

# CELEBRATING SUSTAINABLE PROSPERITY: Onam as Earth Festival

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**Abstract:** Search for the 'enough' that ensures peace is also the path to abundance and prosperity – often with accumulation with a few and deprivation of the many – however, deep down, human desire is for a society where all are treated equally and all have enough. This dream is partly realised in times of harvests, which are experiences of prosperity. The regional harvest festival of Onam of Kerala, in the South of India is a religious celebration of harvest-linked prosperity, into which are dreams of egalitarianism, abundance, and generosity infused through the myth of Mahabali, the benign benevolent ruler of the land. The effort is to examine Onam festival against the background of Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), the elements of sustainability in the celebration and in the increasingly consumerist culture of the region, and what possibly religious and educational institutions could do to reinvent the overarching virtue of sustainability through the celebration and through the platforms available to them.

**Keywords:** agri-culture, diversity, education for sustainability, responsible consumption-production, stewardship.

## 1. Introduction

All human beings desire happiness and well-being and often seek them through economic prosperity, striving for them with specific targets and assuming they will be happy and satisfied. Targets shift from time to time; they broaden and expand, and there is rarely a point at which an individual feels

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that s/he has had enough. Driven by the economics of more, the quest for happiness is almost insatiable. This quest is usually spoken of in terms of development - individuals and economies are desirous of striving for progress without limit, making use of the developments in science and technology. Once a famous filmmaker, now into farming, Mansoor Khan, discusses this quest for limitless progress with very interesting examples in his book, *The Third Curve* (3-23). He establishes clearly the limitations to growth and cites Edward Abbey famously: "growth for growth is the ideology of cancer" (83). The Club of Rome had given this aspect of prosperity as 'the Limits to Growth' (Meadows *et al.*, 23), where a set of technologists, through a computerised projection, warned against seeking a cornucopia by limitless utilisation of the planet's resources. Often, happiness is sought in the abundance of all that one desires – cornucopia – resulting in the deprivation of many and denudation of the planet.

Prosperity, as sought in the abundance of material goods, directly leads to the observed economic phenomenon of wealth accumulation. It is also observed that such "perpetual exponential quantitative growth" (Khan 28) is unsustainable, as Mahatma Gandhi pointed out in his famous stand on the need-based economy and as enunciated by E. F. Schumacher with the stress on 'small as beautiful.' Sustainability of prosperity requires a value system that ensures equity and compassion beyond the norms of competition and merit. This calls for a meta-physical take on economics, which is expected to be supplied by religions. Religions going beyond the *leganomics* of the competitive world are expected to promote compassion and care, sharing and stewardship, which could still assure 'enough for everybody's needs.' This economics has also dawned on global politics, leading to the evolution of sustainable development goals (SDG) by the United Nations. With 2030 as the target, the seventeen goals evince an urgency for corrective action by all players concerned for sustaining life on the planet, by ensuring due share for all in global prosperity.

## 2. Prosperity Promises and Religions

In this regard, it would be worth exploring the role of religion as a dominant institution in human society. It is often assumed that there is a proportionate reduction in religiosity with prosperity. This theoretical position is not necessarily found to be true always. According to the data provided by Win-Gallup International Global Index of Religiosity and Atheism 2012, 59% of the world population are religious, 23% non-religious, and 13% atheists. Religiosity is said to be on the decrease (9%), and non-religiosity is on the increase (3%). African and Latin American countries showed a high religiosity index. The general perception that religiosity and prosperity are adversely correlated is shown as not necessarily generalisable by Appaiah (2012), presenting the data with respect to Ghana, a highly religious country. Like most African countries, Ghana is said to have almost 90% or more of its population claiming to be religious but is steadily on the way to economic prosperity, whereas there were atheist-materialist nations having to grapple with the reality of hunger and poverty. He also cites the story attributed to Chinese premier Jiang Zemin, who, on his retirement, was asked by a journalist what would be that one decree he would make binding on the country which everyone would obey; he is reported to have said, "to make Christianity the official religion of China."

