *pooja* on Tuesdays, Fridays and Sundays, the three main days of the week when *Velichappads* are believed to have a maximum power of the goddess. She has two sons in their twenties; both are abroad, and they were uncomfortable with people coming over to their house. She says that if you allow one person to come more and more will follow. She sees that if her husband is not in the house, all of this is significant discomfort to everyone. So, she prefers going to the homes of others to do *pooja* when they invite. Else she goes for various rituals in other temples. Her husband always accompanies her. She says that her husband is very supportive of her and helps with cooking, washing clothes and cleaning utensils. But her tension was mainly to do with the acceptance or lack of it from her children. She narrates the crisis she had concerning the support of children,

> It was my second son who was unhappy with me being a *Velichappad*. The sight of red blood on the white tiled floor of the house was unbearable for him. Once he held my sword and told me not to go. I did not want to hurt my son but Amma, Devi was calling me. For the next few years, he left for his workplace before it is festival time. This year he was here throughout. I had prayed to Amma that he should not create any more problems. Amma listens and replies to everyone. I started arranging everything much ahead of time. Then I told him I am going. He said yes. I was so relieved then. All these years he has never visited Kodungallur Bharani. This year he came for Ashwati day of Kodungallur Bharani.

Thankam Velichappad says she had to face several problems in the family and there were several problems in people accepting her. *Velichappad thullal* at Kodungallur Bharani is heavily photographed and circulated. Her photo had come in a newspaper and was circulated on Facebook. Her family, mainly an elder sister, had made accusations that she was a loose woman. But then Thankam Velichappad says that there was a certain sense of gratification for her when the daughter of that elder sister (who accused Thankam of loose character) eloped

with a married man and was found in a hotel room with him. Police had then visited their houses, and it became a humiliation for them she says. She tells me, 'so now tell me who gave the reason to be called a prostitute? The daughter is thirty-nine years old now and is still not married. Elder sister now requests me to make prayers on behalf of her. I had only prayed to Amma regarding the pain when they said I am loose women. Later on, I prayed to Amma that I will not ever pray to hurt anyone again.' Does Thankam feel her prayers were answered?

In the case of Thankam, the tensions are at multiple levels. Firstly she had to shift her house to a new place and had to stop entertaining people at her home. Secondly, there is an unwritten rule of husband accompanying her to the places of rituals. Thirdly every time she is possessed particularly in the festival season, she becomes deeply concerned about how her children perceive it. Finally, she had to face a lot of difficulties from her family because of what she is. For the in-laws, a sudden change in the status of daughter-in-law gives tension, an indication of the hierarchy of women within families. For the children of a possessed woman, it is the figure of caregiving mother as opposed to the fierce Goddess image that is giving tension. The hope here is to have a less 'chaotic' family. However, based on the religiosity of the children, their expectation also changes. The more religious and God-fearing the children are they embrace their mothers as a possessed Goddess and take pride in it. The lack of acceptance of children leaves the mothers who are possessed in a state of absolute despair as they then assume to be badly caught between the 'divine' duties and the 'motherly' duties. The expectations of a gendered role and the boundaries of gender with tensions of sexuality are in turn gendering the goddess she is believed to be. Becoming a *Velichappad* has brought her immense agony and pain; this coexists with her tremendous belief in the goddess.

3.1.3 *Separation*

In some situations, conflicts in families lead to the separation of women *velichappads* from their husbands. The earlier chapter started with the narrative of Kunjali, which traced the

journey of her becoming a *velichappad*. Her journey after her becoming is given here. Kunjali had to go through a tumultuous period wherein she suffered from her parents, her husband and her children. Her parents did not accept her being a *velichappad,* and the primary reason she cites is the absence of any awareness on practices such as being a *velichappad*, for they belonged to Cheramar caste with no access to the temple because of the untouchability practices then. Kunjali was married off at the age of fourteen, that was after she became a *Velichappad*. She says that she had protested a lot before the marriage. However, her father and brothers disagreed, she was forcefully married off. She got separated from the husband soon after marriage, but she again went back to him, the reasons for which become apparent through the narratives here. She remembers the times,

There was no relationship between my husband and me. He always used to drink. He never took care of me. I came to my own home, leaving him. After five or six years of separation, my friends forced me to go with him. My father and brother had beaten me and forced me to leave. They once hit me with a machete. I was injured and hospitalised. I was at the hospital, and there I thought, *Amma* has married only once. Whether a robber or a cruel person woman needs a husband. Hence, I decided to go back to my husband. I started living with him. Another marriage was not an option for me. What if I experience more pain and suffering in another marriage?[171]

Kunjali indicates the absence of a sexual relationship with her husband. One of the main imperatives for her to go back to the abusive husband was the lack of support she received from her own family. More than that she connected her story to Amma, Kodungallur Amma here. Imagining her life in parlance with the myth made her confident of staying married. The fact that in the myth the goddess was married made her believe the same is possible for her. However, even after she went back, her husband stayed with her till her youngest son, Kuttan,

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[171] Kunjali, Interview, Wayanad, February 2018.

was eight years old. She has two elder daughters as well. Her husband used to be more of a wanderer. The husband would disappear for weeks altogether. However, later she learned that her husband had started living with another woman. They had infringed upon forest land in Wayanad and had started cultivation of coffee, pepper and other cash crops. Her husband made some money through all this. Kunjali however, had gone to meet her husband when he was unwell, and she was in great pain when he passed away. She recollects,

> I clearly remember the day of his death. I had gone for a ritual at an ancestral temple. So, had not gone home that day. Morning around 4 O clock when I was about to take a bath there, I got a call from Kuttan telling '*Amme, Achan has passed away*'. Whatever he has done to me, he was somebody who has taken me with *nilavilakku* and *nirapara*[172] at a very young age. When I heard the news, I fell in the bathroom, hit my head on the wall. We took a vehicle and went to his home. Kuttan requested the family and made it sure that he does the funeral rites. We gave a bath to the body and did the funeral. Ten days after the death, we called a Namboodiri[173] to do all the rites. Now his second wife lives there.

Even after having a tough life, Kunjali holds her husband, who has passed away in a high position. For her, the husband remains as the father of her children. The husband remains an important figure in life, as important as the goddess. Kunjali does not believe that one cannot become a *velichappad* before getting married. But one should be worried about *kanyadhanam*[174] if *vettitheliyal* has happened before marriage. The husband should be understanding of the *velichappad*. The husband should be aware of when to approach his wife. Similarly, the wife should know when to approach her husband if the husband is a velichappad, she says. Further, the partners should not be fighting for small mistakes. She says, 'Who is the

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[172] Referring to marriage ritual
[173] Brahmin caste
[174] The literal translation of the term comes down to the meaning of the two comprising words – Kanya meaning maiden and daan meaning donation, which may be seen as the Donation of a Maiden.

husband? It is a god for a woman. Devi was married. Who married Devi? Own father, Sivan.[175] If another person marries, there will be *kanyadhanam.* Then the world will be destroyed. They did not live like husband and wife.'

Kunjali raises some important concerns through these statements. Firstly, she raises that there should be modalities of approach for both the husband and wife. There is a 'time' to approach and be in the husband-wife intimacy. If not, marriage may fail. Secondly, she points towards the needs of controlling differences and fights in a marriage as it is not like any other marriage. Again, here she makes a connection with the myth. In one variant of the myth, the goddess was married to her father Siva. Siva, being the father figure abstains from having any sexual relationship with the daughter goddess. Kunjali holds on to the myth to prove her point of the need for abstinence.

Kunjali has gone through many struggles to take care of her children. Kunjali, who was a wage labourer, had to resort to begging at times to take care of her children. She has married off all her children, and they live with their respective families now. Both her daughters have separated from their husbands. Even after marriage, Kunjali helped her children financially, for the construction of their houses or education of her grandchildren. However, these days she is sad that her children are also ignoring her like her husband. She says that her children do not realise, '*Amma thanne paridathil mahanaya aal*' (Amma is supreme in the world). Kunjali is worried that there is no one to take forward the practices and shrines after her death. None of her children has done their *vettitheliyal*.

Kunjali's story of separation tells many different stories of the domestic. Firstly, she became a *velichappad* at a very young age and also got married at a very young age. Belonging to Cheramar caste, her family was witness to untouchability and acute poverty. Status of Kunjali Velichappad did not matter to the family, an indication of a socio-material aspect of

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[175] One variant of the Kali-Darika story.

the practice. The violence she had to endure at her household is evident in the narrative. The abuse and harassment did not stop after getting married. Her husband turned to be a drunkard, and the sole responsibility of her children came on her shoulders. Even though her husband left for another woman, her respect for the figure of the husband persisted. Myths surrounding the goddess contributed to this meaning-making. Thus, being a *Velichappad* is seen to be very much embedded in the social and material. This is not the story of Kunjali alone.

I met Devu *Velichappad* at Appuppillayoor of Palakkad district. She lives at her brother's property but has a house for herself. Earlier in the interview, Devu told me she had never got married.[176] Later on, as the interview progressed, Devu said that she did marry once. She had told her family that she did not want to get married because she had Amma in her. Something which we have seen in the case of Kunjali as well. Both of them had raised objections to getting married. '*Amma Keriyal Athonnum Sheriaavilla*' (all that will not be alright when Amma enters) is what she said clearly indicating on sexual relationships. Even if one gets married one does not feel like staying, she adds. She left her husband after four-five months of marriage. She adds that another *velichappad* Kamalu who is also her neighbour, is not having a peaceful family life. Marriage, however, is accepted as a reality. Both Devu and Kunjali does a lot of other work for sustenance and being a *velichappad* are in a way only a part of their existence. Certain other velichappads have left their husbands and lived an entire life solely being a *velichappad* surrounding their ancestral shrine.

Kalyani Velichappad lived a life of *velichappad* for seventy-five years and passed away in December 2018 at the age of ninety-seven. During multiple visits before her passing away, she had shared her story of becoming a *velichappad* and how she had eventually left her husband. After marriage once when she was taking food for husband in the paddy field, she behaved like a madwoman and went in a trance. She says,

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[176] Devu Velichappad, Interview, Palakkad, oct 2017

I became a madwoman. There was no fear. I was then taken to many natural healers and astrologers to cure my condition. This went on for close to two years. My husband finally took me to someone who said he would exorcise me in a minute. I stomped him with one leg. They later touched my feet, asking for mercy. I told my husband never to revisit me, even after my death and I came home.[177]

Irrespective of the period, the first instinct or response is to cure the illness that has befallen. The possession then immediately is perceived as that of evil forces and liberation from it as necessary for the smooth conduct of the family. This attempts to liberate from evil forces almost always result in a certain kind of separation. Either it is the separation of family or the separation from the husband. The separation from family often results in the family moving away to another place and the possessed woman retaining their status as a *velichappad*.

Federici (2004) in her seminal work 'Caliban and the Witch', see how women were dealt with in early Europe when they were seen as social failures. Even though witches have always been a subject of folklore; she reinforces that the study has to come in the history of the proletariat. She observes that the witch hunt becomes the most important events in the development of capitalist society and the formation of a modern proletariat. The female personality that had developed among the peasantry, in the course of the struggle against feudal power- challenging male authority. Witch-hunting was instrumental in constructing a new patriarchal order- wherein women's bodies, their labour, their sexual and reproductive powers were placed under the control of state and transformed to economic powers. Even though witchcraft cannot be equated to the life of *velichappads*, there is similar tension that is similar to witchcraft that can be extrapolated to make sense of experiences of these women.

Kalyani Velichappad lives alone in her ancestral house and her youngest brother, Kandan, lives nearby (Figure 3.2). Kandan is very young to Kalyani Velichappad, and she

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[177] Kalyani Velichappad, Interview, Palakkad, Oct 2017.

recounts taking her brother on the shoulder and walking from Palakkad to Kodungallur for the Bharani for five years. She says all her brothers have gained a good reputation in the area because of her. Kandan says the reason for the unacceptance by family members was mainly poverty.[178] They could not afford a married daughter coming back to the family, leaving her husband. He also recounts that even before marriage, she was not the usual 'girl' and her conduct with people had 'slight problem'. There were some possession episodes before marriage as well, she recollects. But the family did not understand it then. After the marriage, the problems accelerated. Her ex-husband later got married again, and he is dead now. Husband's parents used to visit Kalyani Velichappad. Kandan says that there was not any particular problem with her and her husband, but they could not continue as husband and wife. The separation did not result in any hatred with husband's family. Marital relationships might be complicated because *velichappads* sit in one thought, and men sit in another thought, he says. If there is not agreement with husband and wife on this, then the problem arises. Kalyani Velichappad adds that 'I have got *thullal* at a very young age. I used to say I do not need a husband even before my marriage. I was married off at sixteen.'

Kalyani Velichappad asserts that everyone who has protested against her has later come to her feet and accepted her. Kalyani Velichappad said she is fully gratified with her universal family, 'I am a mother to everyone, and everyone is my children.'[179] Kandan complains that she gives away everything she has to anyone who visits her. He particularly remembers one time when she gave away her gold chain to a devotee who had visited. To which she says, 'Let anyone take away. Why are we making so much? Why do we make so much? The more people I have around me, the happier I am.' Kalyani Velichappad is a woman who for over seventy-five years has lived as a *velichappad.* She chose a path for herself and walked away from what

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[178] Kandan, Interview, Palakkad, July 2018
[179] Kalyani Velichappad, Interview, Palakkad, July 2018

was expected of her. Being a velichappad and the divinity it entails is an anomaly because it challenges the conventional roles of women.

Ram (1991), in her study on Mukkuvar women, suggests that the spiritual and divine power among the Mukkuvars as one rooted in everyday life. The daily life is inturn intimately tied with femininity and the female principle. As much as a woman's power to create is celebrated, the perception of women having powers of destruction is treated as a danger to social order, particularly to men. With unrestricted freedom of movement, thought, and speech, this destructive capacity is considered as similar to what deities have. Women breaking the domesticity and going one step further is connected with questions of the public and private. The concerns are mainly around how sexual can be a divine body and who sets these boundaries? Gatwood (1985) worked around the concepts of Devi and the Spouse Goddess and sees that there is a clear socio-economic division marked out in the form of worship of both. Devi, according to her, is the control free, non-Sanskritic version of Goddess and Spouse Goddess the control defined, Sanskritic version. She says that earlier research orientations of studying goddess were towards a high caste way of life. In her fieldwork, primarily ethnographic, she finds that unorthodox marriage and absence of a marital imperative becomes a symbolism of a Devi Goddess. There is more considerable marital, sexual and ethnic autonomy for Devi.

Women *velichappads* mostly come from poor working-class families with their struggles of survival, and being a *velichappad* adds to their struggles as much as it adds to the assertion. Women as *velichappads* further problematises the power dynamics within families. Here in the life narratives, there is a clear indication of tension around the marital relationships. Some live with 'adjusting' and maintaining a 'distance' from their partners. For some, it has led to the separation. Another tension that is developing is over the socialisation that comes as part of becoming a Goddess. However, the resources she brings to the family as a *velichappad*

becomes a reason why the woman velichappad is accepted. Tensions around sexuality lurk through all the narratives. Sexuality here is a way of probing the histories of power, domination and various other moments that form the human civilisation as we see it today. Even the goddesses are not free from these entanglements. The figure of the husband is stable in their worlds. The gender norms of women superimpose the norms of the divine of women *velichappads*. It can be seen that the interpersonal of the *velichappads* gives a different entry point to understanding a ritual in holistic.

3.2 Domestic worlds of *Velichappads*: Experiences of Men *Velichappads*

In the second part of the chapter, I try to understand through the narratives of men *velichappads* how and why conjugality and marriage become essential aspects in the study of possession of men particularly concerning the effect it has on their lives. This section further throws light into understanding how *velichappads* negotiates to conform to the social and gender norms. It is explored how masculinity and modernity materialise an imagination of marriage wherein 'divinity' tries to assimilate itself. In the study, it is thus seen how possession is at the conjuncture of imaginations of modernity and masculinity in rural Kerala. This is made possible by bringing together two themes: marriage and possession at the intersection of modernity and masculinity.

Understanding how gender and gender norms affect the being of *velichappads* and thereby makes possession socially situated phenomenon is what is discussed in this section. Gendered dimensions of possession here are explored in three aspects. Firstly, the location of *Velichappads* in the tradition of Mother Goddesses and particularly the Bhagavathi tradition. Secondly, the gendered underpinnings in the process of becoming of *velichappad,* which throws insights into the tensions in conjugal relationships of *velichappads*. Thirdly, the bodily alterations were done by male *velichappads* to truly become the goddess which further informs us about the concerns of *Velichappads* around effeminacy.

In agricultural societies rituals based upon fertility wherein the cult of Mother Earth is conceived as a female deity, has played a very significant part. This belief has led to the conception of a menstruating goddess in different parts of India and the Bhagavathi temples in Kerala can be seen as part of a similar tradition (Bhattacharyya,1999). In the festivities at the Kodungallur Bhagavathi Kavu and the belief systems of the *velichappads,* one can observe many above mentioned symbolism. There is a rite of purification that is seen at Kodungallur Bharani Kavu after the climax of the festival rituals, *Kavu Theendal* (polluting of the kavu). Following which the *kavu* is closed for one week. Also, the recitation of sexual songs during the Kodungallur Bharani festival is considered as for the excitement of Mother Earth or the God of rains, rain being a necessity for the flourishing of agricultural crops (Induchudan,1969). In this tradition the possession is by the Mother Earth/Mother Goddess, irrespective of the gender of the person possessed.

It is believed that *velichappad* shares the substance of a goddess when possessed and shares a special relationship with her becoming her vehicle. It is thought that the Shakti of the Goddess can enter the body of a human, and once it enters the person experiences shivering, thus the person becomes insignificant. The body of the person becomes the instrument of the Goddess (Sukumaran,2003). Ganapati *Velichappad,* who is critical of the becoming of a young woman, sees how men *velichappads* can become *velichappads* with equal commitment as there is a Goddess in them always.[180] Ganapati *Velichappad* explains that when men become possessed, it is not switching between genders that are happening for a person like him. He says, 'A *velichappad* always has a Bhadrakali[181] in him. It is not just for one day. But always. There are a goddess and femininity in us every day. That *bhakti, chaithanyam*, and *roopam*

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[180] Ganapati Velichappad, Interview, Wayanad, March 2017.
[181] The use of Bhadrakali, Kali, Bhagavathy is as synonyms by devotees with regional variations. Eventhough each term of the Goddess has a different origin, it is mostly used interchangeably by the devotees. Same was asked in the interviews.

stay always.[182] It is there as balanced. It is always there in the subconscious state.' In the similar line, Chandran *Velichappad* who lives close by to Ganapati *Velichappad* says that in the process of becoming a *velichappad* (which they believe is three years[183]), they gain energy which makes them closer to Bhagavathi. They become that energy to become a state in which they feel, '*njan ammayanu*(I am the mother)'. He says, 'we get close with becoming a Bhagavathi. We become a different person. We change in character. Gestures. It goes away only when we talk to it. And we have to let it go.'[184] The narratives here are indicating towards a certain way in which *velichappad* themselves have understood possession. They do not see it as a momentary switching between the two genders. Or instead as a co-existence of genders within themselves, here in the form of a Goddess figure. Being a *velichappad* gives Ganapati Velichappad and Chandran Velichappad an absolute sanctity when expressing this non-fixation or rigidity of their genders.

Chandran Velichappad indicates changes in gestures that happen. For men *velichappads,* there is a process that each one of them engages differently to bring in a certain degree of bodily alterations to become a *velichappad*. There is no written set of rules for it. The changes in appearance, when possessed, is facilitated by the need to appear like a goddess. The change should be believable to devotees, and he should imbibe the same. One of the significant changes that are made in appearance is growing the hair. Untied loose hair that sways when in a trance is one of the characteristic images of a *velichappad*. So, most of the men *velichappads* make it a point that they have longer hair than usual. Men *velichappads* who are not growing their hair is motivated to do so by fellow *velichappads*. Mani Velichappad from Walayar of Palakkad district is someone who has made it a point that he will not be growing hair and is quite often taunted by fellow *velichappads* for the same he says. Ganapati Velichappad of

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[182] Translated as divinity, spirit, and form, respectively.
[183] In certain belief system of *velichappads* they belief the process of becoming a *velichappad* is over three years. After three years of going to Kodungallur Bharani, in the third year they take the sword.
[184] Chandran Velichappad, Interview, Wayanad, March 2017

Wayanad is bald and had once tried a wig of long hair which did not work and then decided to come into terms with his baldness. The bodily alteration for some implies removing hair from exposed parts of the body. Velichappads give particular attention in their attire. Ornaments are given much importance, and when decked up as a *velichappad,* some of them wear as many as ten chains and thirty bangles. None of these is a written rule, nor are they followed by everyone. At Kodungallur Bharani the *velichappads* wear red saree which is draped in half. Anklets and waist anklets are also worn. The idea is to dress like the goddess, feel like her and be her.

Velichappads could be seen as a part of an androgynous social history; any conclusion may need more in-depth enquiries. The 10th-century poet aptly remarks demystification of the body and sexuality by complicating the 'sexed' bodies by Siva devotee Devara Dasimmayya (Rajmohan, 1998),

> *'If they see breasts and long hair coming,*
>
> *They call it woman,*
>
> *If beard and whiskers*
>
> *They call it, man.*
>
> *But look, the self that hovers in between*
>
> *Is neither man nor woman.'*

Mukherjee & Chatterjee (2016) suggests in their work on androgyny that the concept comes from a deeply rooted cultural belief in the fluidity of female and male symbolised by mythological figures. Further, they note that this belief, at the constant interplay of duality engenders balance and harmony in both personal and social aspects of human life. They suggest in India; there is the acknowledgement of the existence of male and female physiological and emotional-psychological tendencies within each individual. Even though some think that *velichappads* could be transgender persons[185], in the course of the research, one did not come

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[185] Opined by multiple persons (not velichappads) during the course of the research

across *velichappads* who self identifies so. Nor were there instances wherein the possessed is questioning their gender.[186] The invisibility of velichappads, who identifies as transgender, cannot be seen as an absence of same.[187] However, the thesis does not delve deeper into the transgender question among *velichappads*.

3.2.1 *Masculinity, Modernity and Desires of Marriage*

Men do not face impediments as women face from their families and to a great extent, embraces the gender fluidity it brings to their lives. Such acceptance does come with conflicts. This section tries to understand the intersection of modernity and masculinity in the study of possession. The gendered dimensions of possession discussed so far has unpacked how gender is an essential analytical category in understanding possession. Here I look into the intersection of masculinity and modernity through the experiences of men *velichappads*. The life narratives of *velichappads* throw light into many different aspects, often not given even attention to in the study of possession. The concerns of marriage spanning across the narratives throw insights into larger questions on masculinity and marking of gender that possession does to the possessed, which is at conflict with conjugality and marriage.

Santhosh is thirty-four years old now and resides at Kuthanoor village of Palakkad district, a place very well known for having many *velichappads.*[188] Santhosh expresses that not many in his generation become the *velichappad* because it is not a way of life that suits the younger generation.[189] Santosh belongs to a low-income Ezhava family. He has internalised the fact that he is a *velichappad*, but he did not foresee the tensions that it brought to him. One major struggle he faces is finding a suitable bride. Santhosh who is thirty-four has already crossed a desirable marriage age as per the social norms that prevail in the place, and Santhosh

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[186] Caldwell (1999) mentions that in her field work she came across certain instances in which *velichappads* left their female partner to live with a male partner.

[187] While studying gender, the fieldwork of the current study did not account for any representation from transgender persons, which throws light into the need to intensify the fieldwork practices further.

[188] Becoming of Santhosh Velichappad discussed under the head of 'Inheritance' in Chapter 2

[189] Santhosh, Interview, Palakkad, February 2019

acknowledges that he has a desire to get married like many of his friends have. Well-wishers of Santhosh has been trying to arrange a bride for him for some years now. Subhadra Velichappad, who is a mentor for him, has taken it upon herself to find a bride—being one of the senior women *velichappad* in the area she has taken it upon herself to find suitable brides and grooms for other young *velichappads*. She says all women withdraw when they get to know that Santhosh is a *velichappad* and women are looking for well-educated people. Santhosh says that women these days are only looking for ones with Government job and how is it possible that everyone will get to marry men with a government job. Whenever he had gone to see a prospective bride, the family had turned him down citing one excuse or the other, he says. Women do not want to marry *velichappads*, both Subhadra and Santhosh states. However, this does not affect Santhosh's commitment to being a *velichappad,* and he truly believes that one-day Bhagavathi will give him the right woman.

What Santhosh goes through is not a unique experience of Santhosh alone. In the political economy of marriage in Kerala, Santhosh would figure in the lowest of the ladder because of him being a *velichappad* and also being from a low-income Ezhava family.[190] The families of women whom Santhosh is seeking alliance with turns Santhosh down as they do not see any mobility, economically and socially, the bride would attain through the alliance.[191] Marrying a *velichappad* thus is not an option a woman would consider if she has other options before her, as we see in the case of Santhosh. However, this is an aspect that cannot be generalised, as evident in the narratives discussed later in the chapter. Choices of marriages differ for different classes of women. However, there is a particular exposition of religious society in a modern era that comes out in the narrative. On the one hand 'being' a Goddess is the most revered position that one can be at in a religious society. However, this realm of

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[190] For more on political economy and social history of marriages in Kerala see Kodoth (2004, 2008), Osella & Osella (2000), Sheeba (2012).

[191] Velayudhan (1998) obseves that among the Ezhavas social reform movement on matriliny, inheritance, form of marriage, law of succession had led to a distinct construction of gender and cultural codes.

religiosity becomes strictly separated from the realm of marriage economy in their everyday lives.

Certain other narratives reflect bitter separation from their partners. Mani Velichappad is a prominent face among *velichappads* and is from a border village of Kerala and Tamil Nadu. Like Chandran and Ganapati Velichappad, Mani Velichappad also says, 'we forget our body when goddess comes. We do not realise what happens.'[192] The expression denotes a forgetfulness of body when possessed. It is only after months of knowing Mani Velichappad; he shared his story of marriage and separation. Mani Velichappad had married, and the marriage lasted only for three months. Mani Velichappad had only studied till twelfth standard and had married a well-educated woman. He says both of them could not continue the relationship well. He says, 'she wanted to enjoy life. I was only concerned about the temple and associated activities. I was like this as a child.' Mani Velichappad's clearly shows the differential priorities about life and relationship he and his ex-wife had. The indication towards a certain enjoyment his wife has desired, and his inability to provide those reflects here. Unlike Santhosh Velichappad, Mani Velichappad had no desire to get married but had succumbed to the pressure of the family. He says that his sister even warned not to get married if Mani Velichappad continued to be a *velichappad*.

Mani Velichappad says his ex-wife is accomplished now with a good government job. However, during the time of divorce, she had tried to claim alimony. Mani Velichappad has no regret in accepting that his family is affected by his decision to be a velichappad. His testimonial only reinforces his commitment to Bhagavathi, whatever hurdles he had to face in life because of it. He sees Bhagavathi as the source of his strength. However, a concern which is shared widely among the *velichappads* is, 'who will continue the tradition after us?'. Some of them come into terms of accepting the inevitable change in the prevalence of the practice.

