

Executive Summary

State Party: India

State, Province, and Region : Kerala State, Thrissur

Kerala, often recalled by the caption “Gods Own Country” is culturally rich with its vibrant artistic traditions deeply rooted in centuries old rituals and festivals. The state’s diverse heritage reflects a unique blend of different influences shaped through maritime trade, spirituality, communal and linguistic harmony.

Element Name: Thrissur Pooram (തൃശ്ശൂർ പൂരം)

Geographical co-ordinates to the nearest second:

Latitude: 10.5247° N

Longitude: 76.2146° E

Textual description of the place and element of the nominated intangible heritage:

Thrissur Pooram, known as the “festival of festivals,” is a grand annual temple festival in Kerala celebrated with majestic elephant processions, percussion ensembles, and dazzling fireworks. *Thekkinkaadu Maidanam*, a vast open ground encircling the Vadakkunnathan Temple in Thrissur, serves as the central venue where all the Pooram festivities converge in a spectacular display of devotion and culture.

Criteria under which the element is nominated

1. Basic Identification Details

Element Name: തൃശ്ശൂർ പൂരം (Thrissur Pooram)

Location(s): Held at Thrissur Thekkinkadu Maidanam, Vadakkunnathan Temple;

Key Contributors: Paramekkavu Bhagavathy Temple and Thiruvambadi Sri Krishna Temple

Ten participatory regions-representing temples include;

1. Thiruvambadi Sri Krishna Temple,
2. Paramekkavu Bhagavathy Temple,
3. Kanimangalam Sastha Temple,
4. Laloore Bhagavathy Temple,
5. Ayyanthole Karthyayani Temple,
6. Neythilakkavu Bhagavathy Temple,
7. Panamukkumpilly Sastha Temple,
8. Karamukku Bhagavathy Temple,
9. Choorakkottukavu Bhagavathy Temple and
10. Chembukkavu Bhagavathy Temple.

Domain of Knowledge

Thrissur Pooram is an annual festive event comprise social practice, rituals, knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe, traditional craftsmanship and music.



...the rise, hearts unite - the soul of Thrissur Pooram in the backdrop of vadakkunnathan temple

2. Description of the Element

Detailed Summary:

Historical background

In the heart of Kerala, where spirituality and tradition intersect with exuberance and celebration, stands Thrissur Pooram - the festival of festivals. Widely regarded as one of the grandest and most colorful temple festivals in India, Thrissur Pooram represents a rich blend of devotion, art, community spirit, and cultural heritage. Set against the majestic backdrop of the Vadakkunnathan temple, widely known as Dakshina Kashi, the Kashi of South India - a revered Shiva shrine and salient witness to one of South India's grandest festival: Thrissur Pooram.

It is believed that temple rituals in Kerala were originally prescribed by Sri Adi Shankaracharya, the great philosopher, ascetic and teacher. The term *pooram* refers to *pooram* star of Malayalam calendar and especially Thrissur Pooram is the temple festival that occurs on the day when the *Pooram* star (equivalent to *Purva Phalguni* in Sanskrit) is observed in the Malayalam month of *Medam*.

Its roots run deep in the soil of Kerala, drawing from centuries of tradition, royal patronage, and the unbroken thread of local participation. Also it is the grand finale of many other *poorams* held in different parts of central Kerala, and can therefore be called the 'mother *pooram*' of the smaller sub-*poorams* that begin around January each year and culminate in Thrissur in May.

The origins of Thrissur Pooram can be traced to the late 18th century, when the ruler of Cochin, Sakthan Thampuran, also known as Raja Rama Varma IX, laid

the foundation for what would become the largest and most spectacular festival in Kerala. The story begins with the age old much revered Arattupuzha Pooram, which was once the focal point of temple festivals in the region.

For centuries, the Arattupuzha Pooram had brought together temples from across central Kerala for a grand display of devotion, with each participating temple contributing elephants, rituals, and processions. But in one year, heavy rains caused delays for several temples, particularly those from around Thrissur.



Statue of Sakthan Thampuran

These temples, despite their devotion, were denied entry into the procession due to their late arrival. The setback was a blow to the local temples and devotees, but it caught the attention of the perceptive Sakthan Thampuran, who saw an opportunity to create a more inclusive and grand festival that would showcase the rich spiritual heritage of Thrissur and the surrounding areas.



Arattupuzha Temple

Thus, Thrissur Pooram was born: a new festival, conceived as a celebration not of hierarchy but of unity, where ten participatory temples would come together to offer their devotion in the vicinity of *Thekkinkaadu maidanam* at Vadakkunnathan Temple premise, the central spiritual heart of the city. Sakthan Thampuran's vision transformed a moment of exclusion into an enduring legacy of inclusivity, marking the beginning of an annual celebration that would unite people from all walks of life.



