



Review Article

HEALTH CHALLENGES AMONG *THEYYAM* PERFORMERS AND ITS PREVENTIVE MEASURES THROUGH AYURVEDIC PRACTICES

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ABSTRACT

Theyyam, a ritualistic art form of northern Kerala, embodies an intense fusion of physical endurance and spiritual expression. This study examines the health challenges faced by *Theyyam* performers and explores Ayurvedic preventive and therapeutic strategies to address them. Data were collected through Focus Group Discussions and in-depth interviews with performers, folklorists, and Ayurvedic practitioners. The findings highlight significant physical and mental strain, including musculoskeletal stress and aggravation of *Vata* and *Pitta doshas*- largely due to prolonged exertion, fasting, and exposure to heat and strain. A notable decline in traditional health-supporting practices, such as the ritual-specific diet *Thinakudi*, has been observed with the rise of modern lifestyles. The study underscores the relevance of reintegrating Ayurvedic interventions- such as *Abhyanga* (oil massage), personalized diets, and *Yoga*- to mitigate health issues and enhance resilience. These holistic approaches not only support the performers' physical and mental well-being but also help preserve the cultural integrity of *Theyyam*. The integration of tradition and modern wellness practices offers a sustainable model for safeguarding the health of this unique performing community.

INTRODUCTION

Rituals lasting for long time, rigorous training, fasting, tightly bound costumes, dances performed with heavy crowns on their heads, vigorous movements, leaps executed without missing a step, standing amidst fire, smoke, and ash, hours without even water to drink, and an inability to relieve oneself. From a medical perspective, such conditions are more than enough to make a person sick.

This is the life of artists who perform *Theyyam* rituals. *Theyyam*, a centuries-old ritualistic performance art of northern Kerala, is both physically demanding and spiritually enriching. To the audience, they are manifestations of gods. For gods with superhuman powers, these feats are trivial.

They are believed to leap into blazing fires, perform agile dances, and return to their original vigor within moments. However, the divine forms that fall into fiery pits with 101 or 201 flips, enthralling the audience, are mere humans. All of this takes a toll on their bodies. There are countless examples: some have succumbed to burns after falling into the "meleri" (sacred fire pit). Others have tripped during performances and been bedridden due to injuries from stones. Some have fallen from heights while performing as tree-climbing *Theyyams*, breaking their spines and becoming paralyzed. Still, others have suffered infections from burns, leading to amputations.

A survey conducted to understand the health issues of *Theyyam* performers revealed high prevalence of hypertension, back pain, arthritis, allergies, and liver diseases.^[1] In modern times, unhealthy dietary habits and excessive alcohol consumption are widespread among some *Theyyam* performers. This could be a significant reason for the rise in heart attacks and liver diseases among them.

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Perhaps it was an awareness of these physical challenges that led people of the past to adopt preventive measures. There were unwritten rules about diet and exercise routines. Those who performed physically demanding Theyyams used to train in martial arts at "Kalari" (traditional training schools) to enhance their agility. Meals were neither overeaten nor irregular- often because food itself was scarce. They also practiced traditional medicine, using remedies to build immunity. Clear instructions were passed down by elders on maintaining health.^[2]

An examination of the medical heritage of North Malabar reveals this clearly. Many traditional healers were Theyyam performers themselves. They excelled in treatments for bone and joint injuries, respiratory issues, skin diseases, venom poisoning, and burns. They likely developed this expertise from their experiences with health issues arising during Theyyam performances. Historically, performers adhered to strict regimens involving traditional diets, healthcare practices, and exercises to maintain their physical and mental well-being. However, with the transformation of Theyyam into a performing art, modern lifestyle changes have introduced new health challenges.^[3] This study aims to explore the health issues faced by Theyyam performers, the traditional practices employed to mitigate them, and the changes over time. The research seeks to bridge the gap between traditional wisdom and modern healthcare needs.

AIM

Explore the health challenges faced by Theyyam performers through a qualitative lens, considering the physical, mental, and socio-cultural dimensions of their well-being and analyze the preventive measures through Ayurvedic perspective

OBJECTIVES

- To identify the impact of intense physical exertion, prolonged performances, and costume-related discomfort on the performers' physical health.
- Assess the prevalence of injuries, chronic conditions, or illnesses commonly experienced by the performers.
- Discuss various Ayurvedic measures to prevent these issues

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Study design: This qualitative study employs a mixed-methods approach, combining focus group discussions (FGDs) in-depth interviews (IDIs) and survey among *Theyyam* performers

Study setting: The study was conducted in northern Kerala, where Theyyam is predominantly practiced. Data collection took place in community settings such as performer homes, temples, and cultural hubs.

