



The feminine face of Thrissur Pooram: Increasing participation of women in public festivals

Dr Manjima M V

Assistant Professor, Department of Sociology

Vimala College (Autonomous), Thrissur, Kerala

Abstract

Thrissur Pooram is the iconic festival of Kerala held in the cultural capital of Kerala- Thrissur. Over the past decades important transformation has taken place. Increasing participation of women in different facets of Pooram is evident. We can see this transformation from male dominated roles to leadership functions. When Thrissur Pooram transforms into a celebration of unity and equality, another conspicuous impact is the journey towards women empowerment and gender equality. It also shows God's own country's progressive quintessence.

Latha, a 72 year-old homemaker, was sharing her memories of the Thrissur Pooram. When she was young, a girl could only dream of watching the Pooram up close in the Thekkinkadu Maidanam (the temple grounds), standing right at the Thekke Gopuranada (the southern entrance of the temple). Her father and brothers used to go to the Pooram every year and share their experiences with her. Latha and her mother were unable to attend. When she cried and pleaded with her father, he would take her and her mother to the *pakalpooram* (the morning festival), held on the morning after the day of the main Pooram. After her marriage and the birth of her children, she stopped attending even the *pakalpooram*. Nowadays, Latha watches the Pooram on television. Girls and women today are very lucky, she said, to be able to attend the Pooram and experience the Kudamaattam and the Ilanjithara Melam in person.

Reshma, a 22 year-old postgraduate student, shared her happiness of witnessing Thrissur Pooram in Thekkinkadu Maidanam. Her family, including her father, mother, brother and sister enjoyed the *aanachamayam*, the sample *vedikkettu* and the *pakalpooram*. Reshma noted that most of her peers attend the Thrissur Pooram.

Kerala's Grand Festival of Tradition and unity

Thrissur Pooram is an annual temple festival held in Thrissur District in Kerala. It is held at Vadakkunnathan Shiva Temple on Pooram Day in Malayalam Calender in the month of Medam. Thrissur Pooram is also known as "Poorangalude Pooram:" meaning the Festival of Festivals. Thrissur Pooram centered on Vadakkunnathan Temple in Thekkinkadu Maidanam, which is situated in the middle of city-the hillock which seats the Vadakkunnathan temple in an open ground in the centre of Thrissur City under the custodianship of Cochin Devaswom Board [CDB].



Mass of people during Thrissur Pooram

Photo Courtesy: Malayala Manorama

Exploring Gender Dynamics

Gender is one of the vital factors which are defining spectators. Compared to men, number of women partaking for full day Pooram is limited to previous decades. Women audience is mostly found in next day of Pooram- 'Pakalpooram'. Most of the women used to watch Thrissur Pooram from the top of buildings at Swaraj round while fire display and kudamaattam take place. Some of the Spectators are of the opinion that women cannot walk freely during Pooram. There happened gradual changes over years; however a drastic change in women participation happens gradually over years. Haritha (2022) elucidates about the increasing participation of women in Thekke Gopura Nada outside Vadakkunnathan temple to witness Kudamaattam at Pooram premises. After the district Administration declared 2022 Thrissur Pooram as 'Women Friendly' the presence of women has dramatically increased according to Pooram lovers



Members of WINGS in Sthree Souhrida Thrissur Pooram 2022

Photo Courtesy: Dr RSharmila, Faculty, Dept of Philosophy, SSUS Kalady

N A Vinaya, a police officer and Women Rights Activist from Thrissur explained that " we can see women everywhere even at night for 2022 Thrissur Pooram". This denotes a sign of drastic change. In past years women left the area by 2 pm on Pooram day and it would be just men occupying the whole pooram space. Vinaya had launched campaigns in social media weeks before Pooram.

