Chapter IV

Maveli as Metaphor: Onam Cartoons, Comedy and Social Criticism.

This chapter investigates Onam as an occasion for comedy and cartoon artists to carry out social criticism. This chapter primarily engages with the role of Onam comedy and cartoons in forming the cultural, historical and political imagination of the Malayali and how these comedies and cartoons anticipate a Malayali identity. For any comedy routine to be successful, it is necessary that the audience share the context and the codes available within the living culture it is based on. A cartoon, on the other hand, is a textual composition of various mentalities that organises a common enquiry as well as illustrates contemporary social and political events. Illustrations are the direct reflection of ideology operated in the texts, and they have their own design and practice. A pictorial reading emerges from the consciousness of a particular society and it explicates the imagination of the society. These printed pictures directly communicate the emotions of the reader. In this backdrop, I am looking at illustrations or cartoons dealing with Onam, mainly published in Malayalam magazines. These pictorial expressions emerge as critical art practices or an articulation of a cultural act of social responsiveness in a given temporality. According to Kavitha Balakrishnan,

pictures in the periodicals are engaged as clues for consolidated practices of looking/reading that could also get looked at or textualised so as to attain a status of a cultural act … The periodical itself becomes a site for
circulating both public domain and ideas on the public domain through the sensory involvement of seeing looking and reading (2006: 34).

In the context of the culture industry and the mass mediation of certain cultural practices, these Onam cartoons published in Malayalam periodicals such as Mathrubhumi, Deshabandu, etc. articulate a critical consciousness in society. It invokes certain self-appreciation to generate critical perspectives that counter or negotiate with the hegemonic validation of the social order prevalent in the public culture.

Most of the time, these Malayalam periodicals and comics together enquire the past, delving into the memories of culture. These comics and comedies are identified with social contexts and codes. The social context reflects the knowledge and conflicts in a society, shedding light on social practices and expressions. Comedy is produced from the cultural patterns of the society to highlight the nuances and dialectics existing in the discursive structure. It is a social phenomenon, which occurs across history, affecting people of all groups. In the view of Michael Mulkay, comedy or jokes take shape from the social patterns prevalent within its environment. Mulkay writes, “Joking takes place because the organised patterns of social life themselves involve contradictions, oppositions and incongruities which find expression through the medium of humourous discourse” (1988: 153). Onam serves as the context for comedy and provides the codes which the audience or listener could easily identify and relate to. During Onam, numerous Malayalam comedy skits and cassettes are produced, most of which, as mentioned in previous chapters, also romanticise the ‘golden past’ of the state. Using codes from
everyday culture, these programmes are often social commentaries on contemporary issues. The comedy or humour arises from these social issues, and the act itself attempts to bring about societal corrective measures. Humour is a human practice, and it comes from the realm of free will (Powell 1988: xi). Humour symbolises everyday human actions even while questioning and critically engaging with these practices. Onam comedies, similarly, query the social practices of Kerala society.

Most of these cartoons criticise trends in cultural practices of Onam festival. I divide Onam cartoons into two categories. Firstly, I analyse early Onam cartoons which were mainly published in newspapers and magazines in the period between 1950 and 1960. During this period, most of the cartoons connected Onam to the formation of the Kerala state and the nation. These cartoons commented upon different kinds of policies and legislatures initiated by national and state leaders like Jawaharlal Nehru and Pattam Thanu Pillai. In the second section, I shall focus on contemporary cartoons, which are mainly published in newspapers. These cartoons are based on the practices of Onam and offer criticism of the policies of the state.

The third section of this chapter focuses on Onam comedy programmes and the social criticism that they offer. In this section, I examine how ‘Onam comedies’ develop informed criticism and greater awareness about Kerala society and state. Onam is the season when songs are produced and marketed on cassette tapes – most of these songs are either presented as audio skits or parodies of popular movie songs. Many Malayalam comedy cassettes are released during the Onam season by different mimicry troupes.
Some of them are ‘Onathinidakku Puttukachavadam’ by Navodaya, ‘De Maveli Kombath’ by NAD productions, ‘The Maveli Express’, etc. These cassettes come out every year during Onam and contain parody songs and comedy skits based on real social and political events, and are immensely popular within the Kerala public domain. I discussed these at length in chapter 3.

Onam comedies and cartoons use Onam as a tool to raise criticism about the state's policies and activities while questioning the injustices prevalent in society. Through these cartoons and comedies, the Malayali individuals find a discursive space to actively or covertly criticise the contemporary state while, at the same time, imagining him/herself to be part of a unique cultural identity. Onam lays the backdrop for these comedies and cartoons, which draw upon the Malayali’s notion of caste, gender and race to satirise and lampoon the contemporary. They also criticise others' engagements with the Onam festival. My argument in this chapter is that Kerala society uses Onam as an occasion for raising many critical questions about contemporary society. The comedies and cartoons produce a certain kind of imagination of Kerala’s past. From this collective imagination of the past, the Malayali articulates a unique identity.

