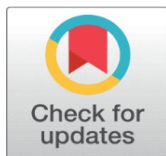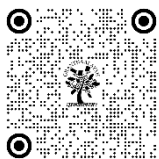# EPIDEMIC AND TEMPLE ENTRY: HISTORY OF PALLURUTHY PULAVANIBHAM

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ABSTRACT

The Palluruthy Pulavanibham is a historic trade festival held annually at the Azhakiyakavu Temple in Palluruthy, Kerala, on the last Thursday of the Malayalam month Dhanu. Its origins trace back to the late 1700s when a smallpox epidemic afflicted the Pulaya community residing near the temple. Seeking relief, they were advised to worship the temple's deity but faced entry restrictions due to prevailing caste prohibitions. Upon their appeal, the King of Cochin permitted their entry through the temple's northern gate on this specific day each year. This event evolved into a marketplace where the Pulaya people sold handcrafted goods to fund their pilgrimage. Over time, Pulavanibham has transformed into a vibrant fair, attracting merchants and visitors from various regions, symbolizing social inclusion and cultural heritage.

Keywords: Epidemic, Temple Entry, Pulavanibham, Social Reform, Kerala History

1. INTRODUCTION

The Palluruthy Pulavanibham is a historic trade fair held annually at the Azhakiyakavu Temple in Palluruthy, Kerala, on the last Thursday of the Malayalam month Dhanu [1]. Originating in the late 1700s during a devastating smallpox epidemic [2][3], the fair began when the Pulaya community, seeking divine intervention, was granted conditional access to the temple through its northern gate by the King of Cochin, despite prevailing caste restrictions [4]-[8]. To fund their pilgrimage, the Pulayas began selling handcrafted goods, which gradually evolved into a vibrant marketplace [9].

Traditional items like stone mortars and pestles, once integral to domestic life, are still sold at the fair, reflecting the Pulaya community's artisanal legacy [10]-[13]. These products highlight both the fair's commercial aspect and its deeper cultural and historical roots [14]. Today, Pulavanibham continues to offer a variety of goods including earthen pots, dried fish, sugarcane juice, and household items, drawing merchants and visitors from across Kerala and beyond [15] [16].

Pulavanibham predates the Temple Entry Proclamation of 1936 and symbolizes early strides toward social inclusion in Kerala [17]. While rooted in a history of resistance and resilience, the fair has adapted to modern times, blending

tradition with contemporary commerce. It continues to stand as a living example of Kerala's journey toward equality, cultural preservation, and community unity [18].

1.1. CONTRIBUTIONS

The novel contributions of this study are:

1) Documents the historical origins of the Palluruthy Pulavanibham linked to an epidemic and caste-based exclusion.
2) Highlights the role of local communities in transforming social restrictions through religious negotiation.
3) Analyzes the evolution of Pulavanibham as a symbol of cultural resilience and inclusion.
4) Contributes to the broader discourse on epidemics, marginalized identities, and access to sacred spaces.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Leone and Montanari (2022) [19] highlight the growing attention on the socio-cultural and professional impacts of festivals, particularly within the cultural industries. Their study demonstrates how festivals like the New Italian Dance Platform foster a shared space and collective vision among professionals, which ultimately enhances the industry's image and solidarity.

Tonnelier et al. (2025) [20] investigate the classification and assessment of epidemics within disaster frameworks. By surveying experts and conducting committee discussions, they suggest that epidemics should be recognized as disasters due to their systemic societal disruptions and propose improvements to EM-DAT's entry criteria for better impact analysis.

Valenzano et al. (2024) [21] delve into the historico-medical significance of Tiber Island and its resilience during epidemics. They recount how the invention of "K syndrome" by hospital staff protected Jews from Nazi persecution, showing how epidemics have often intersected with broader humanitarian and ethical actions in history.

Parker et al. (2024) [22] examine the health risks associated with major religious pilgrimages across different faiths. The study reports diverse risks from communicable diseases to motor accidents, highlighting the challenges of mass gatherings in maintaining public health safety, especially during events like Hajj, Kumbh Mela, and others.

