



The significance of Onam festival in Kerala

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Abstract

Festivals in India are the oldest rituals and traditions that people follow to honour the Almighty. They are essentially symbols of peace and happiness. As everyone knows, India is a diverse country with a wide range of religions and cultures coexisting in one country. Seasonal festivals, in particular, are extremely diverse in our country. Some seasonal festivals in India include Bihu in Assam, Pongal in Tamil Nadu, Baisakhi in Punjab, and others. Onam is a seasonal festival in India. Onam is a harvest festival celebrated solely by Malayali in Kerala.

It is Kerala's official festival and includes a variety of cultural events. It is primarily observed to commemorate the return of the Great King Mahabali. Onam, like Diwali, is known as the festival of joy and happiness; it is a celebration of equality, justice, prosperity, fairness, and unity. The festival is usually held during the Malayali month of Chingam (August to September), which is followed by the first month of the Malayalam calendar, Kollavarsham. Onam brings together all of Kerala's colours, history, culture, and beliefs. The festival also has an interesting history, which will be covered later in the article.

Keywords: significance, Festivals, Kerala

1. Introduction

The majority of Indian festivals mark the start of a new season and harvest. This demonstrates India's enduring fact that it is primarily an agricultural country. As a result, there are numerous seasonal festivals in various parts of India at various times of the year. Seasonal festivals such as Makar Sankranti, Pongal, Holi, Baisakhi, and Onam herald the start of a new season and crop. One of these is Onam, Kerala's harvest festival, which has been celebrated for many years. It is frequently referred to as every Malayali's cultural identity. The festival is held for 10 days in August and September to commemorate King Mahabali's return home. In the Malayalam calendar, Onam falls in the first month Chingam of the Kollavarsham calendar. Every year, people of Kerala, regardless of colour, caste, or creed, come together to celebrate this beautiful occasion, according to tradition.

2. Kerala and its Culture

Kerala is India's 21st largest state, bordered by Karnataka to the north, Tamil Nadu to the south-east, and the Lakshadweep Sea to the west. Kerala is often referred to as "God's own country." Malayalam is the state's official language. Kerala's cultural heritage dates back many centuries. It combines native forms, literature, music, festivals, language, cuisine, monuments, and other elements. Their culture is a hybrid of Dravidian and Indian influences. During the festivals, the entire vibrancy of Keralites is visible. Kerala's festivities are generally distinguished by a grand feast, a musical orchestra, a large parade of decorated tuskers, and massive street displays. These celebrations involve a diverse range of regions and communities.

3. Onam-A History

Onam is the most important and popular festival in Kerala, out of all the others. It is a harvest festival that is celebrated with great pomp and circumstance. Kerala celebrates Onam with unity, regardless of region, religion, or community.

The celebration of Onam has two distinct histories. First, the myth's historical context is as follows. King Mahabali was a generous and righteous asura – a member of the demon clan – who once ruled Kerala. The kingdom flourished during his reign. The devas were envious, not only because King Mahabali was an asura, but also because asuras were devas' enemies. As a result, the devas decided to send Lord Vishnu to King Mahabali disguised as Vamana (a dwarf man). Vamana requested three feet of land from the benevolent king as a gift. When he began measuring the requested land, he suddenly grew enormous, measuring all

the worlds in just two steps. He now had nowhere to take his third step. As a result, Mahabali instructed Vamana to keep his next step on Mahabali's head. Vamana, pleased with Mahabali's generosity, blessed him before sending him to the low world and granted him permission to visit his dear people once a year. Onam is celebrated once a year to commemorate Mahabali's return home. Another reason for celebrating Onam is that it is the best time of year, when a bountiful harvest has been gathered throughout Kerala, resulting in abundance and happiness.



Source Image: Internet

Fig 1: Vamana measuring third feet of land on Mahabali's head

4. Onam Celebration

Onam, Kerala's harvest festival, which begins on 'Atham' and ends on 'Thirunam,' is celebrated for ten days in grand style to bid farewell to monsoon and welcome harvest season. It is also celebrated for King Mahabali's return. Keralites from various regions, communities, and societies participate in this festival, enjoying and celebrating to the fullest. Because it is a cultural festival rather than a religious one, both Hindu and non-Hindu communities participate. Throughout the state, a variety of rituals, processions, and performances take place during these ten days. Locals organise colourful parades that

showcase elements of Keralan culture through detailed floats and statues during the festival. Donating to charity, wearing new clothes and jewellery, exchanging gifts, visiting relatives, and spending time with family are some other holiday traditions. On this day, both men and women dress in traditional attire such as Keralan Sarees and Mundus. The Onam Sadhya, a nine-course meal that traditionally includes several vegetarian dishes served on a banana leaf, is the main food eaten during the celebration. The number of dishes served at the feast can reach 30 ^[1].



Source Image: Internet

Fig 2: Onam Celebration

4.1. Pookalam

Pookalam is basically a flower rangoli or flower carpet made on the floor in front of the house to celebrate Onam. Pookalam is the first thing that comes to our mind when we think of celebrating Onam. This flower decoration or flower

carpet, basically consists of 10 rings to indicate the ten days rituals performed during Onam. This Onam Pookalam symbolizes as a spirit of unity and teamwork as the whole family gathers together and makes it.



