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images & words

THE DANCING GODS OF MALABAR

Writer-photographer Indu Chinta's coffee table book *Theyyam: Merging with the Divine* brilliantly captures the popular ritual art form of north Kerala

The first thing to notice about author Indu Chinta, other than her coal-black deep eyes, is the small mask of a dancer woven with delicate beads of green, purple, and red hanging around her neck. She adjusts her *ikkat* sari, smiles and shares, "It's a special necklace, which has the face of a Theyyam. I got it custom-made." And the resemblance is absolute, as we flip through the pages of her new book, which is as vivid as the tales spun around Theyyam. This was not just a regular book launch, as there was also an exhibition of Indu's photographs, proceeds from which went towards the Kerala Relief Fund.

But why did she choose to come up with this book, that too from a self-publishing house? Shares the 31-year-old photographer, "I used to travel to several places across India with my family, that's how I got into photography. Moreover, I also have a knack for writing. So, I came up with this idea. My fiancé introduced me to Theyyam. The colours were blazing and the practice passionate. It had all the elements that filled my fancy. Just writing it down wouldn't be enough; it would look incomplete without the photographs. Hence, the result is a book that has both the

elements." She pauses and adds, "Big publishing houses don't give you enough freedom and space. That's why I chose a press to take my own decisions about design, layout, etc." She spent several months in northern Kerala to document the art form, which captivated her with its hues and moods.

Theyyam in full glory

This is Indu's debut book, but she isn't from a literary background. She completed her studies on environmental engineering at Illinois University and later worked at IIT-Madras. She loved literature, but has also done much of academic writing. She even worked with Union Ministry of Environment and would write policy briefs, speeches, and other official documents. That explains her flair with the pen. She quit her job to connect herself completely with art and culture which, she thinks, are confined only in textbooks.

There are 21 Theyyams mentioned in the book along with their legends. To capture their tales, the Hyderabad-based writer travelled to Kannur, North Malabar and stayed there from December to May, during which Theyyam is performed. "The dance form is more restricted to

the region. You have to be there to soak in its full glory. I'd begun to write a travelogue interviewing several artistes from the community. I must have taken thousands of photographs of them from my Canon DSLR."

Moreover, every Theyyam has specific folklore. The word means 'God' in Sanskrit and is derived from the term '*daivam*'. She explains, "Theyyam is a cult form of worship in the pre-Hindu era. Later, it began manifesting to a few nuances of Hinduism. Over a period of time, they brought communities together. With a faraway gaze in her eyes, she explains, "While capturing their customs, I could connect with something beyond what the human mind can perceive. There's some power in them that can only be felt and not seen." She calls it a metaphysical reality with an explicable sense of peace.

Most of the Theyyam dances are organised at night. They paint their faces, and put on heavy headgear which can be as high as 12 metres. The atmosphere is aglow with fire as the artistes jump into a bed of burning coals.

Some of them hold bamboo pots around their bellies, lit with fire. The pages in the book show them wearing skirts made from coconut leaves, which sway as they dance to the tune of chants and loud drumming. She captures the mood precisely. She reminisces that the Theyyams appear deeply swayed by the magnanimity of the deity. "I felt it when one of them came and blessed me with her hands."

But aren't Theyyams portrayed by men? Then why she? "She says, "The deity can be any form: masculine or feminine or both." To feel what she has experienced, you need to delve deep into her book. And yes, it's a collector's item.

— Saima Afreen
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Indu Chinta