

## Myth of Vamana and Mahabali: Jungian approach to the origin of Onam festival

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### ABSTRACT

Festivals celebrate the return of the sacred time and its fabled paradisaic state for the humankind. The harvest festival of Kerala—*Onam*—celebrates the annual return of the King Mahabali, a devotee of Vamana (Lord Vishnu), who represents the virtues needed to rule the land and the hopes for the mass well-being. The three worlds belong to the divinities; the kingdoms belong to the virtues and vices of the kings. The king of the land projects the *psyche* of the people and the status of the kingdom. King Mahabali thus makes nature's facilitations efficacious. Like Vamana who is the preserver, King Mahabali, who is the cultural hero of Kerala, too returns to bless his people with prosperity. The paper presents the interpretation of the myth of Vamana and Mahabali using archetypal amplification and reflects on the origin and ceremonies of the *Onam* festival.

**Keywords:** *myth, harvest festival, rituals, psyche, sacred time.*

“Thou shall observe the feast of harvest, the first fruits of thy labours, which thou hast sown in the field: and the feast of ingathering, which is in the end of the year, when thou hast gathered in thy labours out of the field” - Exodus 23:16

As dictated by *Yahweh*, the God of the Israelites, God's chosen people were required to celebrate the feast of harvest as an act of gratitude for the blessings that they had received from above in the form of a bountiful harvest. It is one among the three great feasts mentioned in the Old Testament, and hence is deeply rooted in the Jewish and Christian tradition, observed as the feast of tabernacles (*Sukkot*) or Thanksgiving. Since ancient times, in cultures across the world, harvest festivals have been primarily observed as an occasion to express one's gratitude towards the deities/ nature spirits responsible for a bumper crop and favourable weather conditions during the harvest season. Therefore, the harvest rituals and ceremonies focussed more on pleasing and seeking blessings from the sylvan deities such as offering the best of the first fruits of one's labour unto the house of God.

Festivals that celebrate a sacred mythical event should be distinguished from the ones that mark a historical event. According to Mircea Eliade, “a thing in the past is irreversible,

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whereas a mythical event can be repeated by the power of rites” (Eliade, 1963). By reiterating them, one is able to revive what the Gods did at the sacred time of origin. Religious festivals illustrate a collective ‘going back’ to the mythical narrative or time of origin. Hence the entire community goes back to reconstitute and relive the primordial events narrated in the myths through rituals and ceremonies. Thus, it becomes a time to return to the sacred past, the time of absolute beginning, in order to renew and regenerate one’s existence in the world.

Onam, the harvest festival of Kerala, commemorates the annual visit of the legendary Asura King ‘Mahabali’ from the underworld to his former kingdom, the land of Kerala. It is celebrated in the first month of Malayalam calendar (*Chingam*) spanning across ten days, beginning on the day of ‘*Attam*’ and culminating on the day of ‘*Thiruvonam*’ from which the festival derived its name as ‘*Onam*.’ The occasion is celebrated with grand vegetarian feast served on banana leaves, floral art work (*Rangoli/pookalam*), variety of competitive games (boat race, tug of war, martial arts), tiger dance(*Pulikali*), folk dance by women (*thiruvathirakali, thumbithullal*) and by singing a host of ballads embracing the spirit of Mahabali and the golden mythical era.

During the *Onam* festival, the people of Kerala eagerly await the return of their much beloved King, who is an embodiment of virtues like righteousness, peace, happiness, prosperity and bounty. Therefore, the return of the king represents the return of the sacred paradisaical time during which the land yields plenteous harvest. Culturally, the festival is celebrated in full zest by Keralites, bedecked in their traditional outfit, dancing and singing folk songs (called *Onappattu*) extolling the mythical King and his perfect bounteous kingdom. One such song glorifying the mythical period of Mahabali’s reign in Malayalam (and English translation ) is as follows:

