

Occupational Health Challenges among Traditional Ritual Performers (Theyyam Artists) in Northern Kerala (India): A Narrative Review

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Abstract

Background: Theyyam is a traditional ritual performance art of northern Kerala, India that represents a unique confluence of spirituality, cultural heritage, and social identity. Despite its cultural significance, the occupational health risks and socio-economic challenges experienced by Theyyam performers have received limited attention in the scientific literature. This narrative review aimed to synthesise available evidence on these challenges.

Methods: A narrative review was conducted using published research articles, ethnographic and anthropological studies, public health reports, government policy documents, cultural publications, institutional reports, and relevant grey literature. Evidence was critically reviewed and synthesised thematically to identify occupational exposures, health outcomes, socio-economic challenges, and welfare interventions affecting Theyyam performers.

Results: The available evidence indicates exposure to multiple occupational hazards, including musculoskeletal strain, burn injuries, respiratory irritation, skin disorders, dehydration, fatigue, sleep deprivation, and psychological stress associated with physically demanding performances and ritual practices. Seasonal employment, irregular income, limited access to health insurance, and inadequate institutional support further increase vulnerability. Existing welfare initiatives have important gaps in awareness, accessibility, and implementation, limiting their effectiveness in addressing occupational health needs.

Conclusion: Theyyam performers experience substantial occupational and socio-economic challenges that remain insufficiently addressed. Culturally appropriate occupational health policies, improved healthcare and social protection, strengthened welfare programmes, and evidence-informed public health strategies are needed to safeguard the health, safety, and sustainability of Theyyam artists.

Keywords: Theyyam; Traditional ritual performer; Occupational health; Folk artists; Cultural heritage; Public health; Kerala; Occupational exposure

Introduction

Theyyam is a traditional ritual performance art practiced in temples, sacred groves (kavu), and ancestral worship sites in the North Malabar region of Kerala, India. It represents a unique form of deity worship

in which performers embody divine or heroic figures through elaborate costumes, facial painting, ritualistic dance, and music. The performances are accompanied by traditional instruments such as the chenda, elathalam, kurumkuzhal, and veekkuchenda. Certain forms of Theyyam incorporate fire rituals that symbolize divine power and transcendence. More than 400 variants of Theyyam are performed annually, predominantly in the districts of Kannur and Kasaragod during the festival season from October to May.¹

Although Theyyam is recognised as an important component of Kerala's cultural and intangible heritage, the performance places extraordinary physical and psychological demands on the artists. Performers undergo prolonged fasting, sleep deprivation, ritual restrictions, and continuous physical exertion while wearing elaborate costumes and heavy headgear. Individual performances may last from 12 to 24 hours, exposing artists to considerable physiological stress.²

The occupational environment of Theyyam performers involves exposure to multiple physical, thermal, chemical, and psychosocial hazards. Prolonged dancing, repetitive movements, and the weight of traditional costumes predispose artists to musculoskeletal disorders, while fire rituals increase the risk of burns and heat-related illnesses. Continuous exposure to smoke from oil lamps and incense may contribute to respiratory and ocular irritation, and the physically demanding nature of performances, coupled with seasonal employment and financial insecurity, can adversely affect both physical and mental health.³

Despite increasing recognition of Theyyam as a culturally significant ritual art form, the occupational health challenges faced by its performers remain inadequately documented. Existing literature is largely confined to ethnographic, anthropological, and socio-cultural perspectives, with limited synthesis of evidence from an occupational health and public health viewpoint. A comprehensive understanding of these occupational risks is essential for developing culturally appropriate health interventions and welfare strategies for this vulnerable population.

Therefore, this narrative review aims to synthesise the available literature on occupational health hazards, health problems, socio-economic conditions, and welfare mechanisms affecting Theyyam artists in northern Kerala.

Methods

This study was conducted as a narrative review to synthesise the available evidence on the occupational health challenges faced by Theyyam performers. A narrative review design was considered appropriate because of the limited availability of quantitative studies and the predominance of ethnographic, anthropological, and descriptive literature on this traditional ritual performance.

