

THE
THIYYAS
— OF —
NORTH MALABAR

HEMANTH LAKSHMANAN



BlueRoseONE^{.com}
S t o r i e s M a t t e r

New Delhi • London

BLUEROSE PUBLISHERS

India | U.K.

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ISBN: 978-81-6744-595-7

Cover Design: Aafiya Saifi

Typesetting: Namrata Saini

First Edition: October 2026

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THIYYA HERITAGE OF NORTH MALABAR: ROYAL LINEAGES AND SACRED SPACES

ILLUSTRATING THE HISTORICAL PRESTIGE, GEOGRAPHY, AND SOCIAL EVOLUTION OF PROMINENT THIYYA FAMILIES THROUGH THEIR ANCESTRAL SEATS AND TEMPLES.

The Thiyya community of North Malabar maintains a rich legacy rooted in royal dynasties and merchant elites. This infographic maps the transition from the ancient 'Thiyyar Kings' of the Mannanar dynasty to the social reform movements centered around Thalassery's merchant families and sacred sites.

THE MANNANAR DYNASTY: THE THIYYAR KINGS



MOOTHEADATH ARAMANA, THE ROYAL SEAT OF ERUVESSI

The dynasty resided in the Moothedath Aramana near Taliparamba with full royal privileges.



KUNNATHOOR PADI

THE MUTHAPPAN MADAPURA HUB

Serves as a central cultural hub for year-round Muthappan Theyyam performances.



MUTHAPPAN MADAPURA



PADIKUTTI

SACRED ROYAL GUARDIANSHIP

Maintained as an exclusive royal temple.

THE KARAYI FAMILY & SOCIAL REFORM



THALASSERY'S MERCHANT ELITE

The Karayi family emerged as powerful 18th-century landowners and leaders in women's education.



JAGANNATH TEMPLE: A REFORM GATEWAY

Established by Sree Narayana Guru in 1908 to challenge caste-based exclusion from worship.

CENTER FOR REHABILITATION

The temple area hosted the 1918 Kerala Labour Union to rehabilitate marginalized workers.

MANNANAR DYNASTY



Primary Location:
Eruvessi (Taliparamba)



Key Architectural Legacy:
Moothedath Aramana
(Palace)



KARAYI FAMILY



Primary Location:
Thalassery



Key Architectural Legacy:
Jagannath Temple
(Social Reform Center)

Introduction: The Thiyyas of North Malabar

The history of the Thiyya community in North Malabar is an extraordinary saga of continuity, martial prowess, and social evolution. Tracing a trajectory from deep indigenous roots to a prominent martial, royal, and professional elite, the Thiyyas have long formed the social and cultural bedrock of northern Kerala. Concentrated predominantly in the Kannur and Kozhikode districts, and historically anchored in regions like Kurumbranad, their demographic weight and cultural influence remain pivotal to the history of Malabar.

Deep Roots: Genetic Continuity and Indigenous Origins

Where folk legend once held sway, modern population genetics has now illuminated the deep lineage of the Thiyya people. DNA analysis demonstrates that the Thiyyas represent one of the most genetically indigenous non-tribal communities in Kerala. Carrying approximately sixty to seventy per cent Ancient Ancestral South Indian, or AASI, genetic ancestry, their dominant paternal lineage, Haplogroup H-M69, reflects a continuous presence in the Indian subcontinent spanning over thirty thousand years.

While community lore has historically preserved varied origin narratives, suggesting migrations from Sri Lanka or ancient connections to the Tian Shan mountains of Kyrgyzstan, genetic markers tell a clear story: the Thiyyas are deeply and uninterrupted rooted in the soil of Malabar. The chapters that follow explore these genetic findings in detail, alongside the cultural and political theories they have been invoked to support,

separating what the science says from what the community has wished it to say.

Swords and Sovereigns: Martial Mastery and Royal Power

The traditional authority of the Thiyya community was historically built upon two pillars: the martial dominance of the Chekavars and the royal sovereignty of the Mannanar dynasty. These were not separate traditions but complementary ones, together giving the community a measure of power and self-governance that few avarna communities in Kerala could claim.

The Chekavars were the premier warrior class of northern Kerala, legendary masters and revered instructors of Kalarippayattu. Immortalised in the folk epics of the Vadakkan Pattukal, the Northern Ballads, iconic figures such as Aromal Chekavar and the celebrated female warrior Unniyarcha embody a heritage of physical agency and formidable skill. The Chekavars institutionalised single combat through the ankam, formal duels used to resolve judicial disputes between regional rulers, a system that placed them at the centre of the region's justice and its warfare alike.

Inland, at the seat of Eruvessi, reigned the Mannanars, famously remembered as the Thiyyar Kings. Ruling over the territory known as the Five Places, the Mannanars maintained five royal palaces, the Aramanas, and wielded regalia comparable to regional rajas: the right to travel by palanquin, a personal militia of over two hundred armed Nair soldiers, and a coronation ritual identical to that of the Zamorins of Calicut. Their authority extended beyond politics into the sacred, as custodians of the Muthappan cult and as protectors of excommunicated Namboothiri women, a role explored in detail in the chapters that follow.

Sacred Guardianship: Ritual Arts and the Spirit of Inclusivity

Beyond physical force and royal privilege, the Thiyya community holds an irreplaceable role as the spiritual custodians of North Malabar's most sacred rituals. Theyyam, also known as Kaliyattam, the iconic ritual performance of the region, is intrinsically linked to Thiyya ancestral worship. A majority of the legendary deities embodied in Theyyam trace their historical lineages directly to Thiyya ancestors, men and women whose lives and deaths were transformed into sacred memory through performance. The community holds the ritual authority to conduct the Kalasham submission and the ancient right to cancel a performance if sacred protocols are not met.

Equally significant is the community's custodianship of the Madappuras, the shrines dedicated to Sree Muthappan, the region's principal ethnic deity and the Kulapoorvikan, the clan ancestor, of the Thiyya people. While the Theyyam performance itself is carried out by the Vannan community, the puja rituals, sacred rites, and administrative management of these shrines are exclusively performed by Thiyyas. Representing a non-Brahminical, indigenous Dravidian ethos, the Madappuras stand as enduring sanctuaries of universal brotherhood, welcoming devotees of all castes and religions, subverting the rigid social hierarchies that govern conventional Hindu temple worship.

Clan Structures and the Modern Professional Awakening

Historically, Thiyya society was organised into eight matrilineal clans, the Illams, each further divided into four Kiriyaams, yielding thirty-two sub-divisions. The community maintained order through a structured judicial hierarchy: village-level Desasabhas, higher Kazhakams, and a supreme body known as the Kottil. This internal governance allowed the Thiyyas to settle disputes independently of upper-caste intervention, preserving a

degree of autonomy that was remarkable for a community classified as avarna.

While traditional occupations once revolved around the coconut and toddy industries, the nineteenth century triggered a rapid socio-economic awakening. By engaging early with Western education offered through the Basel Mission and British institutions, the Thiyyas transformed into Malabar's modern professional pioneers. The community produced some of the region's earliest female medical doctors, including trailblazers like Ayyathan Janaki and Moorkkoth Madhavi, and achieved significant representation within the administrative ranks of the British Civil Service, with figures like Churayi Kanaran leading the way. Leveraging early access to modern schooling, the Thiyya elite moved swiftly from traditional land-based trades into medicine, law, and civil administration, setting an early benchmark for social mobility in southern India.

Spiritual and Social Renaissance



Sree Narayana Guru with disciples

This socio-economic transformation gained further momentum through the social reform movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Inspired by the visionary philosophy of

Sree Narayana Guru, organisational bodies like the SNDP Yogam and Malabar-based organisations such as the Gnanodaya Yogam mobilised the community toward social equity, educational empowerment, and institutional reform. The Guru's simplification of wedding rites, his insistence on education as the path to freedom, and his message of universal brotherhood resonated deeply with a community that had long maintained its own non-Brahminical spiritual traditions.

The same period saw the community's traditional labouring class, the toddy tappers of Kurumbranad, become the backbone of the early Communist movement in Malabar. Through strikes like the Kulamuri Samaram, the flower bud cutting strike, tappers transformed themselves from what one account called slaves of brutal contractors into a politically conscious force that would shape Kerala's modern political landscape.

The Contemporary Identity Landscape

Today, the Thiyya community stands at a vital historical crossroads. While twentieth-century political movements and administrative classifications frequently grouped the Thiyyas of Malabar alongside the Ezhavas of Travancore and the Billavas of Karnataka, modern historical and anthropological scholarship highlights distinct regional, cultural, and lineage characteristics that set them apart. The matrilineal system of eight Illams, the royal authority of the Mannanars, the martial tradition of the Chekavars, and the spiritual custodianship of Theyyam and the Madappuras are not shared heritage but distinctly Thiyya institutions.

The ongoing dialogue between maintaining broad socio-political alliances and honouring their distinct regional heritage continues to shape the contemporary identity of the Thiyya people. This book is an attempt to contribute to that dialogue, not by arguing a single position but by presenting, in narrative form, the full depth and complexity of a community whose story

has too often been told by others. From the genetic evidence that roots them in the soil of Malabar to the martial legends that elevated their ancestors into gods, from the royal palaces of Eruvessi to the toddy groves of Kurumbranad, the chapters that follow trace the many currents that have shaped the Thiyya community into what it is today : a people of deep roots long memory and enduring pride.



Toddy Tapper

Thiyyas and Ezhavas: Two Distinct Communities

For generations, the Thiyyas of Malabar and the Ezhavas of southern Kerala have been spoken of in the same breath, as though they were merely regional names for a single community. Yet research by the Kerala Institute for Research, Training and Development Studies of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (KIRTADS) arrived at a different conclusion: the two are distinct groups, each with its own cultural and anthropological identity. The study was commissioned after the Kerala State Commission for Backward Classes asked KIRTADS to look into a request from the Thiyya Kshema Sabha, which had sought recognition of Thiyyas as a separate caste rather than one bundled together with Ezhavas and Billavas.

Roots of a Separate Identity

Several fundamental differences set the two communities apart. The first lies in their kinship and inheritance systems. Historically, the Thiyyas of North Malabar observed a strict matrilineal system known as Marumakkathayam, organised around eight clans, or Illams. The Ezhavas of Travancore, by contrast, generally followed patrilineal (Makkathayam) or mixed (Misradayam) systems and were traditionally divided into only four clans.

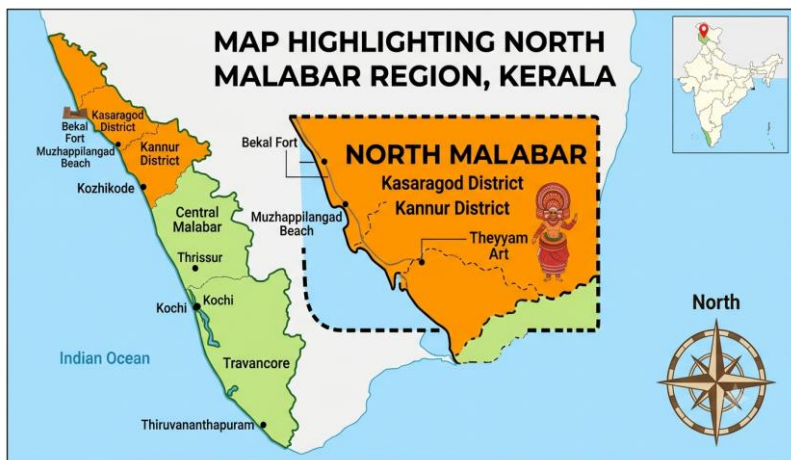
These differing family structures shaped how each community interacted with the world. Thiyyas maintained a well-organised local governance and judicial apparatus of their own, built around caste assemblies called Desasabhas and broader bodies known as Kazhakams. Through these institutions they could settle internal disputes without having to defer to upper-caste

authority, giving them a degree of structured autonomy that was central to their social life.

The distance between the two groups was also social. Traditional records suggest that Thiyyas regarded themselves as socially distinct from, and in some respects superior to, Ezhavas. A Thiyya would not ordinarily eat rice cooked by an Ezhava, and inter-marriage between the communities was not a customary practice. These were not casual taboos but markers of a boundary that both communities recognised and preserved.

A Union Born of Politics

If the two groups were so distinct, how did they come to be treated as one? The KIRTADS findings suggest that the merging of Thiyya and Ezhava identities is a relatively recent phenomenon, a political category that is less than a century and a half old. Its chief architects were social reformers such as Dr. Palpu, who spoke of a brotherhood between the communities in order to build numerical strength. A larger, unified bloc carried greater weight when bargaining for access to government education and employment, and the language of common identity served that pragmatic purpose.



Questions That Remain

The consequences of that older political merging continue to be felt. The KIRTADS study lends weight to the position taken by Thiyya organisations such as the Thiyya Mahasabha (TMS), which argue that the state government's practice of treating both groups as a single entry for job applications and reservation benefits does not reflect their distinct histories. TMS leaders contend that being required to register as Ezhava in official documents erases Thiyya identity, pooling their population into a larger vote bank while overlooking a lineage that some researchers trace to Central Asia, rather than the Sri Lankan migration theories more commonly associated with Ezhavas.

The debate, at its heart, is about whether administrative convenience should override historical and anthropological difference. As the evidence accumulates, it becomes harder to treat the question as settled.

In the Blood: The Genetic Story of the Thiyyas

For centuries, the origins of the Thiyya community have been told through legend and conjecture. Modern DNA analysis now offers something more grounded: a scientific foundation that moves beyond narrative to reveal a profile of deep, continuous rootedness in the Indian subcontinent. The genetic evidence tells a story of a community whose ancestry stretches back tens of thousands of years, predating the Indus Valley Civilisation, the arrival of farming, and every major migration recorded in the region's history.

