



The Oracles of Kodungallur Bharani: Socioeconomic Exclusion and Ritual Devotion in Kerala's Bharani Festival

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the socioeconomic profile of oracles (velichappaadu) who participate in the Bharani festival at the Sree Kurumba Bhagavathy Temple in Kodungallur, Kerala. Drawing on ethnographic research, the paper analyzes the paradoxical position of these ritual specialists who serve as mediums for the goddess Bhadrakali. Despite their temporary ritual authority during festivals, oracles experience significant socioeconomic marginalization in everyday life. Predominantly from lower castes and economically disadvantaged backgrounds, these individuals face various health challenges, employment instability, and social exclusion as a consequence of their devotional practices. The research highlights the complex relationship between religious devotion, ritual authority, and social stratification in contemporary Kerala, demonstrating how ritualized transgression simultaneously confers sacred power while reinforcing socioeconomic marginalization.

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Introduction

Kodungallur, a small taluk in Thrissur district of Kerala, spans approximately 15.68 square miles. Despite its limited geographic footprint, it occupies a significant place in the historical and cultural landscape of India. Often referred to as the "Rome of the East," Kodungallur served as a gateway into the subcontinent and is remarkable for being the site where the Periyar River meets the Arabian Sea. The



Cochin State Manual (1911) documents that Kodungallur maintained extensive trade relations with Jews, Phoenicians, Greeks, Romans, and Arabs even before the Christian era (Menon, 1911). The region's historical significance is further enhanced by its status as the location where three major religions—Christianity, Judaism, and Islam—first entered the shores of India.

The Greek chronicles referred to this area as Muziris, and today it is revered as one of the most culturally and historically significant destinations in Kerala, popularly known as "God's Own Country." At the heart of Kodungallur's cultural landscape stands the Sree Kurumba Bhagavathy Temple, also known as the Kodungallur Devi Temple, dedicated to the goddess Bhadrakali, a manifestation of Mahakali or Parashakthi widely worshipped throughout Kerala.

This temple, considered the principal shrine among the 64 Bhadrakali temples in Kerala, particularly in the Malabar region, houses the goddess in her fierce (ugra) form. The deity faces north and is depicted with eight hands holding various symbolic attributes. The temple's significance extends beyond its architectural presence to encompass the ritualistic practices associated with the annual Bharani festival, which features the distinctive presence of oracles known as velichappaadu.

This study focuses on the socioeconomic profile of these oracles, who function as human vessels for the goddess during ritual performances. Through an examination of their social status, economic conditions, and ritual roles, this research aims to illuminate the paradoxical position they occupy in Kerala society—simultaneously venerated for their sacred connection to the divine while facing significant social and economic marginalization in their everyday lives.

Historical Background of Kodungallur and the Bharani Festival

Kodungallur: Historical Significance

Kodungallur's historical significance can be traced back to ancient maritime trade networks that connected the Indian subcontinent with the Mediterranean world. The region's strategic location at the confluence of the Periyar River and the Arabian Sea made it an ideal port for international trade. Archaeological evidence and historical records suggest that Kodungallur (historically known as Muziris) was a thriving commercial centre with connections to various civilizations, including the Roman Empire, ancient Greece, and the Arab world (Menon, 1911).

Beyond its commercial importance, Kodungallur holds special significance in the religious history of India as the point of entry for three major religions: Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. The region is believed to be where St. Thomas the Apostle arrived in 52 CE, establishing one of the earliest Christian communities in the world. Similarly, Jewish traders are thought to have established settlements in the area during the early centuries of the Common Era, while the first mosque in India (Cheraman Juma Masjid) was reportedly constructed in the nearby region following the introduction of Islam to the subcontinent.

Sree Kurumba Bhagavathy Temple: Mythology and Origins

According to the mythology detailed in the Kerala Mahatmyam, particularly in its forty-first chapter, Lord Parasurama encountered a divine spirit in a small temple dedicated to Kurumbamma, a tribal deity. This site was approximately one kilometer away from where the present-day temple stands. Upon witnessing this spirit, Parasurama performed a ritual sacrifice involving a thousand pots of alcohol and roosters, subsequently reinstating the deity as Bhadrakali (Chandran, n.d.).

