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THE SIGNIFICANCE OF NATURE AND MYTH IN ONAM FESTIVAL CELEBRATIONS

Introduction

History of civilization started with the quest for survival where humans have to fight with every situation as a hazard for their existence. The man started to depend on nature for food, shelter and for everything. Their necessities made them to believe in the nature and started to belief and customize the water, sky, rain, earth, fire as gods¹. It created man with a dependency towards the beliefs and to protect these beliefs, man had intertwined the local myths with the local beliefs. Thus myth, nature, and the man have the unexplainable connection with each other. The shades of this can be seen in every society and in every civilization. The 19th century social scientists had enquired about the relationship between man and nature.

In Indian society, primarily known as the “land of diversities” where the nature, myth plays an important role in the everyday life of its people. The reflection of the being and togetherness of a society is visible only through its celebrations. In Indian subcontinent the festivals and celebrations act as a catalyst to the society and its life. All the year, Indians are having some or other festivals, some may be the agriculture related festivals, the season festivals, religious and community festivals, etc. were people do celebrate it with great ecstasy and abundance. The collectivity and community feeling are transferred to the younger generations through these celebrations. In India, where most of the people were depending up on agriculture and allied occupations. So the importance of agricultural related festivals comes in list with high priority. In most of the celebrations where it is Onam, Pongal, Baisaki, Bihu, etc, when it is fragmented, which is having an unexplainable relationship between myth and nature.

Many social scientists have defined culture and its structures, with in culture is having a subculture which is in most case dominating the particular area. Like that from the Indian context of festival celebration on agricultural festivals, Kerala’s Onam is having another phase in the Kerala society, where apart from the other festivals, Onam festival celebration is having significant role in the Kerala’s culture as well as Kerala’s tradition along with history. It

is an agricultural turned² to be religious festival. The agriculture harvest and sowing festivals are very common among Indians. The sharing among the members of the society, community celebrations, ritual practices, along with the background or the support of the local myth or the local history is the common characteristic of every festival which is common in the Onam festival celebration, which is celebrated in Kerala and all over the Malayali people around the world³ as part of identity establishment in the migrated places. The agriculture has a major role in Indian culture as the majority of the present day festivals are having the very close link or base with the agriculture related harvest and sowing. Like any other festival in Indian society in Kerala, the Malayali have a festival called Onam that explains the relation between man, culture and nature. Onam is having a great relationship to the land, climate or seasons and the agriculture of Kerala. Onam is considered to be natural and nature's festival by the ancestors⁴.

Onam festival is considered to be nostalgic of the celebration for the people of Kerala, which had been enjoyed in the past. Through the myth points it as remembering the good olden days of King Mahabali and his generous rule. The studies on Onam myth are very interesting, there is no unanimity in interpreting the myth of Onam festival as it is intertwined with local culture and local myths in the background of local history. Understanding the Myth of Mahabali through the Indian epic Bhagavathapurana⁵ as it explains the king Mahabali myth in connection to the Vamana Avatar (fifth incarnation of the Lord Vishnu), as to protect the peace and truth in the earth, King Mahabali was sent to the Pathala (the other world). According to the above myth Onam is celebrated in remembrance to the reign of Mahabali, the mythological king who is said to have ruled once Kerala. He is reported to have been humbled by Lord Vishnu who appeared as a fair weeping young boy. Hindu legends put this appearance down as the 'Vamannavathara', or dwarf incarnation. Upon his arrival, the Vamana asks for three feet of land from Mahabali and the King agrees to this and the Vamana then grows up and measure the whole three worlds⁶ in the first two steps and asks for a place for his third step. Honoring his commitment, Mahabali shows his head and was sent to *Pathala*, the underground world. Lord Vishnu grants a wish to the king that he can come and meet his people once in a year and it is believed that Mahabali will come to visit his people on this particular day, and this is the story behind the celebration of Onam⁷ (Shastri, 2008).

The characters of Mahabali is identified differently in literatures, Bali as a myth and Bali as a practice, as per the (Bowker.J, 1997:123) Bali myth is stated Bali as the one of the leader of the *daityas* (demons) and grandson of the Prahaladha, who had acquired the sovereignty over the Triloka who was tricked and cheated by the Lord Vishnu in the form of the Vamana (dwarf incarnation) to regain the power to the Gods from the Bali. And as a practice of Bali is an offering which is in Hinduism and Buddhism, of grains or rice to

the gods or spirits so that the deceased will attain 'Brahman' (favorite to god). (Bowker. J, 1997:123). The Bali is used in two contexts, one as a tax, and other as the name of the King. With Kautilya, it came to be known as religious tax (Kautilya, Artha. pg. 58). The second reference of the Bali name is of the daityas King who was the grandson of Prahaladha (the believer of Lord Vishnu).