Jimi Elekkatt from WINGS [Women Integration and Growth through Sport- a women organization] asked for more space for women to watch pooram. Pink Police Patrolling, bullet patrol, women friendly toilet facilities in and around Thekkinkadu Maidanam were found while pooram takes place. During Ilanjithara Melam main occupant viewers were men. But the number of women increased in large proportion by two years. Krishna Priya, a student from Thrissur watched Pooram by sitting on the shoulders of her friend Sudheep in 2024 Thrissur Pooram turned viral in social media. This shows a clear indication of cooperation and support of family and friends.



Some women are resting on Pooram day. Tradesmen also are seen.

Photo Courtesy: Malayala Manorama

Involvement of WINGS - Women participation in Thrissur Pooram

Women Integration and Growth through Sports (WINGS) was registered in 2016 and the crucial role in bringing women into the mainstream of Thrissur Pooram is predominant. WINGS included women in all age group consisting of youth to old age. N A Vinaya, a Police Officer, activist and Secretary of WINGS shared ample information regarding their hard work for bringing women into the main stream of Thrissur Pooram. They had started an evening get together group called “Saayahna Sallapam”. They started to sit along near Thekke Gopuranada and spent time together by discussing about the role of women and women empowerment, current affairs. Some group members of the Whatsapp group “Thekke Gopuranada” also came and joined with them. This led to a strong bond and unity of women. They made great efforts to bring women to Thrissur Pooram via campaign through Face book and Whatsapp groups

Mob Psychology

N A Vinaya told that they had applied the Psychology of mob during those days. There is difference between women watching Pooram on TV and those actively participating and physically present. Usually a group is forming after 1 pm. Then it will transform into a rabble. As per the planning of WINGS, all the members are requested to reach there at Thekkinkadu Maidanam and near Thekke Gopuranada at 8 am. So the women can be a part of mob from morning itself. It reduced their fear, tension and it making them bold and the impact is great. Crowd Behavior denotes the pattern of action exhibited by individuals as members of a collective identity. Within the realm of Psychology there are theories regarding crowd Psychology.

Social Identity Theory (SIT) –Tajfel and Turner (1979) this theory posits that individuals derive a portion of their self concept from social groups they belong to. When part of a crowd, individuals may experience a sense of social identity and feel a stronger connection to the group. This in turn may lead them to adopt behaviors and attitudes aligned with the group’s norms and values even if these behaviors and attitudes differ from their typical ones.

Contagion Theory- LeBon, et al, (1895) Contagion Theory proposes that the emotions and behaviors of individuals in a crowd can rapidly spread and become contagious like a virus. This lead to emotional strength, where emotion of the crowd quickly spread among all members of the crowd. It further creates a collective emotional state. Group size is a crucial factor that can impact the behavior of individuals in a crowd. A number of individuals in a group increase, the sense of anonymity and decreased cohesion can engender a milieu of negative behaviors that would otherwise be incubated by social norms and expectation.

According to N A Vinaya, by applying mob psychology in Thrissur pooram to bring women in to the main streams of Pooram was pertinent. 2022 Thrissur Pooram was a great task and challenge for WINGS team. Women started to reach Thekkinkadu Maidanam at 8am. Food for women cooked in the apartment of a member of WINGS. A group of women from Irinjalakkuda reach there by hiring a vehicle which is sponsored by a bakery owner Ramesh.

Compared to 2022 Pooram only a few campaigns were there but many women came for Thrissur Pooram in that year 2023. In 2024 in an accustomed way women reached there at 8 am. The members of WINGS tied white ribbon in hand and walked around Thekkinkadu Maidanam to empower women and show their presence all around Pooram. They always tried to maintain a minimum of 50 women in Maidanam and remaining engaged in other activities. It showed a great source of energy and support.

Women participation in Thrissur Pooram shoots up not only in the role of spectator but also in the role of participators behind and on screen of Pooram. (She Sight-She News, 2022) For the first time in History of Thrissur Pooram a woman got the Petroleum and Explosive Safety Organizations [PESO] license and approved to hold the fireworks display at the mega scale in Thirssur Pooram. She is leading the firework display of Thiruvambady devaswom, received the 'poruthu' a wick used for lighting the fireworks.



