

## Literariness Journal

A Peer-Reviewed Quarterly  
Journal of Literature and Cultural  
Studies

P-ISSN: 3108-1614  
E-ISSN: 3108-172X

LiterarinessJournal.org

Vol. 1, Issue. 2  
March 2026

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**Citation:** Venkitesh, Haritha H., and Soumya Murukesh. "When the Goddess Menstruates: Exception versus Exclusion in the *Thrippooth* Festival of Chengannur Mahadeva Temple." *Literariness Journal*, vol. 1, no. 2, Mar. 2026, pp. 743–758.



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## When the Goddess Menstruates: Exception versus Exclusion in the *Thrippooth* Festival of Chengannur Mahadeva Temple

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**Abstract:** Chengannur Mahadeva Temple and the menstrual festival of *Thrippooth* hold a significant place in the discussion of menstruation. *Thrippooth* is a three-day celebration of the menstruation of the Goddess, Parvathy. Unlike the Kamakhya temple in Assam, which is a tantric centre where the *Ambubachi mela* (or annual menstruation festival) is observed, the worship system at the Chengannur temple blends Brahminic, Tantric, and Buddhist styles, making *Thrippooth* more theologically unique and sociologically complex. The Vedic tradition in Hinduism identifies *rajasraava* or body fluids as a contaminant, while the Shakta Tantric denomination treats menstruation and female genitalia with divine significance.

Centring on Chengannur Bhagavathy's *Thrippooth* celebration, the study frames this ritual tradition as a cultural performance in which the Goddess is relocated to a separate place during menstruation. Studying this spatial shift during the performance (of the *thrippooth*), the study attempts to enquire whether this relocation of ritual space is an exception (an exception in the recognition of bodily needs during menstruation) or an exclusion (a denial of access, as she was deemed unfit for public visibility during menstruation). Primary data are collected through ethnographic methods, including field visits, participant observation, and interviews. The apparently contradictory theoretical positions of Foucault's Heterotopia and Julia Kristeva's Theory of Abjection will be used in the study. Therefore, synthesising the ethnographic data and theoretical focal points, the study asks: Is the ritualised relocation of the Goddess during the *Thrippooth* festival an 'exception' in recognition of the biological reality of menstruation, or is it a form of spatial 'exclusion' that reinforces the association of impurity with menstruating bodies?

**Keywords:** *Thrippooth*, Menstrual Rituals, Heterotopia, Abjection, Sacred Spatiality

## 1.1 Introduction

Chengannur Mahadeva Temple is among the 108 Mahadeva temples commissioned by Parasuram, with Lord Shiva as the chief deity. Even though the chief deity of the temple is Lord Shiva, Goddess Parvathy (Bagavathi) is present facing the West, with equal importance. Located on the western bank of the River Pamba in Chengannur in the district of Alappuzha, the temple is famous for the celebration of the menstruation of the Bhagavathy known as the *Thrippooth Mahotsavam*. It is a festival observed upon seeing the period stain on the Bhagavathy's clothes. According to accounts from some elderly worshippers, *thrippooth* occurred more frequently in the past than it does now.

The ritual begins with identifying the stain on Bagavathi's white *ena-neriyath* (undergarment), which is draped in a way worn by brahmin housewives or *antherjanam*. Every morning, when the *Melshanthi* (chief priest), while clearing the *nirmalayam*, keeps out Bagavathi's *udayada* for the temple staff (belonging to the varrier community) to check for stains. If any stain is found, the fabric is forwarded to the Thazamon madam (or convent) for confirmation by the elderly female members or *antherjanam*. Once it is confirmed as a period stain, the west *Srikovil* of Bhagavathy will be shut for the next three days. The energy of the Goddess is then consecrated into the *sheeveli bimbam* (idol) and is relocated to the specially decorated room in the north-west direction called *thrippooth-thara* (which will be otherwise closed). The daily pujas and worship will be offered here, along with special offerings like *Haridra Pushpanjali*, *Thiruvathira Kali*, and *Pittu-mukkara Nedhyam*. One or two women will be assigned as *thozhi* throughout the three days to offer company to the menstruating Bagavathi. On the fourth day, the *sheeveli bimbam* of the Bagavathi is taken out for the ritual bath at the Mitrakadavu, the nearest bank of the river Pamba. This ceremonial bath is called *thrippooth aarattu*. After the *aarattu*, Bagavathi returns to the temple on the back of a female elephant, accompanied by women with *thalappoli*. By this time, Lord Mahadeva comes out on a male elephant to welcome his wife after three days of separation. They together circumscribe (*pradakshinam*) the temple three times and offer *darshanam* to the devotees together. This *Ezhunnallath* is followed by the *parayedupp*, after which deities return to their respective *sri-kovil*, marking the end of the *thrippooth mahotsavam*.

Centring on Bhagavathy's *thrippooth* celebration and the subsequent relocations, the paper examines this spatial shift and enquires into the nature of the relocation practised during the ceremony. This spatial shift could be understood either as an exception, in recognition of bodily needs during menstruation, or as an exclusion from public visibility, as she will be deemed to deny access to her basic needs. Thus, this paper is an attempt to answer whether *thrippooth* really acknowledges and celebrates the biological reality of menstruation, or is it a mere patriarchal weapon to restrict women

from visibility. This ethnographic study identifies the *thrippooth-thara* as a Negotiated Sacred Anomaly, which is simultaneously an exceptive crisis heterotopia and an exclusive abject enclosure.

