

A fest foreseeing

The word 'Onam' brings a set of memories to every Malayali psyche. Regarding Onam as a harvest festival or even as a national festival is a very simple representation of the celebration. Onam represents a worldview we have lost: a radical perspective of the races and their characteristics. Onam symbolises a time when gods and demons were judged by their deeds and not by their creeds. Even from the angles of history and myth Onam is surcharged with political connotations beyond comparison.

Let us begin with the mythical significance of Onam. It is associated with the annual visit of the demon King Mahabali from the Hades to his former kingdom with a view to personally witnessing the welfare of his subjects. The myth of Bali raises many ethical and political questions. It is linked to the rigid political structures and the order of governance prevalent in the three worlds inhabited by gods, men and demons. The geopolitical maps of racial inhabitation were hard and fast. The norm or the order was simple and direct: each race must confine itself to the space allotted to it. Crossing the borders, especially with the intention of usurping power, was considered taboo. It led to ethical and political disorder which was finally set right by the incarnation of Vishnu. The incarnations of Vishnu are prefigurations which re-establish the order of dharma in the worlds. Bali usurped the thrones of the earth and the heaven and controlled the three worlds and unsettled the world order. In spite of being an Asura and antagonistic to the Devas, Bali was immensely popular as a ruler who cared for the welfare of the subjects. This suggests that even a dictator can rule a welfare state and win the support of the people. People are more interested in their welfare than in the political appropriateness of the governance or the decision-making process. Bali's regime was an

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the welfare

order in disorder which was corrected into an order in order by Vamana, the incarnation of Vishnu. The temporal site of a golden past and spatial site of a heaven on the earth are two spatio-temporal "methemes" in the mythical structure of all cultural communities.

Vamana's act in sending Bali back to the Hades may be religiously correct. When the religious aura is taken out of the Vamana - Bali encounter, the episode brims with questions of moral and political propriety: is it right to dethrone a ruler who is anxious of the welfare of his people? The

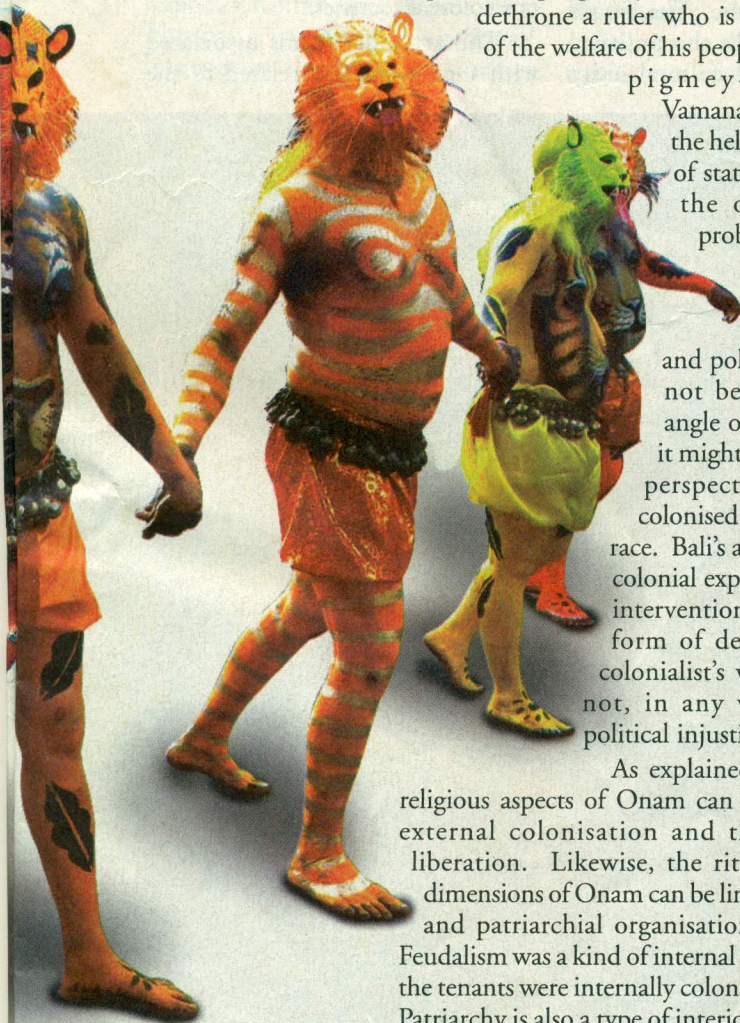
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Vamana pushed Bali down to the hell. The act raises issues of stature and greatness on the one hand and the problematic of national / local welfare and cosmic welfare on the other. Ethically and politically the act could not be justified from the angle of the native subjects; it might be justified from the perspective of the subjects colonised by Bali and his Asura race. Bali's act was a metaphor of colonial expansion and Vamana's intervention was a providential form of decolonisation. The colonialist's welfare measures do not, in any way, diminish the political injustice of colonisation.