Source Image: Internet

Fig 3: Pookalam

4.2. Onam Sadhya

Onam Sadhya is a traditional Kerala meal served on a banana leaf with nearly 25 dishes on the last day of Onam, Thiruvonam. Sadhya is Malayalam for banquet. It embodies the harvest spirit and is traditionally made with seasonal vegetables such as yam, cucumber, ash gourd, and so on. Most Sadhya dishes are mildly spiced and delicious because they are not overcooked or soaked in excess spices. It is essentially a symbol of wealth. The main course is rice, which is served with other dishes known collectively as Kootan. Paruppu, Rasam, Sambar, Kaalan, Avial, Olan, Kootukari, Erissery, Pachadi, Pulisseri, Thoran, Payasam, Banana, Papad, Banana chips, Ghee, Buttermilk, and other dishes [2].



Source Image: Internet

Fig 4: Onam Sadhya

4.3. Snake Boat Races

The snake boat race, also known as chundan vellam by the locals, is unquestionably the most important and exciting event of Onam. The snake boat would be 30-35 metres long and carry 64-128 paddlers. Vellam Kali is another name for it.



Source Image: Internet

Fig 5: Snake boat race

4.4. Puli Kali

To entertain people on Onam, trained artists perform Puli Kali, or the play of tigers. In this play, hundreds of men dressed as tigers and leopards march in celebration of Onam. They paint their bodies and faces like tigers and leopards, walk through streets, and perform traditional folk dances like Udukku and Thakil in front of thousands of people. This event is mostly held in the streets of Kerala's Thrissur district. This type of dance was introduced by Maharaja Rama Varma Sakthan Thampuran, a King of Cochin, and it is essentially a celebration of bravery, courage, and the spirit of battle.



Source Image: Internet

Fig 6: Puli Kali

5. The 10-Day Festivity

Onam is celebrated for ten days during the month of Chingam, which is also known as the first month of the Malayalam calendar, Kollavarsham. Each of these ten days is celebrated differently, with different rituals and customs, culminating in the final day known as Thiruvonam.

5.1. Day 1- Atham

The first day of the month, Atham, is considered auspicious and holy by the people of Kerala. People get up early, take baths, go to temples, and pray. On this day, people begin to decorate their homes with Pookalam. With each passing day of the festival, more layers of flowers are added, increasing the size of the Pookalam.

5.2. Day 2- Chithira

The first day, Atham, is considered auspicious and holy by the people of Kerala. People get up early, take a bath, go to temples, and pray. This is also the day when people begin to decorate their homes with Pookalam. With each passing day of the festival, more layers of flowers are added, and the size of the Pookalam grows larger.

5.3. Day 3- Chodhi

On the third day of Onam, Chodhi, people go to markets to buy new clothes and other Onam accessories. The day also has a significant thing of exchanging gifts of new clothes and jewellery, which is known as Onakodi. Furthermore, more flowers are added to the Pookalam; as a result, the Pookalam grows in diameter and is refreshed on a daily basis.

5.4. Day 4- Vishakam

Vishakam, the fourth day, is an important day when Onam Sadhya preparations begin. The reality of this custom is that every member of the family, no matter how small, must contribute to the preparation. An old Malayalam saying, 'Kanam Vittum Onam Unnanum,' which translates to, one should not miss Onam Sadhya even if they have to sell their properties, confirms the feast ^[4].

5.5. Day 5-Anizham

The fifth day, Anizham, is highlighted by the VallamKali grand Snake boat race. This popular competition is usually held on the banks of the Pamba River in Aranmula. Each boat is exquisitely decorated, and hundreds of oarsmen row it. The boats are rowed in accordance with Vanchipattu's rhythm. More fresh flowers are also added to Pookalam in the front yards of the houses.

5.6. Thiriketa

Thiriketa, there is no significant event on the sixth day. The diameter of the Pookalam grows as at least 5 to 6 flower rings are added to the original design. On this day, people also pay visits to their ancestral homes with their families and exchange gifts.

5.7. Moolam

Moolam, the festival preparations begin today, paving the way for grand processions. This is when Puli Kali takes place. As previously stated, artists paint and disguise themselves as tigers, leopards, and hunters and dance to the music. Another prominent dance is Thiruvathira Kali or Kaikotti Kali, in which women dress in traditional attire and dance around a Pookalam and a lamp ^[3].

5.8. Pooradam

On the eighth day of the Onam festival, Pooradam, people make small statues of King Mahabali and Vamana (an incarnation of Lord Vishnu), which they parade around their homes before standing straight in the centre of Pookalam. It is believed that only when the statues are placed in the centre of the Pookalam does Mahabali have permission to visit people's homes.

5.9. Uthradam

The day of Uthradam falls on the eve of Onam. and on this day, people go to the market with their families to buy fresh vegetables and other provisions for the grand Sadhya on Thiruonam day. According to popular belief, King Mahabali will visit his people for four days and bestow his blessings.

5.10. Thiruonam

Finally, the most anticipated day arrives: Thiruonam. People smile and greet one another. The spirit of King Mahabali is said to visit Kerala on this day. Activities begin early in the morning, when people take baths, put on new clothes, and participate in prayers in their homes and temples. The grand

Sadhya is prepared and served in the afternoon on a plantain leaf laid on the floor. This also represents equality and is a reflection of humility. Other highlights of the day include numerous cultural events such as dance, games, shows, and get-togethers. To commemorate the occasion, firecrackers are also set off ^[5].

6. Conclusion

Onam is a festival of unity, harmony, and oneness. Keralans of all faiths, castes, and classes come together to remember King Mahabali's golden era, which they all adored. Onam's strong message is that people should remain united, happy, and in harmony throughout their lives. Onam also recalls the great King Mahabali's values of integrity, honesty, kindness, and sacrifice.

7. References

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