## 1.2 Methodology

The study employs a qualitative ethnographic research methodology to investigate the characteristic features of the new and old spatial configuration. To capture the nuanced version of the living tradition of *thrippooth*, a combination of methodologies including field visits, participant observation and interviews.

To elaborate, *Thrippooth* is a unique ritual associated with the divine menstruation. The field visits were conducted multiple times. The first visit to the Chengannur temple was on 26th October, 2023. It was the day of *Thrippooth-aarattu*. This provides a firsthand experience of the *thrippooth-aarattu* (ceremonial bath) at Mitrakadavu, the Eastern bank of the River Pamba, the thalappoli, and the subsequent welcoming of the Devi by Lord Shiva. The second visit to the temple was on 20th December 2025, it was a regular Saturday, with normal rush. These visits, the time interval, and the difference in occasion allowed for a comparative analysis of two scenarios in the same space. Further, as a participant-observer, I documented the spatial configuration on a normal day and on the day of *Thrippooth-aarattu*. Additionally, to have an in-depth understanding, two interviews were conducted. One was with a local believer, which was more of a casual conversation through which a basic blueprint for the ritual and its setting was obtained. The notable interview was with the present *Melshanthi* (chief priest) of the temple. It was a semi-structured interview conducted in Malayalam. It is then translated into English by the researcher herself. The interviews conducted and photographs captured were with prior consent. Informed consent from the respondent was obtained, and information about the voice recording of the interview for further study was provided prior to the interview. Further, the primary data collected is stored on two devices: one on a disc and the other in cloud storage.

## 1.3 Theological Understanding of Impurity, Austerity

The Early Vedic corpus approaches menstruation from the logic of purity. The *Yajurveda Taittiriya Samhita* and the *Shatapatha Brahmana* were two prominent texts that supported this association of *asaucha* with menstruation. In the text *The Sabarimala Confusion: Menstruation Across Cultures*, Nithin Sridhar quotes Arthur Berriedale Keith's translation of this Vedic story. It is a story of Indra's karmic guilt over the *Brahmahatya* (killing a Brahmana is considered to be an adharmic act or sin of the highest order) and the division of that guilt. Vishvarupa was a domestic priest of the Devas but was also the son of Tvastri, who created him to avenge the Devas. He had three heads- one which drank the Soma, one which drank the Sura and the other which ate the food. He made a double-deal while sharing the offering- he openly gave to the Devas and secretly promised the Asuras the share. Knowing

this ‘diverting sovereignty’ (29) of Vishvarupa, Indra smote off his heads, “(the head) which drank Soma became a hazelcock; (the head) which drank Sura a sparrow; (the head) which ate food a partridge” (29). The so-born creatures began to call out upon Indra as the Brahman slayer. He carried the guilt for 1 year and wanted to free himself from it. So he approached the Earth, the Trees and a concourse of Women. In exchange for a boon, each one took one-third of Indra’s guilt, which manifested differently. The Earth took the first portion of guilt, which manifested as the natural fissures in the ground. For that, she received the boon that any portion of earth dug out would grow back within a year. The Trees took the second portion, which manifested as red sap or sap from pruning. In return, Trees were given the boon that, through pruning, more shoots would sprout. And the final portion of the guilt was given to women, which manifested as the monthly menstruation. Menstruation, in return, brought them the boon of the ability to produce offspring and the privilege to enjoy sexual intimacy till childbirth. In short, the Vedic scriptures and tradition primarily saw menstruation as a physical manifestation of the *brahmahatya* guilt.

At this juncture, to understand how this guilt translates into impurity, the discussion of *ashaucha* (impurity) in relation to the *Pancha Kosha* is relevant. Originally formulated in the Vedic tradition, but later developed and applied in Ayurveda and Yoga, *Pancha Kosha* is a Vedic/Vedantic map of the human body. It posits that every human body consists of five interlayered sheaths, like the layers that cover one's innermost self, or *atman*. The five *kosha* are: *Annamaya Kosha*, or the physical sheath, *Pranamaya Kosha*, or the vital sheath, *Manomaya Kosha*, or the mental sheath, *Vijnanamaya Kosha*, or the intellectual sheath and *Anandamaya Kosha*, or the spiritual core. As the inner sheaths are relatively stable, only *Annamaya Kosha*, *Pranamaya Kosha* and *Manomaya Kosha* are active in day-to-day transactions. Menstruation, referred to as *Rajasraava*, which literally means the flow of *rajas* (where *rajas* means both menstrual blood and *guna*/passion), therefore, affects these three sheaths of the female body. In *Annamaya Kosha*, the physical evacuation of blood, endometrial tissues and mucus during menstruation is *ashaucha* as any bodily secretion is considered impurity in the Vedic tradition. In the vital sheath or *Pranamaya Kosha*, disturbance of *Pancha-Vayu* or *Pancha-Prana* (the five vital airs) and the excessive flow of *apana vayu* mark the *rajasic* energy flow. This is considered as *ashaucha* in the vital sheath level. Furthermore, in the *Manomaya Kosha*, *rajas* refers to the mood swings and emotional uneasiness experienced by women during menstruation. A mind afflicted with these uneasy emotions and thoughts is considered *ashaucha*. Thus, menstruation is an *ashaucha* that not only affects the physical sheath but also the vital and mental sheaths of the female body.

