

ONAM FESTIVAL

By

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It need hardly be stated that the three pre-eminent national festivals of Kerala are Onam, Tiruvatira and Vishu, and that even among these three, the festival *par excellence* is the Onam which falls on the Sukladvadasi day in the month of Chingam (August-September). The term 'Onam' is derived from the Sanskrit word Srona or Sravana, the name of the twenty-second lunar mansion, and it is common to both Tamil and Malayalam.¹

The Onam festival is associated with the name of Vamanamurti, the fifth avatar of Vishnu. Vamana was born at noon on the Sukladvadasi day in the month of Bhadrpada (August-September)² and that auspicious day is known as Sravanadvadasi, because the Sravana asterism manifests itself in conjunction with Dvadasi, the twelfth *tithi* (of the bright half of the lunar month) on that day. It would be interesting in this connection to remember that the avatar of Matsya took place on the Krshnatrayodasi day in Chaitra (March-April), of Kurma on the Krshnavadasi day in Jyeshtha, (May-June), of Varaha on the Krshnapanchami day in Chaitra, of Narasimha on the Suklachaturdasi day in Vaisakha (April-May), of Parasurama on the Krshnavaditiya day in Marga-

srisha (November-December), of Srirama on the Suklanavami day in Chaitra, of Balarama on the Sukladvitiya day in Vaisakha, and of Srikrshna on the Krshnashtami day in Sravana (July-August).

Puranic Story

The episode of Vamana is narrated in detail in the eighth Skandha of Srimadbhagavata. It is summarised in several other Puranas also, e.g., Vamana and Padma, and in Harivamsa. Mahabali, the grandson of Prahlada, the greatest of Vaishnavite saints, for whose protection from his father, the dreadful demon Hiranyakasipu, Vishnu assumed the shape of Narasimha (man-lion) and slew him, was a mighty emperor of the Asuras. He extended his sway not only over the whole earth, which he governed wisely and well, but also conquered Svarga (heaven).

Aditi, the woe-begone mother of the Devas consequently sought the help of Vishnu, and the Lord, as already mentioned, was born to her and Kasyapa (father of the Devas) as Vamana (dwarf), with the specific object of humbling the overweening pride of Mahabali, and wrest both heaven and earth from him. Hearing that Bali was then performing a great sacrifice and knowing that his one weakness was not to refuse any request that might be made to him, Vamana proceeded to Bhrgukachcha (Broach) on the banks of the Narmada where the sacrificial ceremony was in progress,³ and prayed him for the grant of a tiny piece of land, just enough to cover three of his little foot-steps, and not more. Mahabali readily granted this prayer, in spite of the protestations of his

1. "நலத்தகுவுபிரம் நள்ளே சிரவணமு
லக்கை சேரணை மரயோனோணம்"
(Chentan's Divakaram, the oldest Tamil
Lexicon.)

2. श्रोणायां श्रवणद्वादश्यां
मुहूर्तेभिजिति प्रभुः ।

.....
द्वादश्यां सवितातिष्ठ-
न्माध्यन्दिनगतो नृपः ।
विजया नाम सा प्रोक्ता
यस्यां जन्म विदुर्हरेः ॥"

(Srimadbhagavata, VIII, Chap. 18.)

3. "सनर्मदायास्तद उत्तरे बले-
र्य ऋविजस्ते भृगुच्छसंज्ञके ।
अवर्तयन्तो भृगवः क्रतूतमं
व्यचक्षतारादुदितं यथा रविम् ॥"

(Ibid.)

preceptor Sukracharya who knew the underlying plot, and Vishnu, thereupon, occupied the whole earth and sky with the first foot and the entire heaven with the second, reaching Satyaloka, the abode of Brahma. Since Bali was unable to find accommodation for his third foot-step, the Lord caused the Asura to be bound with the *varuni* noose when, nothing daunted, that generous foe, true to his word, bared his head and showed it for that foot also being planted. Vishnu then pushed him down to the nether-world, Patala (Rasatala according to some authorities), with the promise, however, that he would be installed on the throne of Indra, the king of the Devas, in the Manvantara of Savarni (eighth Manu).