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[192] Interview, Mani Velichappad, Palakkad, Feb 2019.

Some *velichappads* like Maniachan live solitary life devoting himself entirely to Bhagavathi without getting married (Figure 3.3). Maniachan became a *velichappad* at the age of ten, and he is sixty-nine years old now. That is fifty-nine years of being a *velichappad*. He stays alone in his house with a helper. He even now tries to reach to places that he is invited. However, he does not get many invitations these days.

The narratives point towards the life of *velichappad* existing at the conjuncture of a changing society wherein they live outside certain desires of masculinity and developments of modernity. However, *velichappads* are part of structures that helps in negotiating these circumstances.

3.2.2 *Structures of Negotiations*

Velichappads are not a homogenous community, and several factors contribute towards the non-homogeneity. The non-homogeneity is reflected in how *velichappads* responds to the concerns of marriage and conjugality differently. Some of them negotiate with the structures by making use of the resources that are available to them. There are two structures they have to deal with: an imagination of family in which *velichappads* are misfits and the demand of masculinity in conjugality for which *velichappads* have to prove their manliness.

Shibu Swamy is a well-reputed *velichappad* in the state and is the founder office-bearer of an organisation of *velichappads*. Shibu Swamy who hails from Palakkad belongs to a known Ezhava family. The family attributes much of the economic and social mobility they attained from being ex untouchables to what they are today to Thayu Velichappad who is grand aunt of Shibu Swamy.[193] The responsibility of taking ahead of the family tradition of having a *velichappad* in each generation fell on Shibu Swamy who had started showing instances of possession even before the passing away of Thayu Velichappad. Shibu Swamy who was hoping for a good job after his Masters in History thus became a *velichappad*. Shibu Swamy was

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[193] Mother of Shibu Swamy, Interview, Palakkad, October 2018

supposed to get married about twelve years back. However, the responsibilities of being a velichappad after his grand aunt's death delayed his marriage for years. Shibu Swamy's family and Santhosh's family had known each other for long and are neighbours. Like Santhosh, Shibu Swamy struggled to seek a partner who is educated and still wants to accept him as he a *velichappad*. He had a long phase of searching for a bride. What came to the advantage of Shibu Swamy was his family's high social and economic status. Finally, after years of searching for a suitable bride, he got married in 2015. Shibu Swamy says he wanted to marry from a low-income family and sought nothing from his partner other than an acceptance of him as a *velichappad*. Shibu Swamy now understands the difficulties other *velichappads* face and is vocal about it. He says,[194]

> When we look for marriage proposals, the brokers just say that we are priests in temples and do not reveal that we are *velichappads*. I was very sure I will never lie and marry. No one accepts this. Everyone looks for a person with a government job or a relationship that they can enjoy. Finally, I got a girl who has a degree and accepts me. I married three years back, but we have not travelled anywhere together yet. The only place I have gone to is Kadaampuzha.[195] My wife is looking after temple activities. Our lives are complicated because of all this. Not many talks about all this though.

The difficulties come from various aspects of *velichappads*. For Shibu Swamy it has to do with the regiments he follows as a velichappad and how it makes his life different. Shibu Swamy now takes the initiative to look for marriages for his fellow *velichappads*. Shibu Swamy's family's economic well-being is one of the key reasons he could finally find a bride of his desires from a 'poor' family. The caste positions of both Shibu Swamy and Santhosh Velichappad is the same. However, there is a reputation Shibu Swamy's family enjoys because

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[194] Shibu Swamy, Interview, Palakkad, October 2018
[195] Kadampuzha pilgrimage site in Kerala not far from Palakkad where Bhagavathi is the main deity

of having four generations of *velichappads* in the family and an excellent socio-economic status the family has attained. The insistence of Shibu Swamy in marrying form a low-income family shows how he can negotiate the structures that are impediments.

However, Shibu Swamy is also an ardent believer that *velichappads* should not be effeminate. He is very critical of men *velichappads* being very effeminate and sees it as a reason for 'bad reputation' that *velichappads* have. He did ask me several times not to perceive that living like a woman is what becoming a Goddess means. He also cautions about the *velichappads* who become effeminate in walking and talking. He says that *velichappads* applying nail polish, wearing underskirt beneath their dhoti, wearing too many ornaments, wearing a *bindi* is nothing but 'fancy dress'. Thus, holding on to a certain understanding of how *velichappads* should hold on to their masculinity, even in possession.

Several velichappads look up to Shibu Swamy, and one of them is Unni Velichappad who is from Kozhikode district of Kerala. In this place, one will not find too many *velichappads* like Palakkad. *Velichappads* make negotiations in their family life to avoid conflicts. Unni Velichappad recollects the stern position which Shibu Swamy had taken on his wedding day. Shibu Swamy is always dressed in the red, red signifying the goddess's colour. So, on the day of the wedding, he chose to wear the same clothing. When everyone expects the groom to wear white, Shibu Swamy asserted that if he can change his attire on the day of his wedding, then he can change it on any other day.

Unni Velichappad got married at the age of twenty-nine. Before getting married, his wife knew he was a *velichappad*.[196] Unni Velichappad manages to be a *velichappad* and taking forward his family responsibilities mainly because he belongs to Kozhikode district where the practices of *velichappads* are not as rigorous as it is in Palakkad. In Palakkad, the *velichappads* mostly get possessed on Tuesdays, Friday and Sundays in their shrines. In Kozhikode the

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[196] Unni Velichappad, Interview, Kozhikode, May 2018

possession in velichappads are restricted to specific festivals, Unni Velichappad says. Unni Velichappad's wife has told him she might need more time to participate with him in the festivities. He says,

> My wife told me she would come to Bharani only after she is prepared. Even though we had told them before the marriage that I was a *velichappad*, they had not expected cutting forehead with the sword. My wife's family also had *velichappad* at home, but they never did what we do. My wife did not even come for the day when we installed deity in our ancestral shrine. She cannot handle the cock sacrifice. Once she did come for Bharani and decided not to go after that.

There was an element of surprise and shock his wife had to go through when she realised what 'kind' of *velichappad* Unni is. Unni Velichappad himself says he makes it a point not to be a *velichappad* like the people in Palakkad. He adds,

> Never have I felt I should sit as a *velichappad* alone. Never. I can never take it along with my work. In Kozhikode, we do not know the discipline *velichappads* should have. If we do not follow the practice properly, it becomes problematic. Whenever anyone calls me for anything such as oracles, I direct them to Gireeshettan, who is a known *velichappad*. I cannot have a regimented life like Chandran Swamy or Shibu Swamy has. They have not even gone for a wedding in several years. Earlier I had great company with all my friends. They have reduced their friendship now. They are concerned about being strict with me. Even though I still meet with friends, earlier companies that we used to share is not there anymore.

Unni Velichappad is sure that he cannot be a 'fulltime' *velichappad* and working as an electrician is his day job. The last time I saw him at Kodungallur Bharani, he had not dressed as a *velichappad*. The desire for an everyday married life that makes Unni Velichappad mellow down his being of a *velichappad*. Also, he truly believes that being a *velichappad* 'completely'

is not a feasible way to live in the present-day world. Unni Velichappad says that he has discouraged younger unmarried people becoming *velichappad,* especially women.

The narratives throw light into how class acts as a factor in the being of *velichappads.* In some instances, they can articulate and enact their 'divinity' in such a way that they can lead an everyday life. Being higher in the economic ladder and being manly enough helps them to conform to the demands of the institution of marriage. Gendered existence of men *velichappads* is at the intersection of masculinity and modernity wherein they negotiate differently with both of it. The masculinist thrust of the Brahmanical tradition is unsettled. The processes of negotiation throw light into the non-homogeneity of *velichappads* and how class operates in the realm of possession. The category of masculinity should be seen as always ambivalent, always complicated, still dependent on the exigencies of personal and institutional power (Watson et al., 1995, p.3). There already exist propositions on the need to look beyond masculinity as a naturalised relation of maleness and power, developing a more rooted understanding of masculinity's social construction (Halberstem, 2019). Even though the figure of the Mother Goddess/Earth is prominent, and also there is an acceptance of how it unsettles gender rules, *velichappads* tries to hold on to a strictly normative understanding of gender mainly for their assimilation to the social relationships.

3.3 Conclusion

Understanding the domestic world of the *velichappads* is a step ahead in employing historical materialist analysis of gender relations and not to see the phenomenon of possession in an atomised way. A dialectical approach helps to see a diverse and complex social whole as constitutive of every part, and every part as reciprocally constitutive of every other (McNally,2017). The domestic worlds of the *velichappads* inform us about a complex web of life that makes it possible for possession to exist in their material reality, thereby challenging many of the inherited meanings of possession. As much as possession makes *velichappads* a

divine being, there is an effort by *velichappads* to be a social being. The divinity of a possessed person and the non-divinity of a social being is not two separate parallel structures, but are infused together. The chapter through several narratives on marriage and conjugality of women and men *velichappads* unpacked several facets of the domestic worlds. The non-homogeneity of experiences throws light into how several different factors in conjuncture make the everyday being of *velichappads*. Even though both men and women *velichappads* experience difficulties, how patriarchy operates in both cases are different. The women velichappads do not challenge the structure of working-class familie*s*, but an uneasy tension sprouts in the family. The sexual tensions lurk in several of the narratives. Men *velichappads* do not actively question the power structures that form the families. The limits to the possession self-exercised by the *velichappads* help them to blend in society and structure of marriage. One can see that *velichappads* are driven by a deep desire to conform to family life, except for a few exceptions. There is no questioning of the institution of marriage; there is an acceptance on the necessity of marriage in their lives in varying degrees even if the sexual tensions of conjugality are evident. The femininity of women *velichappads* and the masculinity of men *velichappads* are put to question; thus, both are affected by the patriarchal social norms differently, yet so similar. Gender thus is constructed and negotiated in the domestic space of *velichappads*. This, in turn, creates the meanings of being *velichappads*.

Chapter 4:

Caste, Class and Labour of *Velichappads*

The current chapter is an attempt to look at the embeddedness of the lives of *velichappads* in the materiality of caste, class and labour. Materialism here is seen as a theory of historical causality, which explains what conditions cause what other conditions and sees how material realities provide knowledge about a social phenomenon (Marx, 1859; Marx & Engels, 1975). Caste, class and labour here are seen as overlapping and interconnecting conceptual categories (Chakravarti, 1995; Prakash, 1986; Rege, 2002). Existing studies such as Caldwell (1999), Fawcett (1901), Gentes (1992), Seth (1995) et al. have often provided a mystic image of *velichappads*, focussing on the aesthetic, overlooking the socio-material reality in which the practice is located. Most of the *velichappads* belong to the low-caste-class sections of the society and becoming a *velichappad* results in certain status transformation, mostly symbolically, sometimes economically and socially. Meanings of these status transformations can only be understood by interrogating the caste realities and labour experiences of *velichappads*. The focus here is to understand the materiality of caste in the lives of *velichappads*, and further how it informs the understanding of *velichappads* as labouring bodies.

Williams (1989) observes that the cultural and spiritual processes cannot be fully comprehended unless they are seen in the whole real conditions of human existence. In India, the ritual traditions are deeply embedded in caste intricacies and are connected to the social histories of a region. In the specific socio-cultural condition, rituals are seen to have emerged in correlation with caste relations which is further embedded with the labour relations. Prakash (1986) remarks that ritual practices are dynamic events in which social relations are actively reconstructed. Following Bourdieu (1984) he suggests that rituals are not mere executions of pre-existing rules and cultural practices are indicative of an underlying class. Rege (2002) sees

cultural practices as at once emancipatory and imprisoning, containing and resisting and relatively more or less affected and unaffected (in different spheres) by capital, which indicates the need of dialectical study of culture.[197] The chapter through the study of *velichappads* attempts to offer a critique to studies on cultural practices that overlook the material questions. The chapter also explores the possibilities of looking at *velichappads* as labouring bodies, furthering the boundaries of labour historiography. Studying *velichappads* here is also a means of looking at the staggering complexities in the society that makes the ritual possible.

4.1 Interrogating Caste

This section of the chapter tries to understand how caste informs meaning-making of *velichappads* and how the caste realities manifest in the everyday lives of *velichappads*. Caste informs the meanings and perceptions of *velichappads* in multiple ways.[198] Kodungallur Bharani is considered as the festival of the downtrodden (Adarsh, 2013). However, we do not know how *velichappads* themselves perceived the festival, the beliefs and the norms historically. The worship practices of oppressed castes were often seen as exotic and documented so, without a historical perspective (Gupta, 2000). Thapar (1989, p.211) observes that histories of the 'Hindu' religion have mainly been limited to placing texts and ideas in a chronological perspective with few attempts at relating these to the social history. Kopf (1980) remarks that overstressing the anthropological and magical elements in the study of religions of non-western, non-European regions, showed tendencies to treat religions as inferior. Such a treatment can be seen in the studies on Kodungallur Bharani as well.[199]

There was a certain way in which Kodungallur Bharani was perceived and written about in as early as in 1900. Panikkar (1900) writes extensively of the religious practices and worship

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[197] Rege (2002, p. 1038) sees that the consequent Americanisation of cultural studies was marked by a decreasing concern with issues of the political economy of production, dissemination and consumption and an unprecedented concern with the fragmentation of cultures and identities.

[198] The festival of Kodungallur Bharani and the hierarchies maintained in the becoming of *velichappads* were discussed in earlier chapters.

[199] Further see the discussion of literature under the head 'Existing Approaches' in the Introduction chapter.

patterns of different caste groups of Malabar. He mentions that the Cherumars worshiped rude stone images of Gods and had priests from their ranks. Cock sacrifice was practised, and they were believers in the existence of one god. Some of them were believers in life beyond the grave, and others believed in spirit being annihilated with the body. He adds, Purayars, the ex-untouchable caste had oracles among them and at certain times assumed the garb of evil deities. They believed in the existence of a personal God, who presides over destinies. He further states that Vettuvar and Malayar also believed in evil deities. Kadars, according to him, were believers in witchcraft and good exorcists. Naidis worshipped female deities and cock sacrifice was used for protection from evils.

Further, he mentions about the cock festival of Craganore, which is the present-day Kodungallur Bharani festival. Historically there is a notable absence of Brahmins in the rituals and priesthood at Kodungallur. The author remarks about the absence is because of the 'sanctity' of Brahmins that would increase the power of the goddess. Such an explanation explicitly outlays the evident bias of the author. There is little information available on the source of such a narrative. This sort of a Brahmanical understanding of practices had a significant impact on the spiritualities of the oppressed and how it was later perceived. The historiography available indicates how certain perceptions of the festival may have been ingrained in the collective consciousness of the public. Writings of the early twentieth century on religious practices went beyond giving descriptive accounts of practices to attributing higher virtues to the higher castes.[200] Such writings on religion were often written under colonial patronage from an upper caste standpoint and became an instrument of colonial policy designed to strengthen the Brahmin castes (Sweetman, 2003). Friere (1996) remarks that the colonised is made to feel that their language and culture are inferior to the colonisers' language and culture.

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[200] Further see Nair (1994), Prakash (1992)

The late 19th and early 20th century in Kerala were marked by many different social reform movements, some of it surrounding the festivities of Kodungallur Bharani.[201] From time to time there have been clarion calls from various sections to ban the Bharani songs, a prominent ritual at the Kodungallur Bharani festival. Two prominent movements are noted here, one led by Sahodaran Ayappan, a known social reformer of 20th century Kerala[202] and the other one led by Swami Bhoothanantha, a right-wing ideologist (Kuttikkad, 2015). Both of these figures are at two extremes of the political spectrum, former being one of the prominent leaders of anti-caste movements and the later a proponent of Brahmanical Hinduism. Sahodaran Ayappan advocated for the ex-untouchables and lower castes to come out of such degrading traditions, Swami Bhoothanantha advocated for protecting pure Hinduism from the maligning ones. With the famous slogan '*Bharanikku pokalle makkale*' meaning 'Children, do not go for Bharani', Sahodaran Ayappan led a renowned march to Kodungallur in 1920. In 1932, Kochi assembly passed orders regulating the festival. This was after the efforts made by Kunji Moideen, the then representative from Kodungallur constituency. However, the regulations failed in implementation after the devotees, Kodungallur prince and clergy resisted it. The movement lead by Swami Bhoothanantha was much later, in the year 1992. All these movements failed to deter the devotees from continuing with their practice. However, the singing of the songs is now restricted to temple premises and takes place under strict police supervision.

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[201] For more on social reforms and renaissance in Kerala see Namboodiripad (1996), Osella & Osella (2000), Pillai (2004)

[202] Sahodaran Ayyappan (21 August 1889 – 6 March 1968) was one of the outspoken followers of Sree Narayana Guru. As an unwavering rationalist, Ayyappan started a magazine titled *Yukthivadi* in 1928 to spread rationalistic thoughts in a society troubled with superstition and casteism. Through the platform *Sahodara Sangham* (Brotherhood Association) he brought together young men concerned in initiating social change. *Misra Bhojanam* (inter-dining of upper castes and outcastes) was introduced by Ayyappan. He started a journal titled 'Sahodaran' which endorsed renaissance thoughts. He got the prefix Sahodaran to his name after this. He also coined a rejoinder *Jati Venda, Matam Venda, Deivam Venda Manushyanu* (No Caste, No Religion, No God for Mankind) to the slogan *Oru Jaathi Oru Matham Oru Daivam Manushyanu* (One Caste, One Religion, One God for Mankind) of social reformer Sree Narayana Guru. (Accessed from http://www.keralaculture.org/sahodaran-ayyappan/703 on 25 Oct 2020)

Adarsh (2013) in his work on the history and being of Kodungallur says that, even when the Dalits and Ezhavas could not enter temples in Kerala, they could do so in the Kodungallur Bhagavathi temple in the months from Kumbha Bharani to Meena Bharani. He further mentions that even this restriction of the entry to one month, as some accounts denote, could have been a later development, and previously there would have been no restriction at all. *Velichappads* and their practices as we see today have passed through reformatory and puritanical struggles. Singh (2013) observes that the dialectics of cultural struggles and cultural distinctions are produced and reproduced differentially for different castes, classes and gender. The struggles of reformation were based on the understanding that the practices reinforced the hierarchies of the caste stratification. In the next section, I discuss how *velichappads* talk about the caste in the present times.

4.1.1 *Caste Consciousness of Velichappads*

It has been estimated that around fifty thousand *velichappads* visit the Kodungallur Bharani festivities each year (Figure 4.2).[203] There are no data available on the *velichappads* and their numbers, in effect there is no existing statistics available about the caste composition among *velichappads*. Conversations on caste always invite multiple responses. It can be seen that most *velichappads* first opine that Bhagavathi does not have caste; hence there are no caste determinants for the festival. The equality and sameness of every caste and religion in the eyes of Bhagavathi is highlighted. However, as one advanced in interviews and with better rapport, established *velichappads* do converse deeply into the caste questions. Inadvertently everyone says that there are more *velichappads* among the 'lower castes' and 'lower classes.'

Velichappads do not refer to exact caste names of each *velichappad* but refer to caste groups and terms such as *thazhnna jadikkar* meaning 'lower castes', Harijans, Ezhavas, SNDP (denoting the organisation of Ezhavas) and Adivasis. Subhadra *Velichappad,* who is also the

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[203] As opined by *velichappad*s and temple authorities

state President of the Kodungallur Bhagavathy *Velichappad* Sangam (KBVS) says, '*velichappads* are mostly Harijans and SNDP people. There are very fewer Nairs.'[204] Here it can be noted that even when she takes the name of an upper caste, she sticks to naming caste groups and organisations to denote certain castes. Sasidharan, who runs a shop near Kodungallur kavu says, 'Kurumba Bhagavathi means Scheduled Caste. This place had to do with Scheduled Caste.'[205] Sasidharan, who belongs to an upper caste group, attributes a caste category to the goddess as a rationale for the increased participation of ex-untouchable castes in the festivities. He tries to maintain the political correctness by addressing the Bhagavathi, the deity herself as belonging to Scheduled Caste.

As observed, Harijans[206] and SNDP are two words extensively used by *velichappads* to denote their caste identity. Ambedkar propagated the use of the word Dalits which means 'ground down' or 'broken to pieces' in Marathi and Hindi, as opposed to Harijans. The term even though first made its appearance during the late 1920s, gained prominence during the 1970s (Rao, 2009). However, one does not find the assertive use of Dalits among the *velichappad*s. Harijans are used as a term instead of using the exact caste names, a means of being politically correct. However, the using of SNDP to denote Ezhavas has a long social history of assertion to it. At the beginning of the twentieth-century Ezhavas were socially discriminated and economically poor community (Osella & Osella, 2000). They were denied fundamental civil rights and had to bear the brunt of practices of untouchability. Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana (SNDP) Yogam which translates to 'the society for propagating the teachings of Sri Narayana' was founded in the year 1903 by Sri Narayana Guru. Sri Narayana

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[204] Subhadra Velichappad, Interview, Palakkad, February 2019
[205] Interview, Kodungallur, March 2018
[206] The word Harijans comes with a loaded history concerning the social history of Dalits (Prashad, 2000). Gandhi, who had acknowledged untouchability as a reproach to Hinduism by 1920 had made it something of a test case for reforming Hinduism, from exhorting upper-caste Hindus to perform stigmatised labour to renaming untouchables Harijans, or people of god, by 1933 (Rao, 2009, p.6). The word Harijans even though has been much problematised particularly through anti-caste movements, have penetrated the social psyche of the people of Kerala.[206] The address is still used particularly in rural Kerala.

Guru[207] was born to an Ezhava family and bearing the brunt of casteism at a young age made him a crusader against it.

Jeffrey (1974) remarks that the formation and establishment of caste associations among Ezhavas took much more time than one of the Nairs, namely the Nair Service Society. As SNDP propagated the ideals of Narayana Guru, in the first fifteen years of its establishment SNDP concentrated in building temples. The temples could be accessed by all who were otherwise discarded by the upper castes. However, Narayana Guru and his contemporaries later discovered that the construction of temples was not resulting in ending the discrimination, and these were instead creating barriers. Around 1917, SNDP changed its direction. The organisation started constructing more schools and such institutions towards educating Ezhavas. The motive was to bring together all people without caste discrimination and distinctions. 'One caste, one religion and One God for Men' became the slogan of not just SNDP, but social reform movements in Kerala. With the temple entry movements in Kerala, SNDP also witnessed a tremendous increase in its membership.[208] SNDP only had about 5000 members in 1927, but the membership rose to 80,000 by 1930, which is seen as the impact of temple entry agitations (Jeffrey, 2016). The Ezhava castes were by then invested in self-respect and transformation. There was also a small middle class among Ezhavas who were emerging as a commercial class and a few others as professionals. Chandramohan (2016) remarks that the disjunction between principles and practice led to the decline of the SNDP movement in

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[207] Sri Narayana Guru was known as a spiritual leader as well as one who made transformative changes in the spiritual realm, a famous one being the consecration of Siva idol at Aruvippuram in 1888. This is considered as the first major public act by Guru against the evils of casteism. Chandramohan (2016) observes that Narayana Guru should be seen in the lineage of an Indian intellectual tradition. Chandramohan (2016, p.61) also underlines that due to Narayana Guru's acquaintance with other radical thinkers of the time, he acquired a critical attitude towards the scriptures and the notion that Vedas were the sole preserve of Brahmins. Narayana Guru's activities, like the consecration temples, were creating new meanings of spirituality and assertion.

[208] T K Madhavan, who was a prominent member of SNDP Yogam from 1914, first raised the question of temple entry in an editorial in Deshabhimani newspaper in December 1917 (Jeffrey, 1976). The issue was later discussed in the meetings of SNDP Yogam and the Travancore assembly in the next three years wherein Madhavan himself introduced resolutions seeking for temple entry and recognition of Ezhavas as respectable caste-Hindus (Jeffrey, 1976, p.13). Around the 1940s with the growth of the Communist Party, Ezhavas began to see it as a Party that would bring improvement to their way of life (further see Rajendran, 1974).

the latter half of the 20th century. However, today when one speaks that they are SNDP, it is also an aspect of self-assertion of the ex-untouchable caste and the term is used as synonymous to communicating the caste group.

The reflections of this process of caste politics and consciousness are seen in individual narratives of *velichappads*. Raghu *Velichappad* is the main patron of the Pulakkavu, meaning kavu of the Pulaya caste, also known as Keezhkaavu, meaning the lower kavu. During the festivities the site of Pulakkavu witness rituals with animal sacrifices, alcohol offerings, unseen in the Kodungallur temple. According to the myth, Kali spends a week in peace and enjoyment, drinking, eating and singing in the company of folks at Pulakkavu after the *kaavutheendal* ceremony of Kodungallur Bharani (Kuttikkad, 2015). Raghu also shares the oral story carried to him by his ancestors on how Kodungallur Amma after killing Darikan was accommodated at the Pulakkavu. Raghu holds a definite perspective on how the authorities of sites of worship were historically and systematically taken away from so-called lower castes. He says that the origin of all Bhagavathi kavus in the state is from *thaazhna jaathikar*, meaning 'lower castes.' He mentions that all *kavus* with festivals in the same season has a similar origin. He adds,

> People who have seen Bhagavathi and known Bhagavathi are lower caste people. The rights were later hijacked. It is with the yatra of Sree Shankaracharya that the upper caste took over all temples of lower castes. Many such temples exist in North Malabar, for, e.g. Angadippuram temple. If you look at history, you can see the presence of lower castes there. But what to do! All of it has been forcefully taken away. Similar history can also be seen at Kodungallur temple.[209]

Raghu here is making an apparent historical reference to the period of Adi Shankara and the revival of Brahmanical Hinduism during his lifetime. Adi Sankara is believed to have

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[209] Interview, Kodungallur, March 2017

lived in the first half of the 8th century CE (Comans, 2000). Shankara was born in Kerala in a village named <u>Kaladi</u>. Adi Shankara with his philosophy of Advaita Vedanta, developed his teachings on Brahmin to such an extent that it implied the denial of even god, everything other than Brahmin (Namboodirippad, 1989, p.6). The propagation of Vedic Hinduism by Adi Sankara is often attributed to the decline of Buddhism in India (Smith, 1999). Chattopadhyaya (1989) sees this as the struggle between idealism and materialism in ancient India. Namboodirippad (1989, p. 7) observes that the struggle was the manifestation of the Indian variety of class struggle- a minority of upper castes (dwijas) as opposed to the overwhelming majority of the common people. The victory of idealist philosophy of Shankara against the materialist Buddhist philosophy, therefore was the victory of the Brahmin and other dominant castes, the defeat of the rest of Indian society (Namboodirippad, 1989). Raghu Velichappad is not someone who has had formal education but speaks about the historical process with as much conviction as anyone. However, he through the myth-historical perspectives is seen to be making similar arguments.

