

SOME SUGGESTIONS FOR REFORM OF CHILDREN'S EDUCATION

The child is the father of the man. The basic character of a person is largely moulded by his childhood days. The games he plays as a child, the company he keeps with fellow children, the values he imbibes from the stories he reads, the song he sings, the paintings he paints and the little dances he sees and imitates his little world which surrounded him and shaped him. At school, he freely mingles with his classmates and the legends he learn, the temples he visits and the Gods he worships and the teachers who take lessons for him—these small things makes up his character his compassion, his love of food and fruits, in short his personality.

Onam, a great festival of Kerala is merely trivialized and rarely the story of Mahabali and of Vamana and the profound values they embody are used. If properly taught us in school it is so erudite that the child by learning them get transformed morally elevated and developed physically, mentally and even spiritually. Luckily the Website which is so popular these days contains an attractive narration of Onam and that every school should teach it and every children's library must contain a copy of Website on Onam. How instructive and luminous the legend of Onam is best communicated by my request to the educational department to include in the children's books for ready availability. I reproduce it here:

'Onam is a **festival** celebrated by the people of **Kerala, India**. The festival commemorates the **Vamana avatar** of **Vishnu** and the subsequent homecoming of the legendary Emperor **Mahabali**. It is the state festival of **Kerala** and falls during the month of **Chingam** (August–September) and lasts for ten days. The festival is marked by various festivities, including intricate flower carpets, elaborate banquet lunches, snake boat races, Onappottan, Athachamayam in **Tripunithura**, Kaazhchakkula in Guruvayoor, **Puli Kali**, Kaikottikkali, Kumbaattikkali, Onathaar, Onachamayam, Onathallu, Thrikkaakarayappan, Thumbi thullal, Onavillu etc. This is one of the very few festivals which is celebrated with most number of cultural elements.

Onam is an ancient festival which still survives in modern times. Kerala's rice **harvest festival** and the Festival of Rain Flowers, which fall on the Malayalam month of Chingam, celebrates the Asura King Mahabali's annual visit from **Sutala**. Onam is unique since Mahabali has been revered by the people of Kerala since prehistory.

According to the legend, Kerala witnessed its golden era during the reign of King Mahabali. The *Brahma-Vaivarta Puranam* explains that Lord **Vishnu** wanted to curb the pride of Indra; and therefore positioned Mahabali in great power.

The **Bhagavata Purana** reads "He [Vishnu] will take the kingdom away from Purandara [Lord Indra] and give it to Bali Maharaja."

The subjects under Mahabali's reign were happy and prosperous and the king was highly regarded, so much so that even the gods under **Indra** became jealous of Mahabali as was intended by **Vishnu**, and they approached **Vishnu** claiming that Mahabali is now equivalent to Indra. Once Vishnu was assured that Indra's pride has been contained and that a world with two Indras represents imbalance, Vishnu assumed the form of a dwarf: **Vamana**. Vamana requested three steps of land for him to live in. Given a promise of three steps of land by King **Mahabali** against the warning given by his Guru **Sukracharya**, Vamana, enlarged himself to such dimensions as to stride over the three worlds. He had grown so huge that he could step from heaven to earth, and earth to the lower worlds in two simple steps. King **Mahabali** unable to fulfill the promise of three paces of land to the Supreme God, offers his head for the third step. Thus, Vamana places his foot on King Mahabali's head and sends him down to the netherworld. Being worshipped however, by Mahabali, and his ancestor Prahláda, he conceded to them the sovereignty of Sutala (netherworld).

However, as Mahabali was equivalent to Indra, he had to wait until the next [Yuga](#) where he would be the Indra. In the meantime, with the grace of Vishnu, Mahabali visited his people on an annual basis. Vishnu served Mahabali as a gatekeeper in Sutala as the Lord himself serves his greatest devotees.

It is this visit of Mahabali that is celebrated as Onam every year. People celebrate the festival in a grand way and impress upon their dear King that they are happy and wish him well.

The rich cultural heritage of Kerala comes out in its best form and spirit during the ten-day festival. The central feature of Onam is the grand feast called Onasadya, prepared on Thiruonam. 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 popular feature of Onam is Vallamkali, the Snake Boat Race, held on the [Pamba River](#), in which decorative boats oared by hundreds of boatmen race amidst chanting of songs and cheering by spectators and viewers.

There is also a tradition to play games, collectively called Onakalikal, on Onam. Men go in for rigorous sports like Talappanthukali (played with a 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 the house to welcome King Mahabali. Kaikotti kali and Thumbi Thullal are two dances performed by women on Onam. Folk performances like Kummatti kali and Pulikali add to the zest of celebrations.

[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 Vishwajith Yagam or Aswamedha Yagam on the banks of the [Narmada River](#) in Brugacham (which is in Bharuch, Gujarat). He also declared that he would give anything that anyone sought from him during this [Yagam](#).

Taking advantage of the Yagam and Mahabali's declaration, [Vamana](#) (Vishnu 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, [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 his promise, 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, sent him down to Sutala, the heaven-like underworld. The site where he placed his foot is said to be the village of [Thrikkakara](#) (meaning place of the holy foot), and is the centre of the renowned Onam festival celebrated in relation to the legend of King Mahabali.'

Probably the great story of Ramayana rendered in simple Malayalam by that rare teacher Prof. M.K. Sanoo is a charming instrument of instruction. There may be other legends attractively presenting in lucid language 'Mahabharata' and that supreme mantra Bhagvat Gita. How I wish our education department made these creative changes and made our little children wiser than their parents.

I am not a scholar in Malayalam but I do know that a lot of learning moral values and epics can be the subject of entertaining study if at school Kunjan Nambiar becomes learning by-heart, Sanjayan common reading and Ezuthachan selected with an eye on simple language called Ramayanam and other classic episodes. Instructive bits of the bible and Quran also can be extremely educative. The story of the Buddha, of Gandhi on Satyagraha of Asoka

as a King if wisely chosen and introduced for reading by Children can revolutionize our educational system. Select pieces from Jawaharlal Nehru's autobiography and letters to his daughter and other great works of great authors can radicalize our primary and secondary education. Simple drill, native games can be likewise made part of compulsory education.

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