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Politics

Onam, Mahabali and the Narrow Imaginations of the Right

When it comes to Kerala's most important festival, Hindutva organisations, hyper-identitarian Islamist groups and anti-Left Dalit intellectuals are all working to rob it of its subversive, democratic essence.

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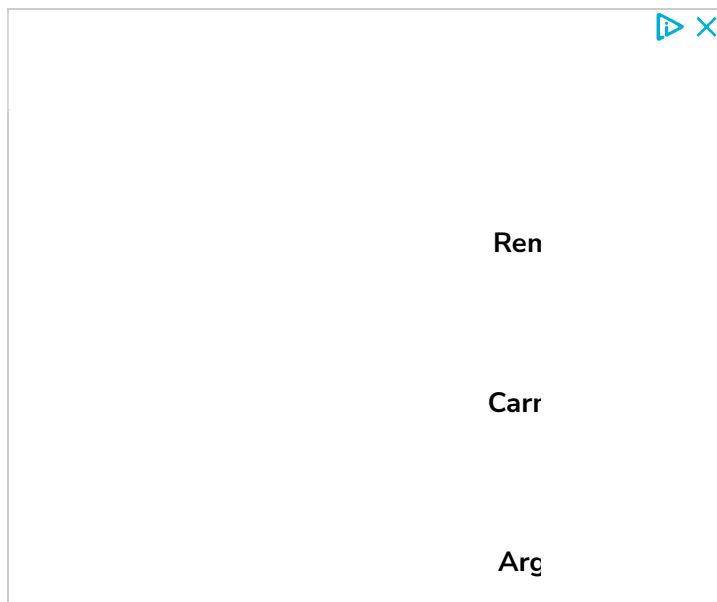
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A dancer performs during festivities marking the start of annual harvest festival of Onam in the southern Indian city of Kochi August 14, 2010.

Credit: Reuters/Dipak

The Hindu Right's engagements with Onam and associated images like Mahabali continue to generate heated public debates in Kerala. The latest example was a legal suit filed by the Hindu Aikyavedi (Hindu United Front) against the setting up of a Mahabali Memorial at the Vamana Murti Temple at Thrikkakkara in Ernakulam district. The Aikyavedi argued that Mahabali 'the demon' can't share the sacred space with Vamana, who is not only Mahabali's annihilator but also a god. The presence of Mahabali is said to have polluted the ritual hygiene of this Vamana temple complex.



The Hindu Right critiquing ‘lower’ caste images of Onam is not a new development in the state. In 2016, a similar controversy erupted when Amit Shah, the national president of the BJP, posted an image of Mahabali on the occasion of Onam, the largest harvest festival of Kerala. Shah’s post stirred up an array of debates in Kerala around the myths of Mahabali and Vamana. In the image Shah used, Mahabali, ‘the indigenous welfarist ruler’ of ancient Kerala, was placed under the feet of Vamana, the ‘manipulator dwarf’ incarnation of God Vishnu.

According to the Puranas, Hindu gods were threatened by the popularity of the charismatic leadership of Mahabali. But the Brahmanical narratives consider Mahabali an impure *asura* and the rustic ‘other’ of pure Hindu divinities. Consequently, Vamana pushed Mahabali to *pathala* – the nether world – after granting him the consolation of being allowed to visit his confiscated land once in a year. Thus, Onam has broadly been celebrated in anticipation of Mahabali’s ‘annual return’ to his own annihilated self.

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In Kerala, Mahabali – the *asura-avarna* who is a victim of Brahmanical manipulation – and his kingdom have been postulated as models of progressive emancipation. This belief is prominent among the Shudra caste groups and many Dalit/marginal communities. However, on the eve of Onam last year, Shah wished everyone a ‘Happy Vamana Jayanthi’ with the image of Mahabali under Vamana’s feet, thus changing the narrative. That was a strategic visual imposition which suits the ongoing political agenda of Hindutva leaders. Through that singularity, the Hindutva groups intended not only to redesign Onam as a Brahmanical victory over ‘lower’ caste groups, but also remake the festival as an exclusively Brahmanical and ‘Hindu’ festival.

Nevertheless, Onam’s lived experiences and narratives – which vary among communities and in micro-regions of Kerala – defy such singularity. Hindutva narratives of Onam, its images and experiences have been significantly different from Adivasis, Dalits, intermediary castes groups like Izhava, Muslims and Christians. However, one dominant factor that stood out in the multitude of non-Brahmanical narratives is Vamana’s act of betrayal, who removed Mahabali, or ‘Maveli’ as he is locally known, as an autonomous ruler who defied the Brahmanical order. And that Maveli’s trusting magnanimity caused the destruction of a non-Brahmanical Kerala past. Thus, representing Onam as the celebration of Vamana’s victory over a Dravidian cultural domain is seen as unpardonable. Critics have also warned of Hindutva’s desire to weaken the region’s specific style of community engagements and civic spaces that emerged through the multiple possibilities that such festivals offer.