Relevant literature was identified from published research articles, ethnographic and anthropological studies, public health reports, government policy documents, cultural publications, institutional reports, and other relevant grey literature related to Theyyam and traditional performing artists. Secondary sources focusing on occupational health, socio-economic conditions, welfare measures, and cultural aspects of Theyyam were included for review.

The retrieved literature was critically reviewed and synthesised using a thematic analysis approach. Information was organized into major themes, including the nature of occupational exposure, occupational health hazards, physical and psychological health problems, socio-economic conditions, and existing welfare interventions. Findings were interpreted descriptively rather than through quantitative or statistical analysis, enabling the integration of evidence from diverse sources and

providing a comprehensive public health perspective on the occupational health challenges experienced by Theyyam artists in northern Kerala.

Results

Occupational Exposures

The reviewed literature indicates that Theyyam performance is characterized by considerable physical, physiological, and environmental demands. Performers participate in prolonged ritual activities that may extend from dusk to dawn while observing ritual fasting, sleep deprivation, and other religious restrictions. The use of elaborate costumes, heavy headgear, facial and body painting, and repetitive dance movements under conditions of high temperature and humidity substantially increases physical workload. Ritual practices involving fire, smoke from oil lamps and incense, sharp weapons, and prolonged exposure to loud percussion instruments further contribute to thermal, chemical, mechanical, and noise-related occupational exposures.^{4–10}

These occupational exposures are compounded by inadequate opportunities for rest, hydration, and nutritional intake during the performance season. The cumulative effects of prolonged physical exertion, environmental stressors, and ritual obligations predispose performers to fatigue, dehydration, heat stress, and reduced physical recovery. The reviewed evidence suggests that these occupational demands create a work environment associated with substantial health risks among Theyyam artists.^{4–7}

Occupational Health Problems

The literature consistently identifies musculoskeletal disorders, burn injuries, respiratory irritation, skin allergies, dehydration, chronic fatigue, and psychological stress as the major occupational health problems experienced by Theyyam performers.^{4–7} Continuous dancing, prolonged standing, repetitive movements, and the use of heavy costumes and headgear contribute to joint pain, backache, muscle fatigue, and other musculoskeletal complaints. Exposure to open flames, smoke, and ritual materials further increases the risk of burns, respiratory symptoms, ocular irritation, and dermatological conditions.^{4–10}

Ritual fasting, inadequate nutrition, sleep deprivation, and prolonged performances under extreme climatic conditions further intensify physiological stress. These factors increase the likelihood of electrolyte imbalance, heat exhaustion, impaired recovery, and chronic fatigue. In addition to physical health problems, psychological stress related to occupational uncertainty, financial insecurity, and social marginalization has also been reported among Theyyam artists.^{5,11}

Socio-economic Challenges

The reviewed literature demonstrates that most Theyyam performers belong to socially and economically marginalised communities and depend largely on seasonal performances for their livelihood. Irregular income, limited employment opportunities during the off-season, inadequate access to healthcare, and the absence of comprehensive health insurance, social security, and pension benefits contribute substantially to occupational vulnerability and reduced quality of life.^{4,5,11}

Welfare Measures and Policy Gaps

Although government welfare schemes and cultural preservation initiatives are available for traditional artists, the reviewed evidence suggests that their implementation remains inadequate. Limited awareness

among performers, administrative barriers, poor accessibility, and insufficient institutional support restrict the effective utilisation of welfare benefits. Consequently, many occupational health needs of Theyyam artists remain insufficiently addressed despite existing policy initiatives.^{11, 12}

Table 1. Summary of occupational health challenges, associated risk factors, reported health outcomes, and occupational health implications among Theyyam performers

