



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

EXPLORING SACRED PERFORMANCE AND DEVOTION IN THE DANCER OF KANNUR, THE LADY TWILIGHT, AND THE SINGER OF EPICS FROM WILLIAM DALRYMPLE'S *NINE LIVES*

S.Sumithra

Assistant Professor

Department of English

St. John's College, Palayamkottai, Tirunelveli - 627002 (Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Tirunelveli – 627 012)

Abstract

William Dalrymple's *Nine Lives: In Search of the Sacred in Modern India* offers a profound exploration of India's spiritual diversity, particularly through the lens of tribal rituals and sacred performance. This study examines the embodiment of spirituality in the book's narratives, focusing on the intersection of dance, music, and theatre in tribal traditions. The research analyzes key chapters, such as The Dancer of Kannur, The Singer of Epics, and The Lady Twilight, where ritualistic performances serve as both artistic expression and acts of devotion. It explores how bodily movements, oral storytelling, and theatrical performances transcend mere cultural heritage to become channels for divine experience. Through ritualistic expressions of devotion, performers transcend the physical realm, allowing their audience to experience the sacred in profound and transformative ways. This paper explores how these performances, rooted in ancient traditions, continue to preserve and perpetuate India's spiritual heritage.

Keywords

Theyyam, Tantra, Phad, Sacred performance, Devotion, Ritual.

Introduction

British historian, travel writer, and journalist William Dalrymple is well-known for his writings about South Asia and the Islamic world. The rich history, culture, and current issues in the areas he visits are explored in a number of his highly regarded books. *City of Djinnns*, *Return of Kings*, *Nine Lives*, and *The Last Mughal* are a few of his well-known pieces. The historical ties between India and the West are frequently examined in Dalrymple's works. William Dalrymple's nonfiction work *Nine Lives: In Search of the Sacred in Modern India* provides a fascinating look into the rich and varied religious traditions of modern-day India. He explains the lives of nine people from various religious backgrounds. He explored the various facets of faith, devotion, and spirituality that influence Indian people's lives through their tales and experiences. This book received the 2010 Asian House Award for Asian literature. Divyendu (2020) in his work mentions,

The sacred in modern India: William Dalrymple's nine lives as a delineation of demystified Indian spirituality" stated that post-colonial India saw a breakdown and threat to religious identities. Spirituality and the sacred in India were tainted by personal reasons, politics, and economics like never before since the turn of this century, in stark contrast to what the West often perceived, idealized, and romanticized. Only a genuine Indian sensibility and an understanding that is honest and sensitive to India's varied cultures, systems, and history can spot the gaps where the original qualities of Indian spirituality persist (Divyendu 2020).

The Dancer of Kannur

William Dalrymple's *The Dancer of Kannur*, a chapter from *Nine Lives: In Search of the Sacred in Modern India* (2009), vividly portrays the intricate world of Theyyam, an ancient ritualistic performance practiced predominantly in the Malabar region of Kerala. Theyyam is not merely a religious spectacle, but a sacred act where performers, often from marginalized communities, momentarily embody divine beings, blurring the boundaries between the mortal and the divine. The Hari Das, a lower-caste Theyyam dancer who spends most of the year as a laborer and prison warden. He says "For nine months a year I work as a manual Labourer. I build wells during the weeks, then at all weekend I work in Tell Cherry Central Jail. As a Warder" (Dalrymple 52). During the festival season, he becomes a divine being, worshipped by those who might otherwise discriminate against him." For three months of the year we are gods" (Dalrymple 33).

Costume and Dance in the Theyyam Ritual

Hari Das one of the most celebrated and articulate Theyyam dancers were explored in *The Dancer of Kannur* is a deeply spiritual performance where the dancer undergoes the transformation into a divine being. One of the most striking aspects of this ritual is elaborate costuming, which plays a crucial role in conveying the presence of the deity. The performer wears intricate face paints in bold colors, such as red, orange, black, and white, each carrying symbolic meanings red represents divine energy and power, while white signifies purity. Headdresses, sometimes towering up to 40 feet, are crafted from wood, bamboo, and coconut fronds, emphasizing the deity's grandeur. The performer's attire includes layered skirts (tatti), heavy-metal ornaments, and sacred bells, all designed to create an overwhelming visual spectacle that reinforces spiritual transformation. Manu Pillai illustrates "Theyyam serves as a living testimony to the syncretic traditions of Kerala, where gods, heroes, and ancestral spirits converge in an elaborate display of devotion and justice" (Pillai 291). These costumes not only enhance performance but also serve as a visual marker of the shift from human to divine, a fundamental aspect of Theyyam's sacred tradition. Hari Das says,