A Balance of Ancient Ancestries

The most significant genetic distinction of the Thiyyas lies in the balance between two deep ancestral components: Ancient Ancestral South Indian, known as AASI, and Ancestral North Indian, or ANI. Thiyyas, along with Ezhavas, carry approximately sixty to seventy per cent AASI ancestry, a component that represents the oldest layer of human habitation in South Asia. This places them among the most genetically indigenous non-tribal communities in Kerala, their genomes preserving a signal of the first peoples who populated the subcontinent.

The remaining thirty to forty per cent of their ancestry is ANI, a proportion that tells its own story. It is lower than that found among Nairs, who carry forty to fifty per cent, and considerably lower than Namboothiri Brahmins, whose ANI ancestry reaches fifty to sixty per cent. In fact, the Thiyya genetic profile sits closer to Scheduled Caste communities such as the Pulayas, who carry twenty to thirty per cent ANI, than to the upper castes of

Kerala. This gradient reflects significantly less gene flow from northern Indo-Aryan populations into the Thiyya community compared to groups higher in the caste hierarchy.

The Paternal Line: A Signal Thirty Thousand Years Old

The paternal lineage of Thiyya men is dominated by the Y-DNA haplogroup H-M69, found in thirty-five to forty-five per cent of the population. This marker arose in the Indian subcontinent over thirty thousand years ago, making it older than the Indus Valley Civilisation, older than agriculture in the region, and older than any recorded migration into South Asia. Its frequency among Thiyyas is significantly higher than among Nairs, at twenty-five to thirty-five per cent, or Namboothiri Brahmins, at ten to twenty per cent, serving as a strong signal of deep indigenous roots that distinguish the community from upper-caste groups.

Equally telling is what is absent. The haplogroup R1a-Z93, the marker most associated with Bronze Age Indo-Aryan migrations, appears in only five to ten per cent of Thiyya men. By comparison, Nairs carry fifteen to twenty-five per cent and Namboothiri Brahmins thirty-five to fifty per cent, a stark contrast that underscores how little paternal gene flow the Thiyyas received from those later northern migrations. Other paternal lineages present in the community include R2-M124, at ten to fifteen per cent, an ancient South Asian line, and L-M20, at eight to fourteen per cent, which has been tentatively linked to the Indus Valley Civilisation.

The Maternal Line: The Deepest Layer

On the maternal side, Thiyya DNA is dominated by indigenous South Asian lineages. The most prominent is Haplogroup M2, found in twenty to twenty-five per cent of women, which is estimated to be between fifty thousand and sixty thousand years

old, representing the deepest maternal layer in the subcontinent. Haplogroup M3, at ten to fifteen per cent, adds another ancient strand to this maternal inheritance.

Yet there is a twist. Some research indicates that Thiyya maternal genomes reflect a higher distribution of West Eurasian mitochondrial lineages compared to other South Indian groups, suggesting ancient female-mediated migration into the community at some point in its distant past. This does not overturn the picture of overwhelming indigenous rootedness, but it adds a layer of complexity, hinting that the community's formation was not entirely isolated.

Kinship Across Malabar and Travancore

One of the most striking findings of genetic research is the closeness between the Thiyyas of Malabar and the Ezhavas of southern Kerala. Studies show no statistically significant differences between the two groups: they share identical AASI proportions and haplogroup distributions. Whatever their cultural and historical differences, biologically they are the same community, separated by geography rather than ancestry. The genetic data does not support theories of large-scale migration from Sri Lanka. If such a migration had occurred in the common era, Thiyyas would show genetic signatures distinct from other Kerala communities. Instead, they cluster tightly with other indigenous South Indian groups, reinforcing the picture of a community rooted in the subcontinent for millennia.

There is, however, a more subtle connection to the north-west. Machine-learning studies suggest that Thiyyas, along with Nairs, carry an enhanced Iranian-related ancestry similar to that found in North-west Indian populations such as the Kamboj and Gujjar. This points to very early migrations from North-west India, possibly following the Godavari basin during the late Bronze or Iron Ages, long before the caste system took shape. These ancient migrants likely contributed to the warrior and

feudal communities of the region, leaving a faint but detectable imprint in the genome.

The Imprint of Endogamy

The final piece of the genetic picture is perhaps the most revealing of the community's social history. Thiyyas exhibit elevated Runs of Homozygosity, or ROH, identical DNA sequences inherited from a shared ancestor. This genetic imprint is consistent with strict community endogamy practised over fifty to seventy generations, approximately fifteen hundred to two thousand years. The timeline is significant: it coincides with the solidification of the caste system in Kerala, suggesting that the community's genetic distinctiveness is not primordial but the product of social conventions that took hold in the early centuries of the common era and hardened over time.

Read together, these findings paint a portrait of a community that is overwhelmingly indigenous, shaped by the deepest layers of South Asian ancestry, touched only faintly by later migrations, and bound by centuries of endogamy into the distinct genetic profile it carries today. The legends may speak of distant origins, but the DNA tells a story of remarkable continuity, of a people who have been here, in this land, for longer than recorded memory.

The Kyrgyzstan Theory: A Distant Echo

Among the various narratives that seek to explain where the Thiyya community came from, one of the most intriguing is also one of the most recent. Known as the Kyrgyzstan Theory, it proposes that the ancestors of the Thiyyas did not originate in South India at all, nor did they arrive from Sri Lanka, as some older accounts suggest. Instead, it traces their roots to the mountains of Central Asia, thousands of miles from the Malabar coast where the community has lived for as long as anyone can remember. It is a theory that sits at the intersection of etymology, genetics, and the politics of identity, and it deserves to be understood on its own terms.

A Name from the Mountains

The Kyrgyzstan Theory was most notably articulated by researchers such as Dr. Nelliatt Shyamalan and a scholar known as Damu. Its central claim is striking in its specificity: that the Thiyya community migrated to the Indian subcontinent from Central Asia around 700 BC, and that their ancestral homeland lay in the Tian Shan mountains of Kyrgyzstan. The argument rests on more than geography. Its most provocative thread is etymological, proposing that the very word Thiyya is derived from Tian, the name of those mountains. In this reading, the community's name is not merely a label but a linguistic fossil, a word carried across continents that still preserves the memory of a distant origin.

The appeal of such a theory is not hard to see. For a community engaged in a prolonged effort to distinguish itself from the Ezhavas of southern Kerala, a Central Asian origin offers

something that indigenous or Sri Lankan theories cannot: a heritage that is entirely separate, rooted in a different continent and a different civilisational trajectory. Whether the etymology holds up to rigorous linguistic scrutiny is a question for specialists, but its power as a narrative is undeniable.

What the Genes Say

Community leaders, particularly within the Thiyya Mahasabha, have increasingly pointed to DNA mapping and genetic studies as evidence supporting a Central Asian or at least North-western lineage. The scientific data is more nuanced than the theory it is invoked to support, but it does contain strands that run in a compatible direction. A landmark study by the Centre for Cellular and Molecular Biology, or CCMB, found that Thiyyas, along with Nairs and Ezhavas, show a genetic affinity with populations of North-west India. The study identified an enhanced Iranian-related ancestry in the community, with similarities to groups such as the Kamboj and Gujjar, and machine-learning analysis suggested migration routes from North-west India through Central India to the South-west coast, possibly following the Godavari basin during the late Bronze or Iron Age.

The CCMB study also noted a higher distribution of West Eurasian mitochondrial lineages in the Thiyya maternal genome, suggesting patterns of female-mediated migration distinct from those seen in many other migrant groups. These findings, explored in greater detail in the chapter on genetics, do not confirm a Kyrgyzstan origin specifically. What they do suggest is that the community's ancestry is not purely indigenous in the narrowest sense, but includes traces of ancient migrations from the north-west that predate the caste system by millennia. The Kyrgyzstan Theory reaches beyond what the genetic data can strictly support, but it draws on real currents within that data.

A Tool of Identity

To understand the Kyrgyzstan Theory fully, it must be seen not only as a claim about history but as an instrument of identity. For Thiyya leaders seeking to assert a separate identity from the Ezhava community, the theory serves a powerful intellectual purpose. By tracing their roots to the Tian Shan mountains and ancient Central Asian migrations, they construct a narrative of origin that is wholly independent of the Sri Lankan migration theories traditionally associated with Ezhavas. The two communities, in this telling, do not merely differ in custom or geography; they spring from entirely different wellsprings of human history.

This is not unique to the Thiyyas. Across the world, origin theories serve double duty as instruments of self-definition, and the questions they raise are as much about the present as about the past. The Kyrgyzstan Theory does not need to be definitively proven to perform its function. It needs only to be plausible enough to disrupt the assumption that the Thiyyas and Ezhavas share a single origin story, and in that, it has succeeded in keeping the question alive. Whether future research will confirm, refine, or set aside the theory remains to be seen, but its role in shaping the community's sense of itself is already a fact of the present.

The Chekavars: Warriors of the Northern Ballads

Before the Thiyya community produced doctors, lawyers, and civil servants, it produced warriors. The martial heritage of the community is centrally defined by the Chekavars, also known as Chekon or Chevakar, a specialised class of warriors in Malabar who were the supreme practitioners and instructors of Kalaripayattu, the ancient martial art of Kerala. To understand the Chekavars is to understand a world in which honour was settled by the sword, in which a community classified as avarna, outside the varna system, nevertheless held an indispensable place in the military machinery of kings.



Masters of the Duel

The Chekavars were legendary for their combat skills and held a unique professional status in medieval Malabar society. They were not merely fighters but teachers, the supreme authorities on the martial arts of their time. As early as 1677, the Dutch Governor Hendrik van Rhee recorded that Chekavars served

as instructors in fencing schools, teaching martial arts to other groups, including the Nairs. It was a remarkable inversion of the caste hierarchy: a community ranked below the Nairs in social standing was nevertheless the community from which the Nairs learned to fight.

The Chekavar's most distinctive role, however, was as masters of the ankam. The ankam was a formal duel to the death, fought by professional Chekavar champions on behalf of local chieftains or families who had a dispute to settle. It was not chaos but a structured judicial mechanism, a means of resolving conflicts through single combat rather than wider warfare. Two parties in dispute would each engage a Chekavar champion, and the outcome of the duel was accepted as a binding judgment. The Chekavar who fought the ankam did not fight for himself; he fought as a professional instrument of justice, his body the medium through which disputes were settled and honour was restored.

Despite being classified as avarna, outside the varna system, Chekavars had an unavoidable presence in the militias of local rulers and kings. The Zamorins of Calicut, the most powerful rulers on the Malabar coast, relied on them, as did the rulers of Kadathanad and Kurumbranad. A community that the caste system placed at the bottom was, in military terms, indispensable at the top, and no ruler who hoped to maintain his power could afford to do without them.

The Puthooram Cycle: Heroes of the Ballads

The valour and sacrifice of these martial families are celebrated in the Vadakkan Pattukal, the Northern Ballads, a collection of medieval Malayalam songs that form one of the great cycles of Kerala's oral literature. At the centre of the most famous of these cycles stands the Puthooram family, a lineage of Thiyya Chekavars whose stories have been sung for centuries.

The chief hero of the Puthooram cycle is Aromal Chekavar, celebrated for his prowess in the ankam. The ballads recount his rise with a mixture of admiration and tragedy, for Aromal was killed through deceit by his cousin, Chandu Chekavar, during his first major duel. The betrayal of Aromal by Chandu is one of the most famous stories in Kerala's martial literature, a tale of envy, ambition, and the destruction of a hero at the moment of his triumph.

Yet the Puthooram cycle is not a story of men alone. Aromal's sister, Unniyarcha, remains the most iconic female figure in Kerala's martial history. She was a supreme practitioner of Kalaripayattu who used her skills to protect her dignity and her family's honour, and her story symbolises a high degree of female autonomy and agency within the Thiyya martial tradition. In a society that often relegated women to the margins, Unniyarcha stands as a reminder that the Chekavar tradition produced women who were as formidable as its men, warriors whose skills were not decorative but practical, deployed in defence of their own bodies and their own names.

Chandu Chekavar himself is a more complex figure than the label of villain allows. Though cast as the betrayer in traditional ballads, he was a peerless warrior in his own right, and modern cultural adaptations have sometimes recast him as a tragic figure rather than a mere traitor. The film *Oru Vadakkan Veeragatha*, an epic retelling of the Puthooram story, presents Chandu as a man caught between loyalty and desire, a reading that has reshaped how a new generation understands the old songs. It is a reminder that the ballads are not fixed texts but living traditions, their meanings reshaped by each age that sings them.

From Warrior to Deity

The impact of these martial heroes extends beyond literature into the spiritual life of North Malabar. Several warriors celebrated in the ballads were posthumously deified and are

today propitiated in Theyyam rituals, their martial memory preserved not only in song but in sacred performance. The most prominent example is Kathivanoor Veeran, a popular Theyyam performed in memory of the great Thiyya warrior Mandhappan Chekavar, whose story has been encountered in earlier chapters.

The connection between martial art and ritual is not merely thematic but physical. The ritual dance of these warrior-deities often incorporates specific Kalaripayattu movements, weaving the community's martial techniques into the sacred enactment of the deity. When a performer channels Kathivanoor Veeran, he does not merely act; he fights, his body executing the forms and strikes of a martial art that was developed on the battlefield and preserved in the training ground. The line between combat and worship, between the warrior who fights and the deity who is invoked, dissolves in the performance itself.