**Cartoon: A Brief Introduction**

Cartoons are forms of popular visual representation, which brings political awareness in the society. A cartoon is a visual metaphor to illustrate a viewpoint on current issues in society. During Onam, many cartoons raise criticism of the state and the society. It adopts a symbolic and allegoric approach towards the subject. The indexicality
of cartoons has the power to criticise the state and it works as an intermediary agency between the state and its people. Cartoons address social problems and help the state to understand the primary issues in the society. According to Abu Abraham, “Today caricatures and cartoons are accepted throughout the world as an important part of social and political life of a country. It has been recognised, not so much as an art form, but as a weapon of criticism and propaganda” (1975: 273). By satirising issues, it produces a cultural knowledge, which emerges from the experiences of day-to-day life. Cartoons become a mode of politics, which sees an issue from a critical perspective.

The cartoon is a representational and symbolic form of a text, which takes part in an act of satirical appreciation. The subject of these cartoons are drawn mostly from the field of political and public affairs. They take a dig at social customs, fashions and personalities. It encompasses all aspects of life, such as politics, economy, social issues, philosophy, religion and sports (Mahamood 1997: 52). Cartoons present a broad opinion associated with the subject. It mainly appears in magazines and newspapers and encapsulates an opinion, which mainly serves as political satire and a commentary for social change. Cartoons document everyday events and the contemporary milieu of the society. Apart from documenting events, cartoonists use the medium as a major tool to convey their critique.

Cartoons are a form of communication and it connects the community to a social structure. In India, cartoons emerged to critique the colonial rule and politics in the country. Most of the Indians were critical of the British rule in the country and articulated
this criticism through subversive mockery and lampooning. During the colonial period, Indian cartoons provided the means to express Indians’ protest and agitation against the rulers. In the early days of independence, it was regional magazines like *Ananda Vikadan* in Tamil, which encouraged cartoons in India (Rao 1995: 15).

Keshav Shankar Pillai, known as Shankar, was the first political cartoonist in British India. Shankar's cartoons were mainly meant for the British residing in India and he maintained a close connection with the Viceroy. Jawaharlal Nehru supported Shankar and encouraged him to draw political cartoons. In 1948, Shankar started a magazine called *Shankar’s Weekly* to publish his political cartoons. R.K. Laxman is another important figure in the history of cartoons in India. He made several humorous pieces on Indian political leaders like Nehru, Gandhi, C Rajagopalachari, etc. Indian political leaders take cartoons as an art which articulates self-criticism. Anuradha Rao writes that, “like Nehru even Indira Gandhi enjoyed cartoons and considered them as necessary and useful institutions in an otherwise pompous and self-centered world of politics” (1995: 17). Indian cartoonists made satires on different government policies and actions, like the declaration of emergency and other “developmental” policies.

Cartoons give a visual form to contemporary social issues and bring them to public attention. Newspapers are one of the earliest media used to publish cartoons all over the world. Indian cartoonists adopted the colonial way of caricaturing issues. According to Ritu Gairola Khandhuri, “the history of newspaper cartoons in India, then offers a remarkable vantage point for observing the multi-directional flow of images, imagination
and the people. Adopting this vantage point makes it possible to get away from a
Eurocentric narrative mode of cultural forms” (2014: 6). The debates of the cartoons are
connected to the past and related to other discourses like representation, development and
religion, etc. Cartoons bring human expression and experience to the public and generate a
satire on power structures. But this criticism is inherently based on identity and, therefore,
also misrepresented some communities.

Cartoonists believe that cartoon is a powerful medium to express dissent in a
democratic society. Cartoons often play the role of democratising society as the idea of
liberty that can be smuggled in through humour, especially when criticising authority is
not very safe. Cartoons are art forms, which demonstrate the sense and emotion of the
society and map the intervention of one culture on another. Cartoons have their own
power. Once printed, editing, omissions or additions are not possible in this art form. It
can, therefore, bring out strong political statements directly to the audience without any
intervention or mediation. It can produce new dynamics in cultural politics and its very
presence demonstrates the functioning of a free, democratic society. This kind of
knowledge emerges from social experience. The images in the cartoons evoke popular
cultural memory and they associate themselves and interconnect with the past. In the view
of Khandhuri,


cartoons in India are elusive – seen as art, they quickly remind us that they are
news; emphasise their ephemerality, and they will demonstrate how they
shape public memory and feeling of the past; insist cartoons are about a
message, and they will make you laugh, cry or be angry. In India, the many identities that the newspaper cartoon occupies open them to public deliberation about meaning. … thus cartoons are not just about seeing but also about a politics of seeing emotion” (2014: 20).