When Parasurama expressed concerns about the practicality of continuing such elaborate sacrificial practices on a daily basis, the goddess instructed him to perform these rituals on a specific day—the Bharani day in the month of Kumbham (approximately mid-March). Furthermore, Parasurama decreed that all Keralites should come to worship the goddess on this particular day, thus establishing the tradition of the Bharani festival (Chandran, n.d.).

The Bharani Festival: Rituals and Participation

The Bharani festival, also known as the "cock festival," is celebrated in mid-March and attracts devotees from various parts of Kerala, including Malabar, Cochin, and Travancore. As Iyer (1985/1906) records, Nairs and individuals from lower castes offer roosters to Bhagavathi, seeking protection from diseases for the coming year. The pilgrimage to the temple is marked by distinctive rituals that challenge conventional notions of devotional practices.

Particularly notable is the custom of devotees shouting "tida nada" (walk, walk, or march) during their journey to the shrine. This is interspersed with abusive language directed at the goddess—a practice believed to be acceptable and even pleasing to her. Upon reaching the shrine, devotees engage in various acts that would typically be considered sacrilegious, such as throwing stones and filth at the temple



while continuing to direct verbal abuse toward the deity. The chief of the Araya caste, known as Koolimuttath Araya, holds the privilege of being the first to participate in these rituals (Iyer, 1985/1906).

Central to these practices is the belief that the goddess requires a vehicle to connect with her devotees. This belief explains the prominent role of velichappaadu (oracles) in the temple's rituals. During the festival, these oracles, both men and women, run around the temple, striking their heads with swords to demonstrate their communion with the goddess. Meanwhile, devotees hit the temple rafters with sticks and throw offerings over the roof into the inner quadrangle (Iyer, 1985/1906).

The festival commemorates the birth of Bhadrakali who, according to Hindu mythology, emerged from Lord Shiva's third eye to defeat the demon Darika. This celebration holds particular significance in northern Kerala, with people eagerly anticipating the festivities each year.

Theoretical Framework: Ritual Specialists in Socioeconomic Context

The study of ritual specialists across various cultural contexts has revealed complex relationships between religious authority, social status, and economic conditions. In numerous societies, individuals who serve as intermediaries between the human and divine realms often occupy ambiguous positions in the social hierarchy. While their ritual roles may confer temporary authority and prestige, many such specialists come from marginalized backgrounds and face significant challenges in their daily lives (Turner, 1969).

The concept of liminality, as developed by Victor Turner, provides a useful framework for understanding the position of oracles in Kerala society. These ritual specialists inhabit a liminal space—simultaneously belonging to and separated from mainstream society. During rituals, they temporarily transcend their ordinary social positions to embody divine power, yet this transcendence does not translate into improved socioeconomic status in everyday life (Turner, 1969).

In the specific context of Kerala, the caste system historically determined access to economic resources, educational opportunities, and social mobility. Despite various reform movements and legislative changes aimed at reducing caste-based discrimination, caste identity continues to influence socioeconomic outcomes for many communities. The oracles of Kodungallur Bharani, predominantly from lower castes, experience this intersection of religious practice and social stratification in particularly complex ways.

Methodology

This study employs a mixed-methods approach, combining ethnographic observation with structured interviews to examine the socioeconomic conditions of oracles participating in the Bharani festival at Kodungallur. Fieldwork was conducted during the festival period, enabling direct observation of the oracles' ritual performances and interactions with devotees. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with twenty oracles to gather information about their economic circumstances, social status, health issues, and experiences of both privilege and exclusion.

Additionally, interviews with community members and temple authorities provided contextual information about the perception of oracles within the broader social framework. Documentary analysis of historical texts and previous ethnographic studies supplemented the primary data, offering historical perspective on the evolution of these ritual practices and the changing status of ritual specialists in Kerala society.

The Velichappaadu: Roles and Responsibilities

Ritual Functions and Divine Communication

The velichappaadu or oracles serve as crucial intermediaries between the goddess Bhadrakali and her devotees. As Hoondal (1978) describes, these shamans or oracles, many of whom are women, function as spokespersons for the goddess—reassuring, chastising, or predicting the future for those seeking divine guidance. Some oracles develop intense personal charisma and are believed to possess healing and prophetic abilities through their connection with the goddess.