Was Mahabali King of Kerala ?

The surmise that Mahabali was the earliest king of Kerala with his capital at Mavelikkara in Central Travancore, is far too fantastic to stand in need of refutation. This conjecture, which is of very recent origin, is due to the misinterpretation of certain ancient Tamil texts. To cite only one instance, Utiyan Cheral 'Vana-varampan', mentioned in the Sangham work Patittuppattu, by which expression is meant the Chera king Utiyan whose territory is bounded by the sky, is metamorphosed into Udayan Banavarman, leading to the glib inference that Bana, the son of Mahabali, was a Chera ruler.⁴ It is well-known that Bana's capital, Souitapura, was situated in Kumaon on the banks of the Mandakini four miles from Umamatha,⁵ while according to a few authorities it stood at Tripura on the banks of the Narmada. It has already been mentioned that Mahabali's sacrifice was performed at Broach. There was a petty dynasty of Banas in South India who ruled over small portions of the Chittoor and North Arcot Districts within historical

4. Vide K. G. Sessa Aiyar's *Ceras of the Sangam age*, p. 9, for a criticism of this view.

5. "देवीकोटो बाणपुरं
कोटीवर्षमुमावनं
स्याच्छोणितपुरम् ।"

(Trikanḍasesha, Blumivarga.)

times;⁶ but they had nothing whatever to do with Kerala. The fact cannot be too strongly emphasised that the Onam festival originated with the worship of Vamana and that it was absolutely unconnected with Mahabali at the commencement.

Onam in Tamilnad

In this context, it is also worthy of note that this festival was not confined to Kerala, but extended over the whole of Tamilnad in early times. There are references to Onavizhavu (Onam festival) in Tamil literature. Maturaikkanchi, the well-known Sangham work composed by Man-kutimarutanar in praise of Netumchezhiyan, the Pandyan king, which forms the sixth poem in the Pattuppattu collection, contains a significant passage describing that on the Onam day when Mahavishnu was born (as Vamana) to destroy the Asuras, able-bodied men fought in opposite camps and received wounds on their foreheads.⁷ This proves that the Onam festival and the mock-fight which formed one of the main amusements on that day are at least as old as the second century A. C. Several ancient social customs of the Tamils continue to flourish intact in Kerala while they have disappeared in other parts of Tamilnad and this is one of them. Onappiran, the Lord of Onam, is one of the names of Vishnu in Tamil. It may also be remembered that the devata (divinity) of Tiruvonam is Vishnu.

Kerala Legends

At the same time it has to be remembered that the Puranic version of the avatar of Vamana has undergone some modifications in Kerala with the advance of ages.

6. Historical Inscriptions of South India by R. Sewell and S. K. Aiyangar, p. 328.

7. கணங்கொளவுணர்கடந்திபாலந்தார்
மாயேன்மேயவேணநன்னுள்
.....
மறங்கொள்சேரிமாது பொருசெரு
வின்
மாறு துற்றவடுப்படநெற்றி".

(Maturaikkanchi, lines 590-591 and 594-595.)

Onappattu, also known as Mahabalicharitam, is a small anonymous poem, in Malayalam, composed about two centuries ago. It possesses no merits as a work of art, but some of its lines are¹ universally known.⁸ That poem narrates the legend that, when Mahabali was the ruler of the earth, he organised the Onam festival in the Trkkakkara temple in North Travancore, that it fell into disuse when he departed for the nether-world, and that when Srikrshna and Yudhishtira succeeded him he complained of this neglect to Srikrshna, with the result that he permitted Mahabali to revisit the earth once every year on the Onam day and arranged with Yudhishtira for the re-institution of the festival on even a grander scale than before, so as to elicit the encomium of Mahabali at the time of that visit.⁹

