Chapter III

Onam: Media and Construction of Identity

Introduction

This chapter explores the way in which the mass media constructs a particular identity for Keralites. It also engages with the fact that Onam is a consumerist activity which is being used by the media for its own popularity. Another question this chapter raises is how the media deals with Onam as media event. Some of the television channels clearly use this as an occasion to produce programmes with film stars and other celebrities. This chapter discusses the motives behind such activities. The chapter also explores the advertisements and audio and video cassettes to find out the specific cultural signifiers they use. Onam special programmes aired on television during the festival season articulate a unique cultural identity by deploying cultural signifiers associated with the Malayali identity. Onam special advertisements also make use of such cultural signifiers to situate themselves within the narrative of the unique cultural identity. The audio and video cassette culture recollects the past, but at the same time use the occasion of Onam to offer a critique of the contemporary society and articulate an idea about how the Kerala society should be.

In previous chapter I have discussed the literary imagination of Onam festival and the construction of Malayali identity. Print media helps the society to form a community
and the literature on Onam addresses the cultural past of the Malayali. The present chapter examines the role of media in the construction of Malayali identity especially through Onam programmes. Media plays a significant role in the everyday life of people in the contemporary society. Media has become a part of their daily life practices and has the power to engage and mediate the identity formation of communities through various programmes. Media plays a significant role in taking local cultures into a global level. It introduces new cultural forms into the existing culture. According to Stuart Hall, media is “a major cultural and ideological force, standing in a dominant position with respect to the way in which social relations and political problems were defined and the production and transformation of popular ideologies in the audiences addressed” (1980: 117). Media has the potential to customise its various programmes according to the local context. During the festival season media outlets come up with various programmes that focus on the cultural heritage of the society. While claiming to be representing the syncretism and plurality of Indian culture and propagating the idea of cultural unity, the media indirectly gives more privileges to the life world and mentality of people who belong to the upper echelon of the society. The presupposition of the cultural or symbolic capital of the upper strata of society and the modes of mediation often echoes the notions of hegemonic caste hierarchies and attached perspectives. This caste hierarchy in media—either in the form of representation or ideological positioning—is visible in the articulation of cultural identity by the media.

In the Indian context, media adjusts its strategies according to the language in which regional culture finds expression. They add more localised programmes which
particularly focus on the local language speaking community. Hindi serials are one of the typical examples of localisation in the field of media. While the media promotes the traditional values of the society, it makes some social structures like the caste and other systems in the society visible.

Media practices affect the everyday practices of people at the local level. For instance, the dressing or life styles adapted by the television serials and films have a wider social influence and mediative mechanisms. Media propagates the cultural values of the society through various social and cultural syntaxes and codes as well as a moral and ethical presupposition in order to attribute a community identity. The imagination of this articulation of identity emerges from the collective consciousness of the society. Media always try to portray the collective consciousness while reworking the traditional ethical, moral, and cultural perspective of the society and then make into in the language of representation. In this form of representation, the commercialisation and commoditisation of the culture are an unavoidable segment. At the same time, in the name of collective or the majoritarian viewpoint, or as the feeling of the civil society, media often entangles with communal perspectives, while projecting values and norms of the upper class/caste mentalities. Here the communalisation and commodification are very much intertwined. Media can spread the communal identity, and it is also part of the commercialisation of culture. In the words of Ram Puniyani, apart from commercialisation, media promotes communalisation. Regional media focuses more on the communal and religious identity. Puniyani writes:
The expression of religious nationalism has much to do with the way the media carries the news. Apart from commercialisation, there is a great deal of the communalisation of the media. Sensationalisation and communal biases are an important part of the media fare …. Most of the newspapers carry divine columns; the language press gives huge publicity to the priests and their sermons. Much space is devoted to the religious aspects of the festivals.

The visual media is growing in its clout, and here again, there are many channels and many TV personalities thrive in the communalisation of their programmes. The commercialisation of the media has gone hand in hand with the rise and increase of the impact of Hindutva (2009: 103).

Media articulates an identity which is mainly based on religion. Media is also used to construct a religious-national identity. Media broadcast the programmes which show the cultural heritage of the region based on myth or religion. Both the audio and visual media work along the lines of constructing a religious identity.

This chapter deals with the role of media in the formation of Malayali cultural identity. The attempt here is to find out how media articulate the Malayali identity through their various programmes, especially programmes related to the festival of Onam. For Media, Onam season is the time of celebrations and all the Malayalam media (both visual and print) celebrate it with local flavours. These local or homely flavours come from the nostalgic feelings of the Malayali. Most of the television programmes focus on the Malayali past and they narrate the cultural heritage of Malayalees. These past elements
evoke the memory of Malayali culture and enunciates the virtues of Malayali identity in
the contemporary world. In this process of identification with an identity media facilitate
viewpoints of rich and prosperous traditions. Lack of virtues of the present and the nature
of growing individualism in the modern Malayali identity formation also find mention.
The print media also shares Onam-memories and celebrate the nostalgia of Malayali. All
the Onam songs, especially the seasonal ones released in audio form, are based on these
nostalgic feelings and most of these songs narrate the scenic beauty of Kerala and
Malayaliness.

Onam and Media

This chapter argues that the images disseminated by various media play an
important role in the construction of a popular imagination of Onam. The media articulate
a common Malayali identity through numerous “Onam special” programmes. Cultural
performances during this festival are always broadcasted by Doordarshan, the official T V
channel, Radio, Newspapers, and Magazines. Video discs and audio records also play a
significant role. Local culture, therefore, is staged in a national context and is mediated by
the mass media (Lentz 2001: 48). At present, the state institutions and media look at
Onam as a time for exchanging cultural products to promote collective values. To promote
collective morals, media give importance to the public culture and through these cultural
activities media make the cultural and moral values as the marker of a collective or group.
Mass media play a key role in bringing out the socio-cultural changes in the society.
Historical and contemporary print and visual media have played a significant role in
popularising Onam while symbolising various manners, customs and life styles. The
media start Onam special programmes one month prior to the festival. They come up with programmes that project the supposedly prosperous past of the Malayali society, and then its contours of changes and intermediations.

The print media have a significant role in the popularisation of Onam. From the beginning of the Twentieth century itself, print media started publicising Onam projecting its practices as a cultural symbol of Kerala. In the 1920s and 1930s, the print media focused more on the need of a linguistic-national festival. In chapter two, I have discussed the literary imagination of Onam, especially those articles written during the period between 1930 and 1960. These writings imagined a unique Malayali culture which necessarily meant the construction of a glorified Malayali past.

In the media, Onam is presented as a festival of all Malayalees, without any religious or caste affiliations. Compared to other festivals, the media construct a prominent position for Onam through its various programs. Contemporary festivals depend a lot on the market and consumption. At various levels, media promote the consumption practices of Malayali, especially during the Onam seasons. Visual and print media target different levels of audiences. Both the media can produce a certain homogenous identity and give a unique cultural identity and practices to the society. These two media aim to promote the consumer habit of the Malayalees. The consumption tendency is seen as the marker of social status in advertisements and television programmes. These two fields introduce new lifestyles and products in the society which become part of the culture. Onam, on the other hand, opens up a new market-oriented space for the Malayali to negotiate not only their identity but also their need. The
negotiation of cultural identity and needs are invariably commoditised and mediated by these two fields of media.

“Celebrate this Festival Season with Us”: Visual Media and Articulation of Identity

Visual media through their special Onam programmes largely impart a nationalist feeling among Malayalees. Television programmes and films broadcasted during this season highlight the unique features of the Kerala tradition and Malayali integrity. Most of the Onam programmes in television and other visual media are nostalgic recollection of traditional virtues and reflections on the changing lifestyle and worldview of the Malayalees.

It is noted that visual media is used as a space for communication between the nation and its people. Visual media also take part in the formation of identities and the programmes in the visual media reflect the everyday life of the society. Media create a public culture and it tries to communicate with the culture or events. Arvind Rajagopal writes,

… merely focusing on the media itself does little more than confirm our own fascination with its power. The media neither cause nor reflect events, they participate in them. To an importance extent, television, like the media in general, exteriorise and consolidate the social functions of communication and representation, leading to a quicker, more efficient
network of signs and messages, and in turn changing the context for social communication in general (2001: 31-32).

