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Chapter Two

Performance and Conflict

Interpreting the meaning of Bharani, the nature of its ritual specialists and the rituals involve complex questions that can be approached from many perspectives that emphasize historical background, belief systems, ritual processes and, social organization. This chapter seeks to make a holistic analysis of the ritualistic process and its popular narratives, as well as the subjective variations and imaginings of Bharani. It also traces out the performative components, playful and carnivalesque elements apparent in the Bharani festival that lend it a unique status in the spiritual silo of India.

Performance, Ritual, and Society

Why does a performance, ritual, or spectacle continue to assume a dramatic significance in the face of an ever-evolving society at large? This simple yet pertinent question imports us into the inaugural moments of the history of humankind, its cultural legacies, discursive and religious epistemologies, and political allegiances. Indubitably, a life without any such activities is feasible, but whether it could be hailed as a meaningful life is worth pondering. Benedict Anderson in *Imagined Communities* (1983) argues that “all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined” (4), in the sense that the members never know most of their fellow members or meet them, yet they bear the image of their communion. Hence, the existence of a ‘pure’ or ‘true’ essential community is a historical fallacy. The concept of an imagined community implies contradictions and fluidity in identities, expectations, and perceptions of their members.

The utility of ritualistic performances has undertaken a marked deviation; from being a primary means of entertainment or efficacy, in the contemporary sphere, they have categorically become pivotal in configuring the identities of the egotistical humankind. Evidently, these ceremonies capacitate the participants with an opportunity to come out of their monotonous, drab and fixed identities to step into a newer domain of creativity. It is noteworthy that religion generally provides an ensemble of such performances, but several rituals are not imbued within the religious dossier. As such, these events cannot be dismissed as hollow or non-productive interactions; its repercussions are invisible to the naked eye as they are largely operational on the psyche of the participants. Collective memory and popular imaginings are key aspects of such events. Thinking in this line, the rituals backed by an archetype ostensibly commemorate or reclaim an archaic memory, and all the participants are inevitably bound by this awareness for a certain period. Such reconstructions create a sense of memory of times past among the participants reminding them of their shared affiliation with the past (Alcock 11). Thus, subjective memories of participation create nostalgic recollections that conclusively aid in soldering a homogenized group.

The schism between duty and choice that sets off spectacle from ritual needs to be looked into. In carnivals or festivals that are characterized by lawlessness or absence of stringent norms, the performers are in ease as they unequivocally derive an indiscernible pleasure or ecstasy from their maneuverings. But in rituals, which are mostly bound by scrupulous rules, the performers are more or less apprehensive and condescending thereby constantly realigning themselves to conform to the rules. Nevertheless, not all the performers in a ritual are forced to be a part of it. Even while they partake in the practice

by their overwhelming sense of duty, it is apparent that they too elicit immense pleasure and contentment from such preoccupations. They are conscious of the gravity of the role they have chosen to play but do not feel the drabness that often accompanies with routine.

As has been identified, rites and rituals have an important role to play in establishing the cultural significations of a society. They penetrate deep into the psyche of its practitioners adding structure and purpose to human lives. Together with myths, they constitute a rich intricate web of life lending material and substance to human existence. G. Mitchell states that “Ritual, like a poem, is a concentrated, focused marshaling of symbols redolent with arrays of meaning” (158). Also, in creating a sense of group solidarity and wellbeing, rituals help people to de-objectify themselves and to forget their sense of shame (Pattison 160). A generation encodes its emotions, thoughts, and angst in their rituals for the future generations to decode. Art forms often convey these candid feelings which are born out of their varied and traumatic experiences in life.

As hinted above, performance is integral to the sound functioning of our societies as it serves as a neutralizer and stabilizer of subjective attitudes and idiosyncrasies; this renders the study of performance important as well. Of particular interest is the intrinsic workings of performative sensibilities and its construal aspects that in time galvanize the unmaking of archetypes. Performance studies is, by and large, an evolving multifaceted branch of study actively interacting with the anthropological, cultural, and ontological dimensions of existence. Understanding what is ‘performance’ and what is not, amidst a slew of activities and behaviors, has been a major goal of the performance discourse since the inception of the twentieth century and in particular during the middle of this century. The relative intangibility

and confusion arise from the fact that the same event can be perceived as performance in one instance and not a performance in another.

To perform is to complete a more or less involved process rather than to do a single deed or act. On another level, Erika Fischer Lichte asserts that performances are created out of the encounter of actors and spectators; this interplay can be termed as the “autopoietic feedback loop.” The interplay of their actions and behaviors constitutes the performance, while the performance constitutes them as actors and spectators. This particular quality of performance is termed “performative.” Whatever happens before the start and after the end of the performance is fundamentally different from the performance itself (R. Leach 20). Seen in this light, be an accomplishment or a two-way interactional process, every performance involves an irretrievable transition bringing forth a cumulative experience for the people involved. Presumably, the ‘performance’ occupies a vantage point reaching out to almost every aspect of human endeavor and delineating contesting behaviors.

Richard Schechner is a distinguished name in the discipline of performance studies who has apportioned decisive theoretical and paradigmatic contributions from its incipient stage. According to Schechner, performance studies resists fixed definition and invalidates the notion of ‘purity.’ Performance may not invariably occur in fixed spaces or situations or in performing arts alone. It can be found in the most unlikely situations as “dress-up and drag to certain kinds of writing and speaking” (Schechner, *Performance Studies* 24). Performance is construed as a ‘broad spectrum’ or ‘continuum’ of human actions. Along the continuum of the discipline, new genres are added, others are eventually dropped. Evidently, the underlying notion can be summarized as any action

that is framed, presented, highlighted, or displayed equates to a performance (Schechner, *Performance 2*). Hence, performance is a protean, dodging notion constantly changing contours subject to individual particularizations and social stigmas.

Performance is “any action that is restored or twice behaved” (Schechner, *Between 36*). Thus, performance means never for the first time. “It means: for the second to the nth time” (37). Peggy Phelan in her essay “The Ontology of Performance” comments on Schechner’s approach that he is interested in almost anything in the world that is done more than once (115). Schechner sufficiently categorizes most performances in two transparent terms, “is” and “as” (*Performance Theory 1*). Philip Auslander affirms that the theatre, performance art, and other forms of aesthetic performance and entertainment (including circus) fit very comfortably in Schechner’s “is” category. The American anthropologist Milton Singer extended that category and put forward the term “cultural performance” in which all the aesthetic, ritual and ceremonial events that provide a sense of the values and priorities of a given culture is included (Auslander, *Performance 5*). Hence, performance is never tired of recurrence, instead, it derives meaning from the repetitive quality of life, and the is/as categorization of Schechner expands its peripheries unconditionally embracing all behaviors directly or indirectly linked into the umbrella of performance studies.

In an article entitled, “Performers and Spectators Transported and Transformed,” Schechner notes that the performer goes from the “ordinary world” to the “performative world” from one time space reference to another, from one personality reference to one or more others. Therefore, in a performance, one can accomplish things that cannot be done in ordinary existence (267). He names performances where performers are changed

“transformations” and those where performers are returned to their starting places “transportations” (“Performers” 269) and affirms that a “series of transportation performances can achieve a transformation” (“Performers” 267). It can be assumed that performance accords superhuman competency and freedom to its performers suspending them in a state of euphoria and tranquility distanced from quotidian concerns and dilemmas.

To begin with, the major contribution of linguistics to the performance studies has been the concept of ‘performatives’ or ‘speech acts’ developed by British philosopher J. L. Austin. In his seminal book, *How to Do Things with Words* (1962), Austin proposes that the uttering of a sentence is, or is a part of the doing of an action, which again would not normally be described as or as “just,” saying something (93). According to this assumption, to utter a sentence, in effect is to ‘do’ it. Here, words drift from a syntagmatic to pragmatic plane as it acquire the clout and effect of actions. Austin labels such constructions as “a performative utterance, or a performative” (93). Further, Bert O. States in his article titled “Performance as Metaphor” elucidates that performance falls into the category of “keywords” proposed by Raymond Williams that evolve into a new word “spreading on the winds of metaphor” (108). The utterance of such words can also be an initiation to the series of events that follow and the circumstances must be also appropriate and be followed by certain actions.

A discursive look into the definitions of performance provides us with an idea of the reach, divergent allegiances, and the dispositions of this discipline. Tellingly, in “A Paradigm for Performance Studies,” Ronald J. Pelias and James VanOosting observe that the term performance studies as used in place of the more familiar label ‘Oral

Interpretation' and insists that such double naming calls into question the nature and scope of a discipline in transition (215). Also, Robert P. Crease in "The Play of Nature: Experimentation as Performance" defines performance as "an execution of an action in the world which is a *presentation* of a phenomenon; that action is related to a *representation* (for example, a text, script, scenario, or book) using a semiotic system (such as a language, a scheme of notation, a mathematical system)" (States 127).

Furthermore, performance studies also gives due value to the presence of spectator/audience relationships as it constitutes the other side of the coin. In "Approaches to Performance: An Analysis of Terms," Grahame F. Thompson defines performance as the mode of assessment of the textual/character/actor interaction. It is interestingly placed at the intersection of the text, the actor/character, and the audience (138). Goffman's typical performer is the "single person moving in a world infested with do's and don'ts," Turner's performers are usually "disturbed social groups caught in the agon of competing political claims" (States 114). Performance, thus, is a semiotic representation of multiple and rhizomatic experiences, whereupon meaning is tacitly aligned upon the interstices of the performer, the performed, and the observer.