Picture Courtesy- thehindu.com.May 2022

Sheena Suresh, a forty three year old, a native of Kundannur near Wadakkanchery in Thrissur. Sheena's first husband died in a firework mishap nearly twenty years back. Sheena has a pyrotechnic experience of over 20 years and has been backstage for countless displays, but now she is the team leader, a position reserved for men since the beginning.

Mulamkunnathukavu native Sreepriya and Thanikkudam native Hridya played Kurumkuzhal for the troupe of Panamukkipally temple (Mathrubhumi.com, 2024) Both are from families of artists and performers. This also shows the clear involvement of women not as audience but as strong pillars of Pooram. Many women are actively working for preparation of kuda making and other rituals and craft related to the mega event. There is active participation of women in administration of Thrissur pooram. This clearly indicates a favorable sign of women empowerment. This happened due to the support of family, friends, colleagues, organizations made this happen. In previous decades Pakal pooram was contemplated as the pooram for women. But this concept switched by the large scale participation of women in Thrissur Pooram. There is same color dress code for men and women for each group from different places. All these manifest gender equality.



A group of friends during Thrissur Pooram

Photo Courtesy: Malayala Manorama

Educational attainment, employment, income, decision making capacity are some of the leading rationale for this change and active participation of women. In previous years women were hesitant to come forward is lack of support from family and society. Women headed organizations, support from family, education, economic and personal independence of women, campaign through social media, organizations for the empowerment of women like WINGS made it practical. Most of the women are considering this as an attainment of equality and liberation by participating in this mass cultural historical event in Thrissur.

REFERENCES

- Bhattathirippadu, K. P. (2000). Kshethracharangalum Vathanushtanangalum. Mannuthy: Jwalamughi Publications.
- Le Bon,. (2004). The Crowd: The Study of Popular Mind. New York, Sparkling Books.
- Le Bon; & Gustav (2009). Psychology of Crowd. London, Kessinger Publications.
- Davis, E. D. (2010). Thekkinkadu- Niralambarude Aashrayam. Thrissur: 3000 BC Script Museum .
- Gurukkal, R., & Varier, R. (1999). Cultural History of Kerala-Volume 1. Thiruvananthapuram: Department of Cultural Publication- Govt of Kerala.
- Jayashankar, S. (2011). Temples of Trssoor District. New Delhi: Census of India-Special States Thrissur.
- Kandamkaavil, V. (2023). Thrissur Poortam- Madhya Keralathinte Poora Charithram. Kozhikkode: Mathrubhumi Books.
- Kasthala, S., & Binoy, B. V. (2018). GIS based preparedness and emergency response for an event: Thrissur Pooram Mass Gathering of Kerala, India. 38th INCA International Congress (pp. 231-237). Hyderabad: Research Gate.
- Krishnan, C. A. (2009). Anjuvilakku- Thrissoorinte Ennalakalilekk oru Kili Vaathil. Thrissur: Current Books.
- Menon, A. S. (2014). Cultural Heritage of Kerala. Thrissur: D C Books.
- Namboothiri, M. V. (1998). Poorakkali. Kottayam: Current Books.
- Rajan, C. R. (2001). Vedikkettu. Kozhikkode: Mulbery Publications.
- Singh, P., Shyju, P. J., & Priyan, A. (2022). Religious events and destination competitiveness; Influential role of local culture and place identity- study of Thrissur Pooram. Singidunum International Tourism Conference (pp. 21-32). Varanasi: Siticon.
- Sivadas, K. K. (2010). Thrissur Pooram- Pakittum Perumayum. Thrissur: Current Books.
- Tajfel, H. (1974). Social Identity and inter group behaviour. Social Science Information (PP. 65-93)
- Tajfel, H. (1982). Social Identity and Inter group relations. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Valath, P. V. (2016). Keralathile Sthalacharithrangal- Thrissur Jilla. Thrissur: Kerala Sahithya Academy.