Every nation has their own channels to broadcast their cultural events and they become part of their cultural identity. In India, the state Television, Doordarshan, has channels in various regional languages to explore the regional language and culture. These channels also reflect regional culture and share the collective memory associated with the region. Most of the Indian channels—both state-run and private channels—use festival as an occasion to display the cultural heritage of the land.

The major focus of the visual media during Onam is on the sharing of the nostalgic memory of celebrity guests and connecting Malayali past to their personal life history. Even though visual media celebrate other festivals as well, the time slot that has been given to Onam is much higher than the time given to other festivals. Also, when festivals like Eid and Christmas are presented as religious festivals, Onam is presented as a common festival. When the festival season begins, the major tagline of visual media is “celebrate this festival with us”. Earlier most of the television programmes used to narrate the history of Onam and present some series of entertainment programmes like films, songs etc. Now there is a change in television programmes. Television channels have started featuring programmes like “traditional tastes” of Kerala and some travel documentaries. *Nadukanunna Maveli* (The Maveli on Kerala Tour) programme on Reporter News Channel is an instance of this. The aim of these kinds of travel documentaries in festive season is to “explore the Malayali life” all over the world. Social media like Facebook and Twitter also have significant roles in showcasing Kerala culture.
during the Onam season. In the next section of this chapter I analyse how the media constructs and reinforces the idea that Onam is a marker of the cultural identity of the Malayalees.

**Making the ‘Special’: Television and Onam Special Programmes.**

Television is a powerful medium that can bring the native culture closer to people and familiarise it to local community at the same time it offers a view of the global society. It is a medium to communicate to the people as well as to unite them. Television also represents the knowledge formation in a society; it dominates the imagination of the people. Through the domination of the imagination, it reproduces the social knowledge (Livingstone 1990: 4). In India, in the early period television was accessible only to the urban population but soon it emerged as a mass medium. The official television channel of the country, Doordarshan had a significant role in the consolidation of the nation building process in the 1980s and 1990s. It functions not only on the level of ideological level but also as a pedagogical tool to educate masses. Television has played the role of propagating the idea of a homogenous nation along the lines of cultural nationalism. For example, the broadcasting of *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* serials in the late 1980s and 1990s contributed to the mobilisation of Hindus against the Muslims. Every nation decides their telecasting system with the ideological and political structure of the society (Nilanjana 2009: 1). According to Ram Puniyani:
… the nationwide broadcast of the serials Ramayana and
Mahabharatha, took religiosity to the higher level. Ramayana in
particular reduced Hinduism to its mythology which was then
presented as the essence of nationhood. The image of national pride
could be served more effectively by the mass popularity of
devotional traditions revolving around Ram. Since television was the
monopoly of the state, this religiosity beamed into every household
and the nation used to come to a grinding halt to watch these syrupy
mythologies constructed for the glorification of the Lord, and around
him the Babri demolition campaign was also built up (2009: 100).

Television works as an agent in society, as it connects the local society to the
global society and it contributes to the making of a common-sense in the society. Through
various kinds of engagements, television works as a mediator in modern society and it
gives a space where the diasporic community can negotiate and create transcultural
identities. Television offers the most visible expressions of the popularisation of
traditional values through festivals and facilitates the construction of an ‘imaginary
homeland’.

During Onam, all Malayalam channels alter their scheduled programmes to add
Onam flavour, in order to increase their viewership and rating. During this season,
channels compete with each other to include Onam “special” programmes like interviews
with celebrities, running premier shows of movies, comedy programmes, music shows,
travel shows, cookery shows, etc. These programmes show the ‘heritage’ of Kerala.
Malayalam channels use Onam as a sign of Malayali identity and show how people celebrate Onam in different parts of the world. Most of the channels broadcast various programmes such as ‘Onam with politicians’, ‘Onam on Campus’, ‘Onam with film stars’, so on and so forth.

Asianet, Surya, Mazhavil Manorama, Reporter, Media One, Mathrubhumi News, Flowers TV, Surya TV, etc. are the leading popular channels in Kerala. All these channels compete with each other to include Onam programmes during the Onam season. A detailed analysis of some of the programmes will help us to understand how they narrate the tradition and culture of Kerala and how they articulate Malayali identity through these programmes. During Onam days, all these channels reschedule their programmes to include Onam special programmes. Most of these programmes share the experiences of a person or a community. Most of the ritualistic practices associated with Onam are derived from the Hindu religious practices, but television presents Onam as a secular cultural festival or a marker of Kerala identity. At the same time, television presents other festivals like Christmas and Eid as religious festivals. This is an instance for how media, especially the television articulates a majoritarian ideology. Selected television programmes like interviews, documentaries, discussions and other entertainment programmes could be used to understand the ways in which these programmes promote a hegemonic perspective of the society to claim the collective identity of the region.

Onam is a special occasion for television channels to increase their viewership. Channels compete with each other to include unique programmes to raise their TRP. Earlier, channels used to show programmes which were mostly music shows and Onam
games. Now there is a substantial change in the content of the TV programmes, as a response to the debates around Onam that have emerged in the last two decades. Now some channels include different narratives and experiences of Onam, and give space for the sharing of the collective memories of hitherto unrepresented groups. “Kaanam Vitta Onam: Onathinte Marupuram Thedi” in Media One is an example for this. These programmes focus on the multiple narratives of Onam; especially the folk kinds from the lower caste people in Kerala. Channels aim to spread the cultural values and historical memories associated with the region.

*Puravrutham*¹ (myth) is a programme broadcasted by Media One channel about the folk culture of Kerala. This programme is a special programme on folk art forms and its connection to Onam festival. All the art forms shown in this programme are performed by lower caste groups. The narrative form of this show is that of storytelling- a father talking about the history of folk arts to his children, a form of transferring memories to the younger generation. At the same time, he is sharing the history of his community and its role in the Onam festival. Some of the folk art forms mentioned in this show are, *Chakram Chavittu Pattu* (Wheel Songs), *Parunthu Pattu* (Song of an Eagle), *Mayilattam* (Peacock dance), *Kala Kali* (Ox dance), *Mudiyattam* (Hair dance) and *Njattu Pattu*.² *Chakram Chavittu Pattu* is a song related to the agricultural practices and mainly found in the lower


²*Njattu Pattu* is a genre of song that people used to sing while planting seedlings in the paddy field
Kuttanad\textsuperscript{3}. This is a song that people used to sing for ‘leisure’ while removing excess water from the paddy field using a wooden wheel. The theme of this song is connected with the lower castes’ relationship with agricultural activities and the community history.

Parunthu Pattu is the other art form included in Puravrutham. It is a folk song and dance that tells the life story of an eagle. Mayilattam is a temple related art form performed in house during the time of Onam. Kala Kali is a dance form and a ritual performance. It is a dance with the image of an ox and describing the beauty of an ox. All these programmes are folk arts and they do not have any connection with Onam festival or Onam myth, but they are being considered as part of the Onam festival. These TV programmes imagine the lower caste culture also as part of Onam festival, thus creating a link between Onam and folk culture. The programme in Media One shows how cultural memory is transferred from one generation to the next generation. Through this programme, the channel tries to show that contemporary Kerala is celebrating Onam without this kind of folk art forms and they are recollecting the memory.

Another noted programme on MediaOne channel is Kaanam Vitta Onam: Onathinte Marupuram Thedi\textsuperscript{4}. This is one of the ‘special’ programmes on Onam which make inquiries into the alternative history of Onam festival. It raises new questions about the origin of Onam festival and the politics involved in its transformation as the national

\textsuperscript{3} Kuttanad is a place in Alappuzha district of Kerala and it has an important place in the map of Kerala tourism. This place is famous for backwater tourism and agriculture.