To put it simply, in postmodern imaginings the whole world is perceived through the focal point of a performative schema and every activity or existence, from every day to exclusive, nondescript to influential or tangible to ethereal can be tagged as performance. Other key aspects of performance studies are 'body,' the space or canvas onto which the images are reflected and 'representation.' The rhetoric of 'body' is a tangled one, involving sexual and corporeal dimensions and in the context of performance studies, it can range from body of the work to the material bodies in action. Actor's body is an

interesting field of study as it is wholly variant from the character's body (E. Bell 37). Feminist theorists like Jill Dolan "sees representation as necessarily masculinist" (Auslander, *Theory* 7) and takes a lesbian feminist perspective. It is this prevailing focus on 'body,' that categorically draws feminist theoreticians into performance studies, and they constantly endeavor to dismantle the conventional orders of representation that upholds the dominant, patriarchal values in performances, thus, creating a niche for themselves in this discipline.

Another thrust of performance studies is the 'mediated performances' as now is the era of mass media culture. Mediatization has brought considerable variations to performance as a whole as most performances are nowadays processed and produced. By implication, these developments have created a new genre of performance alongside the traditional ideological practices and these frictions have consequently given way to the distinction of performance art against 'live art.' Apparently, ranging from individualistic performance to a social drama involving mass audience participation, performance studies has wider affiliations to the semiotic systems of knowledge, the visual sensibilities and the mediated experience, bodily politics, and representation that is subject to a nexus of power relations. Discarding its genealogies, performance studies categorically makes inroads into divergent disciplines reciprocating methodologies and viewpoints, addressing newer concerns. Hence, this discipline actively endeavors to reform lives, strikes a chord of social commitment and answerability, and apparently lay stress on the performer-performed nexus making it more live and interactive.

In addition to the principles of ritual as event and ritual framing, performance theorists are concerned with the peculiar efficacy of ritual activities, which distinguishes

them from literal communication, on the one hand, or pure entertainment, on the other. Catherine Bell observes that though not acknowledged equally, most performance theorists imply that an effective or successful ritual performance is one in which a type of transformation is achieved (*Ritual: Theory* 74). This brings us to the question of “the emergent quality of ritual,” implying what a ritual can “create, effect, or bring about.” Bell validates that the emphasis on the efficacy of performance attempts to illustrate a major goal of performance theory, that is “to show that ritual does what it does by virtue of its dynamic, diachronic, and physical characteristics, in contrast to those interpretations that cast ritual performances as the secondary realization or acting out of synchronic structures, tradition, or cognitive maps” (C. Bell, *Ritual: Theory* 60). From this perspective, what emerges from the ritual is, in one sense, the event of the performance itself.

Again, a performative dimension or self-conscious doing is common to theatre, performances, spectacles, and public events. The performative dimension of social action enables reflexivity by which the community can stand back and reflect upon their actions and identity. Thus, they are constantly shifted to and fro, from being the performer to a spectator, perpetually becoming an audience to themselves. Erving Goffman establishes human interactions as ‘interaction rituals’ or ‘ritual games’ that consists of “ordered sequences of symbolic communication” (*Interaction* 141). We act and perform as ‘self-regulating participants’ ordering our actions according to the norms set by society and culture at length. In most greetings and farewells that seem to be an apathetic set of activities, power relations are astutely ingrained, Goffman argues. In the more elaborate and formalized activities, which acquire the form of a ritual, the interests of dominant

sects supersede the concerns of the marginalized. Also, in traditionalizing rituals, which make them consistent with the archaic customs, the preponderance of certain social groups can be well discerned.

Victor Turner in *From Ritual to Theatre* (1982) proclaims that ritual, in its full performative flow, is not only many-leveled, 'laminated,' but also capable, under conditions of societal change. Since it is tacitly held to communicate the deepest values of the group regularly performing it, it has a 'paradigmatic' function (20). It can be argued that ritual arose from man's desire to be a part of a community, submitting his individual consciousnesses to a collective one, and thereby ultimately succumbing to the forces of the universe that he cannot comprehend but nonetheless experience. Thus, a ritual is a performance that bridges the schism between man's material existence and the esoteric natural world. Schechner in *The Future of Ritual* (1993) defines rituals as "concept, praxis, process, ideology, yearning, experience, function" (228). Further, Victor Turner affirms in *The Forest of Symbols* (1967), that "Ritual is transformative, ceremony confirmatory" (95). Thus, rituals fall in the terrain of epistemological and ontological praxis and as men evolve, the rituals also undergo a transition; this metastasis noticeably reflects human disposition from time to time.

Richard Schechner in *Between Theatre and Anthropology* (1985) indicates that people are accustomed to calling transportation performances "theatre" and transformation performances "ritual" (130). Philip Auslander in *Performance: Critical Concepts* advances the view that Milton Singer's incorporation of religious ritual into the category of cultural performance and Schechner's considerations of ritual alongside theatre both reflect the centrality of concepts of ritual to the discourse on performance

(9). It is at this point that performance studies and ritual studies unequivocally converge promulgating new equations and doctrines. Further, any ordinary behavior transformed through sequencing, repetition, and rhythm into a structured event can be termed ritual (Turner, *Ritual* 16). Seemingly, rule or tradition, or a set of patterns is always associated with ritual-like actions. In that case, everyday activity as brushing one's teeth becomes ritual-like as it is repetitive, occurs at a certain point of time, and follows certain definitive patterns of behavior. Thinking along this line, one attribute that enables us to identify the intrinsic ritualistic behavior is the presence of an indomitable structure and order.

Ritual as noted earlier possesses a transformative or expressive quality. Victor Turner hails this particular quality as 'liminality.' In ritual, the body is central as it becomes a "medium to locate rituals in space" (Tiwari 18). In liminality, there is a conspicuous change in the state or status of the body/mind. The liminal body can thus be called a 'ritualized' or 'performing' body. In a performance as in a ritual, the relationship between the performer and the spectator is at close quarters and largely intimate. Moreover, Schechner in *Performance Theory* (1988) attests that ritual is an event upon which its participants depend; theatre is an event that depends on its participants (137). In theatre, the performers professedly go through the vent of liminality. If the theatre could actualize this liminality in its spectators, then the theatre reasonably attains the quality of being a ritual and the spectators too ascent to the empirical sphere of performers. Another key element to consider is the gossamer layers of meaning enmeshed in every ritual. Rituals must be participated in, to understand the absolute meaning they possess. Sensibly, the adhered observation of ritual in a society begets a collective consciousness

among its participants and as a consequence, the outliers cease to be a part of that community.

Community rituals as a sacrifice and communal sharing of a totemic animal unconsciously work to cement social bonds between its members, but the group remains largely oblivious to this effect of the ritual. For them, rituals are certain actions that must be ceremoniously followed, as their ancestors have done, to placate their divinities. As mentioned above, ritual can involve banal, routine acts, and high-order activities as festivals, or rituals marking a crucial phase in a person's life. It can range from subjective to comprehensive collective terrains. Performative acts as dance, theatre, play, storytelling, religious sermons, and a vast number of events can be enumerated as a ritual. It is the schema of context and time that acts as the conclusive factor in fixing ritualistic behavior. Thus, a performance adequately enacted out, can acquire the halo of a ritual and makes an indelible impression on its audience and ultimately can be instrumental in the making of their dispositions.

In *Totem and Taboo* (1913), Sigmund Freud argued that undercurrent repressed, incestuous sexual desires formed the basis of both obsessional neurosis and religion. He contended that both are rooted in the same psychological mechanisms of repression and displacement, "the repression of sexual impulses in the case of neurosis and egotistical or antisocial impulses in the case of religion... The parallelism led him to the conclusion that one might describe neurosis as individual religiosity and religion as a universal neurosis" (qtd. in C. Bell, *Ritual: Perspectives* 60). Thereby, Freud categorically developed an inseverable link between an individual's mental dispositions with that of his racial past. Through his extensive studies on divergent ritual practices operational in a

society, Freud boldly avows that the taboo necessitates the ritual. This assertion ought to be read along with Catherine Bell's argument in her influential book *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions* (1997) that ritual is an obsessive mechanism that attempts to appease repressed and tabooed desires by trying to solve the internal psychic conflicts that these desires cause. Thus, the ritual has an intrinsic "therapeutic value" (40). Arguably, rather than policing the untoward desires of a community, which is the usual *modus operandi*, ritual and religion offer a cordial understanding and accommodation of such feelings latent in culture and civilization.

Apparently, for humans, rituals act as a conduit of communion with the occult inexplicable orders of nature. Freud alleges that desire channeled through the ritual of an original murder is ultimately enshrined in every social institution, including language (C. Bell, *Ritual: Perspectives* 78). The animal being sacrificed is identified with "the body of the primeval being . . . which gave life to the grain by being itself divided ritually" (qtd. in C. Bell, *Ritual: Perspectives* 48). The ritual sacrifice is how the community deflects or transfers its desire and violence on to another, someone who has been made into an outsider, an 'other.' For Rene Girard, this act of scapegoating lies not only at the beginning of human history but also at the beginning of a socio-cultural process that continually repeats and renews the violence and the repression that renders the violence deceptively invisible. He remarks in this regard, "Violence, in every cultural order, is always the true *subject* of every ritual or institutional structure" (qtd. in C. Bell, *Ritual: Perspectives* 79). Thus, systemic and institutional violence, implicit as well as explicit manifested through multifarious forms lies at the heart of all social activity.

