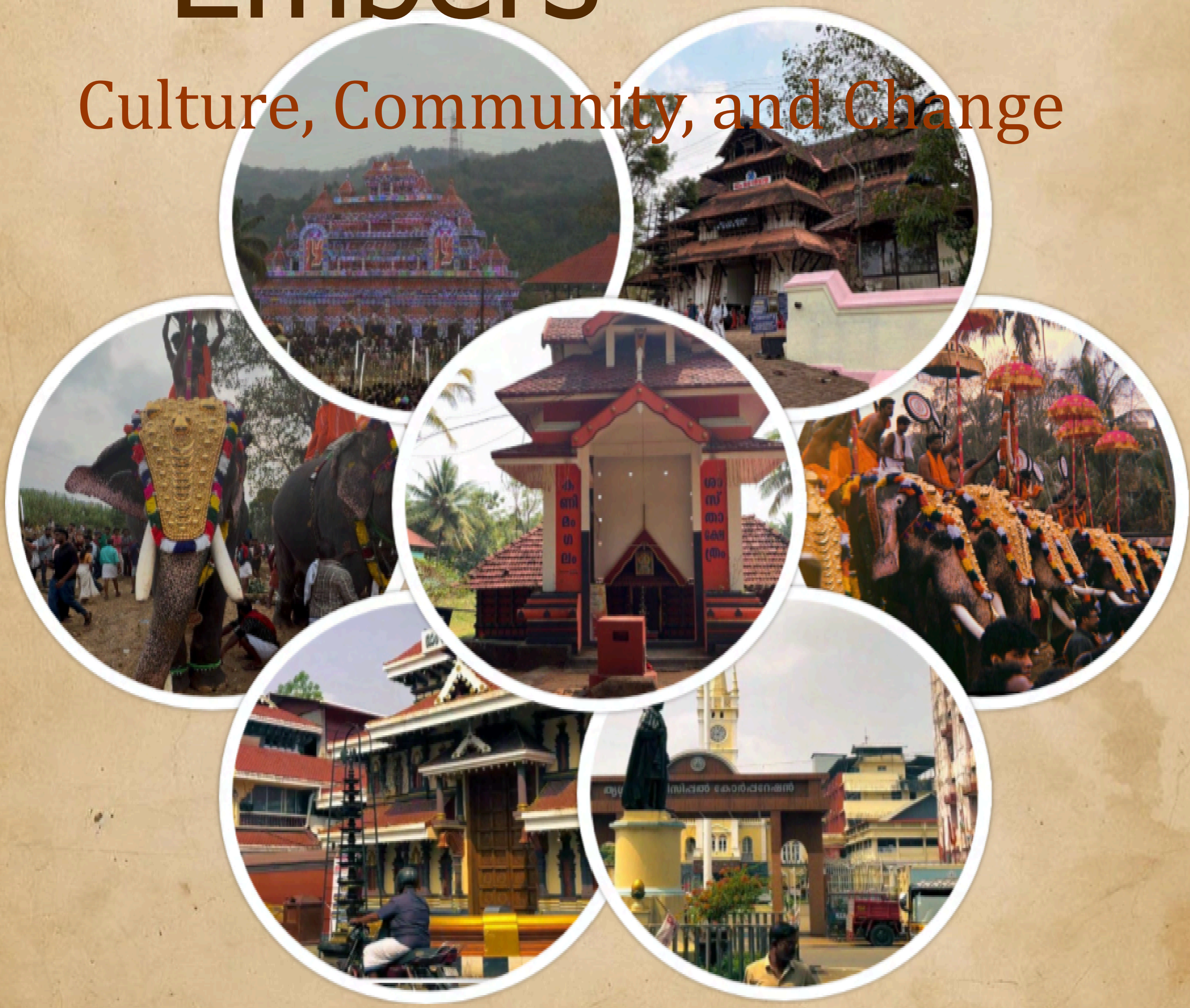
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Echoes & Embers

Culture, Community, and Change



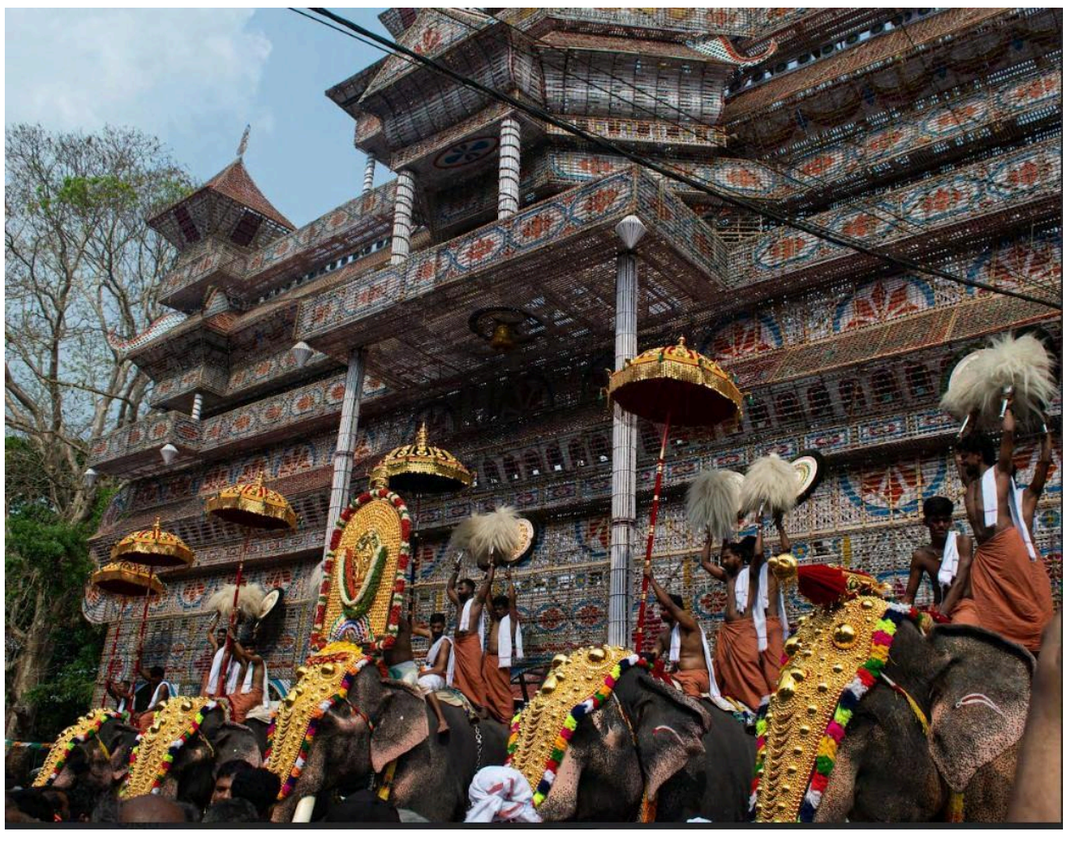
Thrissur Pooram, Kerala

Research Project – DIP 2026

Group 43

Echoes and Embers:

Culture, Community, and Change in Thrissur *Pooram*, Kerala



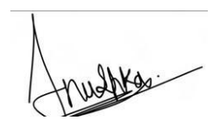
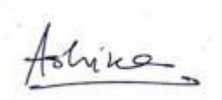
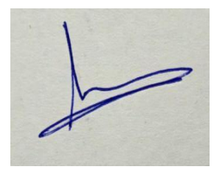
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CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the work incorporated in this DIP report titled "*Echoes and Embers:*
Culture, Community, and Change in Thrissur Pooram, Kerala " submitted by the undersigned Research Team was carried out under my mentorship.

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Abstract

Thrissur Pooram, which is often regarded as the cultural heartbeat of Kerala, stands as one of the most prominent temple festivals all over India, known for its grand scale rituals and rooted community participation. Celebrated annually in the city of Thrissur, the cultural capital of Kerala, the festival brings together multiple temples in a coordinated display of music, umbrellas, elephants and fireworks making it a visual spectacle that's a religious and cultural landmark. It is rooted in traditions established by King Shakthan Thampuran (Rama Varma IX) over two centuries ago.

Over time, the Pooram has grown beyond being just a religious gathering to becoming a large-scale socio-cultural phenomenon. Increased media coverage and tourism led to expanded reach, attracting audiences from all over the world. At the same time, the festival continues to rely on traditional systems of organization. This coexistence of tradition and modern influence has created a unique dynamic which is explained through our report.

This report studies the Thrissur Pooram with a focus on its organizational structure, community involvement and the ways in which it consistently adapts to changing social context in our current world. The primary goal is to examine how the festival keeps its traditional identity while responding to modern influences like increased tourism, media exposure and regulatory frameworks that are changed every year. It also explores the role played by various stakeholders, including temple committees, volunteers, artisans and local participants, in maintaining the traditions of the festival.

For this research, primary qualitative data was collected through a week of fieldwork in Thrissur, including interviews with major temple authorities, artisans involved in festival preparations, local businesses and long-time attendees. Observations of rituals and festival practices further backed the analysis. Secondary research was conducted through over 180 reviews of literature to understand the historical and cultural context of the festival and to support key arguments pertaining to our research

The findings suggest that the Thrissur Pooram functions as a community-driven system,

where coordination is achieved when structured governance and collective participation merge. While the core ritual framework is fully unchanged, certain aspects of the festival have evolved to accommodate modern demands and ethical challenges. At the same time, emerging challenges such as a decline in volunteer participation, increasing logistical and financial pressure, and growing concerns around environmental and animal welfare emphasize the complexities involved in maintaining and sustaining such a festival.

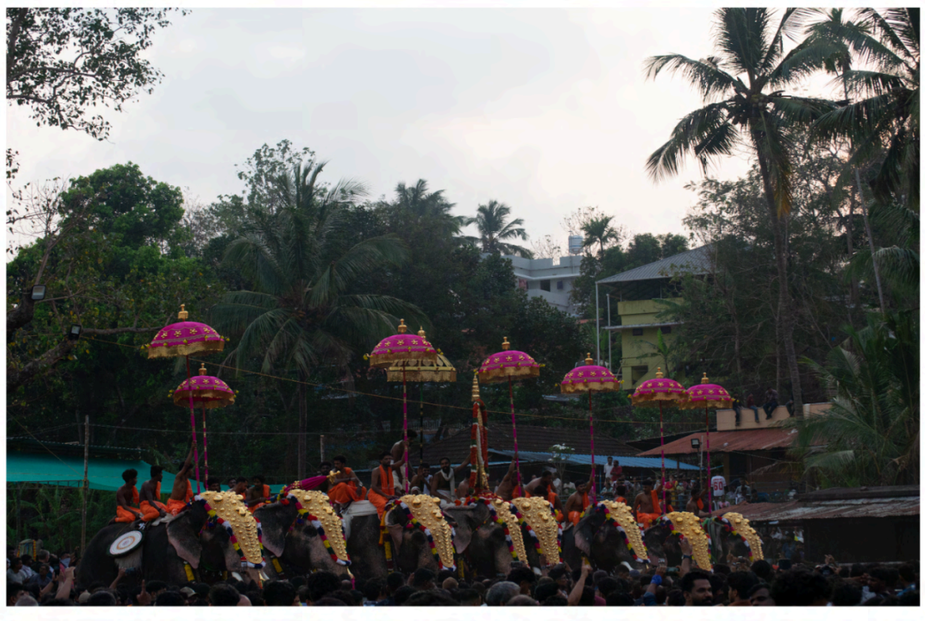
Despite all these challenges, the Thrissur Pooram continues to maintain its relevance by balancing tradition and change. Its ability to adapt without losing its core identity makes it a significant example of how cultural festivals of such a scale can endure in a contemporary context.

