Conclusion

The major concern of this dissertation was to discuss and understand the popular perception of Onam, a cultural festival in Kerala which is identified as a cultural icon of Kerala society. The idea of Onam as a marker of a cultural identity evolved from the collective consciousness of a community. This collective consciousness is related to the cultural practices of a community, whose experiences it shares. Onam has been transformed into an event for sharing of experiences and values through cultural signifiers like the dress, food, habit, etc. Over the course of this dissertation, I have discussed how these cultural signifiers are used in various practices associated with Onam and cultural products such as television programmes, advertisements, cartoons and so on. I have argued that these cultural products, through the deployment of certain cultural signifiers, enable the refiguring of Malayali cultural identity.

In contemporary society, Onam is an event to produce various knowledges. Society perceives Onam as a platform to articulate different ideologies and to unite the people in a unique platform. For instance, Onam celebrations in public spaces such as college campuses, institutions, and village clubs make use of Onam as a field to bring people together as a single community regardless of their different religious and caste identities. On the other hand, this “Onam event” not only connects with the past, but also mediates that past within the context of the present while depicting innumerable social, economic and political problems of the contemporary society. As an event, it transits and mediates culture while advocating for the betterment of society with credible political and
social behaviours. In this research I have argued that Onam is not only a cultural festival that imagines a culturally united Malayali community; but also a cultural event that mediates and transits social and cultural knowledge from one period to another. This knowledge is used to reconfigure Malayali identity by/in the contemporary society with the cultural signifiers associated with Kerala society.

Media, both visual and print, use Onam to produce the knowledge that Onam is a marker of the cultural identity of a Malayali for which they use cultural signifiers like food and dress as markers of Malayali identity. Most of the television programmes and newspaper images carry these cultural symbols which they connect with the Malayali life. This cultural understanding arises from the past experiences of Onam which are connected to the myth of Onam. Through these articulations, contemporary society reclaims the Maveli era, which was a period of harmony and prosperity. Invoking this past memory, Malayali recreates or imagines their unique cultural life through Onam.

The popular cultural practices of contemporary festivals are often disseminated through mass media. In contemporary festivals, media has a significant role in developing the popular imagination of the culture. Most of these festivals are considered as an occasion for social gathering rather than as religious ceremonies. But the cultural practices of these festivals are not completely devoid of religious elements. Media and other popular cultural elements play down the religiosity and make a claim that contemporary festivals are people’s festivals and that they are attributes of a unique cultural identity. The imagination of the cultural identity of a group emerges from a collective consciousness.
In my first chapter, I have argued that Onam is part of popular cultural tradition because the understanding of Onam as “the festival of all Malayalees” emerges from the conception that popular culture is one that arises from the mass or “well-liked” by people or the culture of the people. Popular culture signifiers such as media are used to invoke the cultural past of Kerala. The reproduction of cultural past is connected to the present cultural practices of society. The cultural practices related to the Onam have elements of past which help to form the contemporary identity. I have argued that Onam is used as a site to reproduce the historical knowledge as well as to transfer knowledge from one generation to another. During Onam, The history of Kerala society is understood from a mythical background. The Onam myth—the reign of Maveli—symbolizes life in harmony and prosperity, and Kerala society collectively imagines this harmony and prosperity through the Onam festival.

Cultural practices associated with Onam are also entrenched in the discourse of power relationships. Onam is also a site of hegemonic domination. Through the government-sponsored programmes of Onam celebration and other Onam practices, the state legitimizes the authenticity and authority of the festival; for example, through the declaration of Onam as the “national festival” of Kerala. The state makes Onam the festival of all Malayalees in which all Malayalees are expected to take part. This comes from a collective consciousness—mostly formulated in the literary discussions on Onam in the period between the 1930s’ and 1940s’ by a group of writers. The public celebration of the cultural or religious festival is also the substance of power relations. This kind of celebration marks the social identity of the community and it spots the social mobilization of a group. The mobilization exposes the sharing of experience which helps the formation
of a collective identity. One of the features of Onam festival is that at present, it is a
festival of gathering or get together than a religious practice. Therefore, now days, Onam
is an event for gathering, and this kind of social mobilization helps to share the social
experiences of different individuals or groups which eventually help to make a cultural
identity, that is Malayali identity.