Furthermore, Mircea Eliade insists that through the ritual enactment of primordial events, human beings come to consider themselves truly human, sanctify the world, and render meaningful the activities of their lives (47). He records the whole course cryptically, “Thus the gods did; thus men do” (Eliade 50). By transacting rituals befittingly, humans forsake the current temporality and enter into the sacral primordial times of the divinities. Eliade considers the agricultural rites connected to sexuality and fertility such as naked women sowing seeds at night and carnivalesque festivals, not a means for seasonally evoking the forces of nature, but these acts play out the original creation of the world itself.

Assuredly, the Belgian anthropologist Arnold Van Gennep’s celebrated book *The Rites of Passage* (1909) has laid the groundwork of the ritual theory. He identified rites as powerful means in effecting social transformation and identified rites of passage veritably integral to human lives. Gennep in generalizing the rites to a universal pattern divides it into three distinct phases; preliminal, liminal, and post-liminal. Both Richard Schechner and Victor Turner drew heavily from Gennep and Turner evidently designed his concepts of ‘liminality’ and ‘communitas’ based on it. In rites of passage, the person is first removed from the original group, he is then held in a “betwixt and between” state where he is “neither here nor there” (Turner, *Ritual* 95). After this stage, he is reincorporated into society with an altered status and identity. The first stage, separation, is often marked by rites of purification and symbolic allusions to the loss of the old identity (in effect, death to the old self): the person is bathed, hair is shaved, clothes are switched, and marks are made on the body, and so on. In the second or transition stage, the person is kept for a time in a place that is symbolically outside the conventional socio-cultural order (akin to

a gestation period): normal routines are suspended while rules distinctive to this state are carefully followed. In the third stage, symbolic acts of incorporation focus on welcoming the person into a new status (in effect, the birth of the new self): there is the conferral of a new name and symbolic insignia, usually some form of a communal meal, and so on. Genep argued that the rites of passage minister to orchestrate disarrayed and chaotic social changes that could threaten to disturb the quintessential structure of human society. They inconspicuously facilitate an easy passage or transition from one stage to another. A new reality is being erected; a boy is now recognized as a man, a man attains a new status, subsequent power, and roles, new relationships are made, and some earlier relations are forgotten.

Victor Turner in *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (1969) extends this notion further, and he decidedly focuses on the middle state of Genep's three-part rites of passage namely 'liminal.' Turner in this book affirms that liminal entities or 'threshold people' are "neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial" (95). Furthering the notion, he writes; their ambiguous state is expressed through a variety of symbols of death, being in womb, invisibility, darkness, bisexuality, eclipse, menstruating women, etc. They have no status, property, role, or power (*Ritual* 95). Apparently, in liminality, there is a period of alternative "lowliness and sacredness," of "homogeneity and comradeship" and for a time, they are "in and out of time" and "in and out of secular social structure" (*Ritual* 96). In this pattern, two modes of society are discernible. In the first, society is a "structured, differentiated, and often hierarchical system of politico-legal economic positions with many types of evaluation, separating men in terms of

‘more’ or ‘less.’ The second, which emerges recognizably in the liminal period, is of society as an unstructured or rudimentarily structured and relatively undifferentiated *comitatus*, community, or even communion of equal individuals who submit together to the general authority of the ritual elders.” Turner names this peculiar state as ‘*communitas*’ (*Ritual* 96). Thus, *communitas* is an intrinsic part of liminality; this middle stage is markedly chaotic against its structured beginnings and ends, but it is here that collective consciousness and camaraderie take birth.

Seemingly, the neophyte in liminality is a “*tabula rasa*” or a “blank slate” (Turner, *Ritual* 103), onto which the values of a society are inscribed. He has to pass through several agonizing and opprobrious ordeals to be strong enough to cope with new responsibilities and attain a maturation that would subsequently prevent him from abusing his newly attained privileges. Thus, they are more or less like clay or dust that is molded by society to its desired form and content. Thus, we can see liminal process as a social tool chiseling out the desired members of society. Concerning this, Genep’s concept of ‘territorial passage’ is flagrant and still feasible in the contemporary modernistic imaginings. The peripheries or the line between states or countries exists only in maps but though impalpable, they prevail as cogent marks of segregation and often are not violated. The yardsticks of this separation are more or less political legitimacies, economic parameters, or that of cultural or linguistic legacies as we discern in India. The communal demands for separation and autonomy unfailingly create tensions within the society, eventually conceding in the constitution of new states. These separations though not tangible, are internalized by its inhabitants and followed religiously throughout their life. For example, most Hindu temples in India do not allow

the entry of non-Hindus, and these customs are sacrosanct. This “magico-religious aspect of crossing frontiers” (Gennep, “Territorial” 27) is most noticeable and potential in disrupting the order of society.

Making the life of a central African tribe as his model of study, Turner in “Social Dramas and Stories about Them” considers rituals or to be more specific ‘social drama’ as “generative and regenerative processes.” He continues to state that narrative can be discerned either as one of the “cultural grandchildren or great-grandchildren of ‘tribal’ ritual mechanisms or a universal cultural activity, embedded in the very center of the social drama” (167). For Victor Turner, the social drama is a universal pattern of conflict and resolution that operates at all social levels from intimate, interpersonal relations to conflict within and between societies. He views society as a ‘process,’ in which humans alternate between “fixed” and “floating worlds” (*Ritual* vii). Turner’s division of the social drama into four phases (breach, schism, redress, and denouement) constitutes both an elaboration of Van Gennep’s schema for ritual into a broader pattern of social action. Turner’s claims for the universality of the social drama as a pattern of human behavior have been subjected to criticisms similar to those directed at the efforts of Schechner and others to translate the structure/process embedded in one cultural tradition into another pattern (Bharucha 32). Clifford Geertz criticizes Turner for homogenizing disparate social realities by assimilating them all to a single template of action (“Blurred” 9). What does each performance try to transmit to its spectators? What role does it play in creating or chiseling the collective identities of the people involved? Apparently, Victor Turner genuinely makes an effort to arrive at an answer through his concept of social dramas as he has realized that these events have concealed layers of meanings and repercussions in

society. While playing out, these performances cleverly mask its political and ideological dispositions and appear to be innocuous dramatic performances.

Significantly, the British anthropologist Max Gluckman brought major insights into the study of ritual. “Every social system,” he wrote, “is a field of tension, full of ambivalence, of co-operation and contrasting struggle” (*Rituals* 127). This was a digressive approach from the earlier views on ritual as Gluckman viewed rituals as “the expression of complex social tensions rather than the affirmation of social unity; they exaggerate very real conflicts that exist in the organization of social relations and then affirm unity despite these structural conflicts” (*Rituals* 136). The ritualization of conflict situations and aggression through contests and duels is generally understood as a social control mechanism. Max Gluckman, in the context of his ethnographic work in Africa, referred to such practices as ‘rites of rebellion,’ enactments that allow conflict to be staged and acted out (Stephenson 15). Such rituals provide a framework wherein the participants openly state their resentment of authority and generally act in a fashion contrary to the norms and attitudes of their social system.

Ritualized violence is intentional bodily harm that has been enmeshed with meanings and used as a tool to communicate values, narratives, and beliefs. The pain experienced by victims of torture is all too real, yet also a kind of performance staged for communicative effect (Stephenson 17). They “proceed within an established and sacred traditional system, in which there is a dispute about particular distributions of power and not about the structure of the system itself” (Gluckman, *Order* 3). He claims that this categorically allows for a kind of instituted protest, and in intricate ways rejuvenates the unity of the system. Gluckman cites the example of Zulu women’s agricultural rites, in

which women boldly parade about in men's clothes, doing things normally forbidden to them. The traditional patriarchal values of the community are temporarily inverted, which they believe is beneficial to the whole society. Gluckman suggests that these are 'ritualized rebellions' that channel out the internal conflicts and despair that women have garnered forever living in a subjugated state. These rites have the "cathartic effect of releasing social tensions, thereby limiting discontent and diffusing the real threat contained in such discontent" (*Order* 38). Evidently, these rituals act as compensation and mitigation and avert the group from a bigger catastrophic outburst. Plus, by allowing temporary inversions or suspensions they "dramatically acknowledges that order as normative" (Gluckman, *Order* 38). Hence, for Gluckman, ritual inflates the social conflicts and abysmal chagrin inherent in a system to its pinnacle and rather than leaving them behind, invigorates their expurgation ultimately creating a stable robust society. But it can be assumed that this process is not always in the best favor of the stigmatized groups, and they are at large unaware of this Machiavellian tactic laid out by the dominant groups of the society. Arguably, Bharani can be hailed as a ritual of rebellion as it is an instituted violence cleverly crafted by the dominant groups so that the participants without questioning accept their part in the hierarchical structure. They are seen as intruders who have come to disrupt the normal order of the civilized society. Yet, anticipating a potential rebellion this temporary protest is sanctified and conducted in a ritualized ceremony.