This report is subject to some limitations, including a lack of quantitative data, time constraints during fieldwork, and limited access to certain administrative and sensitive information. Nevertheless, it aims to provide a clear and grounded understanding of the festival through primary insights and observations

Keywords: Animal Welfare, Artisans, Change, Coordination, Community Participation, Cultural Identity and Heritage, Devaswom Committees, Elanjithara Melam, Elephant Processions, Ethical Debates, Fireworks, Kudamattam, Media Representation, Panchavadyam, Regulation, Ritual Practices, Stakeholder Roles, Sustainability, Tourism, Tradition

CHAPTER 1

The Land and The Legend



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1.1 Background

The Thrissur Pooram stands as one of India's grand festivals. The festival occurs between April and May, during the Malayalam month of *Medam* (Arattupuzha Pooram - Oldest of All Poorams | Festivals of Kerala, n.d.). The Pooram is held at the Vadakkumnathan temple in Thrissur every year. According to an article by Kerala Tourism, the date of the Pooram is decided based on the moon rising under the Pooram star (*Arattupuzha Pooram - Oldest of All Poorams | Festivals of Kerala*, n.d.).The festival begins when the flag enters the sacred space of Kodiyettem. The festival runs its full schedule, which lasts about 36 hours (*Arattupuzha Pooram*
- Oldest of All Poorams | Festivals of Kerala, n.d.). The festival exists as the most important event in Kerala because of its exceptional beauty, which attracts many visitors to experience the Pooram.

The festival showcases its elephant processions through the competitive displays of the *Thiruvambady* and *Permekkaku* temple groups (Nishanth P & Udayanandan K M, 2021). The festival features essential artistic elements, which include the *kudamattam* umbrella exchange and the chenda drums and *elanjithara* melam percussion performances (Nishanth P & Udayanandan K M, 2021). The artistic heritage of Kerala demonstrates its temple arts through shared religious practices, which connect people with their cultural paths.

The Thrissur Pooram festival is a very important cultural event that brings together people from different communities through its various activities that include volunteer work, which local residents and temple committees together control (Venugopalan & Kumar, 2017). The festival has transformed into a major cultural symbol of Kerala because it attracts many visitors who come to see its traditional performances and rituals, which have existed for more than 200 years (Venugopalan & Kumar, 2017).

1.2 Historical Overview and Geographical Info



Fig. 1.1: Map of Thrissur, Kerala

This part forms the indispensable geographical, spatial, and institutional context of Thrissur and reveals why this centralised site (which is described as the Cultural Capital of Kerala) is in a unique position to hold and support the Thrissur Pooram. The discussion extends the description to the assessment of how the physical plan and cultural infrastructures of the city can be used as active facilitators of the monumental nature of the festival, its peculiar spectacle, and long-term socio-religious impact.

The physical geography of Thrissur, Kerala, has a direct bearing on the historical requirement of the Pooram as well as on the modern logistical requirement of the Pooram. The

foundation of the festival by *Sakthan Thampuran* was actually meant to establish a new hub of religious display in a logistically safe urban environment (V T Nair & N, 2022).

The Kole wetlands help in preserving both the natural ecological system and culture. The systems function as agricultural wetlands, which combine both wetland ecosystems and farming activities (Mathew & Prema A, 2022). The Kole lands function for multiple purposes because they serve as essential natural flood control systems during the intense monsoon period while providing valuable farming areas during the dry season (Mathew & Prema A, 2022). The physical restriction establishes the boundaries of the regional economy and traditional practices, which demonstrate how district geography connects with cultural resource utilisation.

Urban Morphology: Urban Spatial Blueprint of Spectacle

The ability of Thrissur to accommodate such an event on such a large scale as the Pooram is a direct consequence of the space organisation that was planned out in the city. The city is also among the few historic cities in Kerala with a well-structured concentric ring-and-radial development pattern (C & Kumar, 2017; Devika et al., 2016). This form is the result of the strategic planning of towns, which is meant to organise civic life in a superior manner with a central sacred centre (C & Kumar, 2017).

The *Vadakkumnathan* Temple in Thrissur is where the city planning is centred, since it occupies the geometrical centre (C & Kumar, 2017; *SREE VADAKKUNNATHAN TEMPLE CONSERVATION PROJECT*, n.d.). The geographical representation of it is under a semi-rectangular fortification, encompassing around 36,000 m2, resting on a hilltop in the core. Radial streets (veedhis) lead away from this point of focus. This geometry forms an effective channel arrangement, which makes it easy to move huge masses of people and the in-depth and massive procession vital to the Pooram ritual (C & Kumar, 2017). The city architecture is therefore a built environment that is a spectacle serving as a crucial resource base of culture (C & Kumar, 2017).

The literal seat of the Pooram is the Thekkinkadu Maidan, which is a wide, circular open space located on the physical location of the VadakkumnathanTemple complex and surrounded by Swaraj Round, the major ring road of the city (*SREE VADAKKUNNATHAN TEMPLE CONSERVATION PROJECT*, n.d.; Devika et al., 2016). The one most crucial logistical aspect of the festival is this huge central area (*Sree Vadakkunnatha Temple…*, 2018). It is the official place of the grand procession of decorated elephants and parasol exchange (Kudamattam) and competitive percussion orchestras (Melam) (*Sree Vadakkunnatha Temple…*, 2018). The geometry of the Maidan and the city around it, where the whole town is getting ready to celebrate the festival, contributes to the collective sensual experience (C & Kumar, 2017), and the spatial design of the event is the determinant of the strong aesthetic experience of the event.

The spatial planning of Thrissur is a grandiose and fixed architectural structure that is maximised to perform culturally. The radial plan of the street reduces the friction of the movement of crowds, and the Maidan is the stage that ensures the visual effect and ensures the required acoustics for the announcing Melam contest (C & Kumar, 2017). The city's geometry is a determinant of the intense aesthetic experience of the event in the city, as the city structure boosts the collective, sensory interaction (C & Kumar, 2017). The general physical setting is also part of the spiritual symbolism of the festival. The high, crowned Vadakkumnathan Temple symbolises the inertia of Shiva, which rests at the centre of the place, and the Thekkinkadu Maidan, which surrounds it, symbolises the dynamic energy (shakti) which is the product of the converting processions of the ten goddess temples (C & Kumar, 2017). The metaphysical concepts that have propelled the festival are also well-suited to the centralised geography of the temple (C & Kumar, 2017).

1.3 Research Questions and Rationale

According to the secondary research and prior reports on the festival, Thrissur Pooram provides information on its famous festival highlights, such as cultural milestones and an overall description of how the festival is celebrated. The most focused areas of the celebration are the drums, fireworks, and the elephant decorations. Studies have majorly highlighted the visuals of

the festival when it comes to the fireworks, drums and elephant decorations; however, there is less research on the preparation of these aspects rather than just the visuals. Further, areas of festival impact on different stakeholders have not been explored, and how the festival elements come together to create an experience for the audience.

The main research gaps identified:

- The research concludes that mainly festival operations are set up through the temple committee, as well as volunteer groups. Nonetheless, no investigation has been carried out on the overall management of the festival. There are no insights into how these temple committees work and are managed.

- Although many scholars examine contemporary media through the lenses of tourism and commercialisation, none have explored it in detail. Hence, the conversion of traditional practices through multimedia and culture needs to be studied in depth to understand the overall impact and changes.

- Ritual performance is treated descriptively, not analytically: Cultural elements are often presented as static traditions rather than dynamic expressions of identity.

- Existing research on Thrissur Pooram lacks authentic documentation on what goes on behind the Pooram, and what the stakeholders' reality looks like during the Pooram.

How have modernisation, tourism, and media exposure influenced the Pooram's practices, and what social or environmental challenges have emerged as a result?

The current forces of globalisation and commercialisation, together with digital visibility, control how contemporary cultural festivals develop. The festival has gradually become a major religious event that has grabbed attention from people across the country. Therefore, the research

aims to understand how the Pooram has been carried out throughout the years while tackling modern needs for the audience.

Cultural practices experience commodification through tourism and media exposure, which leads to economic development and cultural appreciation, but results in the commercialisation of rituals and performances that exist for public consumption instead of community value. The festival expansion creates actual problems, which include excessive crowds and damage to local facilities, the production of waste and environmental harm.

The question holds importance because it studies how modernisation affects culture through its two effects, tourism and media exposure, which create cultural visibility yet damage traditional practices.

What roles do temple committees and local volunteers play in sustaining the Pooram's traditional character?

To fulfil the operations for Thrissur Pooram, the organisers have to put into place a system that covers everything about the festival with the help of planners and the members of society. The temple committees and local volunteers ensure that traditional worship has been performed and that operational tasks of this mega public event have been carried out. Since the studies are limited to the visible aspects of the festival, secondary research has not looked at these vital stakeholders. The active maintenance of traditions through various practices depends on understanding their complete contributions to the process.

The stakeholders operate at the point where traditional practices meet new developing trends. The research question focuses on how the stakeholders of Thrissur Pooram preserve the Pooram rituals while coordinating with current problems related to public safety, controlling the crowd, and maintaining regulations

In what ways do the rituals, music, and visual performances of Thrissur Pooram embody and preserve Kerala's traditional cultural identity?

The festival showcases an important visual aspect of the Pooram, which is one of the reasons why it has gained media attention. From an artistic aspect, to showcasing the music and heritage of Trissur, the Pooram has grandiose visuals. The ritual services, Chenda Melam and Kudamattam performances, are the main highlights of the festival performances. The festival is unique and brings out the joint cultural heritage of the community. Existing discourse analyses these festival elements as unchanging aesthetic components and does not take into account demonstrating their actual function as cultural elements that create and share meaning. Yet in reality, they function as cultural elements within performances, mediating tradition and facilitating its renewal for each new generation of audience members.

The research requires an analytical evaluation of cultural elements that function as cultural preservation and create cultural identity. The research question aims to understand what goes behind the massive aesthetic celebration of the Pooram. The study looks beyond the beauty of the festival, focusing on the rituals and performances through the lenses of its preparation, struggles, and perspectives of different stakeholders towards preserving the cultural identity.

1.4 Research Objectives

This study aims to understand the cultural phenomenon shaped by both transitional practices and contemporary developments in Thrissur Pooram. The research focuses on going beyond the mere description of the festival and its various structures, experiences and transformations. Furthermore, the study aims to understand the festival through different perspectives, roles, and experiences.

Below are the specific research objectives:

- To investigate how tourism, modernization, and media exposure had an effect on the traditions of Thrissur Pooram. Further, how has that impacted social and environmental perspectives?

- To study how the temple committees and other local volunteers responsible for organising and maintaining the traditions are involved in managing and maintaining the traditional essence of Thrissur Pooram.
- To examine how rituals, music and visual performance function as articulations of Kerala's cultural identity, adding to processes of its conservation.
- The research aims to understand how Thrissur Pooram has evolved over time, finding a balance between the culture and modern changes.
- To document and interpret stakeholder views on Thrissur Pooram, collected as part of the primary research, capturing real experiences.

1.5 Scope of the Research

The study looks into the decade-old festival Thrissur Pooram as a cultural and social phenomenon, within the spatial limit of Thrissur, located in Kerala. The study uses primary data collection during the field work window to carry out the research in depth. The study goes beyond the cultural aspects of the festivals and investigates the festival from its preparations to understand how the massive celebration takes place. The Pooram attracts people all over India; the study focuses on the management aspects as well as the challenges associated with it. To gather primary data, researchers preplanned interviews with important stakeholders to understand the history of how the Pooram was managed and what has changed.

Furthermore, the study investigates the essential cultural elements that include ceremonies, music, and visual performances with the various stakeholder groups such as temple committees, local volunteers, residents, vendors and tourists. This study explores how the media impacts festival organisers and visitors in the context of tourism and modernisation.

The scope of the research is limited to the primary data collected from the temple committees, volunteers, residents, and vendors. When collecting data from individuals involved during the research process, the researcher employs a qualitative approach. Moreover, the study does an in-depth analysis of what goes on behind the colourful and gigantic experience of the Thrissur Pooram.

The research was carried out ethically, following all the guidelines; participants gave their informed consent and were fully debriefed. The research took into account the participants' confidentiality, privacy, consent, right to withdraw and other ethical considerations.

1.6 Research Methodology

Research Approach

The research investigates Thrissur Pooram through its cultural and social aspects, which the study qualifies as a qualitative research method. The research requires a qualitative framework because it investigates all the festival-related meanings, experiences and interpretations of the event. Instead of numerical data, the study examines stakeholder perceptions, experiences and their festival contributions.

