

# Legend of Mahabali



Onam is the national festival of Kerala. Celebrated in the month of Chingam, it starts from Atham and lasts for 10 days till Ponnonam. Thiruvonam celebrations evoke a wave of nostalgia in Keralites and are celebrated by everyone irrespective of religion and caste. After the harsh month of Karkidakam comes Chingam, offering the hope of prosperity to farmers, making Onam a harvest festival.

It is a time when the entire state is decked up with Athapookkalam and lights. Visitors to Kerala during the festive season have the opportunity to experience the hospitality and culture of the state on a first-hand basis. With the boat races, Onasadhya, Athachamayam, Pulikali, Kummattikali, Thumbi Thullal and Onam Sadya, the festival also showcases artistic and cultural diversity.

Legend has it that Mahabali, the mythical beloved king of Kerala, visits his subjects on the day of Thiruvonam after ascending from the netherworld. Mahabali, a devotee of Lord Vishnu, was the son of Virochan and the grandson of Prahalad. He was a righteous and charitable man and treated all his subjects equally. There was no poverty, crime or cruelty during his rule. Despite Mahabali being a demon king, the state was at its most glorious phase and his people adored him. Mahabali's fame grew with each passing day which enraged the devas. Afraid of losing power, they begged Lord Vishnu to aid them in stopping Mahabali.

As a result, Lord Vishnu in his Vamana Avatar (a Brahmin avatar) visited Mahabali, who was doing yagna for Lord Vishnu's grace. Upon seeing the poor Brahmin boy, Mahabali asked what he desired. The boy responded that he needed land which could be covered in three steps. Mahabali granted the boy's wish. He began to grow in size, covering the entire universe with the first two steps. Mahabali then realised that it was no ordinary boy before him but Lord Vishnu himself. Seeing that there was no more land left, the king bowed before the boy, offering his head for the next step. Satisfied by the king's devotion, Lord Vishnu blessed Mahabali and sent him to Pathala or the netherworld, with permission to visit his subjects once every year. The place where this incident is believed to have taken place was given the name Trikalkkara which was later changed to Thrikkakara.

The incident is said to have occurred on the star sign of Thiruvonam in the month of Chingam, and ever since, every year during the 10 days of Onam, the people of Kerala eagerly await their beloved king. The tale of Mahabali's sacrifice as described in the folk song "Maveli nadu vaneedum kalam" is associated with Onam.

Even though the story of Mahabali is the most prevalent one related to Onam, there are other such folktales too. The Kerala Mahatmyam, related to the Brahmandapurana also has a mention of Onam. It is also found in *Pathupattu* and Mangudi Maruthanar's work '*Madurai Kanji*'. Another myth is that which connects Parashuram to Onam.