Study population: The participants were Theyyam performers.

Inclusion Criteria: Active Theyyam performers aged 18–80.

Exclusion Criteria: Individuals unwilling to provide informed consent.

Focus Group Discussions: FGD was conducted with 7 participants who were experts in Theyyam rituals.

In-Depth Interviews: 15 individual interviews, including 13 performers and 2 cultural experts.

Survey: Conducted among 100 Theyyam performers

Ethical considerations

- Ethical clearance was obtained from the Institutional Ethics Committee.
- Informed consent was secured from all participants.
- Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

One of the most pressing concerns is the physical strain imposed by Theyyam performances. Dancers endure long hours of continuous exertion, often spanning 12–24 hours without rest, adequate nutrition, or sleep. A staggering 95% of surveyed performers identified this as a major health concern. The inclusion of hazardous rituals, such as walking on hot coals and handling fire bowls, further compounds their vulnerability to injuries. Moreover, the frequent use of elaborate costumes and makeup has caused eye problems in 32% of performers, reflecting the physical toll of these ritualistic practices.

Mental health issues are another significant challenge for Theyyam performers. The relentless demands of the art, combined with socio-economic discrimination and the struggle for sustainable livelihoods, have led to widespread stress, depression, and low self-esteem among practitioners. The survey revealed that many performers grapple with the mental strain of balancing their cultural obligations with the pressures of daily survival, often without access to mental health support.

Economic hardships exacerbate the health challenges faced by Theyyam performers. Despite their critical role in preserving a rich cultural tradition, 62% of performers reported insufficient

income from Theyyam alone, forcing them to take up additional part-time jobs. This dual burden often leads to chronic fatigue and long-term health problems. Furthermore, the lack of health insurance

or social security measures leaves them particularly vulnerable to the financial repercussions of occupational health issues.

Common health issues observed

S.No	Health Issue	Percentage
1	Low back ache	75%
2	Neck pain	60%
3	Hypertension	42%
4	Eye sickness	40%
5	Tremour	20%
6	Head ache	18%

DISCUSSION

The results of this study highlight the multifaceted health challenges faced by Theyyam performers, who endure significant physical, mental, and economic hardships as part of their profession. These findings not only underscore the vulnerabilities associated with their occupational roles but also point to broader systemic issues requiring urgent intervention.

The physical demands of Theyyam performances are evident in the prevalence of musculoskeletal issues such as low back pain (75%) and neck pain (60%), which stem from prolonged exertion, repetitive movements, and the weight of elaborate costumes. The physical strain is further compounded by rituals involving hazardous acts, such as walking on hot coals and carrying fire bowls. These activities expose performers to injuries and chronic health conditions. Eye sickness, reported by 40% of participants, is indicative of the adverse effects of heavy makeup and exposure to smoke from rituals. The data suggests an urgent need for measures to mitigate these occupational hazards, such as ergonomic interventions and protective equipment.

Mental health challenges are another pressing concern for Theyyam performers, driven by the relentless physical demands and socio-economic pressures of their roles. Stress, depression, and low self-esteem are prevalent, as performers struggle to balance their cultural obligations with financial instability. Despite these challenges, access to mental health resources remains inadequate, leaving many performers without support. Addressing these issues through community-based counseling services and awareness programs could significantly improve their psychological well-being.

Economic hardships exacerbate the health challenges, as 62% of performers rely on part-time jobs due to insufficient income from Theyyam alone. This dual burden leads to chronic fatigue and a host of related health problems. The absence of health insurance or social security schemes compounds their vulnerability, making it difficult for them to access medical care for conditions like hypertension (42%) and tremors (20%). Structural reforms are essential to provide financial stability, such as guaranteed remuneration, inclusion in welfare schemes, and opportunities for skill development outside the domain of Theyyam.

The observed prevalence of hypertension and other systemic health conditions highlights the cumulative impact of stress, fatigue, and inadequate access to healthcare. These findings emphasize the need for a holistic approach to the health and well-being of Theyyam performers. Preventive health check-ups, targeted health education programs, and accessible medical facilities could address these issues effectively.

Focus group discussions, in-depth interviews, and survey data collectively reveal that one of the most pressing health concerns among Theyyam artists is chronic muscle strain and joint stiffness, particularly affecting the lower back, knees, shoulders, and neck. These issues stem from repeated stress without adequate recovery, compounded by limited access to formal healthcare, structured warm-up routines, or therapeutic interventions. The performers often begin preparing for the Theyyam season with little or no conditioning, making them highly vulnerable to cumulative physical damage. Addressing these health risks through preventive strategies rooted in Ayurveda offers a culturally consonant and sustainable approach.