The research is exploratory and investigates unexplored areas, such as studying stakeholder functions, actual field situations, and examining how modernisation affects their work. The research method enables the collection of different viewpoints while developing new research themes.

Data Collection Methods

Primary data was collected in this research conducted in Thrissur, Kerala. Interviews, observations, and audio-visual documentation were used to collect primary data.

Interviews:

- Certain interviews were scheduled before the field visit due to the availability of the stakeholder and were conducted onfield, such as the President of Thiruvambady Devasom Committee, Col. PRM Ravi. and Secretary of the Paramekkavu Devasom Committee, Mr. Rajesh.
- Unscheduled interviews were conducted to gather information from stakeholders such as street vendors and locals.
- The study used a semi-structured interview, making it easier to ask follow up questions and get more information. The method enabled researchers to achieve better results through detailed answers and research of unexpected themes.

Observation:

The research required researchers to use direct observation as a main research method. The researchers studied all elements of the festival, which included rituals, musical performances, processions and crowd behaviour. The study provided direct evidence of the festival's operational context while supporting data that researchers gathered from interviews.

Audio-Visual Documentation:

The researchers documented the festival through photographs and videos, which were captured at different festival sites to create additional primary data. The researchers recorded all interviews after obtaining participant consent to create accurate records of their responses. The recorded material allowed researchers to perform extensive evaluation work in future research.

Sampling Technique

The study used **purposive sampling** to select essential stakeholders who had specific knowledge about the festival, from temple committee members to festival organisers and volunteers. The researchers used **convenience sampling** to conduct spontaneous interviews with available fieldwork participants, who included visitors and vendors.

Participants

The research considered all stakeholders directly or indirectly impacted by the festival. These include:

- Residents
- Street vendors and small business owners
- Temple committee members
- Local volunteers who helped organise the festival
- Hotel owners
- Festival item sellers

The research team studied various stakeholder groups as it helped them build a complete understanding of the festival.

Data Analysis

The research was analysed through thematic analysis. The method helped researchers to analyse the qualitative data collected and find key insights and findings. Researchers studied observational notes and interview notes to find themes and patterns for the study.

The study examined different main aspects, which included modernisation effects, people involved in the festival, its cultural importance and the effect it has on locals. The researchers used this approach to create an organised data system that contained complete information about each person's individual experiences.

Ethical Considerations

The research activities followed established ethical standards throughout the execution and met all requirements that the DIP Committee established. The researchers maintained strict compliance with the following ethical requirements:

- The study received both spoken and written informed consent from study participants before they commenced their interviewing activities.
- The researchers explained all study details to participants and debriefed by providing them with information about the study objectives and research methods.
- The right to withdraw was informed to participants. They could opt out of the interview and choose not to answer any question they are not comfortable with.
- The research process maintained both confidentiality and anonymity throughout data collection, which protected all data that researchers used for academic research purposes.
- The researchers followed ethical research standards by obtaining permission to enter buildings and to conduct their research with employees who worked in secured areas.
- As per the DIP Committee guidelines, researchers avoided discussing any sensitive subjects that might lead to participant discomfort or distress. The research process achieves ethical standards through these research protocols, which also protect research data integrity and authenticity during the data collection process.

CHAPTER 2

MORE THAN A FESTIVAL



Thrissur Pooram

Research Project – DIP 2026
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2.1 The Anatomy of a Pooram

The festival Thrissur Pooram is often perceived as a visually grand cultural festival. If we look beyond the surface, it is clear that it is more than just a celebration. And a well-structured sequence of rituals and performances that take place gradually over a period of time. It follows a proper pattern rather than randomised planning. Additionally, the entire festival is organised by a well-defined structure (Cambridge,n.d, Menon, n.d.). Every aspect plays a specific role within the larger function, and together they create a coherent structure that determines how the festival is organised and perceived. Historically, the temple festivals in Kerala have been deeply connected to community organisation, where religious institutions shape not only spiritual practices but also social interactions and cultural practices (Cambridge,n.d,; Menon, n.d.). For this reason, Pooram can be understood as a structural cultural institution rather than merely a festival. Where organised practices ensure the continuation of cultural traditions (Menon, n.d.; Bell, 1997).

One thing that becomes noticeable is the way the festival unfolds in a clear sequence rather than happening in a random or disorganised manner. The festival usually starts with relatively simple rituals and slowly progresses into more complex and visually striking performances. This transition is not random but instead reflects an organised arrangement. Where each step connects to the next in sequence. For instance, elements such as processions and the entry of decorated elephants (Bell, !997; Taylor & Francis, n.d.; Papadopoulou,2016).

Kudamattam, along with *Melam,* is a connected part of the sequence as a part of a continuous process rather than individual events. This organisation creates excitement within the audience and maintains engagement throughout the festival. Researchers have argued that this kind of ritual sequencing plays an important role in influencing collective participation as it structures both time and experience in a way that creates a shared sense of meaning. In simple terms, the sequence itself shapes the experience in a way that feels meaningful and shared (Bell, !997; Taylor & Francis, n.d.; Papadopoulou,2016).

Another important element that is not immediately visible is the level of coordination

needed to ensure the festival runs smoothly. Although the festival appears seamless on the surface. It involves immense planning carried out by temple committees, along with performers, artisans, volunteers, and local authorities (Emerald Insight, 2023; Menin,n.d). Each group is assigned a specific role, and its division of the roles is what allows the festival to function on such a large scale, from crowd management to coordinating performances, as well as ensuring rituals take place on time and all elements are systematically managed. During the time of on-field research, according to a local respondent, arrangements such as crowd control and seating are well organised, highlighting the structure beneath its vibrant atmosphere. Research on large-scale cultural events indicates that such events rely heavily on coordination and structured planning to ensure smooth functioning and consistency over time (Emerald Insight, 2023; Menin,n.d).

However, the structure of the Thrissur Pooram is not entirely fixed. Although the main sequence of rituals remains unchanged, it has gradually adapted to new social and cultural contexts. Improvements, including enhanced infrastructure, stronger safety arrangements, and the increasing role of digital media, have influenced how the festival is experienced today (Morgan, 2010; Bell, 1997; Oxford Bibliographies, n,d). Despite these changes, the essence of the festival remains intact, which makes it particularly significant. This suggests that tradition is not static while still retaining its essential significance. Researchers studying ritual and material culture argue that traditions persist because they adjust to new contexts while preserving symbolic meaning (Morgan, 2010; Bell, 1997; Oxford Bibliographies, n,d). Thrissur Pooram demonstrates this balance effectively (Morgan, 2010; Bell, 1997; Oxford Bibliographies, n,d).

Overall, it becomes evident that the Thrissur Pooram is more than just a festive gathering; instead, it functions as a structured cultural framework where rituals, performances, and participants come together within a structured framework. This organised framework allows the festival to operate effectively despite its large scale while also fostering a shared sense of participation.

2.2 Rituals and Symbolism (Kudamattam, Melam, Fireworks)

Thrissur Pooram is widely known for its grand visual scale; however, its foundation lies in a series of ritual practices that hold multiple layers of cultural and symbolic meaning. These

rituals go beyond being simple performances; additionally, they function within a defined framework where meaning is constructed, described, and collectively experienced among the participants and audience. In this context, rituals in the Pooram cannot be seen as a passive tradition; rather, they operate as dynamic processes that contribute to a collective sense of meaning and help preserve cultural traditions (Bell, 1997; Morgan, 2010). What matters here is not only what takes place but also how these actions are structured in a way that enables people to engage with them as a culturally meaningful experience (Papadopoulou, 2016; Oxford Bibliographies, n.d).

A particularly striking example of this can be seen in *Kudamattam,* which involves the ritual exchange of decorated umbrellas between temple groups. Initially, it appears as a colourful and dynamic display; however, a closer observation reveals a deeper form of ritual interaction. The variations in colours, patterns and designs are carefully selected; they reflect creativity, prestige and collective effort of the participating temple groups (Menon, n.d,; Morgan, 2010). At the same time, the level of coordination and teamwork involved reflects a balance between friendly and healthy competition and collaboration, where different groups interact with one another in a shared ritual setting. This means *kudamattam* is more than just a visual display and an expression of deeper symbolism through which relationships among communities are communicated and shaped (Bell, 1997; Freeman, 1999). As one interviewee pointed out, the visual changes stand out as a highly memorable part of the rituals, reflecting how symbolism affects audience experience

Another important element of the festival is *Melam*, a percussion-based performance that has a major role in creating the atmosphere of the festival, in comparison to conventional music forms. *Melam* functions are a ritual practice that organises and coordinates with time, movement and participation. The gradual build-up of rhythm, along with repeated rhythmic patterns that create a collective sensory experience where participants gradually become more involved and attracted to the ongoing performance (Clayton, 2007; Becker, 2004). This is significant because rhythm plays a role more than just a performance; it also helps in shaping collective experience and building emotional memories that will deepen the connection of the participants with the festival even more strongly. Adding to this, researchers also suggested that such repetition can create emotional connection and sometimes lead to altered states of awareness, enabling

participants to feel connected with the performance as well as with others (Becker, 2004; Turner, 1969; Papadopoulou, 2016). In this sense, *Melam* becomes an embodied experience where meaning is not just understood intellectually but also experienced physically and emotionally (Clayton,2007; Stokes, 1994).

Additionally, one more prominent element of the festival is its fireworks display, which further adds to its symbolic significance. Although they are often viewed as spectacles, they carry significance beyond mere entertainment. The magnitude, intensity and timing of the fireworks represent shared celebration, highlighting moments of collective excitement in several ritual traditions. Light and sound are linked to transformation and spiritual presence. Fireworks can be seen as marking a climax within the sequence of rituals. The anticipation that develops around these displays, along with the collective response of the crowed reflect hou they contribute to collective emotional engagement, emphasising that engagement is as important as experiencing it collectively

Looking at them as a whole, *Kudamattam*, *Melam* and Fireworks show, these elements reflect how Thrissur Pooram functions as an interconnected system of rituals and performances (Bell, 1997; Menon,n.d). At first, each aspect appears different, but they function within a larger structure that creates a cohesive cultural experience (Bell, 1997; Papadopoulou, 2016). These traditional practices ensure repetition and continuity while also encouraging creativity and participation (Turner, 1969; Morgan, 2010). This balance is significant because it helps festivals stay consistent while also adapting (Morgan, 2010; Oxford Bibliographies, n.d). Instead of functioning as separate performances, these rituals together contribute to the creation of meaning, building a sense of community and continued expression of cultural identity (Bell, 1997; Stokes, 1994; Turner, 1969). In this way, the Thrissur Pooram becomes more than just a sequence of events; it also emerges as a living cultural process where meaning and symbolism are continuously produced and experienced (Morgan, 2010; Papadopoulou,2016).

2.3 Music as Energy: The Power of Melam

One of the defining aspects of Thrissur Pooram is its music, which also plays a very crucial role in defining and building the meaning of the festival, particularly *Melam*, a rhythmic percussion performance that strongly shapes the festival's atmosphere (Becker, 2004; Clyton,

2007). Instead of acting as background music, *Melam* functions as an active ritual element that organises and coordinates time, movement, and participation within the ritual setting (Clayton, 2007; Papadopoulou, 2016). The rhythmic patterns created by instruments like the *chenda* are carefully structured and well planned since before. They follow a defined sequence that gradually increases in intensity, directing both participants and observers during the progression of the performance (Clayton, 2007; Menon, n.d)

The progressive increase in rhythm, combined with recurring patterns, produces a shared sensory atmosphere where individuals are naturally and gradually become more deeply involved in the performance (Becker, 2004; Papadopoulou,2016). This is important because rhythm here goes beyond simple entertainment; it actively helps build a collective experience and a shared connection by aligning movement, attention and emotional responses among participants (Clayton,2007; Turner, 1969). As the rhythm increases, it produces a sense of anticipation among the participants, bringing them into a shared sense of time and experience (Becker, 2004; Papadopoulou,2016). This process also involves a significant physical aspect, as the rhythms are physically felt rather than only heard, creating a sense of physical involvement as well as an emotional touch. Researchers have observed that this kind of rhythmic immersion can create strong emotional experiences and sometimes heightened states of awareness. Where participants feel deeply connected to a collective setting (Becker, 2004; Turner, 1969). In this sense, *Melam* goes beyond being just a musical performance to become a system of coordination and organisation in which sound serves as a medium that brings people together and their experiences into a shared collective. This highlights how music in ritual settings acts as a means of cohesion and connection rather than simply acting as entertainment (Turner, 1969; Clayton,2007).