*Maveli naadu vaaneedum kaalam  
Manushyarellarum onnupole  
Aamodathode vasikkum kaalam  
Apathangarkkum ottilla tha anum  
Aadhikal vyadikal onnumilla  
Balamaranangal kelkanilla  
Dushtare kankondu kanmaanilla  
Nallavarallathe illa paaril  
Kallavumilla chathiyumilla  
Ellollamilla poli vachanam  
Vellikolathikal naazhikalum  
Ellam kanakinnu thulyamayi  
Kallavumilla chathiyumilla  
Kallatharangal mattonum illa  
Marveli naadu vaneedum kaalam  
Manushyarellaum onnu pole*

*(In the era of Mahabali’s reign,  
Every one was treated equally as one community,  
It was the time of joy and contentment  
Hazards and perils hit none  
There was no fear of disease or death  
Infant mortality was never even heard of  
Wicked people did not exist*

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*The world abounded with none but benevolent people  
There was neither trickery nor robbery  
And no-one was fake in speech  
Measurements and weights were right and just  
There was no sort of lying or cheating  
When Mahabali ruled the land  
Everyone was part of a single happy community)*

The above mentioned folk song virtually summarises the status of the kingdom during the mythical era. This ideal kingdom is illustrative of the exemplary King Bali, as the king of the land projects the psyche of the people and the status of the kingdom. King Mahabali thus returns to make nature's facilitations fruitful.

Myths transpire in rituals and ceremonies, and so, they mutually clarify and affirm one another. The magico-religious rituals of the harvest festival are intended to enhance the growth of the crops. For example, Swinging, an integral part of *Onam* celebrations for children as well as adults, corresponds to the swinging ceremony as practiced by the Latvians of Russia during the harvest festival. It is performed with the avowed intention to regulate the growth of the crops. According to the theory of homeopathic/ imitative magic, it is believed that the higher the priests/peasants swing, the higher will grow the crops. As a result, the Lettish peasants are known to devote their spare time to swinging, for the higher they swing, the higher will grow the crop in that particular season.

Further, competitive games like boat race and tug-of-war mark the celebrations. Tug-of-war being a pagan fertility ritual, is conducted to ensure the productivity of the soil which in turn would ensure an enhanced yield. For example, amongst the Tangkhuls of Manipur, before sowing the rice and while reaping, tug-of-war between young boys and girls are conducted, keeping in view the productivity of the land and an enhanced yield. This game is also believed to influence the weather conditions. For instance, the Eskimos of North America divide themselves into two parties. One party consists of people born in winter and the other consists of people born in summer. If the summer party wins the game, then a pleasant weather may be expected to predominate all through the winter. Eliade writes, "the contests and fights which take place in so many places in the spring or at harvest time undoubtedly spring from the primitive notion that blows, contests, rough games between the sexes and so on, all stir up and increase the energies of the whole universe" (Eliade, 1958). Thus, all sorts of ritual contests/ competitions like racing, wrestling etc., held during harvest festivals are aimed at spurring the energies of nature, especially the vegetative energy, ensuring enhanced growth of crops.

Finally, the quintessence of all harvest festivals, across different cultures, is the savouring of the grand and sumptuous feast. In addition to singing and dancing, the feasting celebrates the joy of abundance bestowed upon humanity as a product of their hard work and labour. For this reason, oblations are made to the presiding deities. On the occasion of *Onam* festival, oblations are made to 'Vamana', the dwarf incarnation of Lord Vishnu in the *Trikkakara* temple (place of holy foot) in Kerala.

Thus, since primordial times, mankind has been observing the sacred feast of harvest as given in the holy scriptures, beseeching blessings from the almighty for a blessed and fruitful year and expressing gratefulness for the bounteous harvest.