Pooram inscription at Arattupuzha Temple



Thrissur Pooram at *Thekkinkaadu maidanam* in front of Vadakkunnathan Temple

Significance

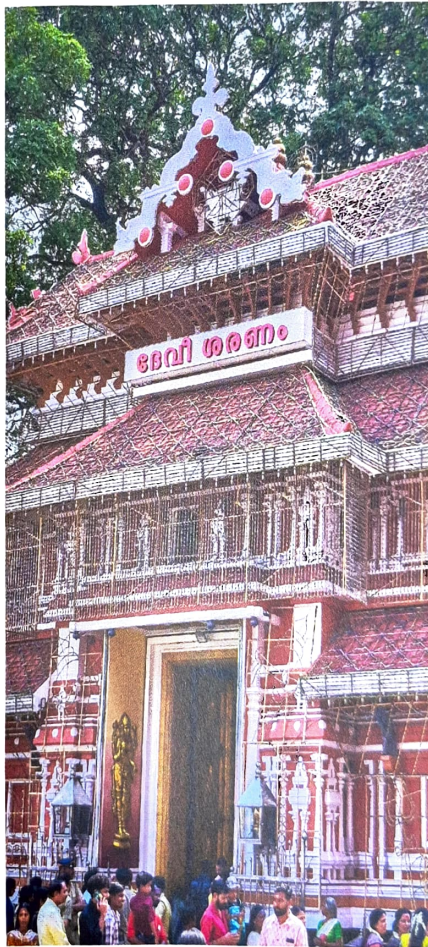
Thrissur Pooram is not just a festival; it is a manifestation of Kerala's cultural soul. Held annually in the Malayalam month of *Medam* (April-May), it marks a confluence of temples, deities, and devotees, with rituals that stretch over seven days of grand processions, music, dance, and spiritual fervor.

The musical instruments used are traditional ones associated with temple processions and rituals. Their use forms an integral part of Kerala's musical heritage, much like how specific instruments such as the Scottish bagpipe hold cultural significance in marking traditional ceremonies in Europe.

The core of the festival revolves around the Vadakkunnathan Temple, a historic Shiva shrine that serves as the sacred stage for this grand spectacle. Ten temples participate in the festival, each bringing its own deities and stories to the sacred gathering. The two leading temples, Thiruvambadi Sri Krishna Temple and Paramekkavu Bhagavathy Temple, have a particularly intense but harmonious rivalry, competing in a spirit of fellowship to showcase the most splendid rituals and performances. Other temples, like Kanimangalam Sastha Temple, Laloore Bhagavathy Temple, and Ayyanthole Karthayyani Temple, contribute to the vibrancy of the festival.



Thiruvambadi Sri Krishna Temple



Paramekkavu Bhagavathy Temple



Kanimangalam Sastha Temple



Laloor Bhagavathy Temple



Ayyanthole Karthyayani Temple



Neythilakkavu Bhagavathy Temple



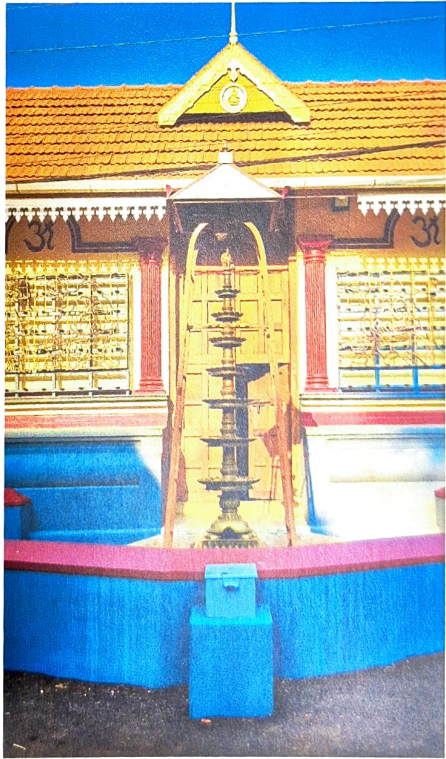
Panamukkumpilly Sastha Temple



Karamukku Bhagavathy Temple



Choorakkottukavu Bhagavathy Temple



Chembukkavu Bhagavathy Temple

The festival begins with the *Kodiyettam* (flag hoisting) that announces the arrival of Pooram season. On the main day, the two rival temples - Thiruvambadi and Paramekkavu - lead their elaborate elephant processions to *Thekkinkadu Maidanam*, where the breathtaking rituals and celebrations unfold. The *Kudamattam* (changing of umbrellas) is a particularly iconic moment - an exuberant display of color, coordination, and rhythm, where devotees compete in the dazzling art of swapping ornate, brightly colored parasols atop elephants.



Kudamattam (Ceremonial display of colored parasols)

What makes Thrissur Pooram extraordinary is its inclusive nature. Devotion transcends caste, creed, and social status as millions of people gather to partake in this grand ritual, whether as active participants or spectators. The *melam* - a powerful and intricate percussion ensemble performed by over 200 musicians - is not just music, but an embodiment of spiritual ecstasy. Instruments like the *chenda*, *maddalam*, and *kombu* come together in an electrifying rhythm that mirrors the collective heartbeat of the crowd, infusing the air with devotion and energy.



Elanjithara melam
(The grand percussion held under Elanji)

The *Elanjithara Melam*, performed in the courtyard beneath an ancient *Elanji* tree, is among the most famous of these rhythmic performances, held in reverence as one of the most intricate and thrilling percussion ensembles in India.

As night falls, the *Vedikkettu* (fireworks display) takes center stage. A breathtaking, almost cathartic spectacle, it lights up the skies above Thrissur with blazing streaks of color, marking the grand finale of the Pooram festivities. The beauty and intensity of this display serve not only as a visual treat but as a symbolic ascent of prayers and devotion to the heavens.