A performance involves visual representations, sounds, and even tactile, olfactory, and gustatory sensations thereby simultaneously appealing to multiple senses. By participating in these activities, even the passive audience is galvanized into a rarefied

state qualifying them to experience motley of sensory experience. At carnival time, the unique sense of time and space causes the individual to feel he is a part of the collectivity and he ceases to be himself. It is at this point through costume and mask, an individual exchanges bodies and is renewed (Smith 82). Michael Holquist in the Prologue to Mikhail Bakhtin's *Rabelais and His World* (1965) suggests that Bakhtin's carnival is not only an impediment to revolutionary change but a revolution in itself. Carnival is not a mere holiday or festival sanctioned or fostered by governments or secular institutions. It proceeds from a force that pre-exists priests and kings (xviii). He further contends that Bakhtin's conception of folk is colorful and contradictory to the civilized folk. His folk is blasphemous, they are coarse, dirty, and rampantly physical, reveling in oceans of strong drink, poods of sausage, and endless coupling of bodies (xix). Thus, carnivals, more than being a nonsensical festival of color and pomp, eventually effects an explosion of subjective identities to acquire a heterogeneous disposition and in addition, the dichotomy of appropriate/wrong is dismantled for a certain time. The inherent features of a carnival that he underscores are its emphatic and purposeful 'heteroglossia' and multiplicity of styles (Bakhtin x). In carnivals, humor is attained through ritual spectacles (carnival pageants and comic shows), comic verbal compositions (oral and written), and various genres of billingsgate (curses, oaths, and popular blazons). He validates that in the folklore of primitive people, serious cults were coupled with comic cults that laughed and scoffed at the deity, evoking 'ritual laughter,' and abusive cults (Bakhtin 6). Both of these variations were equally sacred to them. As hinted above, serious and comic were two facets of man's bearing, but in the definitely consolidated state and class structure, such equality of the two aspects was implausible. All the comic forms were transformed

to a non-official level, acquired a new meaning, were deepened and rendered complex until they became the expression of folk consciousness (Bakhtin 6). Hence, Bakhtin argues that in the evolutionary process of man, he lost touch with the comic aspect of life as the world around him became more stringent, comic and serious were categorized into impervious structures.

Carnival is an occasion for maximum social chaos and licentious play, and though it seems to be the pure opposite of ritual, it follows a ritual pattern. They are considered ritualistic as divergent social groups come together and social differences are kept apart or reversed in the duration of the activity. The mad rites of the carnival serve as a reminder to the elite groups of the power of the poor and their contempt against political and religious authorities (C. Bell, *Ritual: Perspectives* 126). Though the elitists have tried to curtail it, by recognizing the relative utility of the act they have granted its continuation aiding the masses to vent out their repressed emotions. Arguably, carnival celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions. People were reborn for new pure human relations. These relations were not only imagined but experienced. Arguably, the utopian ideal and the realistic merged in the carnival experience (Bakhtin 10). He traces the origin of abuse in human culture and records that abuse is not homogenous in origin and has the character of magic and incantations. The language that insults and mocks the deity as part of ancient comic cults were ambivalent, while humiliating and mortifying, simultaneously revived and renewed them (Bakhtin 16). He presses that the same ambivalent abuse is made use in the carnival but it underwent an essential transformation; it lost its magic and specific practical direction

and acquired an intrinsic universal character and depth. The new form contributed to the creation of the free carnival atmosphere and a droll aspect of the world (16). To Bakhtin, carnival is the people's second life, organized on the basis of laughter (8). It is not an individual reaction but festive laughter; laughter of all the people. It is directed at everyone including its participants. In the most general sense, the carnival celebrates the body, the senses, and the unofficial, uncanonized relations among human beings. But in man's development cycle, these festivals, whether ecclesiastical or state-sponsored, failed to create a second life; rather than aiding men to come out of the existing world order, it only reinforced the pattern (Bakhtin 9). This led to the ineludible genesis of carnivals, plays, or performances where the natural drab order of life was reversed. Evidently, such acts that involve a profuse display of power configurations and audacious breach of impervious norms can trigger human minds into action. As we have seen, these two disciplines often situated on the fringes of entertainment and efficacy, frivolity and seriousness are not always disparate or contrasting. They reciprocate and supplement each other at times, sharing their analytical tools and *modus operandi* and are indisputably fixated on decoding nuanced facets of human behavior. This original purpose and character of 'abuse' are seemingly preserved in Bharani, and more than creating a festive mood, the 'abuse' aimed at Goddess, in particular, is believed to placate her, supplementing her lack.

It is clear that from being an innocuous activity to a social drama or further to being a form of rebellion, all these dominant approaches identify the therapeutic value of the ritual and its construal capabilities. In concluding this section, we realize that the spurring list of play, performance, ritual, carnival, festival, and spectacle, etc. converge at

some point, all of them are unequivocally devised to satisfy one or other human needs, from alleviating boredom, appeasing human's desire to experience this esoteric world, forging a community, to providing them with a sense of identity and belonging. Regrettably, they can be a means of despotism in the hands of those wielding power. At the same time, they can be instrumental in flaring rebellion or resistance against totalitarian agendas. Hence, they are ambivalent but the dominant moods may vary between laughter, seriousness, pain, and anger. Through this study, it is apparent that it is impossible to insulate the myriad idiosyncrasies of human temperament; they most often converge and reciprocate in their enterprise.

Evidently, no aspect of human rhetoric-religious, artistic, political, physical, or sexual is rooted and perpetual. Instead, they constitute a continuum. They are shaped and re-shaped in accordance with particular social and historical prospects. Thus, in a dramaturgical trope, every being is an actor and every activity is patently a series of performances or behaviors which are learned, rehearsed, and presented over time. This chapter began by asking certain questions: What is the relative relevance of performance to this revived world? How do they operate and negotiate in the new arena? What happened to the original signification of rituals, which has now been stratified with fresh imbuelements? The probe does not end here, rather the pursuit to trail the answers to these queries perseveres through a comprehensive study of the Kodungallur Bharani Festival.

Performative Elements in Kodungallur Bharani Festival

Now, moving on to the performances in Bharani, being a subaltern fest it is essentially quotidian. Nevertheless, it follows an impervious and stringent pattern as

every event occurs within a fixed temporal frame and is contained within the religious confinements of *muhurtham* (“auspicious time”). Though wild and ravenous comportment is largely exhibited by its participants, this promptness about time and ritual severity has to be noted in particular. From day one to last, each group’s participation and performance occurs within a scrupulous schema, lending theatricality to this festival. In analyzing each rite of the Bharani festival, the presence of imperious forces is evident, and being a subaltern festival it undergoes strict monitoring of magisterial powers, and any step against the conventions is contained using force and weight. In addition to the natural order, the event also falls under a symbolic-time as Bharani decisively epitomizes the archetypal combat that occurred between Darika and Bhadrakali, and hence the actual time of this battle is typified with respect to day and time. Further, regarding the sacrality of the objects concerned, Bharani devotees, especially the chief oracles come adorned with the jewelry of the Goddess, which comprise of innumerable gold ornaments embellishing the idol of their respective temples. They wear this jewelry manifesting the form of Goddess herself. Also of much importance in the ritual is the saber, the anklet, and the waist belt used by oracles that are hallowed by the devotees, and various rites are performed in relation to them.

In Sarah Caldwell’s research paper, “The Blood-Thirsty Tongue and the Self-Feeding Breast: Homosexual Fellatio Fantasy in a South Indian Ritual Tradition,” she asserts:

The essential rituals of the Bhagavati cult all point to the aggressive and fatal erotic drinking of the male by the female, the infamous orgy of blood sacrifice of male ‘cocks’ at the Kodungallur Bhagavati temple; the male *veliccappatu*’s

cutting of his head in a symbolic act of self-castration ... [Kali] is herself, first of all, a phallic being, the mother with a penis... she is the bloodied image of the castrating and menstruating (thus castrating) female.... (76)

The essay “The Hindu Goddess Reinterpreted as a Symbol of Sex and Violence” offers a harsh criticism against Sarah Caldwell for applying far-fetched Freudian theories upon the Kali Cult of Kerala. The Indian scholars identify this study by Caldwell to be partial and she uses the English word ‘cock’ instead of the rooster, thus hinting at the connotation of the phallus. Keralites, or in particular, the ritual participants are unaware of the connotative value of the English word ‘cock.’ In other words, this is a “projection of the scholar” (Rampersad 43). Further, in the review of *Oh Terrifying Mother: Sexuality, Violence and Worship of the Mother Kali* (1999) by Sarah Caldwell, Cynthia Humes affirms, “The implications she sees, while tantalizing and truly fascinating, are based on extended digging into and assembling a dispersed array of sensationalist and homoerotic mythological themes, combined with rumored sexual activity” (Rampersad 44). Thus, Caldwell sees Kali as a ‘phallic being,’ this addition of meanings from outside the contexts of Indian culture can be disturbing to the moral and spiritual edifices of a sect.

One plausible reason behind why Kodungallur cannot negate and restrict Bharani is the massive support it lends to the socio-economic sphere of Kodungallur. It is a highly productive festival in terms of its material outcomes and utility as the devotees come with huge amounts of *kaanikka* (“offerings”) for the Goddess. Thus, every year, a substantial sum inadvertently flows into the economy reviving the commercial domain of Kodungallur and the temple as well. Also, the relationships Bharani has spawned over

generations is much wider than the financial conjunctions. It is intrinsically connected to the life nod of Kodungallur forging a lasting kinship. There are homes in Kodungallur which provide space and shelter to these devotees to stay and cook, and this tradition has been carried over for ages. For the Bharani devotees, *deviyude thattakam* (“The jurisdiction of the Goddess”) i.e, Kodungallur becomes a borrowed space that they make their own for a few days and worship their mother goddess who resides far away from them.