Apparent humour apart, the author sees the Chinese insight into the prosperity boosting religious ethic of Christianity (Protestant version) as proposed by Max Weber in his classical work *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (Weber, x-xiii). Antony Kariyil (1985) countered this famous Weberian generalisation in his study on the prosperous Syrian Catholic community of Keralam, indicating that there could be a spirit of enterprise, even in the Catholic fold, that engenders prosperity like access to education, social position in the (caste) hierarchy etc. It is difficult to have a generalisation of how supportive religions can be towards sustaining prosperity.

Religions, in general, wish for and pray for prosperity. There are abundant promises of prosperity in the Hebrew Bible with the proviso of obedience to the Lord's decrees, at times in this world itself (Exodus 3:17; Deuteronomy 8:6-9), at other times, in the next life or world (Ps. 23). According to Quran,

Beautified for men is the love of things they covet; women, children, much of gold and silver, branded beautiful horses, cattle and well-tilled land. This is the pleasure of the present world's life; but Allah has the excellent return (Paradise with flowing rivers) with Him. Say: "Shall I inform you of things far better than those? For *Al-Mutaqun* (the pious) there are Garden with their Lord, underneath which rivers flow. Therein (is their) eternal (home) and *Azwajun Mutahharatun* (purified mates or wives)... And Allah will be pleased with them (3.14-15).

In the Hindu traditions, there are many invocations and chants that are linked to prosperity. For example,

May there be prosperity to the subjects,  
To the rulers protecting the world in a lawful manner;  
May the cows and brahmanas have auspiciousness eternally,  
May all the people be prosperous (well).<sup>1</sup>

Let there be well-being for all,  
Let there be peace for all,  
Let there be completeness for all and  
Let there be auspiciousness for all.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>*Om svasti prajabhyah paripaalayntaam  
nyaayena maargena mahim mahishaah |  
gobrahmanebhya subhamastu nityam  
loka samasta sukhino bhavantu | |*

<sup>2</sup>*Om sarvesam svastirbhavatu, sarvesam santirbhavatu  
Sarvesam purnam bhavatu sarvesam mangalam bhavatu | |*

Note: These slokas are *Subhasitas*, with no specific authors. Many of them originated from the so-called *samasya-puranam* (something like solving a riddle). That is, scholars are given the last line, and are asked to fill up the three lines. The best among them get wider circulation.

There is a deity of wealth, Lakshmi, and there are days dedicated to the flourishing of wealth on earth, like *Akshaya Tritiya*. The latter, falling in the spring on the third day of the *shukla paksh* (waxing phase) of the lunar month of *Vaishakh* of the Hindu calendar, is celebrated for prosperity by many followers of Hindu and Jain traditions. Sri Sri Ravishankar cites two popular stories from the Hindu tradition, which are indicative of prosperity and sustainability linked to Lord Sri Krishna. (i) The *Pandavas* in exile were informed of the arrival of sage Durvasa with his disciples as their guests for meals. With hardly anything with them to treat the guest, the *Pandavas* were in a dilemma as to how to receive the guests. The *Pandava* homemaker, Draupadi prays to the Lord, and he appears, feigning hunger. Finding nothing but a grain of rice on the vessel, he eats that, and the vessel acquires the power to feed inexhaustibly – *akshayapatra*.<sup>3</sup> The sage arrives with 400 disciples, and all are fed to the full. This is the power of the ultimate provider, expressed miraculously as an answer to religious fervour and devotion. (ii) The other story is about Sri Krishna's childhood friend Sudama, who, in distress, seeks the Lord's help by bringing him beaten rice as a gift. In their mutual joy of meeting, both forget the purpose of Sudama's visit, and he is about to part when Krishna asks if Sudama's wife has sent any gift for him. Sudama remembers the parcel of beaten rice and gives it to his friend. Krishna eats the beaten rice with great joy. Sudama, on reaching back, to his great surprise, finds his house and status transformed, sharing in the wealth of the Lord. Sri Sri Ravisankar sums up the significance of sharing gifts that would lead to abundance and happiness (online). Traditionally, and now, further augmented by the marketing techniques, the gift is of gold, which implies purchases, and the religious aura makes the purchase of gold on this occasion auspicious. But that tends to make the

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<sup>3</sup>As told by Sri Sri Ravisankar. The traditional version refers to the limitations set to *akshayapatra*, which were overcome by Krishna's act which made the guests feel full.

religious celebration, with all its goodness notwithstanding, affordable only for the rich.