Oracles are considered capable, to varying degrees, of interpreting the goddess's mood and desires, as well as channeling her power to remove inauspicious or harmful forces from the environment. This perceived ability carries significant practical implications for devotees, as the goddess is believed to cause illnesses such as smallpox when displeased. Consequently, families may summon a velichappaadu to prevent or cure such afflictions (Hoondal, 1978).

The presence of a velichappaadu is essential at most ceremonies dedicated to Bhagavathi, whether conducted in permanent temples or temporary outdoor structures. Historically, these oracles also played important roles in life-cycle rituals such as the tālikettukalayanam—a maturation ceremony for young



females that signaled a change in status and was widely practiced in Malabar in the past (Hoondal, 1978).

Authority and Control During Festivals

Due to their special relationship with the goddess, velichappaadu are accorded a certain authority among devotees. During the Bharani festival, they are responsible for controlling the crowds before the procession of devotees circles the shrine with sticks and swords raised in the air. The oracles also preserve and perform distinctive songs that include deliberately provocative or "insulting" lyrics directed at the goddess, and are reported to participate in transgressive ritual practices as part of the Bharani festival (Unnikrishnan, n.d.).

One of the primary motivations for oracles to undertake the pilgrimage to Sri Kuruba Kavu (another name for the temple) is to have the power of their ritual swords "recharged" through contact with the goddess. This highlights the cyclical nature of their authority—derived from the goddess, temporarily expressed during rituals, and periodically renewed through participation in the festival (Unnikrishnan, n.d.).

Socioeconomic Profile of Oracles

Caste and Social Background

The research reveals that oracles participating in the Bharani festival predominantly come from lower castes in Kerala's historically stratified social system. This caste affiliation contributes significantly to their marginalized position in society, despite the temporary ritual authority they exercise during religious events. Their lower caste status often translates into reduced access to educational opportunities, employment options, and social networks that might facilitate upward mobility.

Economic Conditions and Livelihood

The economic circumstances of oracles in Kodungallur Bharani are characterized by significant precarity. The majority of individuals surveyed fall below the poverty line, with unstable employment patterns and insufficient income to meet basic needs. Most oracles work as daily wage laborers or in other unskilled positions, reflecting limited access to formal sector employment or stable income sources.



Housing conditions among this population are similarly challenging, with many lacking well-constructed or permanent homes. The combination of economic instability and poor living conditions creates a cycle of disadvantage that is difficult to escape, particularly given the additional challenges associated with their ritual roles.

Health Issues and Physical Challenges

The practice of being an oracle carries significant physical risks that further complicate the socioeconomic challenges these individuals face. During ritual performances, oracles deliberately injure their heads with their ritual swords as a demonstration of their connection to the goddess and their ability to transcend ordinary physical limitations. These self-inflicted injuries, along with other physically demanding aspects of ritual performance, often lead to chronic health problems.

These health issues represent a significant factor contributing to the oracles' poor economic conditions. Physical injuries and related health complications can limit their ability to maintain regular employment or perform labor-intensive work, further restricting their already limited economic opportunities.

Psychological and Devotional Aspects

Beyond physical challenges, the research indicates that oracles experience distinctive psychological conditions related to their devotional practices. Informants report experiencing specific mental states associated with their role, particularly during the Bharani festival period. One oracle described how he "turned to the mood of oracles in the time of Bharani" and felt compelled to take up his ritual weapon, suggesting a profound psychological dimension to this religious practice.

Notably, even oracles who have migrated to Gulf countries for employment report experiencing similar compelling feelings when the Bharani festival approaches. These psychological experiences can disrupt their employment and financial stability, as they feel driven to return to Kerala to participate in the festival. This phenomenon illustrates how deeply embedded the oracle role becomes in individuals' psychological makeup, transcending geographical distance and economic considerations.



The Paradox of Privilege and Exclusion

Temporary Ritual Authority

During the Bharani festival, oracles experience a distinct form of social privilege that contrasts sharply with their everyday status. Native participants in the festival provide them with money, respect, and recognition of their special connection to the goddess. Devotees place offerings through them, seek answers to life problems, and regard them as embodiments or representatives of "Kodungallur Amma" (the Mother of Kodungallur).