Media has a significant role in the popular imagination of Onam. During the
time of Onam celebration, the media run many “Onam special” programmes which
reflect upon the “traditional” culture of Kerala. Through various Onam programmes,
media constructs a Malayali identity and they project Onam as the ultimate cultural
event of Malayalees. The idea of Onam as the cultural event of Kerala arises from a
collective experience. This collective experience reproduces a historical event, and
it reconstructs the past with the help of memory. The popular cultural practice of
Onam is more focused on media production and consumption. Thus, Onam is the
celebration of cultural memory. The public celebration of Onam is a strategy for
social mobilization, and this social mobilization is achieved through the sharing of
the memory of Onam. This memory produces a historical knowledge, and this
knowledge is transferred from one generation to another. This kind of social
mobilization helps to share the social experiences of different individuals or groups,
which eventually helps to make a social identity. Most of the media practices are
focused on this kind of mobilization and attributing a Malayali identity to its
viewers. Media makes Onam as a historical event to reconfigure the identity with
cultural symbols like food, dress, etc.
The years between the 1930s and 1960s were significant in the socio-political history of Kerala. This period witnessed different levels of political and cultural formations such as the state formation and development of new political parties like the Communist Party (1939). In the 1930s, some Malayalam writers such as Puthezhathu Ramanmenon, P V Krishnawarier and so on, started the discussion of Onam festival and these writers connected the Onam festival to the culture of Kerala. The contemporary imagination of Onam is the outcome of the narration of collective experience in the 1930s and 1940s.

The second chapter discussed the writings on Onam in Malayalam during the period 1930-1960, which had formulated the knowledge that, Onam is part of Kerala culture and these set of writers also set a frame that Onam is a cultural symbol and secular festival of Kerala. The literary imagination in this period constructed a collective consciousness of the nation as well as a national culture. These literary writers used Onam to demand the cultural unity for the region and they identified it with the identity. Most of these writings are based on the nostalgia of a person or community. These writings on Onam festival have a significant role in the popularization of Onam festival and they made it as the “people’s festival”. The writings focus on the daily life experience of the people, associating it with the Onam festival. The literary imagination of Onam, in the period from the 1930s to 1960s, constructed knowledge that Onam is a vehicle to transfer cultural knowledge.

The literary perception in the period between the 1930s to the 1960s started with the discourse of the Mahabali myth. The literary writings on Onam during this period recollect the past that is completely bound with the Maveli myth. The imaginative world
of the reign of Maveli is reproduced in these writings which connect it to the history of modern Kerala. Onam works as a mediator between the past, and the present, and is presented as the memory of a historical moment to recollect and share a glorious past. In contemporary society, this sharing of memories happens through popular cultural products like television and films. The writings on Onam reproduce the “golden past” of Kerala, and the Malayali identity is configured based on this past. The Onam myth is an integral part of the construction of Malayali identity. Almost all of Onam narratives use the myth to explore the cultural life of a Malayali. Contemporary literary works also look back to this golden past and romanticize their experiences or memories. The majority of contemporary Onam writings are more about the nostalgia of the past. Early Onam writings view Onam as part of the cultural pride of Malayalees and validate the need for a recreation of that egalitarian past. During the discussions on state formation, many writers proposed that the Onam should be made the cultural festival of the state because it symbolizes the harmony and unity of the people. One can conclude from these writings that Onam came to be identified with Malayali culture from the first half of the twentieth century. Contemporary Malayalam literature views Onam as an occasion to bring back the memories of a glorious past and imagine the world where all the people are equal, as was the case during the Maveli era.

Television is one of the key sites to articulate identity in modern society. Television reflects the day to day life of people, and it has an important role in the everyday life of contemporary society. During Onam, many “special” programmes are aired on television, which discuss the cultural lives of Malayalees. In the third chapter, I have discussed the involvement of media in the reconfiguration of Malayali identity.
Media invokes a homogenous cultural identity through the Onam special programmes. Onam days are “special days” for Malayalam media. Both, visual and print media strive to preserve the traditional flavours these days, and their debates and discussions vie to discover the long lost tradition of Kerala society. In this chapter, I have argued that media use the Onam as a cultural space to articulate Malayali identity as well as a saleable product to increase their ratings. Hence, media also contribute to the popular imagination of the Malayali, that Onam is an integral part of their culture and prosperous lives.