Even traditions which sought ultimate peace or release (*nirvana*) by renouncing all desires incorporated elements of prosperity in their process of growth (progress). *Om Vasudhare*<sup>4</sup> *Svah* (Hail, Oh Stream of Gems) – the Buddhist mantra invoking the Bodhisattva for wealth, prosperity, and abundance, is indicative of that. From renunciation of desires, religion, as it gets established, seeks to incorporate human aspirations for prosperity into its functions. There are modern god-men (and women) of all hues and dyes who preach and promise prosperity. Even in Christianity, which generally presents God's Reign as the ultimate goal, which is described to be not in (the abundance of) eating and drinking, but in justice, peace and joy in the Spirit (Romans 14:17), there are certain emergent sects with modern-day preachers, offering earthly prosperity, if only the hearers followed the path they show.

Often as religious inspirations get solidified into social institutions of religion, they tend to generate worship places where religious sentiments also tend to contribute to the generation of wealth and resultant prosperity for many. We can see this in the emergence of welfare centres and pilgrim centres of all religions turning into centres where wealth tends to accumulate, but at the same time, helping several thousand, directly or indirectly providing livelihood sources in numerous ways. (In 2022, Mata Amrtananandamayi Math was able to establish a health care centre in the north of India, spending over 60000 million rupees, and providing employment for almost 12000 people.)

A pertinent question in this regard would be whether religion as such promotes sustained prosperity on the planet, or if prosperity, as it promotes, would be confined to the world and life beyond the present one. Nandhikkara presents religions as proponents of sustainable prosperity (4). As the

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<sup>4</sup>It could also mean earth.

sustainability narrative gains greater significance in the development discourse, we are able to identify more sober traditions that speak of peace and happiness as a result of shared resources and wealth, indicative of sustainability – thus, the forceful re-presentation of the Biblical stewardship and consequent responsibility for others, by Pope Francis (*Laudato Si*, 68-70; *Fratelli Tutti*, 36, 50, 57-60. Against the background of a very visible affluence in many parts of the world, and the perceptible deprivations leading to hunger and death, Pope Francis presents the two dimensions of human stewardship: i) one that calls for a spirituality that goes out to the creator through the created world, its upkeep in a sustained manner, with a shift from wastefulness to the conservation of the elemental nature as our common home, and ii) that of the significance of reaching out to others who are less privileged, in a spirit of universal solidarity, dialogue and brotherhood.

In a similar strain, we find the ancient Indian wisdom of utilising the earth's resources with the attitude of *tyaga* – sacrifice (Isa. Up. 1:1),<sup>5</sup> reminding us of the divinity that the universe is permeated with, that we are bound to utilise it with reverence. The element of sacrifice implies restraints on the consumption of the good of the planet so that there is enough for the generations to come. It is this connection with the source of all that makes religions a potent medium of educating and reforming human beings to regulate their casual-normal economic act of consumption into a critical-conscious spiritual act and thus make them influential players in promoting the developmental virtue of responsible and sustainable consumption and production (SDG12). In this paper, I examine the religio-cultural festival turned secular-state festival of Onam against the paradigm of consumption and production as linked to prosperity and sustainability dynamics.

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<sup>5</sup>*Ishavasyamidam sarvam yat kinch jagatyam jagat*

*Tena tyaktena bhunjitha ma grhdh: kasysvidhanam* (Isa Upanishad 1:1)

### 3. Onam – A Celebration of Prosperity, Equity, and Righteousness

The festival of Onam is celebrated in Keralam, a state on the southwest tip of India, on the *Tiruvonam* day of the first month of the Malayalam Calendar, Chingam, usually in the second half of August or the first half of September. It was a festival, usually within the Hindu family circles, which later became a 'state' festival of Keralam by the Pattam Thanu Pilla government of Keralam in 1961.

