



ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Revisiting “Thinakudi”: Health Implications in the Framework of Yavagu- An Ethnographic study

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Abstract

Introduction: Theyyam is a ritualistic performance tradition of northern Kerala that combines intense physical exertion with profound spiritual significance. Performers endure prolonged periods of strenuous activity while wearing elaborate costumes, heavy headgear, and intricate makeup under conditions of high heat and humidity, predisposing them to considerable physiological stress. To mitigate these challenges, Theyyam performers have preserved several traditional dietary and healthcare practices. Among these, *Thinakudi*-the consumption of *Thinakkanji* (foxtail millet gruel) during the pre-performance fasting period (*vratham*)-is regarded as an important dietary practice for enhancing stamina and minimizing physical discomfort. **Methods:** This qualitative study explored the composition and traditional use of *Thinakkanji*, assessed its nutritional significance, and compared it with the Ayurvedic dietary preparation *Yavagu*. Data were collected through focus group discussions and in-depth interviews with Theyyam performers and cultural experts. The findings were thematically analyzed to understand the perceived role of *Thinakkanji* in supporting performance and health. **Results:** The study found that *Thinakkanji* is a nutrient-rich preparation traditionally made with foxtail millet, often supplemented with green gram and ghee, providing sustained energy, easy digestibility, and nutritional support during prolonged fasting and physically demanding performances. Participants consistently perceived the preparation as essential for maintaining stamina, reducing fatigue, and improving endurance throughout ritual performances. Comparative analysis revealed notable similarities between *Thinakkanji* and the Ayurvedic preparation *Yavagu* in terms of their preparation, digestibility, nutritional attributes, and use as strength-promoting dietary formulations during periods of increased physiological demand. **Conclusion:** *Thinakkanji* represents a culturally evolved functional dietary practice that closely aligns with the Ayurvedic concept of *Yavagu*. Integrating this traditional knowledge into the Ayurvedic evidence base may contribute to the development of nutritionally appropriate dietary interventions for enhancing endurance, promoting recovery, and supporting individuals engaged in sports and other physically demanding occupations.

Introduction

Theyyam, an enchanting ritualistic art form of northern Kerala, represents a unique combination of cultural heritage, spiritual expression, and physical endurance. Rooted in old traditions, Theyyam performances embody the divine, with the artist transforming into a craft for the deity being invoked. The intense physical movements, vibrant costumes, and prolonged hours of performance are

not just artistic but also deeply symbolic, reflecting the complex interplay between devotion and human effort. However, this extraordinary art form demands a high level of physical endurance. The performers of Theyyam often accompanies with various health challenges, including muscular fatigue, joint strain, abdominal discomforts and dehydration.[1]

To reduce these issues, many Theyyam artists are following various indigenous health practices passed down through generations. These include therapeutic measures such as oil massages to soothe the strained muscles and specific dietary interventions aimed at enhancing physical resilience. Among these practices, the practice of *Thinakudi*, -(*Thina*-millet; *Kudi*-drinking) a pre-performance dietary regimen, stands out for its ritualistic and nutritional significance. Rooted in traditional knowledge, *Thinakkanji* encompasses a well-balanced diet designed to meet the intense ergogenic requirements [2] of the performance, ensuring the artists maintain their stamina and focus throughout their schedules. This preparation closely resembles with a basic dietary regimen, *Yavagu* [3] suggested in Ayurveda, during the recovery stage of various kinds of disease conditions to improve basic absorption and to nourish the body.

This article explores the connection of tradition, nutrition, and physical performance through an ethnographic view. Drawing on insights gathered from literary review, focus group discussions and in-depth interviews with Theyyam artists and cultural experts, the study examines the components and nutritional value of *Thinakkanji*. The data gathered from various sources can be utilized for other high-performance contexts like sports medicine.

Aim: To explore the health benefits of the traditional food practice *Thinakudi* prevailing among Theyyam performers

Objectives

- Document traditional practices: To document the preparation, ingredients, and cultural significance of *Thinakudi* as a dietary tradition among Theyyam performers.
- Assess nutritional value: To analyze the nutritional properties of *Thinakanji* and its role in supporting the physical and mental endurance required for Theyyam performances.
- Exploration of participants' perceptions regarding the nutritional significance and health benefits of *Thinakkanji*

Promote traditional practices: To highlight the relevance of traditional food practices like *Thinakudi* in modern dietary contexts and suggest its potential applications in physically demanding occupations and sports medicine

Materials and Methods

Study Design

This qualitative study employed an exploratory design using two complementary qualitative methods-Focus Group Discussion (FGD) and In-Depth Interviews (IDIs)-to explore the traditional use, perceived health benefits, preparation methods, and cultural significance of *Thinakudi* among Theyyam performers in northern Kerala. The use of both

methods facilitated data triangulation, allowing collective community perspectives obtained through the FGD to be complemented by detailed individual experiences gathered through the IDIs.