Scholars in ethnomusicology argue that repetition and rhythmic intensification in such performances can generate a strong and emotional response and may even lead to altered states of consciousness. In the context of the Thrissure Pooram, this becomes visible in the physical and emotional response of the audience, often becoming deeply immersed in the rhythm. In one of the interviews, a participant mentioned that the “sound builds energy in the crowd”, showing how rhythm directly influences collective emotion and participation.

Apart from its emotional and sensory influence, *Melam* also contributes to expressing and strengthening cultural identity. The performance is strongly grounded in Kerala's musical traditions and shows continuity of cultural practices that have been maintained over generations (Menon,n.d; Stroke, 1994). At the same time, *Melam* is not just a representation of tradition; it is a dynamic cultural practice. Where identity is constantly expressed and reshaped, in this context, music acts as a force of cultural communication, allowing individuals to connect with shared traditions and collective memory that has been constantly followed by the tradition and history (stroke, 1994; Becker, 2004). The shared nature of the performance strengthens this connection as both performers and spectators engage in a collective cultural experience that strengthens social connections through such performances. Cultural identity is not only represented but also actively experienced and strengthened, making it a continuous and evolving process rather than something fixed or unchanging (Stroke, 1994; Turner, 1969).

Therefore, as mentioned earlier, *Melam* can be seen as more than just a musical performance; it operates as a form of embodied energy that influences the experience of Thrissure Pooram on multiple levels (Becker, 2004; Clayton, 2007). Through its organised rhythm, emotional depth and cultural importance, it transforms the festival into a multisensory experience that engages both the body and the mind by bridging participants into a common temporal and emotional space (Papadopoulou, 2016; Turner, 1969). *Melam* strengthens the collective nature of the festival and contributes to the formation of meaning within the ritual context.

2.4 Elephants, Art, and Visual Grandeur

One of the most significant and well-known aspects of the Thrissur Pooram is the elephants. It has a deep cultural significance, and they are not just for visual representation. They play a very crucial symbolic role in the celebrations since they are often connected to divinity, strength, and good fortune in Hindu traditions (Sahapedia, n.d,; Indica, n.d). Elephants are deeply connected to Kerala's cultural life and public traditions (Vijaykrishnan & Sinha, 2019). Elephants are ornamented with ceremonial accessories, bright umbrellas, and gold colored decorations throughout the celebration. In addition to being visually appealing, this design displays artistic abilities, tradition, and social status. The precise placement of fabrics and

ornamentation enhances the event's grandeur and demonstrates the role of craftsmanship involved (Morgan, 2010). The number and grandeur of elephants indicate the status and importance of the temples involved (Menon,n.d). Adding to it, the placement of the elephants follows a structured order that reflects ritual hierarchy (Bell, 1997). In ritual traditions, elephants are associated with sacred or divine power (Sahapedia, n.d). Their presence highlights the connection between humans, animals, and ritual culture.

The audience has a great opportunity as they receive an extreme visual experience from the elephant procession. Altogether, their size, movement, and ornamentation create wonder and grandeur. According to the scholars of material culture, these visual components are very crucial in making religious rituals more concrete and interesting (Morgan, 2010; Oxford Bibliographies, n.d). Adding to this, the elephants, extra visual elements like fireworks, and *Kudamattam* enhance the festival's creative richness. These aspects offer a unique sense of taste by combining colour, movement, and performance, highlighting the nature of creativity and decency. They explain how rituals and art interact in public spaces. This shared visual experience generates a sense of collective immersion among participants (Turner, 1969). As a result, they make cultural meanings easier to understand through physical representation (Morgan, 2010). The experience goes beyond passive observation and involves emotional and sensory engagement (Papadopoulou, 2016).

Overall, elephants and other visual components are essential to Thrissur Pooram's identity and more than only aesthetics. They contribute shared visual experience, traditional craftsmanship, and expression of cultural values. The integration of sound, visuals, and space produces a multi-layered experience. This shows how rituals are expressed through artistic performance (Freeman, 1999). Every single aspect used to make the festival bigger and bolder plays an important role

These elements act as a medium of cultural communication that shows shared meanings and values (Stroke, 1994).

2.5 Thrissur Pooram as Cultural Identity

Thrissur Pooram is a significant representation of Kerala's cultural identity, not only a celebration. It expresses the customs and values of the region by bridging together rituals, music, art, and community involvement. The festival serves as a space to not only preserve culture but also to explore, celebrate, share, and actively experience every moment. The most important feature of this festival is its ability to bring people together. Participation in the festivities by locals, tourists, and other communities fosters a strong sense of togetherness and belonging. According to the research, this kind of group involvement is important for forming cultural identity (Turner, 1969). This feeling of belonging reinforces collective identity among participants (Stokes, 1994). This participation makes identity something that is actively formed rather than just passively observed (Turner, 1969).

The repetition of the performed rituals, music, and visual elements helps to preserve and maintain continuity between generations. These traditions make it possible to endure over time. According to cultural research, festivals serve as an important space for upholding common values and preserving cultural heritage (Bell, 1997). This helps pass cultural traditions from one generation to another. At the same time, repetition also strengthens familiarity and recognition.

However, modern features such as media and tourism also have a significant impact on the Thrissur Pooram. This helps promote the development and recognition of the culture and the region, but it also questions authenticity and change. Despite the changes, the festivals' fundamental cultural components continue to remain strong. In conclusion, Thrissur Pooram is a living example of culture. It maintains a close connection to Kerala's values and identity while reflecting both continuity and development. Media helps extend the festival's visibility beyond its location, allowing it to be experienced beyond its surrounding settings. This reflects a balance between continuity and change, where new changes are being adapted without losing their core meaning (Morgan, 2010).

CHAPTER 3

A LIVING EXPERIENCE



Thrissur Pooram

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3.1 The Festival Through the Eyes of the Crowd

The Thrissur Pooram Festival is not just a religious experience - but a complete, encompassing social and sensory spectacle of immense magnitude. Its impact and significance is directly tied to its overwhelming human presence, artisanal crafts, and age-old traditional performances; gold bedecked elephants marching, percussion and music ensembles, eardrum popping firecrackers and fireworks, and millions upon millions of souls celebrating what has been called “Asia’s Largest festival”. Official tourist sites note that the festival conjoins spiritual and cultural planes, while academic writings emphasize its role as an immense festival that attracts millions of participants into a densely packed urban environment. To phrase this more clearly, the crowd is not merely an audience nor just a participant - rather it is the driving force behind the festival's significance and meaning.

Through a crowd studies oriented lens, Thrissur Pooram highlights how the mass presence of like-minded individuals creates a sense of emotional amplification - the immense crowds react in a synchronized manner to major events such as percussion/musical performances, firework lightings, elephant parades, and *Kudamuttom* (a competitive display of umbrellas using elephants). These synchronized reactions act as an exponential catalyst, enhancing the festival’s atmosphere and general outward perception. The crowd additionally exemplifies cross cultural inclusivity, gathering celebrators and festival goers from a multitude of different cultures and countries from all over the world - surpassing narrow religious/cultural boundaries. This diverse participation additionally serves to garner the city a sense of civic appeal - acting as a cultural reference point for both the city and Kerala as a whole. This once again serves to paint the crowd as not only a mass of people, but rather as an immense symbol of Thrissur’s impact and deep rooted identity - a city where spectacle, tradition, and emotions all converge into one massive cultural event.

Due to the massive crowds, the ordinary urban landscape is transformed into a sprawling ritual space, with streets/roads, shops, and public platforms being redefined by the whims and concentrations of the present crowd. Rather than being relegated to a background setting, this causes the very city itself to become an integral part of the festival’s performance and ethos. This

embodying of festival ethos serves to boost the crowd experience, as participants don't just watch the festival, but rather live it. Through the process of “living” the festival, a powerful sense of emotional synchrony is created amongst participants. This shared synchrony is only boosted by the shared experiences and moments of awe shared by participants, with fireworks, elephant parades and music ensembles serving to create a sense of community and connect between people of all cultures and backgrounds. When interviewing the residents of Thrissur - we asked them their most significant/important memory from the Pooram - and almost all of them concurred it was the sense of group belonging they felt when witnessing certain awe inspiring events, with the most notable being the immense fireworks lighting.

While the Thrissur Pooram is a festival for celebration and joyous memories, for many inhabitants of the city it reflects something deeper - it reflects the deep ancestral and cultural connection of Thrissur. For a vast majority of the local population, attending the Pooram is an ancestral tradition passed down through generations. It goes beyond just family tradition too, as attending the Pooram is linked to local neighborhood pride and at its deepest, a sense of civic belonging to the community as a whole. This serves to make the Pooram both an ancestral tradition connecting past and present, but also as a modern cultural legacy that embodies the ethos of Thrissur.

3.2 Community at the Core: Devotion and Collective Energy

The beating heart of Thrissur Pooram lies in the cradle of communal devotion rather than individual. The collaboration of thousands of moving parts create a structure through which temples, community members, local groups and individuals impart their share to the performances and worship of the festival. Historical depictions and descriptions portray the original purpose of the Thrissur Pooram Festival was to bring together the ten largest temples around the main Vadakkumnathan Temple located in the heart of Thrissur. This "alliance" of temples served to create a cultural alliance rather than having multiple isolated festivals. This temple “alliance” additionally serves to give the Thrissur Pooram its unique collaborative structure, where emotion and celebration are conveyed through extravagant public displays, mass participation and coordination.

The aforementioned idea of communal devotion is key when it comes to understanding the significance of Thrissur Pooram. As mentioned above, the immense co-mingling of thousands of groups and people serve to impart a devotion rich atmosphere visible through shared chants, celebrations and activities; *Chenda Melam, Panchavadyam*, fireworks, and other musical processions are all more than just music and instruments - they are avenues of religious emotion conveyed to a massive scale - heard, celebrated, and treasured by millions of people each year. This cultural co-mingling additionally serves to blur the line and dampen social and economic distinctions between different groups of people. This can be attributed to the shared devotional and emotional connection present between the millions of souls at the festival. This serves to highlight that the energy and atmosphere of the crowd is not a cause of the festival, but is rather one of the cornerstones of the festival's foundation.

Additionally, this communal devotion is not just limited to participants/celebrators of the festival, but can be seen on a larger scale throughout the city of Thrissur - where devotion is part and parcel of local life. A multitude of locals, from shopkeepers, hotel managers, restaurant owners, housekeepers - they all come together to prepare offerings and prepare the city for the expected massive crowds, taking an active part in sustaining the festival environment. This behavior extends far beyond the borders of the temple perimeter and can be observed in all corners of the city, effectively mobilising the local population into a living cultural infrastructure where their collective effort becomes another way of expressing their joy and emotion for the festival.

While at first glance the communal devotion seems to be a byproduct of spontaneity, it is rather the product of careful coordination and planning. Each individual moving part, whether they be the multitude of temple groups, elephant processions, percussion ensembles, or even volunteer groups must work in precise tandem to achieve proper timing, ceremonial order and proper ritual sequences - crucial when even slight logistical delays can ruin the experience for a crowd of millions. This careful structured planning highlights the importance that organizational structure plays in enhancing the devotional experience through a series of organized, rehearsed and carefully planned out events. This further serves to highlight the importance of cooperation, proper planning/preparation, and trust required between various groups to conduct large scale religious festivals/celebrations like the Thrissur Pooram.

This communal devotion extends far beyond just the temple grounds and forms of it can be seen in everyday life surrounding the days of the festival - most notably in the interdependence it creates between the various temple groups responsible for the Pooram and the general population of Thrissur. Any festival of such massive proportions would need a legion of logistic help, ranging from transport workers, sanitation, vendors, security, social media/news/journalists, etc. The co-mingling of these various moving parts with the main cogs of the temple groups highlights one of the main ways that festival devotions extends far beyond the temple grounds and is embedded in the daily functioning of the city. As stated previously, this large cooperation and collective devotion - through its multiple forms and ways of expression - serve to impart upon the Pooram the reputation of a community spanning cultural event rather than strictly a temple ritualistic festival.