Onam, the waking up of the land of Keralam to its springtime after the deprivations of *Karkidakam*,<sup>6</sup> is presented with the mythological good governance figure of Mahabali, said to have ruled from Thrikkakkara, a small town in central Keralam. The deity of the festival is called Thrikkakkara Appan (the Lord of Thrikkakkara), with his seat at what used to be a small temple at Thrikkakkara. He is none other than Mahabali, whom the Keralites celebrate as their mythological King, Mahabali, whose reign was characterised by equality, unity, justice, truth, and prosperity. There are also versions that refer to the deity as Vamana – the Vishnu *avatar* or even as Siva. The popular Kerala version goes thus: Mahabali's reign of prosperity and goodness was seen as a threat to the 'gods' (*deva*) with Indra as their King. They appealed to Vishnu (the sustainer God of the Divine Triad) to deliver them from the threat of Mahabali, and Vishnu appeared to Mahabali as a brahmin, dwarf in stature. Mahabali abounding in generosity does not leave any stone unturned to give what is sought from him. On seeing the brahmin, Mahabali is duly warned by his guru Kripacharya, but Mahabali cannot shed his nature of generosity. The brahmin seeks space equivalent to what can be measured by his three steps, which are granted

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<sup>6</sup>Karkidakam, the last month of the Malayalam Calendar, is when the South-west Monsoon is at its peak. Due to incessant rains, there used to be hardly any work for people, and hence no earning. It was, perhaps the toughest period for a Keralite in the year. And with its nature of 'depriving' people of their possessions – land, harvest, family, lives... it used to be referred to as *Kalla Karkidakam* – the thief of *Karkidakam*.



without any hesitation. The brahmin immediately grows in stature encompassing the whole of the earth. In the first step, he measures the entire earth; in the second one, the heavens, and being true to his word, Bali offers his head for the third step, with which he was sent to *Paatal*, the nether world. It is also told that Mahabali realising the brahmin as an incarnation of Vishnu willingly surrenders himself in submission, thus obtaining *mukti* (release). Onam is the celebration of the boon Vishnu gives to Mahabali, to visit his people from the netherworld annually. There is a *deva-asura* version of this legend, which differs in details and without the annual visit to his erstwhile kingdom granted to Mahabali to meet his people.<sup>7</sup>

People of Keralam recall those days of equality, prosperity, peace and righteousness – offering worship, welcoming and honouring their King with floral carpets, singing songs, playing games, dancing and above all, making sure that all are having a sumptuous traditional meal (*sadya*) that reminds them of the prosperity of the yore. There is a saying in Malayalam, indicative of this: *kaanam vittum onam unnam* (at any cost – even by selling off one's plot of land – one should eat the Onam meal).

The Mahodayapuram Perumal (King), who ruled from Thrikkakkara, is said to have celebrated Onam from

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<sup>7</sup>According to a tradition, Bali was a powerful *asura* (the dominant discourse refers to them as 'demons', whereas today's political-sociological discourse would treat *asura* as the South Indian Dravidian King, who was cheated out by the invading Aryan, through the better abilities in warfare. (An allegoric interpretation holds Vamana as the Sun that spreads over the region in Chingam, freeing it from the oppressive hunger and joblessness of the rainy season.) He re-captured his powers and possessions from the *sura* (*deva*) through his austerities (*tapas*) practiced before Brahma. Now he was advised by Brahaspati that he had to offer a *yajna* to become invincible. As he was in the process of accomplishing this, the threatened devas approached Vishnu, whose *avatar* put an end to the *asura*'s growth on earth, but pleased with Bali, Vishnu sends him to *Patal* where he would be the most prominent one.

