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Beyond Kerala**

How the diaspora keeps
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V.D.SATHEESAN

CHIEF MINISTER
KERALAM

18.08.2026

MESSAGE

I am glad to note that Benchmark Events in collaboration with Hit 96.7 FM is planning to publish a special magazine titled Onam Annual to commemorate this year's Onam festival.

Onam, the national festival of Kerala reminds us the need for a society that loves and cares for one another. Therefore, let us strive to reach out to the needy and insecure and share with them the spirit of Onam.

I wish the readers of Onam Annual, a very happy and prosperous Onam.

V.D. SATHEESAN

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FAR FROM HOME, NEVER FAR FROM ONAM

How far can Onam travel? Apparently, much farther than we ever imagined. From Kerala to the Gulf and beyond, the festival has crossed borders, generations and cultures, carrying with it the flavours, colours, music and memories of home.

For Malayalis living abroad, Onam is not something we simply miss - it is something we recreate, together.

Thanks to the remarkable Malayali community and its incredible ability to come together, organise and celebrate, we rarely feel that we are missing out. In fact, there are times when Onam in the Gulf feels even bigger, more vibrant and more inclusive than the celebrations back home. From community gatherings and cultural programmes to grand sadyas, stage shows, music, cinema and family events, the festival takes on a life of its own.

There is a strong sense of belonging among Malayalis across the Gulf, and nowhere is that bond more visible than during Onam. In countries such as the UAE and Qatar, Onam is not confined to a single day or even a single weekend. The celebrations stretch across weeks, as communities, associations, workplaces, restaurants and families find their own ways to mark the season.

There is even a humorous saying among Gulf Malayalis that Onam celebrations continue until Christmas. It may be an exaggeration, but there is certainly some truth behind the joke. Pookkalam, sadyas, cultural programmes and Onam gatherings seem to keep appearing long after Thiruvonam has passed.

And perhaps that is what makes Gulf Onam so special. It is a celebration shaped by distance but strengthened by community. Traditions brought from Kerala have found new spaces, new audiences and, in many cases, new expressions in the Gulf.

This special edition of Onam is a celebration of that journey.

In these pages, we explore the many ways Onam continues to evolve - from the changing festival wardrobe and the sounds and flavours associated with the season to the growing popularity of the sadya beyond the Malayali community. We look at how technology is changing the way families celebrate, how younger generations are discovering and reinterpreting traditions, and how Malayalam cinema remains an important part of the festive experience.

Food, inevitably, occupies a special place in our celebrations. Our recipe section brings together traditional South Indian flavours with contemporary culinary ideas, while our features explore the growing appreciation of Kerala cuisine in the UAE and beyond.

Ultimately, this edition is about Onam beyond Kerala - a festival that has travelled across borders without losing its soul.

For those of us living away from home, Onam is a reminder that home is not always a place. Sometimes, it is a song heard on the radio, a familiar voice, a sadya served on a banana leaf and shared with friends, a kasavu saree, a mundu, a pookkalam, a Malayalam movie or simply a room filled with people who share the same memories.

And when thousands of Malayalis come together in a foreign land to celebrate those memories, Kerala suddenly does not feel very far away.

Happy Onam!