According to Ayurveda, Abhyanga, or the practice of therapeutic massage using medicated oils, is one of the most effective preventive measures against musculoskeletal disorders. This daily ritual of oil application nourishes the muscles, lubricates the joints, and supports the functioning of ligaments and tendons. For Theyyam performers, medicated oils prepared with herbs such as *Bala* (*Sida cordifolia*), known for strengthening muscles and nerves, *Eranda* (*Ricinus communis*), an anti-inflammatory agent, and *Rasna* (*Pluchea lanceolata*), a classic remedy for joint pain, can be highly beneficial. Massage, when done regularly before and after performance periods, not only improves circulation and detoxification but also brings mental relaxation, which is essential for artists undergoing the dual stress of physical labor and spiritual performance. Community-based Ayurvedic camps offering such therapies during the Theyyam season can provide timely intervention and long-term musculoskeletal support.

In addition to external therapies, internal strengthening through movement and breath control is crucial. Ayurveda emphasizes *dinacharya* (daily regimen), in which yoga plays a foundational role. Unlike rigorous exercise, yoga offers low-impact, muscle-lengthening postures that gradually build strength, flexibility, and endurance without strain. For Theyyam performers, incorporating targeted asanas such as *Trikonasana* (Triangle pose), *Bhujangasana* (Cobra pose), and *Vrikshasana* (Tree pose) can strengthen the spine, hamstrings, calves, and shoulders- areas frequently affected by performance stress. Meanwhile, pranayama (regulated breathing) enhances lung capacity and balances the nervous system, preparing the mind for long spiritual immersions. These practices not only prepare the body for the rigors of Theyyam but also foster resilience and mindfulness, making the performer more aware of their bodily limitations and capacities.

Finally, dietary rejuvenation plays a pivotal role in maintaining muscle health. Ayurveda asserts that tissues are nourished through proper digestion (*agni*) and metabolism (*dhatwagni*). Hence, food must not only contain the right nutrients but also be easy to digest and assimilate. Medicated porridges made with ingredients like green gram, rice, ghee, and digestive herbs such as ginger and cumin serve as functional meals, particularly during the physically intense Theyyam season. Among the most potent dietary recommendations is the Ashtavargam Medicated Goat Meat Soup, a *Rasayana* (rejuvenative tonic) revered for its restorative effects on muscle

and bone tissue. Experts in Focus group discussion shared their traditional knowledge base regarding this preparation. This preparation includes eight potent herbs: *Bala* (*Sida cordifolia*), *Sahachara* (*Strobilanthes ciliatus*), *Sundi* (*Zingiber officinale*), *Rasna* (*Pluchea lanceolata*), *Devadaru* (*Cedrus deodara*), *Nirgundi* (*Vitex negundo*), *Eranda*, (*Ricinus communis*) and *Lasuna* (*Allium sativum*), cooked along with goat meat in a decoction of *Ashtavargam Kashayam*^[4]. This herbal-nutritional blend acts as a tissue tonic, improving strength, muscle tone, and post-performance recovery. Promoting such holistic regimens among Theyyam communities could significantly reduce injury rates and ensure the continuity of this sacred art form with healthier, better-prepared performers.

CONCLUSION

This study underscores the profound physical, mental, and economic challenges faced by Theyyam performers, highlighting the precarious intersection of tradition, health, and socio-economic disparity. The findings reveal that the physical strain, hazardous rituals, and lack of adequate protective measures significantly compromise their health, while persistent mental health issues and economic instability exacerbate their vulnerabilities. Addressing these challenges requires a holistic approach that includes implementing safety measures, providing access to mental health and medical care, and ensuring financial security through fair remuneration and welfare schemes. Protecting the health and dignity of Theyyam performers is essential not only for their well-being but also for the sustainable preservation of this culturally rich and spiritually significant tradition.

The integration of Ayurvedic preventive measures offers a culturally rooted, sustainable framework to address the chronic musculoskeletal challenges faced by Theyyam performers. By combining therapeutic practices such as Abhyanga, targeted yoga routines, and nourishing dietary interventions, a comprehensive model of care can be established that aligns with the traditional lifestyle and spiritual ethos of these artists. These interventions not only mitigate the physical toll of performance but also enhance overall resilience, recovery, and mental well-being. Community-based implementation of such holistic strategies could significantly improve the performers' quality of life while preserving the vitality and continuity of the Theyyam tradition for generations to come.

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