From this knowledge, I shall try to understand how Onam cartoons shape a public memory and imagine a unique cultural identity. Onam cartoons generate a space to (re)think about the contemporary practices of Onam and bring critical worldviews to the present. Cartoons help to share alternative and critical perspectives and ideas. In this sense, we can see that Onam cartoons share the idea of emphasising the importance of traditional practices and dialectical responses in Onam celebrations and the cultural experiences of the community.

Caricaturing Culture: Onam Cartoons and Social Imagination.

Kerala has a long history of satirical tradition. It begins with Kunchan Nambiar (1705-1770), a satirical poet, who introduced the satirical dance form called Thullal (Abraham 1995: 61). Kerala produced many cartoonists who were well-known at the national level. O. V. Vijayan is one of the most prominent figures among the Malayali cartoonists. Onam cartoons began to appear in newspapers and periodicals. The Onam cartoons in the 1950s and 1960s focused on the nationalist idea of the formation of a linguistic state and the making of Onam into a national festival. The more recent Onam cartoons concentrate on the contemporary practices of state and society, like the dependence on the neighbouring states, political scams, etc.
S.K. Pillai (K Sreedharan Pillai) was one of the most famous cartoonists in Kerala in the 1950s. He had drawn many Onam cartoons on state and politics during the 1950s. He published his works mainly in Malayala Manorama and Deshabandu. Pillai’s Onam cartoons were critiques of concurrent political events and his works were built on the idea of social criticism. Some of his cartoons are, Kazhinja Onam (Last Onam), Onakazcha (Sights of Onam), Abhinava Vamanan (Neo Vamana), Janakeeyam Naduvaneedum Kalam (When the Popular Reigns), etc. All these cartoons criticise state and central governments and their attitude towards public issues. Sivaram and Vikraman were other prominent cartoonists during the 1950s and 1960s. Their cartoons criticised the state government’s attitudes towards its people and Onam celebration. Navabharathathil Ponnonathinte Ranga Pravesham (The Entry of Onam in New India) and Onathappan Malayalikalude Idayil (Maveli amongst the Malayalis) are a couple of famous cartoons drawn by Sivaram and Vikraman.

In this section, I analyse some of the Onam cartoons published in newspapers and magazines. To understand the early period of social criticism, I look at cartoons published in the period between 1950 and 1960. I am looking at cartoons published from 1990 onwards to understand the current trends in Onam cartoons. Contemporary cartoons are a tool to satirise the state’s intervention in Onam and criticise its activities. However, all these cartoons draw from the legacy of Kerala's tradition, and it lays down the importance of cultural values in the society.
S. K. Pillai’s cartoons were replete with social criticism. In *Kazhinja Onam* (Last Onam) - Figure 4:1 -, one of his famous cartoons, S.K. Pillai comments on the economic inequality in society. This cartoon was published in an entertainment magazine called *Murali*, on October 3, 1950. In this cartoon, a fat man is depicted having *Onasadhya* (Onam feast) and on the opposite side, a poor lean man and his son are shown looking at their ration card. This shows how the government’s economic policies help only the rich in the society, and how only the wealthy can celebrate Onam with all pompousness. This cartoon clearly shows the economic disparity in society. Pillai used this cartoon to criticise the state's attitude towards the poor and it is one of the most famous social criticisms made by Onam cartoonists. *Kazhinja Onam* is evidence for the fact that from its very inception Onam cartoons have engaged in social criticism and that cartoonists regarded it as their ethical responsibility to bring social issues to the public.

Figure 4: 1. “Kazhinja Onam”: - Cover picture of *Murali Masika*, October 3, 1950.
Abhinava Vamanan (Neo Vamana) - Figure 4:2- is another Onam cartoon by S.K. Pillai. It was published in Deshabandu daily newspaper in 1951. The cartoon followed a statement by the then Prime Minister Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru\(^1\) in May 1951 justifying the need to pass the First Amendment curbing the freedom of expression of the press (Balachandran 2012). In this cartoon, Maveli represents freedom of speech and freedom of press while Nehru is depicted as Vamana, stamping his foot on Maveli’s head. The cartoon makes the statement that Nehru is curtailing freedom of the press in the country. Here the cartoonist connects a political issue of that time with the Maveli myth, allowing the viewer to associate it easily with a cultural symbol from popular mythology.

Figure 4:2 Abhinava Vamanan (Neo Vamana). Deshabandu Daily June 1, 1951.