This fusion of martial and spiritual traditions is one of the most distinctive features of Thiyya heritage. The Chekavars who fought the ankam and the performers who invoke them in Theyyam are separated by centuries, but they are connected by a continuous thread: the belief that valour, when it reaches a certain pitch, transcends the human and enters the sacred. The warriors of the Northern Ballads did not merely die; they were transformed, their lives preserved not in stone monuments but in the living traditions of combat, song, and ritual that continue to this day.



Uniyarcha

The Thiyyar Regiment: From Chekavars to Soldiers

Long before the Thiyya community produced doctors, lawyers, and civil servants, it produced soldiers. The Thiyyar Regiment, known in Malayalam as the Thiyyar Pattalam, was a specialised military class created by the British Empire, drawing thousands of recruits from the Thiyya community of North Malabar, particularly the Kannur district. Recognised as one of the oldest army regiments in India, it represents a chapter of Thiyya history in which the community's ancient martial traditions were channelled into the structured machinery of colonial warfare, transforming warriors into professional soldiers.



Thiyya Regiment

Why the British Came Looking

The regiment was based in Thalassery, chosen by the British for its strategic importance as a centre of colonial power in Malabar. But the decision to raise a Thiyya unit was not arbitrary. It was rooted in an observation that startled the British when they first encountered it: in 1792, Thiyya warriors constituted half of the Kottayam Raja's army. The community that the caste system had pushed to the margins was, in martial terms, a force to be reckoned with, and the British recognised an opportunity that local princes had overlooked.

Unlike the native rulers who often excluded Thiyyas from military service, the British readily employed them, and this willingness created a smoother relationship between the community and the colonial administration. Historical records such as the Thalassery Manuscripts mention a Thiyyar Pattalam as early as 1799, suggesting that the regiment's roots predate formal colonial military reorganisation. What began as an informal arrangement, the British tapping into an existing pool of trained fighters, gradually hardened into an institutionalised military unit.

Ranks and Leaders

Within the local militia under the East India Company, Thiyyas held responsible positions of real authority. Many served as Subedars and Jemadhars, the senior Indian ranks through which the British governed their indigenous troops. The most notable figure was Ayyathan Chandhoman Jemadhar, the first person to occupy the highest rank available to an Indian in the British Indian Army under this regiment, eventually retiring as a Subedar Major. He was a strong personality who led many wars, and his legacy extended beyond the battlefield: he was the great-granduncle of Dr. Ayyathan Gopalan, the renowned social reformer, a connection that links the community's martial and reformist traditions in a single family line.

The Ayyathan family of Randuthara, near Dharmadom, was central to the regiment's history. This aristocratic warrior clan, already encountered in these pages for its scholars, navigators, and physicians, produced the soldiers who filled the regiment's ranks and officered its campaigns. The family embodied the dual nature of the community's transformation: the same household that sent men to fight under the British flag also sent them into medicine, scholarship, and social reform.

Baptism of Fire: The Pazhassi Wars

The regiment's first major test came in the conflict between Pazhassi Raja and the British East India Company around 1802. The battalion played a significant role in this prolonged and bloody guerrilla war, one of the most challenging campaigns the British faced in South India. The irony was sharp: Thiyya soldiers, fighting for the British against a Malayali king who had himself employed Thiyya warriors, found themselves on the opposite side of a struggle that pitted colonial power against indigenous resistance.

The British deployed the regiment across a range of military operations in the region, relying on it both as a regular force supporting European regiments and as a pool of what they called native irregulars, or *sebundies*, maintained for wartime needs. The regulars were recruited from the local Thiyyas, referred to in British records as *Tiveys*, and formed a disciplined core that could be deployed alongside European troops. The irregulars were a looser formation, raised and discharged as operational demands required.

Discharge and Aftermath

That flexible structure had its costs. In March 1802, orders were received to discharge Nair, Thiyya, and Moplah irregulars to reduce battalion numbers to peace establishment levels. The decision threw hundreds of armed men back into civilian life,

and the colonial administration was sufficiently worried about the prospect of unemployed soldiers to take preventative action. General Stuart suggested that the discharged men be taken into service as revenue or police peons, or be given waste land to cultivate, to prevent social unrest.

It was an acknowledgment, however cautious, that men trained for war could not simply be abandoned without consequence. The concern was not unfounded. The same communities that provided the British with soldiers also produced the leaders of the labour movements and political struggles that would later challenge colonial rule, and the discipline and organisation learned in military service did not simply disappear when a man laid down his rifle.

A Legacy That Endured

While its early predecessors date to the late eighteenth century, historical records note the Thiyyar Regiment as existing until 1950, a lifespan that carried it from the age of muskets and palanquins through two world wars and into the era of Indian independence. The regiment remains a significant part of Thiyya heritage, representing the community's transition from the legendary martial traditions of the Chekavars to a structured professional military role under colonial rule.

It also represents something more subtle: the community's ability to find opportunity within systems designed to exclude it. The caste order that kept Thiyyas from the temples and dining tables of upper-caste Malabar could not keep them from its battlefields. The British, who cared less for caste protocol than for military competence, opened a door that native rulers had kept shut, and the Thiyyas walked through it in their thousands. The regiment they served in may have been a colonial instrument, but the courage and discipline of the men who filled its ranks belonged, in the end, to the community itself.

The Mannanar Dynasty: Kings of the Thiyyas

In the lush landscape of North Malabar, northwest of Taliparamba, lies the village of Eruvessi. It was here that the Mannanar dynasty established its seat of power and earned a designation unique among the communities of the region: the Thiyyar Kings. Their authority was defined not only by territory and wealth but by a distinctive title, a singular architectural tradition, and a legacy that still echoes along the banks of the Eruvessi River.



Thiyya King

The Title of Muthedath Aramanakkal

At the head of the royal family stood a figure known by the prestigious title Muthedath Aramanakkal. This was no ceremonial honour. The title carried with it the supreme authority to adjudicate disputes within the Thiyya caste, functioning as a final court of appeal for the community. Matters

that could not be resolved at lower levels of the caste's internal governance found their way to the Aramanakkal, whose word settled them.

The position also conferred unmistakable markers of royal standing. The Mannanar was recognised as a feudatory ruler, the Thiyyar King, and enjoyed the privileges that came with that rank: the right to travel in palanquins and the protection of a personal militia of over two hundred armed Nair soldiers. In a society where such trappings were carefully guarded markers of status, these were signs that the Mannanar's authority was acknowledged beyond the Thiyya community itself.

The Five Palaces: Anju Aramana

The dynasty was traditionally described as the ruler of five places, a phrase that referred to its five royal mansions, collectively known as the Anju Aramana. These were not mere residences but institutions, each with its own role in the life of the ruling household. They were named Moothedath Aramana, the primary seat of power; Elayidath Aramana; Puthan Araman; Puthiyidath Aramana; and Mundaya Aramana.



Aramanna

What set these mansions apart was the very word used to describe them. Across Kerala, the residences of rajas were conventionally called Kovilakams or Kottarams. The Mannanar's homes alone were termed Aramanas, a word believed to derive from aracha, meaning king, and mana, meaning the king's court. It was a linguistic distinction that reinforced a social one, marking the Mannanar as a class apart even within the broader architecture of Kerala royalty.

Of the five, the Moothedath Aramana held the greatest significance. It stood near the Padikutty Devi Temple, a site deeply entwined with the origin myths of the deity Sree Muthappan. The proximity of palace and temple was no coincidence; for the Mannanar, political authority and sacred geography were inseparable, each lending weight to the other.

A Kingdom Measured in Mountains

The power of the Mannanar rested on an extraordinary base of land. Historical registers from 1905 record that the dynasty owned thousands of acres, including twenty-three separate mountains stretching from the Western Ghats to the border of Coorg. To stand at the edge of such an estate was to look across a domain that few families in the region could rival, a landscape of forest, hill, and valley that sustained both the household and the community it governed.

Yet this prosperity could not withstand the pressures of the nineteenth century. Heavy land taxes imposed by the British colonial administration, combined with conflicts involving local vassals, steadily eroded the dynasty's foundations. As revenues shrank and disputes multiplied, the palaces fell into disrepair. Today the crumbling ruins of the ancient Aramanas can still be seen along the banks of the Eruvessi River, quiet monuments to a dynasty that once held sway over the Thiyyas of Malabar and gave them, for a time, kings of their own.

The Mannanar Kings: Crown, Sword, and Silken Leaf

The Mannanar dynasty has been encountered already in these pages: their five Aramanas in Eruvessi, their role as supreme arbiters of Thiyya caste disputes, and their extraordinary function as protectors of excommunicated Namboothiri women. Yet the full story of the Thiyyar Kings contains details that reveal just how deeply their status was embedded in the ritual and political fabric of Malabar. From the coronation rites they shared with the Zamorins of Calicut to the silken plantain leaf on which they alone were served, the Mannanar occupied a position unlike any other Thiyya family. This chapter fills in the portrait, focusing on the symbols, privileges, and the violent end that closed their reign.

The Varakat Illam

The Mannanar belonged to the Varakat illam, also known as the Varaka Thiyyar, a clan identity that placed them within the broader Thiyya community while simultaneously distinguishing them as a ruling lineage. The head of the family held the prestigious title Muthedath Aramanakkal, a name that carried with it both political authority and judicial finality within the community. To be a Mannanar was to stand at the intersection of Thiyya identity and royal privilege, a position that the surrounding political order acknowledged, however reluctantly, for centuries.

Coronation Like a Zamorin

The privileges that set the Mannanar apart were not merely a matter of wealth or land. They extended into the most intimate rituals of kingship. The enthronement of a Mannanar involved the Aryittuvazhcha ritual, the ceremonial offering of rice to the

gods, a rite identical to that performed by the Zamorins of Calicut, the most powerful Hindu rulers on the Malabar coast. That a Thiyya dynasty performed the same coronation ritual as the Zamorin was no small thing. It signified that the Mannanar's authority was not merely tolerated but ritually consecrated, embedded in a sacred order that transcended caste hierarchy.

The external markers of that authority were equally striking. The king was escorted by more than two hundred armed Nair soldiers, a personal militia drawn from a caste that stood above the Thiyyas in the conventional hierarchy, yet served a Thiyya king. He travelled in a palanquin, a mode of transport reserved for those of the highest rank, and was authorised to wear gold neck jewellery and silk clothing, garments that caste custom would ordinarily have denied to a Thiyya.

Most intriguing of all was his weaponry. The Mannanar carried a shield and a sword made of thin, pliable steel, a blade resembling the urumi, the flexible sword of Kalarippayattu, worn coiled like a belt around the waist. It was a weapon that doubled as an ornament, concealable and deadly, and it spoke to a martial tradition that ran alongside the dynasty's judicial and ritual functions.

The Silken Leaf

The Mannanar's status was acknowledged even at the tables of other rulers. On formal occasions at the palace of the Chirakkal Raja, the Mannanar was served food on a tender plantain leaf known as the pattiḷa, the silken leaf, a distinction reserved for him alone. Other princes at the same gathering were served on leaves softened over a fire, a lesser preparation. It was a small difference, easily missed by anyone unfamiliar with the codes of Malabar dining, but in the precise grammar of caste hierarchy, it spoke volumes. The silken leaf placed the Mannanar above every other prince in the room, a Thiyya king honoured above higher-caste royals through a tradition too old and too entrenched to override.

Temples and the Sacred Order

The dynasty's spiritual authority was anchored in a network of royal family temples. These included Kunnathoor Padi, the Muthappan Madappura, and the Padikutti temple, sites that connected the Mannanar to the broader sacred landscape of North Malabar. The Sree Muthappan cult, which pervades the spiritual life of the Thiyya community, is believed to have originated in Eruvessi, near the Mannanar's ancestral palaces. The dynasty's temples were not merely places of worship but instruments of their sovereignty, binding sacred authority to political power in a way that reinforced both.

The Fall

The dynasty's decline began in 1822, the year that heavy land taxes imposed by the British colonial administration began to bite. The financial pressure was compounded by a more dangerous threat: conflict with their own vassals, the Karakkattidam Nayanars, who were supported in their defiance by the Chirakkal Kovilakom, the ruling house of the region. The Mannanar were caught between the fiscal squeeze of colonial taxation and the political machinations of rival powers who saw an opportunity to diminish a dynasty whose authority they resented.

The end came violently. The last recognised king, Muthetadath Aramanakkal Kunhikelappan Mannanar, was killed by assailants on the seventh of March, 1902. His death marked the extinction of a line that had ruled for centuries, a dynasty that had performed the coronation rites of Zamorins, sheltered the outcast women of Brahmins, and been served on silken leaves at the tables of kings. Today, the ruins of the ancient Aramanas can still be seen at the foothills of the Western Ghats, their crumbling walls the last visible remnants of a royal house that once held the Thiyya community in its sovereign care.

The Sanctuary of the Thiyyar Kings: Mannanar and the Namboothiri Women

The Mannanar dynasty, remembered as the Thiyyar Kings of North Malabar, held a role that went far beyond the usual business of ruling. Their Aramanas in Eruvessi were not only seats of political power but designated sanctuaries for some of the most vulnerable women in Kerala's caste society: Namboothiri women who had been cast out by their own community. This responsibility, sanctioned by the very social order that produced the outcasts, made the Mannanar dynasty an essential safety valve within the rigid machinery of Brahminical purity laws.

Excommunication: A Woman Cast Out

In traditional Kerala society, Namboothiri women lived under severe codes of conduct. A woman accused of infidelity, loss of chastity, or violation of pollution rules faced a ritual trial known as Smarthavicharam, a judicial process designed to determine her guilt. If found guilty, she was formally declared BhRASht, meaning excommunicated, and cast out of her community entirely. Stripped of all ties to her family and her home, she was left to fend for herself in a society that had no place for her, often forced to flee to avoid slavery or worse.