Study Setting

The study was conducted in Kannur and Kasaragod districts of northern Kerala, India, where Theyyam is widely practiced as a living ritual tradition. Data collection was undertaken in natural community settings, including performers' residences, temple premises, and cultural centres, to facilitate open discussion in familiar environments.

Study Population

The study included Theyyam performers, family members involved in the preparation of traditional foods, and local cultural experts possessing traditional knowledge related to Theyyam dietary practices.

Participant Characteristics

A total of 22 participants were included in the study. The FGD comprised seven experienced Theyyam performers and ritual experts. Fifteen participants were interviewed individually, including ten active Theyyam performers, three family members responsible for preparing traditional foods, and two local cultural experts.

Participants ranged in age from approximately 25 to 78 years and represented varying educational backgrounds, including primary education, secondary education, higher secondary education, and college-level education. Their experience in Theyyam performance ranged from approximately 8 to over 50 years. Participants represented diverse Theyyam traditions practiced across Kannur and Kasaragod districts, thereby ensuring representation of different ritual practices and dietary customs.

Inclusion Criteria

- Active Theyyam performers aged 18–80 years.
- Individuals recognized within the community as possessing traditional knowledge regarding Theyyam dietary practices, including senior performers, family members, and local cultural experts.
- Individuals willing to provide written informed consent.

Exclusion Criteria

- Performers with limited exposure to traditional Theyyam food practices.
- Individuals unwilling to participate or provide informed consent.

Sampling Technique

Purposive sampling was employed to recruit information-rich participants with extensive knowledge of traditional Theyyam dietary customs. Maximum variation sampling was considered while selecting participants from different geographical regions, age groups, and Theyyam traditions to capture diverse perspectives.

Data Collection

Focus Group Discussion

One Focus Group Discussion involving seven experienced Theyyam performers and ritual experts was conducted. The discussion lasted approximately 90 minutes and was

moderated by the principal investigator using a semi-structured discussion guide developed from the study objectives. An assistant moderator documented field observations and non-verbal interactions. The discussion explored the historical background of Thinakudi, methods of preparation, timing of consumption, perceived health benefits, cultural beliefs, and changes in dietary practices over time.

In-Depth Interviews

Fifteen semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with ten Theyyam performers, three family members, and two cultural experts. Each interview lasted approximately 40–60 minutes. Interviews were conducted in Malayalam, allowing participants to express their experiences freely. Open-ended questions were used to encourage detailed narratives, while probing questions were employed to clarify emerging concepts and obtain deeper insights.

Recording and Transcription

All interviews and the FGD were audio-recorded with participants' permission. Field notes were maintained throughout data collection to document contextual information, participant interactions, and non-verbal observations. Audio recordings were transcribed verbatim in Malayalam and subsequently translated into English. To ensure accuracy, transcripts were cross-checked against the original recordings before analysis.

Data Analysis

Data were analysed using thematic analysis following an inductive approach. Initially, transcripts were read repeatedly to achieve familiarization with the data. Meaningful units of text were identified and assigned initial codes. Similar codes were grouped into categories, from which broader themes and subthemes were developed through iterative comparison across transcripts. The emerging themes were reviewed, refined, and interpreted in relation to the study objectives and the cultural context of Theyyam traditions. Data obtained from the FGD and IDIs were compared and triangulated to enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the Institutional Ethics Committee prior to commencement of data collection. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants before participation. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the study, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any stage without consequence.

Results

Cultural Context and Traditional Composition of Thinakkanji

The preparation and utilization of Thinakkanji are deeply embedded within the ritual discipline (*vratham*) practiced by Theyyam performers. Approximately two weeks prior to the performance, artists embark on strict physical and psychological regulation, characterized by spiritual orientation toward the deity they are to embody. This preparatory phase is marked by purposeful withdrawal from sensory indulgence

and worldly attachments, with an emphasis on mental focus, self-discipline, and ritual cleanness.