However, early Vedic, Vedantic, and dharma texts such as the Vashishta Dharma Sutra, Baudhayana Dharmasutra, Parashara Smriti, etc., identify *ashaucha* as a temporary state of impurity that is removed by the bath on the fourth day. From that perspective, menstruation is a period of austerity and self-purification. In contrast to the *ashaucha* concept, menstruation is here understood as

*tapas* (or hardship). According to the early scriptures, *tapas* is the restraint of the body, mind and senses from all material comforts. This detachment is believed to free one from internal impurities and to lead to self-purification. The restrictions imposed on women during menstruation include:

*Yajurveda Taittiriya Samhita* (Verse 2.5.1) indirectly suggests that menstruating women should not comb their hair, anoint their eyes or cut their nails. Further, they must not have conjugal relations with the husband during that period. *Vashishta Dharmasutra* (5.6) goes further and explicitly states that during monthly periods, women should not apply collyrium to their eyes, that they should not anoint their body, that they should sleep on the ground, that they must avoid sleeping during the day, that they must not eat meat, mustn't look at the planets, and must not smile (Sridhar 38).

Upon a close analysis, these restrictions are the curtailment put on the female body from looking beautiful, enjoying the sensual pleasures and possessing the material comforts. Thus, they can be regarded as a form of *tapas*, which affects the physical, vital and mental sheath of a being. Through these austere, detached practices, the women purify themselves and ultimately realise their higher selves. The other-imposed *tapas* during menstruation in the Vedic tradition transforms when understanding the Tantric perspective. In the Vedic system, menstruation enables a realisation through detachment and depassion; in the tantric view, it is empowerment through recognition.

In the Tantric perspective, the ritual impurity or incompetence is never counted; rather, it recognises the 'living goddess' residing in every woman. In Yoni Tantra, Lord Shiva explains to Parvathy the importance of Yoni worship and how *sadakas* should worship it. Nithin Sridhar quotes the reply of Lord Shiva as:

A sadhaka wishing to worship a yoni, which is the form of the cosmos, should cause an erection and insert it into that thing which is Shakti herself. The vagina is Mahamaya and the penis is Sadashiva. Worshipping them, one becomes liberated while still alive, there is no doubt of it. One should offer bali, flowers and so forth. If incapable of this, worship with wine, O Durga. One should do pranayama and my six-limbed puja in the yoni region. After reciting the mantra [a] hundred times at the base of the yoni, one should rub the linga and the yoni together (54-55).

Yoni Tantra also state that the Yoni that has bled is suitable for worship, as worshipping the otherwise could lead to the loss of *siddhi* (or spiritual power). Similarly, early Kaula Tantric texts, such as *Kaulajnananirnaya* by Matsyendranath, the *Matrikabhedha Tantra*, and many others, identify rajas, or the menstrual fluid, as *anusadha* (elixir) for liberation and immortality. According to Matsyendranath's *Kaulajnananirnaya*, quoted by Nithin Sridhar, a brahmin attains salvation through "endless washing of the feet and mouth" (53), while a tantric practitioner achieves *moksha* by making

a forehead tilak with the menstrual blood. In other words, a tantric practitioner, by making a forehead tilak with menstrual blood, moves beyond the conventions of purity and impurity. Through this deliberate, transgressive act, they redefine cleanliness, and they regenerate like a “serpent sloughing its skin” (53).

Furthermore, the performative Tantric tradition identifies menstruation as the period of mahayoga (the Great Yoga), the period of heightened yogic and spiritual potential. The Deha Sadhana practised by the Bauls of Bengal and the sexual-spiritual practice of Raja-Yoga prescribed in *Yoga Shiksha* align with this core notion. In Deha Sadhana, the sexual energy is transformed into the love of the Divine. According to the female principle (female sexual fluid symbolically represented as the fish) and the male principle (*kshir* or semen), they have to commingle through intercourse so as to attain the yogic bliss or the ultimate *anandha*. To them, sexual sadhana during menstruation is of the highest importance. Yoga-Upanisadic texts like Yoga-Shikha Upanishad acknowledge this claim and prescribe that sexual sadhana during menstruation is ‘Raja-Yoga’, which is:

There abides in the great spot in the middle of the Yonis of creatures: rajas (menstrual fluid) resembling the Japa and Bandhuka flowers in colour, well-protected and (representing) the Devi (feminine) principle. By the conjunction of the rajas with the retas (of the male organ), (i.e., of Shakti with Shiva), there is what is known as raja-yoga. From raja-yoga (the Yogin) shines out after attaining the psychic powers of attenuation and the like. (55-56).

In short, according to tantric tradition, menstruation is not a temporary period of uncleanness; rather, it is a period when the female body attains its highest potential.