***The Myth of Vamana and Mahabali***

Mahabali, son of Virochan and grandson of Prahlad- the good Asura, was such a generous and mighty monarch of whom even the Devas were afraid. Mahabali had acquired the power of Indra through his deeds. His kingdom thrived with peace and prosperity. His subjects were a happy and content lot who turned to him with reverence as all their needs were satisfied and there was neither disease nor death in his kingdom. He made sure that there was righteousness, honesty, justice and peace in every part of his kingdom. Everything was perfect and Mahabali's fame spread far and wide across the three realms. The boon of immortality was granted to Bali by Lord Brahma and so he continued to expand the frontiers of his empire. He conquered the three realms: Heaven, Earth and the Underworld. The Devas, especially Indra, who were immensely troubled, feared that Bali would be invincible and would overthrow the gods forever by his power coupled with Brahma's boon. Indra, sought the help of his parents, Aditi and Kashyapa, in changing the fate of their children who had lost heaven to King Bali. They summoned Lord Vishnu to intervene and restore the balance of power. Lord Vishnu agreed to intervene when the time was ripe. In answer to the prayers, Lord Vishnu incarnated as Vamana, the dwarf, went to *Yaga*- the great sacrifice that was being performed by Mahabali, where to all were welcome, to ask for and receive anything they wanted. Shukracharya, the preceptor of Asuras, knew who Vamana really was when he presented himself as a suitor, and therefore, warned Mahabali against promising to grant the requests of the young Brahmana as he could be Lord Vishnu in disguise, who had come to undo him. Besides being a devotee of the Lord at heart, Mahabali was a generous king who could never turn down a request, and so, he did not pay heed to Shukracharya's warnings. Mahabali smilingly bade him to ask for anything that he wanted, like jewels, land, forests etc, without hesitation. Vamana denied all the wealth politely but asked for three paces of land. Looking at Vamana's diminutive stature, Bali said, 'So be it; pace and take it.' The dwarf Vamana suddenly grew in size into a giant Trivikrama and with one step measured the Earth and with another the entire Heaven. As there was no room left for the third step that had been granted, Mahabali humbly knelt under Vamana's foot and offered his head. As Bali sank deep into the underworld, he heard his subjects wailing in grief for their much loved king. Seeing this, Vamana granted Mahabali one last boon. The boon was the permission to visit his subjects on Earth once a year. Thus, Mahabali returned every year during the autumn harvest to visit his people and the land that he had once ruled with much benevolence.

***Hypothetical Interpretation***

The myth relates the journey of King Bali from being a conqueror of the three worlds to his downfall and descent to the underworld with a boon to return to the land of the living once every year during the harvest season. This annual return of the mythical king is celebrated as the harvest festival in Kerala. Thus King Mahabali brings along with him the magnificence of the sacred mythical time to bless the land and the people. As Mircea Eliade rightly puts it, "By living the myths, one emerges from profane, chronological time and enters a time that is of a different quality, a sacred time at once primordial and indefinitely recoverable" (Eliade, 1963). Every year the myth is relived as the entire community undergoes a period of renewal to rediscover the sanctity of the sacred past. Since the *Onam* festival falls on the first month of the Malayalam calendar, it is also an occasion of new year. New year being the time of renewal, it is imperative that the primordial time of origin is recovered in order to regenerate the chaotic cosmic world within and without. Thus, it is the time when the cosmogony is reiterated implying the beginning of the annual seasonal cycle. The symbolic and sacred presence of the mythical King Mahabali during the time of new year suggests a renewal as he is an embodiment of fecundity and prosperity believed to renew the entire cosmos. Across different cultures, new year rituals intend to re-create the cosmogony periodically which is

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associated with new harvest. Therefore harvest period of each region coincides with their new year.

According to Sir James Fraser (1996), in numerous cultures, one might come across an image of a King/ruler whose fate is to die/be wounded in order to be resurrected/replaced, depicting the fertility rituals intended to keep the kingdom in good health. Alchemy has adopted the motif of a sacrificial king to indicate the renewal of *psyche*. Psychic factors that were hitherto dominant undergoes a radical change in the form of the execution/ immersion/decimation of the 'Old King', resulting in the emergence of a 'New King' implying the dawn of a new and enhanced order of consciousness. Therefore, fatality and regeneration of a king intimates a psychic revival as the union of the conscious and the unconscious leading to the emergence of a radically different and renewed level of consciousness.