Raghu works as a daily wage labourer for sustenance. Being the main patron of Pulakkavu, Raghu Velichappad during the festivities can earn some money during the festivities. The family, however, lives in a dilapidated house near the Pulakkavu. He says, he belongs to the 79th generation and learned all the rituals from his ancestors. Raghu receives enough devotees, particularly on Tuesdays and Fridays. People mostly come to seek guidance and oracles. He says that the family do not see all this as a business, but a tradition that they took over from ancestors. Raghu shares his apprehensions on whether the younger generation will continue the tradition. The younger generation is not interested in keeping the tradition he says. The reluctance of the younger generation to continue with the practices is a reality of the times. The status which Raghu speaks of in his narrative is not seen when others talk of Raghu.

Premnath, who runs a shop in the area, says that Raghu is a known drunkard in the area.[210] Premnath also says how 'people like him' distance from the Bharani festival and gives the space for 'them'. The narrative that space is provided to 'them' is recurrent in several descriptions.

Narratives of *velichappads* also point towards how belief in Devi and becoming a *velichappad* gives them a sense of equality. One such narrative of Kunjali *Velichappad* is included here. Kunjali has never even stepped the school for any formal education. Whatever she says here is the reflection of her life reality. Kunjali says that her family, who belonged to the Cheramar caste, did not understand what temple or goddess was when she became a *velichappad*.[211] She recollects that in the time when she became a *velichappad* the lower castes-Ezhavar, Cheramar, Parayar, Paanar etc. were not allowed to enter the temple, nor were they allowed to even stand on the roads adjacent to the temple.[212] She says,

> We did not know whether it was a stone or tree inside a temple. Everything was in their custody.[213] My parents did not know how to pray, how to worship or how to keep a lamp for god. Even on Panchayat road, Namboodiris did not allow us to walk. We did not know the history, myth and stories of god. That is how we fell into the lower strata. It is Sreenaryana Guru, Ayyankali and Doctor Ambedkar who brought us out of this misery.[214] We could fight their arrogance because of these people. Else we would have remained in lower strata and would have never learned about Devi.[215]

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[210] Premnath, Interview, Kodungallur, March 2017
[211] The story of becoming of Kunjali Velichappad is given in Chapter Two
[212] The Temple Entry Proclamation was issued by Maharaja Chithira Thirunal Balarama Varma only on November 12, 1936, which abolished the ban on Dalits and the ex-untouchables from entering the temples in the Travancore state, now a part of Kerala.
[213] Custody of upper castes she means
[214] Ayyankali was born on August 28, 1863, was a major icon of the Kerala renaissance and was from the Pulaya community. He has been remembered as one of the most influential anti-caste crusaders in colonial Kerala in the late 19th century. He vociferously challenged caste-based discriminations in education, public space and social interactions.
[215] Kunjali Velichappad, Interview, Wayanad, July 2018.

The figure of Devi here and her being a *velichappad* has given a sense of equality that was previously unattainable for her caste group. She has understood her family's reluctance in accepting her as a *velichappad* as coming from their lack of awareness of religiosity because of their so-called lower caste position. She raises her voice strong against the discriminations in retrospective but at the same asserts that there is no caste at Kodungallur the reason being the acceptance of those belonging to all castes there. She says, 'from the time I have started going to Kodungallur, I have not experienced caste.' Even when she says this, she also shares the reality of the caste she has experienced. She asserts that the lower castes are the rightful owners of the place, '*Keraleeyar*' and everyone else has come from elsewhere, referring to Kerala. She further says that the Nairs and Namboodiri attained the resources they have through physical violence and brutalities. 'They were walking around with sticks shouting *ooha ooha.* We have to move aside then. Else they will kill us. They will bury us beneath the coconut tree,' she recollects the atrocities. Her references are historical accounts to the brutality of the caste system that existed in Kerala. Through her encounters with different political discourses, she has formed a perspective on understanding discrimination. Referring to struggles, she recollects the struggles led by Narayana Guru and Ambedkar against the caste atrocities. Because of all the efforts, she believes that the oppressive caste structures do not exist now as it existed before. She is also convinced that the Devi she believes in did not believe in the oppressive caste structures.

Kunjali Velichappad holds sharp political articulations. It is not on an everyday basis that one meets *velichappads* who has a perspective to history as Kunjali has. For Kunjali the Devi she believes in has no discrimination. The so-called upper castes would have only brought the discrimination in later stages. She owes to the efforts of Gurudevan, Ambedkar and Ayyankali in addressing caste discriminations (Figure 4.1). Kunjali is convinced she owes the religious equality she has achieved to the political process as well. Kunjali Velichappad has

also had a long association with the Communist Party. She has been a member of the Communist party for forty-six years and has even been a local leader of the party. She says, 'it is because I could work in the party that I learned so much. I learned to talk. I was illiterate right. I learned to work with great leaders. Otherwise, I would not have known anything.' Kunjali has had struggling years of political work during the period of Emergency, wherein she had to suffer police brutalities. She has memories of attending meetings in many difficult situations in the forest lands and plantations. She adds, 'those days working in the Marxist party was like sacrificing our lives. It was a time when Congress was mighty.' She believes it is Devi's blessings as well that gave her the strength to face all of it. She does not shy away from sharing her disappoints now as well. She says she stopped her association with the party after having witnessed certain corruption charges and wrongdoings. She adds,

> 'To live in a world, we should not cheat, do robbery or prostitution. We have to live fearlessly. We have to act fearlessly. We should understand that the other person is like us. If we live with that understanding, then we have no problem. Even if problems arise, we can overcome it. I learned all this because I worked at the party. Else I would not have anything. I would have to sit like a stupid when others talk.'

Kunjali now thinks it is not easy for her to take ahead the temple activities and party activities together. The friction seems to have developed much later in her life. Kunjali is not the only *Velichappad* with association with political parties. The current treasurer of KBVS is also a Branch Secretary of CPI(M) Branch.[216] It is difficult for Kunjali to differentiate between her political awakening and caste awakening.

4.1.2 *Status Alterations*

The section attempts to unpack some narratives on status alterations experienced by *velichappads*. The focus here is on how *velichappads* articulate and make sense of the change

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[216] Further see Chapter 5

in their status, thereby linking it to the labour questions raised in the next section. Studies on festivals have suggested that the experience of the privileged time of performance of subaltern castes persist beyond the time and space of the festival. It is noted that the roles adopted during festivals such as Kodungallur Bharani widens the behavioural option of people here, particularly that of the 'lower caste' (Menon, 1993). The hierarchies, however, remain intact. Kolenda (1981) focuses on the question of extreme powerlessness in everyday life and suggests the ritual domain as the only autonomous space. Vijaisri (2008) sees how specific ritual events hold the rejuvenating potential for the outcaste communities in an otherwise oppressive social space. Baby (2009) in her work discusses incidents of Dalit women getting possessed by the goddess-like Mari Aai, Laka Aai in rural Maharashtra. When they get possessed, they are called goddesses and mothers and the entire community, including the elderly, is in reverence. It is believed that the goddess speaks through the possessed. She remarks that in the realm of belief, there is a rediscovery of self and self-worth by the Dalit women. Similarly, the experiences of *velichappads* indicate momentary negotiations with the caste structure than permanent transformations in the hierarchy. As opposed to permanent status changes, there is a symbolic way in which this status change has an impact on the *velichappads*.

Kunjali Velichappad remarks that she gets much respect now and has earned a position because of the blessings of god. She says, 'when we get all this respect, it is happiness. I do feel sad at times, thinking of people who pushed us down are respecting us now. I do not show my sadness. Everywhere I go, I get a warm welcome.'[217] Kunjali was recently felicitated during a festival at a local temple. She talks about it with much pride. The felicitation was reported in newspapers, she remembers. She asserts that the respectability she has got is because she is a *velichappad*. Kunjali suggests that it is essential to hold on to good behaviour, such as abstaining from alcohol, talking with reverence etc., to earn the respectability. Kunjali holds a

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[217] Kunjali Velichappad, Interview, Wayanad, July 2018.

perspective on how the perpetrators of caste discrimination are respectful of her now. She says, 'now Brahmins and Namboodiris are very respectful to us. Earlier when we travelled for Kodungallur Bharani, the Brahmins had spit on us. Now they put a chair for me.' Kunjali says she makes it a point to ask them about the difference in attitude and point out to them why she was discarded earlier. 'These days they respect as the Prime Minister,' she says.

Being a *velichappad* have brought Kunjali little economic mobility. She still lives in her house at Sultan Battery, Wayanad, which is in the old, worn condition. She continues to go for daily wage labour and MGNREGA work. However, she had found respect that she did not enjoy before after she became a *velichappad*. The respect she has earned is cut across the religious and political worlds. She takes great pride in telling the MLA of the area knows her. The MLA had visited her before the elections, and she had assured him he will get elected. Later on, when the MLA saw her in the crowd, he came to her and talked. Kunjali remembers the incident with much happiness. Similar narratives of earning respect come from other *velichappads* as well. Ganapati Velichappad told me that even when velichappads behave like an ordinary person, there is a respect which is expressed by people.[218] There are also voices of the assertion that comes through economic stability. Mother of Shibu Swamy once told me, 'even after belonging to SNDP[219] we have amassed much wealth. We did not get land from any Nairs through land redistribution policies by the government. We got it through goddess and the power goddess gave.'[220] Her reference is clearly to the land reform movements initiated by the first Communist government of Kerala. She takes pride in the fact that they have amassed wealth not by benefitting through such policies, but by having *velichappads* in the family.[221]

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[218] Interview, Wayanad, Oct 2017
[219] Referring to Ezhava caste group
[220] Interview, Palakkad, Oct 2018
[221] For more on land reforms in Kerala, see Oomen (1975), Raj & Tharakan (2010) Scaria (2010)

The status change does not come to the *velichappads* alone, but their families as well. The families earn mobility upward because of having *velichappads* in their family. Supriya Velichappad says, 'yes, we get more respect from people around. When I walk with my husband, I see people who are above us respecting us. This makes me feel odd. I panic. I ask them, why are you respecting me? Then they say that they are not respecting me but the goddess within me.' Supriya says she is still coming into terms with 'big' people respecting her and honouring her husband. She says she feels very small in front of them. She is, however fine when 'small' people show respect. Supriya lays it out how her internalised ways of caste hierarchy are at conflict with what she experiences, a form of temporary respectability. Supriya says that being a *velichappad* is only one part of her being. She and her husband engage in other works for sustenance. She is aware some velichappads make a lot of money by being *velichappads*. The same however is not possible for her she remarks. The people around may assume that they earn a lot of money; however, they are just surviving without starvation, she says. The narratives unpack the complexities of understanding the status question.

Velichappads who are engaged in other works are often involved in menial jobs. Radha Amma is not practising as a *velichappad* full time. She is involved in sanitation work for sustenance. Many of the *velichappads* that one comes across at Palakkad district are daily wage labourers mostly engaged in agriculture. Otherwise, *velichappads* are seen to be employed as drivers, employed in carpentry, working as electricians etc. Rarely does one come across a *velichappad* who are in white-collar jobs. Why does this happen? What does this indicate about communities among which rituals are prevalent such as *velichappad thullal*? I note down one case here of a *velichappad* who was working as a Chartered Accountant. The said person was working as a charted accountant at a well-known firm in Dubai. During one of his visits to Kerala, he got influenced by the ritual and became a *velichappad* gradually. The family did not take this well. He is from a financially well-off family, and his father works abroad, at Sharjah.

Once the police called him in for the possession of an illegal weapon (the divine sword). Later it came out that the complaint was made to the police by his parents. His family never accepted him being a *velichappad* as they belonged to Nair caste and were prominent members of Nair Service Society (NSS).[222] His family claimed Nairs could never become a *velichappad*. Even as believers, her parents were not in approval of the ritual practices of their son. They preferred the status of the white-collar employee as opposed to the status of the *velichappad*. The said *velichappad* is working as a head priest in a temple at Chettikulangara.[223] Even when one talks about the status changes, there has to be a clear understanding of the options of 'statuses' available before a *velichappad*. The symbolic power does not translate into social power, as evident from the social and economic vulnerabilities (Anandhi, 2013).

The section tried to interrogate the caste question, looking at the practice as embedded in the social history of the region. The sites of knowledge production historically have seen religiosity of the oppressed castes as inferior. The fact that the practice evokes critical responses from the social reformers and also the Brahmanical forces invites us to approach the practice more dialectically. The perspectives which *velichappads* provide in understanding the caste relations hold the key in the process. The caste consciousness of *velichappads* provides insights into how *velichappads* themselves look at the practices. The *velichappads* belong to the working-class sections of the society. There is an assumption of the equality of castes before the goddess. At the same time, there is an awareness of the distinct caste composition. The narratives of *velichappads* on the social histories of upper caste oppression and lower caste assertion are explanatory of the understanding of *velichappads* about the material basis of the practices. Further, questions on the labour of the *velichappads* can only be understood when seen along with the caste questions. The labouring body of a *velichappad* cannot be detached

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[222] Nair Service society (NSS) is an organization founded was founded by the late Mannathu Padmanabhan in the year 1914 for the social advancement and welfare of Nair community (Nair, 1984).

[223] As told by Shibu Swamy, Interview, Kodungallur, March 2019

from the caste and class structures that exist. The materiality of the caste and class informs the formation and being of the labouring body of the *velichappad*.

4.2 Labouring Bodies of *Velichappads*

The current section attempts to look at *velichappads* as labouring bodies. The narratives of *velichappads,* along with the analytical part in the section delves into aspects that forefronts labour as an essential framework to make sense of the being of *velichappads*. The last few decades have seen the developments of several terms such as creative labour, network labour, cognitive labour, affective labour and immaterial labour to denote the transformations and subjectivities of labour (Gill & Pratt, 2008). Scholarship on immaterial labour and cultural labour provides particular insights for the chapter. Hardt (2000, p.292) observes immaterial labour as where labour produces immaterial goods such as a service, a cultural product, knowledge or communication. Immaterial labour thus involves a series of activities that are usually not recognised as work, such as activities involved in defining and fixing cultural and artistic standards (Lazzarato, 1996). Sharmila Rege (2002) has engaged with the term cultural labour to denote the popular cultural performances such as Lavani and Povada,[224] which are embedded in the materiality of caste and labour and constitutes manual labour in Indian society. She underlines the need to look at popular culture as related to everyday lives, struggles and labour of different castes, classes and gender. Further, Prakash (2013, p.17) understands cultural labour as a kind of labour that is not always directed towards an economic outcome or material production but towards the systems of significations that articulate the constitutive human process through performance. The objective of the section is not to apply one of these perspectives to understand the labour of *velichappads*. The section also falls short of providing a single conceptual framework to understand the labour question. Instead, it looks at the

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[224] Lavani, a form popular in Maharashtra, is a combination of traditional song and dance, which particularly performed to the beats of Dholki, a percussion instrument. The Powada is a genre of Marathi poetry that emerged during the late 17th century. The powadas are a kind of ballad that narrates historical events.

possibility of dialogue between the perspectives. It opens up a plethora of options to think towards developing a framework for studying rituals that forefronts questions on labour.

4.2.1 *Labour Classifications and Descriptions*

At the offset, it is essential to do a preliminary classification of *velichappads* based on the way the labour and labouring bodies are defined. In the previous chapters, it was discussed that there are *velichappads* who become *velichappads* only during the times of festivities. They continue to live as an 'ordinary' person with regular work otherwise. For this category of *velichappads* being a *velichappad* happens only for a few times in the year, sometimes only once in the year, during the Kodungallur Bharani. For them being a *velichappad* or *velichappad thullal* is not necessarily contributing towards any substantial economic income. Rameshan Velichappad of Kakkodi of Kozhikode district is one such *velichappad*. He becomes a *velichappad* only during the festivities. He has a government job and has never felt the need to sit as a *velichappad*, he says.[225] His aunt is a *velichappad* as well, and she works as a sanitation worker in a government department. The earnings from the smaller jobs make them comfortable and economically satisfying. Thus, being a *velichappad* is kept in the domain of divinity alone. Unni Velichappad of Kozhikode district is another such *velichappad*. Unni Velichappad works as an electrician. Unni says that being a *velichappad* alone is not viable for him.[226] The regional specificities and the difference in respect they get as *velichappads* is also a contributing factor towards his decision.

Several *velichappads* are engaged in different works for survival. Most of the *velichappads* come from poor working-class families. Joseph (2018) narrates how *velichappads* are people who are struggling to make two ends meet, yet holding on to their devotion without fail. He describes his encounter with Sulochana Velichappad. She works as a head load worker in construction sites. Sulochana got possessed after she was married.

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[225] Interview, Kozhikode, January 2018
[226] Interview, Kozhikode, February 2018

Everyone around her attributed madness to her, and she was taken to different places to cure her 'mental illnesses. Two of her children are deaf and mute. She does not have a proper house. When several other *velichappads* are constructing temples only for Bhagavathi next to their homes she has kept her sword in her small home, she says. The same report carries the story of Karthyayani Velichappad, which again is a story of the devotion *velichappads* adheres to despite having complicated lives. Karthyayani Velichappad says that she had to long wait for a husband and a child. Once she had children, she had to endure acute poverty wherein she did not even have a mat to sleep on, cloth to wear or anything to eat. She stayed in a hut with her children. Now she is working as a daily wage worker at construction sites for basic earnings. She became a *velichappad* ten years back and despite all these difficulties in life, she holds close the devotion of Amma. The section does not focus on the labour experiences of the category of *velichappads* discussed above.

The current section focuses on the experiences of those *velichappads* for whom being a *velichappad* is an essential aspect of their everyday being and survival. *Velichappads* differ in how they practice the ritual. The space and reasons for the practising of the rituals give meanings to the way we understand labour. The chapter progresses through several such classifications for ease of comprehending the differences among *velichappads*. The section is only a beginning towards thinking and evaluating the work done by *velichappads* as labour and the different classifications given here are informed from the field narratives.

The primary question that needs to be answered is, what is the labour of a *velichappad*? How does *velichappads* earn their income? There are two ways to answer this question. Both of this way informs in developing an understanding of labour in this chapter. Firstly, the very enactment of the ritual, being a *velichappad* during the times of a ritual can be considered as labour and the *velichappad* as a labouring body. Marx (2005) which refers to labour as all forms of human doing, not necessarily directed, to the economic outcome or material

production. The work of the body results in some experience among the devotees who are also the spectators. It can be considered as a form of affective labour that produced intangible feelings of ease, excitement and passion (Hardt & Negri, 2000, p.293). Labour performed here is beyond conscious awareness (Wissinger, 2007). After the act the devotees present velichappads with gifts, in money or kind. When the *velichappad thullal* happens in large gatherings, there is not a specific way in which each devotee is spoken to separately. The labouring body of the *velichappads* moves, throbs, jumps, elates to provide the experience of the divine for the spectators who are also the devotees and participants in the process. '*Pani aanu'*, meaning 'it is a difficult work' is something that is usually said by the *velichappads* when asked about the effort involved in the process. At the same time, they talk about a certain sense of forgetfulness that happens in the process, of not knowing the processes that occur in the body.

Some *velichappads* performs at the local shrines or in the ritual performances attached to the festivals they are invited. Here the *velichappad* takes the role of a performer whose labour is acknowledged and paid by the organisers or the patrons of the shrines. These *velichappads* are also seen as part of other rituals such as *theyyam, kalmezhuthu pattu* etc. The income received by these *velichappads* who mainly move from one festival to another is seasonal. In the Malabar area, the temple festival season for *theyyam* is mostly from November to May. This is the time when most ritual performers in North Malabar earns considerable income. Again, after their enactment, they receive offerings by the devotees and also, they accept payments from the temple committees in charge of conducting the festivals. In local shrines, there could be *velichappads* who are attached to temples and is committed to the everyday rituals there. This is a diminishing category.

In all the cases giving oracles is an essential aspect of being *velichappads*. The *velichappads* believed to be the mediators of the divine give utterances in the peak of the

performance. These utterances in a festival or a large gathering is mostly mumblings aimed at announcing something familiar to a large gathering. However, giving oracles to individual devotees also involves giving 'answers' to the troubles faced by each one of them. 'Sometimes, this giving oracle goes to the extent of curing illnesses.'[227] The illness with which the devotees approach the velichappads mainly involves mental disturbances faced by the devotees or their loved ones. This aspect of being a *velichappad* needs a more in-depth understanding which is explained further through some narratives. At the offset, it may be noted that studying such a phenomenon need not have an acceptance that what is happening is scientifically valid.

4.2.2 *Interrogating Superstition*

One may argue that the paradigm in which *velichappads*' labouring bodies exist and function is as well one of the superstitions or mental health.[228] There is no reason to contest such a claim made from the standpoint of a rationalist. Getting possessed, giving oracles and suggesting solutions may as well be seen as not scientific. A television channel in Malayalam, named Reporter TV in their show called *Kaanatha Keralam*(Unseen Kerala) covers the story of Chandran Velichappad of Palakkad district.[229] The format of the show is investigative and aimed at uncovering the superstitions Chandran Swamy perpetuates during the times of his possession mainly three days a week. The reporters in the video pose themselves as devotees and ask solution for speculated situations that are created by the reporter. The *velichappad* in possession gives solutions for these and suggests some corrective measures to do as well. The report exposes the *velichappad* as 'fraud'. The report exposes the *velichappad* as 'fraudster.' In the said video, the reporters say when the *velichappad* starts speaking, there is increased attention given to the more feminine voice, which is shown as a reason for his fraudulence. If

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[227] As claimed by some velichappads
[228] See Aktar (1998) Islam & Campbell (2014), Halliburton (2005), Mercer (2013), Ward (1980) for work on mental health and possession.
[229] Uploaded on YouTube on 25th October 2014. Available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bA8qNf6vwdk&t=490s accessed on 15 March 2020

one exercises a litmus test of oracles of the *velichappads* many such stories may come out. The current study then will become something different in its totality. Also, one needs to think why is that the patrons of canonical religions never face such tests. Why is a Brahmanical priest not accused of superstition when he takes care of the prayers of the devotees and guides them? Any practice in the domain religion can fall into the domain of superstition.[230] However, it shows a problematic standpoint when certain practices become increasingly as superstition and certain others are not seen so (Prakash, 2013). The meanings of the practices can be inferred from multiple standpoints.

During my fieldwork, I went to the same place where the reporters had gone. There was a meeting of *velichappads* and devotees in the area. Before going to the place, I was warned by certain other known *velichappads* that not to give my number to any of the *velichappads* at the place as they were not 'proper' people. I was also told to observe the effeminacy of the *velichappads* there and have fun. It is important to note that such warnings were given to me by fellow *velichappads* and not by a television reporter doing scientific journalism. Only once I reached the place and spent time in the place did I realise the shrine of Chandran Velichappad is located on one of the poorest localities, a border village of Tamil Nadu and Kerala. He is a *velichappad*, who is a Dalit and effeminate in his gestures. Most of the devotees and resident in the areas are Dalits, from a working-class background, mostly engaged in daily wage work. A very effeminate Chandran Velichappad has made enough money through his ritual practices, but the experiences show that his social acceptance even among the other *velichappads* who are Ezhavas remain low. Here the belief of the lowest of the caste remains a matter of suspicion more because of his identity. Even though it may be superstition, the practices of some are only marked thus.

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[230] See Quack (2012), Van der Veer (2001)

4.2.3 Stories of Survival

Being a *velichappad* is a means of survival for many. For many who become *velichappads,* this becomes their only income and their only source of sustenance. Their narratives best tell hardships in the lives of velichappads of survival. It can be seen that believers come to meet *velichappads* even from far of places with their worries. Here the *velichappads* giving suggestions/solutions may or may not be in a possessed state. They enact the role of a godman in some cases. In other instances, they could be a friend who listens to worries or a mentor who provides guidance. The role played by the *velichappads* vary. Some of them become a popular name in the area. What some others essentially do is to 'pray' for the well being of the devotees. This praying entails wishes of wellbeing and nothing more.

Devu is in her sixties now and lives alone in her house at Vythiri of Wayanad district (Figure 4.3). The home of Devu is located in a tea plantation area with no proper road connectivity. Elephants frequently enter the area and often damage all the crops. Devu is a known person in the area. People even a few kilometres away from her house knew her and guided me correctly to her place. Just beside her home is a small shrine which she has built with her earnings. Devu's family had immigrated to Wayanad as workers in tea plantations and coffee estates decades back. Years back, she had come from Palakkad to visit her family in Wayanad and continued staying there. She married a distant relative in Wayanad, and he passed away a few years back. She worked for years in coffee estates with meagre income and no other benefits. She had started going to Kodungallur at the age of thirteen and later on became a *velichappad*. She worked in the estate even after she became a *velichappad*. Now she is unwell and has the illness of a minor stroke. She has a son who once in a while visit her. The primary source of sustenance for her is what she gets through being a *velichappad*. She need not necessarily get possessed or go in trance. But people who trust her continues to visit her so that she prays for them or sometimes give oracles. With her earnings of being a *velichappad*

along with her late husband's earnings from daily wage work, she has managed to build a small house. She still has to repay a loan of seventy-five thousand, which she had taken towards the construction of the house. After her husband's death and children's marriage, she confines herself to the house. She used to keep her holy sword at her sister's place before her current home was constructed. Then she was told by an astrologer not to do that. Following which she built a small shrine just next to her house, and now the sword is kept there. She says that mostly when people visit her, all she does is listen to them. She says,

> People who come are mostly those who come for pooja. They come here and talk about all their sadness. They talk for very long. Usually, they come on Tuesdays, Fridays and Saturdays. If they are too sad, they come in middays as well. Most of them have problems at home, issues with husbands, and some are concerned that their children are not taking care of them. Both men and women come to visit me. They have the freedom to share any sadness with me. Once they leave, they also call me on the phone. I just need to give assurance and then they are happy. It is a relief we give than anything else. Many people have told me that they have got relief after coming here. Even though it is a bit difficult to reach my place, once they reach people do not like leaving from here. I support people when they are scared and afraid. I give them food if they are coming from far off places. I tell them it is okay; I ask them to stay healthy. I ask them why they are scared. Then I try to give a solution. I give them warm words. They know I will pray here for them. They will sponsor some pooja once they have attained what they desire. I never ask for any specific money. We should not do that. Amma does not like all that. I just pray to Amma to help them. I ask them if they have satisfaction.[231]

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[231] Interview, Wayanad, June 2018

The words of Devu Velichappad is self-explanatory on the kind of process she is engaged. What she offers essentially is a sense of comfort to people who comes to her in grief. She says people from all religion come to her. Through word of mouth, more and more devotees came to know about her. At the same time, Devu Velichappad is cautious about her boundaries. Sometimes people with psychiatric illness are brought to her. She always asks such families to take the person to a hospital. Thus, she has set her limits for what she can do. She does not claim to have cured illness of people as some other *velichappads* do.[232]

Devu says that she never gets arrogant about being a *velichappad*. But being a *velichappad* has helped her in surviving for many years now. Devu has not gone for any other work for sixteen years. Whatever she needs for her survival, she gets as offerings from the people who visit her. Sometimes it is just two people who come in a week. Devu says that the meagre earnings are enough for her to survive. She does not complain about not being able to accumulate any wealth. 'Amma also has her limit in helping', Devu says. Devu also points out that there are *velichappads* who have amassed much wealth by being a *velichappad*. She hears the worries of people, consoles them and motivates them, needless to say, prays to god for a cure. She clearly says when people come for curing mental illness, she readily recommends them to a good psychiatrist. Neither does she get possessed every day or whenever people visit her? Even during my stay at her place, she got phone calls from people just asking for consolation and reassurances over phone calls. Being a *velichappad* has helped Devu *Velichappad* to survive and be independent in her old age. This is her only source of income which keeps her from having to go for work in a plantation.