These two seemingly irreconcilable theoretical perspectives converge at Chengannur Bhagavathy’s *thrippooth* festival. The Vedic observance of *ashaucha* is clearly evident in the ritual of *thrippooth*. When the senior *Antharjanam* from the Thazhmon Madam confirms the stain as the menstrual stain, the western *srikovil* of the Goddess is immediately closed. The Goddess is then relocated to the specially arranged *thrippooth thara*. Various kinds of restrictions related to *ashaucha* can be observed during *thrippooth*. Initially, during the *thrippooth*, the goddess is relocated to a specially decorated room located in the *Vayu Kon* (the north-west). This room, called the *thrippooth-thara*, is located away from the main *srikovil*. Similarly, the western *srikovil* of the Bhagavathy is in direct view of the general public (it is visible even from outside the *naal ambalam*, or inner cloister). Relocating her to the *thrippooth-thara* in the *Vayu Kon* removes her from direct visibility. There is also a restriction on *Melshanthi* and *Keezhshanthi* on entering and doing the *poojas* of *Thrippooth-thara*, as ritual purity is essential, as they are also in charge of the rituals and *poojas* of other deities. Furthermore, when the *sheeveli bimbam* of the Goddess is consecrated in the *thrippooth-thara*, an *ena-*

*thorthu*, instead of the regular *ena-neriyath*, is draped. The aforementioned aspects of *thrippooth* directly align with the notion of *ashuacha* and the observance of *tapas* prescribed in the Vedic system. The Bhagavathy, who is menstruating, is removed from the presence of her husband (Lord Shiva) and from the visibility of the general public, draped in a simple *thorthu*, unlike on other days, suggestive of the austere practices regarding physical, material, and sensual needs found in the Vedic system. Similarly, the ritual bath of the fourth day, which, according to the Vedic system, removes the temporary period of uncleanness or ritual impurity, is also observed as part of *thrippooth*. After the *thrippooth-aarattu*, the grand ceremonial bath at the Mitrakadavu, the Goddess is welcomed by Lord Shiva himself, in the presence of multiple *thalapoli*. After the ceremonial cleansing following menstruation, she enters the Western *srikovil*, where the regular poojas will then be offered.

In stark contrast to Vedic traditions, *thrippooth* has multiple elements that denote the presence of tantrism. The core postulate of Tantrism is the idea of ‘the living goddess’- the female principle in every essence is a ‘living Goddess’. The menstrual stain found in the inner vesture is evidence for the living consciousness (*chaitanya*). Yet another example of the *chaitanya* of the Bhagavathy is evident from the throngs of devotees (mostly affected with diseases related to abnormal periods, infertility, etc.) that flocked to the temple during *thrippooth-aarattu*. While sharing about the origin, history and age-old tradition of the *thrippooth* festival, the *Melshanthi* shared with me an anecdote related to Colonel John Munro and how he realised the living consciousness of this living Goddess:

Even today, there are numerous cases related to irregular periods. Numerous people come here every day. It is not just a single case; it involves people not having their monthly periods or not having them by the age of twenty-five. But once you come here, it changes, and the menstrual flow appears. That is the biggest *adbutam* (miracle); in fact, it really is an *adbutam*.

It is not just about one or two cases which have recently appeared, but even from the time of Munro *Sayippu* (bursts into laughter). Have you heard of his story, by the way? He felt that this ritual of Thrippooth was a waste of money, and he cut down the temple's funding to conduct it. Haven't you seen the Thrippooth Aarattu? It is a really grand festivity. Seeing this, Munro thought it was an unnecessary expense, so he cut many things from the ritual. As he did that, Munro's wife started to bleed. They consulted numerous doctors and visited various places, but her bleeding didn't stop. After that, he came here and performed *samasthaparadam* (seeking total forgiveness), and just like that, her bleeding finally stopped. Instantly, he promised that as long as this temple and ritual remain alive, the expenses of the first Thrippooth of the Malayalam calendar year will be borne by him. He also offered two bangles to the Devi to be worn on these occasions. The recorded name of these bangles is *Pananthandan Vala*, along

with a gold *Odyanam* (waist belt). So, what I meant is that, from that time onwards, this place has had the solution to all such problems (Melshanthi).

Furthermore, there is also a practice whereby the *ena-udayada* in which the stain first appears is sold among the devotees. This act of preserving the stained garment (even though it is *ashaucha*, as per Vedic tradition), underlines the strong Tantric presence in this ritual. In short, *thrippooth* is neither a Vedic seclusion nor a Tantric celebration, but rather it is a living paradox. *Thrippooth* and the spaces associated don't choose one system over the other, but rather create a negotiated space where one breathes life into the other. With the Vedic theoretical concepts of *ashaucha* and *tapas*, and the Tantric spirit of recognising one's physical, emotional and spiritual potential, *thrippooth* is a vibrant yet versatile ritual.