*Tiruvonam* of Karkidakam (last month) till *Tiruvonam* of Chingam, with the 56 rulers of princely states under him. When their coming to Thrikkakkara was found to be difficult, it was ruled that the celebration could be held at each one's household, leading to the household-based celebration of Thrikkakkara Appan (Kerala Tourism, online). Then we have the modern-day popular celebration of *attacamayam* centred around Thrippunithura, (the seat of the Kochi King), with the deity being honourably taken from there to Thrikkakkara in solemn procession.

The apparently exploitative God-deal, in which Mahabali epitomises great possibilities (i) in human generosity to the extent of losing oneself, (ii) in the culture of hospitality, and in the extent to which accommodating strangers could go, and (iii) of obtaining immortality in the very act of generous self-giving – in the memory of his people forever, and (iv) of even the liberated status to come back from the confines of the *Pataal* with his annual legendary visit – but possibilities hardly ever referred to as part of the culture in reference or the present-day celebration.

Whether Onam celebrations involve any of them is indeed doubtful – however, as prosperity of the harvest season sets the actual background of the celebration, it can serve as a reminder of the great virtues of generous sharing and welcome extended to strangers. While the former is generally understood and accepted in principle, the latter is found difficult to digest – with the stranger, the migrant around is treated with suspicion and fear. A religious re-reading of the festival is prompting people to greater generosity in accommodating people and sharing the goods, which alone can sustain the prosperity achieved, as established in the Gandhian formula of *antyodaya* (uplift of the last) for *sarvodaya* (uplift of all).

#### **4. An Optimistic Future Vision Retrojected into the Past**

Whether there was ever such a past anywhere or not – I doubt. Such plenty and equality for all are dreams of the human

heart, retrojected into the mythical past. I feel things are much better now; even the very celebration of Onam itself has increasingly become a community celebration, a state festival of Kerala rather than a celebration of culture confined to the Hindu religious fold. Forty years ago, there was hardly any communitarian celebration of Onam in localities around Kochi – there was hardly any mention of it in the school, except in connection with the terminal examinations and the vacation linked to Onam; nor did the churches have anything to do with it. This is drastically changed. Now it has grown broader in its celebrations, involving all educational institutions devoting at least one working day to celebrate Onam. It does promote fellowship among the students and teachers and sometimes extends to the parents and neighbourhood as well. All the Kerala churches (even the Churches of Malayali diaspora all over the world) celebrate Onam enthusiastically. These are very positive signs of the new era where at least some fundamentals of sustainability – inclusion and equality – are unwittingly being celebrated.

Rather than a memorial fest of the past, it is the celebration of the future hope, the dream every human nurtures: a reign of values and virtues, like equality, liberty, fraternity, human dignity, unity, corruption-free, just, caring, and good governance. The core aspects of good governance, as seen by UNDP, are effectiveness, inclusiveness, responsiveness and transparency – the Mahabali myth and the tradition handed over in this regard make it fit the frame.

The implication is for the annual renewal of commitment to these values by the people, which unfortunately is hardly ever a part of the festivities. The fact that all educational institutions celebrate this feast on a solemn scale, including traditional art forms and the traditional meal in the celebrations, provides an excellent opportunity to instil the values of prosperity, as linked to the earth and its productivity, generosity, and sharing. The increased stress given to the outcomes in education centred around making a 'good human being' of India's National Education Policy aptly

sets the background for such celebrations to be an outcome-oriented part of the curriculum (NEP 4).

### **5. Celebrating Food Culture – Food Crop Diversity**

Onam is typically a harvest festival when the rice crop is harvested, along with the tubers planted during the *kumbham* (Vishu season), which become ready for harvest – and fittingly celebrated with the *sadya*, a festive meal. Hence Onam is a 'food festival' and the right time to celebrate the traditions of food of the region, with all its diversities and its new permutation-combinations – like the entry of the non-native cabbage as a regular item of *sadya* for quite some time now; another non-traditional item beet-root and the naturalised *kappa* (tapioca) are making gradual entry into the *sadya-menu*. In some parts of the North Kerala non-vegetarian dishes are also included as part of the menu – all of which are indicative of an accommodative and diversified food basket which is to be sustained and preserved.