Vedikkettu (fire works)



Ceremonial umbrellas from the *Chamayam* exhibition

Cultural Meaning

Thrissur Pooram is a cultural showcase of Kerala's collective identity. From the artisans who craft the intricate *Nettipattam* (golden caparisons), *Aalavattom*, and *Venchamaram* (decorative fans), to the musicians who uphold oral traditions and the volunteers who coordinate logistics, the festival is a living expression of community, creativity, and devotion. It is a time when the entire city becomes a living gallery of spiritual and artistic brilliance, as every element of Pooram from the elephants' regal march to the colorful umbrellas speaks of centuries of craftsmanship, cultural continuity, and

The Pooram *Chamayam* Exhibition, held before the festival, showcases the dazzling craftsmanship involved in the creation of the parasols, ornaments, and elephant decorations, giving visitors a chance to marvel at the skill and artistry that goes into making the festival possible. The festival is also an economic engine, supporting local artisans, weavers, food vendors, and tourism, drawing hundreds of thousands of visitors from all over the world.

One of the most poignant symbols of the festival is the arrival of the goddess Neythilakkavilamma from the nearby Neythilakavu Temple, who performs the sacred act of opening the southern gate of the Vadakkunnathan Temple. This moment is deeply symbolic, representing the welcoming of all devotees regardless of background into the divine fold. The gate, usually closed, opens to usher in a festival that transcends the material and the spiritual, embracing all with its light and joy.

The elephants themselves are more than just majestic creatures they are living symbols of devotion, often considered



Visitors at the exhibition

the carriers of divine grace. The elephants' participation is both sacred and symbolic, embodying the majesty of the gods themselves. Each elephant is carefully tended to, with special medical attention provided to ensure their well-being throughout the festival. Their presence is a reminder of the ecological and spiritual harmony that characterizes Kerala's ancient traditions.

Thrissur Pooram is not just an event; it is a continuum of cultural expression, passed down through generations. Its rituals, performances, and communal participation have helped shape the cultural identity of Kerala. In the

heart of Kerala, where spirituality and tradition intersect with exuberance and celebration, stands Thrissur Pooram - the festival of festivals. Widely regarded as one of the grandest and most colorful temple festivals in India, Thrissur Pooram represents a rich blend of devotion, art, community spirit, and cultural heritage. Its roots run deep in the soil of Kerala, drawing from centuries of tradition, royal patronage, and the unbroken thread of local participation. This annual occasion has also become a significant itinerary within the circuits of international cultural tourism, drawing numerous foreign visitors who are fascinated by the grandeur of Thrissur Pooram.



Neythilakkavilamma opens the southern gopuram of Vadakkunnatha temple

3. How it is performed/practiced (Step by Step description)

Thrissur Pooram is a grand festival that unfolds over seven days, with rituals, processions, and celebrations building up to the grand climax. The festival is a living testimony to Kerala's deep spiritual and cultural heritage. Below is a detailed step-by-step look at how Thrissur Pooram is performed and celebrated.

Festival-Preparations

1. Kodiyettam (Flag Hoisting)

The festival kicks off with the *Kodiyettam* or ceremonial flag hoisting, which marks the official beginning of the Pooram festival. The temple authorities hoist a flag at each participating temple, announcing their participation in the Pooram celebrations. The first *Kodiyettam* is an important signal to devotees that the festival is approaching.

Both key contributors of this festival; Paramakkavu Bhagavathy Temple and

Thiruvambadi Sri Krishna Temple hosts elephant procession (*Ezhunnallathu*) with Percussions (*Melam*) on this occasion.

2. Pre-Pooram Preparations

The preparations for Thrissur Pooram highlight the intersection of ritual, architecture, and urban aesthetics, where temple facades are adorned with intricate embellishments, *pandals* serve as temporary yet elaborate extensions of sacred space, and decorative practices spill into the city, symbolically uniting the sacred and the civic in a shared cultural celebration.

Preparations of Jewellery, Procession, and *Kudamattom*: The splendour of Thrissur Pooram is inseparable from the painstaking craftsmanship of traditional artisans, who prepare the magnificent regalia that adorns the festival elephants. The *Nettipattam* (golden caparison), *Kolam* (ornamental forehead plates), bells, and other ritual jewellery are meticulously handcrafted by hereditary goldsmiths and metalworkers, ensuring continuity of aesthetic and symbolic traditions.

Parallely, artisans specializing in textile, woodwork, and painting contribute to the making of vibrant umbrellas used in the *Kudamattom* - the dramatic and competitive exchange of multicoloured parasols atop elephants during the procession.



Kodi (the ceremonial flag)

These collaborative craft traditions not only enhance the visual spectacle of the Pooram but also embody the interdependence of ritual practice, artisanal knowledge, and cultural performance.



Umbrella making



Umbrellas



Umbrella making workshop

Day-by-Day Rituals Leading to the Main Pooram Day

Day 1

The Pooram festivities commence with the ceremonial flag hoisting (*Kodiyettam*), marking the formal beginning of the celebration. This is followed by the *Ezhunnallathu* (ritual procession) accompanied by the resonant rhythms of *Pandi Melam*, situating music at the heart of the temple's performative space.

The temple hosts a sequence of rituals extending from morning, culminating in the *Aaraattu* (ritual bath of the deity) at the sacred pond (*Teerthakulam*). Then, *Navakam*, *Nivedya*, *Athazha Puja* (ritual meal offering), and *Sreebhutabali* (offering to attendant deities and spirits), reinforcing the integration of ritual devotion, spectacle, and community participation. The evening is further marked by displays of fireworks.

