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FROM RITUAL TO REVENUE: TOURISM AND THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF CULTURAL COMMODIFICATION IN KERALA

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ABSTRACT

Breathtaking landscapes and unique traditions best describe the destination of Kerala, from the vibrant ritual of Theyyam to the classical dance drama of Kathakali and the grand festivals of Onam and Vishu. However, in its eagerness to entice tourists, most of these cultural practices are transformed from meaningful community rituals into marketable products for global consumption. The core of this commodification is the turn from traditions into performance, here sacred rituals like Theyyam, though deeply bound with Kerala's caste systems and spiritual practices, are now staged for tourist entertainment. The spiritual and communal values that characterise such rituals are diluted so that they fit within the expectations of tourism: profound cultural expressions become spectacles. This, in turn, makes these practices less authentic and strips away their cultural depth, although it makes them more accessible. This study explores how Kerala's rich cultural heritage is being commodified by tourism under the pressures of capitalism and how the transformations that follow have changed the culture and the people of Kerala.

The paper also touches on the model of "responsible tourism" Kerala has lately adopted, with a veneer of fattening local communities and sustainability. It often conceals the deeper issue of exploitation. Local artists and cultural practitioners are pushed to tailor their traditions for tourists, leaving little room for agency or ownership over how their heritage is represented. The commercialisation of Kerala culture will benefit the more significant stakeholders in tourism, while the local community finds itself caught between balancing cultural preservation and economic survival. This paper highlights how capitalism operates within Kerala's tourism sector by examining these dynamics. While tourism brings economic benefits, it also introduces challenges, as the culture that draws visitors is commodified and sold.

Keywords: Cultural Commodification, Tourism, Kerala, Theyyam, Kathakali, Staged Authenticity, Visual Culture.

INTRODUCTION

With its immense beauty, rich cultural heritage, and undying tradition, Kerala has been termed "God's Own Country." Some of the deep-seated elements that shape the identity of the state are ritualistic performances like Theyyam, which merges myth, caste, and spirituality; Kathakali, the classical dance-drama depicting stories of gods and demons; and festivals like Onam and Vishu, depicting agrarian and cultural life. And yet, the rich cultural heritage of Kerala has started to buckle under the pressures of tourism and global capitalism. The commodification of cultural practices-or the ways in which sacred and communal traditions become products for tourist consumption-threatens cultural authenticity, local agency, and community well-being in profound ways. This is a transformation, indeed economically lucrative, but yet threatens the very essence of those traditions it sells-reducing profound cultural expression to some performative spectacles for an external gaze.

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This paper is situated within a growing body of critical literature that interrogates the intersections of tourism, performance, and cultural authenticity. Drawing on Kirshenblatt-Gimblett et al. (1999) analysis of how heritage is produced through dislocation and exhibition, and Edward Bruner's (2019) concept of tourism as a representational borderzone, the paper critiques how ritual performances like Theyyam are stripped of their spatial and spiritual integrity when adapted for touristic spectacle. Rather than preserving tradition, such practices often stage a version of culture tailored to market demands, diluting complex ritual meanings and marginalizing the communities who historically embody them. The focus here is not only on what is performed, but where, for whom, and with what implications for cultural sovereignty and labour.

Commodification is not a new concept; thus, Dennison Nash and Erik Cohen established how tourism reconstructs cultural praxis into commercial commodities a long period of time ago. Whereas rituals in Kerala, such as Theyyam, are typically embedded in caste orders, communal religiosity, and vernacular mythology, these traditions are increasingly mobilised out of context into spectacular performances for tourist onlookers. Once sanctified rituals performed in courtyards and village temples, Theyyam Performances are often tailored to suit tourist preferences, leading to shortened durations and modifications that may compromise the art's authenticity James et al. Kathakali also meets the same fate in that performances are shortened and adapted to suit global audiences who have no idea about its complex narrative structures and rich cultural significance. This shift necessarily raises critical questions of authenticity: how does tourism-driven capitalism redefine cultural heritage, and what happens when rituals born from lived community traditions get reconstituted as marketable products?

Similar patterns of cultural commodification have been noted across India, as the literature review has indicated. For example, in Ladakh, the tourism that began in the 1970s led to the re-construction of a "Ladakhi identity" as a singular and endangered Buddhist culture. The Ladakhi traditions, crafts, and festivals that were part of the routine communal life of the Ladakhis are now presented for consumption by global tourists. A similar process is at work in Kerala, where cultural practices are reconceptualised as economic capital. The performances, which in Assam are staged versions of the Bihu festival and Satriya dance rather than a community's traditions celebrated within the community, generate the same debates of authenticity and identity, combined with questions of economic survival.