#### 1.4 *Thrippooth-thara* as a Foucauldian Heterotopia

While these theological frameworks provide a map for understanding the vividness, versatility and relevance of the ritual of *thrippooth*, to have a more nuanced understanding of the lived reality of the menstruating body (of Goddess) in various spaces (such as the Western *Srikovil*, *Thrippooth-Thara* and *Mitrakadavu*), a theoretical enquiry is necessitated. Specifically, given the concern about the 'other space' (*Thrippooth-Thara*) opened/created solely during the ritual, Foucault's theory of Heterotopia comes in handy. Foucault, in his essay "Of Other Spaces" (originally a speech delivered at the Architectural Studies Circle in 1967), remarks that Space is the concern of the Era. Beyond the traditional ideas of Space- Utopia, which is an unreal space where society is represented either as perfect or as inverted, there exists a space, "in every civilization, real places, actual places, places that are inscribed within the very institution of society, and which are a kind of counter-sites" (Foucault), which he termed as Heterotopia. To understand the physically locatable spaces that are outside all places, he outlines six core principles as characteristic features. They are:

1. ***Crisis Heterotopia v/s Heterotopia of Deviation***: According to Foucault, heterotopia is universal to every human civilisation. However, it takes various forms in response to the requirements of the time. The Primitive type of heterotopia is reserved for individuals who live in a state of crisis in relation to the society or human environment in which they live. These places are either privileged, sacred, or forbidden. Foucault termed it Crisis Heterotopias, and identified adolescents, women during menstruation, women in childbirth, the elderly, etc., as people in crisis. To him, in modern times, crisis heterotopias are disappearing, and a new category, the Heterotopia of Deviation, has emerged. These places are for individuals who have a deviant behaviour (from the average or required norm). He identifies rest homes, psychiatric clinics, and prisons as examples of Heterotopia of Deviation.

2. ***The Functional Evolution***: According to Foucault, the function of the same heterotopia can change/evolve with the synchrony of the culture in which it is found. He uses the example of a cemetery- during the pre-18th century, the cemeteries were located adjacent to the church in the heart of the city. It featured the hierarchy of burial from common ossuaries to individual tombs to grand mausoleums. During that time, people believed in the resurrection of the body and the immortality of the soul, and little importance was given to physical remains. However, in modern times, Western civilisation inaugurated the idea of ‘cult of the dead’ whereby the physical remains became the only trace of our existence. Therefore, greater attention was given to the body and the cemetery. This is how heterotopia changed as society’s functional uses evolved.
3. ***Juxtaposition***: according to Foucault, Heterotopias have the power to juxtapose several spaces that are inherently incompatible in a single real space. He brings the example of a theatre stage (the rectangular stage where numerous foreign places are presented), a cinema screen (the rectangular room with a two-dimensional screen at the back projecting three spaces) and a garden, which he refers to as the microcosm of the whole world.
4. ***Heterochrony***: Foucault postulates heterotopia is linked with heterochrony, which is “a kind of absolute break with their traditional time” (Foucault). Heterotopia and Heterochrony have a complex relationship: certain heterotopias accumulate time indefinitely (such as museums or libraries), while others transit time (as in holiday villages and fairgrounds).
5. ***The System of Opening and Closing***: Foucault says that accessibility to the heterotopias is not free- it is simultaneously isolated and penetrable. The entry to the heterotopia is either compelled by others or after submission to specific rites and purification. The example is the system in barracks, prisons, etc.
6. ***Illusion v/s Compensation***: Foucault theorises that the function held by heterotopias unfolds between two extremes. They are (i) The Space of Illusion, which exposes the real world (eg, historically brothels) and (ii) the Space of Compensation, which is a real, perfect, meticulously ordered space, a compensation to the chaotic daily life (eg, certain Jesuit colonies).

From the six points forwarded by Foucault, that capture the essence of the concept of Heterotopia, it is obvious that the space created during the *thrippooth*, the *thrippooth-thara*, is a perfect example of heterotopia. It is a counter-site that mirrors and, at times, inverts the regular temple space. Foucault himself lists menstruation as a crisis and menstruating women as the individuals in the state of crisis, whereby women are excluded and secluded to a certain space. In the context of *thrippooth*, the crisis is a sacred crisis, and the *thrippooth-thara* is a privileged, sacred, or forbidden space. For this reason, there seems to be no opposition in calling *Thrippooth-Thara* a Crisis Heterotopia. In the temple, Lord

Shiva is seated facing the main (East) entrance, while Bhagavathy (Goddess Parvathy) faces West at the back of Lord Shiva. From the words of the *melshanthi*, it is obvious that Lord Shiva receives five poojas, while Bhagavathy receives only three *poojas* daily. As the temple is named after Mahadeva, the Bagavathy remains as a secondary deity in the daily hierarchy. However, during the *thrippooth*, the Western *srikovil* and *thrippooth-thara* are radically re-territorialised as the centre of attention, with numerous devotees coming in with multiple concerns which can be solved only by the *chaitanya* of the menstruating Bhagavathy. Similarly, the *thrippooth-thara* in the northwest corner remains as a normal, closed room with little or no attention from devotees. But at once, with the announcement of the *thrippooth*, the room is all decorated to be the abode of Bhagavathy for the next couple of days. In short, the heterotopia, *thrippooth-thara*, is synchronised with the needs of society and culture, of which it is a part. Additionally, *Thrippooth-Thara* simultaneously juxtaposes the binaries of purity and impurity and sacred and profane. This embrace of the traditionally ‘polluting’ biological reality within a sacred temple complex highlights the tantric spirit, and this juxtaposition aligns *thrippooth-thara* more closely with Foucault’s dictums of heterotopia.