\textsuperscript{4} https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7t3olz4eHLw. September 11, 2014.
festival of the state of Kerala. *Kaanam Vitta Onam* produces a new knowledge about the ‘other’ history of Onam. The focus of this show is to find out the other narratives, especially the Dalit narrative of Onam festival and the contemporary critique of Onam festival from a caste and gender perspective. It starts with questioning the validity of the Onam myth and tracing the history of Onam. This programme mainly contains interviews of Dalit intellectuals and other historians in Kerala. Intellectuals like M B Manoj and K E N Kunhjamuhammed argue that Onam is an upper caste Hindu festival and it ignores other narratives like the Maveli story among the Adiyar community⁵. This programme

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⁵ There are several stories about Maveli among the Adivasi communities in Kerala. The Adiyar community in Wayanad has one such story which expresses their pain about King Maveli being betrayed and getting killed by upper-caste landlords. Not only did they murder Maveli, they also grabbed the community's land and forced them into slavery. The land policies of the erstwhile government that declared Onam as a national festival and the attitude of the feudal lords are pretty much the same—both enslaved Adivasis in their own soil and usurped their land. The story that the Adiyars narrate is this:

“Long ago, we also had our time. The time of Maveli Manduva Theyyam. There were no castes or sub-castes and the times were peaceful. Once three lords came from the sky to meet Manduva Theyyam. Maveli received them as his guests. But when Maveli came back after resting, he could not find the *mannu* (soil/land) he had been saving safely until then. He enquired after his guests about this and an argument ensued. Finally, it was decided that a test would be conducted. Both parties will take a dip in a river—the lords in the lower banks and Maveli in the upper banks. If the lords had stolen the land, the water will get muddied and will flow up. If the *mannu* were with Maveli himself, the muddy water would flow to the lower banks. Maveli agreed to the conditions. Both parties then took the dip and the muddy water flowed to the lower banks. The enraged lords hit Maveli with a vessel of slaked lime and murdered him”. 
aims to produce counter knowledge on Onam and it questions the power involved in the mainstream construction of Onam history.

Onam is considered as the festival of people and there is a notion that all the communities participate in Onam festival. To authenticate this claim some of the channels come up with programmes on Onam celebration in the Adivasi settlements. The channels project the Adivasis—as a marginalised community—celebrating Onam in the “traditional” way. One such Onam special programme is “Onapperuma” telecasted on Indiavision channel. This programme is about the different ways of Onam celebrations. This programme features Onam celebrations of Adivasis in the Wayanad district of Kerala, which is organised by the Sulthan Bathery block Panchayath. Here they include all Adivasi communities’ traditional performances, and the title of the programme is “Gothra Sandhya (Tribal Night)”. From this programme we can understand that the media are trying to say that Onam is part of the culture of all the people in Kerala. What the channel claims to do is to provide a platform to perform the traditional art forms of different communities in an attempt to bring all religious sects together.

Doordarshan telecast programmes on the Onam celebration among the Adivasi community in the Idukki district. These programmes are set in the settlement of Mannan community and show how this community celebrates Onam. These programmes present

7. Mannan is an Adivasi community residing in the Idukki district of Kerala.
that Adivasis have their own traditional festival, but in addition, they are also part of this national festival, Onam. Even though there are no historical accounts available to prove that Adivasis had participated in the Onam festival, now they are also included in the festival while bringing them as subordinate and marginalised group in order to satisfy the spectatorial gaze of the viewer. One elder man in this programme says that, “we started to celebrate Onam after our children got education, and after that only we came to know about Onam festival. Now we celebrate it with all its rituals”\(^8\). From these words we can understand that, Onam celebration was not common among all the communities in Kerala. Adivasi’s Onam celebration may be interpreted as the result of state’s intervention in the Onam festival. And also one could see the interventional role played by the media in order to bring them as spectacle in the larger domain of the visual consumption.

As already discussed all channels come up with special programmes during Onam and try to include a variety of programmes like sharing the memories and experiences of celebrities like film stars and ministers. The titles of these programmes are “Onam with Minister”, “Onam with Stars”, etc. For example, Asianet News channel interviewed P K Jayalakshmi\(^9\) (Then Minister for Welfare of Backward Communities in the state Government of Kerala, 2011-2016) and Mazhavil Manorama had an interview with

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\(^8\) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LR8tCwkf5vs. September 10, 2015.

\(^9\) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vjpLeIH-uZ0. September 8, 2011.
Bollywood actress Vidya Balan\textsuperscript{10}. Here they are sharing their views on Onam and narrating their experiences. Flowers TV channel came with a live telecast of Onam celebration in Cochin, the title of the programme is “\textit{Uthradapaachil: Special Onam Programme}” (2015)\textsuperscript{11}. Here they conduct the live show to the audience in the middle of Onam market and road and they tried to include the audience as well. The channel is intervening in the daily practices of Onam. The channels include traditional cultural programmes like \textit{Vanjipaattu} (boat songs), \textit{Chendamelam} (Drums), \textit{Kothamoori pattu}\textsuperscript{12}, etc. Some channels try to bring the history of Onam. Onam is part of Malayali nostalgia and it is a one-month long celebration. In Malabar Onam starts on the day of Thiruvonam in the month of \textit{Karkkidakam}\textsuperscript{13} and ends on the day of Thiruvonam in \textit{Chingam} (‘\textit{Nostalgia Onam’}. Asianet, August 23 2015).

Contemporary trends too are included in the Onam special programmes of various channels. Manorama News channel enquires the trends of youth in Onam celebration in

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{10} https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WYujrLqr28Y. September 10, 2014.
\item \textsuperscript{11} \textit{Uthradam} is the day before Onam. On this day people will be very busy to make arrangement for the final celebration of Onam festival. There is a term called “\textit{Uthrada Paachil}” to show the hurry of arrangements.
\item \textsuperscript{12} Kothamoori pattu is one of the ritual and performance on Onam day in Malabar region, where they sing the songs of bull
\item \textsuperscript{13} Onam celebration in the month of Karkkidakam (July – August) is also known as the Pilleronam (Children’s Onam). Earlier it was celebrated like Onam, but there are not many ritual practices in the Onam in Chingam (August – September).
\end{itemize}
campsues, with a special programme on the effect of the blockbuster Malayalam movie *Premam* (2015). It shows that the Students imitate the style of the hero and the heroine in this movie, which in turn gives an idea about the way the youth incorporate new trends drawn from popular culture into the practices of Onam celebration. The promotional songs and videos of various channels feature the cultural practices of Onam such as Onam games and flower carpets. These promotional videos also produce the same kind of knowledge the promotional videos of tourism department produced. In 2015, Flowers TV came up with the tag line “this spring season is with Tigers” for first Onam celebration after the channel was launched. Flowers TV promo video is on the *puli kali* (tiger dance). The video explores the beauty of Kerala through the tiger dance.

![Figure 3:1. Onam promotional song of Flowers TV](image)
During Onam days, most of the channels reschedule their programme and add more Onam related programmes. Some channels like MediaOne used to telecast their serials on Onam days and this episode will be special episode, which deals with the theme of Onam. *M80 Moosa*, is a serial on MediaOne that also came up with Onam special episode. This programme showed the difficulty of Onam celebration in contemporary period. This serial aims to show the importance of cultural values of Onam festival and its religiosity.
*M80 Moosa* deals with the story of a Muslim family. Their celebrating Onam reinforces the secular claims of the festival. Onam special episode of this serial criticises the contemporary celebration of Onam by the new generation. This programme laments that the new generation never understands the value and pride of Onam; Onam celebration has become a sponsored event, as everything is available on the market. This serial critiques the contemporary practices of celebration such as reducing Onam celebration to watching Onam special programmes on Television, which according to this serial, affect the togetherness of the family. This serial also promotes vegetarianism. In Malabar region, people used to consume non-vegetarian food on Onam days. The Muslim family in this serial adopts traditional Hindu practices like dress and food. This special episode ends with the message that Onam means sharing of love and since Onam is the synonym of love, everyone should celebrate Onam with all its values\textsuperscript{14}.

Travel documentaries like *Nadukanunna Maveli* (Maveli on Kerala tour) in Reporter channel and *Nerode Maveli* (the Truthful Maveli) in Asianet bring the nostalgic feelings of the Malayali all over the world. In these programmes Maveli travels all around Kerala. *Nadukanunna Maveli* is featured with regional tours to all districts of the state and visualises the Onam celebration of the people and their problems. The other programme, *Nerode Maveli* is focused on Migrant Malayali life and explores their ways of celebration in those countries. The aim of these programmes is to explore changed nature of Onam.

\textsuperscript{14} https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zOAt4EFcmsgA, September 6, 2014.
celebrations as well as the way of life in the contemporary world. The narrative format of this programme is like a travel show in which Maveli visits his people all over the world participating in the festival.