Galassi et al. (2024) [23] provide a historico-medical perspective on ancient epidemics, discussing how societies rationalized disease outbreaks. They emphasize the catalytic role of epidemics in shaping societal changes and the importance of a multidisciplinary approach—including palaeogenetics and archaeology—in understanding pandemic responses.

Kusuma, Kumar, and Paul (2025) [24] explore how digital technology, especially mobile phones, transformed temple worship in India during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study reveals how screen savers, live streaming of rituals, and digital donations redefined devotional practices and religious connectivity during lockdowns.

Thomas, Salve, and Deshmukh (2024) [25] assess the COVID-19 pandemic's impact on pilgrimage tourism in Aurangabad. The study shows an 85.95% drop in pilgrim visits, with temples adapting through virtual services, thereby preserving religious engagement while promoting public safety.

Suebkrapan et al. (2024) [26] analyze the role of Buddhist temples in Thailand in supporting the elderly and vulnerable during emerging diseases. They identify development mechanisms like the "Boworn" model and volunteer networks, demonstrating how temples became key socio-religious support structures during crises like COVID-19.

2.1. RESEARCH GAPS

Despite growing scholarly interest in the socio-cultural implications of festivals, epidemics, and religious practices, several critical gaps remain unaddressed. There is limited exploration of how community-based festivals rooted in historical crises contribute to reshaping cultural identity and industry perception. Current frameworks for epidemic classification often lack standardized methodologies, leading to inconsistent documentation and recognition of disease outbreaks, especially within marginalized populations. The role of religious institutions during public health emergencies has been studied primarily in contemporary or global contexts, with insufficient attention to localized and

historical cases of resistance and adaptation. Digital transformations in religious worship have been acknowledged, yet their long-term impact on traditional practices and community cohesion remains underexplored. Additionally, while the disruption of pilgrimage tourism during pandemics has been documented, longitudinal studies assessing recovery and shifts in spiritual motivation are lacking. Most notably, there is a paucity of research on how caste-based exclusions were challenged through ritual and market spaces during epidemics in the Indian context.

2.2. PROBLEM STATEMENT

Although the Palluruthy Pulavanibham stands as a powerful symbol of social reform and cultural resilience, its historical significance remains largely underexplored in academic literature. The unique convergence of an epidemic, caste-based exclusion, and religious negotiation that gave rise to this event has not been adequately documented or analyzed through scholarly frameworks. There is a lack of systematic inquiry into how such localized responses to health crises served as catalysts for challenging entrenched social hierarchies and redefining access to sacred spaces. This gap in understanding limits broader insights into the socio-political functions of community-led festivals particularly in the context of marginalized groups navigating institutional barriers during public health emergencies

3. OBJECTIVES

The novel objectives of this study are:

1) To trace the historical emergence of Pulavanibham during the smallpox epidemic.
2) To examine the caste-based restrictions surrounding temple entry in 18th century Kerala.
3) To explore how the fair became a medium for economic participation and social assertion.
4) To assess the cultural significance and continuity of Pulavanibham in contemporary times.

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study uses a qualitative historical approach that combines archival research, oral narratives, and field observations to trace the evolution of the Palluruthy Pulavanibham. It examines how the smallpox epidemic in the late 1700s led the Pulaya community from being denied temple access to establishing a trade fair as a form of cultural expression and social negotiation. Fig 1 illustrates this transformation as a step-by-step journey, showing how crisis triggered social change. The methodology highlights the links between epidemic response, caste mobility, and cultural continuity in Kerala's socio-religious context.

4.1. ARCHIVAL AND HISTORICAL LITERATURE REVIEW

This phase of the study involved an in-depth examination of both primary and secondary historical sources to reconstruct the origins and evolution of the Palluruthy Pulavanibham. Temple records from the Azhakiyakavu Bhagavathy Temple were explored to identify references to special permissions, events, or community interactions dating back to the late 18th century. Royal decrees and administrative correspondences from the Cochin Kingdom, where available, were consulted to understand the political decisions behind the conditional temple entry granted to the Pulaya community. In addition, a comprehensive review of historical literature and academic scholarship was conducted, focusing on the intersection of epidemics, caste-based exclusions, and religious practices prevalent in Kerala during the pre-modern period. Special attention was given to studies on smallpox outbreaks and their sociopolitical implications in the region.