His torso and upper arms are covered with yellow paint, and his cheeks are smeared with orange turmeric, which gives off a pungent smell. Two black paisleys were painted around his eyes, and a pair of mango-shaped patches on his cheeks were daubed with bright white rice paste. On these, using a slim strip of coconut leaf, the make-up boy is skillfully drawing loops and whorls and scorpion-tail trumpet spirals, then finishing the effects with a thin red stripe across his cheekbones (30). Music is another key aspect of Theyyam's artistry. The orchestra that accompanies the performer is called "Theyyambakam," and they are trained musicians who have a prowess with folk instruments such as chenda, veekuchenda, elathalam, kuzhal, etc. The orchestra plays according to the performer's movements and adds an air of mysticism to the ritual.

Spiritual and Ritualistic invocations

Theyyam involves an intense process of spiritual invocation, where the performer undergoes physical, emotional, and psychological transformations to embody the divine. The performer engages in fasting, meditation, and the chanting of sacred mantras to purify the body and mind. Rich Freeman added "The ritual invocation in Theyyam is not merely a performance but a re-enactment of mythic narratives, where the performer ceases to exist as an individual and becomes the deity in flesh and spirit" (Freeman 50). The ritualistic performance involves elaborate costuming, face painting, and rhythmic drumming that induce a trance-like state, allowing the deity to possess the performer. The deities invoked in Theyyam are a mix of Hindu gods, local guardian spirits, warrior heroes, and ancestral spirits. Each deity has a unique history, legend, and role in its community. Some of the most prominent Theyyam deities include: Goddess Bhagavathi (Bhagavati Theyyam) where they worship Chamundi Bhagavati, a fierce manifestation of Devi

responsible for annihilating demonic forces. The Next one is Vishnumoorthy Theyyam which is based on the Narasimha Avatar of Vishnu, who slayed Hiranyakashipu to restore dharma. Hari Das added,

The hardest technically is the Vishnumurti theyyam, especially the opening scene where the demon king Hiranyakashipu doubts the existence of the god Narasimha, and to punish him, Narasimha, who is half-man and half-lion, breaks out of one of the pillars in his palace, smashes open the wall with his mace and devours him, tearing out his heart and drinking his blood (Dalrymple 47).

Before the performance, the performer undergoes a period of strict purification and mental preparation to ensure that the body is a worthy vessel for divine presence. He observes fasting, abstains from worldly pleasures, and maintains celibacy to purify the body. The performer remains in solitude, reflecting and meditating on the deity to achieve a heightened spiritual state. The invocation of the deity begins with sacred drumming and chanting, creating a hypnotic rhythm that prepares the performer to enter a trance-like state. The intense and rhythmic beating of the cenda drum gradually increases with tempo, inducing a state of altered consciousness. Hari Das mentions,

That light stays with you all the way through the performance. You become the deity. You lose all fear. Even if your voice changed. The God comes alive and takes over. You are just the vehicle and the medium. In the trance, it is God who speaks, and all the acts are acts of God—feeling, thinking, and speaking. The dancer is an ordinary man, but a divine. Only when the headdress is removed does it end. (32)

The Theyyam performer transforms into a living deity through elaborate costumes, body paints, and ritualistic dance, invoking the presence of gods and spirits. The act of possession allows the dancer to embody divine energy, thus blurring the line between humans and God.

The Lady Twilight

The story of Manisha Ma Bhairavi, a devout follower of the goddess Tara, makes her home in the holy city of Tarapith in the Indian state of West Bengal. Referring to the fact that human skulls were kept and eaten as part of the Tantric rituals practiced at Tarapith. Dalrymple also stated that from afar, the village of Tarapith appears no different from any other Bengali community, with its homes made of palm weave and its placid fishpond.