Television uses Onam as an occasion to communicate the public through certain cultural signifiers. In the above paragraphs, I have analysed television programmes that mainly focus on the features and practices associated with Onam such as the sharing of memory and history; representation of various communities in these programmes, etc. While some of the programmes discussed the significance of Onam itself, some other programmes narrated problems associated with the festival. The programme *Puravrutham*, for instance, discusses the relationship between folk art forms and Onam. Onam is used as an event to perform folk art forms and thereby integrate them into the mainstream narrative of Onam.

**Capturing the Culture: Analysing Onam Advertisements**

Advertisements are an integral part of popular culture and they transform the cultural symbols and modes. The advertisement is part of the marketing activity of a company or a group and it aims to sell or promote a product. This too is used as a tool to reach the people. Here advertisements work as an agent between products and consumers, in the process transferring some values. Advertisements are promoting a consumerist culture. The introduction of global goods in the local market is the finest example of cultural transfer. It is an important cultural artefact that shapes and reflects our everyday life. It provides a structure which is capable of transforming the language of objects to that
of people, and vice versa (Williamson 2002: 12). Advertisements aim to include people in a particular locality and its flavours. For example, advertisements in rural area aim at the rural people and the subject is also taken from that culture.

Advertisements in rural areas involve social communication as well. According to William Leiss, “Advertising caused unease because it seemed to have broken free from its original production information mandate to become highly persuasive and seductive form of communication” (2005: 275). Almost all the advertisements carry an identity related to the region and culture. Advertisements internally connect with elements of consumption and they bring the daily experience of the society. According to Roderick White, “Advertising campaigns, on the whole, reflect society, rather than changing it and this is primarily because it is remarkably difficult to change society by active intervention: societies evolve, in response to a very complex range of stimuli, of which advertising is a small part” (2000: 264). Advertisements are part of the capitalist mode of marketing and it changes according to technology. The elements of advertisements are a reflection of society. Nokia phone’s Onam advertisements ask people to buy a new Nokia phone to make their celebration more colourful.
In this ad, one man who is using an old model of Nokia phone comes home from the city on Onam days. On the way, he passes many Onam visuals, but all are quite ordinary. Suddenly he gets a message that asks him to change his old Nokia phone and make his celebration colourful. After that, he can see all visuals in full colour. Here we can see how an advertisement prompts people to upgrade their product and change the society.\textsuperscript{15}

Early Onam advertisements saw Onam as an occasion to introduce new goods to the public. A formal aspect of the early ads is that it was mostly through images, and with less description, that the Onam ads conveyed their message. The advertisements by the

\textsuperscript{15}https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KdTDYGK524w. August 8, 2008.
handloom corporation showed the importance of using their products during Onam thus connecting the national festival of Kerala with the ‘indigenous’ industries of the emerging nation.

Figure 3: 4 Onam Greetings by M. B. Tutorial College- Palakkad

In this advertisement, the management of the M. B. Tutorial colleges wishes Onam greetings to all their students and well-wishers.
This is an advertisement by the Department of Industries and Commerce. The description in the ad reads thus: Onam, the national festival of Kerala is coming. Get quality dress from the handloom co-operative societies. This ad asks people to promote handloom industry.
The above advertisement is on Onam special edition of Mathrubhumi weekly. This advertisement says that this Onam special edition contains articles on the major cities in the state of Kerala, and it would help understand Kerala.

Figure 3:7. Advertisement of a Textile shop

This is an advertisement of a textile shop located in Vadakara, run by Weavers Co-operative Society. This ad prompts people to visit their shop to get a new dress for Onam as their clothes are well received among people.
This is an advertisement from the *Deccan Chronicle* News Paper, Hyderabad of August 1956. It is about the Onam celebration of non-resident Malayalees in Secunderabad organised by Kerala Association on 9 September 19 in the present day Telangana. The ad, issued by the secretary of the Kerala Association, Secunderabad, requests all “Keraleeyans” to attend the celebration. It has to be noted that this ad came out before the formation of the Kerala state and that the word “Keraleeyans” (people from Kerala) is used instead of Malayalees.
The tagline of this advertisement is “Thiruvonam: Pleasure, Prosperity, Onam dress.” This advertisement was issued by Kerala State Handloom Corporation Limited. Different types of clothes made by the Corporation are mentioned in the ad. Wearing new dress was seen as an important part of Onam celebration. These advertisements evoke the memories associated with Onam through certain cultural signifiers.
This ad describes the art forms of Onam such as *Kaikotti kali* and *Onathallu*. Here Maveli sees people playing Onam arts during his visit and he is very happy to see this. However, he later realises that people are not actually playing Onam games but killing
mosquitoes. This advertisement is presented in a storytelling format and uses signifiers associated with the cultural practices of Onam.

Figure 3: 11 Advertisement of the Department of Tourism
This is the Onam special advertisement of Onam weekly celebration by Tourism Department of Kerala. The image in this ad contains various cultural and art forms in Kerala.

Almost all advertisements in a way show how print media uses advertisements to sell cultural values and norms during the time of Onam. They also emphasise and essentialise certain traditional forms of Malayali identity in the emerging context of modernity. Television is one of the prominent media that is the common carrier of advertisements. Advertisements encourage and promote the consumerist behaviour of the community. Through an examination of the festival ads we can see how images are used to transfer the cultural values using advertisements as a tool for such an effort. In India, Television serials have a significant role in popularising advertisements. According to Tej K. Bhatia, “Every media form since the late 80s and early 90s set a new trend by emulating the power of television serial for advertising” (2000: 272). During the broadcasting of Ramayana and Mahabharata serials in the 1980s and 1990s, the advertising companies had the power to show their dominance in the television serials for advertising. Advertisements are contributing to the process of cultural changes in the society. The introduction of new goods brings new cultural tradition into the society. Lynne Coichetto argues that “Advertising contributes to cultural change through the introduction of new values (individualism, definitions of beauty), the intensification of other values such as materialism and consumerism and by the diminishing and displacing other key values in society” (2011: 197). Visual and print ads refer to festivals as the cultural festival of that region and they denote the nature of the festival also. For example,
ads refer to Holi as the festival of colours and Onam as the harvest festival. What we see here is the advertisements defining the nature of festivals. Advertisements use regional and religious symbols to create cultural appeals. For instance, in Onam advertisements, the costume is ‘Kerala traditional dress’ (Figure 3:11). Through these kinds of representation advertisements project traditional elements which in turn authenticate their ‘special ads.’ Festival is used as a tool to promote brand image.
Festivals are considered as the best opportunity for making a profit for the advertisement industry. The companies manipulate the festive season to get maximum attention for their products. The Advertisers employ local connotations to project the cultural importance of the product. It is observed that the number of ads being broadcasted...
and published during the festive season is relatively higher than the other seasons in India. According to Tej K Bhatia,

Religious festivals offer an opportunity for special promotional and advertising campaigns. Promotional events and lucky drawings are held. Some products are indexed for special festivals. For instance, Holi is associated with products symbolising youth, enjoyment, and romance products such as perfumes and liquor, while Diwali is associated with products such as gold and jewelry (Plate 10.5), in addition to new merchandise. Thus religious festivals are closely associated with some product types and rural advertising underlines such associations (2000: 274).

Onam is associated with products like dress items and these products symbolise the pride of a Malayali. A Large number of advertisements come up with these kinds of symbols, which advocate a figure of an ideal prosperous Malayali.
Figure 3:13 A scene from Bhima Jewellers’ advertisements. It shows that during Onam days you will participate in traditional Onam programmes even if you are a modern Malayali.

Figure 3:14. Onam advertisement of Peter England
In this advertisement of Josco jewellers, the jewellers introduce a Thiruvona boat with gold ornaments. This advertisement includes the image of Maveli and the Onam boat, which is a symbol of the Onam ritual. Various traders offer special discounts during Onam, making Onam a season for shopping.

Most of the advertisements are about the ‘special’ offers on goods during the festival season and also about the cultural programmes related to the festivals. In Kerala, festivals come one after another. Once the sale for the preceding festival ends sale for
Onam begins. Jewellery, textiles and electronic gadgets contribute the major share of advertisements during Onam and they come with the ‘traditional’ cultural products in this season. Advertisements play an important role in Onam celebrations. Most of Onam advertisements are connected to the so-called ‘Kerala culture and tradition’. Through different signs and idioms, these advertisements signify certain virtues and values of ‘those days’ and its embedded cultural exaltation. Advertisements in Onam season create a market space for Kerala culture, which focuses more on the consumer habit of the society. Advertisements express the ideology of consumption in its visual form. Some of the advertisements during Onam season exhibit the culture and heritage of the Kerala society, thereby recreating the notion of ‘golden past or tradition’ of Keralites.