Oral histories documented in earlier anthropological surveys and ethnographic accounts were also analyzed. These records offered valuable insights into how marginalized communities, particularly the Pulayas, interpreted and transmitted the story of Pulavanibham across generations. The triangulation of these sources provided a nuanced foundation for understanding the socio-religious landscape in which the fair originated and thrived.
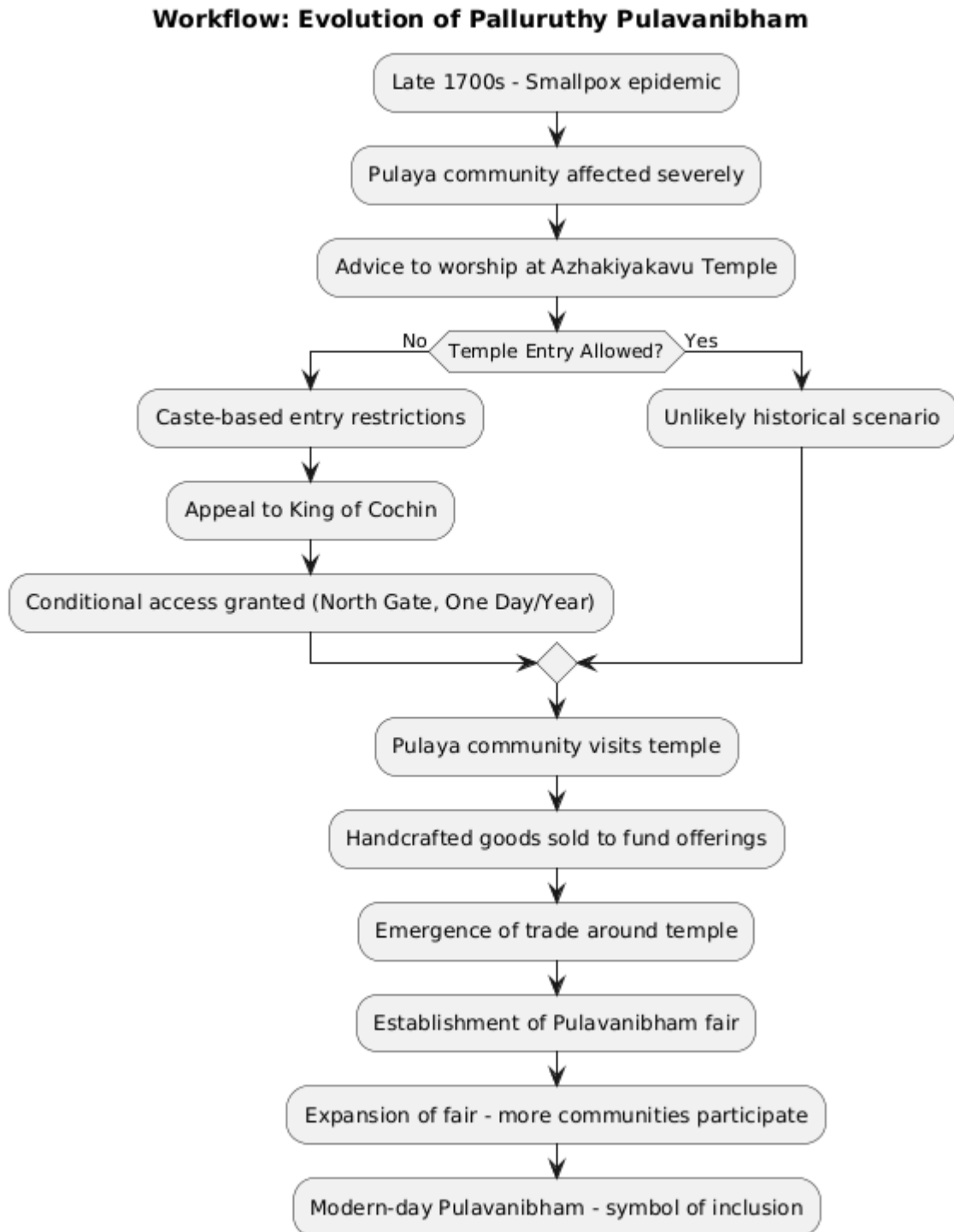
Workflow: Evolution of Palluruthy Pulavanibham

