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The Asura Who Won Hearts: Kerala's Onam Festival and Its Subversive Significance



Jawhar Sircar
15/Sep/2024 · 5 min read



Mahabali's tale is quite similar to the Greek one of Prosperine who is permitted to come once a year from the underworld to see her mother Ceres, the goddess of corn and harvest.



For people in Thrissur the finale of Onam celebrations is marked by the colourful 'tiger dance', a pageantry of men and women painted as tigers. Photo: Flickr CC BY-NC-ND 2.0
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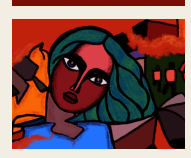
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Thiruvonam represents the peak of the ten-day celebrations of Onam in Kerala and by Malayalis of all communities, all over the world. It is more than a festival of joy for it represents the core of the great reconciliatory heart of India wherein all religions have pooled in. Malayalis welcome Onam with joy and unbelievably beautiful flower decorations called Pookalam.

The roots of Onam lie in a Hindu sacred tale of how Vishnu, as Vamana Avatar, pushed the Asura king Mahabali deep into the earth. Like all such stories, they recall the victory of a great god or goddess over dark forces personified by some demonic Asura.

Hindu lore invariably portrays the Asura as someone evil who challenges the divine into a mortal combat. All tale describe what superhuman efforts the god or goddess had to undertake to overpower him. Depicting the Asura as a dark creature with a fearsome moustache reflected the prejudices of the fairer section in Aryavarta and their insecurities about the 'darker' indigenous people of India.

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 first prize for the maximum number — from Putana to terrible Asuras Trinavarta, Bakasura, Aghasura, Vyomasura, Keshi and many more.

But Malayalis have always been different and Onam represents a brilliant example when they actually celebrate a defeated 'demon' — much more than the victor. The entire state and all sections of the people believe the defeated Mahabali is actually the real hero and have they

organise the grandest of feasts in his honour.

Though Mahabali came from an impeccable Asura lineage, he just does not fit into such an antagonistic bracket. His great grandfather, Hiranyakashipu was a terror until he was vanquished by Narasimhama, but Prahlada, was a Vishnu-worshipping Asura — though he too suffered because of the jealousy of the gods.



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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 as Onam, because people celebrate the victim. That look forward to the annual return of their virtuous king, Mahabali, and not Vishnu's overlordship over him.

In 2016, when the BJP attempted to 'mainstream' Onam, whatever that means, and wanted to celebrate Onam as Vishnu Jayanthi, rather than as Mahabali's festival — the proposal was met with popular anger. It was roundly rejected by Kerala and the homogenisers of Hinduism are still wondering why on earth do they celebrate an Asura.

At present, Dalits and subaltern groups have started celebrating and deifying Asuras, Rakshasas and other anti-heroes of Hindu lore. Decades ago, Periyar had attacked the Ramayana and upheld Ravana as the hero. 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 several parts of India — Mandsaur, Gadchiroli, Bisrakh, Kangra, Mandya, Kakinada, Kolar and even Jodhpur. while JNU's Mahishasura's festival also hits headlines.

Mahabali's tale is quite similar to the Greek one of Prosperine who is permitted to come once a year from the underworld to see her mother Ceres, the goddess of corn and harvest.

We must recall that it was not force or conquest, but the spirit of accommodation that had brought together so many different, widely-varying and contesting communities in India. The process required centuries of patience and tolerance, as adjustments were made with local deities and beliefs. Even Asuras were equated with Devas, as descendants of Kashyap, through two of his wives, the sisters Aditi and Diti, but they continue to be on the receiving end.

Onam of Kerala and Jagannath in Puri represent the two most effective focal points that united a whole people. In Odisha, the very plebeian wooden stump worshipped by the tribals was ultimately elevated as the highest god of the universe, Jagannath. Bengalis celebrate Durga with demonstrative non-vegetarian fare instead of worshipping Ram with strict vegetarianism **during Navaratri**. This is another effective demonstration of regional autonomy and local unity. All of these are contrarian in nature and contest the myopic view that all of India needs to be standardised and homogenised.

But the best part of Thiruvonam is the bonhomie and enjoying the really delicious 9-course Sadhya lunch.

*This **article** was originally published on **e Newsroom India**.*

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