The broader theoretical framework for this paper places commodification within the political economy of tourism. The concept of "staged authenticity," as examined by Cohen et al. (1988), reveals how cultural performances are remade to meet the external demand, so that the line separating original rituals from their commodified forms becomes hard to discern.

This paper examines how Kerala's rich cultural heritage, specifically practices such as Theyyam and Kathakali, have been commodified through tourism-driven capitalism. The study examines the socio-economic implications of such commodification with a focus on tension within cultural preservation and economic survival. With the focus on Kerala as the primary case study, this research contributes to broader debates on cultural tourism, commodification, and the politics of authenticity in a globalised world.

LITERATURE REVIEW

COMMODIFICATION AND THE EROSION OF AUTHENTICITY

A recurring theme across the studies is a commercialisation of culture and what the implication of this is for authenticity. For example, in Kerala, Theyyam and Kathakali—the erstwhile integral parts of spiritual and communal life—have now become increasingly out-of-context performances for the tourist public. This shift from a sacred ritual to spectacle dilutes the spiritual depth and communal significance; such has been the assertion about the cultural heritage of Kerala through literature. But things stand no different in Ladakh too, where the rise in the population of tourists since 1974 "led to a change in traditional perceptions of culture." After the tourism industry began selling off a commodified version of culture within Ladakh, it formed an identity of a sort of "unique cultural center," whereas many elements included as Ladakhi Culture were never reflected upon till they were presented in form of "authentic cultural product" for tourist consumptions.

The case of Assam further shows how traditional events such as the Bihu festival and Satriya dance are staged for tourists, thus changing their nature from a community celebration to an economic venture. These changes raise questions of authenticity, as noted by Cohen, who argued that "staged authenticity" itself becomes a new form of cultural expression over time as cited by Das and Acharjee (2013). Commodification, therefore, does not simply degrade culture but also reconstitutes authenticity within emerging socio-economic structures.

IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION AND CULTURAL PRESERVATION

Another critical theme is that of the construction of cultural identities in response to tourism. Construction of local identity discourses has been remade according to the influx of tourists—what happened in Ladakh—after the boom of tourism, Ladakhis framed their culture specifically as unique and in danger of being lost. However, the economic opportunities tourism has brought about have actually led to a very definite construction of Ladakhi identity as a "preserved Buddhist culture" with its traditions, crafts, and festivals being showcased to the world market (Lundup). Similarly, the promotion of indigenous crafts and performing arts in Assam, such as its cane and bamboo products and folk dances, reflects an urge to create a sellable cultural identity (Das and Acharjee).

These identity constructions, however, are mostly marked by tensions between the imperative of tradition and the need to cater to the tourist. The Kerala case underlines how local communities fight with the dual pressure of preserving their cultural heritage and earning an income from it. In fact, as traditional practices are made more visible and gain economic value, the agency of local practitioners in determining how their culture is represented diminishes, since tourism-driven capitalism frequently prioritises marketability over authenticity Menon et al. (2021).

SOCIO-ECONOMIC IMPACTS OF TOURISM

Undeniably, the socio-economic benefits of tourism are great, considering its huge contribution to employment and infrastructure development. For example, the cultural tourism of Assam can uplift the indigenous people by showcasing their crafts and performances. However, due to a lack of infrastructure, poor publicity, and socio-political instability, it is not fully materialising, according to Das and Acharjee. In Kerala, the so-called "responsible tourism," which promises economic benefits for the local communities, often camouflages the exploitative practices. This in turn forces the local artists and performers to pander to the demands of tourism, thus leaving them economically empowered but culturally disenfranchised.

The Ladakh study adds another dimension and portrays how tourism has economically stabilised a region that conventionally depended on caravan trade. However, such commercialisation of Ladakhi culture has also resulted in the loss of cultural identity due to homogenisation of culture, where traditions are adapted to meet the generic expectations of global tourists. These studies indicate overall that one needs a balanced approach toward economic benefits on one hand and the preservation of cultural integrity on the other.