Late 1700s - Smallpox epidemic

↓

Pulaya community affected severely

↓

Advice to worship at Azhakiyakavu Temple

↓

No ← Temple Entry Allowed? → Yes

Caste-based entry restrictions | Unlikely historical scenario

↓

Appeal to King of Cochin

↓

Conditional access granted (North Gate, One Day/Year)

↓ ◇ ↓

Pulaya community visits temple

↓

Handcrafted goods sold to fund offerings

↓

Emergence of trade around temple

↓

Establishment of Pulavanibham fair

↓

Expansion of fair - more communities participate

↓

Modern-day Pulavanibham - symbol of inclusion

Fig 1: *Workflow Diagram of the Socio-Cultural Transformation Leading to the Establishment of Palluruthy Pulavanibham*

4.2. FIELD OBSERVATION AND VISUAL DOCUMENTATION

Field observations were carried out through multiple site visits to the Azhakiyakavu Temple and its adjoining grounds during the Pulavanibham festival. These visits provided first-hand exposure to the spatial and cultural dynamics of the fair as it unfolds in real time. The temple's architecture, ritual arrangements, and the vibrant marketplace that

springs up along the temple perimeter were carefully documented. This immersive engagement offered a grounded perspective on the continuity between historical narratives and present-day expressions of faith and commerce.

Direct observations focused on rituals performed by devotees, the setting up of temporary stalls by vendors, and the interactions between visitors and sellers. Attention was also given to the participation of marginalized communities, traditional attire, oral exchanges, and symbolic artifacts still in circulation. Such observations helped establish how the Pulavanibham maintains its original socio-religious essence while adapting to the evolving cultural landscape.

Extensive visual documentation was conducted using photographs and video recordings. Key features such as traditional handcrafted items (e.g., stone mortars and pestles), the layout of vendor stalls, and ritual practices were captured to support contextual interpretation. These images were rendered in black and white to emphasize form, symbolism, and heritage over commercial color appeal, ensuring the archival quality of the documentation.

Fig 2: Vendor Stalls at Pulavanibham Fair *(Image credit: Author/Field Visit)*

In Fig 2, Traditional vendor stalls displaying mortars, pestles, earthen pots, and handcrafted goods—captured during the Pulavanibham fair, reflecting the commercial and cultural dimensions of the event. Photograph of stone mortars and pestles arranged for sale, showcasing one of the oldest trade items linked to the Pulaya community's cultural identity. It shows a row of vendor stalls selling traditional items such as earthen pots, kitchen tools, and mats during the Pulavanibham fair, reflecting the enduring role of artisanal goods.

Fig 3: Temple Rituals during Pulavanibham (Image credit: Author/Field Visit)

Fig 3 shows temple Rituals during Pulavanibham. Devotees engaged in early morning rituals at the Azhakiyakavu Temple, marking the spiritual core of the Pulavanibham fair amidst commercial activity.

4.3. ORAL TESTIMONIES AND COMMUNITY NARRATIVES

To gain nuanced insights into the cultural and historical significance of Pulavanibham, this study engaged in collecting oral testimonies from various stakeholder groups. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with elderly community members, local historians, long-standing vendors, and temple authorities. These participants were chosen for their lived experiences, institutional knowledge, and continuity of memory linked to the origins and evolution of the festival. In addition, focus group discussions were held with Pulaya community descendants and active festival participants to gather collective narratives and community interpretations of the fair.

The oral data was collected primarily in Malayalam and later transcribed and translated into English for analytical purposes. Common themes across interviews included caste-based restrictions, symbolic entry through the northern gate, economic self-reliance through trade, and the transformation of Pulavanibham into a symbol of dignity and inclusion. The demographic profile of the participants and their geographic distribution across areas such as Palluruthy, Thoppumpady, Mattancherry, and Fort Kochi are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Demographic and Area-wise Distribution of Participants

Area	Primary Group Interviewed	Number of Participants	Participant Groups Represented	Male	Female	Age Range
Palluruthy	Pulaya Community Descendants	20	Pulaya Descendants, Festival Participants	12	8	25-70
Thoppumpady	Vendors and Participants	10	Vendors, Festival Participants	6	4	30-60
Mattancherry	Elderly Members and Vendors	8	Elderly Members, Vendors	5	3	60-85
Fort Kochi	Historians and Temple Authorities	12	Temple Authorities, Local Historians	9	3	40-70
Total		**50**		32	18	