Furthermore, while considering the performative elements, the entertainment quality of Bharani deserves mentioning. The *theripattu* sung in devotion to the Goddess is a primary source of entertainment of the fest and draws scores of spectators. Additionally, Bharani is an arena where many traditional performing art forms as *Kalampattu*, *Kettukazhcha* (see fig. 2. 1), *Teyyam* (see fig. 2. 2), *Mudiyettu*, *Mudiyattam*, *Velavaravu*, and *Thira* are played out.



Fig. 2. 1. Jayan, Nimisha K. *Velavaravu* or the effigy of bullocks in the temple premises during Bharani. 20 Mar. 2018. *Private collection*.

These performances are played out in the open air involving complex face paintings, attractive headgears, exotic costumes, natural accessories, and rhythmic dance movements and articulate various aspects of Kali worship.



Fig. 2. 2. Jayan, Nimisha K. *Teyyam* performed in the temple premises before *Kaavutheendal*. 20 Mar. 2018. *Private collection*.

These art forms are exclusively and elaborately played in the Kali groves of the native place of devotees. Apparently, Bharani offers a performing space for the divergent social dramas to come together. And visibly, both efficacy and entertainment qualities are ‘braided together’ in Bharani as Schechner pointed out regarding gatherings in general. As a matter of fact, the quintessential *tantric* nature called *Shaktheya* or *Kaula marga* of this ritual conveniently allows for a certain kind of celebration or polyphony. The *Panchamakara* tradition is a form of worship using the five elements like sex, alcohol, grain, fish, and meat. A *tantric* tradition is a paganistic form of the ritual and in stark contrast to the Brahmanical tradition, *Shaktheya* or *Kaula marga* do not advocate pain and suppression. Partaking in the joys of life, one attains the peak of existence that is *moksha*, the ultimate joy. In its inception, explicit female vagina and phallus were

worshipped but later due to the civilizing influence of Brahmins, the shape was smoothed out and is now implicitly worshipped. Also, in small groups, the devotees cook food, especially meat in the temple premises, and consume alcohol (which is sacrilegious and not allowed otherwise) and they dance and sing ribald songs. Oracles who are believed to be the representation of Goddess in the battlefield, smites the forehead and other members of the group sing around to arouse them. The oracles make several cadenced steps according to the rhythm of the music and *kottuvadi* (“small sticks”). Here, many cultures overlap in a single space, and a new experience is created. For the devotees, it offers a cathartic moment whereas the spectators/audience, most of whom belonging to the natives are also transformed to certain degrees. Indeed, this interaction between various caste groups and cultures creates a *mélange* of experience.

Further, space has a deeper, more varied significance for traditional societies than for current urban ones (Kellerman 45). Space is very crucial in Bharani and the paths along which the devotees move are well designated and fixed. The devotees move along their hitched paths and the pilgrimage as a whole is well-organized and executed. A detailed analysis of spatial relations of the Bharani festival and its space-body relationship is being carried out in chapter five of this dissertation. Three kinds of participants are seen in Bharani: the performers, the accompanying or assisting devotees, and the spectators. Bharani like many rituals do not call for the presence of spectators; they are engaged in communion with the divine directly. Several natives, including the royal doyen and the clans, have the privilege to perform several rites; they perform alongside the immigrant groups. Also, they have their *avakashathara* which signifies

each group's prowess and power (see fig. 2. 3). These rights are hereditary and are passed on to future generations.



Fig. 2. 3. Jayan, Nimisha K. Pilgrim group from Palakkad along with chief oracle singing songs in their *avakashathara* at Kodungallur. 29 Mar. 2017. *Private collection*.

Bharani as explicated earlier, consists of a series of events and one categorically leads to another in sequence. It demands several days of preparations which eventually culminate in the ceremony of *Kaavutheendal*. Unlike theatre, the devotees harm themselves in reality striking their forehead with the sword and they dance in mirth which leads to a trance state strewn with blood. They apply turmeric to the wounds at once which is the only medication they seem to take. Thus, a conflict is presented before the audience and as this festival is believed to be the re-enactment or re-presentation of the battle fought between Devi and Darika, the space sooner or later gets metamorphosed into a battlefield. Ghastly torrents of blood, the burgeoning crowd, and the flagrant color of the spices and assorted flags, the masking dust, etc. produce the illusive impression of a battlefield. Devotees undergo a trance-like state and even spectators are transported into

an empyreal existence. Apparently, Bharani is both ‘actual’ and ‘symbolic’ in the tradition of many of the rituals all over the world.



Fig. 2. 4. Jayan, Nimisha K. Oracles dancing near *kozhikkallu*. 20 Mar. 2018. *Private collection*.

The whole of the atmosphere, their costumes, jewelry, and the accessories as swords and anklets heighten the elements of ‘play’ and they are made into believing that they are Goddess incarnate. Devotees in their delirium do serious injury to their bodies, but through self-inflicted torture, their visage is that of pleasure and not of pain. Thus, pain for them is a path to otherworldly existence. The human body is the reminder of mortality and triviality and by trying to deny this protected body, they try to be in communion with the divine. To elaborate in Schechner’s version of performance, the devotees of Bharani are involved in a kind of ‘dark play’ that “subverts order, dissolves frames, breaks its own rules” (*Performance Studies* 36) where they are simultaneously their real selves and the Goddess herself (see fig. 2. 4).



Fig. 2. 5. Jayan, Nimisha K. Oracle in trance performing near *kozhikkallu*. 20 Mar. 2018.

Private collection.

This shifting to and fro between these two identities can be conscious or unconscious. The play may start from a conscious level and enters the threshold of unconscious dark play in the zenith of religious fervor and ecstasy (see fig. 2. 5). This transportation to another existence is possible through the spiritual devotion of the performer involved. Thus, the devotee becomes something ‘other’ in the heightened state of emotional intensity, each devotee seemingly experiences different levels of ‘play’ and after they reach the culmination point of ecstasy, they either lose consciousness or come back to their serene state (see fig. 2. 6).

Thus, Bhagavathi, the predominant deity of Kerala, is a form of the pan-Indian goddess Kali. As Bhagavati she is a benevolent protectress, but in her more common angry and violent form, she is referred to as Bhadrakali. She is referred to as *agnigolam* or ‘ball of fire’ that can cause much havoc and destruction. She is the goddess of earth, “deity of the soil, the matron goddess of Kerala” (Caldwell, “Bhagavati” 216). Earth is

her fertile womb and Bhagavathi is also the patron of agriculture. David Kinsley states that Kali is almost always “associated with blood and death,” and he goes on to state that “within the civilized order of Hinduism blood, death, and Kali herself are the supreme anomalies” (Caldwell, “Margins” 250). She is hot, full of rage, sexually dangerous, but she is also a loving mother whose blessing ensures prosperity and fertility. The whole atmosphere is that of heat, the performance itself falls on the peak of summer, the scorching sun, the heat of the chicken and the liquor the performers consume, and ultimately the inner heat of the devotion, anger, and revenge that they experience while merging with the higher energy of the Goddess. But this connection to religion and daily activities such as agriculture is long lost to Keralites due to social and economic reasons.



Fig. 2. 6. Jayan, Nimisha K. Oracles at play in Kodungallur temple during the Bharani festival. 29 Mar. 2017. *Private collection*.

Further, probing the international interfaces, M. J Gentes observes parallelism between the mystery cults of the Greco-Roman near east and the rituals of the Bharani festival. “The links with Syria and the Hellenist world may have been the conduit for the

transmission of the worship of the mystery cult goddess into Kerala.” Similar in nature to the Cult of Dea Syria is the Mystery Cult of the Phrygian goddess Cybele. Both men and women became priests in the Cult of Cybele and her consort Attis. In this cult, the male priests were called *galli* and their emblem was the cock (*gallus*) (313). He presses the view that Kannaki is painted as a wronged, sorrowful, and vengeful figure that is deified and worshipped. But he contends that story- neither of Kannaki nor Kali appears to be overtly tied to fertility exactly as it is expressed in the Syrian example. Considering the esoteric virtues of the festival and its unquestionable celebration of sexuality similar to occult mystery cults and fertility cults, and the ancient relations Kodungallur had with classic civilizations like the Greek, the Romans, and the Chinese, such an infiltration of cultures is quite plausible.

This study would not be complete without probing the influence of Buddhism in the making of the Bharani festival in the light of humungous Buddhist ligations in the archaic past of Kodungallur. According to researchers, historians and thinkers, Buddhism was introduced in Kerala in the third century BC by the missionaries of Emperor Asoka on their way down to Sri Lanka which still retains Buddhist links. “The history of Hinduism abounds both in periods of creative assimilation and interaction and in outbursts of violent intolerance” (Doniger 25). Ajay Sekhar in his article proclaims that Jainism and Ajivaka philosophy also co-existed with Buddhism creating the great Sramana civilization of the South that has given birth to cultural classics like *Thirukural*, *Silapatikaram*, *Manimekhala* and the whole canon of *Sangham* writing. In places like Mathilakam and Kiliroor in Kerala, there were even Buddhist and Jain Universities and Research Centers in the early centuries of the first millennium that

attracted intellectuals and scholars from all over the world (Chandran 42). Later with the invasion of Aryanism, their culture along with their canons and sacred texts were burnt and destroyed.