\(^1\) Jawaharlal Nehru was the first Prime Minister of Independent India and a prominent leader of the Indian National Congress.
The September 1951 issue of *Sarasan Masika* published two Onam cartoons of Pillai of which one was the front cover of the magazine, *Janakeeyam Naduvaneedum Kalam Manusherallarum 1 pole* (When democracy rules, people are like 1) (Figure 4: 3), and the second one was on the back cover of the magazine, *Pulikali* (Tiger Dance) (Figure 4:4). The first cartoon *Janakeeyam Naduvaneedum Kalam Manusherallarum 1 pole* describes the situation of the people in a democratic country. This cartoon criticises T. K. Narayana Pillai’s ministry in 1951. He draws the then Chief Minister, T. K. Narayana Pillai, as a fat person while other people in the state are lean and emaciated, looking like the numerical figure “1”. In the cartoon, T. K. Narayana Pillai exhibits his people to Maveli saying that, when democracy rules, all people are like “One”, a pun playing on the stick-like figure of the number “One”. Here, the cartoonist criticises the state's policies and illustrates how the people are affected by these policies. Here too he takes the line *Janakeeyam Naduvaneedum Kalam* from the popular Onam song, *Maveli Naduvaneedum Kalam* (When Maveli ruled).

The cartoon on the back cover, *Pulikali*, shows how Onam is celebrated by the incumbent ministry. In this cartoon, the ministers are shown using tin cans as drums. These tin drums are played by T.M. Varghese, Akkamma Cherian and P. T. Chacko (He is playing *Ilathalam* - a musical instrument). Other characters in this cartoon are C. Kesavan with a gun and Kumbalathu Sankupilla as a tiger. Panamballi Madhava Menon, Mannath Padmanabhan, and T. K. Narayana Pillai are watching the whole scene as spectators (Balachandran: 2012). This cartoon criticises the developmental policies of the 1951 ministry.
Figure 4: 3- Cover picture of Sarasan Masika, September 1951. “Janakeeyam Naduvaneedum Kalam Manushyrellam Onnu Pole”
S.K. Pillai has drawn other cartoons as well which make social commentary. These include *Onakazcha* and an untitled cartoon. All these cartoons were published during Onam and feature Onam and Maveli as its key elements. In these cartoons, Pillai shows the attitude of both the main political parties in the state, the Congress and the Communists, towards the people. The period of this cartoon is around 1956-58 (Balachandran 2012). *Onakazcha* (Figure 4:5), shows the Communist party leader E M S Namboothiripadu, acting as a tenant, presenting workers to Birla, the landlord, as *Onakazcha*—a traditional cultural ritual of an auspicious sight offered during Onam. Another cartoon is about the hypocrisy of various political parties. Here, he depicts a scene from a play enacted by members of the Congress party. Here, the Kerala Ministry is depicted in a scene of strife and one-upmanship – Panambally Govinda Menon as Mahabali and P. T. Chacko as Vamana. P.T. Chacko has stepped his foot upon ‘Kerala
Ministry’ and the Communist party says ‘no.’ This cartoon is based on the internal conflict in the Congress party, and it shows the Congress party’s opposition to the then Kerala ministry. Another cartoon is based on the popular Malayalam Onam song, *Maveli Naduvaneedum Kalam* (Figure 4: 6). This song describes the reign of Maveli where people lived happily without any conflict or discrimination. These cartoons expose the state’s attitude towards people and the exploitation that people endure.

Figure 4:5. *Onakazcha*, A cartoon on the hypocrisy of the political parties.
Figure 4.6 - Deshabandu, September 13, 1959, When the Democratic reign begins
Through these cartoons, Pillai brings attention to all levels of corruption in the society and shows how the state's institutions and machineries systematically exploit the public. During Onam, all cartoons can make a significant impact on the way society imagines itself. It evokes the cultural memory of a distant past and it reminds the society how they lived during Maveli’s period. Maveli appears as a figure in most of Pillai’s cartoons. Maveli's presence as a just and honest ruler gives legitimacy to the ideas expressed in the cartoon. Pillai uses the image of Maveli to criticise the corruption in the state and, thereby, making a social criticism on the then society.