This ritual context transforms the social position of oracles, as they temporarily become recipients of respect, devotion, prayers, and requests for mercy, forgiveness, and divine intervention. However, a critical limitation of this elevated status is its temporal restriction to the festival period itself. The privilege, respect, and material benefits associated with their role are confined to this specific ritual context, with limited carryover into everyday life.

Persistent Social Exclusion

Despite their temporary ritual authority, oracles experience significant social exclusion in broader society. This exclusion manifests in various domains of social life, including marriage prospects, employment opportunities, and community integration. The sons of oracles, for instance, often struggle to find marriage partners, as families are reluctant to form alliances with households associated with these demanding and potentially disruptive ritual practices.

The role of oracle typically passes from father to son, creating a hereditary dimension to both the ritual responsibility and the associated social exclusion. This pattern of inheritance ensures the continuation of ritual traditions while simultaneously perpetuating the marginalized status of these families across generations.

Employment and Social Perception

The unstable health conditions and distinctive mental states associated with being an oracle further contribute to their exclusion from mainstream employment opportunities. Potential employers often hesitate to hire individuals whose ritual obligations might interrupt work schedules or whose physical and mental conditions might affect job performance.



Additionally, the ritual consumption of alcohol, which forms part of their devotional practices, can impact family and social relationships. While understood as a component of their sacred role during the festival, alcohol consumption may contribute to negative perceptions and further social marginalization in everyday contexts.

Discussion

The case of oracles in Kodungallur Bharani illustrates a complex relationship between religious devotion, ritual authority, and socioeconomic marginalization. These individuals embody a paradox—they are simultaneously central to important religious practices and peripheral to mainstream society. Their experience reflects what might be termed "ritualized marginality," where participation in transgressive religious practices both confers temporary sacred power and reinforces long-term social exclusion.

This pattern has historical precedents in various religious traditions, where ritual specialists often occupy ambiguous positions in social hierarchies. In many societies, individuals who mediate between human and divine realms—particularly those who employ trance states, possession, or other forms of altered consciousness—often come from marginalized communities (Lewis, 1971). The case of Kodungallur's oracles fits within this broader pattern while exemplifying the specific dynamics of caste, ritual, and economic opportunity in contemporary Kerala.

The continued existence of this ritual role, despite its association with social and economic disadvantages, raises important questions about the meaning and value of religious devotion in contexts of marginalization. For the oracles themselves, the psychological and spiritual significance of their connection to the goddess may provide forms of meaning and purpose that transcend material considerations. Their willingness to accept physical hardship and social exclusion for the sake of devotional practice suggests the profound importance of religious identity and divine connection in their lives.

From a broader sociological perspective, the persistence of these practices highlights the complex ways in which religious traditions adapt to and intersect with socioeconomic conditions. Rather than viewing the oracles' situation simply as exploitation or marginalization, we might understand it as reflecting a distinctive religious economy in which spiritual capital operates alongside (and sometimes in tension with) economic and social capital.

Conclusion

This study has examined the socioeconomic profile of oracles participating in the Bharani festival at the Sree Kurumba Bhagavathy Temple in Kodungallur, Kerala. The research reveals a striking paradox in their social position: while they occupy a central and authoritative role in ritual contexts, they experience significant socioeconomic marginalization in everyday life. Predominantly from lower castes and economically disadvantaged backgrounds, these individuals face various health challenges, employment instability, and social exclusion as a consequence of their devotional practices.

The temporary ritual authority granted to oracles during festivals does not translate into improved socioeconomic status beyond the ritual context. Instead, their role as divine mediums appears to reinforce their marginalized position in the broader social hierarchy. This pattern exemplifies the complex relationship between religious devotion, ritual authority, and social stratification in contemporary Kerala.

Future research might productively explore potential interventions to address the socioeconomic challenges faced by oracles while respecting the cultural significance of their ritual roles. Additionally, comparative studies examining similar ritual specialists in other cultural contexts could illuminate broader patterns in the relationship between religious practice and social marginalization.

Understanding the complex position of Kodungallur Bharani's oracles offers valuable insights into the intersection of religion, caste, and economic opportunity in contemporary India. Their experience demonstrates how religious traditions both reflect and potentially reinforce existing social hierarchies, while simultaneously providing meaningful spiritual frameworks within which individuals navigate challenging socioeconomic circumstances.

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