SUSTAINABLE AND RESPONSIBLE TOURISM

Other research points to sustainable tourism as a counter to all the ills of commodification. In Kerala itself, different responsible tourism initiatives are under way, promising to assimilate elements of both community involvement and environmentally sustaining tourism practices. Critics contest their effectiveness, however—on grounds of inequity on the distribution of benefits that are supposed to accrue from tourism and superficial use of the term sustainability or eco in tourism Menon et al. (2021).

The Assam case study also supports the call for indigenous peoples' participation in policy for cultural tourism. In this respect, tourism may be able to incorporate an aspect of proprietorship and decentered agency and thereby avoid the mere exploitation that accompanies commodification, it may do so by raising awareness of the economic and cultural significance of heritage among the people at the local levels themselves, as Das and Acharjee point out. Community involvement and the presentation of nonmaterial culture, for example, oral traditions and rituals, have been suggested for Ladakh as a means to retain cultural depth while benefiting from tourism.

Commodified cultural tourism is an explicit paradox, which, while offering increased economic opportunities and international visibility for the local culture, often destroys their authenticity and cultural integrity. Theyyam and Kathakali of Kerala, Buddhist traditions of Ladakh, and Bihu of Assam all of these show how tourism reconfigures cultural performances into commodities with altered meaning from the original. These changes also create new forms of cultural expression and opportunities for identity construction.

The challenge, of course, is how to balance economic development with the preservation of culture. Sustainable and responsible tourism practices that put local agency, community involvement, and the equitable sharing of benefits as priorities offer a way forward. While the commodifying tendencies of tourism may well be inevitable, its potential support for cultural preservation and the well-being of communities does depend on careful planning and ethical governance.

HERITAGE AS SPECTACLE: RECONTEXTUALIZATION AND THE TOURIST GAZE

The commodification of ritualistic art forms under tourism's influence has long been critiqued within cultural and performance studies. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett et al. (1999) argues that what is framed as "heritage" for tourists is not preserved as-is but rather transformed into a "second life" through processes of display, detachment, and recontextualization. She contends that cultural practices, when displaced from their original spatiotemporal contexts and repurposed for tourist consumption, undergo a transformation that foregrounds spectacle over significance. This theoretical lens is crucial for understanding how Theyyam rituals tied to specific deities, locations, and caste lineages, loses cultural and spiritual specificity when performed in urban hotels, resorts, or even public exhibitions where such contextual anchors are absent. This aligns with Edward Bruner's notion of staged authenticity, where the cultural performance is not only reshaped by the expectations of the tourist gaze but also functions within a new "borderzone" that merges imagination, commerce, and representation Adams et al. (2019). These frameworks help problematize the seemingly innocuous act of "reviving" or "celebrating" culture under tourism, drawing attention to the violent displacement of meaning it often entails.

OBJECTIVE

The current study aims to examine the aspect of commercialisation of art forms such as Theyyam and Kathakali in Kerala and the loss of cultural identity.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In order to examine such commercialisation from the eyes of the artists, it is important that a qualitatively driven research framework be adopted, as this offers the best avenue to explore first-person narratives, subjective accounts, and the socio-economic dynamics involved in the lives of these particular artists. Semi-structured, in-depth interviews have enabled to pose specific questions while at the same time allowing participants substantial freedom to elaborate on relevant subject matter in their own words. This is a useful approach because it is non-directive, and allows the respondent to give very detailed, contextual information that might not be captured in a structured interview or survey. All interviews were conducted during September 2024 and November 2024. The interviews were recorded and ranged between 30 – 45 minutes. Pseudonyms were allocated to safeguard the professional safety of the study's participants. The interviews were transcribed into a word document and subsequently examined multiple times. Transcription served as a preliminary analytical method. Following transcription, themes were identified from the data. This study, which focuses on subjective narratives and socio-economic dynamics, aims to give a comprehensive understanding of the challenges faced by the artists with the rapid commercialisation of art and cultural practices. A text analysis was also employed to further study how social media is used to promote “theyyam tours.”

ANALYSIS

COMMODIFICATION OF THE CULTURAL PRACTICES IN KERALA

While Kerala is more famous for its rich traditions and rituals, the challenge is continuously on an increase day by day due to the metamorphosis of such practices under pressure from capitalism and tourism. The commodification of cultural practices—a process by which sacred traditions get transformed into marketable products—presses deep implications for authenticity, agency, and the socio-economic conditions of the community involved. The analysis is based on a critical investigation into how such cultural practices like Theyyam and Kathakali are transformed as commodities using Marx's framework of commodity fetishism, among others, in light of Urry et al. (2002) theory of the tourist gaze.

