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# The many stories of THEYYAM

Indu Chinta documents north Kerala's vibrant Theyyam art form through photographs and a book

entails for the artists. She learnt there were sub-categories, with performances narrating stories of different gods, goddesses and ancestors. Some were fiery with the use of fire and others, playful and joyous.

Indu documented the performances over several sleepless nights, as Theyyam is performed late night/ crack of dawn and occasionally during the day in scorching heat. "The audience cannot cover their heads and must be barefoot. I'm photosensitive and don't know how nothing affected me as I watched the performances," recalls Indu.

She is happy that the younger generation is keen to pursue the art form: "I've met children as young as eight learning steps of Theyyam through YouTube videos and wanting to perform as they grow up."

(The photo exhibition is on at Phoenix Arena, Madhapur, till September 10. The book 'Theyyam: Merging with the Divine' will be launched on September 7, at 5 p.m.)

:: SANGEETHA DEVI DUNDOO

'Theyyams of Malabar', a photography exhibition at Phoenix Arena showcases the folklores and behind-the-scenes footage of Theyyam art form. Writer-photographer Indu Chinta spent months in north Kerala, understanding the art form she grew fascinated with.

An environmentalist who was working on a project for IIT Madras, she quit her job last year to travel and documenting lesser-known stories of art and culture. "I loved my work as an environmentalist. But I wouldn't have had the time to explore art and culture and document it through writing and photographs," she says.

At Phoenix Arena, Hyderabad, on display will be several photographs of Theyyam taken by Indu Chinta. The inaugural evening will also witness Theyyam performance of Anugrah, a 16-year-old artiste. The exhibition's proceeds will go towards rehabilitating those affected by the recent floods in Kerala. "It was heartbreaking to see how the state was ravaged by floods. Many of the places I had visited look different now," she rues.

After quitting her job, Indu travelled through Tamil Nadu and Karnataka, visiting Thanjavur, Gangai-konda Cholapuram, Rameshwaram, Sringeri, Shraavanabelagola, Belur and other places. "These regions are culturally rich. I wanted to understand art outside of textbooks and see how I could contribute to it. The one method I know is to document. Art forms like Theyyam are rich in oral folklore that stand the risk of being lost. Writing wouldn't have done justice to the vibrancy of Theyyam. So I used photography as well," she says.

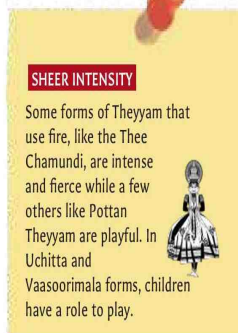
Indu Chinta's photography-driven

**In flames** Fire is a significant part of one form of Theyyam **BY ARRANGEMENT**

coffee table book 'Theyyam: Merging with the Divine' will also be launched at Phoenix Arena on September 7. Indu travelled to Kannur in north Malabar region of Kerala, towards the end of December 2017. "Each year Theyyam performances happen from December to May," she informs. "Watching the first Theyyam performance was my moment of epiphany. There

was a spiritual connect and I could relate to the faith the artist is an embodiment of," she says. She cancelled her return ticket and stayed on till May 2018.

Unlike Kathakali, Mohiniyattam and a few other art forms that occupy popular mindspace, Theyyam is less known outside Kerala. Film enthusiasts will recall Theyyam being a significant part of Kamal Haasan's *Uttama Villain*. In her book, Indu delineates the difference between Kathakali and Theyyam and what it



### SHEER INTENSITY

Some forms of Theyyam that use fire, like the Thee Chamundi, are intense and fierce while a few others like Pottan Theyyam are playful. In Uchitta and Vaasoorimala forms, children have a role to play.

