Two centuries ago, tigers roamed Thrissur streets on the Chathayam day of Chingom, in royal grandeur. It was majesty and power that Shakthan Thampuran probably intended to infuse into Kerala’s hallmark harvest festival when he introduced Pulikali, the tiger hunt–themed street art form that has men done up in tiger body art roaming the streets in a feral dance, accompanied by rustic drum beats.

Now, years later, the pomp is in place and even the gaiety, as Pulikali teams get on street on Chathayam day. But the shades of draining pride are more than conspicuous. The art form, Thrissur’s own, is being ravaged mainly by financial crisis.

There are many teams that focus on the art form, but most of them are struggling to make ends meet, with expenses skyrocketing and funds a trickle. T.S. Sumesh of the Viyyur Centre Pulikali Sangam says it is a tough time for the Pulikali teams and many well-known teams have withdrawn from the scene over a period.

Unlike Thrissur Pooram, which is managed by Devaswoms (temple trusts), Pulikali is managed by groups of youth who want to preserve the dying art form. From paint and thinner to fibre for making the masks and dresses, everything has become costly. Even the payment for the artistes has gone up, they say.

State apathy
Apart from aid from the city Corporation and the Tourism Department, a major portion of Pulikali fund comes from locals, the rest from sponsors. Blame it on economic slowdown or GST, sponsors are increasingly hard to come by, complain the Pulikali teams. They even pawn gold ornaments of their kin to raise funds, but often fall into debt traps as cost exceeds the collection.

The acute financial crisis is exacerbated by the attitude of the Tourism Department towards the art form, say the Pulikali teams. While the art form should be flaunted as a flagship cultural event, it is grossly neglected by the department, they say.

“The average expense for each team is around ₹15 lakh. The city Corporation is giving ₹1.5 lakh. But it hardly suffices. Though the Tourism Department has been promising ₹1 lakh, it is not available on time,” says Sumesh. We are yet to get the fund for 2017 from the Tourism Department. Now it is already time for the preparations for 2018, he says. The department should keep a separate fund for Pulikali, he adds.