Subhadra Velichappad's life has also been one of an immense hard work wherein possession became a means of income not just for her but for the family as well. Subhadra was born into an extremely low-income family. Her father was a peon in a police office. Everyone

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[232] Some *velichappads* makes claims of curing chronic illnesses in informal interactions.

in the family, including her siblings, used to go as daily wage labourers from a very young age. She remembers that sometimes in acute poverty, they had to ask their neighbours for food. However, Subhadra became a velichappad at a young age, and this changed the scenario. Subhadra Velichappad recollects how her being a *velichappad* at a very young age has resulted in the economic upliftment of her low-income family. 'After I got the *daivam* people started coming to listen to my oracles. It is with the money thus earned with *dakshina* that I married off three of my elder brothers and sisters. As I was not getting married, my father got land in my name. Bhagavathi has given me all this. Bhagavathi helped me live.'[233]

It was not an easy process for Subhadra. She says that she had to cut her forehead almost every day and get possessed every day. Her house and the shrine attached to the house was a site of rigorous activities until her father passed away twenty-eight years back. Subhadra Velichappad does make claims about curing illness. She says that people used to mainly visit her for *ozhippikkal*,[234] *manthras* and curing mental illness. Mentally ill people used to stay over at her place for long as two weeks until their condition was cured. However, the veracity of the claims may be disputed.

Subhadra Velichappad demarcates her life as before and after *daivam* not only for her religious experience of being a *velichappad.* She also observes it about how the status of her family changed in the period. The family attained economic mobility through the income generated through possession activities. After his father's death, she has stopped undertaking rigorous possession activities at home. She does not cut her forehead every day now. These days when people visit, she just sits and gives oracles, is what she says. She says if someone comes with problems until they are cured, it occupies her mind. However, people around think she has no tension, she says. Subhadra also used to be engaged in tailoring job after her father's

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[233] Interview, Palakkad, Feb 2018
[234] Meaning taking away the bad omens, exorcise.

death when there were reduced possession activities. Subhadra also does cultivation in the agricultural land she owns which is also a source of assertion for her.[235] Now if she gets some money, she plans to redo the roofing of her house from terracotta to concrete. Subhadra Velichappad does live with a regret of not being able to complete school. She says her only sadness is she could not get a proper education.

Subhadra Velichappad being a *velichappad,* became the primary source of income for the entire family. From her childhood for several years, ' possession became an induced activity. In addition to the devotional aspects, there were economic reasons that may have kept her going. The labour brought forth a certain degree of bodily altercations. Can we see the body of the *velichappad* in *thullal* as a strenuous task of a labourer also including physical wounds? The self-infliction of injuries can be cast as a performance in the sense of interaction between participants and audience (Schieffelin, 1985, p. 710). This understanding is critical to the meaning and effectiveness of the ritual in a social purpose rather than cognitive sense (Peteet, 1994, p.31). For Devu Velichappad of Wayanad, the journey of being a *velichappad* has been a relief in her ageing years wherein it helps her basic sustenance. Understanding the gender dynamics of the labour question is also essential here. For the same reason, when we talk about resource accumulation, we do not see as many women *velichappads* to have had the same mobility or access as the men *velichappads*. Even if there is mobility, there is a lack of acceptance of women in ritual roles.

Mani Velichappad of Palakkad had left his job at a factory to become involved in *velichappad* activities. Mani used to work in a Pepsi factory. The factory later got closed. He has a temple, and for the past fifteen years, he has been concentrating on temple centred activities alone. He says that earlier he used to get income from some buildings he has rented out. However, with the changes in Goods and Services Tax (GST), his income from the

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[235] For land rights and women's assertion see Agnihotri (1996)

business has dried off. 'Only temple and the incomes from it is our survival,' he says.[236] The changes in the economic realities of the region necessitated Mani to take up the charge of the temple.

Even when one looks at the economies of *velichappads,* it can be observed that they are not one homogenous category. Some *velichappads* have amassed much wealth by being *velichappads*. This amassing of wealth may have also happened across generations of having *velichappads* in families. Fellow velichappads often cite the life of Mayyil Chandran Velichappad as an example of such cases. In my interview with Ganapati Velichappad,[237] I was informed about a Mayyil Chandran Velichappad who comes from Kannur is a 'big person'. The *velichappad* is settled at Dubai and only wears gold ornaments for the Bharani. At Kodungallur Bharani, Mayyil Chandran performs several actions to generate attention while entering the temple premises.[238] He comes with a huge accompaniment and usually he is the only *velichappad* in a large group. He gifts clothes to those sitting for *vettitheliyikkal* in the way leading to temple. Mayyil Chandran Velichappad has been a *velichappad* for forty-two years. In my interview with him, he says the background he is from and his journey,

'In school, when I was asked by the teacher what I want to be after growing up, I always said, a social worker'. When I was about ten years old, one day, I started jumping up and down. I started chanting it is Kodungallur Amma in me. Until then, my family nor I had an idea of who Kodungallur Amma was. My families were communists and atheists, including my mother. Then my family did not accept me. I had to go through a lot of humiliation and discrimination from family and school, and finally had to leave them.'[239]

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[236] Interview, Palakkad, February 2018
[237] Interview, Wayanad, October 2017
[238] Participant Observation, Kodungallur, March 2017
[239] Interview, Kodungallur, March 2017

Mayyil Chandran Velichappad says even now some family members of his ridicule him. However, he did not go into the details of his journey. All we know is he left his home to become what he is even without encouragement from the family. Mayyil Chandran Velichappad is married and has two daughters. Another *velichappad,* Unni Velichappad once told me that going to Dubai is an escape for Chandran when he is flooded by people who want to meet him at his home. However, there are people, even in Dubai, who is waiting to meet him.[240] The comment is an indication of the stature of Mayyil Chandran Velichappad. Chandran evaded my request for meeting him at his home town.

When I asked his phone number for further follow-up, he said, 'You cannot come to Kannur and talk to me. I am hardly in India. My Arabi has given me leave to come. I am an atheist and communist after all these festivities. It is only during Bharani I am like this.'[241] Chandran wishes to stay away from research enquiries. The wealth he has amassed has made other smaller *velichappads* to see him as a role model. Chandran falls into the category of a godman for many. With ardent believers in his strength, a very effeminate Mayyil Chandran Velichappad gets wide acceptance and respect among the *velichappads*. Some other *velichappads* look at him with much awe and aspire to be something that he is. When one Chandran Velichappad is accused of superstition (see earlier section), Mayyil Chandran Velichappad enjoys a much-elevated status, explanatory of how class status operates among *velichappads*.

Velichappads are diverse and non-homogenous, and there is no unified way of articulating and classifying the labouring bodies of *velichappads*. The attempt of the stories listed here is not to reduce the question of *velichappads* to a labour question alone, but rather to expand the meaning of *velichappads* in multi-faceted ways.

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[240] Interview, Kozhikode, April 2018
[241] Interview, Kodungallur, March 2017

4.2.4 *Job Position and Contestations*

The category of *velichappads* always attached to a temple is a diminishing category among the *velichappads*. However, it is noted that such job positions are available under certain temples governed by the Devaswom. In Kerala, there are five Devaswom boards such as Guruvayur, Travancore, Malabar, Cochin, and Koodalmanikyam. The Kodungallur Kurumba *kavu* falls in the administration of the Cochin Devaswom Board.[242] One of the key activities undertaken by the Devaswom Boards is the recruitment for positions in various tiers of temple activities, including the temple priest. Some of these temples also have the post of *velichappads*. I was told by an official that there is a post of *velichappad* at every Bhagavathi temple and Shastha (Ayyappa) temple.[243] However, there is no assigned work for a *velichappad* every day. The work mainly falls on forty days of Sabarimala pilgrimage season. The velichappads are not paid as much salary as a priest. There is no age limit for the velichappad and Hindus of any caste can apply for the position. The position, however, is not available in all temples. In some temples, they do not receive any salary as it is not regular employment.

This section of the chapter attempts to forefront certain contestations that happen for these posts. These contestations reflect on how *velichappads* look at being *velichappads* in the language of labour and law. Legal cases filed by *velichappads* are looked at in detail. The analysis of the cases unpacks the complexities of the claims of work. The section also touches upon the united struggles done by *velichappads*. The demands point towards the labour articulations of *velichappads*. The section prompts to think towards the indications around labour and work initiated by *velichappads*. The section, thereby, connects to part two of the chapter which is a case study on an organisation of *velichappads*.

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[242] The Cochin Devaswom Board undertakes the administration, supervision and control of incorporated and unincorporated devaswoms and Hindu Religious Endowments and funds which was under the ruling area of the former Cochin state. The Cochin Devaswom Board was was formed under the act of XV of Travancore-Cochin Hindu Religious institutions Act,1950. Each temple on CDB has controlled by devaswoms and there are 403 temples under the CDB. Accessed at http://www.cochindevaswomboard.org/ on 5 Jan 2021.

[243] Interview, Kodungallur, April 2019

The Cochin Devaswom Board (CDB) job positions of *velichappad* is a matter of contention many times because of the lack of clarity over whether the position is an appointed one or an inherited one. Two such cases are discussed here. One such case was filed by Mr Manoj Kumar K against the President of the Cochin Devaswom Board at the High Court of Kerala.[244] The father of Manoj Kumar was an Oracle[245] at the Kumbalangad Sree Kurumakavu Bhagavathy Temple, under the Cochin Devaswom Board. After the death of the Oracle, it was decided by the CDB to appoint a new Oracle. Accordingly, applications were invited. An interview was conducted and, the Devaswom Board eventually appointed Kuttappan as the Oracle. The said decision was challenged before the Court by Manoj Kumar, the petitioner who is the son of the previous Oracle, contending that he had a right to be appointed as the Oracle since the post of the Oracle was a hereditary post.

The writ petition filed by Manoj Kumar was disposed of by Court. Devaswom Board was directed to conduct an enquiry as to whether the post of Oracle was hereditary or otherwise. Accordingly, the CDB conducted an enquiry, and it was found that the office of the Oracle of the said temple was not a hereditary post and that Manoj Kumar was not entitled to stake his claim. The directive by CDB suggests the position of *velichappad* as a work that can be claimed by any applicant. The taking of such a position by the CDB is a step in the direction of seeing *velichappad* primarily as a job position which gives equal options for anyone to apply and lay claim. After that, the Board issued an order appointing Kuttapan as the Oracle of the temple.

Manoj Kumar challenged the order which had come in the year 2008 at the High Court. He was then asked by the High Court to approach the Civil Court. So, in the year 2009 he approached the Munsiff's Court, Wadakkancherry seeking a declaration of the hereditary right claimed by him and also for a mandatory ruling directing the Board to appoint Manoj Kumar

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[244] Accessed from https://indiankanoon.org/doc/882701/ and https://indiankanoon.org/doc/732704/ on 10 February 2020

[245] Oracle is the word used in the legal document

as the oracle. At the Munsiff he got the following relief until the civil suit went on. The Court observed that:[246]

1. The President of the Cochin Devaswom Board and its Secretary were restrained by order of temporary injunction from appointing Kuttappan or anybody else to the post of *velichappad* at the temple and from allowing to undergo the Kalasham ceremony to assume the post of *velichappad* till the suit was disposed of.

2. Secretary of the Cochin Devaswom Board was authorised to appoint any competent person to perform the duties of *velichappad* as an interim arrangement till the suit was disposed of.

Kuttappan then filed a case against this injunction by the Munsiff in 2010 before the District Court, Thrissur without the knowledge of Manoj Kumar in which Kuttappan got a stay in the injunction. Manoj Kumar again approached the Kerala High Court against this. The verdict given by Justice V Ramkumar noted that whether the position of an Oracle is a hereditary one or not requires much more in-depth study. The Court is not a competent authority to give an immediate judgement on it. The Judge directed the Civil Court to expedite the process of enquiry in the same. The contestations on the legality of a non-hereditary appointment points at seeing *velichappads* as work that exist in the articulations of the modern system of justice. Manoj Kumar approached the Court of law for his hereditary rights for a possession ritual. Similarly, Kuttapan's response is also seeking a jurisprudence solution to the same. The legal system here becomes the means of finding justice in a ritual right.

Another case discussed here is regarding the payment of *velichappads.* Jayakrishnan used to perform as a *velichappad* at Mulyankavu Bhagavathi Devaswom in Palakkad district. Jayaprakashan approached the Court after the Devaswom stopped paying him the salary that he had been getting from 2007 to 2010. Devotees would pay him *dakshina* (offerings, usually

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[246] Accessed at https://indiankanoon.org/doc/882701/ on 10 February 2020

money) apart from the rate fixed by the Devaswom for each ritual. Jayaprakashan contended in his petition that his services were required at the temple regularly and he had been performing rituals every day. The Court held that his role being hereditary, it could not be treated on par with salaried employees of a Devaswom. His position was hereditary, and therefore his claim that he be treated on par with salaried employees could not be accepted was the gist of the verdict given by the division bench of Acting Chief Justice Manjula Chellur.[247] The Court also observed that the 'job' does not go through any selection process and that there was no retirement from duties. The case also noted that as long as a *velichappad* can perform his duties, he would remain in that role and get the charges fixed by the Devaswom. This case questions the right of salary for a hereditary position. There were also instances in which *velichappads* had approached the Court for better salary as they were not in a position to take up any other vocation for survival (K. Chandramohanan vs The State of Kerala on 10 January 2001).[248]

Thus, the *velichappads* have approached the Court and sought legal action on multiple occasions for grievance redressal concerning the job.[249] There is a demand from *velichappads* that they get proper wages for the work that is done by them. The work is seen here as the one that demands a remuneration, like any other work. The system does not see the need to pay a wage or salary for a hereditary post in nature. However, there is a move towards making the post-non-hereditary. The velichappads challenge thi*s* in some cases. It is not possible to give a conclusive analysis of the contestations here without more in-depth inquiries into the subject. The fact remains that *velichappads* here are becoming part of the legal justice system and rightfully seek their rights as a worker. There are instances in which *velichappads* have organised themselves to demand the rights of a worker. A strike was once organised by

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[247] Accessed at https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/kochi/Temple-oracles-not-eligible-for-salary-rules-HC/articleshow/10675021.cms on 12 Feb 2020
[248] See https://indiankanoon.org/doc/23886647/
[249] Further see https://indiankanoon.org/doc/4933799/ and https://indiankanoon.org/doc/105953933/

velichappads in February 2012 in Malappuram district seeking revision of wages and better working conditions with the support of Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU).[250] This contestation leaves us with the pertinent question of how much-revered mediators of goddesses are left in a position to struggle for their rights, which makes them a political subject as well.

4.3 Organising *Velichappads*: A Study on Kodungallur Bhagavathi Velichappad Sangam

Workers' unions and Co-operative societies are deep-rooted in the polity of Kerala.[251] Even *velichappads* do not stand apart from such an orientation. The Kodungallur Bhagavathi Velichappad Sangam (KBVS) formed in 2009, is an organisation of *velichappads* registered under the Co-operative Societies Act.[252] The initial demands of the organisation out before the government included issuing of swords (*pallival*) with government mark, welfare fund, pension, group insurance, reservation in temple jobs, representation in temple boards and appointment of *velichappad* in every temple run by the government-constituted Travancore Devaswom Board which administers all temples at Travancore.[253] The organisation even though had started its functioning with an agitational spirit; it is yet to achieve its initial objectives. However, the organisation has grown to provide solace and respectability to *velichappads*. Looking at the formation and working of the organisation offers pertinent insights on the questions around caste, labour and status, as articulated by the *velichappads*.

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[250] Accessed at https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/kochi/Oracles-trade-trance-for-union/articleshow/11708483.cms on March 2020

[251] Further see Issac, Franke & Raghavan (1998), Jose (1977), Kannan (1981)

252 Kerala Cooperative Societies Act, 1969 aims to organize the Co-operative Societies in accordance with Co-operative principles as self-governing democratic institutions. Further see https://cooperation.kerala.gov.in/2019/04/22/kerala-co-operative-societites-act-1969

[253] Report on the formation as reported in Kerala Kaumudi (27 March 2009, Friday, Page 2, Thrissur edition) accessed from Adarsh (2013): 'Komarangal from across the state in addition to the possession and dance have now formed an organisation. Komarangal are organised under the name Kodungallur Bharani Velichappad Sangam. The Organisation was registered with Sethumadhava Pannikkar, a main Velichappad at Kodungallur Bharani as its patron. With K Radhakrishanan Swamy of Puthunagaram as President, Shibhu Swamy of Koduvayoor as General Secretary, Subhadra Komaram as Treasurer a fifteen-member governing committee was formed and has started its working. As one of the first activities of the organisation a procession of Komarangal is scheduled to start at nine in the morning from the North gate of the temple, as reported by a governing committee member.'

4.3.1 Why Organise?

Velichappads who have taken the initiative to form the organisation unambiguously underlines that the organisation was created to address the several miseries and penuries of *velichappads*. K Radhakrishna Swamy, the founder President of the organisation, remarks that the organisation was formed to 'earn rights and respect' as enjoyed by a temple priest.[254] He remarks that *velichappads* cut foreheads to please the goddess and for the welfare of devotees, yet they are mistreated. The undercurrent of caste, labour and respectability is evident in Radhakrishnan's argument. The *velichappads* despite being engaged in the process of bodily torture, do not garner enough respectability as a temple priest, who in most cases belongs to a Brahmin caste. There is an indication of the marginalisation of popular culture (Banerjee, 1989).

Shibu Swamy has been the Secretary of KBVS since its inception. He is also a key person behind the formation of the organisation. As a person who has been visiting Kodungallur Bharani since she was three years old, he recollects many experiences of ridicule faced by the *velichappads*. He says, even when *velichappads* solve the problems in the lives of others, their lives continue to be in great misery. Shibu Swamy says that *velichappads* get little support from their families, particularly their children.[255] He recollects an incident wherein children had forcefully asked their mother to stop being a *velichappad*. *Velichappads* also hesitates to bring their children to the fold and make them *velichappads*.[256] In one of the meetings I attended, the General Secretary of the organisation asked the crowd whether anyone would want their children to be velichappads. The crowd remained silent, and no one answered affirmatively. He sees these as a reflection of the hard life faced by *velichappads* that they seek no continuity for the tradition. He says that the spectators like to see blood flowing from the

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[254] https://www.indiatoday.in/web-exclusive/story/kerala-oracles-too-form-union-46086-2009-04-30 accessed on 10 March 2020
[255] Interview, Palakkad, February 2019
[256] Participant Observation, Palakkad, Feb 2019

forehead of the *velichappads*, the more the blood, the more contented the spectators are and no one bothers to ask the pain in the process. He adds that because of the bodily injuries induced, it is observed that *velichappads* start ailing early, and no governmental support is given to them (Figure 4.4). Sometimes, the older *velichappads* live with no family support even. A chit fund called the 'Bharani fund' was initiated by the organisation to provide immediate financial assistance to *velichappads* in times of such difficulty.

He believes that the lack of respectability has brought degradation to not only the tradition but also the families. The organisation also intends to protect the practice. He asserts that the organisation, to a large extent, was able to provide handholding support to the *velichappads*. It has been told that the *velichappads* active in the organisation begin to experience newfound respectability. Becoming part of an organisation earns them some recognition in the family and society. In Palakkad, when the organisation started its functioning, there were about 2500 members. However, Shibu Swamy says that initially, people had joined because they were expecting some immediate benefit out of it. Many members hoped the organisation would help them in building and renovating the temple. There were also demands by *velichappads* for sword and anklets. The organisation is now conscious of admitting new members who want to join the organisation 'just for benefits.'

The assertions of the organisation seem to have had a positive effect on how *velichappads* value themselves. They value the mobility the organisation has provided them. Subhashini has been a *velichappad* for eleven years and was the Thrissur district secretary of the organisation. Subhashini's decision to become a *velichappad* happened out of a need for money.[257] Being a velichappad was also a source of great solace for her from all the illness she was experiencing then. However, she had to face many difficulties as her neighbours had started bad-mouthing her due to odd hours of work. Being part of the organisation gave her the

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[257] https://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/Kochi/in-gods-own-country-trade-unions-speak-for-oracles/article4501729.ece accessed on 8 January 2020.

strength to approach the police to resolve issues with the neighbours. So being part of an organisation has given Subhashini a will power to stand up for her rights and resist the wrongs. There are several areas in which *velichappads* face a lot of problems concerning non-cooperation from people around. The possession of sword becomes an issue of security and in many cases have even become police case. In such times having the ID card of KBVS has helped the members in getting protection and sanction.

Subhadra Velichappad, the current President of KBVS, says that they did not expect the organisation's growth when they began.[258] They were initially focussed only in Palakkad district, and their aim was only to stop the ridicule *velichappads* face daily. She echoed the health concerns which Shibu Swamy had shared. *Velichappads* get extremely weak when old, and she insists that there is some government support in the form of pension. However, there has not been a positive response from successive governments yet. 'Velichappads have left their life for Kodungallur Bharani; we should understand that,' she says voicing the demand for a pension. Subhadra Velichappad remarks that it is through the organisation she got to know several other *velichappads,* and she could empathise with their problems. Meeting fellow *velichappads* and listening to their stories gives her a sense of camaraderie which did not exist until the organisation was formed. As a single woman living as a *velichappad,* she used to face many problems.[259] Being part of the organisation, she has gained much confidence, she says. She is cautious about some members withering away as the organisation could not have tangible achievements as assured at the inception.

Subhadra Velichappad also holds on to the need of nurturing the tradition. She says that before KBVS there were *velichappads* 'who did not even keep a lamp in their own houses', meaning they did not know the value of their possession or had the means to guard it. 'They used to keep the sword in the corner of the house after Bharani, and it used to stay rusted', she

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[258] Interview, Palakkad, Feb 2019
[259] Discussed in Chapter 3

says.[260] Now with the efforts of the organisation, they can make *velichappads* to put an effort to light the lamp at the homes of *velichappads* every day and become more regular with the rituals. She asserts that KBVS has no political affiliation. Nor is there any discrimination based on caste or religion. 'We do not see if the person has taken a bath or not, whether they eat fish or not eat fish.'[261]

Subhadra Velichappad has a clear rationale why they demand pension as one of their key demands. 'Brahmins who are the main priests in temples have a pension, but *velichappads* who almost does the same job do not have it,' she says echoing the comments of the founding President. The journey of Subhadra Velichappad, as the leader of the organisation, was gradual. She says initially for the first meeting she had great difficulty in public speaking. Then she initiated the speech with utmost truthfulness; thus, '*Penapidicha kaikondu vaalupidiche sheelamullu. Athondu prasangikkaan ariyilla. Penapidikkan enikkanariyilla. Vaalu pidikkane ariyullu. Prasangikaan ariyilla. Kalpana venel thara*' (I only have the habit of holding a sword with the hands which hold a pen. Hence, I do not know to give a speech. I do not know to hold a pen. I only know to hold a sword. I do not know to give a speech. But I can give an oracle). These lines exemplify the journey she has had with the organisation.

Another prominent woman leader, Chandrika, is the Vice President of the organisation who also is the Branch Secretary of the Communist Party of India (Marxist). Chandrika reflects on the camaraderie that has developed over the years with the formation of the organisation. 'Initially, there was no feeling of community;' says Chandrika.[262] But now there is a feeling of being supported by other *velichappads* in the time of crisis. She recollects some instances in which *velichappads* helped each other for hospital expenses. For her Bharani festival, is a space

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[260] Interview, Palakkad, Feb 2019
[261] Interview, Palakkad, Feb 2019
[262] Interview, Palakkad, Feb 2019

of equality between men and women. She asserts in meetings the importance of the need for equality among *velichappads*.[263]

The aspects voiced by the members on the need of organising is also reflected in a pamphlet released by KBVS (April 2019) asking *velichappads* to take membership in the organisation. The pamphlet reads,[264]

> *Amme Sharanam Devi Sharanam*
>
> *Join Kodungallur Bhagavathi Velichappad Sangam*
>
> *Respected Velichappads, Mooppans of Aalthara, Sthanikare and devotees,*
>
> *Kodungallur Bhagavathy Velichappad Sangam, which was established for the prosperity and betterment of the all blessed Velichappads, Komarangal, Aalthara Mooppanmar, Sthanikar and devotees, completes twelve years of its working. There are over 10,000 velichappads and even more Aalthara Mooppanmaar and Sthanikar in and around Kerala. KBVS is working relentlessly to bring together all of them. The organisation is now active in Palakkad, Thrissur, Malappuram, Kozhikode, Wayanad, Kannur, Vadakar, Kollam, Kottarakar, Kudagu and some parts of Tamil Nadu. We have not been able to bring together all Velichappads, Aalthara Mooppanmar and Sthanikar in the organisation yet.*
>
> *The material condition of many Velichappads and Sthanikar who live devoted to Bhagavathi is abysmal. In the last twelve years, KBVS has done commendable works towards improving the material conditions of the devotees of Bhagavathi and improving their status in society. Neither the government nor system here has done anything to help our distress the devotees who spend a lifetime devoted to Bhagavathi. KBVS is tirelessly working towards taking the demands of Velichappads and Sthanikar in front of the government and working towards achieving something.*

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[263]Participant Observation, Meeting of KBVS, Feb 2019

[264] Original pamphlet in Malayalam was distributed at the Bharani festival (April, 2019). Translated by the author

The Komarangal, Mooppanmar, Sthanikar, Devotees who reach Kodungallur for Meena Bharani face several difficulties during the conduct of several rituals. The work of KBVS is essential to make sure that the devotees can satisfactorily conduct their rituals and traditions without problems.

Several outside interferences have caused several damages to the great tradition, and particular cultural malice has affected us. We must make sure that such sort of degradation does not happen to our culture and tradition. We have to voice our opinion in front of the authorities and be determined to fight for it and achieve it. The time demands that from us.

For Komarangal, Mooppanmar, Sthanikar and Devotees to continue with their traditions and practices, and get status in the society we request with devotion all Komarangal, Moppanmar, Sthanikar and devotees to take membership in the Kodungallur Bhagavathy Velichappad Sangam.

Kodungallur Bharani Velichappad Sangam State Committee (KBVS)

Reg No. CA 271/2008

The call for membership is addressed not to *velichappads* alone. KBVS also invites others who have rights at the Bharani festival to be part of the organisation. Through the pamphlet, KBVS reasserts the need for coming together. KBVS highlights the importance of improving the material conditions of *velichappads* living in abysmal conditions. They also forefront the questions of status and respectability. KBVS recognises the difficulties faced by *velichappads* in pursuing the tradition. Even though the pamphlet does not voice out the problems in detail, it has to be read together with the narratives *velichappads* discussed earlier, related to the difficulties faced in personal and domestic lives, financial instabilities, lack of respectability. Further, the complications *velichappads* face in pursuing their belief without being accused of black magic and superstition is also highlighted. The organisation holds on to preserving the

purity of tradition, something that is reflected in the narratives of *velichappads*.[265] They do express their anguish on the degradation of tradition and cultural practices.