The most important aspect of heterotopia in the specific context of the discussion on *thrippooth* is heterochrony. The temple operates on the regular administrative clock, which is either solar- or lunar-influenced. However, with the onset of *thrippooth*, even though there are a few changes in the regular poojas and offerings to deities, the biological/body clock of the bhagavathy is activated. This transition transforms the (temple) space from a ritual space to a seclusion space, but only for the three days. Additionally, Foucault remarks that the accessibility to heterotopia is limited, and the entry to which is either compelled or after a submission to a certain ‘rite of passage’. Likewise, the entry of the Bhagavathy into the *thrippooth-thara* is only after the onset of *thrippooth*. In the conversation with the *Melshanthi*, it was clear that neither *Melshanthi* nor *Keezhshanthi* has the right to enter the *Thrippooth-Thara*; only the *Tantri* or a *koottushanthi* is allowed to enter and perform the poojas within this sacred enclosure. With this nature of heterotopia, the selective permeability makes the Western *srikovil* a temporary heterotopia as well. This is because, after the three days of *thrippooth*, a ceremonial bath, welcomed by Lord Shiva (himself) in the presence of flocks of devotees with *thalappoli*, are required to re-access her Western chamber. This makes Western *Srikovil* a heterotopic space as well.

The *thrippooth-thara* is an example of the Space of Compensation. Unlike the Space of Illusion, the Space of Compensation is meticulously well-ordered, sharply contrasted with the chaotic, mundane everyday. In the real world, menstruation and menstrual seclusion are often sites of shame and stigma, but in the compensatory heterotopic enclosure of *thrippooth-thara*, it is lavishly enjoyed by the menstruating body as well as liberating for the devotees who worship it. When the Goddess is relocated to the heterotopic *thrippooth-thara* for the three days of *thrippooth*, the space (temple) recognises the living consciousness of Bhagavathy as a distinct physiological reality. Unlike the

conventional body, which follows the rules of space, here the space follows the rules of her body and her biological heterochrony. Similarly, in daily lives, the menstrual seclusion and places where women are secluded are the least visited by people. However, during the thrippooth, the number of visitors (devotees) to thrippooth-thara is much greater than to Western or even Eastern srikovils. This might sound contradictory to the privacy of the Bhagavathy. However, the presence of the devotees is not intrusive in nature; rather, they come together with the Bhagavathy to witness this ‘liberatory seclusion’. Hence, the heterotopic *thrippooth-thara* is a space of empowerment through the recognition of the female body and its needs. This recognition leads to a liberation— an internal liberation by subverting the patriarchal system of temple and temple spaces. With this logic, the relocation of the menstruating Bhagavathy to the *thrippooth-thara* is an exception in recognition of her biological reality.

### 1.5 Thrippooth-thara as Kristeva’s Abject Space

Having established menstruation as a crisis that led to the formation of a crisis heterotopia— *Thrippooth-Thara*, there is an additional aspect which needs to be examined at this crossroad. Unlike menstruation being the crisis, if the Bhagavathy’s heterochrony disrupts the ritual order and purity of the temple, then the crisis belongs to the patriarchal system of the temple. This patriarchal system of order fears the disruption of the boundaries and the consequent chaos. To analyse this external ritual crisis posited by the temple (unlike the biological internal crisis of Bhagavathy), Julia Kristeva’s theory of abjection becomes an essential lens.

In her seminal work, *Powers of Horror*, Julia Kristeva explores the psychological and cultural dimensions of abjection and defines the abject as the human psyche’s reaction to that which “disturbs identity, system, order” (Kristeva, 4). The abject emerges not from a lack of cleanliness, but from the collapse of boundaries between the self and the other. In the essay, “From Filth to Defilement”, from the same text, she narrows the larger theoretical framework to two primary polluting objects based on the bodily opening. They are excremental and menstrual matters; both of them are potent to generate abjection, but through different types of boundary collapse and different directions of danger. The former, excrement includes decay, corpses, infection, etc. They act as threats from outside the body; i.e., the fear, in this case, is that of a foreign body attacking and invading the identity from the outside. Contrastingly, menstrual blood acts as a threat from within. The internal danger in this case is when one’s identity is disturbed by one’s own biological and sexual identification. Further, Kristeva points out that the similarity between these two polluting bodies is that they are both related to the mother and to early childhood experiences, where one learns to distinguish between clean and dirty. In explaining the role of the mother as the trustee of mapping one’s own body, she notes that during early childhood, before language acquisition or social law learning, the infant experiences authority through the maternal principle (Maternal Authority). This is because most of our early bodily experiences, like

feeding, toilet training, and the distinction between clean and dirty, are taught by/ learned from the mother. This leads the child to realise that the body has boundaries, some things are shameful and stay inside, and some things need to stay inside. This ‘early body discipline’ creates a primal mapping of the body and a binary logic of inside v/s outside, clean v/s dirty, and proper v/s improper. Kristeva terms it the primitive bodily logic, developed even before language acquisition or symbolic law. The sense of binary also enforces the logic of boundaries; as a result, whenever the boundaries get disturbed, the child considers it a threat/danger to their physical and psychological self. Similarly, menstrual blood, a primary polluting object, disturbs the bodily boundary and creates the impression that the clean and proper body (*le corps propre*) is affected. Additionally, as this threat comes from within one’s own identity, this triggers profound abjection that is both physical and psychological, signaling a return to the ‘leaky’ maternal state that the structured social order seeks to exclude.