Attire as a Medium of Transformation

Lady Twilight focuses on Manisha Ma Bhairavi, a tantric practitioner in Tarapith, West Bengal. Manisha Ma Bhairavi's attire reflects her spiritual path and devotion to Goddess Tara. As a tantric practitioner, she adheres to traditional attire that carries a deep symbolic meaning. She wears a red saree, which is emblematic of Goddess Kali and Shakti's energy. Red signifies blood, life, power, fertility, and sacrifice, all of which are central themes in tantric worship. Additionally, she wears beaded ornaments and a Rudraksha mala, both of which symbolize devotion and spiritual discipline. Mala is traditionally used during the meditation and chanting of mantras, serving as a conduit for spiritual connection. Manisha Ma Bhairavi also applies ash (Vibhuti) or vermilion, signifying her connection to cremation grounds and the concept of death, which is a fundamental theme in tantric rituals. Dalrymple says, "On her forehead is a patch of red kumkum powder" (211), which represents the transcendence of fear and worldly attachments. Furthermore, her unkempt appearance, including matted hair, serves as a visible marker of renunciation and detachment from worldly concerns, reinforcing her commitment to the tantric path. He says,

Nor was Manisha in any sense a fearsome or sinister figure. Despite her matted, dreadlocked gray hair and ragged saffron robes, she was a large, warm woman in her sixties, quietly spoken, with gentle, vulnerable eyes. Her dark-brown skin was disfigured with large, creeping patches of white, the result of a skin disease (207).

Spiritual and ritual Invocations

Manisha Ma Bhairavi resides near the Tarapith cremation ground, where she performs her tantric rituals in devotion to Goddess Tara. Tara is one of the fiercest and most compassionate forms of the divine feminine in both Hindu and Buddhist traditions.

Tara means 'star' in Sanskrit, and some scholars trace the origins of her cult to the Mesopotamian goddesses of the stars, Ishtar and Astarte: indeed the modern English word 'star' and 'Tara' are almost certainly linked through a common Indo-European root, via the Persian 'Sitar', the Greek 'Aster' and the Latin 'Stella', all of which have the same meaning. It is even possible that the modern Catholic cult of Our Lady

Stella Maris, Star of the Sea, may be part of this tradition. Moving eastwards in the early centuries AD, the cult of Tara quickly became central to Mahayana Buddhist cosmology, where the great goddess was worshipped as the consort of the Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara and came to represent primordial female energy (211-212).

In tantric practice, Tara is especially revered as a goddess who embodies both destruction and protection, guiding her devotees through the fear of death and suffering toward ultimate liberation (moksha). Tara is depicted as a dark-skinned goddess with a fierce appearance, often holding a severed head and sword while seated on a corpse. Dalrymple mentions,

With her left hand, she holds a knife and skull and, in her right hand, a sword and a blue lotus. Her complexion is blue, and she is bedecked with ornaments. She is decorated with three beautiful serpents and has three eyes. Her tongue was always moving, and her teeth and mouth appeared to be terrible. She was wearing tiger skin around her waist, and her forehead was decorated with white bone ornaments. She was seated in the heart of a corpse, and her breasts were hard. She is the mistress of all three worlds (212).

These symbols represent her role in dissolving ego and ignorance while empowering her devotees with spiritual wisdom and strength. Goddess Tara plays a pivotal role in tantric practices, where devotees seek to transcend worldly attachments through intense rituals and sadhana (spiritual discipline). In *Nine Lives*, Manisha Ma Bhairavi resides near the Tarapith cremation ground, performing tantric rituals in pursuit of divine power and enlightenment and often performing Shava Sadhana (corpse rituals) to invoke the goddess and attain spiritual power. This ritual reflects tribal practices where rituals surrounding death are seen as a pathway to commune with ancestral spirits and transcend the fear of mortality. Hugh explains “Tantric rituals, particularly those involving possession and trance, aim to dissolve the boundaries between the self and the divine, enabling the practitioner to experience union with the goddess” (Urban 144).

Some tantric practices involve the use of human skulls (kapala) in rituals, which are seen as a symbolic act of confronting and transcending the fear of death. Dalrymple says “Tantra on its own can be very dangerous. The skulls may help us to awaken the goddess, but if you make one mistake in the ritual, you can go mad” (225). The use of skulls and bones in tantric rituals resonates with tribal traditions that use symbolic objects to communicate with the spirit world. The use of skulls and bones in tantric rituals resonates with tribal tradition. Manisha uses a tantric drink from the human skull, symbolizing the destruction of ego, and this practice is meant to bring detachment from a worldly illusion. Bharathi highlights, “In Tantra, the body becomes a sacred vessel for the goddess, allowing the practitioner to embody divine consciousness through intense discipline and ritual” (Bharati 109).