It was into this void that the Mannanar stepped. Their Aramanas were recognised as sanctuaries where such women could find refuge, and the nature of their reception was governed by a ritual of remarkable precision. A woman seeking sanctuary entered the royal mansion through one of two gates, and the gate she chose determined the shape of the rest of her life.

The Two Gates

If an ostracised woman entered through the eastern gate, she was received and integrated into the royal household as the Mannanar's wife. If she entered through the northern gate, she was accepted as the Mannanar's sister. In either case, her arrival was marked by rituals that signified a new birth, a symbolic wiping clean of the social stain that had driven her from her home. She was then provided with the facilities and living standards of the royal household, ensuring that despite her excommunication, she did not lose her dignity or her place in society.

The symbolism of the two gates is striking. A single architectural choice, the direction from which a woman approached, carried the weight of an entire life redefined. It was a system that combined ritual formality with a genuine act of shelter, turning the Mannanar's palace into a place where a woman written off by one community could be received and restored by another.

The Limits of Refuge

The sanctuary, however, was not unconditional. The Mannanar's protection operated within the boundaries of the caste system it served. If a Namboothiri woman had been excommunicated for a relationship with a man ranked lower than a Thiyya, the Mannanar would not accept her. In such cases, the woman was turned away, left to flee into the forests of the Western Ghats, where survival was unlikely and death the probable outcome. The refuge offered by the Mannanar thus had a hard edge: it extended protection within the caste hierarchy but did not break it.

This condition reveals the complex position the Mannanar occupied. They were not reformers challenging the caste system; they were figures woven into it, performing a function that the system itself required. Historical analysis suggests that the Namboothiris permitted the Mannanar dynasty to survive

through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries precisely because their sanctuary was a social necessity. The Brahmin community's own purity laws, as severe as they were, produced outcasts who could not simply be abandoned without consequence. The Mannanar provided the structured means of receiving them, and that role bought the dynasty a measure of security that other Thiyya institutions did not enjoy.

A Bond Sealed by Adoption

The link between the Mannanar and the Namboothiri community ran deeper still. If the royal family lacked a successor, they held the right to meet the Kurumathur Namboothiri to adopt a virgin into the royal household, thereby continuing the lineage. This privilege was extraordinary in the context of Kerala's caste order: a Thiyya dynasty formally entitled to adopt a Brahmin woman into its ruling line. It speaks to a relationship between the two communities that was not merely one of tolerance but of structured, institutional interdependence.

Taken together, these customs reveal the Mannanar as far more than regional chieftains. They stood as essential judicial and social figures who moderated the consequences of a rigid caste system, absorbing its casualties and, in doing so, securing their own place within it. Their Aramanas were palaces of political power, yes, but they were also sanctuaries, places where the broken edges of caste society were quietly, ritually, mended.

The Architecture of a Community: Clans, Courts, and Customs

A community is not merely a collection of families who share a name. It is a structure, an architecture of relationships, rules, and institutions that holds people together across generations. The Thiyya community of North Malabar possessed such an architecture in remarkable detail: a clan system of precise genealogical divisions, a judicial hierarchy that operated entirely outside the authority of upper castes, and marriage customs shaped as much by economics as by tradition. Together, these formed the internal governance of a community that maintained its own social order for centuries.

The Eight Illams and Their Names

The matrilineal foundations of Thiyya society have been noted in earlier chapters, but the specifics of the clan system deserve their own attention. The community was historically divided into a strict matrilineal clan structure of eight Illams, each serving as a fundamental social unit whose membership was passed down through the female line. These clans functioned as the primary regulators of marriage through exogamy: a Thiyya could not marry within their own Illam.

The names of these eight clans survive in historical records and in the ritual vocabulary of Theyyam, the performance tradition that preserves the community's ancestral memory. They are Koyikkal, Nellikkal, also known as Nellikka; Vanmarikka, also called Vamseri; Pazhayar, Mamkuti, Thenamkuti, Patayankuti, and Villakuti, also rendered as Vilakkamkudi. Each of these eight Illams was further divided into four Kiriyaams, yielding a total of thirty-two sub-divisions. This was not a loose affiliation but a

precise genealogical grid, one that mapped every member of the community into a specific place within a specific clan and sub-clan, determining whom they could marry and how they related to their neighbours.

The Courts of the Community

Long before the establishment of modern civil and criminal courts, the Thiyya community maintained a highly organised internal governance system to settle disputes independently of upper-caste intervention. This was not informal mediation but a structured judicial hierarchy with defined tiers, each with its own jurisdiction and authority. At its base stood the Desasabha, the village-level caste assembly.

The Desasabha was led by the eldest members of powerful households, known as Tarayil karanavanmar, who wielded the authority to adjudicate both civil and criminal cases within the community. Their powers were real and far-reaching: they could impose fines, settle property disputes, and even excommunicate members who violated social or religious laws. To be cast out by the Desasabha was to lose one's place within the community entirely, a punishment that carried consequences more immediate and devastating than any colonial court could impose.

Disputes that could not be resolved at the village level were escalated to a Kazhakam, a higher assembly composed of fourteen elders drawn from four different neighbourhoods, or Taras. The Kazhakam represented a broader cross-section of the community, and its deliberations carried greater weight. For the most serious allegations, or disputes involving influential persons, a supreme body known as a Kottil was convened. The Kottil was an assembly of elders from as many as sixty-four Taras, a gathering of nearly unprecedented scale whose judgment was final. This three-tier structure, Desasabha to Kazhakam to Kottil, gave the Thiyya community a complete

internal judicial system, one that allowed it to manage its own social order and maintain its autonomy without recourse to the courts of rulers or upper castes.

The Transition to Patriliney

The clan system and its judicial apparatus rested on the matrilineal foundation of Marumakkathayam, a system explored in detail in earlier chapters. As discussed, the Madras Marumakkathayam Act of 1933 provided the legal framework for the dismantling of this order, allowing the partition of tharavad joint families and redirecting inheritance from a man's nephews and nieces to his own wife and children. Reformers like Moorkkoth Kumaran argued that the matrilineal system was no longer practical for a modern, educated elite, and encouraged the adoption of paternal family names, a shift reformers called a jump into Makkathayam.

What is worth noting here is how the judicial structure adapted. The Desasabhas and Kazhakams did not vanish overnight with the passing of the Act, but their authority was gradually undermined as the kinship system they arbitrated was legally dissolved. The tharavad, the joint household whose disputes the Desasabha resolved, fragmented into nuclear families with fewer collective assets to govern and fewer communal obligations to enforce. The judicial hierarchy, once the backbone of community autonomy, slowly gave way to the civil courts of the modern state.

Fraternal Polyandry: A Marriage Born of Necessity

Among the most remarkable and least understood customs of the Thiyya community was fraternal polyandry, a practice in which multiple brothers shared a single wife. It was a rare custom, practised by some Thiyya families particularly in Ponnani and southern Malabar, and it deserves to be understood not as an exotic curiosity but as a rational response to the economic pressures of its time.

In this system, the eldest brother would formally marry a woman, who then became the shared wife of his younger brothers through a simple ritual involving the sharing of sweetened milk. The wife typically lived in the husband's home, and the arrangement bore similarities in its structure to fraternal polyandry as practised in Tibetan society. The motivation was not sensual but economic. By sharing a single wife, brothers avoided the fragmentation of ancestral land that would have followed if each married separately and established his own household. They consolidated their limited resources to meet the heavy demands of rent and customary dues owed to landlords, preserving the family's property intact across a single generation rather than dividing it among several.

The concept of fatherhood within this system was correspondingly collective. Children born from these unions were considered the children of all the fathers, not of a single biological parent. The brothers were collectively addressed as Achanmar, the plural for father, and the children held inheritance rights to the property of all their fathers jointly. It was a system that subordinated biological paternity to communal responsibility, ensuring that no child was left without provision and no brother's line was privileged above another's.

The practice began to fade in the 1930s, as social reformers like Sree Narayana Guru urged the community to abandon it in favour of monogamy. The reformers' arguments were both moral and practical: polyandry was increasingly seen as incompatible with modern respectability, and the economic pressures that had made it rational were themselves changing. The final legal blow came with the Hindu Marriage Act of 1955, which gave full legal sanction to monogamy and effectively ended the practice. What disappeared with it was not merely a marriage custom but an entire strategy of survival, one in which a family's survival was secured through the collective sacrifice of individual conjugal autonomy.

The Madras Marumakkathayam Act: Rewriting the Family

Of all the forces that reshaped Thiyya society in the twentieth century, few were as sweeping as a single piece of legislation. The Madras Marumakkathayam Act of 1933 did not merely adjust a legal technicality; it fundamentally transformed the social fabric of the Thiyya community in North Malabar by facilitating the transition from matriliney to patriliney. It changed who inherited what, who lived with whom, what names people carried, and even what it meant to be a Thiyya at all. The ripples of that change are still felt today.

The System It Replaced

For centuries, the Thiyyas of North Malabar had lived under a strict matrilineal system known as Marumakkathayam, organised around eight clans called Illams. In this system, lineage and property were traced through the mother's line, and the basic social unit was not the nuclear family but the tharavad, the matrilineal joint household in which property was held collectively by a network of kin. A man's earnings did not automatically pass to his wife and children; they flowed into the common pool of the tharavad, to be inherited ultimately by his sister's children, his nephews and nieces, rather than by his own biological offspring. It was a system that prioritised the collective over the individual and the maternal line over the paternal.

By the early twentieth century, however, this system was already under strain. The economic foundations that had sustained large tharavads were weakening, and many Thiyya families no longer possessed the wealth required to maintain sprawling joint households. As the reformer Moorkkoth Kumaran observed,

many Thiyyas were already living with their wives and children out of sheer economic necessity, simply because there were not many wealthy tharavads left capable of supporting large matrilineal groups. The law had not yet caught up with reality, but the reality was already changing.

Partitioning the Tharavad

The 1933 Act provided the legal framework for that change. Its most immediate effect was to allow the division and partition of the tharavad itself. Where property had once been held collectively by the matrilineal kin, the Act enabled individual members to demand their share, breaking up the joint household into smaller, individually held units. The large tharavads that had once been the bedrock of Thiyya social life began to disintegrate, gradually giving way to separate households organised around the conjugal family rather than the matrilineal clan.

This was not a swift or uniform process. Some families partitioned eagerly, seizing the opportunity to claim individual ownership of assets that had been held in common for generations. Others resisted, clinging to the old system and its emphasis on collective welfare. But the legal door had been opened, and once it was, the pressure of individual claims proved impossible to hold back. Over the following decades, the tharavad system steadily eroded, its grand joint households diminishing as partition followed partition.

A New Direction for Inheritance

The redirection of inheritance was the Act's most profound innovation. Under the new law, a man's property could be legally inherited by his own wife and children. This was a revolution in miniature. Under Marumakkathayam, a man's wealth had passed to his sister's children; now it would pass to the children he had raised. The maternal uncle's obligation to his sister's

children, a cornerstone of the old system, gave way to the father's obligation to his own. The entire architecture of kinship obligation was quietly rewritten.

The change was reflected in naming conventions as well. Educated Thiyyas in government service began adopting their father's family names, a practice that reformers described as a jump into Makkathayam. Where a person's identity had once been anchored in their matrilineal tharavad name, it was now increasingly traced through the father's line. A name, in this context, was not merely a label; it was a declaration of which system one belonged to, and the shift in naming marked the shift in belonging.

The Nuclear Family Takes Hold

As the tharavads fragmented and inheritance shifted, the nuclear patriarchal family emerged as the new norm. The Act gave legal sanction to what was already happening on the ground, formalising the reality that many Thiyyas were already living in smaller, father-centred households. The reformers who championed this transition saw it as a step towards modernity, a means of aligning Thiyya practice with the wider world. In this they were not wrong, but the transition carried costs that were not evenly distributed.

What Women Lost

The most complex and least celebrated consequence of the Act was its effect on women. Under the matrilineal system, Thiyya women had held significant property rights and social status within the tharavad. They were not dependants but stakeholders, participants in a collective structure that recognised their claims. The normalisation of patriliney changed this. By making the husband the primary guardian of property, the Act diminished the role women had previously played. Their traditional rights as

members of the tharavad were overshadowed by a new legal order in which property and authority flowed through the father.

Some researchers have argued that this loss was not merely economic but social, that the transition to patriliney eroded a framework in which women's positions had been structurally protected, replacing it with one in which their security depended on their relationship to a man. It is a reminder that what is called modernisation is rarely an unqualified progress; it redistributes power as it reshapes institutions, and those who gain in one dimension may lose in another.

The Erosion of a Distinct Identity

The Act's consequences extended beyond the family into the fraught question of community identity. Along with similar regulations enacted in Travancore, the legislation played a role in the homogenisation of the Thiyya and Ezhava communities. By establishing common laws for inheritance and marriage for both groups, who were frequently grouped together in official British and native records, the specific matrilineal traditions of the North Malabar Thiyyas were increasingly subsumed into a broader, unified Ezhava political and legal category.

This was, in a sense, the deepest irony of the Act. By modernising Thiyya family law and bringing it into alignment with patrilineal norms, the legislation also brought it into alignment with the Ezhava community's practices, eroding the very differences in kinship and inheritance that had once distinguished the two groups. The Thiyyas' distinctive matrilineal heritage, one of the strongest markers of their separate identity, was legally dissolved into a common framework. The law that was meant to bring modernity thus also became an instrument of assimilation, and the debate over Thiyya distinctness that continues to this day must reckon with the fact that one of the most powerful arguments for that distinctness, the matrilineal system, was dismantled with the stroke of a pen.