Influence of Buddhism and Jainism, the presence of *Saktha Tantra* tradition which is still the form of worship in the temple, points to the fact that a huge level of assimilation has taken place in Kodungallur temple. Buddhism is of no doubt has been a great influence in Kali worship. In Buddhism, Vajratara is a goddess similar to Kali in appearance and character and follows *tantric* tradition (Kumar 200). Many historians agree to the notion that the Kodungallur Kali temple was a Buddhist shrine in ancient times. The lotus petal engravings evident in the circular *balikallu* reveal it to be the remnant of a Buddhist stupa. This *balikallu* points to the popular myth that practices like cock sacrifices and lewd songs were commenced to expel Buddhists from Kodungallur temple (Gopalakrishnan 35). Thus, it is highly likely that when Buddhists took over the temple and the *kavu* from the lower castes, they had to make only a few changes in the practices as the goddesses were very much similar. Probably, they could continue the adoration without disturbing the local traditions and inciting their anger. Historians point to the presence of Buddhism in Kodungallur and their usurpation in the hands of lower caste people guided by high caste groups. Furthermore, the Goddess Sitala of West Bengal and Mariyamman of Tamilnadu embody many aspects of Bhadrakali primarily being the goddesses of smallpox.

From *Manimegalai* we can fathom that Kerala was a decisive center of Buddhism. Four important Buddhist centers in Kerala were 1) The stupa installed by Mahendra, son of Ashoka near Kodungallur temple, 2) Avalokiteswara-Bodhisatwa in Churulimala, a

cave temple north-east to Sabarimala, 3) Indra Vihar in Kodungallur, 4) Sreemoolavasam between Azhikode and Kottapuram in Kodungallur (Chandran 96). The travelogues of Huan Tsang stand as testimony to this. T. K Krishna Menon in *Kerala Samskaram (Culture of Kerala)* suggests that when Thomasleeha visited Kerala, the prominent religion of Kodungallur was Buddhism. During the reign of Chera Chenguttuva, the prosperity of the kingdom and the spread of Buddhism reached its peak (3). Buddhism triggered considerable modifications in the cultural dossier of Southern India. Brahmins tried hard to resist these new advancements. Ilango Adigal, Chithala Chathanar, and people from administrative domains adopted Buddhist philosophy and Kodungallur thus became a strong playground of Buddhism. And in the niche created by the conflicts between Buddhism and Hinduism, Christianity grew in Kerala (K. Menon 23). Veda religion did not know of temple worship till then. It was Buddhists who built viharas and installed Buddha as their deity in it. Hinduism imitated and followed this practice from them. Strikingly, the ruling class as well as the common people practiced Buddhism. Buddhist monks traveled throughout the state preaching this religion. At those times, Brahmins were reasonably a minority group and Buddhism and Brahminism were always in tension and conflict. Thus, the arrival of a third religion was welcomed by both of them (K. Menon 29). They both might have dreamt of defeating the other using this new religion.

Elamkulam Kunjan Pilla in *Chera Samrajyam, Onpathum Pathum Noottandukalil (Chera Dynasty in Ninth and Tenth Centuries)* asserts that it was from Kodungallur itself, the capital of Kerala that the annihilation of Buddhism commenced. By eighth-century Buddhism declined in Kerala. Buddha was against any sort of idol worship. But in its

evolutionary trajectory, he began to be worshipped as god contrasting its basic axioms and ideologies. Aggrandized by other superstitions and demoralizing practices, Buddhism displayed signs of decline. Jaina Mahavira began to be worshipped as Karumadikuttan and Buddha as Vishnu (Kunjan Pilla 54). In Kerala, Brahmins were gaining power in the eighth century. By the twelfth century, they became all-powerful. However, Jainism managed to endure until the sixteenth century. When the reformist movements heralded by Kumarila Bhatta and followers progressed with royal support, the Buddhist monks and nuns were forced to leave the land. Also, abusive songs against Buddha's preachings began to be performed. In the songs sung in Kodungallur Bharani and Cherthalapooram, these slogans against Buddhism can be heard (Kunjan Pilla 53). Further, one set of historians believe that Kodungallur temple was once a shrine of Jain goddess. The Chera emperor, whose capital was at Vanji, protected the Jain and Buddhist communities. With Aryan immigration, these two sects had a setback and showed signs of decline. The Savarna had diplomatically persuaded the lower castes into attacking the Buddhists and "throwing animals and filth into the sanctuary" (Induchudan 39) thus expelling them from Kodungallur forever. Thus, Bharani is believed to have played an important role in the disappearance of Buddhism from Kodungallur. The trouble with this version is that the natives could have easily used force to expel them since Buddhism is a doctrine founded on peace and tolerance. It is highly contestable that the upper caste had to strategically expel them taking into consideration they were more powerful, seeking the help of lower castes provided Nair community were the commander-in-chief of the state army and exercised power.

In the cultural progression of Kerala, temples played a major part. They were not merely places of worship. They were educational centers, places of protection, and defense. Sekhar states that “All the Buddha idols in Kerala were recovered from current Savarna temple ponds or paddy fields in their vicinity. They were violently attacked, uprooted and thrown or buried in ponds and marshes.” It shows the repressive power of the mainstream Savarna Hindu ideology and common sense that becomes hegemonic and annihilating. This historic and epistemic violence are legitimized in the name of an omnipotent god and timeless religion. Thus, we see that most Hindu Savarna temples of Kerala had a Buddhist/Jain connection and they were either Buddhist shrines or Jain temples or monasteries. If this is a phenomenon common to most temples of Kerala, festivals similar to Kodungallur Bharani should have been celebrated in other such temples of Kerala which is not quite the case. We do not happen to see any such festival in Kerala that uses extreme ‘abuse’ and violence as in Kodungallur temple; one plausible reason can be the centralization of Buddhism in Kodungallur. As in many other parts of Kerala, Buddhist centers were converted into Hindu temples and in Kodungallur it was dedicated to Bhagavathi. Later the spirit of Kannaki was also absorbed into Bhagavathi. Thinking along this line, Buddhism played a decisive role in the inception of the festival, and the history of Buddhism in Kerala unfolds a different picture, where Hinduism was a marginal presence and subsequently throws light on the power diffusions and the cultural and epistemological alignments converging in contemporaneous attitudes. The placing of Kali at the center of life is justifiable when we envisage the contingent import attached to Kali festivals even in the revamped climate of human existence. In Kerala, life has remarkably transgressed from a thoroughly agricultural tradition. We have been exposed

to a globalized way of living; nevertheless, we are constantly assimilating and adapting new trends to compensate for the lost traditions and beliefs which were once the life-nod of our earlier civilization.

Conflict and Rebellion in Bharani

Bharani follows an abrasive religious tradition, but no system can be disparaged as the subjective experience of its practitioners ultimately contours their life. Why such allowance was granted to the lower class at a time when untouchability and caste discrimination was rigorously practiced? Even when the natural rights of living and walking in freedom were denied, they were granted an unimaginable allowance of contaminating the Goddess and the temple creating a conscious loophole in the existing systems. That if anyone mentioned on that particular day that this fest is pollution, they will have to pay for the entire process of purging the whole of the temple which amounts to a considerable sum, thus strategically sealing off people's mouths forever. Prior to the passing of *The Temple Entry Act* in 1936, the idea of pollution was more intense as lower caste groups were not allowed worship in the Temple. Now, that 'pollution' is no longer valid, 'pollution' arises from the 'opprobrious' acts of the performers. Furthermore, why this tradition is still practiced in the face of strong opposition from various groups? This leaves us wondering why orthodox upper class society took such pain to acquiesce this subaltern festival. Firstly, in the light of the origin of sacred groves in Kerala, we can ascertain that Kodungallur temple too was in its primitive state nothing but a grove which was later transformed into a temple. Thus, Kali is a goddess who belonged to the indigenous natives and was not part of Aryanized nomadic invaders. This philosophical compromise is very evident in the Kodungallur Bhagavathi Temple. Most probably,

religious practices originated there in strata, each layer took shape adding to or subtracting from the existing practices. No much logical evidence is available to validate that the temple belonged to lower caste people in the earlier times but considering the general trend in Kali worship, this must have been the case even in Kodungallur temple as the circumstances were almost identical.

A more psychological reason can be identified, footed on the notion of conflict. Partha Chatterjee suggests that subaltern movements against feudal or semi-feudal exploitation are “enmeshed in a host of relationships of mutual obligation, institutionalized in a wide variety of customary practices” and involves acts of “conscious violation of the symbols of authority-loot and destruction of property and desecration of objects of ritual significance” (35). Ranajit Guha feels that though the ideology among the subaltern groups is diverse, “one of its invariant features was a notion of resistance to elite domination” (5). Bharani is a social drama that involves certain conflict and its resolution; it exhibits a breach-crisis- redress pattern but resolution occurs not in the strict sense as Turner proposed. In one sense, it is a re-enactment of conflicts that occurred in the ancient past; be it the conflict of Kali and Darika, or the conflict that is believed to have occurred between upper class sects and Buddhist or Jain groups or the conflicts that have surged out of the shifts in the ruling structure, a transition from a *kavu* of lower castes to that of upper class jurisdiction. The trace of the latter conflict is still present, at least to an extent that primarily gets reflected in the Bharani songs and the ‘opprobrious’ behavior of the performers by challenging the civilized order of the state. The performers pass through a liminal state and *communitas* evidently emerges from the ritual, a group with similar interests and values (for a detailed discussion, see chapter five). Hence, a

solution or reintegration does not emerge, if at all there is a solution it is temporary. Thus, it would be more appropriate to categorize Bharani as a 'ritual of rebellion' to use a term from Max Gluckman.