4.3.2 *Everyday Functioning*

KBVS has a twenty-eight-member state committee, with President, Secretary, Joint Secretary, Vice President and Treasurer as the key office-bearers. Apart from the state committee, there are district and area level committees as well. There are district committees at Trivandrum, Kollam, Thrissur, Palakkad, Malappuram, Kozhikode, Kannur and Wayanad. According to the bye-law of the KBVS constitution, only *velichappads* can hold the key positions (even though they admit members who are not *velichappads*).[266] Not all District Committees and Sub Committees are as active as those in Palakkad. Most office bearers belong to Palakkad district. Outside Kerala, KBVS have an active committee at Coorg, Karnataka and Ooty, Coimbatore, Vaalpaara of Tamil Nadu. In Kodagu it is migrants from Kerala, mostly from Palakkad who have formed committees. Similarly, at Vaalpaara, the members are mainly estate workers who have migrated from Kerala. Annual conferences are held at all levels of the committees. The organisation is focussed primarily on the Palakkad district. This is also cited as one reason why *velichappads* from other districts cannot participate in the day-to-day activities of the organisation and results in gradual withering away.[267]

Mostly the members are *velichappads*. However, Northern districts do not have as many *velichappads* as Palakkad. Office bearers say that it is not possible to run the organisation only with *velichappads*. Hence, from the Northern districts, there are memberships from those who hold certain rights at the Kodungallur temple. It is also noted that most members of the

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[265] The aspect is critically explored in the next section and further in the next chapter which discusses on the being of velichappads in the contemporary times.

[266] My permission to access the bye law was denied by the organisation

[267] Another Organisation, Kodugallur Bhagavathy Seva Sangam (KBSS) was formed after a split in KBVS and is not as functional an organisation like KBVS. A member of KBSS said that because of some problems in KBVS, some people had formed KBSS. Like KBVS, one of the key demands of KBSS is also the demand for pension. The members of KBSS are not *velichappads* alone. It is also common among the members to confuse the two organisations. And some members of KBSS believes there was a name change of KBVS to KBSS.

organisation are Ezhavas. The organisation faces severe financial crunch when it comes to working full-fledged. Initially, there was a monthly collection of Rs.25 taken from the members. There were several intermediaries given the charge to collect fund with membership folios. However, because of discrepancies, it was done away. Thus, the monthly collection was stopped about seven years back. The Secretary of the organisation says that ever since the monthly supply was stopped the organisation runs with the personal money of the office-bearers. An identity card is provided for all its members. The active members of the organisation wear the identity card during the Bharani festivities. As the Bharani festivities near several preparatory meetings are held at various places. As Bharani festivities approach, several preparatory meetings are held.

KBVS members say that they had taken a firm decision to have a woman *velichappad* at the helm and hence Subhadra Velichappad is the President. Subhadra Velichappad was earlier treasurer of KBVS. The organisation takes immense pride in the fact that it is a woman at the helm. Subhadra Velichappad has become much more vocal of the issues after joining the organisation. She says, 'it is the organisation that has brought the people from the kitchen to the front stage *(Adukkalayil Ninnu Arangathekku*[268]*)* '[269] The Secretary of the organisation says that there is no woman in the leadership of many political organisations which talk loudly about gender equality. KBVS has set an example in this regard, the leadership claims. The level of decision-making power the woman in leadership gets in the organisation needs to be further enquired.

Certain positions taken by KBVS makes their political location a complex one. Secretary says in one of the meetings that there is a move to stop cock sacrifice in their shrines

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[268] 'Adukkalayil Ninnu Arangathekku' is the name of a play by V T Bhattathiripad. The play is believed to have had very powerful role in the social reformist movement led by Namboodiri Yogakshema Sabha, a reformatory organization among Namboodiris. The play became much popular and is accoladed to have had a definite and concrete social objective. The reference of the usage here is to the play.
[269] Participant Observation, Public Meeting, Palakkad, February 2019.

and temples. There is a caution given to its members that the state government may introduce an Anti-Superstition Bill to regulate their activities.[270] KBVS had also taken a strong position against the entry of women to Sabarimala. The key office-bearer in a public meeting claimed that the tradition is being attacked by letting women's access to Sabarimala, and no respect is given to Lord Ayyappa. However, not all members hold the same opinion as to the leadership. Adarsh (2013) sees the organisation as an outcome of changes that have happened to the tradition. Adarsh remarks that *komarangal* felt the need to create a new sense of identity that adapts with the times. He observes that *komaram* in recent time can be seen as one that tries to create an all-encompassing identity. He considers the organising of *Komarangal* as a way in which the diversities are homogenised. Even if there might be several diversities among *Komarangal,* they want to appear as one identity outside.

Velichappads who are organising belongs to working-class agrarian backgrounds. Through organising, *velichappads* wish to come together to overcome their miseries and earn better social and economic status in the society. They are conscious of the differential status enjoyed by different priestly positions in the religious realm. They hope to address the concerns around material conditions raised by *velichappads,* particularly the financial difficulties faced by ailing old *velichappads*. The organisation voices the need for government interventions to address their problems. The organisation is in an amateur phase, and how the organisation proceeds politically in the future needs to be observed.

4.4 Conclusion

The chapter throws open some significant perspectives on the labouring bodies of *velichappads*, at the intersection of caste and class. The embeddedness of ritual practices in the caste hierarchies is well explored in several studies. The introduction of labour in studying ritual remains an area of contestation. Singh (2013) observers cultural labour is neither

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[270] Public Meeting, Palakkad, February 2019

considered 'culture' (referring to elitist art and cultural practices) nor 'labour' (referring to explicit material production) and thus it becomes a category of disavowal. Here, the questions and articulations of *velichappads* push the boundaries of labour historiography in thinking towards ritual as labour. Such an articulation problematises the debates around labour, caste and stigma. Being a *velichappad* becomes a means of income and survival for many *velichappads*. It also informs the status transformations, both economic and social. By producing their means of subsistence, men are indirectly making their actual material life (Marx, 1970). The materiality of the lives of *velichappads* is informed by the materiality of the practice.

Chapter 5:

Changing Times, Changing Meanings

Interactions with *velichappads* throughout the study had opened up several meanings and transformations on being *velichappads*. Some of them unpacked distinct perspectives and facets of what it entails to be a *velichappad* in contemporary times. I was motivated to examine several aspects that are seemingly present in the background, informing the meanings of understanding *velichappad*s today, and possibly predicting the future evolution of the practice. What does it mean to be a *velichappad* in the present times? What is the new meaning of being a *velichappad* generates in contemporary times? How much has the practice changed, and what are the factors that have contributed to this change? Is it possible to look at any tradition ignoring the reality of the socio-political of the times? In a changing global world, what remains of practices of these kinds? These are some of the questions explored in the chapter.

A basic premise in the chapter is an understanding that culture can only be understood as a part of a whole of the structure, wherein they emerge and exist (Williams, 2020). Rituals very certainly permeate into social, political as well as domestic (Thompson, 1979). Rituals and tradition have historically emerged from social patronage that the social structure produces (Thapar, 1987). Tradition has been continually mobilised, reinvented and innovatively packaged (Guha-Thakurta, 2004). When the social patronage changes, it is reflected in the alterations that happen to the rituals and tradition. No ritual that existed today exists in the same way as it existed a hundred or fifty years ago.[271] A certain historical epoch gives meaning to the ritual, and these meaning change with the time. Traditions have to see as historical pieces of evidence and not anthropological alone (Adarsh,2013). Any tradition is a continuum, and it

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[271] The thesis is limited by the absence of an in-depth account of the features of ritual enactment and its historical evolution. In the analytic, the study did not go in-depth into a comparative approach of looking at other similar ritual practices that exist mainly in South India to mark the commonalities and thereby the possibility of common social history.

is essential to note the changes that occur to the ritual as part of the continuum. In this approach, studying the contemporary meaning-making of any tradition demands an in-depth enquiry into the fundamentals of what forms the particular historical period.[272]

In the normal progression of civilization, traditions are in a continuum and adapt itself to the change in social and material conditions from which traditions sprouts. When the social patronage from which rituals have evolved changes, it naturally affects the form and meaning of rituals. Sometimes these changes are induced as much by external factors with vested interests, and sometimes these same external factors resist change (Hobsbawm, 1983). The resisting of changes then results in a tension between those evolved values in any society and certain fundamental concepts. This is the idea based on which the chapter develops. This chapter tries to understand *velichappad*s in contemporary times, positioning it in a larger structural framework.

One could observe that among *velichappad*s, some hold a solid understanding of the said aspects. *Velichappad*s articulates these in varied different ways, and despite speaking about immense changes that have happened to them or are happening to the practice, there are voices which says that 'nothing has changed'. It can be inferred that the articulations of *velichappad*s are informed by the circumstances they are in and how much they are part of the said change. These differences in perspectives tell us about the non-homogenous nature of *velichappads* and the practice as well. The diversities of views also reflect on the diverse socio-political spectrums in which *velichappad*s are located. The changes, transitions and transformations that are happening concerning *velichappad*s and around *velichappad*s are discussed herein three different sections. The sections even though they are separated into three parts, each part informs the other and is strongly interconnected.

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[272] Thapar (1987, p.4) observes that historical process is decisive to the definition of culture, yet the understanding of Indian culture is poorly served in this respect, for it is assumed that the historical process has a static interpretation and it has remained broadly unchanged over the last century, or that culture is a one- time event which has survived untampered with from the past to the present.

The first section tries to understand the changing ritual spaces of *velichappad*s by looking at the evolution of the sites of worship. It is seen how the temples are evolved from *kavus,* and the same is studied with case studies.[273] A trajectory of transformation points towards the shift towards more Brahmanical forms of practices. The second section tries to understand the mediations in the processes of transformations which is directly linked to the political changes of the times. There are no cultural practices that are not mediated, and these mediations not only give new meanings to the ritual but transforms it as well. Occasionally these mediations come with its agenda. A trajectory of temples as a site of struggles, conflicts and politics is understood. Especially the case of Kodungallur Kavu and the temple politics is studied, mainly giving attention to the Kodungallur Bharani festival. Debates surrounding women's entry to Sabarimala and the articulations of *velichappads* around it are discussed in detail. This helps to develop an in-depth understanding of how tradition and rituals are impacted by the socio-political. Third section tries to understand the inventions of traditions and the change in the representation of *velichappad*s in the backdrop of the concept of globalizing cultures.[274]

5.1 Transforming *Kavus*, Changing Authority:

Kerala has witnessed large scale changes in the sphere of religiosity, particularly at the sites of worship in the last few decades (Roopesh, 2017). There has been a tremendous intensification in the expression of devotion in public, accompanied by a massive increase in the number of devotees at several sites of worship and festivities (Devika, 2020; Raj, 2018; Sreedhar, 2014). The visibility of temple festivals has increased massively with every temple keen to organise mega-events and processions attached to temple festivals. These processes have much effect on the public sphere of Kerala. Bourdieu (1989), in his study on social space and symbolic space, sees how a social space functions as a symbolic space. The mental

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[273] See Roopesh (2017) and Roopesh (2020)
[274] The term 'The Invention of Tradition' is derived from the seminal work of Hobsbawm & Ranger (2012)

structure with which a sense of social world is created is nothing but internalization of the structures of the world. The transformations are an essential aspect that demands to be studied for its effective impact on the participants. This section of the chapter forefronts an aspect of the changes that are happening that is often overlooked. The enquiry here is to understand how different worship sites that are grouped under the larger umbrella of puritan forms worship practices. The tendency to convert local worship places into 'temples' is an attempt to create the temple as a normative ideal of the Hindu worship place (Roopesh 2017, 12). A trajectory of transformation is seen at different sites of worship. This transformation involves a redefinition of spaces at sites of worship and introduction of new practices. Only in this larger framework of transitions and transformations can we locate *velichappad*s today. *Velichappad*s are firmly rooted in the *kavus* system of worship, as explained in the introductory chapters. The shifts that are happening to space is noted with caution by some *velichappad*s, as they observe that the change is affected towards more puritan ways of practice.

I was guided to Jithu Velichappad, who is from Kozhikode by Shibu Swamy. Shibu Swamy, while guiding me to Jithu, had told me about the 'different' person he is. Jithu does not use the surname of a 'Velichappad' along with the name. This pattern of omitting the 'Velichappad' part in the name was noted among many younger *velichappad*s. My interaction with Jithu gave me a deep sense of disillusionment *velichappad*s goes through in the present times. Jithu works as a contractor of Aluminium fabrications at Kozhikode and is twenty-nine years old.[275] He had become a *velichappad* at the age of fourteen, but he has stopped following it keenly for years now. He says he did not become a *velichappad* because he wanted to. He 'so became one', denoting a sense of calling. Once he accepted being a *velichappad*, he got involved in it. There was a time when he was actively pursuing being a *velichappad*, being very active during the Kodungallur Bharani and other festivities at several places. However,

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[275] Interview, Kozhikode, March 2019

this phase was short-lived. Even as a firm believer in Goddess and her powers, he has also grown very critical of the changes that are happening surrounding *velichappad*s. There are several reasons he cites that caused his growing disengagement and disillusionment with the rituals.

Jithu is an adopted child of his parents. So, when he became a *velichappad* and started becoming an important person in his family temple, the extended family had to devise methods to keep him under check. The temple authorities developed a new rule suggesting in the temple premises no one can spill blood. As it is already discussed in the earlier chapters, a *velichappad* cuts themselves multiple times on their forehead when possessed. This would typically result in spilling of some blood in the premises of the temple. Jithu sees this as a rule 'invented' in the name of purity of the temple to stop him from having any authority in temple. He does not look at this as a personal problem, and instead, as part of more extensive changes that are happening across. He explains that these are smaller changes that are happening as part of the more extensive ways of converting *kavus* to temples. He says people are largely unaware of the traditions attached to *kavus*. In the process of converting *kavus* to temples, *Velichappad*s/*Komarangal*[276] are put at the lowest ladder of the hierarchy by people higher in the ladder. He says the reason why *kavus* came into existence is to generate a positive feeling among communities and families, and that is lost in the process of transformation of these spaces to a more rigid framework. Festivals that brought together family members are now only about showing off, he says. He says, 'kavu is like a home and temple is like a hotel', suggestive of how impersonal the devotion at the temple is.

Before going into the recent changes at sites of temples, there is a need to understand the historical trajectory of the transformation of different sites of worships along with the growth of Brahmanical Hinduism in India. The historical evolution of Hinduism is one of a

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[276] He in the course of interview shifted between using *Komarangal* and *Velichappad*s. However, he says there is no difference between the two.

dynamic process of integration, and in that process of integration, one culture became dominant over the other. The Brahmanical mode of appropriation is a powerful mechanism of appropriation through which myriad local cults and oral traditions get incorporated to Hinduism, which in effect gave Hinduism its local character (Chattopadhyaya,2005). This process is also seen as a synthesis. The origin of many 'Hindu' gods today has their actual source in a tribal cult.

In the same way, when the tribal cults took up farming for their livelihood, the ancient gods were abandoned, and Hindu religious practices were adopted (Kosambi,1967). The conversion of *kavus* into temples was part of a dominant politics of Varnashrama Dharma (Narayanan,2018). The origin of most of Siva and Vishnu temples in Kerala is traced back to *kavus* (Menon,1949). The transformations are a history of one culture becoming predominant over the other. The threat of Brahmanism is in homogenizing cultures with legitimacy only given to certain Sanskritised forms. Menon (1994, p.70) observes that in the discourse of reform the complex pantheon of shrine worship was in the process of reinterpretation in the early 20th century, and a sharp division emerged between Brahmanical and non-Brahmanical deities. The processes in place to re-imagine all practices of worship and homogenize it has disappeared from the collective memory of people. The attention in this chapter is on the processes that are happening in contemporary times.

Kerala is witnessing an increased focus on renovation and reconstruction of sites of worships (Roopesh, 2017). This is a shift towards a hegemonical, puritan, homogenous understanding of religions and religious practices. The same is enabled through alterations in the structures of sites of worship, thereby the spatiality. These transitions have an impact on how rituals are conceptualised and practised. In contemporary times the transitions of *kavus* to temples is not a simplistic architectural transition. What marks this moment in history is instead a concerted effort to homogenize the traditions associated with *kavus*. Explored here are some

of the processes that are involved help to understand the transformation better. Activities such as *Brahmakalasham* (cleansing ritual) and *Punna Prathista* (restoring the idol) is becoming increasingly common. The irony is that 'restoring of the idol' in the first place is sometimes done in a place where there was no idol. Jayarajan (2017) observes that old sites of worship, such as *kavus* are at least half a century old and might need some renovation. In the process, Brahmanical authority gets established in sites of worship. Owners of the *kavus* seek guidance from astrologers who become adamant on the need for renovation activities to be undertaken in the guidance of a Brahmin priest. Such a suggestion is then taken in without any critical enquiry by the stakeholders in the *kavu*s. A *thantri* or *komaram* can do the renovation, but this is often overlooked (Jayarajan, 2017). Jayarajan further mentions that in some places there are even attempts to stop the *theyyams* and introduce festivals with major processions involving elephants. As early as the 1970s there were such attempts made. Osella & Osella (2000) remarks that among those who have no temple to renovate, old simple ancestor shrines consisting of one stone at the edge of the compound have been turned into full-fledged family temples with puranic deities. The renovation of sites of worship is also associated with the upward economic mobility which families attain, and renovation of sites of worship is seen as a cultural and social indicator of the upward mobility.

O K Vasu, the President of Malabar Devaswom Board,[277] remarks that the changes that are happening concerning *kavus* are happening across the state.[278] I met him during the festival in March 2019 at Valliyoorkavu at Wayanad district of Kerala.[279] He told me that usually, Presidents of Devaswom Boards do not come for the festivals, but he makes it a point to attend;

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[277] The Malabar Devaswom Board is holds supervisory control of the temple administration, to see that the funds are utilized for the beneficial interest of that institution, in a proper, transparent and lawful manner. So, the temple funds are not used for any other purpose, alien to each temple. Even the Government or the Board have no authority to take away or transfer the temple money or channelise the fund for Government functions. Accessed at http://www.malabardevaswom.kerala.gov.in/ on 5 Jan 2021.

[278] Interview, Wayanad, March 2019

[279] For more on Valliyoorkavu see Gopalakrishnan (2015), Steur (2014), Vinayan (2009)

it is his third year now at the festival. He opines that earlier there was no entry for backward castes to temples and hence their worship practices were mostly surrounding *kavus*. He observes that different Gothra groups built *kavus* according to their belief systems and called the deities any name they liked. They gave deity the food they ate. The deity was just something as simple as a stone, which they covered with a red cloth. They kept their working tools for blessings. Sometimes that was a sword. There was no idol. Different kinds of *kavus* such as *kottam, kallangal, mundya, kottapura, kalapura* had no *Vastu* based discretion such as *sreekovil, sopanam* or *mandapam* (denoting sanctums).[280] '*Kavu* is close to nature; it is nature,' he says. The natural biodiversity was preserved in *kavus*. An idol of the snake was kept so that snakes could not be killed. 'It was a complete ecosystem; however, things have changed' he says. Now Devaswom has charge of many *kavus* in the state[281]. Vasu suggests that Devaswom is attempting to preserve the tradition. At several *kavus* owned by Devaswom, chicken spiced up with pepper plus pulses are still given to devotees, which he marks as an example of preserving the tradition.

He says that there is a major change in the way in which *velichappads* conduct the ritual*s* in their local shrines. There are two main characteristics seen in this shift. Firstly, there is a shift from worship, including any animal sacrifice to a more puritan understanding of worship. He adds that 'not just that there is no animal sacrifice, there is no non-vegetarian food served in the festivities like before.' The second characteristic is the introduction of a Brahmin priest to conduct the pooja related activities in the local shrines of *velichappad*s. Vasu sees this as a hidden agenda and explains there is a need to understand the political economy of transactions.[282] He explains that when brahmin dominance in temples diminished with the government's regulations, the priestly castes started venturing into *kavus* owned by 'lower

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[280] For more on Vastu of temples see Hardy (2016), Trivedi (1989), Vardia (2008)
[281] Further see Chandrashekara, Joseph & Sreejith (2002)
[282] See also Scaria (2010)

caste.' The Brahmins devised a strategy to enter these places of worship wherein they had no erstwhile authority. They had to show their domination in *kavus* without the real owners knowing what is happening. This was done through a nexus of astrologers, priestly castes and shop owners who sold *pooja* related items. Vasu calls this a caucus. The people in nexus suggests to the *kavu* owners' to undertake specific remedies and solution. A network of pilgrimage to temples was formed under the aegis of travel agencies and astrologers. In the renovated temple the erection of idol is often done by a Brahmin, establishing their control over the place. The owners of the *kavu* even encounter many expenses in the process. Vasu suggests that the intervention of Devaswom is mainly to check the corruption in the *kavus* by the priestly class. Thus, according to him, the government body's presence checks the shift towards more puritan practices.

A sense of these transformations can be better understood by looking at some sites of worship closely. One such case study is given here. By understanding the processes of establishment of Kakkodi Madathil 'Kshetram', the interconnections in the process of transformation are drawn.

5.1.1 *The establishment of Kakkodi Madathil 'Kshetram.'*

I first met Radha *Velichappad* addressed as Amma in October 2017. Her son and nephew were also present during the meeting, which happened at Kakkodi, Kozhikode.[283] She is one among the few women *velichappad*s in Kozhikode district and she had become a velichappad in the year 2012. Amma's father was a *velichappad,* and there was a *kavu* near their house from the year 1962-63. After Amma's father passed away, her eldest brother used to take care of the *kavu*. They all used to go together for Kodungallur Bharani in those times. After the death of her father, the *kavu* was largely unattended and gradually became a forested area. Even though relatives used to go to Kodungallur Bharani, not much importance was given

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[283] Group Interview, Kozhikode, October 2017

to the *kavu* that belonged to their family. Amma after her marriage used to stay in a Corporation Colony, which is away from her ancestral home. She was enrolled as a sanitation staff in the Kozhikode Corporation. Amma and her children only had vague memories of the functioning of *kavu*, particularly the rituals such as *gulikan* (animal sacrifice) in the *kavu*.

A few years back, the family started getting anxious and worried about recurring problems in the family. Amma says that her husband always had some illness or the other. So, the family decided to see an astrologer of Panikkar caste. The astrologer enquired about their family *kavu* and agreed to visit the *kavu* on a Tuesday, which is a special day for the Bhagavathi. The astrologer then asked the family if there used to be any festival conducted at the place and sought the reasons for discontinuing the festival. He also told them that the primary responsibility of the place would be upon a woman. He asked them to light a lamp at the *kavu* on Tuesdays and Wednesdays, which the family obeyed. The extended family who was not in a cordial relationship then started talking to them, and Amma's family saw it as an indication of Bhagavathi's blessings. The family then started the cleaning of the premises of the *kavu* and called for a family meeting, following which they conducted the first festival at the *kavu* after decades. The festival is being conducted every year since then. They now wish to make a sanctum sanctorum and has begun work for it. I visited the site of *kavu* and the place of construction of Sreekovil with them in October 2017 when I first saw them. The family takes active participation in *kavu* centred activities now.

The family says that rituals at the *kavu* can be done in *madhyamam* and *uthamam* (translates as good and excellent), referring to the rituals involved. They used to do in *madhyamam* during the older times. Now they follow *uthamam* at all times other than during the festivals. During the ceremonies at festivities, there is still the use of alcohol and chicken but is kept outside *kavu* premises. Amma's son vividly remembers that during the times of his uncle who is a *velichappad*, his uncle used to take the intestine of sacrificed cock and put it all

over him when possessed by the Goddess. This continued till the 1980s. Amma's son believes that ideally, the same needs to be conducted now. It was discontinued because none of them has the expertise to continue same, he says.

Now a two-day festival is conducted in March, before the Kodungallur Bharani festival. I got an opportunity again to visit the *kavu* during the time of festivities in March 2018. On the first day of the festival, it can be seen that the priests of Namboodiri caste conduct all the main rituals.[284] It can be seen how *kavu* rituals are being reimagined with the entry of the priestly caste. Namboodiris enter the realm of worship. Hierarchies are invited in; authorities shift from the *Velichappad* to the priestly castes, here the Namboodiris. The Namboodiris who were two in numbers left after the morning rituals that day. During my conversation with a family member, he expressed his dream of expanding the *kavu* to a big temple. Aspirations are formed. The whole family of Amma has now turned vegetarian to maintain the purity of rituals at the *kavu*. During the festival *guruthi* (sacrifice) is done outside the compound of the *kavu*. I was told that as there are Brahmins who are coming for the pooja, they cannot do the pooja in *madhyamam*. They consulted with an astrologer, and it was told to them that they could not enter the premises with alcohol and the strictness at par with Sabarimala has to be followed in the premises of *kavu*. The family says that even now they do not restrict anyone of any religion to enter '*kshetram*'. The change in terminology, from *kavu* to *kshetram*, is observed. They say Muslims do come to offer some rituals.

There is a shift in the terminology of addressing the *kavu*, as now the family members use *kshetram* to manage the *kavu*. The invitation brochure to the festival of March 2018 read as,

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[284] Participant Observation, Kakkodi Madathil kshetram, Kozhikode, March 2018

Devotees,

This is to inform everyone that it is decided that annual festival at Madathil Sri Bhagavathy kshetram in connection with the Kodungallur Bharani festival will be conducted with all festivities this year and will begin with the erection of flag on 4th March 2018 (1193 Kumbham 20). We are also requesting for boundless help from devotees for the completion of Sreekovil in the name of Madathil Bhagavathi.

Signed By/-

Secretary, Madathil Sri Bhagavathy Kshetra Samrakshana Samiti

Two facts are clear from the notice. Firstly, the affirmed transition of the *kavu* to the *kshetram* with the construction of the Sreekovil. Secondly, the involvement of Kshetra Samrakshana Samiti, which translates as temple protection committee. The work of Kshetra Samrakshana Samiti is discussed in detail in the following section, which talks about political interventions. The notice also mentions the conduct of rituals such as Ganapati Homam and Lalitha Sahasranama Archana, which had no place in the rituals of a *kavu*. All the boards leading to the *kavu* suggested it as *kshetram* and not a *kavu* anymore. There were several direction boards to the temple that was put up. When I reached the place a day before the festivities, there were only the family members there. They instantly knew me as someone who has come to study their '*kavu*'. Even if the boards suggested the place as *kshetram* in everyday of the family '*kavu*' remained

On the second day of the festival by the time I had reached the main *velichappad*, who is Amma's nephew was in a trance and was giving blessings and oracles. Devotees approached the *velichappad* with their problems. Irrespective of the nature of the problem response provided by the *velichappad* was to visit Madathil *kavu* more often and offer prayers there. The velichappad criticized the main organisers of the festival for not doing the rituals well. As one could see the *velichappad* trance at one side of the temple, the other side of the *kavu* had the

Lalitasahasranamam recital happening.[285] The space saw diversities performing simultaneously and time will say what will eventually prevail. I left the place at night after watching the first *thira* (*theyyam*) another introduction to the festivities. A member of the family itself also flags the transitions. The wife of the main *velichappad* is an Anganwadi teacher and was curious about my study and reasons for my research. She then told me that many of the traditions peculiar to the *kavu* are not there in the *kshetram* now (Figure 5.1 & Figure 5.2).

