

The Festival of Onam: A Celebration of Kaivalya

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The legend of Emperor Mahābali is well known: A just and able king-emperor who ruled over all the three worlds, in whose reign there was prosperity, plenty and equality for all citizens. But life was so good that people forgot to make sacrifices and the devas who got their sustenance from these sacrifices were unhappy. They requested Lord MahāVishnu to intercede. The Lord took the form of a young brahmachāri, short of stature, Vāmana and appeared before the Emperor with a small request: three measures of land (by his foot size). Despite the warnings of his mentor, Sukrāchārya, Mahābali agrees to the request and binds his agreement by the ritual of pouring water on the palms. Once this was done, Vāmana grows in size, and with two measures of his feet encompasses the three worlds; and asks Mahābali where is his third foot to be used. The Emperor bends down and offers his forehead. The Emperor is banished to the nether world but is granted the boon of revisiting his world once a year. This is that day in the asterism of Śrāvana (thiru ōnam) in the month of Chingam (Leo). We want to demonstrate to the revered Emperor that prosperity still reigns along with the equality before the law.

This, according to one point of view, is an example of justice miscarried, and the downfall of a great personage by an unscrupulous partisan Vishnu to preserve the dominance of the devas without the least consideration of the excellent rule of the Emperor. It is racism and partisanship at its worst with Mahābali's disregard of his great mentor's advice as the final lost hope for redemption. The story of Mahābali is thus a tragedy and the triumph of deceit and

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treachery over generosity and goodness.

Were this so, the Onam celebration today should be tinged with sadness and frustration. But we don't feel so. Further, we honor Vāmana (as Thrukkākkara Appan) by flowers in concentric circles from the asterism of hasta (attam). This "attappoo" increases in numbers and elaboration each day until the Onam day. We welcome Vāmana! There must therefore be another point of view in which the incident is the fulfillment of a long-awaited dream.

What could this be? We recall that the four imperatives (purushārthas) for an adult are balanced action (dharma), acquisition of wealth (artha), loving and being loved (kāma) and liberation from attachments (mōksha). Mahābali, grandson of Prahlāda, had carried out the imperatives of dharma, artha and kāma. He had fulfilled his duties and needed only liberation. After all, good deeds and habits can also be binding; one can coast along complacently. A stage comes when a new order has to take place, detachment has to set in and some catalyst has to initiate the change to the new order.

For Emperor Mahābali, the appearance of the Lord in the form of Vāmana was this moment of transition. All the attachments to wealth and duty had to fall off and what more effective way than to offer all one's possessions and all the duties and obligations. Such a change is upsetting the order of things and it is only natural that one's mentors and friends warn you about the possible dangers. But the inner voice tells us that this is no ordinary occasion and, hence, even the mentor's advice should not deter one from the path. The trigger encounter is only that: it is anticipated and awaited, and the culmination of a path in which the three imperatives of duty, libido and wealth are already satisfied.

In our tradition the touch of the feet of the Lord on one's forehead is a symbol of grace. In Mahābali's case it comes after the voluntary offer of all his possessions, wealth and station in life.

Initially Vāmana appears as a shining youth from nowhere; only when He is received does He engage in a dialogue and eventually grows to fill the whole of one's vision. As the poet says,

“... aspaṣṭam dr̥ṣṭa mātṛe, punaruru pur̥ṣāarthātṃmakam brahmatatvam...” (indistinct at first sight, but in due course being cognized as the Great Principle, the essence of all the imperatives). Even in small insights this is true, how much more so when it is the sense of full liberation!

Does this transition render a person become unconcerned with the world and barren to all the delights of life? Not so, reminds us the story. Emperor Mahābali is still delighting in the welfare of his subjects and their successors in perpetuity. It is not the central aspect but it is still there; and so the Emperor comes to verify this on this day of Onam.

The story is a most appropriate lesson for us who are in voluntary exile from our land in search of wealth, glory and fulfillment. We were of a land which was plentifully supplied with natural intelligence and sensibility and the willingness to sweat and toil. We have worked hard and more or less fulfilled the three imperatives of dharma, artha and kāma. What next? More of the same, with exponential growth of work, wealth and duties? Should there not be the prospect of release from the burden, short of dropping out? The legend of Emperor Mahābali, it seems to me, points to a transcendence, liberation without suffering, a joyous ascension to a happy existence.

We are used to strong family and friendship ties; and feel sadly that in course of time these ties become dissolved; people and associations move out of our orbit, despite our best efforts to retain them. The strongly independent ego-centric culture in which we live seems to be corrosive of family and friendship relations. But rather than struggle against this evolution we may, with Mahābali, welcome this with “attappoo” (ceremonial flowers) and be satisfied to make sure periodically that our family and friends are well and prosperous; and that the harmony and prosperity that we may have been instrumental in bringing their way are continuing.

In this respect there is a similar Hebraic legend of the Tower of Babel. The heavens got displeased by humanity’s effort to build a tower reaching up to the sky. The men were all of one mind and one tongue: they acted in unison. The celestial displeasure took the form of a mischief mixing up their tongues so they could not comprehend each other any longer. Their

joint efforts ceased and the tower was never completed. The place was called Bab-el. This looks like deliberate and malicious mischief. How come? On reflection we see that the spread of civilization and the flowering of culture required a dispersal and the opportunity for differing aims and visions. A hundred flowers had to bloom. So Bab-el was not an end but a beginning.

We may, if we choose, recognize the Onam as the promise of Kaivalya (liberative transcendence) and peace that surpasses mere well-being and prosperity. We already celebrate this in the feeling of goodwill, contentment and mutual regard that dominates this day.