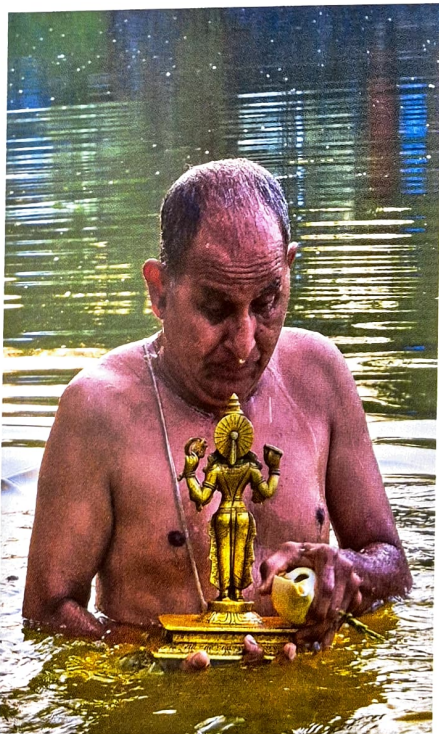


Kodi (the ceremonial flag)

Day 2 - 7 (Daily Rituals)

In the early morning, all participating Bhagavathy temples the *Aaraattu* (ritual bath of the deity) is performed in the temple's *Teerthakulam* (sacred pond), symbolizing purification and renewal. This is followed by a series of ritual observances, including *Navakam*, *Nivedyam*, *Uchapooja*, and *Sreebhutabali* (offerings to attendant deities and guardian spirits).

Subsequently, the presiding Bhagavathy embarks on the ritual procession known as *Parayeduppu*. Each day the goddess or god steps down from the sanctum, receives the *Aaraattu* the ritual purification bath and sets out atop elephant, to meet the people. This sacred journey through the streets is not merely a procession.



Aaraattu (ritual bath of the deity)

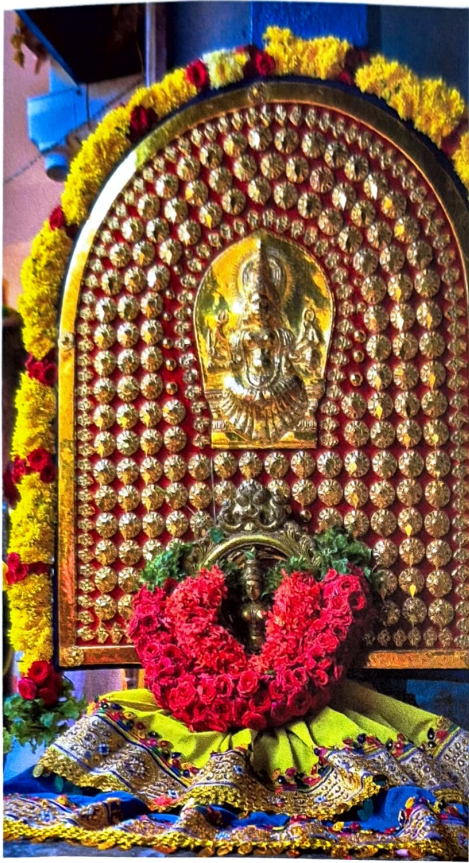
It is a dialogue of blessings where gods greet their devotees at their homes, their doorways, their hearts. By evening, the deity returns to the sanctum, completing the cyclical movement of divine presence between the sacred interior and the lay community.



In these days leading up to the Pooram, several *melam* (percussions) are performed at various temples, gradually increasing the tempo and energy in preparation for the main event.



Rituals related to Aaraattu



Thidambu (Idol)



Bhagavathi (goddess) heading on elephant

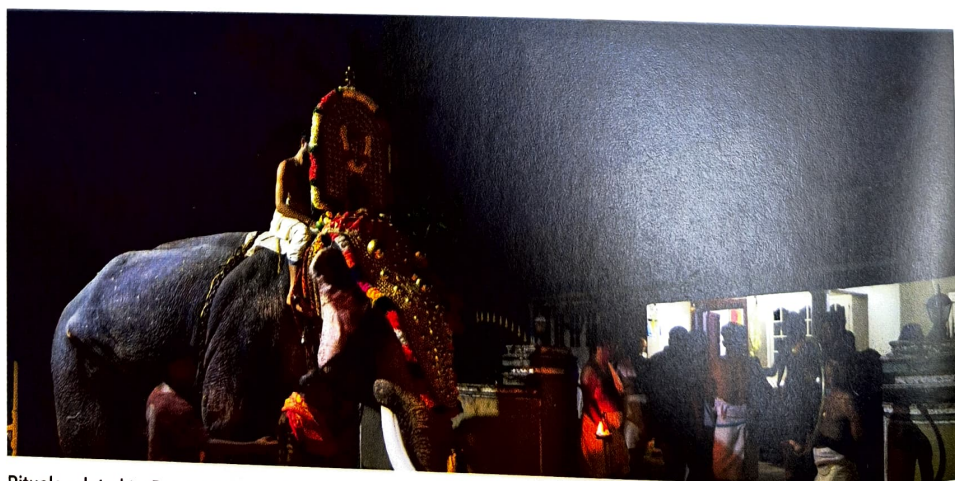
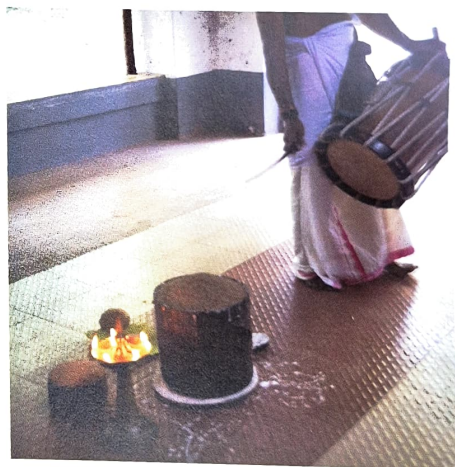