This shift in tradition, the introduction of Brahmins into the rituals erstwhile performed by *velichappad*s is not a unique phenomenon. The same is observed in several other *kavu*s were *velichappad*s have rights. This is not just a story of Madathil *kshetram* alone. I had attended the *kettunira*, pre-Bharani ritual ceremony common in North Kerala, at the house of Ganapati Velichappad in April 2019, at Wayanad.[286] *Kettunira* is seen as a preparatory step before leaving for the Kodungallur Bharani. The function only had *velichappad*s from the Dalit community until last year, and Ganapati Velichappad was the key person to guide others. This year when I visited Ganapati Velichappad during the *kettunira,* the *velichappad*s and devotees shared happiness in the fact that there is a Namboodiri to do the rituals this year (Figure 5.3). The Namboodiri named Asokan is from Vadakara, Kozhikode. I also learned from the devotees that the Namboodiri has strict practices and do not take food or water from there. The entry of Brahminism is every day; the change in rituals is institutional. Here the person who has come from the priestly caste is invited by Ganapati and his fellow devotees. They see this as recognition for practices; the establishment of a wider acceptance of divinity to their practices.

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[285] The *Lalita Sahasranama* is the thousand names of the Hindu mother goddess Lalita. It is a sacred text for the Hindu worshippers of the Goddess Lalita Devi, who considered to be a manifestation of the Divine Mother (Shakti), and the text is therefore used in the worship of Durga, Parvati, Kali, Lakshmi, Saraswati, Bhagavathi, etc. as well.

[286] Participant Observation, Wayanad, April, 2019

Certain similar experiences came throughout the research. Thankam Velichappad says they do not have non-vegetarian food on Tuesdays and Fridays. Also, during penance, they do not eat anything non-vegetarian. She suggests that it shows their devotion.[287] Similarly, Kunjali Velichappad also indicates a shift in their pooja practices as well. But she also tells that there is no restriction for Kodungallur Amma on eating anything non-Vegetarian. Dried prawns is a primary offering at the temple. Kunjali says that even now sometimes they do sacrifice cocks, mostly to cure the ill persons who come to them for a cure. At her shrine as well, the rituals are now conducted by the Namboodiris, the practice started thirty-four years back, and she firmly believes Namboodiris are needed for the pooja.[288]

Jithu Velichappad says people from all castes owned *kavus*.[289] He says, 'The priestly castes who did pooja were Moosathu, Namboodiri etc. They did their prayers with *crushed rice, jaggery* and *payasam* (kheer) and had authority over *mantras*. The processes of transformations of *kavu*s need to be seen as a means to maintain the authority of priestly castes. Every ritual is converted to *Uthamam.'* Further, he asserts that there is an angle of caste to all the changes that are happening. He says he does not believe that any caste should be ridiculed. Then he gives the following analogy for the changes that are happening concerning *kavu*s and temples, 'You are a non-vegetarian. All of a sudden from a particular day onwards you are not given anything but kheer and crushed rice. Will not you be angry? But since there is no other option, we may continue eating it. That is what is happening here precisely.' He is also firmly against the argument that alcohol and meat are impure. He says the so-called pure items that are used in temples are transmitted through so many hands in markets. They are not preparing it in their homes. Hence it generates a feeling of the hotel. In his temple when he told he is going to be part of an organisation of *velichappad*s, i.e. Kodungallur Bharani Velichappad

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[287] Interview, Thrissur, February 2018
[288] Interview, Wayanad, February 2019
[289] Interview, Kozhikode, March, 2019

Sangam he was immediately asked whether the temple will benefit out of it. He sees all these as part of a systematic effort. 'They do not have *kavu* anymore. Everything has become a temple. Even Kodungallur Kavu will be destroyed thus,' he says.

Even though only one site of worship was looked into detail here, we can see that similar changes are happening at several sites of worship where *velichappad*s have their rights. Mostly, *Velichappad*s validates these changes as that is needed and desired. They see this as a normal progression or the right form. Some lone voices are questioning these, like that of Jithu. Following the discussions on the changes happening around the temples, and evolution of *kavu*s, in the next section, I try to understand how are changes effected at the Kodungallur Kavu.

5.1.2 Forgotten Kurumbakavu

At several points in the thesis by now, the strong connection of *velichappad*s to Kodungallur Bhagavathi temple is established. Kurumba Bhagavathi *kavu* popularly known as Kodungallur Bhagavathi temple located in Thrissur district of Kerala has a history similar to that of several *kavu*s. Kodungallur temple is noted to have had no relation to Brahmanical Hinduism, and Hinduism is a constructed religion there (Narayanan, 2017). Kodungallur temple is a classic example of how the history of community spirit and worship surrounding *kavu* is wiped off. In the last ten years, many things have changed about the Kodungallur temple, the main change being the forgetfulness about the earlier name of the temple, which is Kurumba *kavu* (Adarsh, 2013). Adarsh further observes several changes that have happened at the Kodungallur temple over the century. He highlights the incidents of caste discrimination that had occurred in the area surrounding the temple in the early 20th century. The author particularly mentions one incident, particularly of a Thiyya person getting beaten up for walking on the roads of the temple in the year 1917, an incident that generated much furore. The incident highlights the complexities of the transforming *kavu* in the early 20th century. The

author further discusses another incident about a century later, in 2007, wherein Muslims in the area were beaten up badly. These incidents exemplify how the surroundings of the temple have changed massively over the decades. The residents of the area note that the region surrounding the temple was a space where several cultural programmes were held. Areas surrounding the *kavu* was more of a place for socialisation. However, now the areas surrounding the temple has only restricted access. The spaces of shops in the immediate surrounding area allotted only to Hindus now. Adarsh (2013) further observes the interventions made by *Hindu Aikya Vedi*[290] during the constructions around temple raising voice against the 'commercialisation' of the area. The spaces are demarcated and transformed. Practices surrounding Kodungallur Bharani is made and remade. Most of the practices involve the role of *velichappad*s. Most of the changes are concerning the Kodungallur Bharani festival. But the practices and change in practices are not confined to where the festival happens. In a way temporarily and spatially these practices and the changes that happen are not limited to the time and place where Kodungallur Bharani happens.

Kavu is perceived differently by *velichappad*s, and thus the changes are also seen differently. Kunjali Velichappad firmly believes Kodungallur temple is a *kavu*. She says all Ayyappa temples and Devi temples are *kavu*s. The understanding is that Maariyamma and Bhadrakali, variations of Devi are also in *kavu*s. Hence once sees the existence of Maariyamman *kavu*, Kodungallur *kavu*, Chottanikkara *kavu*, Chakkulathu *kavu*, Oourakathu *kavu* in Pazhani etc. She says that all avatars of Vishnu and Siva have temples. Mainly women deities reside in *kavu*. However, she does not see much difference between temples and *kavu*s. She says her forefathers used to address Kodungallur as *kavu* and hence they continued calling it Kodungallur *kavu*. But now the terminologies have changed. 'When we quickly talk, we do

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[290] The Hindu Aikya Vedi (HAV) or Hindu United Front is a group of Hindu prevalent in the Indian state of Kerala. The organisation aims at the consolidation of various organisations and social sections in Hindu society (Guillebaud, 2011).

not say we are going to *kavu,* but going to *ambalam*'[291] Radha and Padmavati Velichappad of Palakkad says there is no difference between a *kavu* and a temple.[292] Thankam Velichappad is sure that Kodungallur was a *kavu* and says there should have been no fencing of the walls of the Kodungallur *kavu*.[293] The understanding of *velichappad*s is informed by the prevailing practices and denotes non-homogeneity in perceptions, informed by their immediate surroundings. However, the changing authorities and rewriting of histories surrounding Kodungallur temple are exemplified while trying to understand the assertions made by the Pulakkavu.

5.1.3 Assertions of Pulakkavu

The devotees who have been coming for decades for Kodungallur Bharani gives due importance to the Pulakkavu, also known as Keezhkkavu. Pulakkavu is located on the roadside just 500m from the Kodungallur Kavu temple. Even when there are no festivities, a lamp is lit there every day, and on Fridays and Tuesdays, there is *guruthi* (sacrifice). On other days it is just the lighting of the lamp. Raghu Swamy has the authority of the *kavu* now and is the key person who organises the *kavu* activities during the Kodungallur Bharani. I first met Raghu Swamy before the beginning of festivities and after that during the festivities as well. In my interaction with him, he explained to me the importance of Keezhkkavu at Kodungallur.[294] It is believed that Amma after killing Darikan came to the ancestors of the Keezhkkavu. Also, the spirit of Amma was taken from the Keezhkkavu to Melkkavu. *Velichappads* hold rituals that happen at Keezhkkavu with much reverence. Several of the rituals that occur at the Melkkavu needs sanctions from the Keezhkkavu. It is believed that after the culmination of the festival at the Melkkavu, Bhagavathi stays at Keezhkkavu for fourteen days. At the Keezhkkavu the offering includes meat and alcohol. At the keezhkkavu, the goddess is believed

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[291] Interview, Wayanad, February 2018
[292] Interview, Palakkad, October 2018
[293] Interview, Thrissur, October 2018
[294] Interview, Kodungallur, March 2017

to be in 'ugra roopam' (fierce embodiment). The devotees at Keezhkkavu addresses the Devi as *thalla*, meaning mother. '*Amma has told us not to visit her, and she will be visiting us for fourteen days in a year. I am always at your call; she has told us. As long as your lineage is there you do not have to come to visit me is what Amma said. None of us goes to Melkkavu hence,*' asserts Raghu while describing several of the rituals undertaken at Keezhkkavu in details. An assertion of the rights the Keezhkkavu holds at the Melkkavu prevailed in his narrative. He also insists that velichappads and devotees ought to visit Keezhkkavu before visiting Melkkavu, a practice mostly followed. The practices at Keezhkavu now is starkly different from what happens at the Kodungallur Kavu. The conversations with Raghu Swamy also gave insights to several myths, rituals and oral history, which is not talked about by the key stakeholders in the main temple. Raghu also expresses his grievance on little attention given to Keezhkkavu in the documentation. In my conversation with a member of the temple advisory committee, it was told that there exists no evidence of right which Keezhkkavu enjoyed.[295]

Raghu further highlights the egalitarian nature of the goddess. 'Amma's energy is everywhere. People come here without religion and caste. Even Muslims come here, a lot of them,' he says. Kodungallur Kavu temple still does not restrict entry to those belonging to other religions in the premises during Bharani. One could even now see a burqa-clad woman offering a blessing in front of the temple.[296] The narrative of Raghu Swamy is also indicative of syncretic spaces.

Homogenisation of sites of worship under the larger umbrella of Hindu temples is a process that has undergone several historical trajectories. The section of the chapter unpacked how these transformations are affected in contemporary times by particularly looking at the transitions of *kavus* attached to *velichappad*s. Further, it is seen that *velichappad*s become part

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[295] Interview, Kodungallur, March 2017
[296] Participant Observation, Kodungallur, March 2017

of transformations and become attune to the new meanings it generates. It can also be noted that there is no homogeneity in the responses of *velichappad*s concerning the change in practices. Even though natural changes in traditions are inevitable, contemporary times are a concerted effort by the Hindu political right to effect changes that cater to the political agendas. The following section goes more in-depth into these aspects. It is seen how the temple becomes a politicised space and *velichappad*s political beings.

5.2 Temple Politics, Conflicts and Articulations:

Temples in Kerala has been a site of socio-political struggles from pre-independence times (Manmathan, 2013). Firstly, I look into some of the erstwhile struggles surrounding temples to understand how the struggles surrounding temples differ now. Unlike North India, a medieval tradition of cultural critique was not part of the intellectual tradition of Kerala, and the cultural critique happened in renaissance and reformation (Panikkar, 2016). The process of renaissance led to several reform movements in the state. Such movements, in turn led to not just breaking the centuries-old traditions but sowed the seeds of modernity based on dignity and equality of the socially downtrodden in the state (Bijukumar, 2019). The mobilization that was built through the temple entry movements such as Vaikom Sathyagraha[297] and Guruvayur Sathyagraha[298] was later developed into political mobilization against other social inequalities and the colonizers. These movements of temple entry brought egalitarianism to the public space, and lower-caste assertion in accessing temples against the prevailing tradition-defined practices forced the Maharaja Chithra Thirunal Balarama Varma of Travancore to issue the

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[297] Vaikom Satyagraha happened in the princely state Travancore (South Kerala) for temple entry of the ex-untouchables. It took place near the Shiva Temple at Vaikom, Kottayam district, Kerala during 1924-25. A committee formed in the Kakkinada conference of Congress in the year 1924 decided to launch a 'Keralaparyatanam' in order to get temple entry and also the right to use public roads for every Hindu irrespective of caste. This was one of the earliest organized movement that was being conducted on such a massive scale for the basic rights of the ex-untouchables and other backward castes in Kerala.

[298] Guruvayur Satyagraha took place in 1931–32 and was then part of Malabar district. The Satyagraha was an effort to allow entry for ex-untouchables into the Guruvayur Temple. K. Kelappan, A. K Gopalan (volunteer captain), P.Krishna Pillai, Mannathu Padmanabhan and N.P Damodaran Nair were the leaders of that agitation.

Temple Entry Proclamation in 1936 (Kumar, 2019). The temple entry movement had triggered much of the progressive politics which Kerala saw in its pre-independence and post-independence history. However, with changing times, politics around the temple has taken a turn which may not be seen in continuity to the struggles mentioned above. Roopesh (2020, p. 9) observes that the demand and concern for temple protection was a change from the discourse of temple entry. Further, in the post-independent period, temple entry struggles became limited to legal battles. The struggles around temples in recent times are seen as a means of advancing the political Hindutva. More than what emerged from reforms, we now see a planned effort from the advocates of political Hindutva, to puritanize practices and places of worship. Reddy (2011) remarks that if the Hindutva that Savarkar or Golwalker once imagined exists at all, it exists as a set of tools, logics, and mechanisms by which contemporary politics at all levels plays out. The politics of Hindutva can be seen massively concentrated on the temple centred activities in Kerala.

The period is also marked by the planned interventions undertaken by the political right. Roopesh OB (2017) studies the advent of Hindutva politics in the cultural fields of Kerala and how temples in Kerala have been identified as a field of cultural politics by the Sangh Parivar.[299] He observes that Sangh Parivar has been administrating full-fledged temple centred activities in the last twenty years and one of their key projects was the conversion of all *kavu*s into temples to bring in a more Brahmanical administering (Roopesh 2017). It is essential to note the arguments of Roopesh along with the more extensive changes that are happening with *kavus*, as discussed in the previous section. The temple centred activities undertaken by the Sangh Parivar is very evident in the everyday conduct of temples. Author observes that the involvement can be dated back to the 1960s. Even though the shift towards more Brahmanical forms of worship is part of a complex historical process, it is marked by the immense socio-

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[299] The *Sangh Parivar* (Family of Organisations) refers to the family of Hindu nationalist organisations which have been started by members of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) or drew inspiration from its ideology.

political power and cultural domination of Brahminical ideas that increasingly generate a consent among Hindu communities to see the temple as the normal, that particularises and/or renders deviant any other existing worship system (Roopesh 2017, 12). The interventions are dealt with counter-responses from others in the political spectrum as well.

Jayarajan (2017) sees taking over temples as one of the key strategies undertaken by the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) in Kerala with the support of centre government. The formation of Kshetra Samrakshana Samiti (KSS), meaning Temple Protection Committees, in 1967 has to be seen along with the hegemonic agenda of bringing together worship places of Dalits, Adivasis, Ezhavas under a single umbrella. Author remarks that when RSS started functioning in Kerala, their Shakhas were held in the courtyard of temples. The effort of RSS was to get powerful in the temple committees. The intention was also to take over all sites of worship from the *kavu*s of *theyyam* to significant temples. One significant development was the initiation of Ramayana month celebration in the *kavu*s owned by the low castes. Srikrishna Jayanthi procession under the leadership of Balagokulam was another.[300] Women were targeted through Lakshmi pooja and students through Vidhya Archana (offering). Jayarajan (2017) observes that the temple centred activities initiated by RSS intend at spreading hatred towards other religions among the devotees.

Malabar Kshetra Samrakshana Samithi (MKSS) was formed under the leadership of K Kelappan the Indian National Congress (INC) leader in the year 1967. Later, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) leader, P Madhavan and his colleagues took initiation to transform MKSS into Kerala Kshetra Samrakshana Samithi (KKSS) in 1975 and got registered in 1977 (Roopesh, 2017). Before going to the specificities of effects of temple centred activities, I briefly discuss here a vital work of an RSS Idealogue, Madhavan which will give further insights into the need of discussion in the said perspective. Madhavan (2014) was a firm

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[300] The website of Balagokulam defines it as a forum for Hindu children to discover and manifest that divinity.

ideologue of Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) in the late twentieth century Kerala. He devoted much of his time and efforts to the conceptualization of Kshetra Samrakshana Samiti (KSS) which translates as Temple Protection Committee. Here I give a summary of his book Kshetra Chaithanya Rahasyam, wherein he mainly outlines the work of Swayam Sevaks surrounding the temples of Kerala.

The book covers several different aspects of the intervention that needs to be done in temple centred activities. Madhavan (2014) believed that the completion of the renaissance of Hindus of Kerala should be through temples. The festivals and rituals surrounding temples are not seen as having roots to the social history of the place but to a Vedic period of worship. Religiosity is seen as the core of being a political being, and hence the culture, art, literature, governance et al. are seen to be closely associated with temples. The growth of cities and villages are directed around temples. Madhavan (2014) evokes the earlier works of Sree Narayana Guru surrounding the temples of Kerala to establish the importance of temples in society, by completely overlooking the context of the intervention of Sree Narayana Guru. Devaswom Departments and other Boards for governance for temple activities are seen as the means of giving the control to non-believers and reforms of the temple wealth are seen as a way to take away power from the temple. This has, in turn, led to the closing down of significant temples and erosion of temple rituals, he suggests. The reason for a scattered Hindu unity is linked to a deterioration of temples. Unlike the places of worship of other regions, a connection is established between people of a place as psychologically linked to temples as a sort of 'psychic engineering' (2014, p.209). There is the special attention that is given to the temples that are of not 'Savarna' temples. KSS is requested to give special attention to those worshipping places that belong to the 'lower castes.' Even though these sites of worship may not have Brahminical worship, it is said not to discard such sites of worship, he says. Sites of worship of the oppressed castes have to be seen as belonging to the Hindu fold. Raghavan asks

the members to follow the unique practices in such places of worship keenly. Most importantly, it is said to lead to a unification of worshipping rituals. Thus, KSS is asked to not work only in Savarna temples.

Through the book Madhavan (2014) KSS is given an immediate task of organising the devotees irrespective of whatever work that has been undertaken by Devaswom or Trustees. After the organising of the devotees gradually they will be capable of conducting the activities of the temple in a village. But these should never be aimed at taking the administration of the temple as it would be too much activity to take up, instead, KSS should act as a pressure force. These groups can be then built to one such pressure force at the state level, author mentions. In the process, there is special attention given to the festivals, to see it as a means to build certain discipline in the people and evoking the need for the prosperity of the temple. KSS places itself to have a role in the nation-building process, with values rooted in the past. KSS thus intends to play a pivotal role in the nation-building process as well. Madhavan (2014) acknowledges that there is an increase in the participation of devotees in the temple activities. Sammohyaradhana (Social Worship) and Mathru Samiti (Mother's Organisation) are the two key outreaches of KSS, two critical aspects discussed in the works of Seva Bharati, which is discussed later in the section. Due importance is given to Dharma Learning Centres where he observes that effort is made to instil at a young age a belief in God, intense religiosity, valuable tradition, nationalism, pride in the culture, discipline and pride in Hindutva among Children. KSS gives special emphasis for Seva activities.

Understanding the text by an RSS ideologue on temple centred activities furthers our knowledge on the operating principles that govern the activities of Sangh Parivar. With the understanding, the venture here is to look into the particular works undertaken by the Sangh Parivar at Kodungallur Kavu. The section also seeks to unpack how the changes ought to be seen as a part of increasingly volatile religiopolitical spaces. The following section tries to

understand the location of Kodungallur as a political hotbed and the political influence in the conduct of Kodungallur Bharani. A detailed study of the Seva Bharati - the Seva organisation of RSS and the role played by it during the Kodungallur Bharani festival is given. The attempt here is to unpack the specificities of interventions and the new meanings it generates. Also looked into keenly are the debates surrounding women entry into Sabarimala temple and the responses of *velichappad*s towards it.

5.2.1 *Kodungallur and Temple as a Political Space*

Kodungallur is a politically volatile area wherein all political parties have considerable strength. The place is also known as one of the strongholds of RSS. The place reports minor conflicts from time to time. During initial fieldwork, I stayed in a hostel run by Christian nuns of Presentation congregation.[301] Through my fellow hostel mates, I learned about the advent of Hindu Right in the area and their strength there. I was told that during the Christmas in 2016 the Hindu households in the area were not allowed to hang the Christmas star. During my field visit to the Cheraman mosque[302] and interaction with the mosque authorities, I was informed about communal politics that is taking place at Kodungallur.[303] Once the members of Minority Morcha (the minority wing of RSS) visited the office of Cheraman mosque to ask if they had any concerns. The authorities conveyed to the members of Minority Morcha that they, in particular, do not have a problem. However, they are concerned about the attempt to build '*Bharatiya Samskaram*' (Tradition of Bharat) in the country. Authorities of the mosque recollects that earlier there used to be a lot of Muslim traders running a business in the temple premises and now there are not any. Some of them, the oldest member among the office-

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[301] Aavila Hostel, Kodungallur, March 2017
[302] The Cheramaan Juma Mosque is a mosque in Methala, Kodungallur Taluk, Thrissur District. Built in 629 AD, Cheraman mosque is regarded as the first mosque in India and the oldest mosque in the Indian subcontinent. It was built by Malik Deenar, Persian companion of the Islamic Prophet Muhammad, on the orders of the successor of Cheraman Perumal Tajuddin, the Chera King of modern-day Kerala.
[303] Group Interview, Kodungallur, March 2017

bearers, claimed that the area has a Buddhist history to it. The opinions mentioned here is an indication of a rupture in social cohesion, particularly in the area.

The political activities that are happening around the Kodungallur Kavu and particularly during the Kodungallur Bharani festival directly affects how rituals are perceived and enacted. In March 2017, the political control of Kodungallur Kavu became a discussion in the Kerala Assembly. Pinarayi Vijayan, the Chief Minister of Kerala, told in the assembly that Sri Kurumba temple has been 'taken over' by RSS. This became a huge discussion at Kodungallur. A response to this was written as an open letter by KG Sasidharan, of Kshetra Upadeshaka Samiti (Temple Advisory Committee) of Kodungallur. The letter read as,[304]

> It is your governance that has made the historic decision of making a person from SC category Dr A K Sudarshan, the President of Cochin Devaswom. It is the same Devaswom board that is doing the governance of the temples. Kodungallur temple is one of the prominent temples under Cochin Devaswom. Instead of declaring in Assembly that RSS takes over the rule here, you could have once asked the people in Devaswom Board. Your statement is a shame for the Devaswom Board members. It is these people who you have despised who is taking care of Sabarimala devotees and Kodungallur devotees for the last two decades by giving services free food, drinking water and health care. About two years back your party people have insulted the Great Temple by throwing stones at the temple. No one would have informed you about it. But when you were misinformed about the temple's running, you could have at least asked the LDF representative of the place, Mr V R Sunil Kumar.

I was at Kodungallur for my fieldwork during the said period and got to meet with KG Sasidharan. During the interview with him, certain things became apparent.[305] He was reluctant in acknowledging prominence of Dalit worshippers who come for the festival and reasons for

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[304] Mathrubhumi Newspaper, March 2017
[305] Interview, Kodungallur, March 2017

the same. Sasidharan even despised the use of the term Dalit. Further, he rejects the idea that the place and the temple have anything to do with the figure of Kannaki. 'Kannaki is a historical figure, and the temple is beyond history and beyond the measurement of time', he says. There was an absolute rejection from his side of Keezhkkavu and the concept of Melkkavu and Keezhkavu as well. He overlooked any attempt to historicize the festivities and emphasised on the 'timelessness' of belief. There was a particular emphasis given to Sevabharati and the work of Sevabharati in the area, particularly during the festivities. Special importance in the conversation was given to the Hindu organisations that participate in the conduct of the festival. The interview with Sasidharan further exposed the undercurrents of the political hold in the temple. Looking deeper into the functioning of Seva Bharati at the Kodungallur Kavu will give an adequate understanding of the Sangh Parivar interventions undertaken at the temple.

5.2.1.1 *Case study of Seva Bharati and its work during the Kodungallur Bharani festival*

The role of Seva Bharati in the conduct of the Kodungallur Bharani festival cannot be overlooked while looking at the changes in traditions and factors contributing to it. Seva Bharati is a frontal service organisation of Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and was established in the year 1979. Social welfare is key to Hindutva's post-independence organizational diversification and a means by which they try to recover respectability lost in the wake of Gandhi's assassination (Hansen, 1999). The commitment to *seva* has long been core to Hindutva praxis, particularly in rural areas (Reddy, 2011). Jaffrelot (2005) remarks that Seva Bharati's purpose is to teach national awareness values and a sense of hygiene simultaneously with *seva*. There is laid out understanding of what is right for society and how one can be useful to society. This Jeffrelot sees as a means of assimilation of marginal populations which are naturally appreciative of charitable work into a Hindu nation. There is a pattern of work that can be termed as philanthropy of patrons which is wishing to gain merit by the gifts of Seva Bharati.

The affiliations of Seva Bharati's is mostly concealed, same as in the case of Kodungallur Bharani. The presence of Seva Bharati at the site of Kodungallur Bharani cannot be seen in a direct cause-effect relationship concerning transformations that are happening to the *velichappad*s. But instead, the presence of Seva Bharati at the space of Kodungallur Bharani changes the politics around the space considerably. Seva Bharati has made their presence felt very strongly by providing free food to everyone for the span of three peak days during the Kodungallur Bharani festivities. This started in 2008 and is continuing since. The venue of this service is a temporarily constructed huge pandal at the South Gate of the temple. Both the cooking and serving of the food happens in the pandal. The service is marked by a massive presence of women, youth and children. The claim of Seva Bharati is that food is given to over two lakh people for three days. The health centre is equipped with over 20 doctors and nurses who are in continuous service for three days. Over this, the ambulance service is available for 24 hours three days. Also, there is an information centre for those who have lost their way (Figure 5.4 & Figure 5.5).