Most of the advertisements make the Malayali identity marker visible and invoke the nostalgic feelings of the Malayali. For example, in 2012 Pothy’s Silks, a textile shop, produced an advertisement on which a person shares his Onam memories. At the same time these advertisements talk about the necessity of having modern goods in Malayali life. For instance, in the case of advertisements of electronic gadgets, the receiver of the ads is a local consumer and they introduce global goods to the local market. This introduction of new goods affects the traditional Onam markets in villages.

The traditional village markets aim at introducing traditional goods in the local market, and it is as well the space for cultural exchange. In village markets, people come from different regions with their own traditional goods, and they use the space to share their experiences and memories. This place is used as a meeting point for different communities to come together. In the contemporary Onam celebrations, these village
markets have become part of the nostalgic memory of the Malayali. Asianet News, a Malayalam news channel, broadcasted ‘Onam special’ story on Village market in Kasaragod district. This programme laments the fact that these days, people are visiting shopping malls to buy goods and other necessary things for Onam. (Asianet News 2013).

A considerable shift can be observed in new advertisements in comparison to the old advertisements. While old advertisements followed the style of description, contemporary advertisements give importance to cultural images over descriptions. Contemporary images highlight the “offers” section to aim the consumer behaviour of the Kerala society, while the old advertisements highlighted the cultural values of the product. Attire is a common factor in both old and new advertisements, as it stands for the cultural values of Onam. New advertisements use cultural signifiers and situate Onam within the consumer culture. The central focus of contemporary advertisements is the introduction of global brands of products such as mobile phone and television, to the local market.

**Preserving Cultures and Re-collecting Past: Onam Special Video and Audio Cassettes**

Audio Cassettes are considered as part of the cultural industry and cultural consumption. The cassettes are meant to popularise music to public and to make it part of the popular culture. In the developing field of music, cassettes were considered cheaper and more durable for recording. In addition, music too is regarded as the domain of
experience. Peter Manuel is interested to find out the way in which popularisation and emergence of cassettes in India made a significant influence on Indian media. He writes,

the cassette revolution in India, however, has provided many of the basic perquisites for such a democratic restricting of media control and content, at least in relation to popular music (xvii) … the emergence of cassette culture in India thus must be seen in the context of a new world information under with new potentialities for decentralisation, autonomy, dissent and freedom (2001: 3).

Manuel shows that the cassette revolution, however, has brought new contradiction and problems to Indian culture. In fact, inexpensive cassettes revitalised local subcultures and community values throughout the subcontinent. The most provocative sort of elements in cassette culture is that it is used to spread religious nationalism and made it a form of consumption.

Cassettes are widely used to spread religious nationalism and culture. Most of the cassettes have been produced based on the culture of that region. The cassettes represent regional diversities. Moreover, the regional music industry is being promoted through the production of cassettes and thus it becomes an integral part of cultural industry. Cassette culture is a particular sub-culture and it symbolises the barriers of cultural appropriation. Cassette media has always been influential in attracting the attention and emotion of the audience and it has ample receptivity among the audience. It has been used to make awareness among the
audience. Charles Hirschkind, in his work *The Ethical Soundscape: Cassette Sermons and Islamic Counterpublics* deals with the cassette sermon listening habit of the Muslims in Egypt. He says that this cassette sermon listening has created an Islamic counter public. The cassette is used for spreading the ideas and implanting religious ideologies. He writes, “… the contribution of this aural media is to shape the contemporary moral and political landscape of the Middle East lies not simply in its capacity to disseminate ideas or instill religious ideologies but in its effect on the human sensorium, on the affects, sensibilities, the perceptual habits of its vast audience” (2006: 1). Similarly, Onam cassettes create cassette culture in Kerala public and it produces a knowledge especially on the idea of culture.

During Onam season many groups release their Onam special cassettes. These cassettes usually contain Onam songs and comedy based on the Maveli myth and Kerala culture. The comedy cassettes project Maveli as a tool for social criticism and the music albums are meant to recollect memories of Malayali’s past. There are many Onam comedy cassettes like ‘Onathinidakkut Puttukachavadam’, by Navodaya, ‘De Maveli Kombathu’ by NAD productions, etc. In this section, I look at how Onam cassettes (both video and audio) showcase Kerala culture and how they recreate a Malayali identity through Onam songs. In the past, comedy and cassettes were available only in the form of audio cassettes. But now these are available in video format. The change in format has also changed the habit of reception of the popular songs by the masses. The change from audio to video format is more powerful because it helps the cassettes to visualise the theme. Most
of the Onam songs cassettes contain folk songs, pilgrimage songs, romantic songs, etc. Over a period of time, Onam cassettes have become part of the cultural consumption of Malayalees. Later, this consumption is taken by new technologies like YouTube and other social medias.

**Onam Songs and Audio -Video Cassettes.**

Music has a significant role in the making of an individual as well as forming a collective identity, which is mainly constructed by the society over time. Music can create a sense of identity through social practices. Music often emerges from the expression of a society and it is used as a tool to emphasise cultural identity. Most of the songs reflect the cultural practices of a particular region and becomes part of the common life of people. Festival songs invoke the memory and culture of a society and it represents the group or a community. These songs bring back the cultural past of the community as well as celebrate the pride of the region. Festival songs in India are more or less associated with religions. However, Onam songs talk about the tradition of a community rather than religious aspects.

Onam festival begins with Onam songs commonly known as Onappattukal (Onam Songs). There is a rich collection of Onam songs in Malayalam language. The tradition of Onam songs can be traced to the folk tradition of Kerala. The major subject of the Onam songs is associated with various tradition of Kerala and these songs have been handed down from one generation to another. Another major theme of Onam songs is the natural beauty of Kerala. These songs describe the beauty of nature and its relation to Kerala
tradition. In these songs nature symbolises the prosperity of the state and also glorify selective past. There are many songs that share the memories of the foregone-good days of Kerala’s past. In this part of the chapter I analyse how the cassettes are used to spread the idea of Onam as the cultural festival of Kerala and how these songs recollect the past. Onam songs and its values articulate the ideology of a community’s expression and experiences.

**Early Onam Audio Cassettes.**

Onam cassette culture began in the 1970s and 1980s. In the early stage these songs were available only in the audio format. At present, Onam songs are considered as the genre of light music in Kerala. One of the key themes of these songs in the contemporary time is love and lost days and later it changed to praising the culture of Kerala. The songs on home left behind project how the non-resident Malayalees reminiscence their “home”. These special songs start prior to Onam festival. Onam season is also known as the season of Onam cassettes. The tendency of Onam song cassettes began with the release of the cassette called ‘Madurasangeetham’ in 1970 by HMV. It was a collection of Malayalam light music and there were few songs are on Onam. The cassettes at that time were also known as festival songs. These songs narrate the beauty of nature. *Onappattukal* (Onam Songs) is the first music album based on Onam. These cassettes were produced by Tharangini Studios, started by the popular singer K.J. Yesudas in 1981. All songs in Onappattukal are about Onam and it is the first cassette exclusively on Onam. *Ulsava Ganangal* (Vol – I & II – 1983 & 84), *Vasantha Geethangal* (1984), *Gaanolsavam* (1984), *Chingappulari* (1986), *Aavani Pookkal* (1986), *Onappootthaalam* (1987)
Onathappan (1992) are some of the early Onam audio cassette by Tharangini studios. Every year the Tharangini studio used to bring out new cassettes.

![Figure 3:16. Cover of Onam music album Tharangini](image)

The major themes of the Onam cassettes in the 1980s and 1990s were love, celebration, separation, etc. Most of the cassettes produced by Tharangini dealt with these themes. These cassettes were considered festival songs. During this period Malayalees used to eagerly wait for the release of new Onam cassettes. Now this has become part of memory with the introduction of new technology. Nowadays Onam songs are released on YouTube and other digital media.