Dietary regulation constitutes a central component of this *vratham*. Performers consciously adopt a simplified dietary pattern, avoiding foods that are rich, excessively spiced, or sensorially stimulating. The underlying rationale is to minimize gustatory attraction and maintain control over the sense organs (*indriyas*), thereby supporting a state of heightened mental discipline and spiritual receptivity. At the same time, the dietary intake must remain nutritionally adequate to sustain the physical demands of the impending performance. Within this context, *Thinakkanji* emerges as a culturally evolved functional food that effectively balances these dual requirements of restraint and nourishment.

Traditional Composition

Thinakkanji is typically prepared using a limited number of ingredients, each selected for its nutritional value, digestibility, and compatibility. The core ingredients include Thinayari (foxtail millet) *Mudga* (Green gram) and *Ghritha* (Ghee)

The preparation of *Thinakkanji* is more or less similar to that of *Yavagu* detailed in *Sargadhara samhitha*. i.e; One part of Thinayari along with half the part of soaked green gram will be boiled with six part of water. After cooling it down, *Ghritha* in small quantity also will be added. This is semi-liquid in consistency, facilitating easy consumption and digestion. The simplicity of ingredients and method reflects an intentional design aligned with the physiological and spiritual needs of the performer during the preparatory phase.

Nutritional Profile and Functional Properties

Table 1 [4,5,6]

Ingredient	Properties	Functions
Foxtail Millet (Priyangu/Kangu)	Guru, Br̥mhaṇa, Rūkṣa, Kapha-hara, Rucya, Saṅgrahī Pittadāha-nāśaka	Nutritive, absorbent (anti-diarrheal), improves taste, supports tissue healing (<i>Bhagna-sandhānakara</i>)
<i>Mudga</i> (Green gram)	Madhura-Kaṣāya Rasa; Laghu, Rūkṣa Guna; Śīta Vīrya; Madhura Vipāka; Tridoṣa-hara (Pitta-Kapha śamana)	Dīpana-Pācana, Kaphapittahara, Jvaraghna, Medohara, Raktaprasādana
<i>Ghr̥ta</i> (Ghee)	Madhura Rasa; Guru, Snigdha Guna; Śīta Vīrya; Madhura Vipāka; Vāta-Pitta hara	Medhya, Rasāyana, Vayasthāpana, Balya, Cakṣuṣya, Agnivardhaka

Yavagu[7]

Ayurveda describes a wide range of therapeutic dietary preparations, such as Manda, Peya, Vilepi, Yavāgu, Yūṣa, and other forms of medicated and non-medicated food preparations, which play an important role in the preservation of health as well as in the management of disease. These preparations are designed with varying consistencies, nutritional compositions, and digestive properties, enabling them to be selected according to an individual's digestive capacity (*Agni*), disease stage, strength (*Bala*), and therapeutic requirements. In healthy individuals, they serve as wholesome dietary regimens that support digestion, nourishment, and overall well-being. In clinical practice, these preparations are

extensively employed as therapeutic diets and are often prescribed as adjuvants or supportive measures alongside primary medications. By improving digestion, facilitating nutrient assimilation, restoring strength during convalescence, and enhancing the efficacy and tolerability of pharmacological interventions, they constitute an integral component of Ayurvedic dietary management. Consequently, these traditional dietary formulations represent a valuable interface between nutrition and therapeutics and continue to hold significant relevance in contemporary preventive and restorative healthcare.

Yavāgu is a semisolid gruel prepared by cooking cereals, predominantly rice, with an adequate quantity of water to produce a light, easily digestible, and nourishing food. Depending on the ingredients used, *Yavāgu* may be prepared as a simple gruel or as a medicated formulation incorporating herbs, spices, or pulses to achieve specific therapeutic objectives. It is indicated in conditions associated with impaired digestion, fever, dehydration, convalescence, and physical debility, where it serves to replenish fluids, provide easily assimilable nutrients, kindle digestive fire (*Agni*), and promote gradual restoration of strength. Classical texts also describe several medicated varieties of *Yavāgu*, highlighting its versatility as both a dietary and therapeutic intervention. Eg: Aamraadi Yavagu

Thinakkanji may be considered a region-specific adaptation of the Ayurvedic concept of *Yavagu*, integrating classical dietary principles with locally available ingredients to achieve comparable preventive and restorative health benefits.