THEYYAM AND KATHAKALI: COMMODIFICATION

Commodifying Theyyam and Kathakali represent an indication of how tourism-based capitalism manages the transformation of cultural heritage Ajayagosh et al. (2018). Theyyam is a ritual performance which is inextricably linked with the caste systems and spiritual beliefs of Kerala, now increasingly taken out of context and performed for tourists and photographers. According to VINU "Theyyam as an artform has divine connections but lately its divinity is losing. They perform for tourists' view and for the photographer to capture it; a divinely great art is actually slowly losing its divine." The transition from sacred into a kind of spectacle therefore underscores this process of dilution where profound expressions are reshaped into visual delight.

Likewise, Kathakali the classical dance-drama of Kerala has been long victimised by commodification Ajayagosh et al. (2018). "Kathakali has been portrayed as an integral part of Kerala's culture. This art has turned into a business long ago. It has been performed for tourists for a very long time now, especially foreigners, at 5-star hotels so they can enjoy. But they do not understand the story or what we perform; it is just a visual spectacle" explained KRISHNAN. The complex narratives and the depth of culture that go with Kathakali are reduced to aesthetic appeal for audiences unfamiliar with its traditional significance.

While Kathakali has become a consumable product of tourism consumption, Theyyam in the northern regions remains residually rooted in its vanguard traditional settings. In recent years, however, there continue to be signs of commoditisation. As SHYJU explained "Unlike Kathakali, Theyyam still hasn't been commercialised on a mass scale. It is still conducted in the kavus in sacred groves and holy places. But now many people from other states have started to come to view Theyyam post Kantara cinema. They equate Bhoota Kola with Theyyam. Now there is a larger rush of people to see it, and in future it might become like Kathakali. Who knows?"

This highlights more that it is actually the external factors, as represented through the media, that fuel this commodification in drawing new audiences to the rituals.

Karl Marx’s commodity fetishism and John Urry’s tourist gaze, serve well for a critique of such commoditisation. In this aspect, cultural practices, namely Theyyam and Kathakali, lose all their social and spiritual associations to get reborn into commercially viable commodities for tourists to feed on. The original meaning of the rituals, steeped as it is in caste, community, and mythology, is obscured; the market value of the rituals now assumes primacy.

This fetishism transforms the performances into objects of desire for the tourists, who consume them without necessarily engaging with their deeper meanings. The dynamics are even clearer through the "tourist gaze" as conceptualised by John Urry. Tourists come to these performances with preconceived notions of what they expect to see: something exotic, visually striking, and culturally "other." The gaze itself conditions the way in which cultural practices are represented; often, spectacle takes precedence over authenticity. ABHIJITH noted, "With photographers and social media, people from all places now come to watch and click photos of performances. It is a good thing, but people here have turned it into a business lately. There is a team in Kannur that charges a certain amount and takes tourists for Theyyam watching, providing them special places and privileges to watch this performance." It is turning into a business nowadays." The tourist gaze, thus, dictates the performance of Theyyam and Kathakali, changing their very essence to suit expectations from the outside.

PERFORMERS WITHOUT PROFIT: AGENCY EXPLOITATION IN CULTURAL TOURISM

Another layer of exploitation emerges in the growing trend of curated cultural tours, often promoted via Instagram pages and boutique agencies claiming to offer "authentic" Theyyam experiences. These private operators organise seasonal tours for small groups of upper-class or foreign visitors, marketing the visual intensity of Theyyam as a unique aesthetic encounter. However, these ventures seldom share profits with the performers themselves. The agencies typically charge high fees for these curated experiences, yet local artists many from historically marginalized communities receive no percentage of this income. Their role is reduced to that of labourers in a privately owned spectacle, with no recognition of their ritual authority, community value, or cultural ownership. This silent exclusion from the economic structure of tourism mirrors broader capitalist extraction, where the labour and cultural capital of oppressed groups fuel profit for intermediaries and platforms.

THE COMMODIFICATION OF CULTURE: IMPLICATIONS TO THE LOCAL COMMUNITY AND AUTHENTICITY OF CULTURE

While tourism provides economic opportunities, it often exploits the local artists and performers. SHANU stated "The Theyyams that are mainly sold as part of their package are usually Wayanattu Kulavan, Kandanarkelan, Agni Ghandakarnan, and Kathivanoor Veeran Theyyams. These Theyyams lately can be seen turned into a business. Some kavus are performing these Theyyams even though those gods aren't present there."