Gluckman identified a 'conflict' or 'social tension' in most ceremonies or rituals and based on the anthropological studies by Hilda Kuper in South-eastern Bantu of Zululand, Swaziland, and Mozambique regions, he proposes the concept of 'ritual of rebellion' to denote the conflict inherent in these structures. Gluckman uses the term 'rebellion' as well as 'licence' and 'protest' in his book *Custom and Conflict in Africa* (27). In such rebellions, the participants seem to attain a "catharsis through a general confession of anger" (*Order 57*). Gluckman views rebellion as an "ever-present, persistent, repetitive process influencing day-to-day political reactions" (*Order 71*). The starting point of Gluckman's theory, as he acknowledges is James Frazer's narrative in *The Golden Bough* (1890) of a ritual of the priest-king of the Italian grove of Nemi. In that tradition, a candidate for the priesthood could only succeed to the office by slaying the existing priest, and the new priest continues to hold the office until he gets slain someday. Gluckman asserted that this priest-king is involved in a 'ritual rebellion' (*Order 178*). Gluckman identified rebellion in both social and political rituals that are explicated in his study of women's rituals of the Zulu and *Incwala* ceremony respectively. This occurs in sacred and traditional established systems where there is a dispute about particular distributions of power, and not about the structure of the system itself. This allows for the instituted protest and in complex ways renews the unity of the system (*Order 179*). Gluckman records the unique rites of women folk of the Zulu community practiced in honor of Goddess Nomkubulwana. The most important of the rites of the

goddess required 'obscene' behavior by the women and girls. The girls donned men's garments and herded and milked the cattle which were normally taboo to them. Their mothers planted a garden for the goddess far out in the veld and poured a libation of beer to her. At various stages of the ceremonies, women and girls went naked and sang lewd songs. Men and boys hid and did not go near (181). Nomkubulwana is the only developed deity in the religion of Zulu. Gluckman notes that this ritual is obsolete, women no longer perform the ritual to honor the goddess. Furthermore, among the Tsonga tribe of Mozambique, a ceremony to drive crop pests is practiced exclusively by women. If any man walked through the paths, "he is pitilessly attacked by these viragoes," who push him or maltreat him. Nobody goes to help him from the "savage crowd of women" (*Order* 182). Further, the Swazi *Incwala* ceremony is a typical first-fruit ceremony and no one should eat the crops before it has been performed. In the ceremony, a pitch-black bull is stolen from the subjects and sacrificed. Then the priests start a journey to fetch water and plants from forests and on their way, "the priests practice licensed robbery on people" (190). In the ceremony, they chant, "You hate the child king, / You hate the child king" and "You have wronged, // Bend great neck, / Those and those who hate him, / They hate the king" (191). At various stages of the ceremony, this hatred song is sung as a national anthem. Certain medications are applied to the King who is secluded from the rest, and at the end of the ceremony, he spits medicines over people so that his strength goes through and awakens them. Then, marking the end of the ritual, he bites the new crops and next day various groups of the nation have the crop in the order of precedence.

Gluckman saw these rituals as a means of “re-establishment of social cohesion.” Through the controlled allowance of protest, a potential rebellion or violence of massive repercussions is adequately checked. These rituals identify conflicts as an essential feature of social life, which is amplified in customs. But through the very same means of customs, the conflict is restrained thus maintaining the social order (2). Tellingly, a custom or tradition is simultaneously the catalyst and the controlling agent of conflicts. An evident resemblance is perceived in Turner’s discussion of *Kumukindyila* rites, an Ndembu ritual of installation of its chief, known as Kanongesha. In *Kumukindyila* rites, the fellow men shower a series of harangues on the chief, “You are a mean and selfish fool, one who is bad-tempered” (Turner, *Ritual* 201). After this, any person who considers that he has been wronged by the chief-elect in the past is entitled to revile him and most fully express his resentment. The chief-elect during all this sit silently with a bowed head. However, Turner does not stress the element of conflict in such rituals and cites it as an example of a phase of liminality, explicating how the rites mold its citizens to conform to its customs; the chief is erased out of all his past allegiances and ego, making him a better leader.

These rituals “openly express social tension: women have to assert license and dominance as against their formal subordination to men, princes have to behave to the king as if they covet the throne, and subjects openly state their resentment of an authority” (Gluckman, *Order* 179). Gluckman notes that the men wished the ritual to be performed and their positive role in the ceremony was to hide (*Order* 182). This dropping of normal constraints and adopting an “inverted and transvestite behaviour” by which men became inferior to women was believed to result in an abundant harvest thereby

ensuring the prosperity of the community. An “open and privileged assertion of obscenity” is yet another marked feature of these rituals that bring out the “fundamental conflicts both in the social structure and in individual psyches” (*Order* 187). Gluckman pays tribute to Frazer who stressed a ‘political process’ inherent in natural, agricultural ceremonies that seemed to be harmless (199).

Rituals of rebellion are an intrinsic feature of an “established and unchallenged social order” (Gluckman, *Order* 200). One important feature of the participants involved in these rituals is their unequivocal belief in the system of institutions. They may have displeasure with certain authorities or individuals; they may hate the king but never hate the kingship. Certainly, these rituals are not aimed at “altering the existing social and political order.” And it is this acceptance of the established order as the right and sacred, that allows the “unbridled excess,” as it is the system itself that sustains rituals of rebellion (Gluckman, *Order* 201). The words of the *Incwala* songs may be shocking, in contrast to the general patriotic songs sung in praise of king, its theme is the “hatred of the king and his rejection by the people” (Gluckman, *Order* 203). The rebellion is headed by a prince; thereby paradoxically the rebellion supports the kingship. In Bharani as well, *Kaavutheendal* occurs after getting permission from the royal head, in the symbolic form of opening a red silk umbrella. But the royal chief does not go through the ordeals as the Kings of Swazi rituals.

Similarly in Bharani, the ceremonies are agricultural rituals, thanksgiving to the goddess for the harvest she has given and for the future prosperity. The women’s ceremony and the King’s ceremonies at sowing and having the first-fruits occur within the ritual pattern of worship of Goddess Nomkubulwana, the nature spirit who is their

patron as is the Bhagavathi. As a part of the rituals, 'temporary kings' are also installed who were sacrificed or mocked or discharged after a few days of role (199). The conflicts can be acted out directly as in the case of temporary kings or by inversion of roles. In Bharani the participants mimic those in power, becoming a representative or a shadow king, a concession of certain days is given, which ultimately asserts the superiority of the royal head. There exists another temple called Pulappadam, about half kilometers east of the Kodungallur Temple at Kaavilkadavu. In relation to Kodungallur Temple, it is called *keezhkavu* (lower grove) and Bhagavathi Temple is known as *melkkavu* (upper grove). Here, we see a small raised platform without roofs and walls, and Bhagavathi is worshipped. This temple belongs to the Pulaya community. The main priest of the temple is known as Vallon and this title is supplied by Kodungallur Thamburan. There is a popular myth that explains its origin and relevance. One day Vallon and his wife Chakki returned from their work to see a dark woman sitting in their hut. Upon inquiring, she reveals that she is Kurumbakkali and is returning after slaying demon king Darika. She expresses her wish to remain in Pulappadam. Pulaya community worshipped her for thirteen days with alcohol, meat, fish, and grain powder and on the fourteenth day, she blessed them and said she will be present thereafter and will be happy if they worship her using these very things. Then, Devi proceeded to the Pilappilly (Nair House) and asked them to inform this matter to Thamburan. And upon her wish, Thamburan built this temple and installed Pulayas as the priests (Chandran 60). Even this story evidently exemplifies Dalit appropriation. Seemingly, in the past, when there occurred a need for accepting this temple, Savarna groups used divine elements to aid this appropriation. When the lower caste groups were uniting and becoming a power, those yielding power

endlessly tried to bring them under Savarna rules. For this purpose, they made stories that explained and justified their actions as a divine wish. Even today, the Savarna sects find it difficult to digest the importance assigned to this temple. In the past, this allowance might have emerged from a social crisis that could have affected Savarna domination. Today, they question the implausibility of such a story and feels if the Goddess can reach Pulappadam, there is no need for her to rest there as Kodungallur temple was just a few distances away from Pulappadam. When *keezhkavu* began to be famous and made more income, a donation box from *melkkavu* was placed in *keezhkavu*. Then, as per an agreement made between the then Vallon and Devaswom, this custom was changed, and instead *keezhkavu* submitted fifty-one rupees every year to the *melkkavu*. This is still practiced and again points to the Savarna attempts to have control over any enterprise of the lower caste groups.