Coast Audios and *Onathumbi: Festival Songs* (2013) by S K M-Audios; and *Maveli Nadu Vaneedum Kalam: Festival Songs* by East Coast Audios. These all are audio cassettes and most of the songs are sung by leading Malayalam playback singers like, P. Jayachandran, K S Chithra, Sujatha, M G Sreekumar, Madhu Balakrishnan, G Venugopal, Srinivas, etc. The lyrics are written by famous poets such as O N V Kuruppu, Kadamanitta, etc. Some of the albums contain both festival songs and folk songs and these songs discuss the cultural practices of Onam. These albums too revisit the memories of Onam games, Onam practices, nature and memories. The central theme of these albums is the practices of Onam. Some of the songs talk about the collection of flowers and the rituals of making flower carpet. These songs tell the relation between nature and Onam.
There are a few video albums released during Onam. Nowadays the new medium like YouTube is used as the space to release the songs. *Onam Vanne, Ormayile Onam, Onanilavu, Uthradakkattu* are some of the video albums. Most of these albums are sung by Praseetha – famous female folk singer and Madhu Balakrishnan – playback singer. These video cassettes visualise the natural beauty of Kerala and Onam games. The video albums also focus on the contemporary Onam debates like commercialisation and caste question. Praseetha’s album *Oramyile Onam* is the finest example for a discussion on the contemporary debates. In this album there is a song that talks about the need for celebrating Onam by all communities even though there are differences in the ways of celebration. The song exhorts that we have to bring back the golden days of Kerala and people should celebrate Onam without any barriers of caste. Some albums focus on the nostalgic feeling of the Malayali, especially on how Onam was celebrated in the past. Onam songs become a tool for recollecting the memory of a community or an individual. Both video and audio songs articulate the knowledge that Onam is associated with Kerala culture and nature.

**Onam Songs in Malayalam Films**

Onam songs have appeared in many Malayalam films. Interestingly some other language films too have feature songs on Onam and Kerala tradition. The *Onam,*
Onam song in the Telugu movie Ra Ra Krishnayya (2014) directed by P Mahesh is an example for this. This song starts with lines from the popular Malayalam Onam song, Maveli Nadu Vaneedum Kalam. Onam songs have appeared in Malayalam films since 1961. Onathumbi, Onathumbi... is one of the first songs that talk about Onam in Malayalam cinema. This song appeared in the movie Mudiyana Puthran directed by P. Bhasakaran in 1961. Some of the songs which talk about or mention Onam are given below: Omanathinkalin from the movie Thulabharam (1968) directed by A. Vincent; Thiruvona Pularithan in Thiruvonam (1975) directed by K P Mohanan; Poovili Poovili Ponnonamayi from Vishukkani directed by J. Sasikumar in 1977; Vembanattu Kayalile in the movie Randu Lokam (1977) by J. Sasikumar (this song is about the annual boat race which takes place at Vembanattu Lake on the auspicious eve of Onam and this song mocks the ‘western’ style of dressing in the traditional place); Onappoove from the movie Ee Gaanam Marakkumo, directed by N Sankaran Nair in 1978. One of the most popular Malayalam Onam film songs is Poo Venam Pooppada Venam Poovili

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Venam\textsuperscript{23} from the movie Oru Minnaminunginte Nurungu Vettam (1987) directed by Bharathan.

Most of these film songs related to Onam represent Kerala culture and tradition. They also project the Malayali identity and its markers connected to the upper caste symbols and practices. These songs are mostly set in a traditional Nair Tharavadu (ancestral home). For example, the Telugu song’s background is Kathakali- the traditional art form of Kerala, Kasavu saree- the traditional dress of Kerala- and the ancestral home. What this song includes the cultural practices of Kerala and traditional forms come from upper caste Hindu milieu. The knowledge that these songs produce is that Onam can only be identified with traditional flavours of Kerala. However, Onam has been projected as a secular festival in these songs.

Most of the Malayalam film songs on Onam project Onam as the cultural festival of Kerala and explore the tradition and heritage of Kerala. The beauty of nature is a major element in these songs and a connection is made between nature and Onam. The flower carpet made during Onam is connected with nature. By featuring nature in Onam songs, a connection is made between the geography and the festival, thus projecting Onam as a festival unique to the geographical region called Kerala. Recent Malayalam films also have songs that mention Onam. The Onathumbi\textsuperscript{24} song in the movie Superman directed by


\textsuperscript{24}https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JXrM2Wz8L_E. December 28, 2010.
Rafi Mecartin in 1997 and *thiruvaavanirravu* in *Jacobinte Swargarajyam*\(^{25}\) (2016) by Vineeth Sreenivasan are examples for this. In the song *thiruvaavanirravu* from the movie *Jacobinte Swargarajyam* we see how the modern Malayali, especially non-resident Malayali celebrates Onam. For the non-resident Malayali it is an occasion for get together and gathering. While the earlier film songs on Onam described the practices of Onam and projected Onam as part of Malayali life, the recent songs just mention Onam.

There is a discernible change in the production and reception of Onam songs. According to the needs of the new generation the producers make changes in the form and content of the songs. New media like internet are used for the dissemination of these songs. Experiments are made in the form such as mixing pop and rock style with Onam songs. In 2014, the playback singer Ranjini Jose and Santhosh Chandran released an album titled ‘Onam Rocks’\(^{26}\) on YouTube. While the style of music has changed, the theme has remained same as old Onam album songs. New Onam songs\(^{27}\), invoke the cultural memory of the Malayali and it focus on the contemporary celebration of Onam.

**Counter Narrative: Onam Folk Songs**


\(^{27}\) By new Onam songs, I mean songs that are released recently and composed in different styles like pop and rock.
Folk songs provide a window to the history of Onam. Most of the Onam folk songs share the memory of lower caste groups and narrate their part in Onam festival. The function of folk songs is to transfer cultural memory from one generation to another in the oral form. Some of the popular Onam folks are: *thumbapoove poothirule*, which describes the different varieties of flowers used for making the flower carpet during Onam and this song is used to sing sung while collecting flowers; *Kunjanje kunjanje* is a song that talks about the food culture of Kerala. It describes the food items served on Onam day. These days vegetarian *sadya* has become the ‘traditional’ food of Onam. There is a line in the song that states that fish curry is a must during Onam. In contemporary debates Dalit intellectuals in Kerala bring attention to this song to question the upper caste practices of Onam. Another famous folk song on Onam is *Asante padathu* which narrates the history of lower caste groups in Kerala. This song talks about how the lower caste communities used to work for the upper caste people in the field.

Onam songs explore the culture and tradition of Kerala. Folk songs narrate the life history of a community, especially how did they live in the past and how did they participate in the Onam festival. Different folk songs give different histories of Onam, as various communities express their perspective on Onam, connecting it with the histories of various communities. The folk songs produce alternative knowledge which questions the mainstream understanding of Kerala culture. The key difference between Onam folk songs and other Onam songs is that while other songs invoke or reproduce the knowledge that Onam is part of the cultural identity of the Malayali folk songs generate the knowledge that Onam is associated with the practices of particular communities and their
histories. The recollection of cultural memory is the common factor in these two types of songs. Nowadays new folk songs are available in video disc format. The Onam songs essentially produce collective memory and imagination of the past.

Many television channels telecast programmes based on Onam songs. The format of these programmes is in the form of recollection of Onam memories and Onam songs by popular actors or singers. What the television channels try to do here is to make the audience identify with the cultural identity of the popular actors or singers and make them feel part of the collective imagination. Media One channel, telecasted one programme called “Pattinte Ponnonjar”\(^{28}\), a compilation of old Onam songs sung by younger singers. The younger singers share their favourite Onam songs. What happens here is the meeting of old songs with new instruments and new ways of production. This programme started with the popular Onam song “Maveli Nadu Vaneedum Kalam” and included songs from Onam albums and film songs. The programmes describe itself as a programme that remembers the golden songs and through them, the golden time of Kerala.

“Onam is the commemoration of the golden past of Kerala state”, the tagline of one of the Onam musical programme, Onamelam (2015), on Amrita T V reads thus. It was a ‘special’ musical reality show based on Onam songs. Another musical programme telecasted by WE TV was titled Poliyo Poli. The programme is set in a boat and people are singing popular Malayalam songs and folk songs. In this programme traditional songs

\(^{28}\)https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HKiT_SglEGL. September 5, 2014.
are mixed with rock music and performed with folk art forms like Kolkali (dance with sticks). The theme of these songs are basically about receiving Maveli and celebrating Onam. Songs play a significant role in Onam special TV programmes as they visualise Kerala culture. There are many experiments in Onam songs in the form of mixing pop with traditional songs. Animation songs Onam, aimed at children, are also produced. The function of these animation songs is to transfer the history of Onam from one generation to another. The general features of Onam songs are the description of the beauty of the village or region and the nostalgia it produces. The Onam songs facilitate the rememberance of a ‘golden past’.