Occupational domain	Occupational exposure/Risk factors	Reported health outcomes	Occupational health implications
Physical workload	Prolonged dancing, repetitive movements, prolonged standing, heavy costumes and headgear	Musculoskeletal pain, joint disorders, backache, muscle fatigue	Increased risk of work-related musculoskeletal disorders and reduced physical performance
Thermal exposure	Fire rituals, prolonged exposure to high ambient temperature, inadequate hydration	Burns, dehydration, heat exhaustion, electrolyte imbalance	Need for heat stress prevention and adequate hydration strategies
Respiratory exposure	Smoke from oil lamps, incense, and fire rituals	Respiratory symptoms, cough, airway discomfort	Increased risk of occupational respiratory symptoms and need for respiratory health monitoring
Dermatological exposure	Prolonged body painting using natural and synthetic pigments	Skin irritation, contact dermatitis, allergic reactions	Regular dermatological assessment and safer cosmetic materials where feasible
Sleep and nutritional deprivation	Ritual fasting, prolonged performances, inadequate rest and recovery	Chronic fatigue, nutritional deficiencies, reduced physical recovery	Nutritional counselling and scheduled recovery periods during performance season
Psychological and social factors	Occupational uncertainty, seasonal employment, caste-based marginalization, limited institutional recognition	Psychological stress, anxiety, emotional exhaustion	Integration of mental health support and social protection programmes
Socio-economic	Seasonal income,	Delayed healthcare	Expansion of welfare

conditions	limited employment opportunities, lack of insurance and social security	seeking, financial insecurity, reduced quality of life	schemes and occupational health coverage
Healthcare and welfare access	Limited awareness of welfare schemes, administrative barriers, inadequate occupational health services	Underutilization of healthcare services and welfare benefits	Improved awareness, accessibility, and implementation of government welfare programmes

Discussion

This narrative review highlights that Theyyam performers are exposed to a complex combination of physical, environmental, psychological, and socio-economic occupational hazards. The available literature consistently identifies musculoskeletal disorders, burn injuries, respiratory irritation, skin problems, dehydration, fatigue, and psychological stress as the major health concerns associated with the physically demanding and ritualistic nature of Theyyam performances.^{4–7} These findings emphasize that occupational health among Theyyam artists extends beyond workplace injuries and should be understood within the broader context of cultural practices, social determinants of health, and occupational vulnerability.

Unlike many conventional occupations, the occupational exposures experienced by Theyyam performers are closely intertwined with religious and cultural traditions. The use of heavy costumes and headgear, prolonged fasting, sleep deprivation, repetitive dance movements, and exposure to fire and smoke are integral components of the ritual and therefore cannot be easily modified without affecting its cultural authenticity.^{4–7} Consequently, implementing conventional occupational safety measures may be challenging and requires culturally sensitive approaches developed in collaboration with artists, community leaders, and public health professionals. The review also demonstrates that occupational risks are compounded by socio-economic disadvantage. Most Theyyam performers belong to socially and economically marginalised communities and depend largely on seasonal performances for their livelihood.^{5,11} Irregular income, limited employment opportunities outside the festival season, and inadequate access to healthcare, health insurance, and social security increase their vulnerability to both occupational injuries and chronic health problems. These findings illustrate the close relationship between occupational health and the broader social determinants of health.

Psychological well-being emerged as another important but relatively underexplored aspect of occupational health among Theyyam artists. Occupational uncertainty, financial insecurity, caste-based discrimination, and limited institutional recognition contribute to psychological stress and emotional burden.^{5,11} The contrast between the performers' temporary ritual status as revered spiritual figures and their continued social marginalization outside the performance context may further influence mental well-being and quality of life.

The review further indicates that although several government welfare schemes and cultural preservation initiatives are available for traditional artists, their implementation remains limited by poor awareness, administrative barriers, and inadequate institutional support.^{11,12} Improving awareness of existing welfare programmes, strengthening access to occupational health services, and integrating traditional