As explained, the mythical and religious aspects of Onam can be correlated to the external colonisation and the problematic of liberation. Likewise, the ritualistic and artistic dimensions of Onam can be linked to the feudalistic and patriarchal organisation of Kerala society. Feudalism was a kind of internal colonisation wherein the tenants were internally colonised by the landlords. Patriarchy is also a type of interior colonisation where

women are sexually colonised by men. The tension between landlords and tenants or between men and women constitute a dialectic. The rituals of Onam are oblique attempts to perpetuate feudalism or patriarchy. It is, as Louis Althusser observes, an instance of "politics by other means." For, feudalism and patriarchy can be expressed in identically structured paradigms.

Some of the rituals of Onam are related to the harvest. Prior to Onam, the ritual of new grain or yam is conducted in almost all temples. It is only a ritualistic enactment of tenants' submitting the best of the yields to the landlords. The rituals without its ceremonial grace were repeated at the landlord's homes in a serious atmosphere. The rituals only herald the large scale harvesting that takes place with Onam. Illam Nira or Niraputhari performed in temples was more related to the feudalistic organization of the agrarian Kerala society than to its religious or liturgical significance. These kinds of rituals are common to all agrarian societies. The ritual of Onappudava



PHOTOS : JOSHI MANJUMMEL

again fortifies the feudalistic organisation of the society and the phallogocentric structure of the once matrilineal Hindu upper caste family. The ritual renews and strengthens the relations between the Karanavar and his dependants within the family and the landlord and the tenants outside. It only ensures the perpetuation of feudalism and patriarchy. The ritual related to Athapoo or floral carpet underlines the greatness and the relevance of nature and conventional flora rather than the modern. It is an attempt to landscape one's resistance to the hegemonic and oppressive structures prevailing in the society. As the French thinker Michel de Certeau explains, even routine or "the practice of every day life" can be used as a form of resistance to disguised hegemonies in society. Athapoo also symbolises an attempt to decolonise the landscape in the quest to re-invent an identity. A ritual can be appropriated as a form of resistance in a colonial situation. It exemplifies what Simon During calls "politics that does not



PHOTO : JOSH MANJUMEL

look politics." This is an apparently innocuous, but deliberate attempt to consolidate native resistance to cultural and political invasion.

The ritual of Onathappan is again a ritual disguised as resistance. It must be noted that what has been practised as rituals have latent cultural and political connotations. The rituals intrinsically embody the political dualism, despite the cultural unity

they apparently create. The rulers often use the rituals as a means to consolidate their power structures whereas the subjects use the same rituals as powerful articulations of their dissent and resistance. This is the paradox of ritualistic significance, especially in postmodern or postcolonial societies:

The art/sport forms associated with Onam are also related to the

Elizabeth Mathew

Looking outside through the balcony of her son's tenth floor flat, eighty five year old Narayani Amma sighed. Tomorrow is Thiruvonam day. But nobody living in this house is bothered about it. No busy arrangements on the eve of Uthradam day. What is wrong with Malayali... Time has changed and now all are busy. Nobody has time to go through all these traditional rituals. They are all addicts of fast food culture. Everything is available at the nearby supermarket she was told. There is no time for them to prepare *ona sadhya* or onam specialties. 'Amma if you want I can arrange one ona sadhya at the nearby hotel for you', said her son sarcastically when she enquired about the arrangements for Onam. After her death no one in this family will celebrate this festival of Kerala, she was sure. But at the same time she is also having the hope that her elder

Hope permeates...

son and family will visit her on Thiruvonam day....

The case of Narayani Amma is not an isolated one. There are many senior citizens living in flats and small houses in cities of Kerala who are unable to cope up with the present day Onam celebrations. Onam according to them was a harvest festival full of fun and joviality, colourful and vibrant... It was a feel good, do good and be good time for all Malayalees.