According to the ancient Egyptian tradition, a king at his coronation enters into the celestial sphere often assuming the quasi priestly role of mediating between the extraordinary and mundane realms. He is the ruler of the worldly realm yet approximated to the gods. This dual nature of king as both human and god belonging to the earthly and celestial spheres respectively symbolises those essentials within the *psyche* that are partly under the realm of consciousness and partly the unconscious. The king is the one who is equipped with supreme power and skills to lead the masses and function for the welfare of his folks. Psychologically it reflects what is most supreme and dominant within the *psyche* of an individual and the society i.e., the dominant principles that govern the course of the *psyche*. However, the supreme powers of the king will have to eventually end as the monarch loses his power following the collapse of his principles and kingdom. Mythically, the chaotic transition period illustrates the old king's plunge into the underworld, the source of renewal, momentarily hindering the cosmic order until the establishment of the new law and order, depicting the renewal of the land and the people. The myths of death/descend of gods/goddesses/kings/maidens into the underworld are also related to fertility and vegetation. For example, the myths of Osiris, Tammuz, Attis, Adonis, Ishtar, Persephone are all associated with the descend in to the netherworld and the annual return to the earth, bringing along with them the season of bounty when the nature is ready to fill the hearts and minds of people with plenteous harvest, joy and contentment. Thus, King Mahabali too symbolically returns every year during the harvest season to reinstall the fabled paradisaal time of origin and bless the land and the people with prosperity and bountifulness.

According to Devdutt Pattanaik (2011), harvest festivals in India are basically a commemoration of the defeat of *Asuras* by *Devas*. *Asuras* are demons who reign over the subterranean realm. They are earth bound in nature as deities and share much with the serpents in terms of being related to the underworld. Both are in pursuit of *Amrita*, an elixir of eternal life, which is jealously guarded by the *Devas* and are also closely associated with the notion of renewal. The ability to be revived and reborn grants them the virtue to be the deities of the earth; hence they are often linked to the fertility rituals seeking offspring, and also the ones that are performed during harvest. The *Nagas* and the *Asuras* are the reviving energies of the earth, while the *Devas* symbolise the non-terrestrial forces which include the sun, moon, wind, rain and fire. It is through the powers of the former that Lakshmi takes birth and it is the latter that liberates her from the captivity of earth. Thus, both are essential for the maintenance of cosmic balance; none is singularly relevant.

The festivals of harvest are associated with the elimination of *Asuras*. The *Sanjivani Vidya* (the secret of resurrecting the dead) is kept by the *Asuras*, who rejuvenate the earth's fertility.

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The harvesting of crops leads to the release of the earth's bounty, thus becoming a symbolic decimation of the *Asuras*. The eternal cycle of renewal and fertility as mapped in the rhythmic battle between *Asuras* and *Devas* is necessary for the preservation of cosmic balance. In order to maintain the cosmic balance, it was important to curb the *Asura*'s affinity to reign over all the three worlds. In the myth, though Mahabali was a generous ruler, the expansion of his rule beyond the limits of the earth threatened to disturb the cosmic balance. Lord Vishnu sends him into the depths of the underworld and restores the order. *Asuras* misuse the Vedic knowledge in their greed to overpower the outer world rather than using it to discover their inner-self. The goddess Lakshmi, who is the epitome of wealth, is very integral to the *Asuras*' realm because the basic forms of wealth like metals and plants, are rooted in the ground. Hence, all the myths that allude to the decimation of the *Asuras* at the hands of the *Devas* symbolise a liberation of goddess Lakshmi from the clutches of the *Asuras*. One may therefore consider mining, fishing, hunting, farming and harvesting as violent acts. One can extract the metal only after the rock is broke open, likewise the grains are acquired only after being threshed. Therefore, the killing of the *Asuras* is necessary to obtain the wealth hidden in the secret chambers of the earth. That is the reason why almost all the harvest festivals are related to the decimation of *Asuras*. Diwali is an example of an autumn harvest festival where the effigy of the Asura Naraka (the son of Lord Vishnu and Bhudevi) is burned down to mark the celebrations in the Konkan region. Here is an intriguing parallel between Vishnu and the farmer. Vishnu, in this context, is the one who creates as well as destroys Naraka; similarly, the farmer sows the seeds as well as harvests the crop. The cyclical killing of the *Asura* thereby becomes necessary to obtain Lakshmi.