Spiritual Foundations: The Living Gods of the Thiyyas

The spiritual life of the Thiyya community does not reside primarily in grand temples or Brahminical ritual. It lives in the sacred groves, the kavus, scattered across the landscape of North Malabar, and in the performance tradition known as Theyyam, or Kaliyattam, a folk religion that traces its origins to ancient ancestor worship, hero worship, and tribal religious practice. What is not always understood is how deeply the Thiyya community is woven into the very fabric of this tradition. It is not merely a community that participates in Theyyam; it is the community from which the vast majority of Theyyam deities originated, evolving from the propitiation of deified ancestors, legendary warriors, and extraordinary historical figures whose lives left marks too deep for death to erase.

A Pantheon Born from the Community

The deities of Theyyam are not distant, abstract gods. They are remembered people, men and women of the Thiyya community whose lives and deaths were transformed into sacred memory through ritual. Kathivanoor Veeran commemorates the great Thiyya warrior Mandhappan Chekavar, a hero of the Vadakkan Pattukal, the Northern Ballads, whose martial valour earned him deification. Chittheyi Bhagavathi, encountered earlier in the sacred groves of Kasaragod, deifies a Thiyya woman whose soul was believed to have merged with the Goddess after her death. In both cases, the divine is not separate from the human but grows directly out of it, a community ancestor elevated to the status of a god.

The pantheon extends further. Ankkakkaran, also known as Karivanchal Daivathar, represents the memory of a renowned Thiyya warrior deified as a deity, another martial hero whose spirit was too powerful to be forgotten. Thottumkara Bhagavathi celebrates the spirit of a Thiyya woman who died due to local cruelty, her suffering transmuted through ritual into a form of divine protection. These are not generic mythological figures but named individuals, rooted in specific places and specific histories, their stories preserved not in written texts but in the living performance of Theyyam itself.

Authority Over the Sacred

The Thiyya community's connection to Theyyam extends well beyond being the source of its deities. The community holds significant ritual authority over the tradition itself. Thiyyas are traditionally responsible for the Kalasham submission, the ceremonial presentation of the sacred vessel to the deity, and they possess the ancient right to cancel a performance if sacred protocols are not strictly followed. At major shrines like Andallur Kavu, explored in an earlier chapter, the community acts as primary custodian, with the central deity Antallur Daivathar, identified with Lord Rama, belonging specifically to the Thiyya community rather than to any upper-caste temple tradition.

This authority is not honorary but operational. To hold the right to halt a Theyyam, the most sacred of acts, is to stand at the centre of the ritual's governance, a role that has been exercised and upheld through generations. It places the Thiyya community in a position that the caste hierarchy would not predict: a community ranked below the upper castes in social standing nonetheless holding supreme authority over one of the region's most important religious traditions.

Sree Muthappan: The Clan Ancestor

At the heart of the Thiyya spiritual world stands Sree Muthappan, recognised as the most prominent deity in North Malabar and regarded as the Kulapoorvikan, the clan ancestor, of the Thiyya community. This is a designation of extraordinary significance. To call a deity the clan ancestor is to say that the god is not merely worshipped by the community but is believed to have originated from within it, that the divine and the communal are, in this tradition, inseparable.



Muthappan

The shrines dedicated to Muthappan are called Madappuras, and the Parassinikadavu Madappura stands as the most important spiritual centre and permanent abode of the god-head. As explored in earlier chapters, the Parassinikadavu Madappura is a private temple owned and managed by the Parassini Madappura family, with whom the Thayyil family shares deep-rooted connections. While the Theyyam performance itself is carried out by the Vannan community, the puja rituals, sacred rites, and administrative management of Muthappan shrines are exclusively performed by Thiyyas.

The history of the Muthappan cult is inextricably linked to elite Thiyya lineages. The cult is believed to have originated in Eruvessi, near the seat of the Mannanar dynasty, the Thiyyar Kings, who held the Muthappan Madappura as one of their royal family temples. At regional shrines like the Nileshwar Muthappan Madappura, the cult remains under the patronage of the prominent Korothe family. Through these lineages, the community's spiritual authority has been preserved and transmitted across centuries.

A Dravidian Tradition of Inclusion

What distinguishes the spiritual tradition of the Thiyyas from the Brahminical Hinduism of upper-caste Kerala is not only its non-Brahminical character but its explicit inclusivity. The rituals associated with Muthappan reflect a Dravidian tradition that emphasises human brotherhood and welcomes devotees of all castes and religions, including Muslims, who participate enthusiastically in the festivals. The Madappura does not exclude; it gathers.

This inclusivity extends to the offerings themselves. Unlike conventional Hindu temples, where vegetarian offerings are the norm, Madappura rituals involve the offering of toddy, known in Sanskrit as *madyam*, and meat or fish, known as *mamsam*. These are not aberrations but reflections of ancient community

customs, rooted in a way of life in which the coconut palm and its sap were central and in which the boundaries between the sacred and the everyday were deliberately porous. The offerings speak of a tradition in which the divine is not fed on the abstractions of Sanskrit hymns but on the concrete realities of a community's daily life: its food, its drink, its labour.

Taken together, the spiritual foundations of the Thiyya community reveal a tradition that is at once deeply indigenous and radically inclusive. Its gods are not distant figures enthroned in granite temples but ancestors, warriors, and women whose lives and deaths were woven into sacred memory through performance. Its authority is held not by Brahmin priests but by the community itself, through lineages and families that have served as custodians for centuries. And its doors are open not to the few who meet the demands of caste purity but to all who come, a living expression of a tradition in which the divine belongs, above all, to the people.

Andallur Kavu: Where the Deity Belongs to the People

Near Thalassery, nestled in the spiritual landscape of North Malabar, stands Andallur Kavu, a sacred grove that is far more than a place of worship. For the Thiyya community, it is a profound symbol of cultural and ritual authority, a living testament to centuries of tradition in which faith and community identity are inseparably intertwined. What makes this Kavu distinctive is not merely its antiquity but the specific bond it enshrines between a deity and the people who claim him as their own.

A Deity Who Belongs to the Thiyyas

Across North Malabar, many sibling deities are associated with various clans and communities, each rooted in its own patch of sacred geography. Among them, the principal deity of Andallur Kavu, known as Antallur Daivathar and identified with Lord Rama, holds a singular distinction: he specifically belongs to the Thiyya community. This is not a matter of mere attendance or devotion. The deity's affiliation with the Thiyyas is a foundational fact of the Kavu's identity, one that has shaped its rituals, its governance, and its place in the community's collective memory for generations.

The Kavu is also home to legendary Theyyam performances that bring the epic tradition to vivid life. Among the most celebrated are Athiralan, identified with Sita, and Bappiriyan, identified with Hanuman. These are not simply spectacular ritual performances but living chapters of a sacred narrative, performed and witnessed by a community that sees in them a reflection of its own story.

The Right of Kalasham Submission

The Thiyya community's connection to Andallur Kavu extends well beyond devotion into the realm of ritual authority. By long-standing tradition, the community holds the right of Kalasham submission, a sacred ritual act that carries deep significance within the Theyyam tradition. The Kalasham, a ceremonial vessel, is central to the invocation and propitiation of the deity, and the right to submit it is a marker of spiritual jurisdiction that few communities possess.

That authority goes further still. The Thiyya community at Andallur Kavu holds a privilege that is rare in the ritual landscape of Kerala: the right to cancel a Theyyam performance if circumstances demand it. This is not a symbolic power but an active, exercised prerogative, one that places the community at the very centre of the Kavu's ritual life. To be able to halt a performance, the most sacred of acts, is to hold a measure of authority that transcends mere participation. It is a living expression of a community's custodianship over its sacred traditions, a tradition where the deity does not merely receive worship from the people but belongs to them.

Kasaragod: The Borderland Sacred Groves

The northernmost district of Kerala, Kasaragod sits at the threshold where Malayali culture meets the Tulu traditions of the coast stretching towards Mangalore. It is a borderland in every sense, a place where languages, ritual forms, and ancestral memories intermingle. For the Thiyya community, this region is a cultural laboratory of extraordinary richness, one in which their spiritual, martial, and social history is preserved not in grand temples but in a scattered network of small kavus, sacred groves that serve as the keepers of memory.

Where Ancestors Become Deities

In the Kasaragod borderlands, the entities worshipped in these groves are rarely abstract gods. They are often deified versions of community ancestors, men and women whose lives left a mark so deep that death did not end their presence but transformed it. The most striking example is Chitteyi Bhagavathi, a deity performed at the Chamundikkunnu kavu near the river Chitteyi. Chitteyi was a woman of the Thiyya community whose soul, it is believed, merged with the Goddess after her death. Her story, preserved through ritual, illustrates how these small shrines commemorate not generic divine figures but specific community lineages, binding the living to named and remembered ancestors.

The sacred landscape extends beyond individual figures to the spirits of the land itself. In northern Kasaragod, during the monsoon month of Karkkitakam, families propitiate Galinchan, a holy spirit connected to agriculture whose performance invokes the fertility of the soil. These entities reflect what

scholars have called a little tradition of worship, one that predates Brahminical influence and remains rooted in the Thiyya and tribal cultures of the south-west coast. Here, the sacred is not separate from the everyday but woven into it, tied to rivers, trees, and the rhythms of cultivation.

Custodians of the Shrine

The Thiyya community's authority over the sacred groves of Kasaragod is both ritual and administrative. At the Nileseshwar Muthappan Madappura, one of the most significant centres in the region, the temple's very origin is tied to the Korothe family, a prominent Thiyya lineage. The story goes that the family's traditional offerings of toddy to a jackfruit tree gave rise to the shrine, a founding myth that links the community's most characteristic livelihood to its most sacred institution.

Across the kavus of the district, Thiyyas hold the traditional responsibility for the Kalasham submission, the ritual act of presenting the ceremonial vessel to the deity. They also retain the distinctive right to cancel a Theyyam performance if sacred protocols are not met, a privilege that underscores their historical role as the social monitors of the cult. These are not honorary titles but living prerogatives, exercised and upheld through generations.

Where Warriors Are Remembered

The sacred groves of Kasaragod also carry the memory of a martial past. The region's shrines are linked to the feudal history of the Mannanar dynasty, the Thiyyar Kings, and historical records identify Kasaragod as a region under their influence, in some accounts even a site for their capital-in-exile. The martial tradition of the Chekavars, the warrior class of North Malabar, is mirrored in the ritual dances performed at these kavus, where Theyyam movements frequently incorporate the techniques of Kalarippayattu, the ancient martial art of Kerala.

The connection between worship and warrior memory is most visible in the invocation of heroes from the Vadakkan Pattukal, the Northern Ballads. Figures like Mandhappan Chekavar, who fell in battle and was deified as Kathivanoor Veeran, are frequently invoked in these shrines, their stories performed and remembered through Theyyam. The kavu thus becomes more than a place of worship; it is a site of historical memory, where the community's warrior past is kept alive not in written records but in the living performance of ritual.

Where Two Traditions Meet

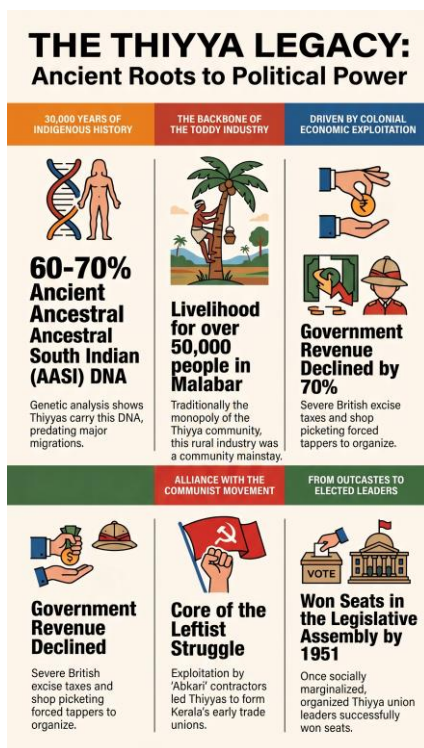
Kasaragod's proximity to Mangalore has produced a cultural synthesis found nowhere else in Kerala. In this borderland, Kerala's Theyyam traditions overlap and interweave with the Bhuta Kola customs of Tulunadu, the ritual spirit-worship of the Tulu-speaking coast. The result is a distinctive blend in which ritual entities cannot be neatly assigned to one tradition or the other.

The Kundoor Chamundi is a telling example. Worshipped both as a village guardian deity and as a household spirit, it displays traits of both Malayali and Tulu ritual theatre, belonging fully to neither yet shaped by both. This synthesis is not a dilution but an enrichment, a reminder that the Thiyya community's heritage was never shaped in isolation but through centuries of exchange along this porous, fertile border.

The small kavus and ritual entities of Kasaragod are, in the end, far more than religious sites. They are the anchors of Thiyya heritage in the borderland, preserving the memory of deified ancestors, martial heroes, and ancient ritual rights through a living tradition that continues to this day. Through them, the community maintains a continuous link to its indigenous roots and its historical status as a social force in North Malabar, even as the world around these sacred groves shifts and changes.

Thiyya Traditions: From Toddy to Triumph

The story of the Thiyya community is one of remarkable adaptability. For centuries their identity was tied to the coconut palms of Malabar and the craft of drawing sap from them. Yet within the space of a few generations, the same community produced doctors, lawyers, civil servants, and merchant dynasties that helped shape modern North Kerala. Understanding this journey means looking at both the traditional economy that sustained them and the educational currents that transformed them.