But even today Onam is one tradition the enterprising Keralite takes with him to different regions of the world where he settles down. Even though the spirit and mode of celebrations changed it is celebrated

in one way or other by Keralites residing in different parts of the world. It is not only celebrated by Keralites but also by Indians from other states as well as people of other nationalities.

Traditionally Onam comes when the state's granaries are full and fruits and vegetables mature to be harvested providing plentiful food for people in Kerala.

The festival is being celebrated by all sections of the society, with pageantry, song, dance and games. In the villages of Kerala, celebrations start from atham, 10 days earlier to Thiruvonam. But in cities and elsewhere the day is celebrated



cultural identities of the rulers and the subjects. The pulikali, for instance, originated from an ideology that considered certain groups of people subhuman: their duty consisted in humouring or cheering the masters. The padayani or pattu with its alliterative incremental repetition and dramatic structure is also intended to humour the dominant groups that rule the society. The thiruvathirakali or thumbithullal, exclusively practised by women, are specimens of art forms that treat women as sexual objects. The body language of the players, like the manipravala narratives, are so structured as to satisfy the male gaze and male sexual fantasies, especially that of the upper caste conservative Hindu male. There is a rather abrupt end to these arts with the disintegration of feudal structure of Kerala society. Though feudalism was socially and legally abolished, it reappears in other forms in the society. This has a parallel at the national/international level: the former

imperialist nations continue to exploit and control the former colonies as donor states dominating international financial institutions. Likewise, the former feudal structures have reorganised themselves as revivalist forces and have been working to revive the rituals associated with Onam. Ritualising Onam depoliticises the political signifiers associated with it.

Kerala is a multicultural society in which the identities of cultural communities are defined in terms of cultural differences. The cultural constructs like race, gender, class, religion, language or sexuality define the cultural identity of groups and individuals. It is but true that the cultural constructs are appropriated by dominant groups to deny equity and justice to others. But they define the power relations among the different cultural communities. Ritualising a celebration is a kind of appropriation that alters the political significance of the event. For, ritual

is a terrain where both oppression and resistance can be oriented, severally and differently. When Onam is ritualised with a view to reviving the hegemonic structures of the past, the rituals are to be resisted by the process of secularisation. Secularising or de-ritualizing is a kind of generalisation or levelling that depoliticizes the motives and message of the process. It is a process that resists the penal power and hegemony associated with revivalism.

The opposition to revivalist tendencies in Kerala comes from the small cultural groups that work in the villages and towns. It is a kind of localised and horizontal resistance initiated by groups associated with library and literacy movements. It is not coincidental or accidental that the annual meetings of the village library or the cultural societies take place during Onam days. The festivals and celebrations organised by such groups

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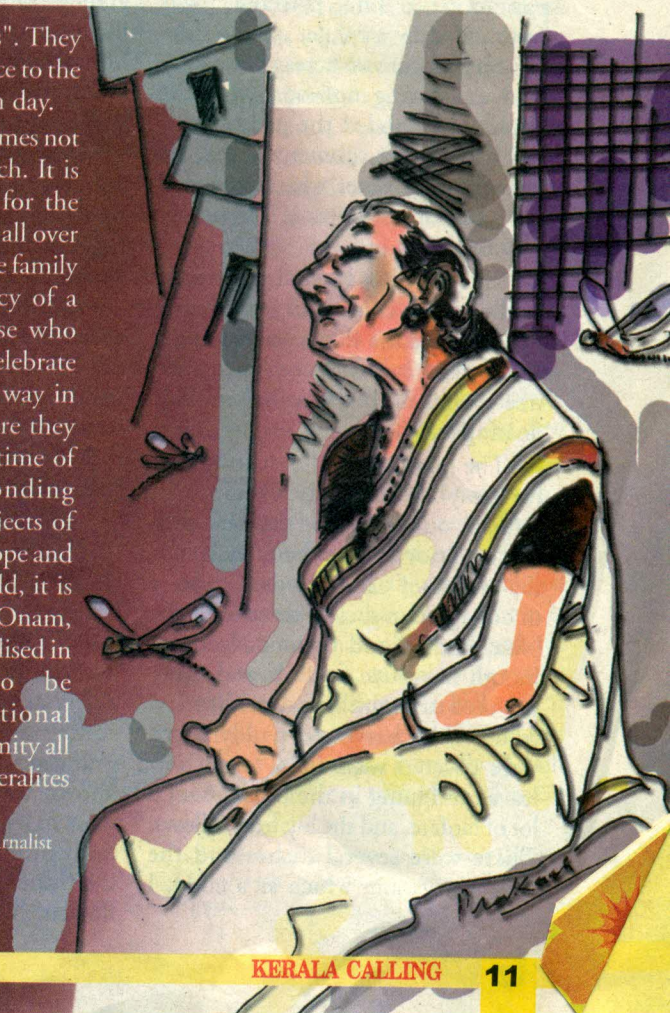
elaborately on a holiday or weekend falling near the Thiruvonam day.