Health outcomes

The Focus Group Discussion (FGD) and In-depth Interviews (IDI) provided a rich ethnographic perception of the role of *Thinakkanji* in the lived experiences of Theyyam performers. The FGD, conducted with ritual experts, brought forward collective perspectives rooted in shared tradition, while the IDIs offered detailed individual narratives reflecting personal practices, bodily experiences, and inherited knowledge. Together, these methods enabled a layered exploration of *Thinakkanji* as both a cultural and functional dietary practice.

Participants consistently described *Thinakkanji* as an essential component of the *vratham* period, emphasizing that its consumption is not optional but integral to preparing the body for the physical and spiritual demands of performance. Many performers explained that during *vratham*, when dietary intake is deliberately restricted and simplified, *Thinakkanji* serves as a reliable source of sustenance that maintains energy without burdening digestion. This collective understanding, repeatedly expressed across both FGD and IDI, highlights its role as a culturally sanctioned dietary norm.

A recurring theme across discussions was the importance of digestive stability, particularly in relation to the physical constraints imposed by Theyyam costumes. Performers vividly described the tight tying of elaborate attire, especially around the abdomen, which creates significant internal pressure during performance. In this context, participants stated in their own words that if *Thinakkanji* is not consumed properly, they may experience “*vayukshobham*”-a

disturbance of *vāta* within the abdomen-leading to bloating, discomfort, and a sense of uneasiness that can interfere with performance. This expression reflects an indigenous physiological understanding, where improper digestion combined with external constriction disrupts internal balance.

Conversely, when *Thinakkanji* is consumed appropriately, performers reported a sense of lightness, stability, and comfort in the abdominal region, enabling them to perform without distress. Many described it as a “settling” or “balancing” food that prepares the body to tolerate both the internal strain of fasting and the external pressure of costumes. These insights, consistently echoed across individual and group narratives, reinforce the perception of *Thinakkanji* as a preventive measure against performance-related discomforts.

Beyond digestive aspects, participants also highlighted its role in sustaining energy and endurance. They described a gradual and sustained restoration of strength following prolonged exertion, without the heaviness associated with other foods. Regular consumption during the performance season was believed to enhance stamina, allowing performers to endure extended hours of physically demanding activity, including continuous dancing and maintenance of ritual postures.

Overall, the ethnographic data from FGD and IDI illustrate that *Thinakkanji* is deeply embedded in the experiential knowledge system of Theyyam performers. It is perceived not merely as nourishment, but as a functional dietary strategy that supports energy balance, digestive stability, and bodily comfort under extreme ritual conditions. The consistency of these narratives across participants underscores its continued relevance as an adaptive and culturally validated health practice.

Discussion

The formulation of *Thinakkanji* reflects a thoughtfully balanced dietary preparation that aligns with the ergogenic demands and ritualistic lifestyle of Theyyam performers. The inclusion of foxtail millet (*Priyangu/Kangu*), *Mudga*, and *Ghṛta* demonstrates a synergistic approach where nourishment, digestibility, and *doshic* balance are simultaneously addressed.

Foxtail millet, described in *Bhavaprakasha* as possessing *br̥mhaṇa* (nutritive) *saṅgrahī* (that can hold mala and moothra, being an absorbent) and *bhagnasandhanakrith* (an agent that facilitates fracture healing) properties, may have a crucial role in sustaining physical endurance and controlling natural urges. Being *bhagnasandhanakrith*, it may heal various minute fractures that may come across during vibrant movements. During prolonged hours of Theyyam performance it may help to control over natural urges as it possesses *sangrahi* property. Being *Guru* for digestion, performer may not feel hunger. As the drug is *deepana* and *paachana*, it may not create gastric issues also. Its *rūkṣa* and *kapha-hara* properties prevent metabolic sluggishness and excessive heaviness. At the same time, its *pittadāha-nāśaka* action is particularly relevant in mitigating heat stress generated during performances involving elaborate costumes and fire rituals.

Mudga contributes significantly by ensuring metabolic efficiency and digestive ease. Its *laghu* (light) and *tridoṣa-hara* properties, especially *pitta-kapha śamana*, make it an ideal dietary component during periods of restricted intake and altered routines, such as the *vratham* observed by Theyyam artists. Unlike heavier pulses, Mudga facilitates proper digestion without producing *āma*, thereby maintaining gut health and preventing bloating or discomfort. Its *śīta vīrya* and *raktaprasādana* properties also help in reducing internal heat and supporting systemic homeostasis, which is essential when the body is subjected to continuous physical and emotional stress.

