

Whats Onam ?

Onam is the biggest festival in the Indian state of Kerala. Onam Festival falls during the Malayali month of Chingam (Aug - Sep) and marks the homecoming of legendary King Mahabali. Carnival of Onam lasts for ten days and brings out the best of Kerala culture and tradition. Intricately decorated Pookalam, ambrosial Onasadya, breathtaking Snake Boat Race and exotic Kaikottikali dance are some of the most remarkable features of Onam - the harvest festival in Kerala.

□□ Welcoming King Mahabali

Onam awaits one very special visitor, Kerala's most loved legendary King Maveli. He is the King who once gave the people a golden era in Kerala. The King is so much attached to his kingdom that it is believed that he comes annually from the nether world to see his people living happily. It is in honour of King Mahabali, affectionately called Onathappan, that Onam is celebrated.

□□□ Celebrations & Cultural Extravaganza

One of the most marvelous facets of Onam is the unfolding of its rich and well-established culture. We see not just glimpses but a whole gamut of it in the ten-day-long carnival. Pulikali, Kaikottikali, Kummattikalli, Kathakali, Thumbi Thullal besides several other folk arts and traditions can be seen on one platform called Onam.

Rich cultural heritage of Kerala comes out in its best form and spirit during the ten day long festival. It is indeed a treat to be a part of the grand carnival. People of Kerala make elaborate preparations to celebrate it in the best possible manner.

The most impressive part of Onam celebration is the grand feast called Onasadya, prepared on Thiruvonam. It is a nine course meal consisting of 11 to 13 essential dishes. Onasadya is served on banana leaves and people sit on a mat laid on the floor to have the meal.

Another enchanting feature of Onam is Vallamkali, the Snake Boat Race, held on the river Pampa. It is a colourful sight to watch the decorated boat oared by hundreds of boatmen amidst chanting of songs and cheering by spectators.

There is also a tradition to play games, collectively called Onakalikal, on Onam. Men go in for rigorous sports like Talappanthukali (played with ball), Ambeyyal (Archery), Kutukutu and combats called Kayyankali and Attakalam. Women indulge in cultural activities. They make intricately designed flower mats called, Pookalam in the front courtyard of house to welcome King Mahabali. Kaikotti kali and Thumbi Thullal are two graceful dances performed by women on Onam. Folk performances like Kummatti kali and Pulikali add to the zest of celebrations.

□□□ Festival Of Unity and Team Spirit

The beauty of the festival lies in it's secular fabric. People of all religions, castes and

communities celebrate the festival with equal joy and verve. Onam also helps to create an atmosphere of peace and brotherhood by way of various team sports organised on the day. Onam is the passion of the people of Kerala. And, pride of India!

International Tourist Week

Government of India has taken due notice of this vibrant and colorful festival. It promotes Onam internationally in a big way and celebrates 'Tourist Week' for Kerala during Onam celebrations. Thousands of domestic and foreign tourists visit Kerala to be a part of Onam.

The legend

Mahabali was the grandson of Prahlad (son of Hiranyakashyap who was slain by Vishnu in his Narasimha Avataram). Prahlad, despite being an Asura, had great faith in Vishnu. Mahabali learned the act of love and devotion to Lord Vishnu as a child, from Prahlad.

Kashyapa had two wives, Diti and Aditi, who were the parents of the demons and the gods (Asuras and Devas) respectively. Kashyapa, who had gone to the Himalayas to do penance, on his return found Aditi weeping. By divine insight, Kashyapa instantly recognised the cause of her grief. He tried to console her saying that nothing happens in the world without divine will and people should go on doing their duties. He asked her to pray to Vishnu and taught her Payovrata, a ritual that has to be observed from the 12th day of the bright half of Karthika (Sukla-paksha Dvadasi). Since Aditi carried out the Vrata with a pious heart, Vishnu appeared before her and informed her that he would help Indra.

Alternatively, the Devas were very annoyed as Mahabali became the ruler of all the three worlds having defeated the Devas. Devas, the celestial beings, were annoyed and jealous. The gods approached Vishnu and asked for his help. Vishnu said to the Devas that Mahabali is doing good things to his subjects and is eligible to become sura (devas). You devas should not be jealous about that. Being jealous would make you asuras. Vishnu decided to test Mahabali.

In the meantime, Mahabali was performing the sacrificial rite of the Viswajith Yagam or Aswamedha Yagam on the banks of Narmada River. He also declared that he would give anything that anyone sought from him during this Yagam.