One might find that Vishnu clearly takes the side of the *Devas* in their ensuing battle with the *Asuras*. This act of Vishnu results in making sure that the wealth which emerged from churning of the ocean doesn't go to the underground but keeps on enriching humanity. Vishnu thus becomes an advocate of culture, thereby taking on a worldly incarnation of God. Both *Devas* and *Asuras* pursue Lakshmi as they both yearn for power and prosperity but neither of them are helped with her company for a long time. She departs when the gods and the demons turn disdainful after acquiring wealth and authority, which leads to their fall through Vishnu's intervention. *Devas* are a symbol of the human angst for stability as they become insecure after being wealthy and prosperous. On the other hand, the *Asuras* are a bunch of agitated, impatient beings who are deprived of prosperity and riches which reflect the human necessity for growth.

Unlike Bali's ancestors Hiranayaksha and Hiranakashipu, who used strength and cunning, Bali used generosity to obtain Lakshmi. Lakshmi symbolising wealth, power and prosperity is desired by both gods and demons. Bali aspired to be more powerful than any other *Asura* before him and to restore to the *Asuras* their kingdoms and dignity that they had lost to the gods by reigning over all the three worlds using the boon of immortality granted to him by Lord Brahma. Bali kept on expanding his empire failing to realise that material needs can never be fully satisfied, and contentment ensues only when material and spiritual growth coexist. So great was Bali's generosity that his kingdom lacked nothing. It was perfect in every sense. His subjects were happy and content. There was no death or disease in his realm. Eventually, as the kingdom prospered Lakshmi departed from Indra to be with the noble King Bali. However, such a state of perfection never lasts long. Perfection in the absolute sense is non-existent, yet everyone yearns for it. That was when Lord Vishnu approached Bali in the form of a dwarf and asked for three paces of land. Bali readily agreed. Immediately, Vishnu grew into a giant and with two strides covered both the heaven and the earth, and with no place left to take the third step, Bali offered his head. He was shoved down into the rightful

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place where *Asuras* belonged—the underworld. Bali had grossly over-estimated his ability to fulfil the needs of his subjects. Therefore, Vishnu’s incarnation as Vamana (the dwarf) teaches him a lesson/reality that “human desires are infinite while material resources are finite” (Pattnaik, 2011). The dwarf turning into a giant made Bali realise his insignificance and the fact that he could never satiate all human desires. Therefore, being too generous also lands one in trouble as it was Bali’s excessive generosity that turned out to be the reason of his doom. One should realise one’s limits and restrictions while aspiring to achieve all that they wish for. One last boon granted to Bali by lord *Vishnu* before thrusting him under the ground was the permission to rise above the ground in order to meet the subjects of his former kingdom once every year, marked by the festival of Onam in Kerala, during the prosperous and bountiful season of the harvest. It is also a time to relive and return to the sacred past: a time of bounty and perfection.

A similar myth depicting Lord Vishnu as *Trivikrama*, the conqueror of three worlds with three steps can be found in the sacred literature of Jains. In this myth, King Mahapadma of Hastinapura had a minister called Namuci who had caused great trouble to the Jain monks residing there. Eventually, the monks approached Vishnu to intervene. Vishnu asked the minister to grant three paces of land so that they could build a monastery and live peacefully. To which, Namuci reluctantly agreed. Vishnu grew huge in size and placed his right foot on Mount Mandara. Another account relates that Vishnu took three paces, and stepped on two of heaven’s foremost peaks Mandara, Manasottara and then stood on Heaven itself thereby claiming the entire universe. This myth further explains the idea that the three worlds (Heaven, Earth and the Underworld) are the possessions of the divinities while kings/ministers are just the mortal caretakers whose reign over them depends on their credibility. Thus, the myths of harvest festivals across Hindu, Jain and Buddhist traditions share the common theme that culminates in the preservation of the cosmic balance through the defeat of *Asuras* by Lord Vishnu, indicating the cyclical nature of generation, release and renewal of wealth.

### CONCLUSION

Festivals are an occasion to return to the sacred mythical past, symbolically indicating the renewal of life and nature. As harvest festivals commemorate a cosmic event, it becomes a time to embrace the spirit of mythical beings/deities responsible for bestowing mankind with bounty and prosperity. Similarly, *Onam* festival that marks the annual return of the generous mythical King Mahabali, who is an embodiment of virtues required to rule the land, symbolically indicate a return of the sacred time of bounteousness and perfection, filling the hearts and minds of people with plentiful harvest, joy and contentment.

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