Legend has it that Onam commemorates the arrival of an ancient beloved king called Mahabali to see his subjects once every year. In our villages people celebrate this festival with all its jollity even today. For them Onam is a celebration of ten days. It comes in the month of "Chingam" according to Malayalam calender. People put 'pookkalam' (flower mats) in front of their houses, to welcome the King. There will be competition for the laying of flower mats. They will wear new dresses, will be visiting almost all temples which they can, they will be performing lot of dances like Thiruvathira kali, Thumbi Tullal etc. to name a few and the most important thing is the grant lunch they will be having on the Thiruonam day. Whatever may happen they will not miss the Grant lunch. There is a saying in Malayalam that *Kaanam Vittum Onam Unnam* which means, "We should have the Thiruonam lunch even if we have to

sell out all our properties". They give that much importance to the lunch on the Thiruonam day.

But this festival welcomes not just the mythical monarch. It is a time of homecoming for the Malayali diaspora spread all over the world. Members of the family unite to relive the legacy of a people's monarch. Those who cannot reach home will celebrate the festival in their own way in the respective places where they are put in. Truly it is a time of greater emotional bonding among the scattered subjects of Maveli. It is a festival of hope and in this fast-changing world, it is heartening to know that Onam, though highly commercialised in Kerala, continues to be celebrated in a traditional manner with mirth and amity all over the world wherever Keralites reside.

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act as catalyst forces that organize resistance to revivalist hegemonic structures. The boat races in southern parts of Kerala are instances of secular celebrations of Onam. The festivals organized by the Tourism Department not only provide colour and splendour to Onam celebrations but also create a context to secularise the festivals of Onam. Such interventions have their limitations. But the space they provide to forces or groups that oppose revivalist forces is invaluable. They also level the geographical disparity associated with Onam celebrations.

There are some geopolitical differences in the celebration of Onam in Kerala. Onam is more ritualistic in Southern and Central Kerala comprising of the erstwhile Travancore and Cochin states. But Onam is less ritualistic in northern Kerala constituted mostly by the erstwhile Malabar state. But the rituals of Onam in Malabar bear the stamp of the community that perform the ritual. There seems to be a hierarchical distribution in the temporal sites allotted to the rituals of each community: lower castes perform the rituals on days before or after Onam, while the higher castes perform their rituals on Onam or days immediately preceding or following Onam. Different types of theyyam or Kummattikkali clearly show the identity of the community that enact them. The cultural difference of the rituals and the spatio-temporal differences in their enactment are clear indications of the geopolitical differences in the identity of the cultural communities. Secularising Onam erases the geopolitical differences and fortifies the forces that oppose the revivalist tendencies. The geopolitical differences are the outcome of cultural insulation and absolutism.

Myth, history and fiction are all narratives; there is hardly any difference among them. Contemporary historians like Dominic LaCapra and Hayden White rule out any differences between history and fiction. As a form of narrative, myth is also a kind of history or fiction. Postmodern historiography conceives of cultural memory as a form of genealogy or at least, an alternate history. The myth of Onam is a matrix of cultural memory which is equivalent to the unrecorded history of a cultural community. In a secular community, it is better to view Onam as the celebration of a set of cultural memory rather than some myths or rituals. It is part of our collective unconscious; it is the identity of the cultural diaspora called Malayali. It is a sustaining force that contributes to the collectivity, legacy and identity of our community. It is only obliquely about a golden past. Onam fortifies the cultural bonds of the community, especially at times of crises like that we encounter now. Celebration of Onam is a paradigm of cultural resistance to the invasion of McDonald menu and Cola. When the present is miserable and the future is bleak, Onam offers a context for a sojourn to the spatio-temporal sites of idealised living and cultural cohesiveness. ■

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