On the day of *Kaavutheendal*, Vallon bows before Thamburan, offers him presents, and adorns him with the sword, shield, bangle, chain, silk, and stick. He wears a cap similar to that of royal head and with all adornments circumambulates the temple three times and pays homage to Goddess. After this ceremony, he seats himself in a raised platform about ten centimeters from the ground. This custom is known as *Vallon Thattukayari*. All the pilgrims who reach *keezhkavu* ascend this platform and receive his blessings and offer *dakshina*. When *Kaavutheendal* concludes, he descends from the seat. On this day, Vallon becomes a shadow image of the royal head. Tangibly, he is only an instrument in this play of Savarna patronage. He enjoys power and fame just for one day and this, in turn, asserts their superiority. The gradual loss of importance faced by *keezhkavu* and the associated practitioners point to a significant period in the history of

Kerala: the rise of Brahminical hegemony in the eighth century and the subsequent marginalization of local groups. Contrastingly, other rituals display an inversion, the inappropriate becomes the appropriate, chaos becomes the norm, and all licentious behavior is tolerated or rather promoted as a potential means of maintaining the balance of the society.

A 'bacchantic' state where women dominate over men as in the case of Zulu does not occur, nevertheless, in Bharani women ascend to share equal space with men. However, men notably do not represent masculinity but manifest feminine force of Bhadrakali, dressed up as women and in a way creates a bacchantic state. It is not an occasion for men to 'hide' (Gluckman, *Order* 182); they play an important role in the ceremony. Women in Kerala, seemingly, are expected to display modesty especially in sexual matters. But in Bharani, sharing equal space with men, they sing ribald songs not in exclusive private space as in the women's ceremonies of Zulu but publicly accompanied by sexual gestures which are otherwise not accepted. Arguably, men in Bharani inverse their role not by leaving the scenario for women to act, but by celebrating the feminine energy. In Zulu, the practice of women donning the men's attire ultimately normalizes the patriarchal system and its superiority. Evidently, the importance attached to feminine nature is not restricted to the period of ritual but is much more lasting in Bharani, producing a healthier gender atmosphere. The presence of transgender groups is a testimony of this broader sentiment and tolerance. Further, menstruation is not seen as a taboo, women are allowed to enter the temple, even during their periods. But by categorizing this entry as one of the elements of pollution, the society is in turn normalizing the taboo against menstruation.

When we come to the concomitant question of the consciousness of the subaltern, the notion of what the work *cannot* say becomes important. And within this realm, “the track of sexual difference is doubly affected” and “subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow...” (Spivak 28). Ranajit Guha proposes to fight against elitist historiography by developing an alternative discourse based on the rejection of the spurious and un-historical monism characteristic of its view of Indian nationalism and the recognition of the co-existence and interaction of the elite and subaltern domain of politics (7). This powerful speaking back is explicit in Bharani songs; ‘abuse’ against royal power including king can be heard and also against administrative powers as in the *Incwala* ritual of Swazi. They perform gestures of hatred towards the head; ‘abuse’ through Bharani songs but ultimately view him as the protector and their savior. This is visible in the performers’ immediate behavior after *Kaavutheendal*, of falling at the feet of the Thamburan.



Fig. 2. 7. Jayan, Nimisha K. After *Kozhikkallu Moodal* Bharani pilgrims contesting to get blessings from royal chief seated in *Nilapaaduthara*. 07 Apr. 2019. *Private collection*.

In the final stages of *Kaavutheendal* when the royal head sits in the *Nilapaduthara* (Platform of the royal chief in the western portico) to permit *Kaavutheendal*, scores of devotees hustle up to bow before him and touch his feet to have blessings. Police and other authorities stand around him to control the crowd and the devotees are pushed and shoved out by these authorities. Still, people swarm around him heedless of the ‘humiliating’ experience (see fig. 2. 7). In the past, the royal head was the king and he ruled over the country. Even today, in the changed scenario, the mindset of these people remains unchanged. For them, their pilgrimage is incomplete without the blessings of the royal head. Here, the royal head holds power almost equal to the Goddess herself and it underlines the general belief that kings are the representatives of gods on earth. After the conflict is enacted out, they return to the normal cycle of the power structure and accept their status as inferior.



Fig. 2. 8. Jayan, Nimisha K. Chief police officials positioned in *Nilapaduthara* during *Kaavutheendal*. 07 Apr. 2019. *Private collection*.

During *Kaavutheendal*, the priests come out of the inner sanctum. Thamburan hands over long sticks known as *mudravadikal* to these priests and Nair chieftains. It

commemorates the ancient incident of Thamburan giving away weapons to the soldiers of the battle as a representative of the Goddess (Chandran 54). Then, accompanied by the young heirs of the royal family and the chiefs of *Onnu Kure Ayiram Yogam* (literally meaning nine hundred and ninety-nine), the association of Nair society of Kodungallur, who were the administrators of Kodungallur temple, Thamburan seats himself in the chair specially ornated with silk on the *Nilapaduthara* of the eastern side of the temple. Then, he opens the silk umbrella signaling the permission to start the *Kaavutheendal*. Police Chiefs, Member of Legislative Assembly, District Collector, and other eminent personalities accompany the royal head (see fig. 2. 8). Ostensibly, political power, administrative power, and royal power are combined in this festival that dictates the norms.

After *Kozhikkallu Moodal* ceremony, the presence of Kodungallur Valiya Thamburan accompanied by his family is mandatory by the custom in the *balikkalpura* in the eastern portico to measure the rice grain for *uchapooja*. After *uchapooja*, he goes back. In the evening, till the *deeparadhana* is over, Thamburan has to be present in *balikkalpura* (Chandran 57). Arguably, these festivals serve to assert upper class superiority and indispensability. Upon close examination, we realize that the customs and rules of these festivals are carefully designed in such a way as to ensure the Brahminical hegemony. In Bharani, different caste groups from upper castes to lower castes share the ritual space and together solidify the established notions of caste and race fields. But, in the initial understanding of the festival, we do not see any resistance. If there is any moral anger even this has been masked by religious fervor and ecstasy. For them, Bharani serves as a harvest festival and their offering to their much-feared Goddess brings them

fortune and health. Thus confirming to the traditions, they seem to accept their social role as marginalized.

Thus, Bharani as a ritual of rebellion is a 'psycho-drama' involving intricate psychological processes above the 'social drama' of class conflict. Bharani is a Freudian 'projection' of upper caste sects, wherein their sexual desires and antagonisms are attributed to the subaltern groups and subsequently disowned. As Jacques Lacan identifies, the unconscious of the performer is the 'kernel of being' and reigns supreme in Bharani. The self of the performer is formed from this unconscious as Lacan observed, "I am where I think not" (103). Bharani is like a psychoanalytic procedure wherein the repressed anxieties, traumas, and desires are voiced thereby taking it from the unconscious to the conscious realm of mind and are openly dealt with. The repressed materials are later sublimated, 'promoted' into something grander or nobler. The devotees are separated from their mother goddess in the course of history pushed to the current 'symbolic order' marked by socialization and the painful knowledge of taboos and restraints. Through Bharani, there is an urge to go back to the 'imaginary' order where there is a relative merging and 'idealized identification' of the devotee with their Goddess. This anxiety and lack and intense longing for the Goddess is best expressed in the Bharani songs. Bharani songs are characterized by a language enriched with metaphor and metonymy, the ingenious play of signifiers all aimed at attaining or reaching a transcendental signified, the Goddess herself.

Bharani is supposedly against the accepted norms of social roles. Though we see an inversion of conventional rules in Bharani, in contrast to carnivalesque behavior, all the participants are not deemed to be equal. A sense of hierarchy exists within the

participants, though the regime of power which is dynamic and implies upper caste domination. Though occasional joviality is created through abusive songs that mock at everything including the upper castes, Bharani is ultimately a religious observance with ritual severity. It occurs within a rigid ritual framework, it is first and foremost an occasion of pain and not laughter. Also, even though in the festival, the participants as Vallon and Palaykal Velan act as a shadow of a king, they do not parody the kingship, but view it with veneration and exercise the office with dedication. By entering the temple premises without adhering to prevalent modes of temple worship, devotees break the sacrosanct convention giving rise to religious tension. The sovereign powers grant the ritual though there is great discontent among them and thus the Bharani devotees 'pollute' the Goddess and the temple premises in the face of fierce moral anger of the natives of Kodungallur. Some resist these 'invaders' and see them as 'pollutants' who have come to denigrate their Goddess. Adding to the friction is the contesting practice of *theripattu*. For a few days, these religious extravagances are tolerated upon. For the time being, this infringement is condoned and the gap between upper class authority and these subaltern groups, otherwise unbridgeable is forgotten. Their excessive anger, frustrations, and energies are spent in the activity and they return as a new being and this is markedly a major event in the spiritual growth of the devotee.

In brief, for the devotees, Bharani serves primarily as a harvest festival, and their offerings and steadfast devotion to their much-feared Goddess brings them well-being and euphoria. As hinted before, they are seen as intruders who have come to disrupt the normal order of civilized society. They serve as a cultural shock to the pseudo-moralistic society and a grim reminder of man's crudeness, vulgarity, and bawdiness. The upper

class continues to view them with skepticism and disgust and is not ready to accept them or even their festival. Even the opposition they face is unequal as they are absent for a year and appear in the arena only for a few days of a month. The totalitarian forces work against them for the rest of the year trying to contain their rituals, ban their songs, and 'clean' their activities. But till now, though much has been gained in writing, the upper class sects have not been able to contain these mass which is wild, divergent, and streaming in from different parts of the state. They stand paralyzed against the latter unrefined, uncontrollable energies and though repressive measures such as policing are used, unmistakably it has not succeeded yet.