Another ritual, animal sacrifice is an integral part of tantric rituals at Tarapith, which is deeply rooted in ancient tribal customs. Animals, usually goats, are sacrificed as offerings to Goddess Tara. The sacrifice symbolizes surrendering the ego and worldly desires to attain spiritual enlightenment. Another tantric practice involves the chanting of mantras, Manisha Ma Bhairavi's tantric practices involve mantra chanting, meditation, and ritual offerings, all aimed at achieving union with Goddess Tara. She chants Bija Mantras (seed syllables) to invoke goddesses and channel divine energy. Continuous repetition of mantras is a means of dissolving ego and achieving spiritual awakening. Ritual Offerings such as flowers, incense, and food are made to the goddess during rituals, leading to purification and transformation, which is a central element in tantric ritualism.

The Singer of Epics

In *The Singer of Epics*, William Dalrymple explores the rich tradition of oral storytelling and epic singing in Rajasthan, particularly focusing on the Bhopas, who perform the tales of deities and folk heroes like Pabuji through song and ritualistic narration. The costumes worn by these performers are not just decorative; they are deeply symbolic, reinforcing the sacred and performative aspects of their traditions. The integration of music, rhythmic movements, and visual storytelling through the Phad (a hand-painted scroll) transforms the performance into a spiritual and cultural experience.

Dance and Costumes in the Bhopa Tradition

Mohan Bhopa, the central figure in this chapter, is a hereditary performer of the Pabuji Ki Phad, who inherited the tradition from his forefathers. His role as a Bhopa is not just that of a storyteller but also of a spiritual intermediary who bridges the gap between the human and the divine through his performances. Mohan's wife, Batasi, serves as his singing partner, and together they bring the epic to life through alternating verses. Their performance is not merely an art form but a ritual act that invokes divine blessings and protection for the community. Mohan's traditional attire of Bhopa represents sacred authority. Mohan Bhopas wore a Turban (Pagri) often red or saffron, which is a symbol of honor and spiritual authority. The vibrant colors reflect the sacredness of the performance and signify the elevated status of Mohan Bhopa as a conduit between the divine and human world. Dalrymple says, "He wore a long red robe and tightly tied red turban"(79). Mohan wears a traditional angrakha, a long tunic made of cotton or silk, often adorned with intricate embroidery or mirror work. The tunic is loose, allowing ease of movement during the performance. The angrakha is usually bright, reflecting the celebratory and devotional nature of the event. A white dhoti or pajama worn below the angrakha signifies purity and devotion, respectively. The simplicity of the lower garment contrasts with the vibrant upper attire, reinforcing the duality of sacredness and humility in the Bhopa's role. Mohan often wears beaded necklaces or a Rudraksha mala, which signifies his spiritual connection to Pabuji and his dedication to the divine path. Jyoyi Jain says "Phad performances are not mere storytelling events but sacred rituals where the Bhopa's costume, the scroll, and the music collectively invoke the presence of the divine" (Jain 134).

Mohan's wife Batasi his singing partner wears a traditional Rajasthani ghagra (long skirt) paired with an odhni (veil) draped over her head. The odhni is often richly embroidered and bright in color and is paired with choli (blouse). Choli is usually adorned with intricate mirror work and vibrant patterns that reflect the aesthetics of Rajasthan's folk culture. She wears silver bangles, anklets, and earrings, which are customary adornments for women in rural Rajasthan. The costumes worn during the performance signify the shift from ordinary life to a liminal state where Mohan and Batasi transcend their identities as mere performers. Shanti Nagar mentions "The ghagra and odhni worn by the female singer in Pabuji Ki Phad performances are imbued with cultural symbolism, representing fertility, prosperity, and devotion" (Nagar, 91).