It is strange that the Onam mythologies are different in different parts of Kerala. The mythical stories regarding Onam, Mahabali, Vamana, even the way of celebration is different from one place to another. Instead of the Mahabali tradition, in southern regions of Kerala, which celebrates Onam as a commemoration of Thrikkakkarayappan, the deity in the national temple at Thrikkakara, which was once the Chera capital (Puthenkalam. S.J, Fr.J. 1977). Regarding the worship of Trikkarakarayappan, the myth of the incarnation of Vishnu as Vamana is the Thrikkakkarayappan. During the Onam season, the effigy of Vamana is made of sand and is worshipped. In the present day the pyramid shaped *Thrikkakkarayappan* idol⁸ will be made and worshiped along with the *Pookalam* (flower carpet which is made of fresh flowers).

Methodology

This paper intends to apply the structural approach proposed by Levi Strauss and the Marxian approach is used to interpret and connect the myths regarding Onam and show how the evolution and changes to the myth symbolizes the course of socio-structural changes that the indigenous people of this region went through from the indigenous to the present day Malayali society. Where the study is fragmented into two structured groups and the study triggers the question of how Onam festival originated as a simple harvest festival of the native agricultural community of Kerala, but after the Aryan invasion and the heirachisation of the Aryan civilizations with the Dravidians at the bottom layer leading to their subjugation and exploitation lead to the creation of folklores about an ideal king and his ideal state which existed before the Aryans came. But the Aryan folk used their power as a process of introducing a new socio-religious system into the community and had monopolized control over that. They made sacred texts and scriptures which segmented the society into castes which made themselves at the top. The notion of the ideal king became an Asura and the one who vanquished him became the avatar of the god — liberating him into immortality and subsequent association of several religious practices to the festival — the myth again undergoes critical changes and yet in course of time almost as a revenge against this cultural hegemony of total strangers, Onam has evolved into a highly secular festival with equal participation from all sections of people in the Kerala region and has even become a cultural icon of Malayali people around the world integrating them, becoming the epitome of their cultural glory.

Discussions

The paper triggers the question of how the nature and myth contributes the celebration of Onam festival in Kerala Society. The question will be discussed in two sections

1. The identifying relevance of Nature in the Onam celebration
2. Understanding the importance of myth in Onam celebration.

As discussed in the introduction the nature and myth is interconnected. Every festival is celebrated for joy and happiness and also maintains the togetherness, The Onam festival practice is very much related to the nature and life of the Keralities. The Onam festival has great connection with the nature of Kerala. Ecologically, the festivals may be classified generally into those of sowing and reaping and in its origin Onam belonged to that of reaping or harvesting category. Understanding the history of Kerala in genesis before the advent of the Aryans into southern India existed as a harvest festival and celebrated so by the agricultural community in the primitive Kerala region. My inference is that the myth of 'king Mahabali' was a later development as character's in the myth along with 'Vamanan' who is an avatar of Lord Vishnu, a Hindu God became a part of the Kerala community only after the Aryan invasion, but at the same time when we look at the tribes especially of Kerala who celebrate Onam as a homage to the changing seasons and the God's they worship are the Sun, Rain gods etc. as very similar to the aborigines. Putting aside the myth of King Mahabali we can analyses the topographic and climatic conditions of Kerala.⁹

Unlike many other parts of India, Kerala has two rainy and spring seasons. Summer in Kerala is from '*Meenam*' to '*Medam*' (Malayalam Calendar) and during this period there are no rains and fields remain uncultivated and the commons have to rely on their last food stock for survival and at the end of this season the seeds are sown putting the peasants into further financial burden and constraints. The major monsoon season follows during '*Edavam*', '*Mithunam*' and '*Karkkidakam*' (Malayalam Calendar) in the months of June to August. Now the food-stock is almost over, the roofs are leaking, diseases all around and subsistence is on a bare minimum and the severest of hardships. The transition from the black '*Karkkidakam*' month to the golden '*Chingam*' (the shining paddy fields) marks the beginning of the new year and suggests a 'Passover' or 'Samkramam'—from the paucity and poverty of the rainy season to the beauty and sumptuousness of threshing and garnering filling joy in the hearts of the peasants. This year by year cycle transpired into a celebration of the agricultural community was the first form of Onam and its first story.