India’s independence is also reflected in Onam cartoons. There is one cartoon by Sivaram titled *Navabharathathil Ponnonathinte Ranga Pravesham* (The Entry of Onam in New India) published in the *Mathrubhumi* Weekly, which shows the first Onam celebration in independent India (Figure 4: 7). In this cartoon Maveli is seen carrying the Indian national flag while an entourage follows him. The followers represent prosperity, equality, health, community, fraternity, etc. The image of Maveli represents a specific community, that of the upper caste Malayali. He is shown carrying a flag and leading the poor to a dreamland (Ranjith 2011: 176). We see people in Kerala imagining a new world in post-independence India where everybody will be treated as equal and all shall share prosperity. This cartoon demonstrates how people collectively imagine a new world and assume a new identity within an emerging nation.
The other cartoons which show Malayali unity include Onathappan Malayalikalude idayil (Onathappan\(^2\) among Malayalees) by Sivaram (Figure 4:8). This cartoon, published in the Mathrubhumi Weekly in 1950, describes the visit of Maveli. Malayalees belonging to different communities have gathered to receive him. The arranged line up sequel of people presented here shows an indexical idea about the social conditions of the people; though it exhorts equality, the posture and gestures of the people in the cartoon suggests stratified hierarchical social system. This cartoon depicts the unity of the Malayalees during Onam. According to the myth, on the day of Onam, Maveli is

\(^2\) Onathappan is another name of Mahabali.
allowed to visit his people, and on that day everybody is equal. The Malayali community which is depicted here shows the hierarchical social relation existed in Kerala (Ranjith 2011: 174).

Figure 4: 8. Onathappan Malayalikalude Idayil, (Onathappan among Malayalees), Mathrubhumi Weekly, 27 August 1950: 6.

Many cartoons were published in the period from 1950 to 1960, the central theme of which was the intervention of the state in Onam celebration. They questioned the notion of equality and the encroachment of ‘modern’ culture into ‘traditional’ culture. It is the cartoonist named Manthri, who mainly created these cartoons. Ranjith opines that Manthri’s cartoons bring out symbols associated with political power and he ascribes the image of Maveli to politicians in Kerala (2011: 216). In these cartoons, the cartoonist tries to state that any political intervention in the celebration of Onam will change the
traditional purity of the festival. The politicians use Onam to further their political agendas. Manthri urges that the people have to understand the role of politicians in this festival and points out how the politicians are articulating a cultural identity according to their political disposition.

Manthri’s cartoons describe the state government's Onam celebration in the 1960s. Most of his cartoons show how the state celebrates Onam. Some of his cartoons are, *Onaghosham, State Aabhimmukhyathil* (Onam Celebration under the direction of State) and *1960-le Onaghosham* (Onam Celebration in 1960). The first cartoon, Onam celebration under State (Figure 4: 9), represents various popular cultural practices associated with the Onam festival. It imagines how these practices would be if done by the ministers. The women members in the ministry are shown making a flower carpet, while the male ministers play fight an Onam game, here titled as *Kayyankali*, and in the final panel, the Chief Minister is shown worshipping *Thrakkakkara Appan*, the Onam deity. The state government started celebrating Onam only after Onam was declared as the national festival of Kerala in 1961. Manthri’s cartoons are based on this declaration, and it imagines the ‘official’ Onam celebration by the state. These cartoons critically engage with the Onam celebration by the state. Manthri’s second cartoon, Onam celebration in 1960 (Figure 4:10), shows how the Onam celebration would be if all people were equal. Here he brings together all nationalist and political leaders, unified in celebrating the state Onam function, thus invoking the notion that everybody is equal during Onam.
Figure 4: Onam Celebration under the direction of State. Mathrubhumi Weekly, 24 August 1958: 72.
Figure 4:10 Onam Celebration in 1960. Mathrubhumi Weekly, 4 September 1960. P 37.
These cartoons show the Onam celebration by the state. In the first cartoon titled “Mavelikku Memorandum” (A memorandum to the Maveli), the ministers of the Kerala state submit a memorandum to Maveli when he visits Kerala during Onam. The second
cartoon titled “Oro Veettilum Sadyagraham” (Onam feast in every home) features the Onam feast. Here the cartoonist is playing on the words sadyagraham and satyagraha. He suggests that the state has moved from the path of satyagraha advocated by Gandhi. Both these cartoons directly engage with the political questions in Kerala.

In these above-mentioned cartoons we can see here an invocation political parody while juxtaposing it with that of various cultural practices and performances attached to Onam. It satirically caricature a popular political belief that politics is just like a theatrical performance; or it is all about an enactment of ‘natakam’ (drama) or public performances. In this context women are represented with the certain feminine act, whereas men are occupied with the world of masculine dominance; and wherein state performed the role as a yet another patriarchal upper caste head of the family to follow the norms and ethics of its member. The symbolic political signifiers suggest that the political condition may change from monarchy to the democratic state system. However, it will have the residue of tradition; while using popular Onam metaphors, this cartoon can be a critical appraisal of the emerging political scenario of the nation state, immediately after its independence.

