

ONAM REPRESENTS THE ACCOMMODATIVE SOUL OF INDIA

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Onam that bids farewell is much more than a festival of joy, for it represents the core of the great reconciliatory heart of Hinduism. Most such celebrations recall the victory of a great god or goddess over dark forces personified usually by a demonic Asura. The Ramayana marks the destruction of a Rakshasa while Durga Pujas emphasise the Devi's triumph over Mahishasura. Where killing Asuras is concerned, it is little Balagopala who gets the prize for the maximum number — from Putana to terrible Asuras like the whirlwind Trinavarta, the crane Bakasura, the serpent Aghasura, the ferocious bat Vyomasura, Keshi the horse and more. As an adult, he slew Narakasura as well. The point is the Asura is invariably portrayed as evil who engages the divinity in a mortal combat and the latter has to really struggle to overpower him. The only approved memory we are programmed to carry is hatred for the defeated demon. Not so in Kerala.

Though Mahabali came from an impeccable Asura lineage, he just does not fit into such an antagonistic bracket. True, his great grandfather, Hiranyakashipu was a terror until he was vanquished by Narasimhama, but his grand-father, Prahlada, was a Vishnu-worshipping Asura — though he too suffered because of the jealousy of the gods. According to the Kedara Kanda of the Skanda Purana, reiterated by Krishna in the Mahabharata, Prahlada's son and Mahabali's very generous father, Virochana, was tricked by Indra disguised as a Brahman into offering his own head. We need not repeat how the wise and just king of Kerala, Mahabali, was also artfully led by Vishnu, dressed as a Vamana and pushed into the netherworld. What emerges from these tales is that the Asuras had enviable skills and strength and when threatened, gods often resorted to subterfuge to win. But it is only in Kerala that Karma visits, because the people celebrate the victim — the annual return of their virtuous king, Mahabali, and not Vishnu's overlordship over him. This does not make Malayalis any less Hindu. An attempt was made some four years to 'mainstream' Onam, whatever that means, by suggesting that it be observed as Vishnu Jayanthi. This proposal was met with popular anger and roundly rejected by Kerala. The homogenisers of Hinduism are still wondering what went wrong.

Numerous researchers, European and Indian, have grappled with the origins and significance of Asuras, Rakshasas, Danavas and related creatures. Many scholars have indicated that the term 'Asura' and his usual portrayal as a dark creature with a

fearsome moustache reflected the prejudices of the fairer section in Aryavarta for the indigenous people of India. In his comprehensive coverage, 'Early Indians', Tony Joseph has established with convincing evidence that the more ancient layers of Indians had created their own advanced civilisations before Sanskrit speakers began to hegemonise. Texts have often attempted to erase the Asuras' boundaries with the Devas, by describing them as the descendants of Kashyap, one of the progenitors of all living beings, through two of his wives, the sisters Aditi and Diti.

It would perhaps be more appropriate to view 'Asuras' as a genetic description covering all who differed with the narrative of the 'heartland'. The mighty opponents among them were immortalised in tales that celebrated their defeat at the hands of Devas. In modern India where casteism is still rampant, in spite of constitutional prohibition and legal deterrents, long-suffering Dalits and subaltern groups have begun to celebrate or deify Asuras, Rakshasas and other anti-heroes of Hindu lore. Decades ago, Periyar had attacked the Ramayana and upheld Ravana as the hero and now some Dravidian groups are bent on valorising Narakasura who was vanquished by Krishna. Ravana has, incidentally, been worshipped for ages by certain traditional groups in Mandsaur, Gadchiroli, Bisrakh, Kangra, Mandya, Kakinada, Kolar and even Jodhpur. Mahishasura's festival in JNU shocked the education minister a few years ago, but then he has also become the epicentre of a counter culture even in some localities of Durga-worshipping Bengal.

Though symbolic, the message is clear and it is time to recall that it was the spirit of accommodation that had brought together so many different, widely-varying and contesting communities in India. The process was over several centuries and patience and tolerance were its virtues. Once a definite triad of Vishnu, Shiva and Devi has emerged as supreme by the first millennium, Hinduism went through massive 'mergers and acquisitions'. Regional, local and minor deities were subsumed quite flexibly into one of the three, but their original autonomy was protected. These autochthonous deities were explained as avatars or roopas of the primary three, aided adroitly by sahasranamans. Care was taken to install safety valves like ensuring a position for the original non-Brahman priests and by re-enacting ancient customs in temples and festivals. In the absence of a Vatican or a single 'holy book', unity was achieved by respecting diversity and a series of unwritten pacts were created through myths. These adjustments with local deities and beliefs, *paxdeorum*s, formed the building blocks of Hinduism. Incidentally, the most effective mass-based regional treaties that united a whole people are seen in Kerala during Onam and in Odisha. There, the wooden stump worshipped by the tribals was elevated and accepted as the highest god of the universe, Jagannath.

Standardisation is this antithetical to this spirit and Onam reminds us of the efficaciousness of contrariety.