3.3 The Role of Temple Groups and Traditions

The temple groups of Thrissur are not just another set of participants, but rather play a key role in the upkeep and very foundation of the festival. A multitude of historical accounts attribute the birth of the Festival to a man named Sakthan Thampuran, who brought upon the event by uniting the ten largest temples in the city and dividing them into two sides - namely associated with Paramekkavu and Thiruvambady. By dividing the temples into two cooperative but distinct parties, the Festival preserved its deep cultural and ritualistic center while also introducing a new competitive aspect, with each side aiming to outperform the other. This allowed each temple group to express their devotion and ritual in their own artistic way, while at the same time being bound to the central sacred tradition and rituals.

This competitive nature between the various temple groups additionally serves to contribute to the festival through creating a sense of “prestige”, that helps influence public perception. The standing and popularity/prominence of each temple is strengthened and based off of their respective contributions, visibility, and artistic/ceremonial displays during the Pooram. This serves to help express each temple groups’ and their respective communities' rich history, identity and culture through the medium of a devotional performance. Through this method of competitive interaction, the Pooram aids to display the devotion, tradition, and cultural capability of the various major groups participating in it.

While the types of artistic performances displayed by the Temples are varied and vast, they are an “everlasting” thing, shaping every aspect of the festival. Fireworks, elephant displays, parades/processions, percussion ensembles, umbrella exchanges; all ritualistic traditions and activities passed down through centuries of festivals and temple rites. Due to the everlasting nature of these activities, which can be observed in every Thrissur Pooram since the first, it imparts a strong sense of continuity to the festival - helping make it a living evolving cultural cornerstone of life rather than a one-off static event. The various temple groups are the custodians of these ancient practices, guaranteeing the continuation of this tradition to following generations and ensuring that the festival remains accurate to its historical roots.

While responsible for the vast celebrations and awe inspiring spectacles of the Pooram, the temples groups are also tasked with the more arduous task of managing the practical demands of the Pooram - from planning schedules, ritual performances, and accommodating each performance seamlessly into the larger festival framework. This helps highlight the importance of the temple groups’ organizational and institutional responsibility in making the Pooram a seamless cultural experience.

3.4 Why Millions Gather: Attraction and Experience

Millions of people from all over the world - regardless of socioeconomic status, religion, or background gather together for the three days of Thrissur Pooram. These people are attracted to the festival for the convergence of religion, culture, celebration, and ancient tradition all in one massive event. It is statistically the most celebrated event in all of Kerala, with a multitude of sources claiming it as the biggest cultural event in Asia, known not only for its scale but its ability to create an everlasting impact through its emotional appeal and visually extravagant performances. This visual extravagance is a major part of why the Thrissur Pooram is so widely recognized and loved, with gold bedecked elephant parades, thousands of fireworks and firecrackers, booming musical/percussion performances, and the voices of millions of people all conjoining into an immersive sensory experience. Each sub event during the festival builds off of its previous, stoking anticipation and heightening the crowd to almost rarely ever seen before levels.

Another key reason for the festival's wide known presence and success is due to its surpassing social differences. The festival looks past narrow divisions like religious or economic backgrounds, and allows people from all over to simply "exist" - to bring people from all corners of the world together for the simple joy of celebrating tradition. This disregard for social barriers/constraints appeals to people world over, making Thrissur Pooram an international cultural event open for all rather than a private celebration for one culture or background.

Another driving factor for the Festival's mass participation and reach is its immense emotional and symbolic intensity. When people attend the festival, they not only witness it, but rather feel like a part of a mass symbolic event that embodies the ancient tradition and devotion of Kerala's festive culture. The culmination of intense devotion, celebration, sensory experiences, and musical extravagance serve to make Thrissur Pooram not just an event to attend, but one that is rather lived.

CHAPTER 4

THE HANDS THAT BUILD THE FESTIVAL



Thrissur Pooram

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Group 43

4.1 Temple Committees and Power Structures

The organizational backbone of the Thrissur Pooram lies in its temple committees itself, which function as structured administrative bodies instead of being purely religious institutions. At the centre of this, there are two primary participants as mentioned before: Paramekkavu and Thiruvambady Devasom, which are individually supported by a whole network of temples within the district.

These Devasoms' are administered by a 19-member elected managing committee which happens every 3 years once. This comprises 5 key office bearers including the President, Vice-President, Secretary, and Assistant Secretary. This enables accountability and efficiency in decision making as the structure reflects a mix of democratic representation as well as hierarchical leadership.

Fig. 4.1: Organizational Structure of Devasoms'

The responsibilities of these committees extend beyond just the ritual supervision. They are tasked with overseeing the financial planning, performance co-ordination, making sure compliance



with legal frameworks is proper and managing the entire logistics side of their temple for this festival that attracts millions of visitors yearly. As said by the Secretary of the Paramekkavu Devasom, the committee is responsible for "conducting all that is required" from

its side, highlighting the autonomy given and the grand scale of their respective roles.

A key feature of this specific governance system is the competitive nature between Paramekkavu and Thiruvambady. While most literature frames this as rivalry, primary insights revealed a more nuanced dynamic. The competition is healthy and self-directed for the most part, where each side tries to do better than its own performance from the previous year rather than compete and undermine the other. This internal limit preserves the spirit of the festival and prevents escalation into conflict which ensures that the competitive aspect of the Pooram enhances rather than disrupt the cultural experience.

An elderly couple from Thrissur, who have attended the Pooram for several years and were brought up watching the same offer another distinctive perspective. They described the Kudamattam as akin to, “a daughter returning home and affectionately showing her mother what she has brought one by one” [Translated from Tamil (Palakkad Brahmin Dialect)]. In this analogy, Paramekkavu and Thriuvambday are represented as the daughters, while the Vadakkumnathan Temple assumes the role of the mother.

Equally significant is the rigidity of the ritual structures. Ensured by both the President of the Thiruvambady side (2025) and the Secretary of the Parmekkavu side (2025), the Pooram continues to be conducted according to principles established by King Shakthan Thampuram over two centuries ago, with minimum deviation. This specific adherence to tradition shows a conscious resistance to change within the religious domain, even as other aspects of the Pooram continuously evolve.

4.2 Volunteers: The Invisible Backbone

While volunteers play an important role in the execution of the Thrissur Pooram, their significance goes beyond just logistical support. Volunteers represent the connection between the festival and the community, since this is unpaid work, reflecting how participation is experienced and sustained throughout time.

Traditionally, the Pooram relied heavily on local involvement. Volunteers assist with

tasks like managing crowds, procession guidance and even supporting coordination during key events that will be elaborated upon. Their work is mostly informal but is essential to maintaining order in a festival of such a large scale. More importantly, volunteering has historically been driven by a sense of devotion and cultural belonging rather than being obligated to do so.

However primary insights suggest that the nature of this type of participation is changing. As expressed by Mr. Rajesh “While younger generations continue to attend the festival in large numbers due to popularity, their involvement in organizational roles has decreased massively over time.” ,which indicates a shift from active participation to passive forms of engagement and participation. This change reflects social patterns which extend beyond Thrissur, like academic pressure, professional commitments and changing lifestyles. At the same time, the increasing visibility of the festival through media alters how people interact with it as the Pooram has become something to be watched and experienced rather than actively organized.

At the same time, this shift raises important questions about the future. If active participation continues to decline like this, the burden of organization will fall on a smaller group of individuals which could affect the community-driven nature of the whole festival, which has always been one of its defining characteristics.

In this context, volunteers are not just helpers, but as indicators to the world of how cultural traditions can be expected to be carried forward. Their changing role shows a broader transition in how communities engage in traditions, which is moving from participation to observation. Whether or not this shift will impact the long-term sustainability of the Thrissur Pooram remains an important question which can only be answered by the future.

4.3 Coordination, Planning, and Execution

The execution of the Thrissur Pooram is dependent on strong coordination between many different groups involved. Even though the festival is big and complex, it is carried out in an organized way. This is because the system has been followed and refined based on previous

issues over many years which makes each year better than the previous.

Planning for the Pooram begins immediately after the previous year's festival ends. As mentioned by the Secretary of Paramekkavu Devasom, Mr. Rajesh, the process follows a "set pattern", and the people who are involved already know what needs to be done and how to do each part, which makes the entire process smoother. Instead of starting from zero every year, organizers have a basic foundation that is relied on due to experience and continuity.

The festival is not controlled by one central authority and includes groups like the various temple committees, volunteers, performers, artisans and government authorities. Each group has its own role, but all of the parties involved depend on each other. This means that even if one part of the system fails, the whole group is affected. Because of this, communication becomes very important, especially during the days of the main events.

This coordination of the festival is not limited to just the organizers and the performers. It also includes artisans whose work is vital to key events. During our fieldwork, we interviewed the family of a contractor known as the "*Chamayam Swami*", who has been making the ceremonial *kodai* (umbrella), *alavattom* (fans with peacock feathers), *venchamaram* (white, bushy fans), and *nettipattam* (colorful parasols), which make up the Aanachamayam (elephant decoration), which is where he gets his name from. Since he was quite old, we spoke to his wife, who explained that the art and craft of this has been passed down through generations in their family. Their son, who currently lives in Chennai, handles the finance aspect of it while they handle the entire decoration and deliverables part.

She showed us how the umbrellas are designed, decorated and reused to not waste any material. The level of detail involved in the process was seen from the gold plating, to finding the perfect peacock feathers. Each umbrella requires careful planning and preparation and she emphasized on how reverent her entire family was with regard to making the final idol, which is placed on the main elephant in the center. This interaction made us realize that all of these items carry cultural meaning and reflect years of skill and tradition. Their production also needs to match the festival timeline, which adds another layer of coordination.

One of the key ways this coordination is maintained is through the festival schedule.

Thrissur Pooram follows a clear sequence of events over several days



Thrissur Pooram Schedule (2025)

Based on Thiruvambady Devaswom schedule

Date	Event/Activity
Pre-Pooram Events	
30 April 2025 (Wednesday)	10:30 AM – Flag hoisting ceremony (Kodiyettam) marking the beginning of the festival
11:00 AM – 11:30 AM	11:00 AM – 11:30 AM Ritual proceedings
	Next 3 days: Various preparatory temple *ritual*-S and ceremonial activities
30 April – 7 May 2025	Series of daily temple rituals and associated ceremonial events
3 May 2025 (Saturday)	8:00 PM **onwards** Cultural and ritual performances
	10:30 AM – 12:00 PM Processions and ceremonial offerings
	7:00 PM – 8:30 PM Sample Fireworks Display (Vedikkettu rehearsal)
4 May 2025 (Sunday)	9:30 AM – 12:00 PM Morning rituals and temple ceremonies
	Afternoon: Processions and related rituals
	4:00 PM Cultural programs and particpipation activities
Main Pooram Day	
7 May 2025 (Wednesday)	**Early Morning** (~2:00 AM) Major ritual processions begin
	3:00 AM – 6:00 AM **Main Fireworks Display** (Vedikkettu)
	Morning (~8:30 AM) Processions and assembly of participating
5 May 2025 (Tuesday)	**Late Morning – Afternoon**: Key ceremonial gatherings
	12:30 PM Processions toward Vadakkunnathan Temple
6 May 2025 —Pooram Eve—	**Afternoon – Evening**: Around **Vadakunnathan** Temple
	5:00 PM – 5:00 PM **Kudamattam** (Umbrela Exchange Ceremony)
	8:00 PM – 8:30 PM **Elaniithara Melam** (Grand Perccussion Performance)
7 May 2025	5:00 PM **onwards** Departure of participating temples
	8:00 PM – 8:30 PM Final rituals and symbolic closing ceremonies

Fig. 4.2: Thrissur Pooram Schedule (2025)

Above is the schedule of the Thrissur Pooram for 2025. While the calendar date of the Pooram changes, the timings and rituals involved are the exact same every year. From the flag hoisting (Kodiyettam) to key events such as Kudamattam, Elanjithara Melam, and Vedikkatu, the festival follows a fixed framework. This consistency not only helps maintain the precision of the rituals but makes the festival predictable and familiar for the organizers and participants, which further strengthens its role as a recurring and deep rooted practice.