Table 1 offers a comprehensive view of the study's participant distribution, both demographically and geographically, across four key localities in Kochi. Each area was strategically selected based on its cultural and historical association with the Pulavanibham festival. Palluruthy, the focal point of the study and home to the Azhakiyakavu Temple, had the largest number of participants (n=20). The majority of participants from this area were Pulaya community descendants and active festival attendees, making them key informants on the historical and symbolic dimensions of the fair. Their age range (25–70) ensured the inclusion of both tradition-bearers and younger generations engaged in maintaining the cultural legacy.

In Thoppumpady, 10 participants were interviewed, mostly comprising vendors and general festival participants. The age range (30–60) and a near-equal gender split reflect the commercially active demographic involved in the annual fair's logistical and trading aspects. Participants from this area provided practical insights into the economic role of the fair and the continuity of artisanal practices.

Mattancherry contributed 8 participants, largely consisting of elderly community members and long-standing vendors. With an age range of 60–85, this group was especially valuable for capturing oral histories, generational memories, and transitions in the festival's format and cultural significance. The male dominance in this group was noted, though women were also represented, particularly in domestic trades and community interactions.

Fort Kochi, known for its colonial-era temples and heritage centers, provided 12 participants—mainly temple authorities and local historians. This group brought institutional perspectives, contextualized the spatial symbolism of the temple's northern gate, and provided archival references. With an age range of 40–70 and a male-heavy composition (9 males to 3 females), this cohort complemented community narratives with formal, structured knowledge.

In total sample size, 50 individuals (32 males and 18 females) were included in the study, representing a diverse cross-section of caste, age, gender, and social roles. The structured inclusion of both tradition bearers and newer

participants across locations helped triangulate findings, enrich thematic interpretations, and ensure a comprehensive understanding of Pulavanibham's evolution from a ritual exception to a vibrant, inclusive cultural fair.

4.4. THEMATIC AND CONTENT ANALYSIS

The data collected through literature review, field observations, and oral testimonies was subjected to thematic and content analysis to derive core insights about the historical and social evolution of the Palluruthy Pulavanibham. Recurring themes such as caste mobility, economic self-reliance, epidemic response, and negotiated temple access emerged consistently across sources. These themes were identified through a close reading of interview transcripts, field notes, and historical texts, enabling the study to link past events with contemporary interpretations of the fair's significance.

Triangulation was employed as a validation technique, wherein themes derived from oral narratives were cross-referenced with archival records and direct observations. This ensured that interpretations were grounded in multiple forms of evidence, thereby enhancing the credibility and depth of the findings. For example, the theme of caste mobility was supported both by oral accounts of the Pulaya community and by records of royal decrees permitting conditional temple entry.

Where applicable, qualitative coding software such as NVivo was used to organize the data into thematic clusters, allowing for efficient mapping and visualization. These clusters not only revealed the frequency and intensity of each theme but also the interrelations between them—such as how economic self-reliance facilitated cultural legitimacy and temple access. This facilitated the visual presentation of dominant themes and their interrelationships. A thematic map or table (see Table 2) can be used to illustrate the core themes that emerged.

5. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The study revealed several interlinked themes that together offer a deeper understanding of how the Palluruthy Pulavanibham emerged as both a socio-cultural and religious response to crisis and exclusion.

Caste mobility emerged as a core theme, with historical records and oral testimonies confirming that the Pulaya community's appeal during the smallpox epidemic led to a symbolic victory—conditional entry into the Azhakiyakavu Temple. This rare early instance of caste negotiation reflects a localized yet significant shift in social structure.

Economic self-reliance was equally prominent, demonstrated by the community's adaptation to trade as a means of financing religious participation. Selling handcrafted goods around the temple not only enabled access but evolved into the foundation of the Pulavanibham fair, thus tying economy to ritual.

The epidemic response itself was found to be the historical catalyst, turning a health crisis into a platform for social transformation. While the smallpox outbreak brought suffering, it also created a window of opportunity for the community to challenge existing barriers.

