

PALETTE & PALATE

DEBATE OVER
THE SONG

While some people believe that the famed song 'Maveli Naadu Vaaneedum Kaalam' was penned and popularised by Sahodaran Ayyappan as part of the social revolution during the renaissance period of the early 20th century, many others argue that what we

have today is a modification of an already existing original version written by an anonymous poet.

SALIL CHOWDHURY'S
'POOVILI'

One of the popular 'Onam songs' that one gets to hear during every Onam season is 'Poovili Poovili Ponnonamayi' from the 1977 movie Vishukkani. Directed by J Sasikumar and produced by R M Sundaram, the movie was a remake of Tamil flick Karpagam. Almost all songs of the movie, set to tune by the legendary Salil Chowdhury, are evergreen hits.

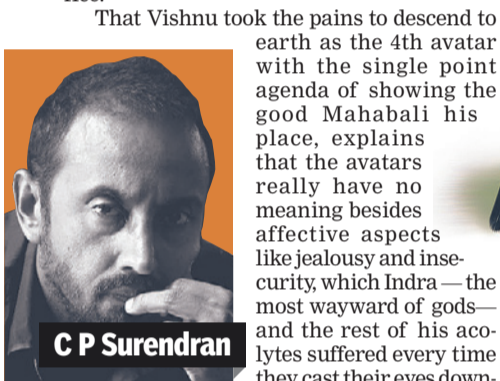
IN THREE EASY STEPS

Sacrifice is often self-serving, and the Malayali finally wakes up to the truth

As we now know, the gods are not a kind tribe, no matter what their provenance: Greek, Teutonic or Indian. One reason for this could be that man created god, and it's not possible to create a product completely free of the creator's limitations.

The myth of Mahabali too is replete with the shortcomings of our gods to the extent that one could easily argue it is an exercise in irony possibly by a Dravidian author — most likely a Malayali — to critique the suras, and point out that their actual quality is that of the asuras.

Certainly in the interaction between Mahabali and Vamana, the hero is the king, considering his nobility and his willingness for self-sacrifice. In fact, though I am no linguist, contrary to what the traditional etymology of the name means, Very Strong, I would venture to say, Mahabali means The Great Sacrifice.



C P Surendran

That Vishnu took the pains to descend to earth as the 4th avatar with the single point agenda of showing the good Mahabali his place, explains that the avatars really have no meaning besides affective aspects like jealousy and insecurity, which Indra — the most wayward of gods — and the rest of his acolytes suffered every time they cast their eyes downward in the direction of the prehistoric — but, naturally socialist, as the traditional Onam lyrics say — Kerala.

We all know the myth. Mahabali was a great Asura king. The gods disapproved of his reign because he was very good at it, and all his people were happy and there was no petty trolling and bitching. So the gods appealed to Vishnu, who, appeared before the king as a Vamana; nevertheless, a brahmin Vamana.

And, typical of a brahmin perhaps, he



Illustration: Gireesh

asked for land — that could be measured in three steps. The king agreed. Then Vishnu assumed cosmic proportions. In two steps he covered the earth and the sky, and, for want of place to put down his third step, Mahabali offered his head. Vishnu sent him down to the netherworld, patalam. The king was granted the favour of returning once a year to Kerala, and see his subjects, some of whom, he must worry, over the years had migrated to the Middle East, and who, too, like him, returned once a year to see their land.

I am not trying to argue that the subtext of the myth is Exile, though that roughly describes the status of Keralites in general. I am more fascinated by the fact — or fiction — that the mythic mind of the Malayali characteris-

tically has chosen a fable that goes against the grain of the establishment, be it Brahmins, or gods.

The moral lessons that one could draw from this fertility lore could not be clearer. Don't do your job better than your boss. Do not believe brahmins, they are deceptive and property-oriented. Socialism is not a historic movement, but a mythical one as exemplified, say, by Mahabali — which must come across as a consolation to right-wing Hindus. Tested against the reality of our times, these points all have their practical relevance.

Personally to me, though I am trying hard to be a devotee of Krishna, the role of Vishnu has been suspect. And not just because he opted to be brahmin in an endorsement of the

caste hierarchies. If mythology is to be believed, Vishnu bore a personal grudge against Mahabali's family. Mahabali is the grandson of Prahlad, whose trauma at seeing his father Hiranyakashipu being ripped apart by Narasimha, must have shown up all through his life as a neurosis of guilt and terror, though we are never told about it. There, too, Vishnu had taken on an avatar just to settle the usual scores of jealousy of the gods as Hiranyakashipu had won by means of tapas many great favours from Shiva and Brahma and become extremely powerful.

Kashipu's own lineage according to Bhagavata Purana is impressive: he was the son of Diti (daughter of Daksha Prajapathi) and sage Kashyapa. And he was so smart, he ruled for 107,280,000 years. He was clearly a near-immortal. We will not go into the self-contradictory absurdity of how his great grandson Mahabali landed in Kerala, spouting, no doubt, Malayalam with a heavy Thiruvananthapuram accent, especially when Kerala was not yet formed. Parashurama, whose axe carved Kerala into existence, was an avatar of Vishnu after Vamana.

Vishnu's rivalry then is actually familial. Hiranyakashipu had a great, golden-eyed brother. His name was Hiranyaksha. And who killed him? Vishnu. To slay him, Vishnu had to assume the Varaha avatar. It appears rather cost-prohibitive that three of Vishnu's 10 avatars were obsessed with one family, and their, shall we say, serial annihilation.

It would be unfair to blame only Vishnu for banishment of a popular king and an aspirational myth. We too have contributed to his banishment. And that contribution is increasingly ominous with each passing year. The well-to-do certainly tend to skip festivals like Onam and Vishu, because every day is festal. More or less. When Malls replace Myths, festivals change their colour and character.

Mahabali is now a bit of a joke, as you would have noticed from this fortnight's cartoons and TV skits. To me that shows that the life and times of Mahabali are just about over. When a benevolent character becomes the butt of jokes, he has become a caricature. That's a transformation perhaps Kerala in general is going through. The subjects have turned against their king. Vamana must be chuckling.

C P Surendran is a well-known Indian-English novelist and poet, and a former editor-in-chief of DNA

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