In the ways of Onam festival celebration the usage of nature is clearly visible with the rites and performances. Onam festival is an agrarian festival where sowing and reaping of the rice was very important, and it is highly use

in the various ritual¹⁰ in the celebrations. It is said to be the spring season of the Kerala. The celebration will be extended to ten days. The making of flower carpet in front of the courtyards (Pookalam) is very important in Onam, the fresh flowers of the nearby locality were used for it. The drawing were made in the special platform were made by bricks or wet mud, which later washed or spread and dried with the cow dung¹¹. In the middle of the flower carpet there puts three Pyramid shaped Thrikkakkarayappan¹². The food on the tenth day, Thiruvonam day was a vegetarian feast which was served in the banana leaf along with delicious items which were prepared by the home itself, but in the northern part of Kerala the non-vegetarian food is served along with the vegetarian meals on the same way¹³. The games after the feast was also very important and related to nature very much , as if it is of swinging or the local games like Onathallu, Thumbithullaal, were the ingredients used to play will be of things made from the nature only, the coconut flower is used in the Thumbithullaal, etc.

Conclusion

The concept of myth is defined as “a traditional story, especially one concerning the early history of a people or explaining a natural or social phenomenon, and typically involving supernatural being or events” (“Myth,” n.d.). Malinowski explains as the continuation and normal social processes myth is essential in a society where as Durkheim points¹⁴ to the source of symbolic instruction, to shape the individual to his group. Even though the statements underlines the fact that myth acts as a channel which connect the society and culture in the larger canvas. The base of the myth might be a fear of some mortal or unexplainable situations to the common people but gradually the society accommodates the myth as what people perceives (Gotesky, 1952). Thus looking from this perspective the Onam festival is a very popular festival of Malayalis. The myth of Mahabali and Vamana portrays a base structure to the belief and hope of home coming of their beloved king to the people of Kerala but at the same time the Kerala history underlines the importance of Onam festival in the social and cultural life of the people. Onam festival remains a connecting point between Nature and culture of Kerala’s society.

NOTES

1. Concept of Animism (E.B.Taylor,)
2. In Older days Onam was celebrated as agricultural festival but later the introduction of the Mahabali, and Vamana Myth, based on the Vishnupurana tradition, the festival reframed in to Hindu festival which have a status of national festival celebrated by the Kerala People.
3. The migrated people celebrates Onam as a part of the identity formation or making a homogenous group in the their migrated places, the emergences of the new Malayali Samajam (societies) gave leadership to these celebrations, through this they are re-creating a new form of Onam festival practices.

4. The folktales and proverbs in the Malayalam language stress the argument as they are creates the oral history of the Onam celebration in the past.
5. The epic Bhagavatha Purana is the chronology of Vishnu's ten major incarnations (there are in total twenty six incarnations): Mathsya (fish), Kurma (turtle), Varaha (boar), Narasimha (lion-faced human), Vamana (an ascetic in the form of a midget), Parasurama-(a militant Brahmin), Sree Rama, Balrama, Sri Krishna, Kalki-(a predicted warrior on a white horse who would come in this yuga)-whose appearance also signals the beginning of the end of the epoch.
6. Concept three world i.e. the earth, Heaven, and hell which is said to be in Puranas.
7. Natesa Sastri,' Hindu feast, fast and ceremonies' (pg.no.118,)
8. The triangular pyramids shaped the Thrikkakkarayappan deity have direct resemblances with the Egyptian assries empire and assries rulers. (Chon, 2010) and also the local myth prevails in the Thrikkakara temple and nearby places as the annual festival of Thrikkakara temple and Attachamayam was celebrated in grand way where the devotees comes from the different areas in and out to be part of festival, the ruler of the Cochin kingdom had later announced to avoid the difficulties in coming from the far place instead of that they can prepare the pyramid shaped (for easy in preparation) in the courtyards itself. (Source: Personal interview in the Thrikkakara temple and near by the author herself).
9. The story of the "mavothi" (the story among the Kurichiyar's regarding the Mahabali as their ruler)
10. Para naraykuka (filling the pot) is considered to be an auspicious rituals in the Onam celebrations among the upper castes even in the lower castes also the rice plays a dominant role as in the olden days rice occupied more importance than money or currency.
11. This process is considered to be auspicious because by washing the platform with cow dung it was considered to be pious , and when it gets dries the flower carpet of different shapes (Rangoli) were made on that.
12. The symbolic making of the deity in the shape of pyramid made of sand, which is common in the southern, central part of kerala. And the ten days it was worshiped with great sacredness.
13. The vegetarianism and non- vegetarianism of the keralities on the Onam festival was said to be the influence or overpowering of the Aryanianisation over Dravidianisation.
14. <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~ug03/radio/myth.html>

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