Upon a close examination of the nature of a temple as a patriarchal institution, it is obvious that the temple has been performing what Kristeva termed as ‘Early Body Discipline’. Under the Maternal authority, what a child has learned about their body- that it needs to be regulated is emphasised through the ritual seclusion of *thrippooth*. When the Bhagavathy, the icon of purity, begins to bleed, the primal memory of the individuals comes to the fore. In this case, the Maternal Authority of childhood is mirrored in the patriarchal system of the temple. Thus, with the appearance of menstrual flow, Bhagavathy is a leaky body that triggers the abject. The abjection towards the Bhagavathy necessitates a seclusion to a peripheral location- from the Western *srikovil* to the *thrippooth-thara*.

In other words, it is the horror stemming from the abject towards the menstruating body that leads to the spatial relocation. When the *sheeveli bimbam* is relocated to the *thrippooth-thara*, it jettisons the horror of ritual defiling. But at once, when the *bimbam* is relocated from the sacred centre, the illusion of clean and improper is re-established. Furthermore, the danger of the menstruating Bhagavathy sharing the same sacred ritual centre indirectly indicates the presence of an element of abject (i.e., a polluting body) in the room of the sacred. The sacred and abject being the two sides of the same coin (as they are a binary), the presence of a menstruating body inside the *srikovil* disrupts the order of the sacred. Hence, the relocation of the menstruating Bagavathy can be viewed as an exclusion from the centre to the periphery.

### 1.6 Exception or Exclusion

A close examination of another menstrual ritual of the Kamakhya Temple, called the Ambubachi Mela, reveals a striking difference one may observe is the spatial displacement found in the *thrippooth*. When this observation was shared with the *Melshanthi*, while enquiring his viewpoint about the nature of the spatial displacement of the Devi during *thrippooth*, whether it is an exception in the realisation of the

biological reality or an exclusion in the name of impurity within ritual purity, the *Melshanthi* responded:

What happens in the temple is not a resting process. In my observation, there are multiple aspects to it. One is obviously due to the presence and prevalence of a system (that stigmatises and secludes menstruation) in our places. Back then, when all these restrictions and seclusion began, it was necessary... during that time, it was necessary. Another is that the 'charge' of the *moola bimba* (the original idol in the Western *Srikovil*) will be very high. As the Devi approaches the time of *thrippooth*, she enters an extremely powerful mode; her face turns redder and chubby with the energy. If you ask people who regularly visit the temple, they can identify that the Devi is about to get *thrippooth*; for those who come for regular *darshan*, they can easily identify the different yet special *chaithanyam* and *prabhavalayam* (aura) around her. Maybe because the intensity of the aura might not be acceptable to everyone, and could be overwhelming to the public. That might possibly be a reason for her displacement. The thing is, the *moola bimba* is made of *pancha-loha*, and we don't even have a single clue of how this happens, and the stain appears on the *ena-udayada*. Even in this century, with so much scientific development happening around us, there is no logical explanation for this stain appearance. However, one thing is certain: it still happens, and it will happen again. (Melshanthi).

This narrative, as the respondent suggested, has two aspects to ponder on. Firstly, about the special aura developed prior to the *thrippooth* and during the *thrippooth-aarattu*. With a more identifiable redder and chubbier face, and the intense aura, she is 'different' from the other days. This difference can be read along with the Foucauldian Crisis- Crisis here is the state of difference from others, as well as from one's own self, due to the overload of power. In this state of Crisis, a spatial shift is necessary to fully utilise and celebrate the extreme power. So she is exempted from the regular space and relocated to a crisis heterotopia as a liberatory transformation. This perspective points to the spatial relocation to *Thirrupooth-Thara* as an exception in the realisation of Devi's biological needs.

However, the second spect that can be inferred from the *Melshanthi's* narrative is the inability of the 'others' to withstand the overwhelming aura of the Bagavathy during the *thrippooth*. Her aura increases drastically during this time, because of which the order of the temple (as a system) gets disrupted. This disruption is an apparent blurring of the distinction or boundaries. According to Kristeva's Early Body Discipline, any system fears most when the horror of boundary disruption occurs. At this point, the polluting body (i.e., the body that causes the boundaries to collapse; in this case, the Devi) is relocated. This displacement acts as a buffer against the ritual order of the patriarchal temple system being affected. The assumption is that when the Devi is relocated, the temple's order is

reinstated. This perspective points to the spatial relocation to *Thrippooth-Thara* as an act of exclusion from visibility because of the inability of others to perceive her potential.