On the way to Parayeduppu (Ritual Procession)

Parayeduppu is a central ritual practice associated with Thrissur Pooram and several other temple festivals in Kerala, in which the presiding deity, often in the form of Bhagavathy, undertakes a sacred journey beyond the temple walls. In this ritual, the deity is carried in procession, typically atop a caparisoned elephant, accompanied by music and ritual paraphernalia, to visit the homes of devotees within the temple's territorial domain. Symbolically, *Parayeduppu* embodies the deity's movement from the sanctum into the lived spaces of the community. At each household, devotees receive the divine presence at their doorways, presenting offerings of

rice, coconut, flowers, and monetary gifts, which are collectively termed *para* (measure of grain). The act of "receiving the deity" is understood not merely as a social exchange but as a spiritual moment in which the divine presence blesses the thresholds of homes and the hearts of the devotees. In return, the offerings signify devotion, gratitude, and the reaffirmation of the devotee's bond with the temple.

In these days leading up to the Pooram, several *melam* (percussions) are performed at various temples, gradually increasing the tempo and energy in preparation for the main event.



Rituals related to *Parayeduppu* on the doorstep of a devotee



Devotees offering at their doorways



Parayeduppu (offering)

Day 5 (Special Event)

Aanachamayam Exhibition:

On the fifth day of the Pooram observances, both the Thiruvambady *Devaswom* and Paramekkavu *Devaswom* start the *Aanachamayam* (elephant ornamentation) exhibition. Inauguration of these grandeur event happens this day morning. This event showcases the full array of ritual regalia-including the *Nettipattam* (golden caparison), *Aalavattom* (ornamental fans of peacock feathers), *Venchamaram* (yak-tail fans), decorative bells, and umbrellas, that are later employed in the festival processions. More than a visual spectacle, the *Aanachamayam* serves as a performative prelude to the Pooram, foregrounding the artisanal craftsmanship, ritual symbolism, and aesthetic grandeur that converge in the celebration.

On the same day, sample *vedikkettu* (fire works) happens from 7 pm to 9 pm by Thiruvambadi and Paramekkavu *Devaswom* groups.



Aanachamayam exhibition



Bell, Umbrellas, from Aanachamayam exhibition

Day 6 (Special Ritual)

Arrival of Neythiakkavilamma

Before the Main Pooram:

Prior to the commencement of the central festivities, the goddess Neythiakkavilamma from the Neythiakkavu Temple arrives at the Vadakkumathan Temple, ceremonially enthroned upon a caparisoned elephant

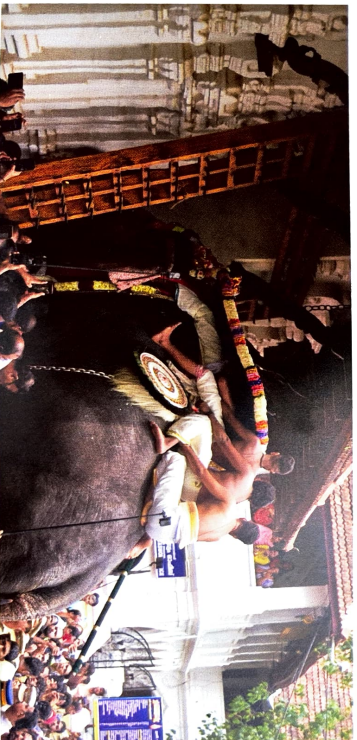


Neythiakkavilamma deity



On procession

the formal opening of the southern *gopuram* (gateway) of the Vadakkumathan Temple. This act is deeply symbolic, as it marks the ritual inauguration of the Pooram celebrations and signifies the welcoming of all participating deities, devotees, and associated traditions into the temple grounds, thereby transforming the space into a shared sacred arena.



ready to open the southern gopuram at Vadakkumatha temple

Day 7 - Main Pooram Day (Day of the Grand Procession)

The main participants of the festival are the Thiruvambadi Sri Krishna Temple and Paramekkavu Bhagavathy Temple, which are the central focus of the Pooram. These temples lead the procession with their respective elephants (total around 100 elephants), decorated with gold caparisons and carrying the temple deities.

The seventh day of Thrissur Pooram commences with the *Niyama Vedi* (canonical firing), a ritual signal that initiates the day's proceedings. This is followed by a sequence of temple rituals including *Abhishekam* (ritual bathing of the deity), *Malarnivedya* (floral offering), *Aaraattu* (ceremonial bath at the sacred pond), *Navakam* (recitation of hymns), *Nivedya* (food offering), *Uchapuja* (midday worship), and *Sreebhutabali* (offerings to attendant deities and guardian spirits). The ritual cycle culminates with *Nadakkal Para* offerings presented before the sanctum in the principal temples.