Social Satire: Onam Comedy Cassettes and Configuring Malayali Identity.

During Onam, many entertainment companies release cassettes and video discs that mainly satirise Kerala society. These cassettes and video discs use Onam comedy as a tool to critique the society and to bring the social injustice to the attention of the public. Comedies are the reflections of the peculiarities and immoralities of social life. In this section, I shall look at how Onam comedies - comedy cassettes, comedy programmes in Television, parody songs – make social criticisms and how they evoke a cultural memory of the Malayali. Most of the Onam comedies question the values associated with and the central theme of Onam like prosperity, equality, tradition, etc., as practiced in contemporary celebrations of Onam. Contemporary society uses the media to criticise the state and its policies. These Onam cassettes and cartoons explain the irregularities of Kerala society.
There are many Malayalam comedy cassettes released during Onam season by different mimicry troupes. Some of the prominent Onam comedy cassettes are, ‘Onathinidakku Puttukachavadam’ by Navodaya, ‘De Maveli Kombath’ by NAD productions, ‘The Maveli Express Platform No.12’, etc. Almost every cassette is in the form of parody and comedy and the background of these comedy cassettes is contemporary Kerala society. Some comedy troupes try to associate current comic characters with Maveli like Tintu Mon29, Ayyappa Baiju,30 etc. For instance, the cassette, www. Maveli @ Ayyappa Baiju co. in, produced by Hot & Sour Entertainments, and Tintu Mon special in Onathinidakku Puttukachavadam Vol- 21, in 2011. The most famous Malayalam Onam comedy cassettes are Onathinidakku Puttukachavadam and De Maveli Kombath, which have several series of volumes. These two series have more than twenty years of history each in this field and they are Onam special comedy cassettes. Every year, based on real social and political events, these cassettes make parody songs and comedy skits that are immensely popular in the Kerala public domain. Started as audio cassettes, these are now available in video format. The change from audio to video format is more powerful because it helps the cassettes to visualise the current issues. These two cassettes have significant role in the Malayali imagination of Onam and bear the label of Onam “Special” cassettes.

29 Tintu Mon is a naughty boy appeared as a comic character in Malayalam children stories.

30 Ayyappa Baiju is a famous comic character appeared in contemporary Malayalam comedies. Baiju is a drunkard and create problems in the family and society. This character’s features represents the lower class people in the society. This comic character is performed by Mimicry artist Prashanth Punnapra.
Questioning Social Injustices: Onathinidakkku Puttukachavadam and De Maveli Kombathu

Two decades ago, popular Malayalam film and mimicry artists, Dileep and Nadirsha, created a new space for social criticism in Kerala through a comedy cassette called, Dey Maveli Kombathu. Onam is the central backdrop for these cassettes as they voice out their humorous take on various social issues. At the same time, another mimicry troupe called Navodaya also released an Onam comedy cassette titled, Onathinidakkku Puttukachavadam, which as well uses Onam as the central subject to make social criticism. Both these cassettes were started in the 1990s as audio cassettes, by 2010 they had transferred to video format. Video cassettes are more powerful than audio format. Video format of cassettes emerged with the blooming of television culture in Kerala and it brought significant changes in the society. In the view of Peter Manuel, video cassettes are more powerful than audio cassettes. In India, the audio and video media are considered more influential than print media. During the parliament elections in the 1980s and 1990s, cassettes played a significant role in the election campaign. Manuel writes, “Video technology played a prominent role in the opposition parties; 1989 campaign, and particularly in that of B J P. J K Jain, a member of the Hindu fascist Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) party and founder of New Delhi’s Jain Studios, rented out assorted video equipment, and especially seventy – five specially constructed “video

31 In an interview, Nadirsha, one of the founder of Dey Maveli Kombathu says that, they taken this name from the popular Malayalam movie, Thenmavin Kombathu directed by Priyadarshan in January, 1994.
“raths” (chariots) – vans fitted with three-hundred-inch video screens – to opposition parties (2001: 244-45)”.

The video comedy cassettes mainly talk about the ‘injustices’ in contemporary society and culture. They mock the transformations of the society. For example, in one cassette, Onathinidakku Puttukachavadam, there is a parody song on the dressing style of girls which is considered ‘bad and against’ the morality of the society. They satirise the introduction of new goods which doesn’t have any ‘cultural value’. These cassettes say that these changes are not part of the ‘Kerala tradition’. Many of the comedies refer to recent news items such as current political issues. Most of Onam skits include the imitation of political figures, celebrities and public figures. The producers of Onam special comedy cassettes like ‘Onathinidakku Puttukachavadam, ‘Dey Maveli Kombathu’ etc., believe that, through criticising social norms, they can bring social issues out into the public and they can use it as a tool for social change. We can see that the voice of the Maveli in these cassettes has a unique feature. All the comedians imitate one voice for Maveli, which is the voice of Innocent, a cine artist in Malayalam. Regarding the use of Innocent’s voice, the actor himself explicates during the introduction of the cassette Dey Maveli Kombathu (2009), “People think that the actor Innocent is a person who is innocent and truthful. Maveli is also the symbol of honesty and truthfulness. So people think that, as Innocent is an honest person, his voice may be very apt to show the truthfulness of Maveli”. Almost all the comedy cassettes have Innocent’s voice as Maveli’s and it shows the uniqueness of Maveli. The unique voice in the cassettes marks the power and authenticity of Maveli image.
Current events and incidents are the main subjects of these two cassettes. These comedy cassettes evoke relevant issues in the society. The producers of Onam cassettes claim that they are just bringing parodies of the social evils to create awareness about our society. Here, we can see that these cassettes are taking social issues as a temporal event, as if social inequalities did not exist in history but rather comes with modern trends.

*Onathinidakku Puttukachavadam* (2014) begins with the statement that, that year Maveli is not visiting Kerala because of the sexual harassment of women in the society. Here the cassettes express their worry about the atrocities against women and opines how this will affect the culture of the state. In this volume of *Onathinidakku Puttukachavadam*, they are making a robot Maveli in the absence of a ‘real’ Maveli. Here, they expose the problems of scientific invention and unbridled technological advancement. Two scientists arrive with a robot Maveli as they try to loot the society using the image of Maveli. When the real Maveli comes people are initially scared of seeing him and the video ends with the society finally identifying the real Maveli. In this cassette, the theme of a robot is taken from the popular Tamil movie *Enthiran*, directed by S. Shankar in 2010.

This volume criticises the political developments in Kerala society. Some parody songs narrate that the ruling party and opposition are focused on the development of their family and party, rather than the welfare of the people. Another significant representation in contemporary comedy cassettes like *Onathinidakku Puttukachavadam* and *Dey Maveli Kombathu* is the presence of Hindi speaking migrant workers. In this cassette, Maveli asks about Onam celebrations to a migrant labourer, upon which Maveli's assistant explains that the labourer is a Hindi speaker and they won’t celebrate Onam. From this dialogue,
we can understand that these cassettes produce the knowledge that Onam is the festival of Malayalees. When Maveli visits Kerala, he witnesses a lot of social issues like, quotation teams (goons), sexual abuse, misuse of mobile phones, etc. and he is worried about the current situation of his state. Among these issues, he observes that some Malayalees continue to celebrate Onam. Such random, local celebrations show that Malayalis cannot live without Onam even though there are several issues plaguing their society. From this narration, we can understand that, Maveli becomes the symbol of social relief, because his visit brings a temporary relief to the society and it indicates that Onam season is the golden days of the year. Another significant point in this visit is that it recollects and evokes the memories of Maveli reign. In the comedy cassettes, Maveli is caricatured as a very innocent person, because, on most occasions, he fails to understand crimes and corruption in the society as he believes in the inherent goodness of all people. It is only after Maveli's assistant and guide informs him that he comes to know about the political issues in the society. Here, cassettes use Onam as the tool to make bring these social issues and to criticise societal problems. Apart from critiquing the society, Onam comedies critique the social practices in the society. For instance, Onathinidakku Puttukachavadam 2010 cassettes ridicule the marriage system within the Muslim community.