4.4 Challenges Behind the Grandeur

While the Thrissur Pooram appears seamlessly executed, there's always challenges behind the spectacle. Its organization involves several challenges due to the multiple

stakeholders involved. These challenges are not always visible but play a significant role in shaping how the festival is conducted in the future years.

One of the primary challenges is the grand scale of the festival. The Thrissur Pooram attracts large crowds and managing this many people requires careful planning. Crowd control, movement management and ensuring safety during the elephant processions are all vital tasks. As highlighted in an interview with the Secretary of the Paramekkavu Devasom, Mr. Rajesh, “safety is a top priority” and the organizers work closely with the civil and district authorities to maintain order and follow all given regulations.

Another major challenge lies in the logistical demands of the festival itself. The President of the Thiruvambady Devasom, explained that preparing for the Pooram involves sourcing a wide range of materials, all of which are not easily available. Items like the ceremonial umbrellas, decorative ornaments, plumes of peacock feathers (only the ones that have fallen off naturally), and yak tail fans require time, effort and coordination to procure which is why preparation starts immediately after the previous Pooram is done. In addition, these materials need to be repaired often or even remade each and every year, making the entire process very labour intensive and expensive.

The financial aspect of organizing this festival has also become one of the challenges. While events like the Thrissur Pooram Exhibition help generate revenue, managing expenses still remains an ongoing challenge. The cost of elephants, performers, materials and infrastructure adds up significantly.

In recent years, environmental and ethical concerns have also become more prominent. Fireworks which are a key part of the festival have been strictly regulated due to concerns about noise and pollution.



Fig 4.3: Sample Fireworks at Uthralikkavu Pooram (2026)

Color	Chemical Combination	Chemical Name
Dark Red	$SrCO_3$	Strontium Carbonate
Light Red	Li_2CO_3	Lithium Carbonate
Orange	$CaCl_2$	Calcium Chloride
Yellow	$NaNO_3$	Sodium Nitrate
Green	$BaCl_2$	Barium Chloride
Blue	$CuCl_2$	Copper Chloride
White	Ti + Al	Titanium + Aluminium

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Fig 4.4: Firework colors and chemicals involved

As mentioned by Mr. Rajesh, all fireworks are now tested in advance at Sivakasi, Tamil Nadu which is also known as “Little Japan of India” due to its firework manufacturers. Figure 4.4 shows the chemical combinations for a sample of colors used in the Vedikattu. These must comply with the approved decibel levels. While this ensures safety, it places limits on how displays can be and will be conducted in the future.

Similarly, the use of elephants has drawn attention from the public as well as from regulatory bodies. Since elephants are an integral part of the festival, their welfare is consistently tracked and monitored. Organizers must ensure that animal welfare is made a priority and all guidelines are being followed.

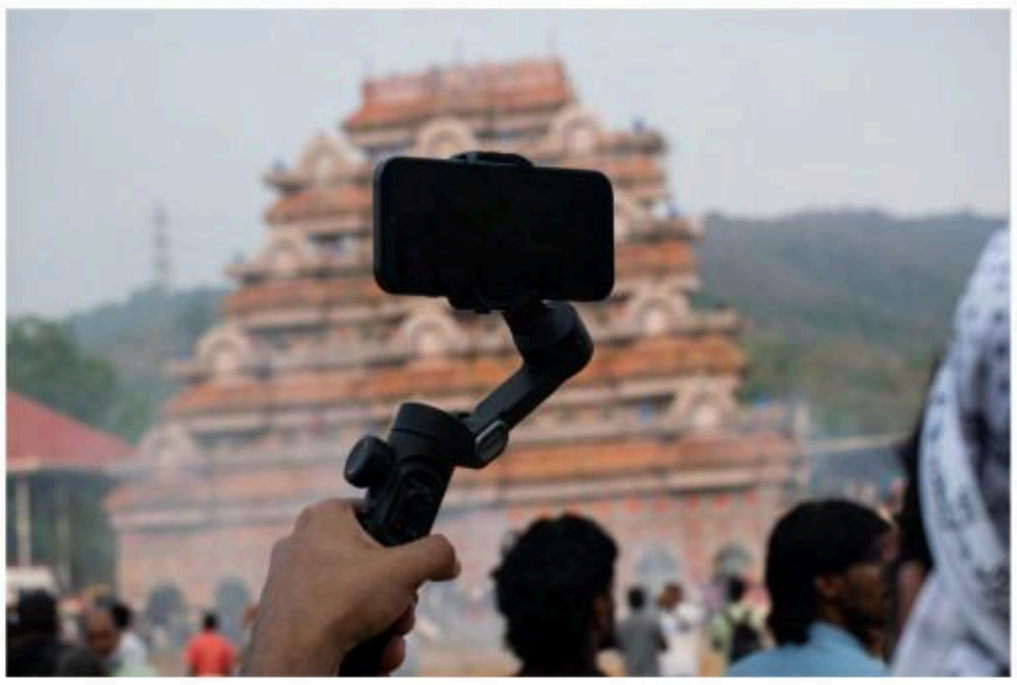
Another challenge is maintaining participation from the community, specifically in organizational roles. As discussed earlier, the decline in involvement from the younger generation actively raises concerns about the future sustainability of the entire volunteer system itself. While the festival continues to attract large audiences, ensuring that enough people are willing to take on major responsibilities behind the scenes is sought to be an important issue.

A notable example of how organizers handle challenges can be seen during the COVID-19 pandemic. According to Mr. Rajesh, the festival was conducted under strict restrictions, with limited attendance and controlled access. This meant that only those who met specific requirements were allowed to participate and the entire area was managed with caution. This clearly shows that the system is capable of adapting to unexpected situations while keeping the essence of the festival alive.

Despite all these challenges, the Thrissur Pooram, continues to function successfully each and every year. Both sides, Devasom Boards, agree that it’s due to flexibility of its organizational structure and the experience specifically of those involved. So instead of resisting change completely, the festival adapts wherever it is necessary while keeping its core traditions intact.

CHAPTER 5

WHEN TRADITION MEETS THE MODERN WORLD



Thrissur Pooram

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5.1 The Entry of Technology and Scale

Festivals are dynamic systems, not just static traditions. Along with the passage of time, all things pertaining to human life and culture have continued to evolve right along with them and the Thrissur Pooram is no exception. Although a bulk of the traditions and the procedures of the festival have remained unchanged through the centuries, some aspects of modern life have seeped into the practices of the Pooram. The most notable examples we found included the usage of LED lights as decoration for the backdrops of the Pooram grounds and the Muthukada umbrellas. We noticed a brightly lit structure in the background of the Uthralikkavu Pooram, every inch of which was covered in vibrant LEDs, reminiscent of a city street during Deepavali.

Technology serves just as much of a functional purpose as it does decoratively. The advent of technology has facilitated better communication, coordination and overall surveillance. This technology has also helped the organizers ensure the safety of the attendees of the Pooram, ensuring a timely spread of important information and rapid emergency response, which is especially critical with the rapidly increasing crowd at these festivals.

Fig. 5.1: Crowd at Uthralikkavu Pooram (2026)



Festivals are complex, organized events rather than simple informal gatherings (Elsevier, 2023). Along with the rapidly spreading population, the Pooram has also risen to meet it in scale.

By our best estimation, the Uthralikkavu Pooram, which is not as popular or grand as the Thrissur Pooram, saw between 50 thousand to 1 Lakh attendees during February 2026. In the same spirit, during April 2025, the Thrissur Pooram saw between 18-20 Lakh attendees. Along with so many attendees, come fresh challenges which must be addressed. Some risks pertaining to conducting a festival of such scale include crowd safety. Overcrowding can cause several issues, causing strain on existing infrastructure. Addressing these issues can be especially challenging taking heritage sites into consideration, especially as changing the core structure can cause damage or change the fundamental structure of these historical temples (Elsevier, 2023).

Precautions taken by authorities to protect the public to the best of their abilities by keeping several ambulances on standby to ensure swift assistance as well as a strong police presence to deter misbehaviour. Fire safety is also taken into account, as we witnessed a man enter the grounds and immediately extinguish the remains of the firework canisters following the showcase (Tiwari & Chowdary, 2025).

Along with an evolving modern populace and technology, mobility is also significantly easier. For the Arratupuzha Pooram, dating back centuries, people used to travel on foot for weeks from all over the state of Kerala to attend. Now, thanks to travel evolving on all mediums, people take flights, trains, buses and cars to attend the Thrissur Pooram not only from all over the country, but from around the globe (KPMG, 2025).

Our interview with Colonel Ravi was especially enlightening, since being the President of the Devasom Board, he was able to pull back the curtain and grant us an insight into the operations of the Pooram. As per Colonel Ravi in our interview with him, all these challenges are taken into account, addressed and dealt with thoroughly to ensure that the festival can continue without a hitch.

The grounds of the Vadakkumnathan Temple, where the festival is hosted every year also sprawl over 7 acres, creating a vast area to house the festival-goers. Even still, this space can be insufficient due to the sheer size of the crowd of devotees that come to pay their respects at the Pooram. To that effect, law enforcement shut down the areas around the Vadakkumnathan

Temple, and the crowds spilled out of the grounds and onto the city streets. Another challenge posed by these circumstances is crowd planning (Elsevier, 2023).



Fig. 5.2: Vadakkumnathan Temple- Thrissur Pooram Gopuram

Even with the spread of modernity and the mass evolution of technology and almost every single aspect of human life since the Pooram was first celebrated during the rule of Sakthan Thampuran, the majority of the traditions of the Thrissur Pooram have remained almost entirely unchanged. Although modern technology facilitates vastly easier production of materials and products of the Pooram, tradition demands that every Muthukada as well as the decorative fans and fireworks are handcrafted individually over months. The booming music ringing through the streets continues to come from the beat of the drums, without the use of any speakers or technology. Overall, the integration of technology and tradition in the functioning of the Thrissur Pooram is harmonious, with the modern aspects complimenting and facilitating traditions rather than taking them over.

5.2 Media, Globalization, and Digital Visibility

With the vastly spreading population, educating people about the Pooram can prove challenging, as only a sliver of the populace outside of Kerala is aware of the Pooram. Thankfully, however, due to the reach of modern media, people from all around the world can find the festival gracing their news feeds, their social media algorithms and their newspapers. While at the Uthralikkavu Pooram, we met multiple European tourists, coming from Italy, France and even Germany. Through a mix of social media and recommendations from Indian friends settled in their respective countries, these folks had heard about the beautifully rich cultural center that is Thrissur, and had travelled thousands of kilometers to witness it firsthand. Most people visiting Kerala also visit Thrissur, as it is called the cultural capital of one of the most culturally rich places in the world (Nair, 2022).

Media has largely replaced word of mouth as the largest contributor to the spread of the Pooram's message globally, with news stories covering the festival every year, including live broadcasts of the processions in their entirety. Some notable channels covering the same are Times Now, CNN, Asianet News, Doordarshan, News9 and more. CNN and Times now are two of the largest news networks in the world, with viewers located all over the world. CNN specifically remains prevalent in the global mass media industry, and reaches approximately 150 Million individuals every month. This news also reaches a portion of the audience which looks for opportunities to travel to "exotic" locations and explore different parts of the world, driving people to Thrissur and by extension, the Pooram (UNWTO, n.d.).

There have also been several documentaries made about the festival, and although they succeed in capturing the customs of the Pooram, they still drive people to witness the magic of the Thrissur Pooram in person. Documentaries about the Pooram include 'Festival of Elephants - Thrissur Pooram' that goes into details about the cultural,, historic and spiritual aspects of the festival, while 'Thrissur Pooram - An Explosion of Colour and Sound', produced by Kerala Tourism is a focus on the festival's scale, elephants, fireworks and the unfiltered energy of the crowds. (P & Sharma, 2025)

As significant as mass media has been historically, the younger generations tend to flock to social media as their primary source of news. To adapt to this paradigm in viewership dynamics, Kerala Tourism has set up accounts on several platforms, including Instagram, X, Facebook and Threads, where they have amassed millions of followers, following trends to reach a wider audience. They post pictures and videos of the beautiful landscapes of Kerala, as well as informative posts showcasing the rich cultural heritage of the state. Some of their recent posts have accumulated up to a hundred and fifty thousand views. They recently also posted about the vibrant festival season coming up during the summer, a highlight of which was the Thrissur Pooram. (UNWTO, n.d.) During the Uthralikkavu Pooram, we also saw dozens of drones in the sky recording the proceedings from dozens of angles.