The trajectory of Hindutva’s expansionist agenda and machinery at work in Kerala over a period of time proves that the ‘Vamana’ valorisation is not the product of some unthinking individual or certain frontal organisations. The homogenising attempts of Hindutva groups around

festivals such as Onam and Pongal through such re-descriptions show the umbilical relationship between the sustenance of its ideology and the reinvention of myths. There is no Hindutva without myth, but the fact remains that the multitude of myths – and the persistent paradoxes through which they are born – threatens its very existence.

Thus, calibrated attempts are being made to create a grand narrative around Onam, along with other divisive activities.

Successful at selling festivals through assertive description, Hindutva uses Onam as an instrument for establishing itself in the micro-regions of Kerala, following North India where it earned huge dividends through such tactics. Instilling a hegemonic Brahmanical image through Vamana as the *conquistador* of the subaltern has the intent of tapping into the politics of emotion in Kerala. Through reassembling the scattered Puranic and emotive imagination of the ‘upper’-caste population of Kerala, Sangh parivar organisations try to construct an ‘upper’-caste Hindu solidarity. Such Puranic signs and symbols can also be used to garner ideological support and spiritual solidarity from upwardly moving intermediary caste groups as well. Along with it, the persistent presentation of the ruling Left as those who hold an anti-Hindu ideology has been part of the same agenda which attempts to earn a long-term emotional dividend for the BJP in the state. Through the continuous denial of narrative possibilities, Hindutva has opened up a culture-based political strategy in the state as well.

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Various historical and oral sources have established Onam as a pre-Brahmanical sedentary agricultural festival, which predates the expansion of Vaishnavism in South India. It was possible that once Vaishnavism became a cultural-liturgical reality, Onam and its folk characters got absorbed into Vaishnavite narratives. Suvira Jaiswal highlights how such popular stories and liturgical traditions got absorbed into Vaishnavite narrative dominance in various North Indian regions in ancient times. That is why a section of Dalit-subaltern intellectuals

perceive Mahabali as an *avarna* ruler who can be located in Kerala's Buddhist past. According to this version, Onam is a celebration of a Buddhist memory in which the humanist 'Buddhist Mahabali' triumphed over his manipulative Brahmanical detractors in an ideological and moral battle. Mahabali's annual return on Onam, thus, has been taken as the celebration of honour and hope that awaits a moral protagonist, who can never be fully colonised.

It shows that Onam as a subject experience varies from person to person. The Hindutva attempt to use the Vamana image to homogenise the festival reflects the fear of many Onams. Similarly, the new trends of celebrating Onam as a secular signifier also threaten Hindutva's divisive manipulations. Therefore, it continues to re-assert the post-Vaishnavite spatial identity and ritual past of the festival to ensure the eviction of other religious communities from what is not 'innately theirs'. Through the presentation of Onam as an upper caste Hindu victory over *avarna* Mahabali, the Hindu Right wanted Muslims, Dalits and Christians removed from shared spaces such festivals might offer. Though Amit Shah has urged his local party leaders to tap the electoral potential of Dalits in Kerala, their increasing Ambedkarite assertion has started troubling Hindutva. Thus, a singularised summation of the festival is also aimed at reaching out to many intermediary caste groups who have been seeking social and political 'honour'. This is important in a context where a significant population from such caste groups had begun to show Hindu Right inclinations, particularly in South Kerala.



Dancers perform during festivities marking the start of the annual harvest festival of Onam in the southern Indian city of Kochi August 23, 2009.

Credit: Reuters/Sivaram V.

Ultra-identitarian paradoxes

As if Hindutva attempts to rob Onam of its essence were not bad enough, the simultaneous efforts of hyper-identitarian Islamists and anti-Left Dalit intellectuals is further muddying the waters.

They too negate the whole multitude of Onams and assert its savarna provenance. Some sections of the Dalit intellectual cauldron envisage Onam as the *savarna* celebration of Dalit/lower caste peripherality and upper caste subjugation of marginal lives. This version finds rhetorical allies, particularly in the overt neo-Islamist discourses which now affirm a language of subaltern cohesion, despite the 'elitist' traits and upper caste premises of the Islamists. Paradoxically, these debates emerge from the larger decolonising project of the post-structuralist cultural critiquing of grand narratives and search for multiplicities. However, they consider the idea of secularism and the 'Left' as the most potent immediate enemies and de-historicise festivals like Onam from their own socio-cultural premises.