In short, Chengannur Bagavathy's displacement to the *Thrippooth-Thara* is simultaneously an exception and an exclusion. In the prior case, it was the biological reality of the Devi, while in the latter, it was the psychological inability of the system to accommodate her power that pushed her to the *thrippooth-thara*. When enquired about the devotees' attitude towards the ritual of *thrippooth*, the *Melshanthi* responded that:

For the native of Chengannur, not just women but the entire believer community, the announcement of the *thrippooth* itself is a celebration. It is a celebration of their long-standing belief in the Devi. When we hear the news, "*Devi Thrippoothaayi*" (Devi has started menstruating), it reinforces their emotional attachment to the goddess... the attachment is reinforced, their belief in the Devi is reinforced. There are a few things as well. One is that during this time, Devi is highly powerful, particularly during the *thrippooth-aarattu*. Most of them offer multiple offerings, such as *haridra pushpanjali*, *manjal para*, etc. Generally, the devotees have a positive outlook on the ritual. For instance, if a person is offering swayamvara pushpanjali daily. And if Devi attains *thrippooth* during the course, Devi will be secluded and consequently, the offering of the swayamvara pushpanjali will be interrupted. But no one sees it as an interruption, rather a positive sign from the divine. And more auspicious. Other than that, nobody sees it as Devi is removed or excluded. At the same time, the devotees want the Devi to attain *thrippooth*. So it is like a two-in-one emotion. (Melshanthi).

As the *Melshanthi*'s testimony rightly remarks, the *thrippooth* and associated rituals constitute a "two-in-one emotion" or a Paradox- it is neither completely Vedic nor Tantric; it is not exactly an exception nor an exclusion. When spatial relocation is understood as an exception, it not only realises her biological reality but also the intense power she possessed during the *thrippooth*. Similarly, the exclusion of Devi is not just because she is impure, but because her energy is intolerable to the temple's system. In short, it is neither completely Vedic nor Tantric; it is not exactly an exception nor an exclusion. Chengannur Devi's spatial displacement during the *thrippooth* is nothing but a Negotiated Sacred Anomaly.

### 1.7 Conclusion

The post-structuralist ethnographic research focused on the *Thrippooth* festival of the Chengannur Mahadeva temple. *Thrippooth* refers to a peculiar celebration of the menstruation of the Bhagavathy of the temple. Like menstrual norms commonly followed by women, upon confirmation by the Thazhmon Matham that the stain found on the *ena-udayada* of the Bhagavathy is menstrual blood, the

Bhagavathy is believed to be menstruating. The Western *Srikovil* is then closed for the next three days, and Bhagavathy is relocated to a specially decorated room in the *vaayu-kon* called the *thrippooth-thara*. The primary focus of the study was to analyse the nature of the menstrual seclusion that Bhagavathy underwent.

Through the Foucauldian lens of Heterotopia, this spatial relocation was a crisis heterotopia. Recognising the living consciousness (*chaitanya*) of the Bhagavathy and the biological reality of menstruation, this crisis heterotopia offers a space of Exception. However, the Kristevan analysis saw this spatial relocation as an Exclusion, as the patriarchal system of the temple found the menstruating body of Bhagavathy as a pollutant which disrupts the temple and collapses the boundaries of order and chaos, pure and impure, etc. So, they relocated the Goddess, excluding her, so as to reinstate the order of the temple. This discussion added a novel perspective to the understanding of the *thrippooth* and associated seclusion-negotiation. The menstruating body in the *thrippooth* goes through a living paradox, whereby menstruation is restriction and empowerment, it is exception and exclusion. Therefore, it is apt to call the Chengannur *thrippooth* a Negotiated Sacred Anomaly.

Additionally, from a broader perspective, the implication of celebrating rituals like the *thrippooth* lies in their applicability to devotees' lives. Although the lavish treatment Bhagavathy receives during the *thrippooth* stems partially from the privilege of being 'the Goddess. However, a privilege does not necessarily mean a social right or something one can easily take home. Rather, it grows from the experience of witnessing social change. In that sense, *thrippooth* is an apt space. This space of compensation provides a ritualised counter-narrative- the celebration of menstruation, the time and space for herself during the ritualised seclusion, etc. Being part of the experience of the *thrippooth* itself can initiate the thoughts of destigmatising menstruation. When inquired about the broader societal impact on the *Melshanthi*, he said:

If you really want to experience what *thrippooth* is and what this strong aura of Bhagavathy is, do one thing. Not on any casual day, but visit the temple during the next *thrippooth aarattu*, after the *aarattu*, when the Devi comes back and enters the Western *srikovil*. There is a moment when the *srikovil* opens- a fraction of a second. At that moment, you have to feel that exact moment; it is just a fraction of a second. But you have to be physically present there and feel the energy, and at that very moment, everything I said will just 'click' to you. (Melshanthi)

The 'click' experience, according to *Melshanthi*, might be a subjective spiritual encounter. However, an analytical framing reveals that it is at this point that the devotee realises the blurring of the boundaries between pure and impure, and thereby internalising the notion of *thrippooth* as a Negotiated Sacred Anomaly. At this juncture, for devotees, *thrippooth* is no longer a symbolic and mystical phenomenon;

rather, it is a lived realisation through which they understand, question, and reinterpret every menstruating body in the social sphere. Ultimately, with the aid of the divine status of Bhagavathy, the Chengannur *Thrippooth* and the space it creates are a vital cultural intervention that helps women to de-stigmatise the shame of menstruation and the menstruating body prevalent in the mundane world.

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