



Glory of Bharath » INDICA

Onam



Onam is the biggest festival in the Indian state of Kerala. Onam Festival falls during the Malayali month of Chingam (Aug - Sep) and marks the homecoming of legendary King Mahabali. Carnival of Onam lasts for ten days and brings out the best of Kerala culture and tradition. Intricately decorated Pookalam, ambrosial Onasadya, breathtaking Snake Boat Race and exotic Kaikottikali dance are some of the most remarkable features of Onam - the harvest festival in Kerala.

Welcoming a Very Special Visitor

Onam awaits one very special visitor; Kerala's most loved legendary King Maveli. He is the King who once gave the people a golden era in Kerala. The King is so much attached to his kingdom that it is believed that he comes annually from the nether world to see his people living happily. It is in honour of King Mahabali, affectionately called Onathappan, that Onam is celebrated.

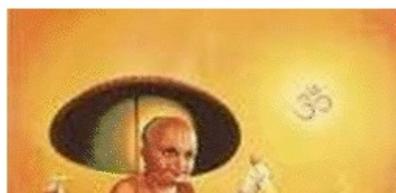
Womenfolk make special arrangements to welcome Onathappan. Flower carpets are laid in the front courtyards with dedication and full sincerity. A grand meal is prepared on the day of Thiru Onam. It is on this day that Maveli's spirit visits Kerala. Lip smacking meal consists of best of Kerala cuisine including avial, sambhar, rasam, parippu and the payasam.



The Legend of King Mahabali

It is believed that there once lived a wise and generous asura (demon) king, Mahabali. He was highly regarded by his subjects and everybody was happy in his kingdom. Gods felt challenged with the growing popularity of Mahabali. They sought help from Lord Vishnu who was worshiped by King Mahabali. Lord Vishnu took the avatar of a poor and dwarf Brahmin, called Vamana and came to the kingdom of Mahabali just after his morning prayers, when the King gave boons to the Brahmin.

The disguised Lord Vishnu asked for as much land as could be covered by his three steps. The King made a promise to do so. Suddenly, Vamana increased to a massive size. With his one step he covered the whole of the sky and with the other he covered the whole of earth. He then asked for a place to put his third step. King realised that the boy was no ordinary Brahmin and asked Vamana to put his third step on his head.



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When Bhattathiripad went close to the hut he saw a poor widow weeping and some children sleeping besides her. The woman told Bhattathiripad that her children slept off hungry and she has no food to feed them. Bhattathiripad was moved by her pathetic state. He went to the boat Palliyodam and brought food for the family. When the family became happy with the food, boat Palliyodam could be easily maneuvered to the main course of river again. From then on began the tradition of feeding one poor person on the day of Onam.

The Legend of Vanishing Boy

It is said that once, about 10 kilometers up the river Pampa from Aranmula, the head of the Katoor Mana, a Nambudiri family, had a bath in the river. He said his prayers and waited to feed a poor man to complete his ritual. He waited for long but nobody came. Tired of waiting, the Brahmin closed his eyes and began to pray to Lord Krishna. As soon he opened his eyes, he saw a small boy in tatters before him. The devout Brahmin gave a bath to the boy, a set of clothes and a sumptuous meal.

To the surprise of the Brahmin, the boy vanished as soon as he finished his meal. He looked for the boy and spotted him near Aranmula Temple. But, the boy disappeared again. The Brahmin came to the conclusion that he was no ordinary boy and was God himself. From then on the Brahmin brought food to Aranmula Temple every year during Onam.