A Life Woven from the Coconut Palm

In the traditional economy of Malabar, few communities were as closely bound to a single livelihood as the Thiyyas. They held what amounted to a virtual monopoly over the toddy trade and the wider coconut industry. Toddy tapping, the extraction of sap from coconut palms, was their principal vocation and supported thousands of families. The industry was a leading contributor to the economic life of regions such as Kurumbranad, offering cultivators a relatively stable income in an otherwise uncertain agrarian world. By the beginning of the nineteenth century, the profession of toddy drawing alone supported approximately fifty thousand people across Malabar.

What made this trade distinctive was not merely its scale but the indigenous techniques the community developed for extracting toddy. These methods were refined over generations and became woven into the social and religious fabric of the region. The rhythms of tapping shaped daily life, and the industry's demands influenced everything from social customs to ritual practice. Beyond tapping itself, the community was deeply involved in coconut cultivation, coir making, and weaving, building a layered economy around a single versatile tree.

This stable world, however, was not to last. From the late nineteenth century, the British colonial government imposed heavy excise duties on the community's tools of trade, levying what came to be known as the knife and still tax. The burden made traditional toddy tapping increasingly unprofitable, pushing families that had depended on the craft for generations towards hardship. The resulting discontent seeded some of the earliest forms of organised labour unrest in the region and contributed to the formation of early trade unions, as tappers and workers began to push back against a system that had quietly eroded their livelihood.

The Classroom and the New Elite

Even as the traditional economy came under pressure, a different kind of opportunity was opening. The Thiyyas were among the first communities in Kerala to embrace Western-style education. Despite the barriers of caste discrimination, they recognised early that the schools and institutions being established by the colonial government and Christian missionaries offered a path to something beyond hereditary labour.

The single most important force behind this shift was the Basel German Evangelical Mission, which began working in Kannur in the first half of the nineteenth century. The missionaries did more than preach; they established schools and set up printing presses, and these became the engines of community progress. Literacy spread, ideas circulated, and a new sense of what was possible took hold among younger Thiyyas who could now imagine futures their parents had not.

The result was the emergence of what historians have called a new Thiyya elite, a highly educated class of professionals whose careers stood in stark contrast to the community's traditional occupational roles. Members of the community rose to positions as doctors, lawyers, sub-judges, and civil servants within the British administration. Among the notable firsts were Churayi Kanaran, the first community member to enter the British Civil Service, and Ayyathan Janaki, who became the first female doctor from Malabar. Each such achievement quietly widened the horizon of what the next generation could aspire to.

Merchant Dynasties of North Malabar

Alongside the professional class, a powerful merchant and landowning elite had been taking shape within the Thiyya community since the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In North Malabar, trade, landholding, and proximity to the colonial

economy created the conditions for certain families to amass considerable wealth and influence.

The most prominent of these was the Karayi family of Thalassery. Favoured by the British East India Company, figures such as Karayi Bappu and Karayi Kutti emerged as powerful pramanis, or elites, and major landowners whose reach extended across the economic and social life of the region. But what set the Karayi family apart was not wealth alone. They channelled it into social reform. Karai Damayanthi, for instance, established one of the first Stree Samajams, or women's associations, and a women's library in Thalassery, creating spaces where women could gather, read, and organise at a time when such opportunities were rare.

Several other lineages contributed to this broader aristocracy of talent and enterprise. The Ayyathan family, an aristocratic warrior clan from Randuthara near Dharmadom, produced noted scholars, navigators, and physicians. The Moorkkoth family built a reputation for intellectual and literary achievement, embodied most visibly in the social reformer Moorkkoth Kumaran. The Kottieth and Churayi families, meanwhile, were instrumental in pioneering professional roles in law and the British Civil Service, opening doors that others would later walk through.

Taken together, these families illustrate a community in motion. From the coconut groves of Malabar to the courtrooms and civil offices of the colonial era, the Thiyyas repeatedly found ways to reinvent themselves, turning each new constraint into the raw material for a new beginning.

The Vaidyars: Healers, Scholars, and Botanists

The Thiyya community is often remembered for its toddy tappers and its warriors, but among its most significant yet least acknowledged contributions is its legacy in traditional medicine. For generations, members of the community who served as physicians were known as Vaidyars, a role passed down through families along with an extensive and closely guarded knowledge of the medicinal properties of plants. The Vaidyars were not mere practitioners of folk remedies; they were serious scholars of Ayurveda and toxicology, and through the most famous among them, they helped shape the global understanding of tropical botany.

Itty Achudan and the Hortus Malabaricus

The most renowned figure in this medical tradition is Itty Achudan, a seventeenth-century physician from the community whose contribution to botanical science was nothing short of monumental. Achudan served as a primary source for the *Hortus Malabaricus*, the comprehensive seventeenth-century treatise on the flora of Malabar published by the Dutch. His deep understanding of local plants, drawn from generations of community knowledge, directly influenced the botanical classification and scientific documentation of the region's flora. The *Hortus Malabaricus* remains one of the most important works in the history of tropical botany, and at its foundation lies the knowledge of a Thiyya Vaidyar.

Achudan's contributions were written in the Kolezhuthu script, a detail that reveals as much about the community's social position as about its scholarship. The Thiyyas were historically

prevented from learning the more Sanskritised Aryazuthu script, which was restricted to upper-caste groups. The use of Kolezhuthu was thus not merely a linguistic choice but a marker of the boundaries within which the community's intellectual life was forced to operate. That Achudan produced work of global scientific significance within those constraints is a testament to the depth of knowledge that flourished behind the walls of caste exclusion.

Masters of Poison

The community's medical expertise was not limited to general Ayurveda. It extended into the specialised and dangerous field of toxicology, the study and treatment of poison. Ayyathan Kannan Vaidyar, a prominent figure from the aristocratic Ayyathan family of Malabar, was a renowned Ayurvedic scholar and physician who specialised in poison therapy. In a region where snakebites and toxic plants were everyday hazards, the ability to diagnose and treat poisoning was not an academic specialisation but a matter of life and death, and the Vaidyars who mastered it held a position of critical importance within their communities.

The intellectual rigour of the Vaidyars extended beyond practical medicine into formal scholarship. Many were well-versed in Sanskrit, despite the restrictions placed on the community's access to Sanskrit education, and served as Gurukkals, or teachers, maintaining a standard of learned discipline within their traditional practice. They were not merely healers who relied on inherited recipes but scholars who engaged with texts, debated methods, and transmitted knowledge through structured instruction. The Gurukkal tradition ensured that medical knowledge did not stagnate but was continually refined, tested, and passed forward.

The Medical Class and Social Mobility

Traditional medicine was not merely a profession for the Thiyya community; it was a vital avenue for social and economic mobility. In both Northern Malabar and Southern Kerala, Ayurvedic physicians formed a respected and relatively prosperous section of the community, often described as part of an educated and enlightened elite. While the community is frequently stereotyped by its association with toddy tapping and manual labour, historical records confirm that Vaidyars were a distinct and unavoidable professional class, standing alongside other specialists such as Sanskrit scholars and astrologers.

The Vaidyars occupied a paradoxical position within the caste order. Their medical skills were sought after by members of all castes, including those who ranked above them, and their knowledge of the human body and the natural world gave them a practical authority that caste hierarchy could not easily override. A physician who could save a life was not easily dismissed, regardless of his caste, and the Vaidyars leveraged this practical indispensability into social standing and economic security that softened, if not entirely overcame, the disabilities of their caste position.

From Ayurveda to Western Medicine

The medical tradition of the Vaidyars laid the foundation for the community's early adoption of Western medicine. When colonial educational institutions began offering training in modern medical science, the Thiyya community was uniquely positioned to seize the opportunity. Families that had produced Vaidyars for generations already possessed a culture of medical learning, an familiarity with anatomy and pharmacology, and an understanding that healing was a profession worth pursuing. The transition from Ayurvedic physician to modern doctor was not a leap but a continuation.

It was this tradition that eventually produced Malabar's first generation of female modern medical professionals. Ayyathan Janaki, the first female doctor from Malabar, and Moorkkoth Madhavi, one of the first three women from Malabar to pass medical examinations, both emerged from families with deep roots in the community's medical and intellectual life. Their achievements, explored in earlier chapters, were not isolated breakthroughs but the flowering of a tradition that had been cultivated for centuries by the Vaidyars who came before them. The thread that connects Itty Achudan's botanical classifications in the seventeenth century to a young woman entering medical school in the twentieth is unbroken, a continuous legacy of healing that the community carried from the forests of Malabar into the modern age.

The Families That Shaped a Community

The rise of the new Thiyya elite in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was not the work of isolated individuals. It was driven by a handful of aristocratic lineages that seized on modern education and the openings created by colonial rule to lead their community into social, intellectual, and professional life. Each family left its own imprint, and together they formed the backbone of a community in transition.

The Moorkkoth Family: Letters and Reform

Among these lineages, the Moorkkoth family stands out for the breadth of its contributions to literature, journalism, and social reform in Kerala. Moorkkoth Kumaran, already remembered as a close associate of Sree Narayana Guru, was more than a reformer in the abstract sense. As the editor of Mitavadi magazine, he turned its pages into a platform for articulating community rights and unifying Thiyyas across North Malabar, giving voice to aspirations that had previously had no organised channel.

The family's legacy extended well beyond him. Moorkkoth Madhavi broke barriers of a different kind, becoming one of the first three women from Malabar to pass medical examinations, a milestone that opened the imagination of the community to the possibility of women in the professions. Moorkkoth Kunjappa, a writer and reformer in his own right, took on the quieter but equally vital task of documenting the community's history and preserving the memory of the Basel Mission's cultural legacy in Malabar. Between them, the Moorkkoths touched nearly every

current of modern Thiyya life: activism, medicine, and historical self-awareness.

The Thayyil Family and the Parassini Madappura

The Parassinikadavu Madappura, the permanent abode of Sree Muthappan, occupies a singular place in the spiritual landscape of North Malabar. The temple itself is a private one, owned and managed by the Parassini Madappura family, whose custodianship of this sacred site has endured through generations. While the Theyyam performance is carried out by the Vannan community, the administration, sacred rites, and puja rituals of the Madappura remain the preserve of the Thiyya community, a role that distinguishes Muthappan shrines from the Brahmin-led temples that dominate the conventional religious architecture of Kerala.



Parassini Madappura

The Thayyil family, though not the owners of the Madappura, shares a deep-rooted and long-standing connection with the Parassini Madappura family. This bond is most visibly expressed during the annual Ulsavam festival, when by long-standing tradition the celebrations must begin with a procession led by a male member of the Thayyil clan. He travels from the family home in Kannur to the temple's main altar to offer the initial puja to the deity, a ritual role that underscores the families' intertwined histories. The trustees of the Madappura, drawn from the Thiyya community, bear responsibility for the temple's administration and the performance of its primary rituals.

The connection between elite Thiyya lineages and the Muthappan cult runs deep. Madappuras, the shrines dedicated to the deity, were historically under the patronage of prominent Thiyya families. The Mannanar dynasty, the Thiyyar Kings, held the Muthappan Madappura as one of their royal family temples, and the cult itself is believed to have originated in Eruvessy, near their ancestral palaces. Under the care of the Parassini Madappura family, maintained in close association with the Thayyils, the Parassinikadavu Madappura has preserved a non-Brahminical, inclusive tradition that welcomes devotees of all castes and religions, including Muslims, who participate enthusiastically in its festivals. Its rituals uniquely involve offerings of toddy and fish, a reflection of the community's ancestral customs that survives to this day.

The Kottieth Lineage: Law and the Working Hand

The Kottieth family produced several high-ranking professionals who stood at the centre of the community's legal and political mobilisation during the British era. Kottieth Ramunni, a prominent advocate and reformer, presided over major community meetings and became one of the most vocal advocates for Thiyya unity across Kerala. He argued forcefully against regional sub-caste differences, encouraging inter-dining

and inter-marriage within the broader community, treating internal division as a greater threat than external prejudice.

His relative, Kottieth Krishnan, turned his attention to a more practical crisis. In Thalassery in September 1918, he founded the Kerala Labour Union, one of the earliest organised labour bodies in the region. The union was created to provide alternative livelihoods and rehabilitation for toddy tappers whose traditional work had been made increasingly precarious, and it operated, remarkably, out of the Jagannath Temple. Kottieth Kannan, meanwhile, represented a quieter kind of transformation: as one of the first generation of educated Thiyyas to adopt his father's family name as a surname, he was part of the community's transition from matrilineal to patrilineal, or Makkathayam, naming customs, a shift that reflected the broader move towards modern civic identity.

The Churayi Lineage: Breaking into the Civil Service

If the Moorkkoths led in letters and the Kottieths in law and labour, the Churayi family carved its path through the structures of colonial administration. Churayi Kanaran is historically recognised as the first member of the Thiyya community to enter the British Civil Service in Malabar, rising to serve with distinction as a tehsildar and deputy collector. His career was more than a personal achievement; it demonstrated that caste was no longer an absolute bar to high-ranking government service under British rule, and his example quietly redefined what the community's younger generation could aim for.

In Thalassery, Kanaran also took on a leadership role in community reform, championing changes such as standardising dress codes to reflect a modern sense of community respectability. The Churayi family's influence, like that of the Moorkkoths, Kottieths, and Thayyils, was thus felt on two fronts at once: within the institutions of the colonial state and within the internal life of the community itself.

These families did not act in isolation. Alongside others already encountered in these pages, the Ayyathans, known for their medical pioneers, and the Karayis, the merchant titans of Thalassery, they formed a network of talent and enterprise that bridged the gap between traditional community structures and modern civic life. Each family, in its own way, carried the community forward.