The author of this poem was in no sense a scholar and he never had even a nodding acquaintance with Puranic literature. Another version of this tradition is that, before his exit from the earth, Mahabali prayed Vamana to allow him to visit it on the Onam day annually and that this prayer was granted by the Lord.¹⁰ There is no foundation for either of these versions in any of the Puranas, and one modern

scholar rightly calls it a grandmother's tale.¹¹

A different tradition based on the authority of Keralamahatmya, an anonymous Sanskrit work of the 17th century A. D., is also current, according to which Striparasurama once cursed the Nambutiri Brahmans of Kerala on their attempting to test the truth of one of his promises, and that on their expression of regret for that sinful act, he agreed to visit Kerala on the Onam day at Trichur¹² or at Trkkakkara as per another

11. "മുനംപാമനമുത്തുവതാരകിരപോണമെന്നം
ലന്ന
മാബലിതൻപരവൃത്തിവിട്ടെന്നതൊരേമ്മ
ശ്ലഃശ്ലം."

(Tiruvonamahatmyam by Aranmula Kochchuraman Pillai, published in 1906.)
The late Kochchuraman Pillai, who was a good Sanskrit scholar, also says that he was not able to come across any authority in support of this tradition.

"മുനം പാമനമുത്തിയാടൊരു ഹരിക്കായിട്ടു
നാടാകവേ
ധന്യൻ മാബലി നൽകി താത്രയരളിപ്പോ-
ചോരവസ്ഥാന്തര
എന്നാലതിരപോണനാളിവിടം ധന്യവു
മാണിന്നിമേ-
ചെന്നോതീ ബചി ; ചോഷകാരണമതമെന്നം
നോതിട്ടന്തു ജനം,
എന്നാൽ ഭാഗവതാന്തരമപി ഹരിവംശാദ്യം
ന്തരപുത്ര്യമം
മാന്യതപംകലതം പുരാണമതിലും ഗ്രന്ഥാന്തരം
തന്നിലും
ഇന്നീലോകർ പഠഞ്ഞിട്ടെന്ന മൊഴിയെന്തൊ-
ങ്ങിട്ടുപാൻതക്കതാ-
യൊന്നും മാമകളുഷ്ടികരക്കു പിഷയീഭൂതപ-
മാന്നില്ലമോ."

(Ibid.)

8. "മാവേലി നാടുവന്നീടുംകാലം
മാൻ പരമല്ലാതമാനന്ദപാലേ."
(Onappattu)

C. F. the English distich
"When Adam delved and Eve span,
Who was then a gentleman?"

9. "ചിങ്ങമാനാത്തിപദയാണത്തിൻനാദം
മാവേലിതാരം വരമിവിട്ടു,
പണ്ടേതിനക്കാലം വിചിത്രമാചി
വേണ്ടുന്നതല്ലാതമാക്കിടുന്നു."
(Onappattu)

10. "മുൻപിൽജഗത്തിതഖിലം ബഹുധർമ്മം
മുരുകൈ-
ങ്ങൻപോട്ടു കാഞ്ഞാരു മഹാബലി ചൈത്യം
രാജൻ
വൻപൻ പരന്ന തിരുവാണലിരം ജനങ്ങര
സംപൂർണ്ണഭക്തി പരമോത്സവമരക്കിട്ടനു."
(Malayankollam, by Kochchunni Tampuran.)

12. "श्रावणे संस्थिते भानौ
श्रवणर्क्षे द्विजोत्तमाः
आगमिष्यामि मद्भूषौ
केरळस्मिन् सुवर्षके
वृषाद्रिपुरमागत्य
श्रीमूलस्थानमण्डपे ।"
(Keralamahatmyam, Chapter 99.)

version.¹³ This tradition, is also wholly unfounded.