Onam special comedy cassettes criticise the Malayali’s desire for and aspiration towards new trends. Most of these cassettes opine that the fascination towards modern goods will affect the traditional life of the people in Kerala, especially during Onam, and may cause the loss of cultural values. For example, in the Onam cassette Dey Maveli
Kombathu (2009), there are few songs about this attraction towards new goods. In another scene, they criticise modern art forms like a fashion show. This scene discusses the introduction of new programmes and predilections into the state, and the song itself critiques this fashion trend. The cassette begins with an Onam celebration organised by the local club where they are getting ready to receive Maveli. Maveli seems disturbed by the current political situation, and so he refers to Kerala as a lunatic land. The parody songs are draw comparisons between the Maveli era and the contemporary reign by political parties. There are references that, during Maveli’s reign women were safe, but now the situation has changed, as every day a woman gets abused. At the same time, these cassettes satirically points out the dressing style of women and make fun of their public appearance. These cassettes also make jokes on disability. For example, in one scene, the comedian Sajan who is made up as a Maveli, who struggles with a stammering problem.

The comedy cassettes, Dey Maveli Kombathu and Onathinidakku Puttukachavadam, raises pertinent questions about the field of films, politics and television programmes like reality shows. Video cassettes continue to follow the same issues like political parties, films, marriages, TV programmes, etc. which were previously dealt by the audio cassettes. In video cassettes, they visualise the situation in Kerala; this made their social criticism more effective than the criticism made using audio cassettes. These media produce a critical knowledge of Kerala society. They recollect the cultural memories and attempt to imagine Kerala the way it was during Maveli’s period. Almost every Onam comedy cassettes asserts that Onam is the cultural festival of Kerala and it is the marker of Malayali identity.
VD Rajappan—a famous comedian in Kerala—has a comedy Kathaprasangam called ‘Maveli Kanda Kerala’. He produced it in cassette mode and it is a narration of Maveli and his visit to Kerala. In this cassette, V D Rajappan critiques Kerala society and its practices. He says that the government declared Onam festival as the national festival of Kerala only to attract the foreigners. He imagines contemporary Onam practices and recite these using parody songs. The author is worried about the impact of external factors in the Onam celebration; for instance, in one song, he talks about the lack of flowers and the need to import flowers from another state. This kind of encroachments questions the traditional values of the Onam celebration. He is anxious about the introduction of the new goods into the cultural practices of Onam celebration. Rajappan too uses Onam as an occasion to critique Kerala society.

State Sponsored Festival: Onam Promotional videos.

The Kerala State Tourism Department often brings out Onam promotional videos at the time of Onam and the interesting fact is Onam celebration is generally considered as part of Kerala’s tourism project. In addition, many programmes have been conducted by the state tourism department to promote the cultural heritage of Onam. Other Indian states also promote the cultural festival as part of their tourism project. What follows is an analysis of a few Onam promotional videos produced by the Kerala State Tourism Department, and the videos show how Kerala culture has been promoted through Onam.

32 Kathaprasangam is a form of storytelling similar to burrakatha etc.
festival. These videos display Malayali identity in various ways. All the videos are made at the background of Kerala tradition and it shows how Onam should be celebrated in a traditional way. Here I am analysing three videos published in the year 2011, 2014 and 2015 respectively to understand how the culture is depicted through these videos.

Onam promotional video of 2011 begins with the popular Onam song *Maveli Naaduvaneedum Kalam*. This song describes the reign of Maveli. Central theme of this video is Maveli’s visit to Kerala to see his people. The landscape is another significant element in this programme, which shows the natural beauty of Kerala. The 2014 promotional video focuses on the traditional way of Onam celebration. This video has the song, which narrates the practices of Onam, and it includes Onam games such as *Puli Kali, Kummatti Kali, Thiruvathira* and *Vallam Kali*. This video describes the culture of Kerala. The promotional video of 2015 is slightly different from other two videos. This video is noted for depicting the external presence or intervention into the tradition. In this video the visit of a foreign family member during the Onam season has been depicted. This foreign family comes to visit Kerala and they participate in Onam celebration. When they enter into the celebration, they become part of Kerala culture. The foreigners have to be changed into the Malayali style to celebrate Onam. It is only by changing themselves to the supposedly ‘traditional’ attire of Kerala, *Kasavu Mundu* and Sari that the foreigners could become part of the Kerala culture. The crucial question to be asked here is that, why it is that certain marker are privileged as tradition. The song in this video is different from the other two videos. In the video the song is about the preparation of feast and flower carpet.
The natural beauty of Kerala, the upper caste ancestral houses and the traditional attire of Kerala are the common features of all the videos. Nair taravadus (ancestral houses) appear in the backdrop of all the videos where the Onam celebration takes place. The Onam represented in these videos mostly represents the features of upper caste Hindu life. The presence of natural beauty in these videos is connected with the idea that Onam is a festival of flowers. The Kerala tourism department has brought out other Onam videos that talk about the history of Onam; the way flower carpet (athapookalam), is made, etc. Kerala tourism department began promotional videos during festivals like Diwali as well. This video defines the cultural practices of Diwali festival. Other Indian states also have this practice of coming up with festival special promotional videos. For instance, Bihar tourism department published a video on Chhath Puja in Bihar. This video narrates the busy life of a young man and his worries and tensions in connection with attending the festival. He decides to attend the festival despite his busy life. The video

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33 Diwali is one of the prominent Hindu festival in India. It is celebrated in spring or autumn in every year, mostly in October or November. Diwali is also known as the festival of lights. This festival spiritually signifies the victory of light over darkness or good over evil. It has a weeklong rituals and it represents the traditional culture of India. The promotional videos and Television programmes during this period brings the “traditional flavour” of India. Some scholars says that apart from Hindus, Budhists, Jainis and Sikhs also celebrate Diwali.

34 Chhath Puja is a Hindu religious festival, largely celebrated in Bihar. The central ritual of this festival is worshipping the Sun god. Chhath Puja falls in the month of Kartika, (October- November) and it is observed for four days with different rituals, which include holy bathing, fasting and abstaining from drinking water, standing in water for a certain period of time and making offerings to the Sun god. This festival is celebrated in Nepal and some other parts of India like Jharkhand and Eastern UP. People make it a point to home during this festival no matter how far they are from home.
ends with the tagline “festival brings everyone home”. Similar elements can be seen in Onam videos as well. Onam is presented as a time for the get together of family and friends amid their busy life. In these promotional videos, Onam is used as a tool for marketing Kerala culture and a certain kind of Malayali identity is articulated through them.

New digital media like YouTube enables the production of the knowledge that Onam is a festival of tradition and memories. For example, one short video on YouTube called ‘Oru NRI Onam’ describes the Onam celebration of non-resident Keralite. In this video one person is not able to celebrate Onam due to his busy business life but his wife reminds him about the importance of Onam festival. On the way to the office Onam practices haunt him and he sees that his colleagues are wearing traditional Kerala dress. This video produces the knowledge that on Onam day each and every Malayali should celebrate Onam, otherwise its memories will follow you. All the new digital media produce the knowledge that Onam is the cultural festival of Kerala and it is an occasion to recollect the memories.

Conclusion

To sum up, cultural practices define the identity of an individual and it happens through the process of negotiation in everyday life. In contemporary society media are an integral part of day-to-day life of people. Media invoke a cultural identity and

35. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=00WpAPrs3oE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=00WpAPrs3oE). August 15, 2010.
Interestingly Onam culture has been constructed through Onam programmes. Malayalam channels have a significant role in giving cultural space to construct this cultural identity, and this identity is fashioned by a particular community’s everyday cultural practices. Television programmes produce a collective imagination of culture and tradition through the cultural programmes they broadcast. The songs and advertisements are also instrumental in creating the image of a unique cultural world through the images of tradition. These cultural symbols simply promote Malayali pride. They use Onam cultural symbols to transmit the traditional cultural values to the next generation and construct a unique cultural identity based on the tradition and practice. Onam audio and videocassette songs preserve the culture and promote cultural nationalism.

What we have explored in this chapter is how the various forms of mass media construct a unique cultural identity for the Malayalees. We have seen that, using Onam as an event, the media employ certain cultural signifiers to articulate a unique cultural identity. The audio and video cassettes that are produced during the Onam season use the festival as an occasion for offering social criticism. In the next chapter we explore how cartoons use the occasion of Onam as an event and metaphor for offering social criticism.