The brochure of Seva Bharati released for the year 2019 reads,

Dhanyathman,

We with pleasure inform you that under the leadership of 'Annadhaana Yanjasamiti', Seva Bharati and different Hindu theological community and social service organisations will jointly provide continuous free food service in addition to the services such as breakfast, drinking water, treatment help, ambulance service, information centre at the specially erected venue near South gate for three days, i.e. 2019 April 05,06,07 Friday, Saturday and Sunday (1194 Meenam 22,23,24) of Meena Bharani festival at Kodungallur Sri Kurumba Bhagavathi temple. With devotion and respect, we request everyone your help and cooperation to make this a grand success.

Newer rituals mark each step in the process.[306] The beginning of erection of the temporary pandal is characterised by a ritual which was done by Shri. T Vijayaraghavan of Thacholi Tharavadu. Thacholi Tharavadu is one of those families with rights in the temple. The lighting of the fire for cooking is another ritual which is called the '*Panchagni Jwalanam*' which again in the year was done by Shri Sathyadharman Adikal, who is currently the head priest of the Kodungallur Kavu. The inauguration of the food service is conducted in a big way every year in which most people close to the Sangh Parivar establishment is invited as chief guests. In 2017 inauguration was done by Rajya Sabha MP of BJP and film star Suresh Gopi. Not everyone is allowed to participate in the inauguration process freely. One has to either be a member of Seva Bharati or has to take a pass from the entrance and wear Seva Bharati tag. Tag is given only after giving one's details such as name and phone number. In the year 2017, I chose not to participate in the inauguration process, but the next year I attended and got a chance to listen to the speakers there closely.

It is interesting to note that in the brochure released in the year 2018, the inauguration was supposed to be done by A B Mohanan who is the President of Cochin Devaswom then.[307] Later Devaswom President said that his name was kept in the brochure before finalising the same with him. Through the inaugural function, there is an effort to achieve political neutrality. In addition to printing name of Mohanan without consent, the organisation had invited Thamburan of Kodungallur to light the lamp. There was also appreciation given to selected Padmashri awardees of the year. In the inaugural function, what stood out was the speech by RSS Pranthpracharak P N Harikrishnakumar. He made use of the platform to advertise the current Central government and the *seva* of RSS. The insistence was on the importance of being a right-thinking Hindu; this is a pattern commonly followed for its work elsewhere in the country as well (Jeffrelot, 2005).

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[306] Participant Observation, Kodungallur, March 2017
[307] Participant Observation, Kodungallur, April 2018

The Devaswom Board holds reservations against how Seva Bharati has got hold of the festivities. In 2018, even the Devaswom Board had given free food to the devotees at the festival which went without attention. What the Devaswom Board was successful in doing was controlling how Seva Bharati used to own the loud speaker announcements. Until last year Seva Bharati announcements used to run at par with the temple announcements. Temple announcements are largely cautionary with clear instructions to devotees. Seva Bharati announcements were only aimed at making the name of Seva Bharati reverberate at short intervals among the tens and thousands of devotees. They announced the services provided by them repeatedly. The Devaswom authorities in the year 2018 could keep a tab on this. The Devaswom observed that the temple space is being used to propagate their politics blatantly.[308] Seva Bharati was given the place for conducting the service long back. So Devaswom is not in a position to revoke that allotment of space as it will have severe repercussions.

The primary office bearers (*Rakshadikaris* as they are called in Malayalam) of the committee formed by Seva Bharati for the service are all from Adikal and Namboodiri castes. At the same time, Vice-Chairpersons of the committee has representations from the organisations such as RSS, Kshetra Samrakshana Samiti (KSS), O K Yogam Kodungallur, Akila Bharat Shri Kurumba Seva Sangh, Kerala Pulaya Maha Sabha (KPMS), Kudumbi Seva Sangh, Vettuvva Maha Sabha, Vishwa Brahmin Association, Vishwa Karma Sabha, NSS, SNDP, Deevara Sabha, JSB Maha Sabha, Pattyar Samaj; almost all of it being caste groups. *Velichappads'* organisation is also included in the organising committee. The service is provided by taking donations from individuals, traders, organisations, religious congregations etc. According to data given by Seva Bharati in the year 2018 about 6000 kilograms of vegetables and 44 sacks of rice were used. This does not include the additional donations that were made during the programme. Contrary to the belief Seva Bharati is left with a profit at

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[308] Devaswom President, Interview, Kodungallur, March 2018

the end of all this. Initially, the opinion was expressed by one of the shopkeepers in the nearby area that people even though assume this is service that incurs a lot of loss it is not so.[309] Seva Bharati is left with substantial financial profit. The audit report of Seva Bharati for the service of the year 2018 exemplifies this fact.[310] The total income for the year 2018 was listed as Rs. 1629030/- and the total expenses for the year 2018 is listed as Rs.1049388/-. That means there was a balance of Rs.579642/- for the year of 2018.

The presence of Seva Bharati in the conduct of festivities at Kodungallur Bharani cannot be seen separate from the public attention given by the Sangh Parivar in temple management and temple centred activities, particularly the festivals. Also, the impact of Seva Bharati in the psyche of the lakhs of devotees visiting the temple and particularly the *velichappad*s may not be quantifiable. Devotees visiting the area goes back with name Seva Bharati and 'service' they are doing without being critical or instead of being complacent to the political underpinnings of it. The seed of a serving-seva oriented Hindu is planted.

How will these interventions that are seemingly minor impact the larger public? Or are these minor interventions that do not demand an enquiry in a study of *velichappad*s? The everyday interventions and the cumulative effects of these are not quantifiable. The invented tradition become the norm and practice. The shift towards any attempt to democratise the religious spaces is dealt with organised resistance. The purpose of discussing Sabarimala debate here in detail is to understand how tradition becomes a political tool in mobilisation. It may not be adequate to draw a direct co-relation to Kodungallur Kavu and politicisation around Sabarimala. But all these processes have to be seen as part of a more extensive web of interconnected networks in place. It is essential to note the concerns flagged by *velichappad*s while addressing the controversies.

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[309] Interview, Kodungallur, March 2018
[310] The audit report of the previous year was accessed by the author from the committee members.

5.2.2 Sabarimala Debate and Political contentions:

The Sabarimala debate[311] in Kerala exemplified how 'traditions' and prevention of 'traditions' become strong political tools for the Hindu Right to establish a homogenous idea of worship that is devoid of any historicity. The tradition around Sabarimala was invented, established, reformed and again reinforced in a legal process which was responded to differently by the Hindu Right at various junctures. The debate is discussed here to establish that fact that domain of worship and creation of tradition in the contemporary society is manufactured. Sabarimala may seem disconnected to the lives of *velichappad*s, but the undercurrent created was seen in the responses of *velichappad*s on the issue.[312]

Sabarimala Temple located at Sabarimala in Pathanamthitta District, Kerala, India is a very well-known Shasta temple which invites a lot of devotees every year.[313] It is commonly believed that the pilgrims have to observe penance for forty-one days before going to Sabarimala. Women devotees of menstruating age group (10-50 years) were not permitted to worship here in the past even though there are reports of women having worshipped at Sabarimala from time to time. The ban that exists is said to be to respect the celibate nature of the deity in this temple. The advocates of the ban argue that since Ayyappa is celibate, allowing "impure" women into the shrine would be discourteous. Some others have upheld the opinion that women cannot take the 41 days of penance, a pre-condition to undertake the pilgrimage, and hence the ban. There was no document available on when this ban was enforced and for what reasons it existed. However, Kerala high-court judgement had legalized this interpretation of banning of women (above ten and below fifty). It forbade women from entering the temple

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[311] See Bijukumar (2019), Das Acevedo (2018), Dequen (2020), Devika (2020), Kumari (2019), Roopesh (2018), Thomas (2019), Vadakkiniyil (2019) for more.

[312] The debates surrounding entry of women to Sabarimala was prominent in the public sphere of Kerala for the major span of the fieldwork for the current research. 'Whether you support the entry or not?' was the question posed to me by several of the respondents including *velichappads*.

[313] *Shasta* is a generic term that means teacher, guide, lord or ruler in Sanskrit. In South India, a number of deities are associated with Shasta the main one being Ayyappa (Bronkhorst & Deshpande, 1999).

since 1991 (S. Mahendran vs The Secretary, Travancore ... on 5 April 1991).[314] The judgement noted that the restriction is not violative of Article 15, 25 and 26 of the constitution or the provisions in Hindu Place of Public Worship (Authorisation of Entry) Act, 1965. In light of the conclusions above, the court instructed the Travancore Devaswom Board not to permit women in the said age group. It was also directed to the Government of Kerala then, to render all necessary assistance for same.

In the year 2006, the Indian Young Lawyers Association filed a Public Interest Litigation (PIL) before the Supreme Court challenging the custom.[315] The PIL was because it violated the constitutional right to equality under Article 14, and freedom of religion for female worshipers under Article 25. The Supreme Court began hearing the case after much delay in the year 2016, referring it to a Constitution Bench the following year. In September 2018, in a judgement that was considered as historical, the Supreme Court of India ruled that 'all pilgrims regardless of gender, including women in the menstruating age group, should be allowed entry to Sabarimala. The Constitution bench of the Supreme Court held that any exception placed on women because of biological differences violates the Constitution.' The bench noted that the ban violates the right to equality under Article 14, and freedom of religion under Article 25. The majority judgement noted that constitutional morality is supreme, and the prohibition cannot be regarded as an essential component of religion. 'We have no hesitation in saying that such an exclusionary practise violates the right of women to visit and enter a temple to freely practise the Hindu religion and to exhibit her devotion towards Lord Ayyappa. The denial of this right to women significantly denudes them of their right to worship,' the court said. Justice DY Chandrachud even termed the custom as a form of untouchability which cannot be allowed under the Constitution. Further, he added that all individuals were created equal. He noted, 'To exclude women from worship by allowing the right to worship to men is to place women in a

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[314] https://indiankanoon.org/doc/1915943/ accessed on 5 Oct 2020
[315] https://indiankanoon.org/doc/163639357/ accessed on 5 October 2020

position of subordination. The Constitution should not become an instrument for the perpetuation of patriarchy.'[316]

This verdict led to protests by those who opposed the entry of women to Sabarimala, mainly under the leadership of Hindu Right. 'Save Sabarimala' campaign echoed not just in Kerala but across the country. It has to be remembered that the nation did not see any such wide protests during the Shani Shingnapur temple entry verdict. There were target attacks against the state government, and the government reaffirmed that it is the responsibility of the government to obey the Supreme Court order and give protection to any woman who wants to enter the temple. Several women attempted to enter Sabarimala despite threats of physical assault against them by the men stationed at various points in Sabarimala. Women reporters who went to cover the protests were also attacked. The period also witnessed revoking of puritan and Brahmanical ideas of practice. The state soon under the leadership of the ruling Left Democratic Front (LDF) a 'Renaissance Protection Committee' was formed to propagate the values of a renaissance. The renaissance history and fight against casteism was evoked like never before. The phase also saw casteist slurs used by protestors against the Chief Minister of Kerala, Pinarayi Vijayan. The BJP mouthpiece newspaper 'Janmabhoomi' also printed casteist slurs against the Chief Minister.[317] The period was marked by the claim made by the Adivasis who reside in the nearby areas, the Mala Arayas. Thadathil (2019) observes that the claim of the Mala Arayas 'gave momentum to the tribal community to successfully articulate their rights in the public sphere, especially their history, stolen gods and the socio-economic alienation inflicted upon them by the state and its agencies in collusion with Brahminism.' The period

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[316] The detailed judgement, https://www.sci.gov.in/pdf/JUD_6.pdf accessed on 5 October 2020

[317] One of the characters in the cartoon published by the newspaper describes Pinarayi Vijayan, who is from a community of toddy-tappers, as someone who is supposed to be climbing on coconut trees (referring to the caste occupation) and not ruling the state (https://www.newindianexpress.com/states/kerala/2018/dec/25/bjp-mouthpiece-slammed-for-casteist-cartoon-against-kerala-cm-1916390.html accessed on 6 November 2020). A video by two women went viral in that period wherein clearly calls out the caste of Pinarayi Vijayan and how he should not attempt to what he is doing and be aware of his caste position (https://www.theweek.in/news/india/2018/10/11/sabarimala-casteist-slur-against-kerala-cm-lands-woman-soup.html accessed on 6 November 2020).

also saw a historic event of 'Women's Wall' that happened in Kerala in connection to the Sabarimala debate (Thomas, 2019). Under the leadership of the Renaissance Protection Committee formed by the state government women in Kerala formed a 620km human chain in support on January 1, 2018. On the following day, two women belonging to the previously barred age group finally entered the temple defying protests with the help of police.[318] Temple was then closed for purification by the chief priest. Roopesh (2019) sees three specific characteristics in the Sabarimala protests. Firstly, it exposes the deep-rooted masculine performance in Sabarimala pilgrimage. Secondly, it is part of the evolution of the temple as a standard site of worship. Thirdly, it throws light into the caste dynamics and the Hindutva's political desire. The Sabarimala debates and discussions are far from over. The Supreme Court accepted the review petitions in January 2019 and forwarded it to a larger bench. The creation and sustenance of tradition by socio-political were exposed and institutionalised like never before in the Sabarimala debates.

Kodungallur Kavu temple and Sabarimala are connected in many different ways. One key aspect is how the penance needed by *velichappads* for Kodungallur Bharani is considered as similar to the one for Sabarimala. The *velichappad*s in their conversation refers Sabarimala many times, particularly concerning the strictness of penance. At what historical period did the connection between Kodungallur and Sabarimala got established needs to be further interrogated. Mythologically there exist several rifts between the Kodungallur Kavu and Sabarimala. Induchudan (1969) observes that a significant reason for the separation between Kodungallur and Sabarimala could be historically traced back to the deteriorated relationship between Chera and the Pandya dynasty after the rise of the Kannaki cult. It was believed that people from Kodungallur need not go to Sabarimala and there are several myths attached to this. These are not followed closely or is seen as holy by the devotees now.

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[318] https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/kerala/two-women-under-50-enter-sabarimala-temple/article25887406.ece accessed on 6 Nov 2020

Many *velichappad*s shares a definitive opinion concerning the Sabarimala debates. This was also an indication of *velichappad*s as having a definite political opinion. The Secretary of Kodungallur Bhagavathi Velichappad Sangam (KBVS) firmly believes that the 'tradition' of Sabarimala needs to be protected, and women should not enter the Sabarimala.[319] This came out as an official position of the organisation as well. KBVS even released a poster with photos of *velichappad*s in all fierceness which claimed '*the Komarangal of Kodungallur Bhagavathi is coming to save Swami Ayyappan*.' The mobilizations and politicization around the issue made the organisation take the position. In my conversation with Shibu Swamy about this, he said he stands for the 'tradition', and it is the left government in Kerala which is destroying the tradition. The family of Shibu Velichappad are supporters of the Congress party and could have been a factor that was adding on to his opinion. Thankam Velichappad, who belongs to a different organisation of *velichappad* closer to RSS, believes that Marxists are against Hinduism and religion.[320] She sees the Sabarimala controversies as evidence for the same. She believes a tradition from the time immemorial needs to be protected. She considers the efforts of women entry to Sabarimala as an indication of the beginning of *Kaliyuga*.

However, the treasurer of KBVS, also the ex-Branch secretary of the communist party, asserts that the issue was politicised. This was said in one of the KBVS meetings I attended.[321] Similarly, Subhadra Velichappad (who is also the President of KBVS) says *velichappad*s should not be part of the party politics.[322] She says that once *velichappad*s cut their foreheads, all are equal. *Velichappad*s do not belong to any political party or do not have religion or caste. 'A few, about 7-8 Muslims have also become *velichappads,*' she says. She says that there is only one organisation for *velichappads,* which is KBVS. She urges *Velichappad*s not to be divided. She says that in one of the meeting of *velichappad* she attended, speakers were talking

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[319] Interview, Kodungallur, March 2019
[320] Interview, Thrissur, October 2019
[321] Public Meeting, Palakkad, February 2019
[322] Interview, Palakkad, February 2019

about the positions of political organizations regarding the entry of women to mosques. She says she did not want to engage with such debates as politicians live for themselves and *velichappad*s live for others. She adds that she does not believe in the impurity attached to menstruation. 'Kodungallur Amma is a woman right. We do not have anything which Amma does not have. This is not impurity. Amma came to me knowing all this. God gave me this body. For three days we do not go to temples because we are also physically tired. I have gone to Kodungallur Kavu on the fourth day of periods, she asserts. She believes older traditions have to change, and the ultimate way to exist is by not harming anyone. 'Ayyappan has not said whether women should enter or not enter. These are all things which we have started. When I say all this to other *velichappads,* I am told I do not believe in God. These are all politics played for the benefit of their own. This time BJP played it', Subhadra Velichappad suggests. She also recollects that another organisation of velichappads (KBSS) and Seva Bharati had called them for a march on the issue of Sabarimala against the entry of women. Members of KBVS had gone with them to Sabarimala. They were instructed not to give offerings in temples governed by Devaswom. Even though her father was a supporter of the Marxist party; Subhadra now is not active in any party.

The politicisation of Sabarimala did have a direct impact on the *velichappad*s and their articulations. However, the positions which *velichappads* holds are also not homogenous. It can be observed that several women *velichappads* has different positions compared to their male counterparts. They see Kodungallur Amma also as a menstruating body, thereby countering the questions surrounding the stigma over the menstruating body through divinity. It can also be ordinary for *velichappads* to imagine their positions in a particular way as catering to the power structures in the devotional space. The possession here also became an activity for political mobilization towards a political agenda.

5.3 Globalising Cultures, Invented Traditions and Changing Representations

An increasingly globalising world with unimaginable internet penetration has resulted in the travelling and circulation of cultures like never before. *Velichappad*s or *velichappad thullal* no longer is a constraint to the place of occurrence. The spatial dimensions of *velichappad thullal* have expanded beyond what is immediately seen and accessed. The figure of *velichappad* travels and circulates beyond the immediate realm of enactment. The nature of *velichappad thullal* is distinct from other rituals that are immediately seen as part of different art forms. Hence one does not see as much of a change in representations of *velichappad*s as it forms other forms of rituals and art forms such as Kathakali, Koodiyattam, *Theyyam* etc. However, *velichappad*s and Kodungallur Bharani now pictures in the tourism and cultural map of Kerala.[323] The increased visibility and circulation affect the practice in a multitude of ways. Bharucha (2003) cautions about the ethics in representation in cross-cultural exchanges and the social relationships that constitute it. The times thus prompts the engagement of a dialectical approach in global desires to understand local traditions. The current section tries to develop these perspectives to understand the existence of *velichappad*s in a new global world and the meanings those generate for the *velichappad*s. It also tries to understand certain traditions as invented and representations of the form as ever-changing.

Panikkar (2016) has written at length about the transformation of local cultures, which he terms as 'fossilization and commodification.' The local cultures are not constrained to the cultural ethos of local. He mentions that much to the dislike of puritans these cultures have gone through processes of accommodation, adjustment and innovation. The puritans have remained for an idea of conservation of cultures which is an existentialist view he says. Further, the author observes that in the era of globalisation culture becomes an industry and transports the traditional arts to a market place through various means, which results in marginalisation

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[323] See https://www.keralatourism.org/event/kodungalloor-bharani/56 and http://www.keralaculture.org/kodungalloor-bharani/413 accessed on 20 Oct 2020

or appropriation. One then ponders on the question that when patronage changes what is remaining of rituals. Do they give rise to new patronages? Similarly, Tarabout (2005) presents a study of village cult in South India which is now also presented as theatre performance in the West, as an example of a passage to the global market resulting from a historically complex process where different mediations are required at various social levels. The method of this travel to global, the inspirations and views of the people concerned may differ according to their social and cultural interests (Tarabout,2005). Before going to *velichappad*s, here I try to see how these changes are affected in a much more popular form such as *theyyam* and how it enables us to hypothesise the transformations that are happening to *velichappad*s.

The study of *Theyyam* is interesting to understand what modernity does to the folk and traditional art forms, also provides a very nuanced way of understanding local cultures in global platforms. *Theyyam* provides a real portrait of socio-political and economic activities of North Malabar (Damodaran, 2008). Struggle for existence and survival as real history as opposed to dynasties and reforms is portrayed in *theyyam* performances. Certain *theyyam*s themselves stand fighting social discrimination. It is seen as an expression of pastoral deities revolting against orthodox Hinduism; thus *theyyam* exemplifies a social history of revolt. The analysis of *Theyyam* is pertinent as Theyyan remains the most circulated, written about ritual and folk art from Kerala. Here one mentions ritual and folk art because of the particular niche space that *Theyyam* performances have taken wherein it is not easy to distinguish between the folk art and ritual. Panikkar (2016), in his study of *Theyyam* in Kuttikkol Village of Kerala, sees how the ritual is taken over by spectacle and celebration. The *Theyyam* exist between dissent and appropriation, domination and subordination. One can see it as a dialectical process in specific regard. The revival of *Theyyam*, Pannikar says is not as an art form or ritual of resistance, but as an occasion for public celebration and private worship. Thus, it is essential to explore how, why and who revives.

Gilles Tarabout (2005) sees a different way of revival of *Theyyam* not in the single meaning of globalization. He observes that between the 1930s and 1950s, three categories of people – Western artists, Indian nationalists and Kerala Communists – all with their respective global attitudes, contributed in diverse ways and for different reasons to these changes insensibility, leading ultimately to a radical reconsideration of *Theyyam* and similar rituals (Tarabout,2005). This can be connected to the previous section, the changing socio-political conditions from with traditions germinates. As a consequence, in the 1940s, *Theyyam* and certain other rituals involving elements came to be seen as 'culture of the people', though in an uncertain manner. Transformation cannot be seen as commodification; such an analysis only oversimplifies the complexities. The promotion of *Theyyam* thus has manifold reasons. It is to demonstrate that *Theyyam* is the true inheritor to ancient Dravidian culture, to suggest that it has the same aesthetic potential as classical art, and to denounce the social oppression that prevented it from fully developing (Kurup, 1973). Tarabout thus sees *theyyam* at the intersection of two certainties: the cult (only in Malabar villages) and the staged demonstration (everywhere, including Malabar villages). The changes are not happening to Theyyam alone. The literature review on theyyam indicates the complex web of transformations in which traditions exists today. The studies reviewed here do not directly address the case of *velichappad*s. However, it helps in developing a framework for studying rituals.

5.3.1 Processions and Performance

Explained here are examples of some of the newly invented traditions introduced by *velichappad*s. Hobsbawm (1983) observes that traditions which claim or appear to be old are new or sometimes invented. Further, Hobsbawm (1983, p.1) defines invented traditions 'as a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviours by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past.' This is then generally seen as in

continuity with the past. With organisations coming into place, there has been a difference in how *velichappad*s present themselves during the festivities. Earlier without organisations and collectives, they went for the Bharani festival, as part of the shrines they represent. There were groups of people that came together from a place - the belief united them in a typical local shrine or by a local goddess. The *velichappad*s are/were diverse, with diverse practices. Homogenising was not a possibility.

With the organisations of velichappads coming into place one significant change that happened during the festivities is the introduction of processions by each of the organisations. There are mainly two organisations, and there exists a competitive spirit between the two organisations in putting up the most magnificent procession. Some preparations happen towards this much before the Kodungallur Bharani. The members of the organisations are informed beforehand about participating in the procession. The *velichappad*s get decked up with more ornaments and style, more of gold, more of silk and more of blood. The known *velichappad*s, mostly the key organisers of the respective organisations, get to march in front, all dressed in full attire and sword. The routes of the procession are pre-decided. Mainly it covers a distance of 2 km or so in the surrounding.

Several introductions have been done to the processions over the years. Two people walking are seen walking in front with the banner. The banner has the name of the organisation. Then there are lines of devotees holding a lamp. *Theyyam* is a new introduction to the procession. *Theyyam*, as a North Malabar ritual historically did not have significant significance at Kodungallur Bharani. *Theyyam,* which is introduced to the Bharani surroundings by the organisations of *velichappad*s acts as a means to garner attention to the separate processions and organisations. A devotee, a regular at Kodungallur Bharani for years says that he has never seen this in the past. The spectre of the *Theyyam* here is used as a means of drawing attention to *velichappad*s and their organisation. *Theyyam* without the spatial

specifications of a *kavu* do not remain as a ritual, just the attire of *theyyam* is exported from the ritual platform. However, the point here is to note how the introduction of processions and the introduction of certain new practices through these possessions in a competitive spirit changes how *velichappad*s may have understood their role during the festivities. Here the changes are introduced by the need for collective solidarity among the *velichappad*s, also driven by competitiveness in these collective spirits.

5.3.2 *Representations and Circulations*

This section attempts to explore the representations of *velichappads* in mass culture. One of the most famous depictions of *velichappads* is in the 1973 movie 'Nirmalyam' (offering) directed by M.T.Vasudevan Nair.[324] The movie is the story of a family of a *velichappad* and traverses through miseries in his life. The film ends with the main protagonist, the *velichappad* does *thullal* before the idol of the goddess, spitting on the idol in protest and dejection. The character then strikes his forehead repeatedly with the sacred sword and then falls dead. Menon (2005, p.319) remarks that in films, religion is the space of the incomplete and rituals are constantly being disrupted. Roopesh (2020, p.11) argues that the movie lent voice to the anxiety of those sections who lost their social dominance with the land reforms. Certain portrayals of miseries of *velichappads* found a place as smaller characters in Malayalam cinema, such as in Aayiram Meni, 1999 (Director: I V Sasi). However, in later cinema, one could mostly observe the presence of *velichappads* as a filling character in the background Malayalam cinema's portrayal of rurality, such as in Ponmuttayidunna Tharavu, 1988 (Director: Sathyan Anthikad) Thilakkam, 2003 (Director: Jayaraj) etc. The *velichappad* would be in the frame, mainly in comedy scenes with his loose hair and sword. Thus, *velichappad*s became marker to denote the rurality and components of rural villages in

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[324] The movie is based on the short story by the author-director named Sacred Sword and Anklets (1954)

Malayalam cinema. Never was it a woman *velichappad*. Further, two aspects of circulation and representation are discussed here: photography and video CDs.

5.3.2.1 *Photography*

The spectator also derives his/her self by looking at the photograph, in Barthes words, ―I see, I feel, hence I notice, I observe and I think (Barthes 1981, 21). The new age media and the vast penetration of social media platforms have given more unique meanings to the imagery of *velichappad*s. Kodungallur Bharani and particularly the fierce image of a *velichappad* with loose hair, sword in the hands and blood spilling from the forehead as one of the most captured and circulated photos of Kodungallur Bharani. Kodungallur Bharani has also become the annual pilgrimage of scores of photographers from across the state and country(Figure 5.6). The captured images get circulated widely in social media platforms and newspapers. It would not be wrong to say that the type of photography one sees during the Kodungallur festivities is very intrusive of the rituals that happen there. The sight of a photographer obstructing the way of a *velichappad* circumventing the temple with his cavalcade is ubiquitous. When some *velichappad*s come in the run in such frenzy that the photographers have to move aside. But some other *velichappads* makes their movements and trance slow, sometimes even pose for a good photograph. The number of photographers is increasing steadily, in my own experience of going to Kodungallur for four years now I have observed a steady increase in the number of photographers who cover the Kodungallur Bharani. This sort of a steep rise in the photography and circulation of Kodungallur Bharani has resulted in the 'quality' of *thullal* is what some devotees say. Ravi Vadakkedath of the Vadakkedath house thinks that there are a lot of *velichappad*s in pretence there just focused on the way they look. He says that many *velichappad*s go to beauty parlours to get ready to be a *velichappad*.[325] This needs to be only considered as a personal opinion of Ravi Vadakkedath. There are instances of singing the

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[325] Interview, Kodungallur, March 2017

Bharani songs to be video graphed as well. On the peak day of the festival, the local media channels cover the event live as well. Every person there is holding a mobile. More than the devotees there are the spectators. The underlying fact is that the *velichappads* give increasing importance on the way 'they look'. The investment on appearance has got a lot to do with the circulation of these images.