Music and spiritualistic vocations

Music and dance play crucial roles in the performance of Pabuji Ki Phad, a sacred oral epic narrated by Mohan Bhopa and his wife Batasi. The integration of music, rhythmic movements, and visual storytelling through the Phad (a hand-painted scroll) transforms the performance into a spiritual and cultural experience. As a hereditary Bhopa (bard priest), Mohan Bhopa assumes the dual role of storyteller and ritual mediator. His performance of Pabuji Ki Phad is not simply an act of narration, but a sacred ritual in which he invokes Pabuji's spirit, allowing the deity to manifest and bless the audience. The epic was performed before the phad. Phad, a 15-foot-long painted scroll, visually depicts the story of Pabuji's life. The scroll serves as a sacred canvas to which Mohan points while narrating the epic. Each section of Phad corresponds to a pivotal moment in Pabuji's journey, visually reinforcing the oral narrative. The Phad serves as a visual anchor, while the music and movement synchronize to narrate the epic. The interplay among visual storytelling, music, and subtle movements ensures that the audience is immersed in a multisensory experience. As the author mention," The epic is always performed in front of a phad, a long narrative painting made on a strip of cloth, which serves as an illustration of the highlights of the story and portable temple of pabuji the god"(79). During the performance, Mohan Bhopa and Batasi sometimes move rhythmically around the Phad, creating a sacred circle that mirrors the cyclical nature of life and the divine intervention in the epic. Victor Turner says "In the liminal phase, performers and participants transcend their ordinary identities, entering a sacred space where the boundaries between the mundane and divine dissolve" (Turner 95).

Mohan and his wife Batasi invoke the divine through the instrument called "Ravanhatta". The ravanhatta is a traditional bowed string instrument used by Bhopa during the performance of Pabuji Ki Phad. Made from a hollowed-out gourd, bamboo, and horsehair strings, it produces a haunting, melodic sound that complements the rhythm of the sung verses. The author mention "Mohan then picked up his ravanhatta - a kind of desert zither spike fiddle with eighteen strings and no frets - and began to it regularly with his thumb"(85). The ravanhatta are believed to have divine origins, associated with Ravana, the legendary king of Lanka, who is said to have invented the instrument. Playing the ravanhatta during the

performance is not just a musical accompaniment but also a sacred invocation believed to summon the presence of Pabuji and other deities depicted in the Phad. The sound of ravanhatta is believed to create a sacred ambiance, summoning the divine presence of Pabuji. As Mohan Bhopa plays the instrument and recites verses, the line between the mundane and sacred dissolves, allowing the spiritual presence of Pabuji to permeate the space. Mircea Eliade mentions “Rituals are not merely symbolic acts but means of returning to a mythic time where divine actions are re-enacted, allowing participants to experience the sacred” (Eliade 35). Mohan Bhopa’s performance of Pabuji Ki Phad transcends mere story telling it becomes a sacred invocation where music, visual art, and oral narration merge to invoke divine presence.

Conclusion

The Dancer of Kannur, The Lady Twilight, and The Singer of Epics illustrate how sacred performance functions as a medium of devotion, where the performer, through ritualistic endurance, transgressive devotion, and oral invocation, merges with the divine. Each of these traditions blurs the lines between performer and deity, history and mythology, and human and supernatural, allowing devotees to witness and partake in sacred experiences. The transformation of Theyyam dancers into gods, tantric practitioners into spiritual vessels, and Bhopa singers into storytellers of epic heroes signify the enduring power of ritualistic performance as a bridge between the earthly and divine. This paper demonstrates that these performances are not merely rituals but sacred reenactments in which devotion transcends the boundaries of the mortal world. Through endurance, invocation, and embodiment, these narratives reveal how ancient ritual practices continued to evoke the sacred in modern India, affirming the enduring power of spiritual traditions. Despite the pressures of modernization, these traditions continue to thrive and evolve while retaining their deep spiritual and cultural significance. They reaffirm that in many parts of India, devotion is not just confined to prayer or temples but is lived, danced, sung, and performed, making the sacred tangible, immediate, and deeply personal.

Works Cited

1. B.Urban, Hugh. *Tantra: Sex, Secrecy, Politics and Power in the Study of Religion*. University of California Press, 2003.
2. Dalrymple, William. *Nine Lives: In Search of the Sacred in Modern India*. Bloomsbury Publishing, 2009.
3. Divyendu M., et al, (2020). The sacred in modern India: William Dalrymple’s nine lives as a delineation of demystified Indian spirituality, *International Journal of Psychosocial Rehabilitation*, 24(10).
4. Eliade, Mircea., *The Sacred and The Profane: The Nature of Religion*, Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1957.
5. Freeman, Rich., “*Performing Possession: Rituals and the Religious Imagination in Malabar*”, *Journal of South Asian Studies*, 2005.
6. Jain, Jyoti., *Oral Epics and Folk Narratives of India*, 2010.
7. Nagar, Shanti., *Folk Traditions of Rajasthan: The Visual and Performing Art*, 2010.
8. Pillai, Manu.S., *The Ivory Throne: Chronicles of the House of Travancore* HarperCollins., 2016
9. Turner, victor., *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*, Routledge, 1969.