**Contemporary Onam Cartoons and Imagination of Malayali Identity.**

Contemporary Onam cartoons are critical of the state and its affairs in Kerala. Some cartoons talk about the failure of the government in building a self-sustaining state. This is shown by Kerala’s dependence on other states for procuring essential goods, such as flowers, rice, etc., especially for Onam celebration. Apart from this, these cartoons
emerge from an imagination of a Malayali past. For example, a cartoon on the dependence of the state on imports reveals the changes in Onam celebrations of the Malayali over the years. These cartoons expose the anxieties of the modern Malayali. Modern Malayalees are more conscious, than before, of cultural appropriation and this reflects in their celebrations. The cartoons make fun of migrant labourers working in the state. For instance, one cartoon shows the intervention of migrant labourers in the state. Nowadays, Onam celebrations are market-centered, and this is manifest in cartoons and comedies.

Some of the prominent figures who produced Onam cartoons from 1960 to 1990 are Yesudas (B.1938 -), G. Aravindan (1935 – 1991), Madanan (B.1960 –), Paul Kallanode (B.1951 -), Gopikrishnan (B.1971 -) and Soman Katalur. Among these, G. Aravindan is one of the most significant figures in the field of cartoon culture in Kerala. In his work, *Cheriya Manushyarum Valiya Lokavum (Small Men and the Big World)* narrates the story of a middle-class youth called Ramu who encounters various social issues. This book was first published in 1978 and is a collection of comic strips drawn by G. Aravindan mainly for the Mathrubhumi Weekly. In the introduction to this book, M.T. Vasudevan Nair writes that “it reflects the contemporary social and political issues, and it is not a traditional comic strip; it is like a poem or a novel (1996: 8)”. Aravindan’s Onam cartoons depict the view of a youth on Onam and associated social issues. One comic explains that this time, Onam has political relevance because it is the first Onam after the independence of India (1996: 8) even while laying out the importance of Onam. Some comics portray the social reflections on Onam and especially how it came to be regarded as a special festival (273-4).
Contemporary Onam cartoons satirise the activities of political parties and Malayali’s attraction to the new trends, like celebrating Onam in a hotel, etc. It criticises the ubiquity of sponsored Onam celebrations and it also criticises Malayalees' consumerism. These cartoons argue that, while historically Malayalees celebrate Onam with all its traditional values and goodness, nowadays it has turned into a more mechanical kind of celebration.
In this cartoon by Paul Kallanodu we see a poet writing a poem on Onam by romanticising it. The cartoonist suggests that the reality is far from the imagination of the poet.
In this cartoon, E Suresh includes the subject of tourism and commercialisation of Onam. He says that contemporary society gives more importance to a market economy than the traditions of Onam. When Maveli visits Kerala, the Malayali is busy with the
making of the carnival to attract the tourists and the prices of all products in the market have gone up, and nobody recognises Maveli. In the end Maveli holds a placard with his name written on it for Malayalees to recognise him. What Suresh shows here is the new meaning that Onam has come to have in the wake of the commercialisation of the festival.

Figure 4:14 Onanattiloode (Through the Onam land) by Madanan, *Mathrubhumi Weekly*, 2-8 September 1990.
This cartoon depicts the contemporary Onam celebration in Kerala. Here Madanan contrasts the idea of Onam that two generations share. The new generation is not aware of Onam practices. Madanan uses different cultural practices of Onam to construct knowledge of Onam and its practices.

Now, Kerala has to depend on the neighbouring states for its daily sustenance. This reflects in contemporary Onam celebration. The cartoon *Kandonam Nallonam* (Figure 4:15) by T. K. Sujith in Kerala Kaumudi daily expresses this anxiety of dependency. In this cartoon, Sujith shows how, when Maveli comes from netherworld to visit Kerala, he finds Malayalees celebrating Onam with all the goods imported from other States; he finds rice from Andhra Pradesh; flowers, vegetables and cooking gas from Tamil Nadu; Onam feast served by a North Indian; and Malayalees inebriated on foreign liquor. Maveli realises that *Malayali thanima* (the Malayaliness) is found only on Television channels. This cartoon criticises the lack of self-sufficiency of Kerala society and their widespread consumerist behaviour.
The cartoon on Maveli and the migrant labourer shows Malayali’s attitude towards migrant labourers (Figure 4: 16). In this cartoon, Maveli asks a person “Son, how is the Onam celebration this year?” To Mahabali’s question about Onam celebrations, the migrant labourer responds saying “kya?” (What?!). This shows Malayali anxiety about the large presence of non-Malayalees in the state. It shows the nature of the changed political economy of production due to the market economy and also hints at the emergence of a large presence of a new working class force and condition whereby Maveli can only see his non-Malayali *Praja* (people).
There are some cartoons on contemporary political issues at the state and national level. The internal conflicts within political parties and the conflicts among different
parties are depicted in these. Onam is a central theme of these cartoons, and the
cartoonists use Onam idioms to convey their messages. One cartoon shows the conflict
within the political party, Bharatiya Janata Party (B.J.P), when Modi\(^3\) was being elevated
to the top of the leadership (Figure 4: 17). This cartoon is by Unnikrishnan in the
Mathrubhumi newspaper. Here, Modi is stepping on Advani’s\(^4\) head pushing him into the
netherworld of political oblivion.