Chenda (Temple percussion instrument)

One of the most significant highlights of the day is the historic *Elanjithara Melam*, performed under the leadership of master percussion artists, and in which nearly 300 artists participate. This monumental percussion ensemble, a hallmark of Kerala's temple performance traditions, concludes at approximately 4:30 p.m., after which the temple procession advances with



Elanjithara Melam (The grand percussion held under Elanji)

accompaniment of *Tripura Melam*. Upon reaching the southern gateway (*Thekke Gopuram*), the *Tripura Melam* transitions into the *Pandi Melam*, leading the procession southward through the *Thekkegopuram* and eventually culminating at Vadakkunnathan (Swaraj Round). Subsequently, the procession moves with *Tripura Melam* to the statue of the Maharaja of Cochin at Corporation Office Road, after which the performance concludes. The musical sequence then shifts to *Kombu*, *Pattu*, and *Kuzhalpattu*, before returning with *Pancharimelam* along the *Pradaksina* (circumambulatory) path. The evening reaches its climax in the *Devasangamam*, the ritualized divine audience between the presiding deities, particularly the meeting with Sri Thiruvambadi Bhagavathy.



Melam (Percussion)

At 5:30 p.m., the divine *darbar*; ceremonial *Kudamattom* (competitive and spectacular exchange of decorated parasols) unfolds, accompanied by *Pancharimelam* in its third to fifth *kaalam*. Following this, accompanied by seven caparisoned elephants, the deity ascends through the southern circumambulatory route to the temple, where *Nadaswaram*



Thrissur Pooram Spectacle

ensembles lead the ritual procession into the evening *Deepaaraadhana* (worship with lamps) at 7:00 p.m.

The nocturnal observances begin at 11:30 p.m. with *Ezhunnallathu*, in which the deity, mounted on seven elephants, proceeds in ritual procession. This is accompanied by *Panchavadyam* and *Nadaswaram* performances led by master artists along the eastern circumambulatory path, culminating at the *Manikandan* (sacred peepul tree) *pandal* by 2:30 a.m.



In the *Brahma Muhurta* (auspicious early hours) at 3:00 a.m., the deity is stationed at the *Manikandan* peepul tree *pandal*, where the ritual space is prepared for the *Pradhanavedikkettu* (main fireworks). Lasting until 5:30 a.m., this pyrotechnic display represents one of the most spectacular highlights of the Pooram. Traditionally, the Tiruvambadi *Devaswom* commences the sequence of fireworks, setting the stage for the competitive grandeur that follows.



Day 8 (Concluding of the Festival)

The *Pagalpooram* (day Pooram) commences in the morning with the *Ezhunnallippu* (ritual procession) of caparisoned elephants. The procession unfolds with *Kombupattu*, *Kuzhalpattu*, and *Chempata*, followed by the *Pandi Melam* in which nearly 300 percussionists participate, underscoring the grandeur of Kerala's collective ritual music traditions. The *Kudamattom* (ceremonial exchange of ornate umbrellas) and accompanying *Melam* conclude by 11:30 a.m., after which the goddess is stationed on the *Nilapaadu Thara* (ritual standing platform).

The midday sequence continues with ritual fireworks, followed by *Kombupattu*, *Kuzhalpattu*, and *Panchari Melam*, leading to the formal recitation of *Upacharam* (ritual offerings of service and homage) for Thiruvambadi Bhagavathy at *Srimoolasthanam*. This is followed by the day's principal fireworks, which enhance the festive atmosphere and mark the symbolic culmination of the deity's public presence. The villagers ceremonially

escort the goddess back to the temple, accompanied by ritual *Aarppuvili* (ecstatic cries of devotion). The day's observances are further marked by the distribution of *Poora Kanji* (ritual gruel) to devotees between 10:30 a.m. and 2:30 p.m., embodying the ethos of communal participation and ritual hospitality.



The Living Tradition

Thrissur Pooram is a celebration that blends deep religious devotion with artistic expression, unity, and community spirit. Each step in the festival from the flag hoisting to the elephant parades and the *Kudamattam* umbrella exchanges; is a testament to the rich cultural heritage of Kerala. More than just a festival, it is a collective experience where faith, art, and community converge in one grand, timeless celebration.

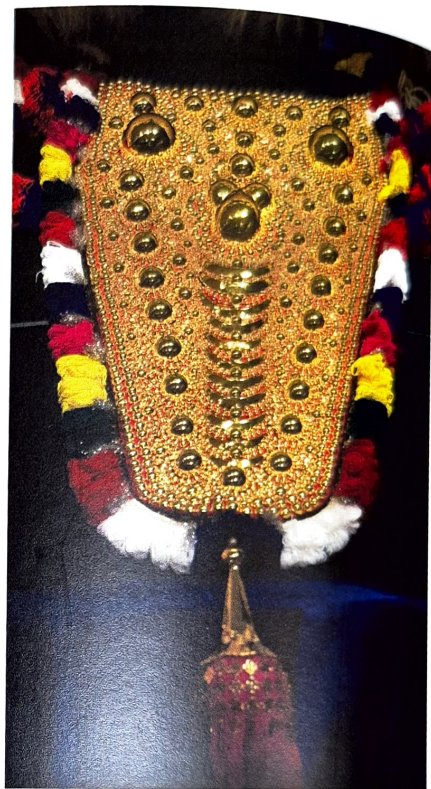
Associated Objects and Spaces:

Thrissur Pooram is distinguished by an ensemble of ritual objects, costumes, instruments, and performative spaces that collectively construct its visual and sonic grandeur. The most iconic objects are the ritual ornaments (*Aanachamayam*) used for adorning elephants, *Nettipattam* (golden caparison), *Aalavattom* (ornamental fans of peacock feathers), *Venchamaram* (yak-tail whisks), decorative bells, and silk parasols, all of which are handcrafted



Bells

by hereditary artisans and displayed in the celebrated *Aanachamayam* exhibition. Costumes associated with temple personnel, percussionists, and ritual specialists reinforce the ritual decorum, while musical instruments such as the *chenda*, *maddalam*, *kombu*, *elathalam*, *nadaswaram*, and *kuzhal* constitute the core of Kerala's traditional orchestral ensembles (*Panchavadyam*, *Melam*).



