

Coastal Traditions



Ready to dole punishment © Mrinalini Perepa

A message popped up on my WhatsApp from Hema Narayanan, also a YPS member: “*Coastal Traditions Tour to Mangalore and Kannur*”—covering Kambala, Bhutakola, and Theyyam. I signed up primarily for Theyyam. It was one of those trips where I did no groundwork, only knowing that these events take place between November and April each year.

Kambala: The Buffalo Race

Our first stop was Kambala at Bantwal, about 27 km (a 30-minute drive) from Mangalore. The excitement was palpable; posters for the event started appearing a few kilometres before the town. The atmosphere at the venue was electric. Performers dressed in vibrant Yakshagana costumes greeted visitors, while rows of food stalls and

buzzing crowds gave the venue a festive air.

Kambala is a high-speed buffalo race run on slushy mud tracks or in paddy fields—a tradition rooted in the region’s agrarian culture. Around 45 such events are held each year, and winners carry a quiet local pride. Each race involves two buffaloes yoked together, with a jockey standing on a wooden plank that replaces a plough. The pair runs about 150 meters in under 30 seconds—nearly 50 km/h.

The buffaloes are trained year-round, and the jockeys practice to master the art of leaping onto the plank mid-race, pressing a pedal that shoots up the mud spray, and controlling the animals with precision. Winners are judged on speed, height of spray, and control. Before every round, rituals are performed, worshipping the buffaloes that are then paraded with reverence.

Photographers crowd about 50 meters away from the finish line, but it is risky business. If the buffaloes lose their jockey mid-race, they can charge wildly, forcing photographers and spectators



Kandanar Kelan jumping the fire © Mrinalini Perepa



Kamabala race © Mrinalini Perepa

to leap aside. One participant invited us to their tent, giving us a glimpse into the community bond behind the competition.

Photographs taken along the gallery show the profile of the buffalo and jockey. The equipment and the photographer can get drenched in the slush. Best shots are from behind the finish line, but one needs to be agile to jump out of the buffalo's way as they near the path. The photos were taken in the evening closer to dusk, so for most of the shots the EXIF was Aperture: F/4, shutter speed: 1/640 or 1/800, and the ISO was between 1000-7000. A 24-120mm lens would have been ideal; I operated with a 24-70mm.



Koradabbu Daiva portrait © Mrinalini Perepa



Preparing Mudi © Mrinalini Perepa

Bhutakola: The Dance of the Spirits

Next on the agenda was Bhutakola at Kodman Bantwal, around 20 km from Mangalore. This ritual, dedicated to Daiva Raja Kordabbu, is a captivating folk dance of Tulu Nadu, performed in honor of the region's guardian spirits—benevolent or fierce.

A Bhutakola runs for 8–10 hours. The performer, believed to become an embodiment of the spirit, enters a trance through rhythmic drumming and ritual intoxication. With each act, an element of the costume is added, and the transformation culminates when the headgear (mudi) is placed, signifying the deity's full descent into the performer's body.



Theyyam - Vishnumoorthi © Mrinalini Perepa



Wow inspiring amman © Mrinalini Perepa

The myth enacted that night told us the story of Kordabbu, an orphan blessed with mystical powers who faced jealousy, persecution, and eventual divine redemption after surviving death with the help of Thannimaaniga, after which Kordabbu considered Thannimaaniga as a sibling. The performance's intensity grew through the night, pulsing with drums and chants that blurred the line between human and divine.

Bhutakola traditions are said to date back to around 700 BCE, with each spirit tied to nature—Panjurli (boar god), Bobbaraya (sea god), Gullige (fierce boar spirit, who works along with Panjurli), and Kordabbu (the healer), among many others. It is performed by male members of specific clans, and the entire clan's attendance is seen as essential for receiving the blessings of the God.



Attending to god © Mrinalini Perepa

Locals believe that when all worldly solutions fail, the Bhuta can resolve the impossible. Even today, one sees a lot of people seeking solutions from God during the Bhutakola. The ritual has gained renewed national attention after its powerful depiction in the film *Kantara*—though nothing compares to witnessing it in person.

Bhutakola is a sacred ritual. Some of the precautions are:

- Dress code for attendees is traditional or modest
- No shoes in the temple premises

- Respect for the local beliefs and traditions
- Don't obstruct the view for the devotees

Challenges for photography:

- No use of flash
- No eye contact with the performer
- Varying light conditions
- Constant movement of the performer

Exif details of the images taken are:

- The ISO was set at 1600
- Aperture at F4

- Shutter speed based on the image was 1/250 or 1/320, depending on the shot.
- An exposure compensation of +2/3rd to +2 was used.