Figure 4: 18. On Modi being elevated to the top leadership of BJP. Mathrubhumi
Newspaper September 16, 2013.

\(^3\) Narendra Damodar Modi, is the current Prime Minister of India and a member of Bharatiya Janata Party
(B.J.P).

\(^4\) L K Advani is a senior leader of Bharatiya Janata Party (B. J. P).
Political parties and their wings too use Onam as an occasion to criticise the ruling party’s attitude towards the public. In a poster made by K.S.R.T. E.A (Kerala State Road Transport Employees Association), a left-leaning employees' association, shows how Oommen Chandy\(^5\), the Chief Minister of Kerala, destroys the state-owned transportation bus corporation. The title of the poster is *Americayil Sandy Chuzhali, K. S. R. T. C.*\(^6\) *yil Chandy Chuzali* (Hurricane Sandy in America and Hurricane Chandy in K. S. R. T. C.). In this poster (Figure 4: 18), K.S.R.T.C. bus is portrayed as Maveli and Oommen Chandy as Vamana. Chandy is seen stamping down K.S.R.T.C. deep into the netherworld. The cartoon brings out allegations against the Chief Minister, Oomen Chandy's incompetence, and criticises the corruption of Chandy and his cabinet. In this poster too, the cartoonist has used tropes and idioms from the myth of Maveli to show the corruption in the state government. As Maveli did when he was sent to the netherworld, the K.S.R.T.C. bus in this poster also voices its concern for people.

\(^5\) Oommen Chandy was the Chief Minister of Kerala from May 2011 to May 2016.

\(^6\) K.S.R.T.C. -- Kerala State Road Transport Corporation is state-owned transport corporation in Kerala.
Figure 4:18. A photo was taken from Alappuzha K.S.R.T.C. Bus Stand of a poster by K.S.R. T.E.A. Alappuzha Unit in 2014.
These cartoons use Onam as an occasion to make social criticism against the state and society. The image of Maveli is used to authenticate and grant legitimacy to their claim. I argue that, Onam cartoons, while making a social criticism on Kerala society, also recollect the traditional past of Kerala society. In any society, comedy is a mechanism to correct society and it works as a tool to bring social awareness. In some sense, humour works as a tool for resistance, because it attacks and insults the dominant ideology of the society. The power of comedy is that it engages with the issues of people in society and it has the social and ethical power to criticise the dominant groups. This criticism emerges from everyday experiences. Humour or comedy is a text, which produces critical knowledge and reinterprets social practices. Humour is a text which is interpreted between the writer and the audience and it can also build social solidarity (Smith 2009: 150). Malayalam comedy tries to bring out social issues. Onam comedies aim to generate awareness about the social issues in the contemporary society.

Central subjects of Onam comedy are contemporary events and the comedians' reactions towards these. But most the time, these comedies are tinged with racial and gender stereotypes. This kind of discriminative humour is developed from the collective communal sense of people or society, who believe that they can articulate social criticism through this type of sense and knowledge. Michael Billing argues that humour has the task of questioning what we take to be commonsensical. He writes, “one of the tasks of social critique is to question what passes for common sense. In so doing, the social critique may well fall foul of common sense’s own criteria for what is sensible and what is not” (2005: 1) Here the comedy often arises from the colour and gender of people. Another significant
theme in Onam comedy is the passion Malayalis exhibit towards modern consumer goods. Onam Comedies openly criticise this passion and they, in turn, promote traditional values.

**Articulating Memory and Criticism: Onam Special Comedy Programmes on Television**

Malayalam TV channels come up with Onam special comedy programmes. These programmes work as a medium for social corrective measures. Television channels broadcast various programmes on social issues and critique the society. Almost every programme ends by invoking the good old days and the remembrance of the cultural values of Onam. These programmes are not separate from the assumed ‘goodness’ of Malayali, but rather serve to reinforce these ideals. In the contemporary society, these comedy programmes evoke the collective and cultural imagination. They point out the social issues which have risen from the collective adoption of modern practices and lifestyle. Contemporary society, these programmes assume, leads a life which has parted ways with traditional cultural values. The comedy programmes try to remind the viewers of their Malayali pride and the great life they had lived in the past. This reading is centered on the notion of the goodness of village or rural life. Television programmes suggest that the villages are more conscious about traditional values of the society than the modern urban populace. They construct the knowledge that Onam can unite people.