What is remarkable about Onam Sadya as it used to be, was its zero waste, with the feast being spread on the bio-degradable banana leaf and whatever waste generated being easily bio-degradable. It is eaten being seated on the floor (a century ago, the comfort and luxury of a raised seat and a table were not thinkable nor affordable for the majority). And it was invariably eaten with hands – a rare dexterity exhibited by people of this region, with the deftness in managing the liquid accompaniments including, employing the right mix with rice, transferred from floor level to the mouth, without spilling or throwing away. The *sadya* includes all the diverse tastes – salty, fatty, umami, sour, pungent, astringent, tarty, sour-sweet, aromatic, sweet – all these consumed in a graded manner, one after the other, from the same leaf and requiring no other contraption than one's hand, without losing the unique flavour of each, and having some native wisdom of digestion in-built into the system.

This zero waste and minimalist ideal, which has gained greater significance for today's world from the angle of

sustainability, is now almost set aside and grossly violated by the new packaged mode of Onam celebration. It is affordable and convenient; it can be ordered and home-delivered – in Keralam or in almost all other countries where ex-pat Malayalees are found. To make it accessible to Malayalees everywhere, the market has found its own ways: A neatly packed *sadya* is delivered at your doorstep; but adds 18 to 30 disposable plastic containers, one or more brown paper packs, an all-inclusive hep-hardboard box, besides the traditional banana leaf, which again, often finds an easy substitute in a plastic/plastic coated paper-leaf for cost-saving/convenience! Costing anywhere between Rs. 100 to Rs. 1000. In the bargain, a production-harvest festival is turned into a consumerist-wasteful feast.

## 6. Celebration of Equity

The reign of Mahabali is remembered for the principle of equity and equality – when everybody was treated at par (*manushar ellarum onnu pole*). The community celebrations, to some extent, try to recall this ideal, ensuring that everyone has enough to eat and wear at least for the occasion. *Sadya* and the usual gifts of dress are symbolic of these. The *sadya*, where everyone sits together and eats together the same meal, is a meaningful token of the ideal but often relegated to mere tokenism, assuming the nature of a modern ritual rather than anything to do with real-life praxis. The celebration has become one for celebration's sake. Accepted that the state government initiates measures to ensure that almost everyone is assured of a hearty meal for the day through the public distribution system, but for the general public, it is just a time to celebrate with rarely any thought for those who do not have the wherewithal for celebrations. In general, it has come to be a ritual of a-good-time-for-us-now, than a reaching out to make a more equitable world or looking into the future for sustaining the produces that are celebrated.

## 7. A Shift from a Minimalist Culture

The festival is a reminder of the simple, minimalist lifestyle of Keralites. Dress – the normal dress of men used to be just a wrap-around cloth that served the climatic conditions best, with hardly anything to cover the top, except a shawl used for solemn occasions. Similarly, the dress worn by the women was also bereft of all ostentation, simple and minimal. The festival has given occasion for the typical Kerala dress to be given various modifications befitting the modern age, still giving a touch of the tradition, but making Onam-dress purchase another compulsive consumption item.

The food was also bare minimum (not really a welcome aspect), but it was diverse. A few lines of a folk song go thus:

Three months on jackfruit and mangoes,  
 three on Colocasia and yams,  
 another three on leafy vegetables available around,  
 and the rest of the three, somehow or other!<sup>8</sup>

The lines are indicative of frugality, diversity, and total dependence on the environment. Against this frugal living, the Onam *sadya* is eaten with great relish and, as indicated, the anticipating of a sustainable future abundance. The material abundance is now much more evident in the region growing increasingly economically affluent – but the sustainability part of that is doubtful, as it is not being built on stable foundations of sustained productivity (SDG 12), which I will indicate as linked to the agricultural scenario of the region.