Fig. 5.3: Drone at Uthralikkavu Pooram (2026)

Almost everyone on the grounds had cameras and their mobile phones out to take pictures and videos of the entire festival, which also led to several posts on social media. The Thrissur Pooram sees the same traction but at a much larger scale, with the hashtag #thrissurpooram has accumulated over 245 thousand posts on instagram, with several of them having millions of views. Under these posts, users in the comments are inquiring about which festival it is, when and where it is held and how they can attend it. (P & Sharma, 2025) This illustrates that although a lot of people may not be aware of the Pooram itself, witnessing the spectacles of the elephant parades and the firework shows, they wish to witness it firsthand, showing the process of driving people to attend the Thrissur Pooram.

These factors fit together like a puzzle into an indefinite cycle, where media coverage of the Pooram leads to greater global visibility of the Pooram. The increase in visibility leads to more tourists attending the festival and the tourists contribute to the ever growing scale of the Pooram. The increasing scale attracts more media to Thrissur, which in turn continues the cycle (UNWTO, n.d.; P & Sharma, 2025). We witnessed this process firsthand while we were on the field. Every single international tourist we met was documenting their experience at the festival, taking a plethora of photos and videos, and they communicated their intentions to share them on social media. We were also told by the parents of one of our group members, who were located in Johannesburg, that they spotted us on the television coverage of the Uthralikkavu Pooram. This demonstrates how far the media coverage of Thrissur has truly reached, drawing people from 6 continents to witness the wondrous events of the festival for themselves.

So thus we can see that the Thrissur Pooram's reach has been bolstered beyond any levels it has reached historically thanks to mass media. Even considering the scale of the festival proportionally to the population, the festival is now much more popular across India and the world than ever thanks to the extensive coverage on mass media channels such as televised news and newspapers. The thousands of tourists pouring into the city to attend the festival also spread knowledge of the Pooram through word of mouth but more importantly through posts on social media, sharing it to fresh globally diverse demographics which wouldn't easily be reached otherwise (Nair, 2022; UNWTO n.d.).

5.3 Tourism and Economic Transformation

As mentioned in the sections above, the vastly increased media visibility has led to a marked increase in tourism both domestically and globally, specifically for people flocking to Kerala and Thrissur to experience its many cultural marvels, prime among them the Thrissur Pooram. With the influx of tourists, the Pooram has evolved from a cultural and religious endeavour to an event of massive economic significance. The core rituals and traditions of the festival remain intact but the scale of the festivities and celebrations of the Pooram have grown tenfold, leading to the economic dimensions of Thrissur and its constituents expanding far beyond the temple grounds.



Fig. 5.4: Tourist at Uthralikkavu Pooram (2026)

Better connectivity, a rise in disposable income and an increased international interest in cultural experiences have been driven by a massive growth in tourism throughout the country over the past few decades. As per the Ministry of Tourism India recorded 1.7 billion domestic tourist visits in recent years, showing a sharp increase in internal mobility and travel interest (Ministry of Tourism, 2023). The growing attendance of cultural festivals such as the Thrissur Pooram has been largely facilitated by this paradigm. People attending the Pooram are no longer limited to local communities and surrounding areas of the Thrissur district, they now flock in from all over the country, drawn in by the Pooram's reputation as one of Kerala's greatest cultural wonders.

As for the economic effects, as per interviews conducted on the field, there have been both positive and adverse effects due to the Pooram. Specifically, vendors around the Vadakkunathan temple stated that during the festivities, they shut down their businesses due to the sheer size of the crowds on the streets outside. Other businesses, specifically the hospitality industry, said that business is better than ever during the celebrations, as room prices skyrocket and foot traffic increases over a hundredfold. (WTTC 2023).

There are also several vendors who set up temporary stalls around the area, selling souvenirs, all manners of food items, clothes, jewelry and more, making the streets a vibrant explosion of a temporary economic portrait. (World Bank, n.d.) The Pooram also provides opportunities for several situation based goods, for example, cold water and ice cream to cater to tourists not used to prolonged sun exposure and heat.

The economic boom brought about by the festivities also affects gig workers, as individuals working in transportation, artisans and performers also see a marked uptake in demand for their wares and services, with millions more needing to traverse and finding themselves admiring the handiwork of local workers bring these people to a market only available seasonally (WTTC, 2023).

CHAPTER 6

TENSIONS BENEATH THE CELEBRATION



Thrissur Pooram

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6.1 Cultural Authenticity vs Commercialization

One of the key tensions surrounding the Thrissur Pooram is whether the balance between cultural authenticity and commercialization is being maintained. Traditionally, the festival has been rooted in devotion, rituals and community participation. Its entire meaning comes from its religious significance and the collective community effort behind it. However, with increasing media coverage and tourism, the Pooram is quickly becoming a large public spectacle.

The growing presence of cameras, digital platforms and global audience has changed how the festival is experienced as emphasized in the previous chapter. Mr. Rajesh noted that the media has expanded the reach of the festival, allowing people from across the world to watch it. While this increases visibility, it also raises the question on whether the festival is becoming shaped for an audience rather than for its original intended purpose.

Events like *kudamattam*, which were once expressions of ritual and devotion, are now moments of visual display and slight competition. The emphasis on colours, design and presentation can be seen as a continuation of tradition as well as a response to the expectations the audience hold. This creates a subtle but not noticeable shift, where the line between the ritual performance and the public spectacle becomes blurred.

At the same time it is important to recognize that commercialization does not always erase authenticity. The competitive element between Paramekkavu and Thiruvambady has always existed, even if not at this scale, before modern media entered the scene. What has changed is the scale at which it is viewed at. The challenge, therefore, is not the commercialisation itself but if it begins influencing the core meaning of the festival.

6.2 Environmental Concerns: Fireworks and Sustainability

Fireworks are one of the most iconic elements of the Thrissur Pooram, especially the Vedikettu, which attracts the largest crowds every year. The sound, light and intensity of the fireworks are central to the festival's identity. However this specific aspect of the celebration has also become a point of environmental concern for years.

Issues such as noise pollution, air pollution and safety risks have led to increased regulation of fireworks. Mr Rohit Unnikrishnan, Managing Director of Move On Leisure, a travel agency in Kerala noted that the scale has drastically reduced from when he was a child to now. All fireworks used during the festivals are tested and must comply with approved decibel levels as mentioned earlier. These regulations are necessary to ensure the safety of participants involved but raise questions about how much the display can be controlled without affecting its traditional impact.

This creates a tension between the preservation and sustainability factors. On one hand, reducing the scale or intensity of the fireworks can make the festival more environmentally responsible. On the other hand, it can alter the entire experience that many consider essential to the identifying factor of the Thrissur Pooram. Thrissur Pooram has notably been taken for multiple risk assessment studies due to accidents that have led to minor and major injuries of attendees including death as well (Baby, 2022)

The question is not simply whether fireworks should be limited, but how can the festival adapt to increasing environmental concerns without losing its true character. This reflects a broader challenge faced by many cultural traditions in today's world – how to balance heritage with responsibility.

6.3 Ethical Debates: Elephants and Animal Welfare

The use of elephants in the Thrissur Pooram is another area where tradition intersects with modern ethical concerns. Elephants play a vital role in the festival, and form the visual and symbolic core of the processions. They are deeply connected to many religious practices and are seen as sacred in the cultural context of Kerala due to its royalty and majestic features. This specific animal has been traced back to centuries of history due to it being the preferred mode of transportation for royalty and King Shakthan Thampuran, who started the Pooram itself. There is no clear evidence as to when elephants became such a big part of Kerala. Anecdotal accounts refer to, Saint Vilwamangalam visiting the Thripunithura temple of the Cochin Royal Family and witnessing the majestic pageantry of 3115 elephants in ca. 15th century CE (Vijayakrishnan & Sinha, 2019)

As noted in the Devasom interviews, elephants are not only used in festivals but are also worshipped and cared for within temple traditions. From this perspective, their presence in the Pooram is not seen as exploitation but as a part of a long standing cultural tradition and practice. Our team noted multiple good changes, one being the hot tar road was sprinkled with water where the elephant would walk on to prevent heat strokes and burns on its body.



Fig. 6.1: Water sprinkling on elephant pathway

However, this view is increasingly being questioned. Concerns about animal welfare,

including the conditions in which elephants are kept and used have gained attention from regulatory bodies and activists, which has led to stricter rules and high public scrutiny of how elephants are managed during the festival.

In addition to regulatory concerns, the use of elephants in festivals has drawn attention from several animal welfare organizations. Reports by organizations like PETA India, of the 2017 Thrissur Pooram, have highlighted instances of stress and poor living conditions among captive elephants used during the Pooram. Observations from these investigations include elephants made to stand for long hours, sometimes in chains, with limited access to water and shade while being exposed to loud noises from fireworks and percussion (PETA India, 2018). But reassurance from Mr. Rajesh and Col. Ravi was provided and seen during the Uthralikkavu Pooram that all elephants were consistently fed, and water was provided every 30 minutes while being kept in the shade. While they were chained, it was for the safety of the participants themselves.

This creates a complex debate. For some, elephant removal would mean losing an essential part of the festival's identity while for others, continuing their use raises ethical concerns that cannot be ignored any longer. Both perspectives are valid within their own frameworks which makes it even harder to arrive at a clear solution. This is why the challenge lies in finding a balance in a decision which respects cultural traditions while addressing ethical responsibilities.

Conclusion

Thrissur Pooram, widely known as one of Kerala's iconic cultural festivals, stands strong as a symbol of strength to tradition and collective effort. Fixed in practices established over two centuries ago, the festival has continued to maintain its core identity while quickly adapting to the everchanging demands of context. What appears as a grand unified spectacle is, in reality, the outcome of decades of hard work and a complex system of coordination involving the temple committees, artisans, volunteers, and the wider community beyond.

As observed through this research, the Pooram functions as a highly structured system with no set framework ironically. The roles of Paramekkavu and Thiruvambady Devasoms, along with supporting temples, demonstrate how authority and responsibility is split rather than taken up. The ritual framework itself remains unchanged which reinforces the importance of tradition as the foundation and cornerstone of this festival.

The findings also highlight the importance of community participation in the coming generations to maintain the Pooram. From temple authorities to artisans, the festival depends on full involvement. Unfortunately, this participation is not without change. The shift from active involvement to more observational forms of engagement raises questions about the long term sustainability of the festival.

Furthermore, the study brings to attention the emerging challenges like logistical complexities, financial demands and ethical concerns, which are only increasing with time and continue to shape how the Pooram is being organized. These factors do not diminish the significance of the festival but instead highlight the need for continuous change and adaptation.

Ultimately, the Thrissur Pooram shows a balance between preservation and transformation. It is neither a festival that resists change entirely, nor a festival that abandons tradition. Instead it evolves selectively, keeping its cultural core while still considering the reality of our world today. In doing so, it continues to be relevant, not just as a cultural event, but as a living tradition that is sustained through generations and time.

Limitations of the study

The study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the Thrissur Pooram, focusing on its cultural significance, organizational structure and changing dynamics. However certain limitations affect the scope and depth of research.

1. Lack of Quantitative Data: The study primarily relies on qualitative data collected through interviews, existing research online and observations. Limited access to qualitative data such as exact financial figures, crowd estimates and participation statistics, restricted our ability to measure the scale of the festival in numerical values. As a result, the analysis focuses more on experiences and perception rather than statistical figures.

2. Restricted Access to Internal Information: Certain aspects of the festival's organization, particularly financial details and internal decision making processes of the Devasom Committees were not fully accessible. While grateful for all the information acquired, the limited the depth of understanding regarding budget allocation and institutional functioning.