In Kerala, most of the Onam programmes are organised by local clubs. In the cities, Onam celebration is more mechanical, and it questions the cultural validity of Onam. In the villages, the clubs try to bring all communities together, and they celebrate
Onam with its all traditional elements and practices, unlike in the cities. The urban way of celebration is concentrated on the market and consumption, but in villages Onam celebration is marked as the celebration of a region or community. So this could be one of the subjects of Onam comedy programmes on television. In television, the comedy programmes represent the celebration of Onam in the cities as a celebration of memories. The comic track in the plot follows the migration of people from the village to cities and their way of celebrating their memories. In programmes like these, the villages stand for the symbol of unity and togetherness. For instance, the Onam comedy programme, ‘Onam Bumper’ broadcasted by Janam TV (29 August 2015), shows the Onam celebration organised by local clubs. The programme tries to portray the small conflicts among the club members. The programme also criticised state level Onam practices like Onam special exams in schools. The programme gives the message that today Onam is celebrated without its message of equality and unity. Malayalam comedies are commonly racial and some comedies are built upon the disability of a person. For example, comedy programmes like Onam Bumper and Oru Load Mavelikal (One Load Mavelis) on Asianet present an image of Maveli as someone who is fat, black and has a stammering problem. This characterisation comes from the assumed cultural knowledge that Maveli is the symbol of prosperity, who does not have any defect or disability and has fair-coloured skin.
Oru Load Mavelikal on Asianet critiques the use of Maveli as an object. In contemporary society, Maveli is used as an exhibit, especially in shops and malls. The new trend in Kerala society is that most of the shops have their ‘own’ Maveli to welcome customers to their shops during Onam season. This can be widely seen in front of the textile and jewellery shops. This programme criticises such practices. The programme is about an agency which arranges actors dressed as Maveli for different shops and functions. As they run short of people dressed as a noble Maveli, the owner of the agency hires different people who are either dark-skinned, fat, disabled, non-Malayalees, etc. Here, the programme suggests that such business enterprises misrepresent the greatness of Maveli and will produce the knowledge that Maveli is only an icon for the shops and functions. The programme laments that it produces the image of Maveli as something representing consumption or as a mere object for exhibition among the new generation — a commodity.

Another significant problem presented in this programme is that of the representation of migrant workers. The presence of Hindi speakers in Kerala has created a new dilemma among Malayalees. Malayalees have expressed great anxiety about losing their tradition to the Hindi speakers. Onam comedies in the television usually end with other cultural programmes associated with Onam such as, Thiruvathira, Onam games, songs, etc. All these programmes bear the symbols of Malayali identity and they imagine

7 http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LyoXE_HbxKM.
Onam to be the cultural festival of Malayalees. Through these imaginations, television aims to construct the collective imagination of the audience and evokes their cultural memories.

**Conclusion**

Onam constructs a political and social consciousness through cartoons and comedies. Comedy and cartoons are some of the strongest tool media uses for social criticism. This chapter has shown that, compared to the literary writers’ and media’s imagination of Onam that talks about the past with a sense of nostalgia, Comedy and cartoons see Onam as an “event” to create new social and political knowledge in society. Though the residue of the past remains as a central concept in Onam cartoons, the new cartoons see Onam as an event and advocate and envisage a welfare nation state, which was an essential part of the unconscious memory of a Malayali identity. The notion of welfare state emerges from the Onam myth, which invokes the prosperous reign of Maveli. Cartoons and comedies use the image of Maveli as a metaphor for a welfare state. Cartoons engage with current issues and use Maveli to create consciousness in society.

Irrespective of the religious connotations associated with it, Onam has become an effective political site to bring forth social and political criticism. The image or idea of Maveli has been used as a metaphor for virtues, moral values, welfare and as an icon of prosperity. In media representations of Onam, Maveli becomes a cultural icon of the state and has the authenticity to criticise the welfare mechanism, political situations, and social problems. In cartoons and comedy skits he has become a desirable object, which people
want to achieve, change or to be fulfilled. He can enter into private and public life of Kerala society, irrespective of the caste, class or religious differences. All Onam cartoons and comedies are a reflection of these ideas. Humour is an act of experiencing human life. Some parody songs make fun of the dressing style and behaviour of the women in the society. This kind of consciousness serves to create the knowledge that modern or progressive women, who step outside the confines of traditional values, are bad and bring a bad reputation to society.

Comedy and social criticism could happen only through the historical knowledge of the social system. Using Maveli as a symbol legitimises the social criticism. Cassettes have been raising social issues through parody songs and comedy skits. Most of these comedies try to bring back the traditional values of Kerala and imagine the return of Kerala’s supposed ‘golden past’ with Maveli ruling Kerala again. Comedy is used as a tool of social criticism wherein Maveli becomes a symbol of prosperity and truth.