Nettipattam (Golden caparison)

Equally significant are the ritual and performative spaces in which these objects are activated. The *Thekkinkaadu Maidanam*, encircling the Vadakkunnathan Temple, functions as the principal site where multiple processions converge, while spaces such as the *Nilapaadu Thara* (ritual standing platform), *Teerthakulam* (sacred pond), *Manikandal* (peepul tree *pandal*), and the *Srimoolasthanam* provide specific ritual contexts. Gateways (*gopuram*) notably the southern and western entrances become symbolic thresholds through which deities and processions move, transforming the

temple complex and the city into an interconnected sacred landscape. Together, these objects and spaces embody the material, performative, and symbolic dimensions of Thrissur Pooram, situating the festival at the intersection of devotion, artistry, and civic culture.



Chenda (Temple percussion instrument)



Kuda (Umbrella)



Grandeur of Thrissur Pooram

4. Community Involvement

Practitioner(s)/Bearer(s):

Thrissur Pooram is sustained through the active participation of a wide range of practitioners and bearers, each contributing to the ritual, performative, and organizational dimensions of the festival. At its core are the *Devaswoms* (temple management bodies), particularly Paramakkavu and Thiruvambadi, who serve as the principal custodians of the event.

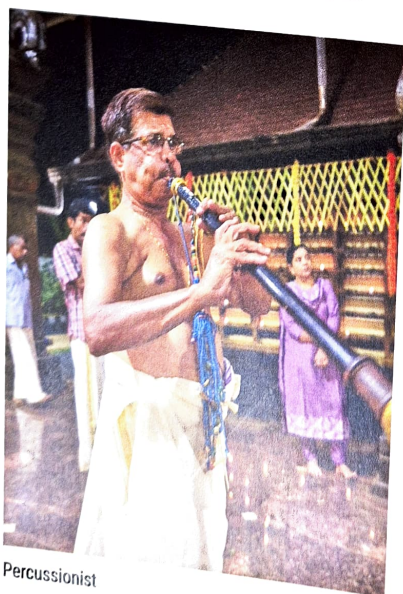
and temple functionaries undertake the liturgical responsibilities, ensuring the continuity of ritual sequences in accordance with established traditions.

Equally significant are the hereditary artisan communities, goldsmiths, metalworkers, umbrella makers, carpenters, and textile artisans, who prepare the ornaments (*Aanachamayam*), decorative parasols for *Kudamattom*, and other ritual accessories. Musical lineages of percussionists and wind-instrument players, such as the Marar



Craftsman

communities (at present this community is not cast based), perform the *Melam*, *Panchavadyam*, *Kuzhalpattu*, and *Naagaswaram* that define the sonic identity of the Pooram. Elephant owners and mahouts also play a central role as custodians of the elephants, who are indispensable to the processions.



Percussionist

Beyond ritual specialists, the wider public, devotees, local residents, volunteers, and civic authorities, contribute to the festival's execution. Over a million visitors come for this annual massive festival. They engage in organizing processions, funding temple activities, offering *Pooram Kanji* (ritual food), and ensuring security, hospitality, and crowd management. In this way, Thrissur Pooram is not the preserve of a single group but a collective performance of faith, artistry, and civic culture, embodying the interdependence of ritual communities and the broader public sphere.

Community Role – Transmission and Preservation:

The vitality of Thrissur Pooram is ensured through the continuous involvement of multiple community groups, who collectively safeguard and transmit its traditions across generations. Ritual specialists and temple priests preserve liturgical knowledge through oral instruction, apprenticeship, and daily practice within the temple structure. Artisan families-goldsmiths, umbrella makers, carpenters, and textile workers-maintain hereditary craft traditions, transmitting the specialized skills required for preparing the *Aanachamayam* regalia, umbrellas, and ritual ornaments through intergenerational apprenticeship.

Musical traditions, particularly *Melam* and *Panchavadyam*, are sustained by hereditary percussionists and wind-instrument players, who undergo rigorous training under master performers. Lineages such as the Marar and allied communities preserve these performance practices not only through formal instruction but also by integrating younger generations into festival ensembles, ensuring continuity through practice-based transmission.



Umbrella maker



Elephant on rest

Elephant caretaking and training are likewise preserved by mahout communities, who pass on their expertise in animal handling and ritual processions. Over one hundred elephants brought from temples and private owners across Kerala. These are not just animals; they are ritual carriers, divine companions, and living embodiments of tradition. But with such splendour comes great responsibility. Behind every adorned elephant is a mahout, the *Paappan*, a guardian, a companion, a trainer. To ensure the well-being of these gentle giants; the Pooram authorities in collaboration with the Forest Department, Veterinary experts, and Animal Welfare groups establish dedicated medical camps before and during the festival. Every elephant is thoroughly inspected for health, temperament, and fitness to participate. A dedicated elephant care team is also in place to manage the health and safety of the elephants. Special food is prepared, and rest zones are marked across the city to reduce stress and heat exposure .