They have tie-ups with these people who organise tours. This commercialisation undermines the performers' agency in that they are forced to make their practices appeal to the market. Besides, economic benefits from tourism are often distributed very unequally. While stakeholders in the tourism industry benefit considerably, local communities have to juggle economic survival with the preservation of culture. VINU noted, "I have heard people do pay nowadays to organise Theyyam tours. I don't know much about it, but I have heard of it from other members in my group. They say this happens in Kannur, mainly for Kandanarkelan Theyyam. They term it as fire Theyyam because Kelan jumps through fire, and that attracts photographers. "If this is actually happening, it is sad how our god's dance is being sold for money." This underlines the exploitative nature of the commodification in which the sacred is being monetised without regard for its original significance.

FROM DIVINE EMBODIMENT TO DIGITAL SPECTACLE

The digital mediation of Theyyam has further intensified its aesthetic commodification. On platforms like Instagram, reels and high-resolution photographs of the performance circulate widely, detaching the ritual from its sacred, caste-based, and spatially grounded meanings. While the vibrant colors, fierce gestures, and theatrical makeup of Theyyam easily lend themselves to visually striking content, the performance is increasingly consumed as a mere "Insta-spectacle." Audiences both digital and in-person tend to engage with the ritual as content for virality, rather than as a divine or ancestral invocation. In this process, the deity is not just staged but stripped of presence; the sacred becomes scenery. The ritual, once meant to invoke and mediate divine power, is flattened into an aesthetic object in the attention economy. This transformation raises urgent questions about cultural sovereignty in the age of algorithmic tourism.

THE FUTURE OF CULTURAL PRACTICES

The increasing commodification of Theyyam and Kathakali brings critical questions regarding the future of Kerala's rich cultural heritage. According to SHYJU "Theyyam turning into a business can be seen lately in Kozhikode with the entrance of Theyyam Agni Ghandakarnan which was not seen in these sides before. In the same way, in Kannur recently they performed Thee Kuttichathan Theyyam without following the proper traditions. Thee Kuttichathan was limited to Kozhikode. This is being done to attract people." Such adaptations not only dilute the authenticity of the rituals but also threaten to homogenise the varied cultural practices to meet the expectations of tourists. Under capitalism, commodification of the cultural practices may be unavoidable, but some means could be sought to lessen the negative impact. Sustainable and responsible tourism models, which would promote community involvement and fair distribution of benefits, stand out as a way ahead. However, such initiatives should go beyond superficial measures and reach

the deeper power dynamics that shape cultural commodification. It is in empowering local communities to retain control over how their heritage is represented that economic development can be balanced with the preservation of culture.

CONCLUSION

This is well illustrated in the commodification of Theyyam and Kathakali in Kerala's tourism sector. A view of such a perspective, through the glasses of commodity fetishism proposed by Marx and the concept of the tourist gaze put forth by Urry, serves to bring into light the active transmutation of sacred rituals into marketable spectacle, often at the cost of their authenticity and communal meaning. While tourism brings economic opportunities, so too does it usher in challenges that beg thoughtful planning and ethical governance. Given that there should be a shift towards an emphasis on local agency and retention of culture, there may be ways through which commoditisation can navigate such challenges successfully to make Kerala's heritage remain synonymous with pride and identity amongst its communities.

The commodification of Kerala's ritual artforms under the weight of tourism and digital capitalism reveals a deeper crisis of cultural displacement and extraction. As Theyyam is performed in resorts, repackaged through Instagram reels, or sold as an "experience" by third-party tour organizers, its ritual and divine foundations are effaced. The transformation from sacred invocation to consumable spectacle marks not merely a shift in venue or audience but a rupture in meaning. Cultural labourers, often from oppressed castes, are systematically excluded from the profits generated through their art, and their performances are stripped of their community relevance and cosmological significance.

The future of Kerala's cultural heritage, therefore, must contend with this dual violence economic and epistemic. Rather than promoting heritage through commodification, there is a need to imagine models of ethical tourism, community-led cultural policy, and decentralised ownership of ritual performance. Recognising that the divine cannot be monetized without consequence, this paper urges a turn toward preserving the integrity of ritual spaces and the sovereignty of those who inherit them. Only then can art remain not a product for sale, but a lived embodiment of ancestral memory and spiritual force.

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