Ten days of Onam

Onam celebrations are marked in **Trikkakara**, a place 10 km from Kochi (Cochin) on the Edapally-Pookattupadi road. Trikkara is said to be the capital of the mighty King Mahabali. A temple with a deity of '**Trikkakara Appan**' or '**Vamanamurthy**' who is Lord Vishnu himself in disguise is also located at this place. Nowhere else in Kerala can one find a deity of 'Vamanamurthy'

Carnival of Onam continues for ten days in the state of Kerala. In some regions of the state festivities are restricted to four to six days only. Of all these days the first day Atham and the tenth day Thiruvonam are the most significant ones. Ninth day Uthradam is also considered to be extremely important from the point of view of celebrations in several parts of Kerala. The days are known by the names of **Atham, Chithira, Chodhi, Visakam, Anizham, Moolam, Pooradam, Uthradam, Thiruvonam**.

Onam Rituals

Celebrations commence from the first day, **Atham**. The day is regarded holy and auspicious by the people of Kerala. People take early bath on the day and offer prayers in the local temple. Notable feature of this day is that making of Pookkalam or the flower carpet starts from this day. Attha Poo is prepared in the front courtyard by girls of the house to welcome the spirit of King Mahabali in whose honour Onam is celebrated. Boys play a supporting role and help in gathering flowers. In the following days, more flowers are added to Pookalam. As a result Pookalam turns out to be of massive size on the final day.

Preparations for the Thiru Onam start in a big way and everybody gets engaged to mark the festival in their own style. House cleaning starts on a massive scale and everything is made to look neat and tidy. There is also a set breakfast consisting of steamed bananas and fried pappadam (pappad). This remains the same till the day of Thiru Onam. A swing is also slung on a high branch of a tree. It is decorated with flowers and the youngsters take great delight in swinging and singing, that goes simultaneously.

Rituals for the ninth day-Uthradam

A day prior to Onam is the ninth day of the festivities and is known as Uthradam. On this day tenants and depends of **Tarawads** (traditional large joint family sharing a common kitchen and consisting of more than hundred people) give presents to **Karanavar**, the eldest member of the family. These presents are usually the produce of their farms consisting of vegetables, coconut oil, plantains etc. These gifts from the villagers to Karanavar on Onam are called '**Onakazhcha**'. A sumptuous treat is offered by Karanavar in return for Onakazhcha. Village artisans also offer a specimen of their handicrafts to the Karanavar of Nayar Tarawads. They receive gracious rewards for this courtesy.

The Big Day - Thiru Onam

Kerala appears in its grandiose best on this day. Cultural extravaganza, music and feasts add colours of merriment and joy to the God's Own Country. There are celebrations all around the state and everybody takes active participation in them; Onam has assumed a secular character and is celebrated by people of all religions and communities.

Morning Rituals

On the day of Thiruvonam conical figures in various forms are prepared from sticky clay and are painted red. These are decorated with a paste made of rice-flour and water and are placed in the front court yard and other important places in the house. Some of these clay figures are in the shape of cone and others represent figures of Gods. Those in the shape of a cone are called, '**Trikkakara Appan**'. The tradition of making clay cones for Trikkara Appan has its roots in mythology, which says that festival originated at Trikkakara, a place 10 km from Cochin. Trikkara is also said to be the capital in the reign of legendary King Maveli.

Elaborate prayers ceremonies and poojas are also performed on this day. A senior member of the house plays the role of the priest and conducts the rituals. He wakes up early and prepares ata; **Ata** is prepared from rice flour and molasses for **Naivedyam** (offerings to God). Lamps are lit up in front of the idols and all members of the house join in for the ceremonies. Priest offers ata, flowers and water in the names of the God. As Onam is also a harvest festival, people thank God for the bountiful harvest and pray for the blessings in the coming year. A peculiar custom is followed after this, wherein male members make loud and rhythmic shouts of joys. The tradition is called, 'Aarppu Vilikkukal'. This represents the beginning of Onam.

It is now the time for members of the house to dress up in their best attire and offer prayers in the local temple. Most people wear new clothes on the day. There is also a tradition of distributing new clothes on

Onam. In Tharawads (traditional large family consisting of more than hundred people), Karanavar, the eldest member of the family, gives new clothes as gifts, called **Onapudava**, to all family members and servants. Other members of the family exchange gifts amongst each other.

Happy Onam