During Onam, popular media configure Malayali identity through several cultural signifiers. For example, the dress in Onam advertisements is the traditional *Kasavu saree* (traditional dress for women) and the traditional feast. All the images carry cultural symbols like boat, dress, face of *Kathakali* (Kerala traditional dance) and feast. They use the Onam cultural symbols to transmit the traditional cultural values to the next generation and construct a unique cultural identity based on those traditions and practices. Likewise, the Onam cassettes and CDs focus on cultural preservation. Audio and video cassettes and CDs on Onam narrate the cultural practices of Onam and articulate the tradition through songs and other performances. All these media programmes produce a collective imagination with a series of cultural signs. For the media, Onam is a very important cultural sign to produce the identity of a Malayali and they use it as a platform to promote their ideology on state and culture. Media also make use of the consumerist desires of the Malayali during the Onam festival. Advertisements promote various kinds of commodities that come with special offers, manifesting the consumer habit of the middle-class Malayali. The paradox of advertisement is that they glorify the tradition of Kerala, while at the same time, promote the flow of global capital to Kerala society. Thus,
advertisements situate Onam within the narrative of cultural identity while commodifying it at the same time.

The final chapter of the thesis looked at Onam as a site for social criticism. Irrespective of the religious connotations associated with it, Onam has become an effective political site to bring forth social and political criticism. Comedies and cartoons use Onam as a tool to criticize the society. The image of Maveli, used as a metaphor for welfare and moral values and as an icon of prosperity, is often used in these works of humour. Comedy uses Onam as an occasion to show the corruption and social anomalies of the society. This social imaginary emerges from a collective consciousness produced by literature. In media representations, Maveli becomes a cultural icon of the state and has the legitimacy to criticize the welfare mechanism, political situations and social problems. In cartoons and comedy skits he becomes a desirable object, which the people want to achieve, change or fulfil. Most of these cartoons and comedies use Maveli as a mediator between the state and society, as someone who can engage with Kerala society, irrespective of caste/class or religious differences. Comedies and cartoons imagine the world of Maveli as one where moral and cultural values are significant.

In this way, contemporary Kerala society uses Onam as an event, platform, and site to produce various knowledge, the exploration of which I have tried to do in my research. Literature uses Onam to construct a popular imagination of a community, while cartoon and comedies use it as an event to critique a corrupted and unequal society. The media use Onam as a site to reproduce a historical knowledge and share the cultural memory of a community. All these fields use Onam as an instrument to disseminate a political and social ideology rather than critique its religious and casteist build up. Most
importantly, the study argues that the modern imagination of Onam is always legitimised with the culturally and socially validated signifiers, and these normativised signifiers are very much part and parcel of the everyday social and cultural perception of an upper echelon of the society. Undoubtedly, the appropriations of these imaginary metaphors, social and cultural signifiers as well as all other imaginary ideals of Onam—either put forward by print or visual media—have an implicit connection with the worldviews of upper caste social and cultural order. Hence, the cultural signifiers and their indexical ideograms have an invisible hierarchical order, which are in turn, either consciously or unconsciously overemphasised, reappropriated and reinsulated by the popular mass media as the grounded aesthetics of Onam, and then proposed as the yeast of Malayali culture and identity. The study, therefore argues that the essentialized Malayali identity—and indeed the self as well—build upon this mythically generated and hierarchically practiced ideals of upper caste mentalities. Onam and its mass meditations, either implicitly or explicitly, proliferate or reinstate this order, in which all other social realities and identities are subordinated. The myth emerges as history and culture, and the appropriation and mediation of the cultural signifiers fall under the process of communication culture. This commoditised socially, and culturally legitimised culture of dominant became the recognised or recognisable identity of the Malayali.

A study on Onam opens up a lens to look at the interventions of various fields of socio-political realms. The festival is associated with songs and stories. This can be one of the areas to be further studied. The predominant role of Onam in the song tradition of Kerala can be discussed in relation to the cassette/CD tradition and popular music in Kerala. The participation of the state in welfare mechanisms through such festivals and
questions about the state promotion of such festivals need to be discussed. Similarly, the question of caste and gender in relation to Onam is a significant debate in contemporary Kerala that needs to be addressed in further studies on this subject.