Theyyam: The Living Gods of North Kerala

The final part of our journey took us north to Kannur district in Kerala, historically known as Kolathunadu. The word Theyyam is considered a local derivative of *Daivam*, meaning God. Originating from Bhutakola, Theyyam has evolved into a dazzling ritual performance that portrays deities, heroes, and elemental spirits through music, movement, and striking costumes.

Our guide got word that a Theyyam was underway at Thekke Thalakkal Tharavadu Devasthanam, Karivellur—just 30 minutes from Payyannur. We detoured immediately. The Kundor Chamundi Theyyam had just concluded, and the Vishnumurthy Theyyam was about to begin, depicting the Narasimha avatar, with fierce red makeup and claw-like extensions made of coconut fronds.

Soon after, we watched the Anicherry Bhagavathy Theyyam. The transformation



Bhutakola © Mrinalini Perepa



Camaraderie at start line © Mrinalini Perepa

of the performer—layer by layer of makeup, ornament, and finally the enormous ten-foot headgear—was mesmerizing. Interestingly, in temples where Theyyams are performed, there are no idols; instead, the sanctum houses the deity's weapons and tools, which are revered before each performance. The devotion is tangible—while the performers dance in heavy costumes under the sweltering heat, we stood drenched in perspiration in awe.

Given that Theyyam is a religious ritual akin to Bhutakola, the etiquette for photographers is the same. Additionally, if shooting the performers while getting ready, one needs to honour their “No’s”. There are stages when they don’t want to be photographed, and this needs to be respected. This set was shot during the day, some in shade and some in the open.

Exif details of the images taken are:

- ISO was between 100 and 400
- Aperture at f/4
- Shutter speed of 1/250 or 1/320
- No exposure compensation or flash.

The Fire Theyyam of Kandarnar Kelan

The highlight of the trip was the Kandarnar Kelan Theyyam, followed by the Vayanatu Kularan Theyyam at sunrise. The women of the clan began with a Thiruvathirakali dance to invoke Lord Ganesha, setting the stage for the fiery spectacle that followed.

The legend tells of Kandarnar, a farmer who tried to clear forest land by lighting fires in four corners. The flames spread uncontrollably, trapping him. When he climbed a tree for safety, cobras struck

him, and all perished in the blaze. The performer reenacts this tragic myth by dancing through actual fire—flames often rising 12–15 feet high. Even from a distance, the heat and ash engulf the spectators, turning the moment into a visceral, almost spiritual experience.

We were fortunate to witness Shanu Peruvannar, regarded as one of the finest performers of this Theyyam. His presence and energy held the entire crowd spellbound.

During the early morning hours, Vayanatu Kularan Theyyam began. According to legend, Vayanatu Kularan was born from Lord Shiva’s thigh, lost his vision, and was granted artificial eyes before being banished to Earth. When he learns of Kandarnar’s death, he descends to retrieve his soul. The performer’s metallic eyes glinted in the firelight—a haunting and powerful image. The dance is much more subdued in tempo and ambience compared to the Kandarnar Kelan.

The places for Theyyam are remote, and one needs to know the locality and have transportation to reach these places. Traditional or modest attire is preferred. The courtyard where the Theyyam is performed is sacred, and no one except the performers and the supporting personnel is allowed into this area. During the performance of Kandarnar Kelan, all the major lights are switched off, and the fire becomes the primary source of light.

Points to be considered are the same as the above two events, and in addition, one needs to be cognizant of the fact that

- The courtyard is sacrosanct

- The best spot is the first row after the courtyard boundary
- One experiences infernal heat and is to be watchful of the large pieces of flying embers

Exif details of the images taken are:

- ISO was between 800 and 1000 when the flames were high. For a few, it was 6400 when there were little or no flames.
- Aperture at f/4 or f/5.6
- Shutter speed of 1/250 or 1/320
- Exposure compensation was used up to +1 as needed.

A Celebration of Coastal Spirit

Kambala, Bhutakola, and Theyyam—three vibrant expressions of the coastal culture of Tulu Nadu and North Kerala—share the same essence: devotion, skill, community, and a deep connection with nature and tradition. Each event lasts for hours, demanding endurance not just from the performers but from everyone present.

Finding these performances often depends on local networks; even with preparation, we missed a few. But the serendipity of discovery made every moment richer. This journey offered not just a glimpse but a profound experience of living traditions—rituals that breathe, dance, and roar with the spirit of the coast.

- Mrinalini Perepa (LM-326)



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