Every year, the Government of Kerala, Thrissur District Administration, Police, Fire and Rescue, and Health Departments join hands with temple committees and volunteers. Together, they orchestrate the movement of millions of people, hundreds of elephants, ensure safety, sanitation, and civic harmony turning the city into a stage where devotion, discipline, and democracy perform together.

Equally significant is the role of devotees, local residents, and civic organizations, who support the festival through voluntary service, fundraising, and community-based organizing. Thus, the preservation of Thrissur Pooram is not confined to ritual authorities alone but is enacted through a broad social network, ensuring its resilience as a living heritage.



Forces on duty - elephants safety measures

5. Viability & Threats

Current Status:

Thrissur Pooram remains an active and vibrant living tradition, celebrated annually with uninterrupted continuity since its institution in the late 18th century under Sakthan Thampuran, the ruler of Cochin. Far from being endangered or in need of revival, the festival has expanded in scale, with increasing participation from temple institutions, artisan groups, musicians, civic bodies, and the wider public. While contemporary concerns such as crowd management, animal welfare,



The Pooram Crowd

and environmental impact (particularly regarding fireworks) are debated, these issues have not diminished the vitality of the celebration. Instead, they have led to adaptive measures and innovations, demonstrating the community's commitment to preserving the festival as a dynamic form of intangible cultural heritage.

Threats and Challenges:

Although Thrissur Pooram continues to thrive as a living and active cultural tradition, it faces several contemporary challenges that have implications for its

long-term sustainability. Globalization and commercialization exert pressure on the festival's ritual and aesthetic integrity, with mass tourism and media spectacle at times overshadowing its devotional and community-centered dimensions. Transmission of knowledge is another concern, as artisanal skills associated with *Aanachamayam* (elephant regalia), umbrella-making for *Kudamattom*, and hereditary musical traditions such as *Melam* and *Panchavadyam* depend on intergenerational apprenticeship, which is increasingly threatened by shifts in livelihood patterns and younger generations seeking alternative professions.

Resource and funding issues also affect the continuity of the festival. The maintenance of elephants, preparation of ornaments, and organization of large-scale fireworks require substantial financial investment, often leaving temple committees reliant on sponsorships and public donations, which can fluctuate. Animal welfare concerns, particularly related to the care and procession of elephants, have attracted scrutiny from rights organizations, creating tensions between ritual continuity and modern ethical frameworks.



Police Force

Environmental challenges, such as pollution caused by fireworks and strain on urban infrastructure due to massive crowds, also pose regulatory and ecological pressures.

Despite these challenges, the resilience of the participating temples, artisans, and the local community has thus far ensured the preservation and adaptation of Thrissur Pooram. However, proactive safeguarding strategies remain essential to balance tradition with contemporary realities.

Safeguarding Measures:

Several existing and proposed measures contribute to the safeguarding of Thrissur Pooram as a dynamic form of living heritage. Documentation and archival practices, including audio-visual recordings of *Melam*, *Panchavadyam*, *Kudamattom*, and ritual processions, are undertaken by temple authorities, cultural institutions, and independent researchers, thereby preserving both the tangible and intangible dimensions of the festival for future generations.

Workshops and training programs led by senior percussionists, wind-instrument masters, and artisan communities support the intergenerational transmission of specialized skills, ensuring continuity in the performance of *Melam*, *Panchavadyam*, and the craft of *Aanachamayam*.

Temple committees and *Devaswoms* have initiated awareness programs within local schools and cultural academies, encouraging younger generations to engage with ritual arts, music, and craft traditions. In recent years, government and civic bodies have extended financial and logistical support for crowd management, elephant welfare, and environmental safeguards, including regulated fireworks and safety protocols. Such initiatives, when combined with continued community participation, provide a sustainable framework for safeguarding Thrissur Pooram as both a devotional practice and a heritage of shared civic identity.

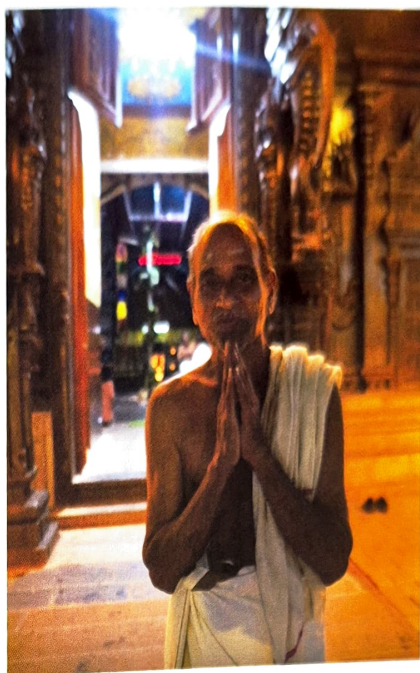


Elephant without *Chamayam* - just after the Pooram

6. Conclusion

Thrissur Pooram is not a mere festival. It is a living heritage; a continuum of cultural expressions passed down through generations. The visual arts, performative traditions, oral knowledge, ritual practices, and social cohesion embedded in this festival make it a unique intangible cultural heritage.

Even as the world changes, Thrissur Pooram remains a beacon, reminding us of the power of collective memory, artistic unity, and spiritual joy. Let this festival of festivals shine beyond borders as a global symbol of intangible cultural heritage, preserved with pride, celebrated with passion.



Devotee



Thrissur Pooram Spectacle