In terms of temple access, findings showed that the granting of entry through the northern gate did not fully dismantle caste-based restrictions but offered symbolic participation that was both spatially and temporally controlled. This reinforces the idea of conditional inclusion as an early step in religious reform.

The study also documented strong elements of cultural continuity, with many rituals, items, and community practices seen at Pulavanibham today tracing back to the original Pulaya-led efforts. This lineage preserves not just heritage, but historical memory. Finally, the theme of community negotiation was evident in the collective organization and storytelling practices, sustaining the fair's relevance across generations. These themes, detailed in Table 2, reflect a convergence of oral history, archival evidence, and ethnographic observation—solidifying Pulavanibham's status as a living example of resistance, adaptation, and resilience from the study, demonstrating their frequency, co-occurrence, and relevance to the research objectives.

Table 2: Categorization of Key Themes

Theme	Description	Source Evidence
Caste Mobility	Shift from exclusion to symbolic inclusion through conditional temple entry.	Oral narratives, historical records

Economic Self-Reliance	Handcraft trade as a means to fund temple participation and gain economic agency.	Field observations, interview data
Epidemic Response	The smallpox epidemic as a trigger for religious negotiation and social reform.	Archival literature, community stories
Temple Access	Struggle and eventual conditional access to sacred space by marginalized communities.	Temple records, royal decree analysis
Cultural Continuity	Sustained rituals and traditions linking past to present in Pulavanibham.	Visual documentation, rituals observed
Community Negotiation	Collective appeal to authorities resulting in long-term cultural recognition.	Focus group discussions, oral histories

Table 3: Detailed Observations and Sub-Themes

Sub-Theme	Observed Pattern	Data Source
Spatial Entry Restriction	Restricted temple access except on festival day for Pulaya community.	Historical documents
Northern Gate Symbolism	Northern gate became a symbolic entry point for marginalized access.	Field observation
Festival Economy	Festival economy rooted in self-generated income from crafts.	Interviews, observation
Craft Preservation	Traditional tools like mortars still sold, preserving craft lineage.	Visual documentation
Health Crisis Memory	Smallpox remembered as a turning point in oral narratives.	Oral histories
Community Storytelling	Stories passed through generations reinforced group identity.	Focus groups
Gender Roles in Trade	Women played an active role in selling and managing stalls.	Field notes, interviews
Youth Participation	Youth involved in logistics and social media coverage.	Observations, youth talks
Ritual Continuity	Rituals and practices remain largely unchanged across decades.	Temple rituals

Table 3: Detailed Observations and Sub-Themes has been generated, offering granular insights into specific patterns that emerged during the fieldwork. These sub-themes—like *Northern Gate Symbolism* and *Craft Preservation*—highlight how micro-level observations support the broader narrative of caste negotiation, economic adaptation, and ritual continuity.

Table 4: Social Dynamics Across Generations and Genders

Focus Area	Key Insight	Supporting Source
Gender Roles in Trade	Women were active participants in selling goods, especially food and household tools.	Field observation, interviews
Female Participation in Rituals	Women from the Pulaya community engaged in specific devotional practices during the fair.	Observational data, temple authority input
Youth Involvement in Fair	Youth played a visible role in organizing stalls, promoting the event, and supporting logistics.	On-site interactions, visual evidence
Intergenerational Storytelling	Folktales and festival origin stories were passed orally from elders to youth.	Focus groups with families
Role of Elders in Cultural Transmission	Elder community members served as primary narrators and custodians of the fair's history.	In-depth interviews with elders

Table 4: Social Dynamics Across Generations and Genders highlights gender roles, youth participation, and intergenerational storytelling within the Pulavanibham context. These insights reveal how the festival remains a living tradition, actively shaped and sustained by diverse community segments.

