

## Pictures that speak a thousand words on Theyyam

Indu Chinta's recently released book on this centuries-old form of worship paints stunning visuals of the performer and the folktales behind Theyyam through photographs and stories.



environmentalist-writer-photographer Indu Chinta at the coffee book launch  
Chennai:

Theyyam, a popular ritual form of worship that's endemic to North Malabar in Kerala, is like an elusive snow leopard — many would have heard of it, but very few would have seen it. To bring out and document the beauty of this art form, environmentalist-writer-photographer Indu Chinta set out on a week-long journey that unexpectedly extended to five months! In the form of a coffee table book, almost, she has beautifully depicted through photographs and text, the rich cultural history and significance behind Theyyam.

While she was working in IIT Madras, the idea to travel and learn more about India's art and cultural heritage befell her. However, her job was "consuming many aspects" of her life, so she decided to quit around July of last year and pursue documenting her sojourns full-time. Tamil Nadu served as her inspiration — thanks to marvels of the ancient empires still prevalent today such as Thanjavur, Madurai, even Tharangambadi. That led her to Karnataka and eventually Kerala, where she witnessed Theyyam for the first time.

"I don't travel to make a statement but to learn about India and right from the first time I witnessed a Theyyam performance, I felt like I could connect to a faith or supreme power," begins Indu. "I felt like I couldn't confine all the experiences I had over those five months into one part of the travelogue I was writing so I wanted to bring out its magnificence and splendour in the form of photos and text," she says. A culmination of all these efforts is her book, Theyyam: Merging With The Divine.

Armed with a DSLR camera, she began tracing the smallest details of the intricate rituals and eventually, she discovered that, "Every Theyyam has a folktale or myth attached to it. So I would talk to the audience and locals to fish out more information. However, many people weren't fully aware of the stories and that further solidified my determination to document its various aspects," recalls Indu.

She began talking to senior artistes, who would perform Theyyam and local experts, to unearth these legends. She says, "I would record them and typed them out once I got back home. Many of these tales are only passed down

orally from one generation to another so I'm proud that my book will serve as a document of centuries-old tales."

Out of all the performances she saw, the Makkam Theyyam had a deep impact on her. "In this form of worship, the performer has bamboo shards tied to the waist and they're lit on fire; viewers or devotees have to be barefoot while watching the act so at times, I would step on embers or burn my hands but it was all worth it," smiles Indu. "Another memorable instance is when a performer walked up to me, touched me on my head and just walked away. These moments left me so stunned — that's how the title of the book took shape, and I'd have it no other way," she says.