3. Sensitivity of Ethical Concerns: Topics such as animal welfare, environmental impact and regulatory challenges are sensitive in nature. While these issues were acknowledged and discussed, it was not always possible to explore them in depth due to their need to be approached with caution during field interactions.

4. Time Constraints during Fieldwork: The duration of fieldwork was limited, which restricted our ability to observe the festival across multiple stages in detail. While key events and preparations were studied, a longer engagement period could have provided deeper insights into the planning process and post event evaluation.

5. Language and Interpretation Barriers: As the study involved regional language interactions,

certain responses required translation and interpretation. This may have led to minor variations in meaning, especially when capturing cultural expressions and local terminology.

Reflection

At the end of our time in Thrissur, we leave not just with an understanding of the festival, but having experienced a system of tradition, coordination and togetherness that extends far beyond what is visible to the eye.

Our fieldwork allowed us to engage with a wide range of individuals, from temple authorities and artisans to long term attendees and local residents, each with an idea of their own. Each interaction offered a different perspective on the festival. Conversations with the Devasom Committees' highlighted the scale of planning involved while interaction with artisan families like the "*Chamayam Swami*" revealed the generational skill and effort rooted in the creation of these ceremonial wonders. Insights from local attendees and business owners, on the other hand, reflected how the Pooram is experienced as an emotion rather than just a festival.

At the same time, our fieldwork brought attention to aspects that are not immediately clear. Changing patterns of participation, particularly among the younger generations, logistical pressure faced by the organizers and ongoing ethical debates were all emphasized as important concerns. These dimensions are often overlooked in the popular representation of the festival, yet they shape the present and future.

Experiencing a mini Pooram first hand also highlighted the gap between perception and reality as it was nothing like what was imagined, and turned out to be a core memory for a lifetime. While the festival is often viewed as fixed and unchanging, our observations show that it is constantly changing for the better.

Ultimately our time in Thrissur has reshaped how we understand cultural festivals. The Thrissur Pooram is not simply something that is performed–rather it is something that is built and sustained over time. It exists not only in the rituals and spectacles but in the people who continue to carry it forward, year after year

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Annexure I

<u>English Consent Form</u>

I have read the Participant Information Sheet/the Participant Information Sheet has been read to me, and I understand the study and the risks and benefits of this study. I have had the opportunity to ask questions, and my questions have been answered. I give my voluntary, informed consent to participate in this study.

- To be interviewed - Y/N
- To be audio-recorded - Y/N
- To be video-recorded - Y/N
- To use the recorded information in the DIP report & documentary - Y/N

Participant Name:

Signature, and Date

Researcher Name,

Signature, and Date

(as evidence that the participant gave voluntary, informed consent verbally)

Malayalam Consent Form

ഞാൻ പ ാളി വിവര ഷീ ് വായിച്ചു/പ ാളി വിവര ഷീ ് എനി ് വായിച്ചു തന്നു, പഠനവും ഈ പഠനത്തിന്റെ അപകടസാധ്യതകളും േനട്ടങ്ങളും ഞാൻ മന ിലാക്കുന്നു. േചാദ്യങ്ങൾ േചാദി ാൻ എനി ് അവസരം ലഭിച്ചു, എ ന്റെ േചാദ്യങ്ങൾ ് ഉത്തരം ലഭിച്ചു. ഈ പഠനത്തിൽ പെ ടു ാൻ ഞാൻ സ്യേമധയാ ഉള്ളതും അറിവൊടയുള്ളതുമായ സമ്മതം നൽകുന്നു.

o അഭിമുഖം നടേത്തണ്ടവർ - Y/N
o ഓഡിേയാ െറേ ാർഡ് െചയ്യേ ടണ്ടവർ - Y/N
o വീഡിേയാ െറേ ാർഡ് െചയ്യേ ടണ്ടവർ - Y/N
o DIP റിേ ാർഡിലും േഡാക െമന്ററിയിലും േരഖെ ടുത്തിയ വിവരങ്ങൾ ഉപേയാഗി ണ്ടവർ - Y/N

പ ാളിയുെട േപര്:
ഒ ്, തീയതി:

ഗേവഷകെന്റ േപര്, ഒ ്, തീയതി

(പെ ടുക്കുന്നയാൾ സ്യേമധയാ ഉള്ള, അറിവൊടയുള്ള സമ്മതം വാ ാൽ നൽകിയതിെ തളിവായി)

Annexure II

English PIS Form

My name is Sruti Satishkumar. I am a student at FLAME University in Pune, Maharashtra. As part of the University's Discover India Program, a group of us are doing a project on Thrissur Pooram and we would like to ask you some questions about the same. The questions will take between 40 to 45 minutes to complete. Your participation in this survey is voluntary and confidential. We will not record your name or any personal information you share with us without your approval. Responses from everyone who participates in our study will be used to compile a report and make a documentary, as deliverables of this program, and we will not share your responses with anyone outside of the research team. You do not have to answer questions you do not want to and can stop answering questions at any time. There are no risks to you sharing your experiences with us, your input will significantly contribute to enhancing our understanding of Thrissur Pooram. Do you have any questions about the study or would you like further information? Would you be interested in answering our questions? For any further queries, feel free to contact me at sruti.satishkumar@flame.edu.in

Malayalam PIS Form

എ◌ന്റ ◌പര് ശ്രുതി സതീഷ്കുമാർ. ഞാൻ മഹാരാഷ്ട്രയെില പൂെനയിലുള്ള ◌ യിം യൂണേിവ◌്◌ി ◌ിയെില വിദ5ാർ ◌ിനിയാണ്. യൂണേിവ◌്◌ി ◌ിയുെട ഡിസ്ട്രവർ ഇ 5 ◌പ്രാഗ്രാമെിന്റ ഭാഗമായി, ഞങ്ങളിൽ ഒരു കൂട്ടം തൃശ്ശൂർ പൂരെത്തക്കുറിp◌് ഒരു ◌പ്രാജ ◌് ◌ചയ്യുന്നു, ഇതെക്കുറിp◌് നിങ്ങേളാട് ചില ◌ചാദ5ങ്ങൾ

◌ചാദി ◌ാൻ ഞങ്ങൾ ആഗ്രഹിക്കുന്നു. ◌ചാദ5ങ്ങൾ പൂർ ◌ിയാ ◌ാൻ 40 മുതൽ 45 മിനി ◌് വെര എടുക്കും. ഈ സർേവയെിില നിങ്ങളുെട പ ◌ാളിത്തം സ്വ◌േമധയാ ഉള്ളതും രഹസ5ാത്മകവുമാണ്. നിങ്ങളുെട അനുമതിയിെല്ലാത നിങ്ങളുെട ◌പേരാ നിങ്ങൾ ഞങ്ങളുമായി പ ◌ിടുന്ന ഏെത ◌ിലും വ5 ◌ിഗത വിവരങ്ങേളാ ഞങ്ങൾ ◌രഖെ ടുത്തില്ല. ഞങ്ങളുെട പഠനത്തിൽ പെ ടുക്കുന്ന എല്ലാവരുെടയും പ്രതികരണങ്ങൾ ഒരു റേി ◌ാർ3് സമാഹരി ◌ാനും ഈ ◌പ്രാഗ്രാമെിന്റ ◌ഡലിവറബിളുകളായി ഒരു

◌ഡാക ◌മെന്ററി നിർ ◌ി ◌ാനും ഉപേയാഗിക്കും, കൂടാെത ഗേവഷണ സംഘത്തിന് പുറത്തുള്ള ആരുമായും നിങ്ങളുെട പ്രതികരണങ്ങൾ ഞങ്ങൾ പ ◌ിടില്ല. നിങ്ങൾ ◌് ഇഷ്ടമില്ലാത്ത ◌ചാദ5ങ്ങൾ ◌് ഉത്തരം നൽേകണ്ടതില , കൂടാെത ഏേ ◌ാൾ ◌വണെമ ◌ിലും ◌ചാദ5ങ്ങൾ ◌് ഉത്തരം നൽകുന്നത് നിർ ◌ാനും കഴിയും. നിങ്ങളുെട അനുഭവങ്ങൾ ഞങ്ങളുമായി പങ്കെവക്കുന്നതിൽ ഒരു അപകടവുമില്ല, തൃശ്ശൂർ പൂരെത്തക്കുറിച്ചുള്ള ഞങ്ങളുെട ഗ്രാഹ5ം വർ ◌ിപ്പി ◌ുന്നതിന് നിങ്ങളുെട അഭിപ്രായങ്ങൾ ഗണ5മായി സഹായിക്കും. പഠനെത്തക്കുറിp◌് നിങ്ങൾ ◌് എ◌ ◌ിലും ◌ചാദ5ങ്ങളുേണ്ടാ അെല്ല ◌ിൽ കൂടുതൽ വിവരങ്ങൾ ആവശ5മുേണ്ടാ? ഞങ്ങളുെട ◌ചാദ5ങ്ങൾ ◌് ഉത്തരം നൽകാൻ നിങ്ങൾ ◌് താൽപ്പരmമുേണ്ട◌ാ? കൂടുതൽ സംശയങ്ങൾ ◌്, sruti.satishkumar@flame.edu.in എന്ന വിലാസത്തിൽ എ◌ന്ന ബന്ധെ ടാൻ മടേി ണ്ട

Annexure III

Interview Guide

The following questions were used as semi-structured guides during fieldwork and adapted based on the role and experience of each respondent. All questions were open-ended to allow respondents to share detailed insights based on their experience. Some were conducted in Malayalam/Tamil and translated to English for the purpose of analysis

A. Temple Authorities

1. Can you describe your role in organizing the Thrissur Pooram?
2. How is the festival planned and coordinated every year?
3. What are the main challenges faced during execution?
4. How has the festival changed over time?
5. How do you balance tradition with modern requirements?
6. What is the structure of the Devasom committee and how are responsibilities divided?
7. How do you respond to concerns around animal welfare and environmental impact

B. Artisans

1. How long have you been involved in the festival?
2. Can you describe the process of making the ceremonial item? (whichever relevant)
3. Has this craft changed over time? (in terms of design, materials, etc)
4. What challenges do you face in continuing this line of work?
5. What materials are used and where are they sourced from?

C. Local Attendees

1. How long have you been attending the Thrissur Pooram?

2. What does the festival mean to you?
3. How do you view the competition between the two Devasoms'?
4. Have you noticed any changes over the years?
5. Which part of the festival is most memorable to you?

D. Business Owners/Local Enterprises

1. What type of business do you run and how long have you been operating in Thrissur?
2. How does the Thrissur Pooram affect your business?
3. What segment of customers do you serve during the Pooram?
4. How important is the Pooram to the local economy in your view?
5. What challenges do you face during the festival?

Glossary of Terms

1. Allavattom: A decorative circular fan made using peacock feathers, held during temple processions
2. Chamayam: The decorative elements used for elephants, including ornaments, parasols, and ceremonial accessories
3. Devasom: A temple administrative body responsible for managing temple affairs, finances and festivals
4. Elanjithara Melam: A grand percussion performance held within the Vadakkumnathan Temple premises featuring traditional Kerala instruments
5. Elephant Procession: A key feature of the festival where decorated elephants carry ceremonial items and participate in rituals
6. Gopuram: The entrance tower of a temple
7. Kodai: Decorated umbrellas used in temple processions and featured in Kudamattam
8. Kodiyettam: The flag-hoisting ceremony that marks the beginning of the festival
9. Kudamattam: A ceremonial display exchange of decorated umbrellas symbolizing friendly competition
10. Netipattam: A decorative ornament placed on the foreheads of elephants, often gold plated
11. Panchavadyam: A traditional Kerala music ensemble consisting of five instruments

12. Paramekkavu Devasom: One of the two main temple groups participating in the Thrissur Pooram

13. Thiruvambady Devasom: The second major temple group participating in the Pooram

14. Vadakkumnathan Temple: The central temple in Thrissur, where the Pooram is conducted; serves as the focal point of the festival

15. Vedikketu: The fireworks display that forms a major visual highlight of the Thrissur Pooram

16. Venchamaram: A ceremonial fan made of yak tail hair, used in temple processions and rituals