Kozhikode: The Crucible of Change

If any single city serves as the stage on which the Thiyya community's modern transformation was most visibly enacted, it is Kozhikode. Known to the British as Calicut and serving as the headquarters of the old Malabar district, Kozhikode was where traditional livelihoods gave way to modern professions, where social reform found some of its loudest voices, and where the community's labouring poor became the foot soldiers of a political revolution that would reshape Kerala itself.

From Coconut Groves to Colonial Professions

The economic story of the Thiyyas in Kozhikode mirrors the broader trajectory of the community across Malabar, but here it unfolded with particular speed. While many remained tied to coconut cultivation and the toddy trade, as they had been for generations, a significant merchant and landowning elite had emerged by the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. What set Kozhikode apart was the advantage of proximity. As the district headquarters, the city offered early and sustained contact with the colonial administration and the Basel Missionaries, and the community's enterprising families were quick to seize the opportunities that contact brought.

These families leveraged their position to secure high-ranking government posts and to establish themselves as pioneers in law and medicine. The transition was striking: within a generation or two, families that had drawn their living from the sap of the coconut palm were producing advocates, doctors, and civil servants. Kozhikode became a vital centre for this shift, a place where the community's old economy and its new ambitions existed side by side.

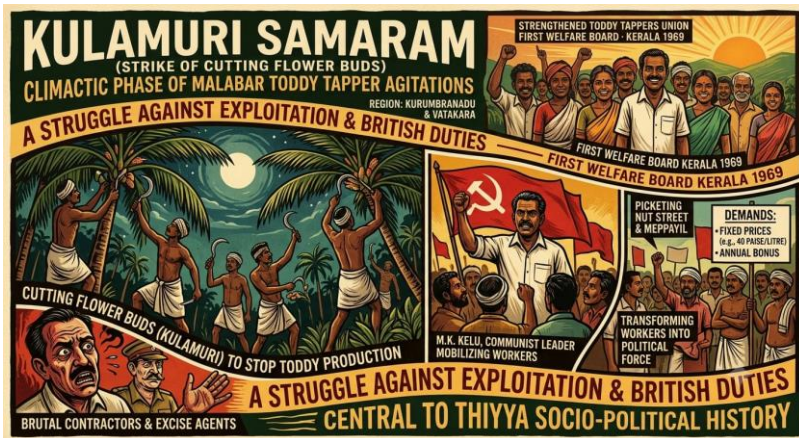
The Sree Narayana Movement in the North

Kozhikode was also a primary theatre for the Sree Narayana movement in North Malabar. The message of self-reliance through education and the dismantling of caste barriers found fertile ground here, articulated by figures who gave the movement its local voice. Among them, C. Krishnan stood out. As the editor of *Mitavadi*, a magazine that had already become a powerful platform for community rights under the earlier involvement of Moorkkoth Kumaran in Thalassery, Krishnan turned its pages into a sustained argument for a distinct Thiyya identity and against the structures of caste that held the community back.

The influence of reform was not confined to journalism. The establishment of the Jagannath Temple in nearby Thalassery had already demonstrated the community's determination to worship without the mediation of Brahmin priests, and the activities of the Gnanodaya Yogam resonated strongly in Kozhikode, challenging traditional caste barriers and advocating self-reliance through education. Together, these currents created an atmosphere in which the community's aspirations could be openly debated and pursued.

The Tappers Who Became Revolutionaries

Perhaps the most dramatic chapter of Thiyya life in Kozhikode unfolded not in the schools or the courts but in the coconut groves of Kurumbranadu taluk, the region encompassing modern-day Vatakara and Koyilandy. It was here that Thiyya toddy tappers, ground down by the exploitation of Abkari contractors and punitive government excise policies, became the backbone of the early Communist movement in Malabar. The leap from traditional labour to organised political action was neither sudden nor easy, but it was decisive.



Leaders like M.K. Kelu and Kuyyale Gopalan emerged from within the community to channel this discontent into organised resistance. They led intense and sometimes bitter strikes, the most famous of which was the Kulamuri Samaram, the flower bud cutting strike, a sustained protest against the conditions imposed on tappers by the contractors who controlled the trade. These were not isolated labour disputes but part of a larger anti-colonial struggle that drew the community into the widening current of revolutionary politics.

The effect was transformative. Through these struggles, the Thiyya community of the region was recast from a traditional labour class into a politically conscious force. The tappers who had once fought merely to preserve their livelihood found themselves shaping the broader political landscape of Kerala, their organised strength feeding directly into the movements that would eventually define the state's modern politics.

Autonomy Preserved

Amid all this change, the community's internal structures endured. In the Kozhikode region, as elsewhere in Malabar, Thiyyas maintained their Desasabhas, the caste assemblies that independently adjudicated community disputes without recourse to upper-caste authority. This strong sense of

autonomy extended into the ritual domain, where the community held its traditional authority over Theyyam, including the right to cancel performances if sacred protocols were not followed.

Today, Kozhikode remains a site of active debate regarding community identity. Modern organisations such as the Thiyya Mahasabha continue to assert the community's separate cultural and historical lineage, pressing the argument that the Thiyyas of Malabar are a distinct people, not merely a regional name for a larger grouping. It is a debate that draws on the full weight of the community's history in this city, from the merchant families who first embraced colonial education to the tappers who marched under the red flag, all of them shaped by, and in turn shaping, the place they called home.

The Three Currents: Guru, Press, and The Red Flag

The transformation of the Thiyya community from a traditional labouring caste into a modern, politically conscious elite was not the work of any single force. It was the convergence of three distinct currents: a spiritual awakening led by Sree Narayana Guru, an intellectual movement carried forward by a powerful vernacular press, and a political radicalisation born from the exploitation of the community's labour. Each current had its own leaders, its own institutions, and its own language of change, but together they created a tide that reshaped not just the Thiyya community but the political landscape of Kerala itself.

The Temple and the Guru

The spiritual reshaping of North Malabar began with the arrival of Sree Narayana Guru, whose mission provided an alternative to Brahminical hegemony and institutionalised a path toward social equality. The centre of this transformation in the Thiyya heartland was the Jagannath Temple in Thalassery, established in 1908. The temple became the epicentre of the community's spiritual and social awakening, and it held a particular distinction: it was the site where the first statue of Sree Narayana Guru was installed, a symbol of the community's deep devotion to his reformist principles.

The temple was more than a place of worship. In 1918, it became the operational centre for the Kerala Labour Union's rehabilitation activities, which sought to provide new livelihoods, such as jaggery production, for tappers leaving the toddy trade. The same walls that echoed with hymns also housed the practical work of rebuilding lives disrupted by economic

change, a combination that reflected the Guru's insistence that spiritual dignity and material welfare were inseparable.

Three years before the temple's establishment, in 1905, Thiyya elites in North Malabar had founded the Gnanodaya Yogam, inspired by the success of the SNDP in southern Kerala. The Yogam was built on four pillars: religion, business, education, and social reform. Its early goals included the construction of Thiyya-only temples, providing sacred spaces free from upper-caste control. Yet this ambition carried an internal tension that the community struggled to resolve. The Guru himself preached a broader inclusivity that transcended caste divisions, and the push for Thiyya-only temples sat uneasily alongside his universalist vision. It was a tension the community never fully resolved, but it did not prevent the Yogam from becoming a powerful vehicle for community cohesion and self-reliance.

The Power of the Printed Word

If the Guru provided the spirit of reform, the press provided its voice. The rise of print culture in early twentieth-century Malabar was instrumental in democratising knowledge and articulating the community's political and civic rights. It allowed what had been called the New Thiyya Elite to challenge caste discrimination in a public forum, turning private grievance into public argument.

The most powerful instrument of that challenge was Mitavadi. The magazine was originally started in Thalassery in 1906 by Moorkkoth Kumaran, who had already been encountered in these pages as a reformer and educator. Under his editorship, Mitavadi became a platform for community rights and the unification of Thiyyas across North Malabar. In 1913, C. Krishnan, often called Mithavaadi Krishnan, took over the publication and moved it to Kozhikode, turning it into a weekly in 1921 and vastly expanding its reach and influence.

The magazine adopted the Guru's call as its motto: freedom through education, strength through organisation, and fight for social justice. It was a credo that bound together the three currents of reform, and through the pages of Mitavadi, the community's grievances were voiced, its demands for English education articulated, and its push for access to government jobs made explicit. It was also through these pages that the community's separate historical and cultural lineage was first intellectualised, fostering a sense of identity that reached beyond the community's traditional labour roles and laid the groundwork for the identity politics that would follow.

Labour Becomes Politics

The third current of transformation flowed not from temples or printing presses but from the coconut groves where the community worked. In the mid-twentieth century, the traditional vocation of toddy tapping became the foundation for Malabar's radical political transformation. The intense exploitation of tappers by Abkari contractors and the British government's heavy taxation paved the way for unionisation, and the unions that emerged were overwhelmingly Thiyya in composition.

The relationship between these labour unions and the Communist Party was dialectical. The party provided the ideological framework for resistance, the language of class and exploitation that gave shape to the community's diffuse anger. The tappers provided the numerical and organisational strength that the movement needed to function. One supplied the theory, the other supplied the bodies, and neither could have achieved what they did alone. The primary theatre for these struggles was Kurumbranadu Taluk, modern-day Vatakara and Koyilandy, where leaders like M.K. Kelu and Kuyyale Gopalan organised strikes to fix wages and demand bonuses.

The most iconic of these agitations, the Kulamuri Samaram, has been described in detail in an earlier chapter. What matters here

is the broader arc it represents. These struggles transformed the community from what one account called slaves of brutal contractors into a politically conscious force. The labour-led radicalisation that began in the toddy groves of Malabar significantly shaped modern Kerala's political landscape, culminating in the 1967 Communist government granting legal relief and status to the toddy industry, a belated recognition of the community whose labour had built the movement.

The Convergence

What makes the Thiyya story of reform distinctive is not any one of these three currents in isolation but their convergence. The Guru gave the community a spiritual framework that dignified its aspirations. The press gave it an intellectual voice that articulated those aspirations in public. And the labour movement gave it the organisational strength to force change through collective action. Each current drew on the others: the temples founded by the Yogam became centres for union activity, the editors of Mitavadi were themselves reformers shaped by the Guru's teachings, and the Communist leaders who organised the tappers were often products of the same educational revolution the Guru had inspired.

Together, these three currents carried the Thiyya community from the margins of caste society into the mainstream of modern Kerala. The journey was neither smooth nor complete, but it was decisive, and its effects, on the community, on the state, and on the political imagination of a people who had been told for centuries that their place was at the bottom, endure to this day.

The Kulamuri Samaram: When the Tappers Fought Back

Of all the struggles that shaped the Thiyya community's modern history, few were as dramatic or as decisive as the Kulamuri Samaram, the flower bud cutting strike. It was the climactic agitation of organised toddy tappers in Malabar, a moment when a community that had lived for generations at the bottom of the economic ladder discovered the power of collective action. To understand its force, one must first understand the conditions that made it necessary.

The Weight on Their Shoulders

By the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the life of a toddy tapper in Malabar had become intolerable. The British colonial government had imposed heavy excise duties on the trade, levying what came to be known as the knife and still tax on toddy drawing and arrack distillation. Taxes on palm trees were raised year after year, steadily eating into the margins of an already precarious profession. What the government did not take, the contractors did.

The Abkari contractors, who held the licences to control the liquor trade, wielded near-absolute power over the tappers. A tapper's life was, in the words of one contemporary account, at the mercy of the contractor. He could set wages, dictate terms, and demand compliance. The tappers, who possessed no other livelihood and no leverage, lived in a state of professional and economic servitude that amounted to little more than bondage. Their traditional vocation, the one the community had practised for centuries, had become a trap.

The situation worsened dramatically with the arrival of prohibition. When liquor was temporarily banned in Malabar on the first of October 1947, the entire toddy trade was thrown into chaos. Approximately thirty thousand tappers found themselves jobless overnight, their skills suddenly worthless, their families without income. The prohibition did not solve the community's problems; it intensified them, throwing thousands of already marginalised workers into destitution and fuelling the rapid growth of unemployed tappers' unions.

Reading Rooms and Revolution

The strike did not emerge from a vacuum. It was the fruit of a sustained campaign of political education that had been underway for years. Communist leaders, many of them drawn from or deeply connected to the Thiyya community, had been organising quietly across the coconut groves of Kurumbranadu taluk, the region encompassing modern-day Vatakara and Koyilandy. Their method was patient and deliberate: they established reading rooms in villages, small spaces where workers could gather, literate comrades could read aloud from newspapers and political pamphlets, and ideas about class, exploitation, and collective power could take root.

This intense politicisation was aimed at raising class consciousness among Thiyya workers, who formed the primary social base of the emerging unions. The reading rooms were not merely educational; they were the organisational infrastructure of a movement. Through them, isolated tappers scattered across the countryside began to see themselves not as individual sufferers of misfortune but as members of a class with shared interests and shared grievances. Leaders like M.K. Kelu and Kuyyale Gopalan travelled between these nodes, channeling dispersed anger into organised demands for wage increases, bonuses, and an approved measure for toddy that would protect tappers from the contractors' arbitrary calculations.

Cutting the Buds

The strategy the tappers devised was as simple as it was devastating. Rather than simply refusing to work, which would leave the contractors free to replace them, the strikers decided to cut the flower buds, the kula, of the coconut trees that the contractors relied on for toddy production. Without the buds, there could be no sap, no toddy, and no income. The act would strike directly at the source of the contractors' power.