artists into health insurance and social protection schemes may contribute to reducing occupational vulnerability while preserving this important cultural heritage. From an occupational health perspective, preventive strategies should emphasize periodic health screening, health education, early management of work-related musculoskeletal disorders, nutritional support during the performance season, and culturally acceptable approaches to injury prevention. Collaborative efforts involving public health authorities, cultural organisations, local governments, and community representatives are essential for developing sustainable interventions that protect both the health of performers and the authenticity of the ritual tradition. This review has several strengths. It provides a comprehensive synthesis of the available literature by integrating evidence from occupational health, anthropology, public health, and socio-cultural studies, thereby offering a multidisciplinary understanding of the challenges faced by Theyyam artists. However, the review is also subject to certain limitations. The available evidence is limited, with much of the literature consisting of ethnographic studies, descriptive reports, and grey literature. The lack of epidemiological studies and quantitative occupational health data limits the ability to estimate the prevalence and severity of health outcomes among Theyyam performers.

Future research should prioritize epidemiological investigations, longitudinal studies, and community-based occupational health assessments to understand better the long-term physical and psychological health effects of Theyyam performances. Such evidence would support the development of culturally appropriate occupational health policies and welfare programmes that promote both artist well-being and the preservation of Kerala's rich ritual heritage.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this review, several measures may help reduce occupational health risks and improve the well-being of Theyyam performers while preserving the cultural authenticity of this traditional ritual art.

a) Periodic health screening and medical services

Regular pre-season and post-season health screening programmes should be implemented to facilitate the early detection and management of occupational health problems. These programmes should include general medical examinations, musculoskeletal assessments, dermatological and respiratory evaluations, hearing assessments, and nutritional screening. Collaboration among primary healthcare centres, public health authorities, and Ayurveda healthcare institutions may improve the accessibility and continuity of healthcare services for Theyyam artists.

b) Occupational safety training and insurance coverage

Training programmes focusing on occupational safety, first aid, fire safety, injury prevention, and emergency response should be developed for Theyyam performers. Education on safe performance practices and methods to reduce physical strain may help minimize occupational injuries while respecting ritual traditions. Expanding health and accident insurance coverage for traditional performers would provide financial protection against work-related injuries and disabilities.

c) Nutritional support and recovery measures

Given the prolonged fasting, physically demanding performances, and inadequate recovery periods, nutritional counselling and hydration strategies should be promoted during the performance season. Practical guidance on balanced nutrition, electrolyte replacement, and adequate recovery between performances may reduce fatigue, dehydration, and heat-related illnesses.

d) Strengthening welfare programmes and social protection

Improving access to existing government welfare schemes, including health insurance, pension benefits, financial assistance, and social security programmes, is essential for reducing the socio-economic vulnerability of Theyyam artists. Simplifying administrative procedures, increasing awareness of available benefits, and strengthening outreach activities may improve programme utilisation. Additional support through education, skill development, and livelihood assistance during the off-season may further enhance long-term economic security.

e) Occupational health research and surveillance

There is a need for systematic epidemiological and occupational health research to better understand the long-term physical, psychological, and social health consequences of Theyyam performances. Prospective studies, community-based health assessments, and occupational surveillance programmes would provide evidence to guide preventive interventions and policy development.

f) Integration into public health programmes

Theyyam artists should be formally included within national and state health protection programmes, such as Ayushman Bharat and relevant state welfare initiatives. Registration of traditional performers and collaboration among local self-government institutions, cultural organisations, and public health departments would facilitate equitable access to healthcare services, occupational health programmes, and social protection measures.

Conclusion

Theyyam artists constitute an important part of Kerala's intangible cultural heritage; however, their occupational health needs remain largely under-recognised. This review demonstrates that Theyyam performers are exposed to multiple occupational hazards, including physical, environmental, and psychosocial risks, which are further compounded by socio-economic vulnerability and limited access to healthcare and welfare services.

Addressing these challenges requires an integrated occupational health approach that combines preventive healthcare, occupational safety, social protection, and culturally appropriate public health interventions. Strengthening welfare programmes, improving access to healthcare, and promoting evidence-informed policies are essential to protect the health, safety, and well-being of Theyyam performers while preserving this unique ritual tradition.

Further epidemiological and occupational health research is warranted to generate robust evidence that can inform effective interventions and policy development for this underserved occupational group.

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