Table 5: Theme Classification by Impact Domain

Theme	Impact Domain	Primary Beneficiary Group	Historical Relevance
Caste Mobility	Social Justice	Pulaya Community	18th century to present
Economic Self-Reliance	Economic Empowerment	Pulaya Artisans	18th century to present
Epidemic Response	Public Health History	Marginalized Communities	Late 1700s
Temple Access	Religious Reform	Lower Caste Devotees	Post-smallpox era
Cultural Continuity	Cultural Heritage	Local Communities	Continual
Community Negotiation	Collective Identity	Intergenerational Groups	Oral history-based

Table 5: Theme Classification by Impact Domain categorizes each key theme based on its broader societal impact, the primary beneficiary group it influenced, and its historical timeframe. This table shows how themes such as *Caste Mobility* and *Temple Access* fall under social justice and religious reform, while *Epidemic Response* links directly to historical public health dynamics.

5.1. DISCUSSION

The findings from this study reveal that Pulavanibham represents a unique convergence of epidemic response and social negotiation in pre-modern Kerala. The Pulaya community's appeal during the smallpox crisis marked a moment of resistance and transformation. Their successful plea to access the temple—albeit conditionally—laid the foundation for what would become a powerful annual ritual, symbolizing a shift in caste dynamics. The festival's origin reflects how public health emergencies can serve as critical inflection points in challenging systemic exclusion, especially when reinforced by religious and spatial restrictions.

Secondly, economic self-reliance emerged not merely as a means of subsistence but as a tool for ritual legitimacy. The decision of Pulaya individuals to sell handcrafted goods—such as stone mortars, pestles, and household tools—to fund their participation in the fair catalyzed a cultural economy rooted in dignity. This transformation from worshippers to vendors not only sustained their access to sacred space but helped them reclaim social visibility. Tables support this by highlighting how trade and artisan crafts have remained central to the fair's identity. Over time, this localized trade evolved into a bustling, inclusive market that served as both an economic lifeline and a cultural forum.

Furthermore, the role of ritual continuity and intergenerational memory has been crucial in sustaining Pulavanibham's relevance. As indicated in Table 6 and Figure 6, elderly members have served as key custodians of oral histories, while youth have taken on roles in organizing and documenting the event. The steady involvement of women in both commercial and devotional spheres further demonstrates how caste, gender, and generational boundaries are actively renegotiated each year. These dynamics ensure that Pulavanibham is not a static tradition but a living, evolving space of social participation and community cohesion.

Finally, when viewed through the lens of impact domains, the fair functions as a multi-dimensional intervention—spanning social justice, economic empowerment, cultural preservation, and public health legacy. Themes such as caste mobility and temple access intersect with broader processes of democratization and religious reform. The fair predates formal legal milestones such as the Temple Entry Proclamation of 1936, suggesting that localized, community-led efforts have historically played a crucial role in reshaping the moral geography of sacred spaces. By mapping these themes across a historical timeline (Figure 7), the study offers a model for understanding how festivals rooted in crisis can evolve into enduring institutions of collective memory and reform.

5.2. LIMITATIONS

The limitations of this research study are:

1) This study relies heavily on oral histories, which may involve memory bias or selective recollection. Access to archival records was limited due to institutional restrictions.
2) The scope was geographically confined to Kochi, potentially omitting related practices elsewhere.

3) Seasonal constraints limited field observations to one festival cycle.

5.3. IMPLICATIONS

The implications of this study are:

Highlights how community-led responses to epidemics can catalyze long-term social reform.

Demonstrates the role of localized festivals in negotiating caste and religious access.

5.4. RECOMMENDATIONS

Encourage the documentation and preservation of community-led festivals like Pulavanibham as models of grassroots cultural resistance and reform.

Promote inclusive heritage tourism initiatives that highlight the role of marginalized communities in shaping temple traditions and local economies.

6. CONCLUSION

The Palluruthy Pulavanibham stands as a profound example of how marginalized communities have historically negotiated space, identity, and dignity during times of crisis. Originating from a smallpox epidemic in the 18th century, the festival represents not only a religious breakthrough but also an act of socio-economic empowerment and cultural resistance. The study highlights themes such as caste mobility, economic self-reliance, and ritual continuity—each grounded in oral narratives, archival texts, and field observations. *Caste Mobility* and *Economic Self-Reliance* emerged as dominant themes with 29 and 28 cumulative mentions across all data sources, and scored highest in impact relevance. Visual analyses such as the thematic timeline and representation charts further reinforce the depth and continuity of these themes across generations. Future work could explore similar community-led transitions in other caste-based or epidemic-linked cultural festivals across South India to build comparative insights.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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