Trkkakkara Temple

Almost every time-honoured belief in this respect converges to the view that Trkkakkara Appan, or the Lord of Trkkakkara, is the deity that has to be worshipped during the Onam festival. This deity is none other than Vamana. Trkkakkara, situated about two and a half miles to the south-east of the Idappalli railway station in the Kunyatnad taluk in North Travancore,

is noted for its ancient shrine of Vamana. It is one of the thirteen Divyadesams (holy spots) of Malainad (Kerala), sacred to Srivaishnavas, and its greatness has been praised in rapturous verses by Nammazhavar, the greatest of Srivaishnava saints. Trkkakkara Appan was one of the tutelary deities of Chera rulers, and several inscriptions of

13. "ശ്രീപരശുരാമഭവൽതാനമേപം-തരൻ
 ശ്രീമുചസ്ഥാനത്തുനിന്നുളിചെയ്യു.
 ശ്രാവണമാസിലതു ഭൂതിനമേനസമിനി
 മേലിൻ-തിരു-
 വോണലിനംമുതലിപിടയിപാസം ചെയ്യിടം
 ഞാൻ.
 ഉണ്ണമളുചെന്മാരേ ! നിന്നു ഉല്യാപേര-
 മെന്തണം തൃക്കാക്കരത്തു കോവിലുതന്നിൽ

 അതു പരം നരദൂത്യതകെന്നിയെ ഞാൻ-
 കമനാൽ"

(Tiruvonamahatmyam.)

14. (Travancore Archaeological Series, Vol. II, pp. 38-51.) The correct form of the word, as seen from these inscriptions, is Tirukkal-kara, which in Tanjil assumes the form of Tirukkatkara.



THE TEMPLE AT ARANMULA: IN THE RIVER IN FRONT OF THE TEMPLE SNAKE BOAT REGATTAS ARE HELD TO CELEBRATE UTRATTATI WHICH FOLLOWS ONAM.

the time of Bhaskara Ravivarman, the last Cheramanperumal (circa 978-1036), have been discovered in that shrine.¹⁴

According to tradition, the Onam festival at Trkkakkara, which began on the Attam (Hastham) asterism in Chingam and lasted for twenty-eight days, was celebrated with great eclat in ancient times¹⁵ and every potentate of Kerala made it a point to participate in that celebration from the very commencement. It is believed that the Attachchamayam procession, which is even now celebrated by the Maharajas of

15. "തൃക്കാക്കരപ്പുനട ലിപ്യമഹോത്സവശ്രീ-
 തിരുവമാണ തടകാതു പണ്ടുപാലും ;
 ചാൽക്കോണ്ട ചോക്കരതുകാണ്ടു നിജകണ-
 ണതിക്ക
 തൃക്കാക്കരപ്പുനട ണിഞ്ഞു നിരത്തിട്ടുന."

(Malayalamkollam, l. 80.)

Kunjikkuttan Tampuran states in his poem Keralam, Part I (vide pp. 90-92), that the festival was instituted by Bhaskara Ravivarma, and that its object was the commemoration of the death of Mahabali. Both these observations are incorrect.

Cochin and the Zamorins of Calicut, serves to commemorate that custom. Neither the Maharajas of Travancore nor the Kolattiris of North Malabar have ever celebrated Atachamayam, because their territories did not fall within the direct suzerainty of the Perumals. People of all castes, classes and communities in Kerala from far and near witnessed the festivities and worshipped Vamana at Trkkakkara. It is stated that it was only after this festival dwindled in importance that the worship of Trkkakkara Appan in every house was started; but this view cannot be accepted as correct. It has to be presumed that while those who proceeded to Trkkakkara took part in the local festivities, the majority who stayed behind celebrated the festival in their own houses. The festival does not commemorate either the close of the Perumal era, the advent of the Christian Community, or the worship of the sun, as wrongly supposed by several modern scholars.