Among the photographers, some are much invested in enquiring about *velichappad*s more than what is seen on the surface. KR Sunil is one such photographer who is a resident of Kodungallur and has been a close witness to several changes that has been happening during the Kodungallur Bharani. He had once done a photo exhibition of Velichappads, and one particular photograph of a *velichappad* stood out in the exhibition. The name of the picture was 'Flaming Face', and it was a photograph of Velichappad Raman. The picture became quite famous, and Sunil came to know from various sources that Raman Velichappad got some fame through the picture among the other *velichappads* and he was even called to act in some movies as Velichappad. However, the photographer lost track of the person, and he ventured into a journey to find Raman Velichappad after a gap of ten years. It was told to Sunil that Raman Velichappad now lives in Ottappalam. When reaching the place, he encountered an older man with long-bearded and took some time to realise that it is the same Raman Velichappad that he had photographed ten years back. Raman Velichappad now lived in a one-room lodge with the wall that has images of Gods and with all the miseries of an older person living alone in his last years. He had long back stopped going to Kodungallur and his only earnings was some money given by well-wishers around. Much to the surprise of Sunil, Raman Velichappad has still kept the photo of his which was taken by Sunil ten years back. (Ramante Kannugal, Mathrubhumi Weekly, Page 32, 9 April 2017). Some people have been video documenting Kodungallur Bharani as well, 'Kali-Flaming Faces' by M S Banesh is one such documentary.

Immediately after the festival, there is a massive circulation of images on social media platforms. The newspaper cutting of the photos is a precious treasure of some of the *velichappad*s. Kalyani Velichappad's shrine has a place on the wall where they have kept such a newspaper cutting.[326] Similarly is the case with Thankam Velichappad. Some of the *velichappad*s take pride in showing the recognition they have got through the media. Thankam Velichappad is someone whose photos get circulated a lot, and for the past fifteen years it has been coming in newspapers.[327] She says photos taken are of *vettitheliyal* and has been circulated on YouTube and WhatsApp. Initially, she was active in an organisation when it was formed; they had asked her photo for the printing of flex. She disagreed then because she did not find it apt to dress up for a photo. Her husband keeps all the newspaper cuttings. Devu Velichappad of Palakkad finds the photographers a disturbance.[328] She says they make money using the image of *velichappad*s, but the *Velichappad*s are hardly given anything. One ponders whether photography and its circulation have contributed to an understanding that *velichappad thullal* is more of a performance and less of a ritual, or whether such a distinction is possible. As mentioned earlier, it is a common sight in the Bharani festivities to see *velichappad*s posing for the photos. In a trance possessed state, *velichappad*s stops for a few second to make it easier for the photographer. However, among the *velichappad*s as well many despise it.

5.3.2.2 *Video CDs, Songs:*

Selling devotional audio and video CDs is a vast business associated with Kodungallur Bharani. Some of the popular video CDs are listed here to understand the pattern of the devotional songs. 'Maniyude Kaavile Pattukal' (the *kavu* songs of Mani) has the photo of Kalabhavan Mani, a late actor, holding the sword adorn in red cloth. It is amusing how the

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[326] Interview, Palakkad, October 2017
[327] Interview, Thrissur, October 2018
[328] Interview, Palakkad, October 2017

image of Kalabhavan Mani, who was a prominent Dalit voice in Malayalam cinema is used in the album to represent the devotee of Kodungallur. This has to be seen together with another aspect of the festivities. What also marks the space during nights are even men dancing drunk and merrily for folk songs sung by Kalabhavan Mani played in speakers. Several such spots of dancing can be seen around the temple premises at night. It goes on for hours in the night and is also a tactic of shop owners to get the devotees to buy the CDs. Only men can be seen dancing.

There are more generic devotional CDs *'Om Kali Mahakali', 'Amme Sharanam', 'Sri Kali Maheswari'* etc. which can be seen as having more devotional songs. One can find choreographed songs with actors in the attire of *velichappad*s. There are video CDs which portrays the history of the temples. Ganapati Velichappad says that they do not imitate the CDs, or audios or videos. He says it is a misrepresentation of *Komarangal*. 'It should have been done with the actual *komarams*' he says. He adds that he became sad when seeing *velichappad*s dancing to the song and he is also against young children being used to be part of the videos. 'It is only a money-making activity' he says. He sees the entire industry as only a money-making enterprise.[329]

A direct outcome of the representations and circulations is *velichappad*s' changes in the attire. The colour of the saree now varies, the older velichappads wear the red cotton cloth. Many younger ones have shifted to silk sarees. Different varieties of red silk can be seen, and most importantly, there is an increase in the number of ornaments worn by the *velichappad*s. The number of ornaments worn by *velichappad*s when they are possessed indicates a class difference among the *velichappad*s. Ganapati Velichappad, however, says that there is no change in a dress over the years. Some people from different places dress differently, he says. Thankam Velichappad says one reason why she wears a lot of ornaments is that Amma is full

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[329] Interview, Wayanad, October 2017

of decorations. She is doubtful of the people who wear *poomalla*(flower garlands) as there is no *poomalla* for Amma she says.

It is interesting to note that a group who come from a Dalit colony of Wayanad wore mullappo mala (jasmine garlands) instead of the ornaments. Devotees say much of the ornaments worn are not real gold ornaments. On the day of the *kavutheendal,* this disparity is more evident. Some come as a spectacle fully ornamented or heavily adorned with the lemon garland. Some even walk around with two *pallivalukal* (swords), which was very uncommon in the past. Jithu Velichappad says the rich ones wear a lot of ornaments and present themselves in front of the crowd.[330] In reality, they are only mediators of Goddess and not Goddess themselves. Some of them just do it for the camera, he says. They cut themselves more when they realize there is a camera shooting the same. At the Kodungallur Bharani, the difference between *velichappad*s is very evident. The visibly poor devotees coming from different parts, particularly Palakkad, to a great extent, are malnourished even. You do not see so much gold or ornamentation on them. Also, an indication of their working-class background.

5.3.3 *Transitions and Circulations of Bharani Songs*

Bharani songs were discussed in detail in the first chapter. The relevance of it, along with the debates and discussions, were discussed then. Here the transitions that are happening to the Bharani songs and the circulations of Bharani songs are addressed from the perspective of changing and travelling cultures. Firstly, the new introductions to Bharani songs are studied. The changes in oral tradition are observed. Secondly, the circulation of Bharani songs is discussed in detail.

Throughout fieldwork and efforts to understand the songs, I have noted several newer additions to the songs that reflect the changing polity. Given below are lines taken out of some of the Bharani songs. The lines indicate how the Bharani songs today are not devoid of the

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[330] Interview, Kozhikode, February 2019

inherent power structures and fissures of the times. This evokes questions on whether these songs are a subversion or domination packed differently.

Additions[331]	Interpretation
"Hey, Catholic Priest. *Your balls were visible* *when you bent down* *for confession"*	Here the references are clearly towards a Catholic priest. Throws light to the religious divide that exists in the place, as discussed in the previous section.
"In the vagina of an eight-year-old *My penis is like a sword."*	A precise instance of reference of violence towards a child and the question is whether this can be passed off as a subversive.
"In a mosque at Kozhikode *The deity is with pubic hair."*	Here again, it is an indication of the existing religious divide. One cannot know with clear understanding when the references to other religions began in the songs.
"To do after having Ice-cream, *Kunjalikutti is very talented."*	Reference to a controversial case in which sexual abuse took place under the garb of an ice cream parlour and how a leading minister from Muslim League was the key accused. Politics also picture in the songs.

In addition to this, the contemporary meaning-making of the ritual is mainly dependent on circulation. *Bharanipattu* attains different meanings based on its representation in popular

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[331] From audio recordings made during Kodungallur Bharani in March 2018 and March -April 2019

culture. There are three types of circulation. One is the purified, sanctified version of Bharani songs circulated as video/audio songs in CDs, DVDs etc. Such DVDs are available in plenty during the festivals and otherwise. The songs here become very cinematic, mostly starred by leading teleserial actors or famous child artists. Kalabhavan Mani, who was a Malayalam actor known for asserting his Dalit identity, also pictures in many DVDs.[332] Secondly, the folk band revival or reclamation of the same. This is a relatively newer genre, and the circulation is mainly among the urban youth and intellectual spaces with acceptance for alternate music. Thirdly, the audio/video lewdness that circulates in the name of Bharani songs which can be easily accessed by a simple YouTube search. One can come across images of men in a party singing the song. Without the actual awareness of the history of ritual and its contemporary forms at the site of the temple, sadly this becomes the most circulated one. A particular aspect of the ritual attains a meaning independent of the site.

Bharanipattu in the present-day Kerala society has attained a meaning synonymous with sexual obscenity. A casual remark such as '*bharanipattu padakayanu*' means they are showering abuses at one another. Such statements are plenty in popular culture. There is a meaning Bharanipattu has achieved, which is independent of the space of enactment.

5.4 Conclusion:

The chapter tried to understand *velichappad*s in contemporary times by looking to certain factors that contribute towards the meaning-making of *velichappad*s today. Even though these factors were unpacked under three separate heads, the primary idea here is to understand the holistic processes that effect transformations in meanings. The transformations that are occurring at sites of worships such as *kavus* are not architectural changes alone. The shift is towards a more puritan form of practices wherein the rights and roles of *velichappad*s get replaced by the priestly castes. The spaces of non-Brahmanical worships are dwindling,

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[332] Further see Mokkil (2020), Parayil (2014) for the typecasting of Kalabhavan Mani in Malayalam Cinema.

and a more homogenised understanding of worship practices of *velichappads* are generated. This, however, should be seen as part of a complex process of change. What significantly marks the contemporary times is the interventions made by the political right in the sites of worship, which is planned and orchestrated. This was exemplified by keenly looking into the works done by Seva Bharati during the Kodungallur Bharani festival. Further, the debates surrounding the entry of women to Sabarimala was a direct outcome of such interventions, an issue in which *velichappad*s also had definite opinions. Along with these, it is also pertinent to understand the effects of globalising of cultures. In the process, traditions are invented, and spaces are altered. In the new internet era, we see new representations of *velichappad*s and circulation of the practices. *Velichappad*s do respond to all these changes, and these are not homogenous responses. The fact remains that *velichappad*s are part of a changing continuum of traditions which is evolving each day responding to the socio-political-cultural environment they are located.

Conclusion

The study primarily gave a documentative and exploratory account on the lives of *velichappads* and focussed majorly on the backstage of the ritual practice. The review saw a dialectical interaction between the ritual practice, and the social and the material lives of *velichappads*. The thesis unpacked the complicated lives of *velichappads* behind ritual practices. Through the process, the study challenged the easy symbolism and meanings attributed to the ritual practices. It emphasised on the centrality of the structures that enable the realisation of the ritual enactments. The ethnography focussed on the experiences of possessed in the social milieu studied and unpacked the problematic in homogenising the experiences of *velichappads* under the larger umbrella of possession experiences. The thesis underlines several mediations that happen that enables the realisation of the possession experience of a *velichappad*. The divinity of a possessed person and the non-divinity of social beings are not two separate parallel structures. Gender, caste and labour as the key analytical categories provide unique and novel insights into knowing *velichappads* which the earlier accounts on *velichappads* lacked. The chapters in the thesis dealt with each of these analytical categories in-depth, as separate chapters.

The non-homogeneity of *velichappads* and the impracticality of studying the subject as a homogenous community comes evidently in the chapters. Diversity is observed in beliefs surrounding the rituals and their practice. The everyday lives of velichappads are also differentially affected by tradition. The practice transforms everyday in a multitude of ways. A significant determinant of the experiences of *velichappads* is the extent to which being *velichappad* forms and defines their lives. Some of them become *velichappads* only during the festivities; for some, it is what they simultaneously carry along with other endeavours on an everyday basis. For some, a *velichappad* engulfs their entire social lives. There are also a few who discontinued being *velichappads* after a certain period. The

experiences of *velichappads* vary considerably depending on how much being a *velichappad* defines their lives. In addition to this, several other factors - class, caste, gender, region and age of the *velichappads* contribute to meaning-making. Thus, the thesis exemplified that the *velichappads* needs to be examined by contextualising them in their immediate lifeworlds.

The thesis establishes the ritual practice of *velichappads* evidently as having non-Brahmanical roots. At multiple points, the idea is to treat the study on *velichappads* also as documentation posing a challenge to the understanding of Hinduism as a homogenous, cohesive religion. Such an approach, however, was done with an understanding of the complexities involved. Much of the *velichappads* come from the ex-untouchable castes, and many aspects of the practice do not follow the norms of written vedic-Hindu strictures. The research established how the celebration of *velichappads* and other elements of the Kodungallur Bharani festivities is seen as traditions rooted in the *kavu* worship practices. The worship practices at a *kavu* were organic with no place for the priestly class or the aristocracy, much of which has historically altered drastically. Even though several aspects of Kodungallur Bharani unsettles numerous notions of puritan religious practices, it will be erroneous to attribute subversion or transgression overlooking the caste and gender complexities today festival. Unlike other temple festivities, Kodungallur Bharani stands apart for women *velichappads* who make a majestic presence during the festivities, claiming the space and owning the ritual rights. Simultaneously, much of the decision making on several aspects of the festivities remain with the men, the spectatorship also largely remains gendered.

Similarly, several rituals at the festivities mark the ritual authority of oppressed castes and *velichappads*; specific readings have also observed this as an assertion. Such readings of assertion are made complex by the ritual power enjoyed by certain higher caste men, very importantly the Raja of Kodungallur and the priestly castes. The hierarchies become even more

evident in the process of becoming of *velichappads*, wherein the sanction of becoming lies with the higher castes. Perceptions that exist of the festival in the public sphere has resulted in the othering of the festival. The complexities of understanding the meanings and implications of Kodungallur Bharani festivities continue to every aspect of the lifeworlds of *velichappads.* It is not easy to attribute the categories of resistance or submission.

Gender plays a crucial role in understanding the questions around agency, autonomy and assertion. Several aspects of gender give a pivot to understand the lives of *velichappads* in multiple ways. Firstly, the gendered histories of the ritual are rooted in the very association of *velichappads*' to the Mother Goddesses such as Kannaki, Bhagavathi, Kali et al. Secondly, gender is seen to operate as a deciding factor in the becoming process of a *velichappad*; validating, sanctioning and accepting the possession experience. Thirdly, there is a differential yet intertwining experiences of men and women *velichappads* concerning marriage and conjugality. Fourthly, the thesis also unpacked the tensions surrounding sexuality, particularly concerning the masculinity of men *velichappads* possessed by the female deity. Thus, gender as an analytical category opens up multitudes of ways to make sense of the becoming and being of *velichappads*. However, gender here is a variable that intersects and interconnects several other structures.

The stories, myths and histories of mother goddesses are embedded in the region, particularly in the festivities surrounding Kodungallur Bharani. The possession here by the goddess is an attribute of the festival and connects to the social histories embedded in the region. The historical association of possession rituals and illness establishes the commonalities with similar rituals across the sub-continent. However, the prominence of the mighty Mother Goddess in the myths and histories does not translate easily to the assertion of women who are *velichappads*. Right from the expression of possession by women *velichappads* through the process of becoming several factors operate in determining

whether a woman should be allowed and supported to become a *velichappad*. The control exerted by the family and other elders in preventing younger unmarried women from becoming *velichappads* is, in fact, control over the sexuality of the woman. The power and checks exist in the same festival that celebrates the sexuality of the goddess, leaving us with the paradox of divinity which exists at the intersection of religion and patriarchy.

The complexities of gender experiences of a possessed go beyond the time of ritual performance to their everyday being. The possession by a female deity generates differential effects and tensions in women and men *velichappads*. The sexual tensions that underlie the experiences of men and women come out very clearly through the thesis. For women, the sexual tension starts from the process of becoming wherein there is an unwritten, yet obvious objection towards unmarried women becoming *velichappads*. Once a *velichappad*, the women are seen to have lesser prospects of getting married. Even if married, they experience several tensions in the marriage. The entry of the divine body to the personal spaces of the families and relationships makes the sexual tensions far more evident. The family's support, particularly the husband, plays a pivotal role in the continuation of women *velichappads* in the ritual practice. The support is made possible also by the social and economic mobility the women *velichappads* brings to the family. In the absence of a supportive environment, the women *velichappads* tend to separate from their families and live independently.

In the case of men *velichappads,* the tensions are similar yet differently affected. There does not exist a resistance to unmarried men becoming *velichappads* as it exists for women. However, the possession by a female deity induces specific experiences in men. Some men *velichappads* acknowledge the co-existence of genders within them, or rather the possibility of seamless switching of genders when possessed. Some other asserts the importance of holding on to the masculinity even when possessed by a goddess. They differentiate experiences of the gender of possession from that of a female, asserting that the

goddess figure has to be seen as one different from a woman. Thus, men *velichappads* differ on the questions on assertions and expressions of masculinity. How society perceives the phenomena is different from how they perceive it themselves. There is an assertion of the masculinity and the conformity to social relationships through heteronormative marriage. Being in a higher economic ladder, and being masculine enough helps them conform to the demands of the institution of marriage. As much as possession makes *velichappads* a divine being, there is an effort by *velichappads* to broaden social relations by entering conjugality and marriage. Further, the study prompts a conceptual framework towards understanding masculinities and femininities informed by these experiences. The process of negotiations by *velichappads* in the process throws light into how socio-economic status function in the realm of possession wherein fluidity in gender manifestations become secondary for a particular caste and class of *velichappads*.

Caste plays a prominent role in the articulations of everyday experiences by the *velichappads*. Some *velichappads* recollect the occasions of discriminations and struggles of survival. They see being a *velichappad* to have brought symbolic and sometimes literal status transformations to the lives of *velichappads*. *Velichappads* experience a greater acknowledgement and acceptance of them after becoming a *velichappad*, quite contradictory to the historical experience of their caste position. However, only for a few does it translate to substantial social mobility. The social mobility attained is also closely intertwined with the economic mobility which they achieve by pursuing certain aspects of being *velichappads* as a vocation. Acceptance of *velichappads* and demand for inheritance is connected to the mobility the family has attained. Thus, *velichappads* in distress, in addition to the utmost faith in the divine, are also to a considerable extent driven by the possibilities of relatively better prospects of living that pursuing of the practice offers them. There are several ways in which *velichappads* strive for the practice to add certain material values to their lives other than

the symbolic alteration of status. Demands for material costs results in the assertions of rights of work done by the *velichappads* in the narratives, in the court cases and the stories of struggles. For many *velichappads* being a *velichappad* becomes the necessary means of sustenance, a means of living. Some have achieved immense popularity by being a *velichappad*. But across the spectrum, the demands of the *velichappads* reflects the demands made by a labour category.

In a changing world, the survival of the ritual practice is also through institutionalisation. *Velichappads* take a keen interest in organising themselves. The coming together of *velichappads* has resulted in an assertion of rights by *velichappads* and most importantly in forming a support system. The *velichappads* pursue the recognition of the government to look into the practice as involving work. Such articulations further point towards the need for conceptualising the ritual in the labour historiography. The organisation has hardly clinched any of its initial right based demands. However, the organisation was successful in bringing forth the feeling of a 'community' among *velichappads*. The future evolution of the organisation needs to be keenly observed and further studied. Institutionalisation comes with a shift towards homogenisation of practices and even inventions of never practices.

The *velichappads* are part of a historical continuum. The socio-political particularities of the time give changing meanings to the practice. One major shift that is happening is concerning the changing authorities of *kavu*s. Even though the transitions surrounding kavus dates much back in history, the thesis discussed the changes surrounding the *kavu*s in contemporary times. Through case studies, it is seen how the everyday shifts in the authority happen at *kavu*s where historically *velichappads* had enjoyed privileges. In most scenarios, the *velichappads* and their groups invite in a priestly caste authority for better acceptance in the religious community. Hierarchies get established gradually through a systematic process. Some *velichappads* and patrons of some of the *kavu*s are critical of the shifts to more puritan

forms of practices. Also observed are other ways of institutionalising procedures that are happening, particularly the interventions undertaken by the Hindu political right. The interventions are part of the broader social and cultural processes of the Hindu political right. The thesis highlighted some of the controversies surrounding temple politics in Kerala, particularly the recent Sabarimala. It underlined the importance of understanding the implications of positions taken by several *velichappads* during the period. Further, the study also prompts to more critically look at the activities undertaken by the Seva Bharati at Kodungallur temple and its possible influence on creating new meanings. Thus, *velichappads* and the evolution of the practice are also intertwined and interconnected by the social-political of the times.

In today's world, the practice is mediated by the modes in which cultures travel. The effects of changing representation reflect in practice in a multitude of ways. *Velichappads* are represented in diverse ways in Malayalam cinema. There has been a wider circulation of visual documentation of *velichappads,* particularly as photographs. Bharani songs are also observed to be changing in content and circulation. The wide circulation through photography changes the forms of seeing and its effects on how *velichappads* perform. Thus, the meanings of being a *velichappad* and several other practices surrounding it is reinvented every day.

The thesis contributes towards producing literature on *velichappads* and addresses the near absence of scholarly account on *velichappads* and the invisibilities of lives of *velichappads*. The documentation of the seemingly inconsequential lives of *velichappads* then becomes a means of understanding several different interconnected facets of gender, caste, labour and traditions. By unpacking several hidden layers, the study becomes an account of the ritual practice and the material lives of the working-class men and women who are engaged in such rituals. The thesis thus addresses the considerable lacuna in the existing accounts on *velichappads*, which has previously concentrated only on the practice's

piquant oriental aspects. The study dismantles an attribution of distinctiveness and exotic, seeing the commonality in structures that transforms the practice. The methodological focus on ethnography, the life narratives and everyday provided a novel approach to understanding the social and the material. The study challenges the easy attributions of subversion and subjugation to popular cultural practices and forefronts the importance of a dialectical approach.

The current work also needs to be seen as a holistic introductory framework which opens up several possibilities for in-depth enquiries engaging with the disciplines of gender studies, anthropology, sociology, politics and history. The research opens up multitudes of ways in taking forward the gender and religious studies. The research has opened up several facets of sexuality and marriage, which by itself is a subject that demands much deeper enquiry. The complexities in their lives concerning the conjugality questions underline the limitations of sexuality studies which often overlooks the experiences of subjects such as *velichappads*. Further, it also sees the possibilities and needs to further sociological enquiries on possession experiences which sees the class and caste complexities of possession. The study prompts towards thinking about labour sociology and labour historiography that sees ritual as a labour category. The study also encourages to inquire further towards the changing aspects of political engagement with religious practices and how it contributes to altering religious subjects' meanings through institutionalisation. Further, the thesis demands more historical inquiries into the evolution of ritual practices through oral accounts. The life and history unpacked through the oral narratives of popular culture will provide an insight into the development of the conception of life and world view away from the mainstream. The knowledge thus produced becomes surviving shreds of evidence of histories from the marginal.

Photos

Figure 1.1 Kodungallur Kurumba Kavu. Accessed from
https://www.vanamaliashram.org/Kodungallur_Devi.html on 05 January 2021

Figure 1.2 *Velichappads* and the crowd at Kodungallur Bharani. 7 March 2019, Kodungallur.

Figure 1.3 *Velichappads* and other devotees circumambulating the *kavu.* Accessed from
https://www.indianpanorama.in/blog/kodungalloor-bharani-festival-in-kerala/ on 05 January 2021

Figure 1.4 Pulakkavu (Keezhkkavu) before the festivities. 7 March 2017, Kodungallur.

Figure 1. 5 Offerings at Pulakkavu (Keezhkkavu). 27 March 2017, Kodungallur

Figure 1.6 Men accompanying a woman *velichappad* with Bharani songs. 28 March 2017, Kodungallur.

Figure 1.7 Surroundings of Kodungallur Kavu during the festivities. 28 March 2017, Kodungallur.

Figure 2.1 A woman devotee initiating the *vettitheliyal* process.18 March 2018, Kodungallur.

Figure 2.2 Women 'competing' to be *velichappads*. 19 March 2018, Kodungallur

Figure 1igure 2.3 Devu Thambatty at her shrine. 13
October 2017, Palakkad

Figure 2.4 Inside view of the shrine of Devu
Thambatty. 13 October 2017, Palakkad.

Figure 2.5 Thayu Velichappad being supported by Shibu Swamy. Photo shared by Shibu Swamy. Date Unknown, Palakkad.

Figure 3.1 House and shrine of Subhadra Velichappad. Banners with her photo also seen. 4 February 2019, Palakkad.

Figure 3.2 Family of late Kalyani Velichappad. Kalyani Velichappad at the middle.

2 August 2018, Palakkad.

Figure 3.3 Maniachan at his house. 6 February 2019, Palakkad.

Figure 4.1 Walls at the home of Kunjali Velichappad. Images of Sree Narayana Guru and Kunjali's photos in the attire of *velichappad* can be seen. 18 July 2018, Wayanad.

Figure 4.2 Flex by Kerala Pulaya Maha Sabha (KPMS) welcoming lakhs of devotees to Kodungallur Bharani. 17 March 2018, Kodungallur.

Figure 4.3 Devu Velichappad in front of her shrine. 14 July 2018, Wayanad.

Figure 4.4 KBVS office bearers visiting older ailing *velichappads*. 6 February 2019, Palakkad.

Figure 5.1 Madathil Kavu before the constructions. 22 October 2017, Kozhikode.

Figure 5.2 Transformations of Madathil Kavu. 13 March 2018, Kozhikode.

Figure 5.3 The *kettunira* at the Ganapati Velichappad's house presided by a Brahmin priest. 2 April 2019, Wayanad.

Figure 5.4 Inside view of the Seva Bharati pandal during the inauguration. 18 March 2018, Kodungallur.

Figure 5.5 Outside view of the Seva Bharati pandal. 18 March 2018, Kodungallur.

Figure 5.6 Devotees, spectators and photographers. 20 March 2018, Kodungallur.

Glossary

aalthara	platform around pipal tree
chaithanyam	prosperous spirit
daivam	god/deity
dakshina	offering
darshanam/ darshan	sight/vision
gurunatha/gurunathan	teacher/mentor
guruthi	sacrifice ritual
kavu	sacred grove/shrine
kshetram	temple
madhyamam	good
pallival	divine sword
pooja	prayer service
thambran/thamburan	god's man
tharavadu	matrilineal households
theyyattam	ritual dance at shrines
thullal	dance/jump/heap
urayal	shiver/dance
uthamam	excellent
vasoori	smallpox

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