Ghṛta, on the other hand, serves as a critical counterbalancing agent within this formulation. While millet and *Mudga* exhibit *rūkṣa* qualities, *Ghṛta* provides *snigdhatā* (unctuousness), thereby preventing excessive dryness and *vāta* aggravation. In the context of Theyyam performance, where repetitive movements, sleep irregularities, and physical strain are common, the *vāta-pacifying* action of *Ghṛta* becomes highly significant. Additionally, its *rasāyana* and *balya* properties contribute to sustained energy levels, tissue nourishment, and recovery. The *medhya* effect of *Ghṛta* may also support mental clarity and focus, which are essential for performers embodying ritualistic and spiritually intensive roles.

From a holistic perspective, the combination of these three ingredients illustrates a classical Ayurvedic principle of dietary balance—where opposing qualities are harmonized to achieve physiological stability. The *rūkṣa* and *kapha-reducing* attributes of millet and *Mudga* are effectively moderated by the *snigdha* and nourishing nature of *Ghṛta*, resulting in a preparation that is both sustaining and easily digestible. This balance is particularly suited for Theyyam performers, whose unique occupational demands require a diet that supports endurance, prevents disease, and maintains both physical and mental equilibrium.

Thus, *Thinakkanji* can be interpreted not merely as a traditional food, but as a functionally designed dietary intervention that aligns with Ayurvedic principles to support the health and performance efficiency of ritual artists.

As per modern concepts, Foxtail millet is rich in protein, dietary fiber, B-complex vitamins, and essential minerals such as magnesium, iron, and phosphorus. This composition enables slow and sustained energy release, crucial for prolonged physical performance. Its complex carbohydrates help regulate blood glucose levels, preventing fatigue, while antioxidants reduce oxidative stress from exertion. Additionally, its mineral content supports neuromuscular coordination, cardiovascular endurance, and mental focus essential for Theyyam performance.[8]

Green gram enhances the nutritional profile by providing high-quality protein and essential amino acids for muscle repair and recovery. Its rich fiber content supports gastrointestinal function, especially during *vratham* with restricted diets. It also supplies essential vitamins (A, B-complex, C, and E) and minerals like iron, calcium, magnesium, and potassium, aiding overall health. Notably, its iron content helps prevent fatigue and anemia, while its immunomodulatory properties offer protection during physically demanding periods, making it both restorative and protective.[9]

Ghee, though used in small quantities, significantly enhances the bioavailability and efficacy of the preparation. Rich in short- and medium-chain fatty acids, it provides readily available energy during high-intensity performance. Its fat-soluble vitamins (A and E) and butyric acid support gut health, improve digestion, and reduce gastrointestinal discomfort. Additionally, it aids joint lubrication, bone strength, skin integrity, and contributes to vocal clarity and overall resilience. [10]

Thinakkanji can be understood not merely as a traditional food, but as a carefully evolved functional diet tailored to the occupational and ritual demands of Theyyam performers. Its balanced composition may support sustained energy, efficient recovery, and overall well-being, enabling performers to meet intense physical, emotional, and spiritual challenges. Traditional practices like *Thinakudi* reflect time-tested nutritional wisdom that is increasingly relevant today, offering a minimally processed, holistic alternative rooted in local ecology. Its combination of millet, legumes, and ghee aligns with modern dietary principles such as low glycaemic load, metabolic balance, and digestive ease, while also supporting the prevention of lifestyle disorders. To validate these observations, further studies employing objective evidence-based methods should be conducted.

In physically demanding contexts, *Thinakudi* serves as an effective dietary intervention by providing sustained energy, aiding recovery, and maintaining gastrointestinal stability without discomfort. Its adaptability in preparation and application further enhances its potential for integration into contemporary settings, including sports nutrition and institutional dietary programs, positioning it as a sustainable and functional model for modern health needs.

Conclusion

Thinakudi emerges as a culturally evolved, functional dietary practice that supports the unique physical and ritual demands of Theyyam performers. Findings from Focus Group Discussions (FGD), In-depth Interviews (IDI) and literary reviews highlight its role in fulfilling the ergogenic needs of Theyyam performers. Its formulation closely aligns with the Ayurvedic concept of *Yavagu Kalpana*, emphasizing easily digestible and restorative nutrition. The synergistic combination of millet, green gram, and ghee ensures balanced nourishment and metabolic harmony. Beyond its traditional context, *Thinakudi* holds significant potential as a functional food in modern fields such as sports nutrition and physically demanding occupations.

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