The entire landscape of Kerala does not show any signs of a past of very great accumulation of wealth with anyone, for that matter. There might have been kings and landlords and resultant exploitation, but even their palaces do not evince any sign of opulence that we are now becoming more familiar with, or the North Indian regions of India are familiar with. From that culture of very simple living, on the whole, the

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<sup>8</sup>*chakkengm mangem mummaasam,  
 thalum thakarem mummaasam,  
 chempum chenem mummasam,  
 anganem inganem mummasam*

Kerala population now exhibits a highly consumerist (maximalist) and ostentatious culture. With wealth increasing and consumption affordable, there is a trend of growing accumulation with the few who can afford and accompanying impacts on the terrain – increasing pollution from emissions, unmanaged solid waste and several regions becoming vulnerable to the climate change impacts. Unfortunately, the festivities of Onam only tend to augment these adverse effects.

### **8. Celebrating Agriculture – Responsible Production (SDG 12)**

Coming back to Onam being a food festival – it implies food production, and hence it should be the celebration of the food producer. *Jai Kisan* (Hail the farmer!) is a mere slogan now, *Jawan* (soldier) has grown in prominence with border security as a priority, and food security, something taken-for-granted. *Kisan* life has become one of indignity and oppression – expressed or hidden; there is no platform, no education that promotes the dignity of food production and producer; no mainstream education or educator or policy maker ever imagines that this is to be one of the important career options, or encourages youngsters to look at this as a career option. While all politicians wax eloquent about farmers, no party or government does anything to promote this as a dignified occupation/profession; and still, people continue to produce since they are left with no other option. Given an option, they would all quit. In my limited interactions with educational institutions across the country in 2021, I could hardly meet any teacher who thought it was his/her duty to educate the students on the importance of agriculture and inspire them to think of this as a future call (career), nor did I come across any student (honestly, with the exception of two), who thought in terms of agriculture as a career option.

It is interesting to note that in the past decade, there was some uncommon political initiative in connection with this festival to increase local productivity of vegetables, to be grown safely by families and local groups, which had some desirable outcomes. This was facilitated by the media

campaign against the presence of damaging chemicals in the vegetables coming to the market from beyond the borders. However, this is to be contrasted with the gaping fact of the steady decrease in the total land under cultivation in the state, as the state becomes increasingly dependent on other regions for its food supply. From 1068 metric tonnes of paddy in 1961 to 626.68 metric tonnes in 2020-21, and from 45% dependence on external sources for meeting food requirements to 85% in 2021. 52% of the farmers were indebted, with almost 80% of them having an average debt of Rs. 2.13 lakh per family (Abbas and Palakkappillil, 88-89). At least for the state of Kerala, it is high time that the government went beyond the stereotypes and made the vast network of their agricultural department vibrant, supportive, flexible, people friendly and productive, not being satisfied by the propagandist and token revival (grow-bag) attempts, including localised procurement and fair price for the producer. With the National Education Policy (2020) in place, it is high time that this is built into the 'Indianness' of the cultural and character formation that the policy repeatedly stresses through real-life, curriculum-based experience in this basic culture.

## **9. Celebration of Earth**

Food is produced only by the earth – though now there are successful attempts to produce without earth – but not sure of its sustainability on a large-scale. It is the mother earth that produces, with the right combinations of soil, air, water, and sunshine. Each Onam is a time for the veneration of the productive, creative mother earth! And a resolve to maintain it, especially by 'protecting soil and its health'. And also challenges every consumer to be a producer as well – or at least all homesteads to produce minimally (family farming ideal). It has practical implications for developing a lifestyle and celebration of life that do not become a burden on the planet, pointing to the need to develop a waste-reducing culture. The Onam celebrations today hardly have any regard



for the reverence to the primary food giver – the mother earth, our common home.

It is to be admitted that in spite of the global reawakening in this respect since the *Silent Spring times*, and increasingly so, after the acceptance of sustainable development goals by the world nations, the world religions have not, as such, adopted this as a divine call (Genesis 2:15 'till and keep' as rearticulated by Pope Francis in *Laudato Si*, 49) and made it a matter of their preaching and praxis.