Vamana visits Mahabali

Taking advantage of the Yagam and Mahabali's declaration, Vamana (Mahavishnu disguised as a Brahmin) came to the Yaga-shala. As he approached them, the sages assembled there perceived the extraordinary effulgence form of the young lad. Mahabali went forth to receive the Brahmin boy with all traditional honours and gave him an eminent seat befitting the status of a holy person. With the usual courtesy given to the people who come to ask for help, Mahabali told him that it was his good fortune that Vamana had chosen to honour him with his presence. Whatever Vamana desired, Mahabali was ready to fulfill. Vamana smiled and said: "You need

not give me anything great. It is enough if you give me that extend of land covered by three footsteps of mine".

On hearing him, Mahabali's preceptor, the Brahmin Shukracharya (a Daitya priest), who had visions of the future, told Mahabali that the one who had come to take alms from him was not an ordinary Brahmin but Lord Vishnu Himself having assumed this form. He advised Mahabali not to promise the lad anything. But Mahabali was a king who would never go back on his word, considering it sinful to do so. Shukracharya insisted that he should not fulfill the demand of Vamana as he had come to deprive him of all his possessions.

Mahabali, determined to honour the word given to Vamana, begged the pardon of his Guru for disregarding his advice. Earlier, while Mahabali was embarking on the war with Indra, he had prostrated at the feet of his preceptor, Shukracharya, and on his advice had he started the Vishwajith Yagam from which he secured some very powerful weapons. It was only because of Shukracharya's help that he was able to conquer Indra. Mahabali's refusal angered Shukracharya. He cursed Mahabali, saying: 'As you have not heeded your Guru's words, you will be reduced to ashes'. Mahabali was firm and replied: 'I am prepared to face any consequence but will not go back on my word'.

Saying so, he asked Vamana to measure the desired three feet of land. All attempts of Shukracharya to dissuade Mahabali proved futile. Mahabali considered everyone who came to him for help as god himself and never refused them anything. Mahabali told his Guru: "Prana (life) and Maana (honour) are like the two eyes of a person. Even if life goes, honour should be protected. Knowing that the person that has come now is the Lord Himself, I should be the most fortunate one as the Lord, who gives everything to mankind, is seeking something from me." Mahabali gladly said that even if Vishnu himself were to come to his sacrifice and ask for anything, he would deliver it.

Vamana grew in size until he towered above the heavens. With one footstep, he measured all of the earth. With the second, he claimed all of heaven. There was still one foot of territory that Mahabali owed him. Mahabali requested Vamana to place the final step on his head as the third step of land, for he had no other left. Vamana did so and in doing so, pushed him down to Patala, the underworld (the kingdom beneath the earth).

For the devotion of this daitya, Mahabali, Lord Vishnu (Vamana) granted him rule over the underworld. It was also granted that he would hold the position of Indra for one Manvantara, thus fulfilling his devotee's desire (the office of Indra being a rotating position, changing every Manvantara).

As a last gift, Mahabali was granted permission to visit his subjects once a year. Thus, Keralites celebrate the Onam festival to commemorate the memory of the Great King Mahabali who would keep his promise to visit. Mahabali fulfilled his name as the great martyr for the sake of Truth ("Satya"). The name "Mahabali" itself means Great Sacrifice.

During Onam, the feast and festive mood of the people, dressed in their best, is considered reminiscent of the prosperous and truthful life of the subjects during Mahabali's flawless reign. People wear new clothes (Vastra) during Onam. The 'Vastra' also stands for heart. Thus the significance of wearing new clothes is about making the heart new by removing all bad thoughts and feelings. People forgetting their sectarian outlooks, join together to welcome the auspicious 'Thiruvonam' day.

Moral questions

It would seem unfair that Lord Vishnu punished Mahabali, who like his grandfather (Prahlada), was deemed one of the greatest devotees of Lord Vishnu, and a very just king. However, Mahabali is not considered penalized by Vishnu, since he was granted the blessings of Vishnu and his remembrance allowed to be observed for eternity by way of Onam. He was also given the opportunity to keep his head under Lord Vishnu's holy feet, thus allowing all his sins to be wiped away.

Also, by the grant of Vishnu, Mahabali will be the next (eighth) Indra during the time of the eighth Manu, Savarni Manu. Purandara is the current Indra.

It is believed that Mahabali became the greatest earthly devotee of Vishnu by sacrificing his kingdom to him.

Sura means a being with more positive thoughts and asura means a being with more negative thoughts. According to Hinduism, sura will become asura by entertaining negative thoughts and asura can become sura by entertaining positive thoughts. Mahabali, having been born into an asura was verily a sura, on account of his character and innate nature. To test Mahabali's altruism and unselfishness, the Mahavishnu has taken the form Vamana and had sent him to Patala, which Mahabali had accepted gracefully. Thus, Mahabali became sura or god and Onam symbolizes the advaita principles of Hinduism.

[Source](#)