The execution was coordinated with remarkable discipline. During the night, groups of tappers fanned out across the region and simultaneously cut the flower buds at several locations. By the time the contractors woke, the damage was done. Trees that should have yielded sap for weeks had been rendered useless. The production chain was broken, and the contractors' income dried up almost overnight. It was a masterstroke of worker sabotage, one that demonstrated the collective power of a community that the contractors had treated as disposable.

The pressure did not let up. The strike was accompanied by fasts and picketing at key sites, including the Memunda shop, a focal point of the agitation. The combination of halted production and sustained public pressure eventually forced the contractors to the negotiating table. They approved the tappers' demands for higher wages and bonuses, a victory that would have been unthinkable only a few years earlier.

From Servitude to Political Force

The legacy of the Kulamuri Samaram extends far beyond the immediate gains of wages and bonuses. It is remembered as the moment that transformed toddy tappers from what one account called slaves of brutal contractors into a politically conscious force. The strike demonstrated that organised labour could defeat entrenched economic power, and it cemented the Thiyya community's role as the backbone of the early Communist movement in Malabar.

The reading rooms that had prepared the ground for the strike continued to shape the political landscape of Kerala for decades. The tappers who had cut flower buds in the dark of night became the foot soldiers of a broader revolution, their organisational experience feeding directly into the movements that would eventually shape the state's politics. What began as a fight for fair wages became, in time, a fight for political power, and the Kulamuri Samaram was its first decisive chapter.

Rites of Passage: The Thiyya Wedding

A community's weddings tell you more about its inner life than any political chronicle. They reveal how it understands kinship, obligation, and the bond between two people. The Thiyya wedding, known traditionally as Mangalam, has travelled a long road from elaborate clan-based ritual to the simplified ceremonies of today. Understanding that journey means looking at the rites that once defined a marriage and the reformer who reshaped them for a new age.

The Pre-Puberty Ritual: Thalikettu Kalyanam

In the older Thiyya tradition, the path to marriage began long before a bride or groom had reached adulthood. The first ceremonial milestone was Thalikettu Kalyanam, also known as Pandal Mangalam or Manjukulikalyanam, a pre-puberty ritual performed for young girls. Some early colonial observers mistook this for a mock marriage, but that description misses its meaning. Thalikettu Kalyanam was a festive community event, a celebration that signified a girl's transition towards womanhood. It marked her formal entry into the social world of adulthood, a moment the community recognised and celebrated collectively.

The ritual was tied to the community's clan structure. The eight matrilineal clans, or Illams, that organised Thiyya society functioned as strict units for regulating marriage through exogamy: one could not marry within one's own Illam. Thalikettu Kalyanam was the first ritual acknowledgment of a girl's place within this structure, a public declaration that she had reached the age at which the community's rules of kinship and alliance would begin to shape her life.

Pudamuri: The Gift of Cloth

The essential marriage rite itself was known as Pudamuri, or Pudavakoda, and it centred on a single, powerful act: the groom's gift of a wedding cloth, a saree, to the bride. This was not merely an exchange of gifts but a formal declaration of commitment. By presenting the cloth, the groom signified his undertaking to maintain and provide for the woman who received it. The simplicity of the gesture belied its weight: a piece of fabric carried the full force of a marital bond.

What set Thiyya and Ezhava wedding customs apart from those of their upper-caste neighbours was the residential arrangement that followed. Among the Nairs of the same period, the prevailing system was matrilocal: the husband visited the wife's home but did not live there permanently, and children belonged to the mother's household. The Thiyyas, by contrast, followed a practice in which the husband traditionally took the wife to his own home after marriage. It was a distinction that spoke to a different understanding of the marital bond, one in which the conjugal unit, rather than the matrilineal clan, was the primary social destination of the union.

Sree Narayana Guru and the Simplified Ceremony

The transformation of the Thiyya wedding from elaborate clan ritual to modern ceremony was largely the work of Sree Narayana Guru, the reformer whose influence on the community's social life was profound. The Guru recognised that the traditional ceremonies, with their expensive feasts and protracted rituals, placed an intolerable financial burden on families, particularly those of modest means. A wedding that bankrupted a household to celebrate it was, in his view, a tradition that had lost its way.

His response was radical simplification. The Guru replaced the costly traditional feasts with a dignified ceremony called Vivaham, a marriage rite that could be conducted in temples or

community halls with simplified hymns and minimal expense. The emphasis shifted from ostentation to solemnity, from the display of wealth to the dignity of the union itself. The Vivaham was designed to be accessible to every family in the community, regardless of its means.

One feature of the modern ceremony is uniquely distinctive. In the reformed Vivaham, the bride and groom stand facing each other during the tying of the thali, the marriage pendant, rather than sitting side by side as is customary in many other Kerala communities. It is a small difference, easily overlooked, but it carries a symbolic weight: two people facing one another as equals, not arranged in hierarchy but standing in mutual recognition, bound by a bond that the ceremony makes visible.

The Kinship Revolution: A Brief Bridge

The changes to the wedding ceremony were part of a broader transformation of Thiyya kinship that unfolded alongside them. As explored earlier in the chapter on the Madras Marumakkathayam Act of 1933, the community's matrilineal system, with its eight Illams and collective tharavad households, was legally dismantled through legislation that allowed the partition of joint families and redirected inheritance from a man's nephews and nieces to his own wife and children.

The wedding reforms and the kinship revolution were two currents in the same river. As the tharavad fragmented into nuclear families and inheritance shifted to the paternal line, the marriage ceremony that bound those nuclear families together was itself reshaped. The naming conventions changed too: educated Thiyya elites began adopting their father's family names as surnames, a practice reformers called a jump into Makkathayam, abandoning the matrilineal household names that had once defined identity. Together, these changes forged a more unified community identity, though, as discussed earlier,

they also marginalised the property rights and status that Thiyya women had held under the old matrilineal order.

What remains, across all these changes, is a wedding tradition that has carried the community from clan-based ritual to modern simplicity without losing its core meaning. The cloth may no longer be the central act, the feast may have given way to the Vivaham, and the couple may stand rather than sit, but the bond that the Mangalam once celebrated is the same bond the Vivaham celebrates now: a commitment, made before the community, to care and to provide, to build a life together.

The Women Who Led: Warriors, Healers, and Reformers

The history of the Thiyya community is often told through the lives of its men: its kings, its warriors, its reformers, its labour leaders. But the women of the community have a story that is, in its own way, more remarkable. From the martial legends of the sixteenth century to the first female doctors of Malabar, from the founding of women's associations to the fight for the simple right to cover their own bodies, Thiyya women were not passive witnesses to their community's transformation. They were active agents, shaping its course with a courage that matched, and sometimes exceeded, that of the men around them.

The Memory of Unniyarcha

The story begins with a figure who has already been encountered in these pages: Unniyarcha, the sixteenth-century warrior of the Chekavar tradition, celebrated in the Vadakkan Pattukal as a supreme practitioner of Kalaripayattu. Unniyarcha is remembered not merely as a fighter but as a symbol of female autonomy and physical agency, a woman who used her martial skills to protect her dignity and her family's honour. Her legacy is rooted in the martial families of North Malabar, where women often exhibited a high degree of independence compared to their counterparts in upper-caste groups. The Chekavar women did not wait to be defended; they defended themselves, and the memory of Unniyarcha served, for centuries afterward, as a reminder that strength was not the monopoly of one gender.

The First Women in the Professions

When modern education arrived in Malabar through the colonial administration and the Basel Missionaries, Thiyya women were

among the first in Kerala to seize it. The community produced the first female medical professionals in the region: Ayyathan Janaki, the first woman from Malabar to pass a medical examination, and Moorkkoth Madhavi, one of the first three women from Malabar to pass medical examinations. Both have been noted in earlier chapters, but their significance bears repeating. In a society where upper-caste women were often confined to their homes, Thiyya women were entering government schools, passing examinations, and building careers in the professions.

The community's early women educators are less famous but equally important. By the late nineteenth century, figures such as Kakkuzhi Kunjichirutha and Manayathu Chirutha were already serving as prominent teachers in government schools in Thalassery. Kausalya Ammal distinguished herself as the first Thiyya woman to pass the B.A. L.T. examination, a qualification that opened the doors to higher positions in the educational system. These women were pioneers not only of their community but of their gender, entering spaces that had been closed to women of all castes and proving, through their competence, that the classroom was not a place from which they could be excluded.

The Stree Samajams

Thiyya women were not content to enter existing institutions; they built their own. They organised themselves into Stree Samajams, women's associations, to challenge discriminatory customs and advocate for community progress. The most notable leader of this movement was Karayi Damayanthi, a member of the prominent Karayi merchant family of Thalassery, who founded one of the first Stree Samajams in the town. Under her leadership, the Samajam established a home-delivery library for women, a service that brought books to the homes of women who could not easily venture out, and arranged vocational training to equip them with practical skills.

The Stree Samajams became forums through which women could discuss their concerns, organise collective action, and push for changes that the community's male leadership was often too slow or too conservative to pursue. They were, in effect, a parallel structure of governance, one in which women held authority not by delegation from men but by their own initiative and organisation.

The Right to Cover the Body

Among the most viscerally felt battles that Thiyya women fought was the struggle against caste-based dress codes. In the caste order of Malabar, lower-caste women were mandated to remain bare-breasted in the presence of upper-caste men, a humiliation enforced not by custom alone but by the threat of punishment. Thiyya women were at the forefront of the fight to abolish this practice, asserting their right to wear the melmundu, the upper cloth, and the ravukka, the blouse, as signs of modern dignity.

The dress reform movement was not a matter of fashion but of self-respect. To be forced to uncover one's body before those who claimed social superiority was a daily indignity, and the women who fought against it understood that the right to clothing was inseparable from the right to dignity itself. Their campaign was ultimately successful, and the melmundu and ravukka became not merely garments but symbols of a community's refusal to accept the humiliations that caste had imposed upon it.

The Dispute Over a Name

If the dress reform was a battle over the body, the Amma dispute was a battle over language. Thiyya women led campaigns for the right to use the honorific suffix Amma in their names, a privilege that had been denied to them by upper-caste groups who reserved the term for their own women. To be called Amma was to be accorded respect, and the denial of the suffix was a linguistic marker of subordination, a reminder that even in the

way a woman was addressed, the caste system insisted on inequality.

The campaign to claim the suffix was a fight for recognition at the most fundamental level: the right to name oneself. That it was led by women, and not merely on behalf of women, underscores the centrality of female agency in the community's broader struggle for dignity. The Amma dispute may seem small compared to the great political movements of the era, but it was precisely in such small acts, the claiming of a word, the wearing of a garment, the opening of a school, that the community's transformation was most deeply felt.

Voices in Print and Speech

The reform movement also produced its own intellectuals. C.K. Revathiamma used public speeches to promote education and challenge regressive customs, becoming a voice that women in the community could look to for leadership. Vallimavungal Ikkavamma, a poet and midwife, brought a unique combination of practical and literary skills to the cause. As a midwife, she served the women of her community in one of their most vulnerable moments; as a poet, she gave voice to their aspirations and their grievances in language that carried the weight of lived experience.

Both Revathiamma and Ikkavamma used their platforms to campaign against the practice of thalikettu kalyanam, the pre-puberty ritual that had once been a central rite of Thiyya life. Their advocacy, alongside the broader reform efforts led by Sree Narayana Guru, contributed to the eventual simplification of marriage customs explored in an earlier chapter. It is a reminder that the reform of Thiyya tradition was not imposed from above by men alone but was pushed forward, with persistence and courage, by the women who understood its costs most intimately.

From Unniyarcha's sword to Karayi Damayanthi's library, from Ayyathan Janaki's medical examinations to the fight for a single word of respect, the women of the Thiyya community wrote their own chapter in the story of its transformation. They did not wait for permission to enter the professions, to build institutions, or to claim their dignity. They acted, and in acting, they changed not only their own community but the wider society in which it was embedded.

About the Author

Hemanth Lakshmanan is a researcher and writer devoted to documenting the socio-cultural history and social anthropology of South India. With a particular focus on the coastal regions of Malabar, his work explores the intersections of lineage, ritual tradition, genetic ancestry, and modern social reform, drawing together threads that are too often treated in isolation.

The inspiration for this book grew from a conviction that the Thiyya community of North Malabar deserves a comprehensive and nuanced account of its own, one that resists the tendency to subsume the community's distinct heritage under broader regional labels. Recognising the limits of generalised histories, Hemanth brings a multidisciplinary approach to the task: combining modern genetic research that challenges older migration narratives with the evidence of classical folk traditions, oral histories, and colonial-era records to illuminate the community's indigenous roots and its enduring sense of identity.

From the martial sovereignty of the Chekavars, immortalised in the Vadakkan Pattukal, and the sacred traditions of Theyyam to the legacy of royal lineages such as the Mannanars and prominent families like the Thayyils, this narrative bridges the ancient and the modern. It traces the community's journey from its matrilineal clans, the eight Illams, and its sacred custodianship of shrines like the Parassinikadavu Madappura, through the rise of the New Thiyya Elite and the social reform movements of the twentieth century, to the political and cultural assertiveness of the present day.

A Note on Research and Methodology

This book is the product of extensive research, data synthesis, and a commitment to cultural advocacy. The core insights, historical direction, and cultural framing are entirely human-led, the result of years of engagement with the community's oral histories, ritual traditions, and documentary record. Artificial intelligence was used as a digital tool to help organise complex historical material, structure dense datasets, and refine the narrative flow. This collaborative approach, between human-led research and modern computational capabilities, was chosen to ensure that the historical legacy of Malabar is presented with both scholarly depth and contemporary readability.

Hemanth Lakshmanan continues to document the vibrant oral histories, sacred rituals, and socio-political evolution of Kerala.