### **10. Reinventing Religiosity of Onam**

Onam myth and the veneration of the incarnate God (*Vishnu*) or the ideal ruler (Mahabali), at best, end up recalling a tradition and relishing the bygone good times. Making it a state festival not necessarily attached to faith practices of a particular religion, rather making it a harvest festival, is an apt point for people of all faiths to come together, to realise the sacred gifts of the earth, especially, food; hold them in reverence, maintain the earth clean and productive, and accept them as sacred duties of every person of faith.

It is linking our celebration to the ultimate *anna-data* (food giver) – God; the inexhaustible source of sustenance; and aptly so, when the celebration implies solidarity with people deprived of food (children of the same mother and hence sisters and brothers living in the common home). Today, as I make these notes, we have unprecedented floods with millions in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Sudan, the Philippines and Somalia who bear the after-effects of the ravages done to the source of food, the planet, mostly by more affluent nations. We also have Srilanka and many parts of Africa being deprived of food on account of civil strife, besides the regular millions of India reported on the hunger rolls. Onam is indicative of the egalitarian abundance possible through just sharing the planet's resources and human responsibility towards the sustenance of fellow humans and other beings (Francis, *Laudato Si*, 51-52).

This reflection itself, being a case-study of a local fest against the framework of sustainability, I would rather look at its locus, Keralam, for awakening a spirit of sustainability through its very influential religious institutions. Harvest at this point in time may be a unique feature of the state of Keralam or perhaps of the western coast of India; but the model of liberating and elevating it to a *food-harvest-farmer-earth* festival can be a model for the whole nation, and worth considering it as a national festival, not a mere a Kerala festival celebrated all over the nation or the world! The local religious institutions can very well match the celebration as an occasion to reawaken the believers to go beyond the rituals to the recognition of the great divine call to 'till and keep' 'our common home,' encourage individual and group attempts to reawaken a food-producing culture, and actually celebrate with produces of the earth. It is to be admitted that there have been some such initiatives, though grossly inadequate to match the need.

## 11. Conclusion

Prosperity is desirable –humans are driven to it as an ideal, but it escapes the majority like a mirage. This human aspiration has been absorbed into almost all religious traditions, which point to the right ways of obtaining and sustaining it. Religious celebrations around the experiences of prosperity, especially those linked to harvest, are common in almost all religious traditions. They celebrate human success as linked to power beyond them, the Divine, invariably involving a sentiment of gratitude to the ultimate provider. Myths have been woven into such traditions and celebrations, and one such we find in the Onam celebration of Keralam in the South of India, which draws from the myth of good-governance under a benevolent King and combines the harvest and youthfulness of nature. It is a harvest festival, a food festival, a nature festival, an earth festival and a celebration of production, consumption, and enough or abundance for all.

To me, as a feast, without explicitly saying so, incorporates the very core of sustainable development goals – zero poverty (SDG 1), no hunger (SDG 2), good health and well-being (good food and not medicines, for good health – SDG 3), clean water and sanitation for all (water as part of food, and waste reduction for sanitation – SDG 6) and responsible consumption and production for health and well being – with every consumer (every family) having a call to be a producer as well (SDG 12). It is worth remembering that the UN celebrated 2014 as the year of family farming and 2015 as the year of soils, with these ideals in mind.

While these are great possibilities with religious and educational institutions, the celebrations have hardly acquired these dimensions. And the challenge today is to reinfuse these elements of sustainability into the celebration, beginning with a resolve to be a responsible producer at the individual-family-community level, focussing on local production and local consumption. Next is to create a culture that holds food production as divine and something to aspire for; and where food producers are given the greatest respect. And thirdly, to a culture of zero-waste, where food is not wasted, where waste generated by humans is managed so as not to pollute the soil and waters of the *Annapurna* (the one who is the producer of all food). Liberated from its traditional religiosities, Onam is an occasion for people of goodwill of all faiths to cherish soil, revere it, and make it an *Akshayapatra* (the inexhaustible resource) through responsible production for sustaining life on the planet.

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