Festival of Spring

It should not be forgotten that there are also certain special reasons for the celebration of the Onam festival in Kerala, apart from its association with the worship of Vamana. Otherwise it is inexplicable how Tiruvonam here has become a day of sumptuous eating and hilarious playing, while elsewhere Sravanadvadasi is a day of fasting and austerity.¹⁶ Chingam is the

16. The details of the worship of Vamana on the Sravanadvadasi day are found in several Puranas. In Agnipurana, Chapter 195, it is stated that the following verses have to be chanted among the pushpanjali hymns that day:

“वामनो बुद्धिदे दाता;
द्रव्यस्थो वामनः स्वयं;
वामनः प्रतिगृह्णाति;
वामनो मे ददाति च;
द्रव्यस्थो वामनो नित्यं;
वामनाय नमोनमः।”

Vide also Garudapurana, Chapter 141. From these Puranas it will be seen that the conferment of riches is one of the special boons of Vamana. Vamana is also believed to grant victory and the day is known as Vijayadvadasi.

month of harvest in Kerala, and it is a season when peace and plenty reign again after the incessant rains of Karkatakam. It is, therefore, not without a sense of propriety that the month of Karkatakam is stigmatised as Kalla (rogue) Karkatakam while Chingam is extolled as Ponnum (golden) Chingam in popular parlance. The ceremonies of Nira (filling the household granary with newly harvested paddy) and Puttari (eating of the newly secured rice) are performed on an auspicious day generally before Onam. Inclemency of weather disappears, days and nights are fresh and delightful, nature puts on a new garb and flowers bloom in abundance. Fr. Bartolomeo, the Carmelite friar who was an intimate friend of Maharaja Ramavarma of Travancore (1758-98) and who lived for several years at Varappuzha and studied, as few other foreigners have done, the culture and antiquities of Kerala, has recorded in his *Voyage to the East Indies*: “All nature seems as if renovated; the flowers again shoot up and the trees bloom; in a word this season is the same as that which Europeans call Spring. This festival (Onam) seems, therefore, to have been instituted for the purpose of soliciting from the Gods a happy and fruitful year.”¹⁷ There can be little doubt that it is for this reason that Onam becomes a season of all-round mirth and regalement and that it was associated with the worship of Vamana to secure spiritual, in addition to temporal, happiness. As a Malayalam poet of the

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17. A *Voyage to the East Indies*, p. 360.

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17th century has put it: "This festival was instituted in order that all people might enjoy themselves." 18

Gathering Flowers

The festival, as already indicated, commences on the Attam day, and while the religious portion of it lasts only for ten days ending with Tiruvonam, two more days are set apart for recreational purposes. The great secret of gaining and giving happiness lies in our becoming as children, and this is what every Malayali strives to do during the Onam season. The festival, of course, appeals most to children with their God-given capacity for concentrated enjoyment, and every boy and girl sets out each morning to collect flowers singing devotional songs in praise of Onattappan (Vamana) and Onam all the way, and returns by 9 A. M. They then carpet the central portion of the front-yard of their houses, already cleansed and purified, with those flowers arranged as artistically as possible. A conical image usually made of clay is also set up in the middle of it, supposed to represent Trkkakkara Appan. This floral decoration and worship proceed with increasing vigour and devotional fervour each succeeding day.

Presentation of New Clothes

The more important portion of the festival commences on the Utradam day, and

18. "ഹൃഷ്യാക്ഷാസുഖോത്സവങ്ങളായീടാലസരി-
ഭമാനം."

(Harykshamasasamarotsavam by
Tirunilakanthan, p. 4.)



CROWDS WATCHING THE ARANMULA REGATTA FROM THE TEMPLE STEPS.

hence it is appropriately termed the first Onam. All the food-stuffs necessary for sumptuous feasting on the four days commencing therefrom and especially on the Tiruvonam day are stored up in advance with punctilious care. In well-to-do families the tenants and other dependents present the fruits of their labour such as vegetables, and this is known as *Onakkazhcha*. At about 4 A. M. on Tiruvonam a portion of the courtyard is decorated with flowers and festoons, lamps are lit in front of the images of Trkkakkara Appan and other deities, and worship is offered on an elaborate scale. This over, all the inmates of the house go and pray in the local temple, and on their return, the head of the family presents them and his tenants and other dependents with new unbleached clothes. In former times, members of the military castes and children also received bows.