Such ultra-identitarian polemics completely negate the multiplicities of the idea of Mahabali and the experiences of Onam itself. Naturally, such positions further strengthen the singularised homogeneity that Hindutva deliberately purports for Hindu cohesion through the reinvention of savarna honour. Similarly, the ultra-identitarian effort to create what can be termed 'savarna-guilt' has been counter effective, as it destroys the possibility of constructive engagement between those with anti-fascist sensibilities. Thus, Hindutva's homogenisation and the ultra-identitarian's de-contextualised excesses about festivals and images will ultimately fuel growing sectarian tensions in the region. One can already see the increasing social gaps between communities and the prominent reason has been the continuous presentation of identity-based binaries by various Right organisations – political and religious.

Hindutva's attempt to re-imagine Onam has emerged at a time when the emergent neo-salafi Islamist groups have started arguing that the participation in Onam-wishing, visiting and dining is 'anti-Islamic.' They argue that such local festivals are a blasphemous religious aberration and part of *shirq* – polytheistic acts. Like their Hindutva counterparts, these *salafi* puritan groups deny festivals their multiplicities.



A dancer gets ready to perform during festivities marking the start of the annual harvest festival of Onam in the southern Indian city of Kochi August 23, 2009. Credit: Reuters/Sivaram V.

Mahabali as resistance

The discourses in Kerala overlook the role of 'Mahabali' in the anti-Brahmanical resistance of the 19 century. Jyotirao Phule, the foremost anti-caste social reformist in western India in the last decade of the 19th century, questioned the dominant nationalist model of *Ramarajya* through the image of Mahabali. Maharashtra's Brahmin intellectuals presented Ramarajya as an alternative 'state' against the violative colonial state. However, Phule countered this savarna model by introducing '*Balirajya*'. He presented it as an emancipator welfare state under Mahabali, the benign *adi-sudra*'untouchable' ruler. This new model was very effective and was also instrumental in the very intellectual making of B.R. Ambedkar in the following century. Phule also

asserted that Shivaji, the Maratha warrior, represented 'avarana' Mahabali and the kingdom of Marathas should be considered as a return of its non-Brahmanical golden past.

Phule reinvented the cult of Mahabali which always existed in the pre-Brahmanical sedentary settlements from Gujarat to Konkan, fully realising the subversive potential of Bali as the first humanist king and his kingdom as a fully-fledged state in his resistance against Brahmanical narrative hegemony. In the Puranic sequence of incarnations, Vamana precedes the 'Parasurama' avatar of Vishnu, who in the Vaishnavite narratives created the Konkan coast. Phule rejects Parasurama completely. His choices of stories reflected on a non-exploitative agrarian reality before the Vaishnavite expansion across the region under Mahabali. Similarly, he perceived Parasurama, the Kshatriya annihilator, as the progenitor of Brahmanical caste violence in the region.

However, the ultra-identitarian positions in Kerala do not appreciate the subversive potential of such non-Brahmanical charismatic figures in their own imagination of anti-caste cohesiveness. It is true that a section of landlords privately see Onam and subjugated Mahabali both as their continual dominance, as sociologists Filippo Osella and Caroline Osella pointed out earlier in their research on the politics of morality in Kerala. However, as it stands now, the vast majority of agricultural labourers believe that Onam and the idea of Mahabali's return gives them a sense of rights and dignity. For instance, in northern Malabar, where many liturgical performatives defy the dominant Vaishnavite rituals, the return has been represented by '*Onappottan*' – the unhearing and unspeaking representative of Mahabali.

The performative cult of Onappottan has largely been enacted by men from the Malayan community, a scheduled caste. This community considers Onappottan as the shadow of Kuttichathan, the lower caste martyr deity. According to one narrative, Kuttichathan annihilated a large number of Namputhiri Brahmins before being killed by their hand. For a section of Dalits, Onam has been the remembrance of his martyrdom and his return through Onappottan. This completely unsettles the established wisdom about Onam itself. In 2016, immediately after Shah's post, one

Onappottan was brutally attacked by RSS activists in Vishnumangalam, a small village in the district of Calicut, declaring the Onappottan cult as anti-Hindu.

As sociologists have already shown, performative politics has become a major site for the Right across the world, and in India, Hindutva has been employing it quite successfully. It has been done through inventing homogenous meanings to rituals, festivals and myths. This 'semitisation of Hinduism', as Jaiswal explained it, through consistent dogmatisation, is a part of their increasing reliance on singularised rituals. Though with the spread of democratic plurality, myths about creation and annihilation ceased to be overestimated and are no longer considered as significant articles of everyday faith. However, Hindutva's over emphasis on such myths are aimed at permanently fixing them as instruments of everyday social tension.

In short, what Hindutva does in Kerala is the representation of myths and history to suit its political agenda, claiming to break the shackle of 'misrepresentation' of secular historians. Writing hate histories, trying to correct 'myths' and the excessive renaming of streets and institutions not only show the lack of a meaningful imagination of governance and capacity to go beyond the rhetoric, but also indicate a dangerously deformed ideology.

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