Amjad Vanimal
Editor





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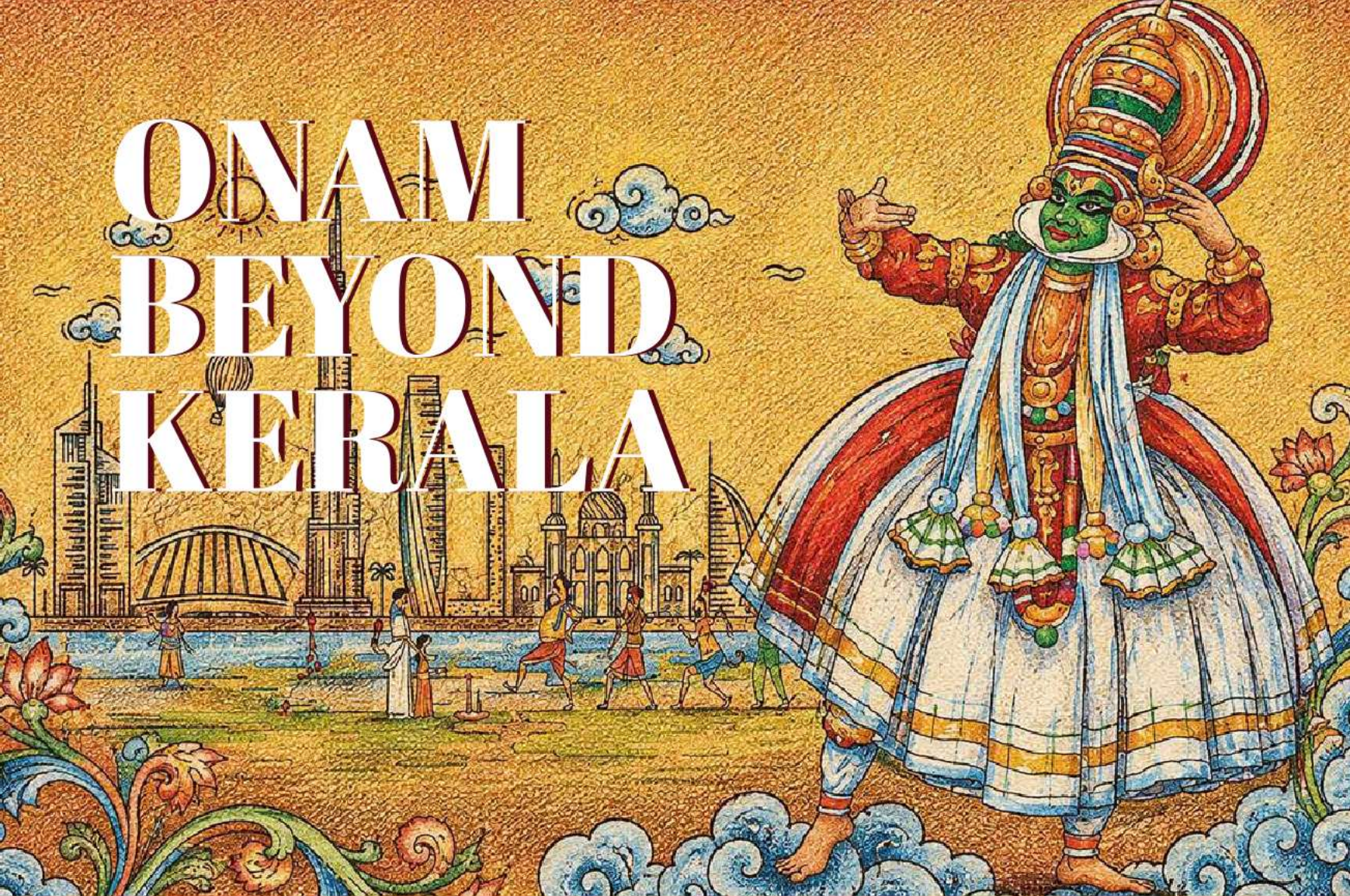


ONAM ANNUAL

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ONAM BEYOND KERALA



How the diaspora keeps the tradition alive

The UAE offers perhaps one of the clearest examples of how the Malayali diaspora has transformed Onam into a community-wide celebration.

For a Malayali living far from Kerala, Onam is more than a festival on the calendar. It is a memory of home, a taste of childhood, a familiar song, the fragrance of flowers, the rustle of a kasavu saree and the anticipation of a Sadya served on a banana leaf.

Thousands of kilometres away from the paddy fields, village homes and waterways of Kerala, Malayalis across the world have found their own ways of bringing that feeling home. Nowhere is this more visible than in the UAE, where Onam has evolved into one of the most prominent cultural celebrations of the Malayali expatriate community.

What may have once been a modest family gathering has grown into elaborate community celebrations featuring pookkalam competitions, cultural programmes, traditional music, dance, games, processions and large-scale Sadya.

In the UAE, the celebrations have historically extended well beyond Thiruvonam, with community organisations organising programmes over several months.



CARRYING KERALA ACROSS BORDERS

Onam has its roots in Kerala's agricultural traditions and the legend of King Mahabali. Kerala Tourism describes it as a celebration associated with joy, prosperity and the legendary king's annual return to his people. The ten-day festival, beginning with Atham and culminating in Thiruvonam, is marked by traditions including pookkalam, Onasadya, games and cultural celebrations.

For the diaspora, these traditions acquire another layer of meaning.

The pookkalam is no longer simply a floral decoration outside a Kerala home. It becomes a way of recreating a familiar visual memory in an apartment lobby, office entrance, school courtyard or community hall.

The Sadya is not merely a festive meal. It is a reminder of family gatherings around a banana leaf, of elders serving food, children waiting impatiently for payasam and relatives coming together around a common table.

The traditional mundu and kasavu saree become more than festive clothing. They become a visible expression of identity.

And Malayalam songs, Onam games and cultural performances provide a connection to a place that many expatriates may visit only occasionally.



THE UAE'S ONAM STORY

The UAE offers perhaps one of the clearest examples of how the Malayali diaspora has transformed Onam into a community-wide celebration.

Historical records of celebrations in the UAE show how the festival developed over the decades. What began as relatively small family gatherings in the late 1970s and 1980s gradually became larger public celebrations involving associations and community organisations. Archival photographs from Dubai document Onam events dating back several decades, including celebrations featuring Sadya, cultural performances and traditional percussion.

Today, Onam can be seen across the UAE—in homes, schools, workplaces, restaurants, cultural centres and large event venues.

The festival has also adapted to the realities of expatriate life. Many Malayalis work on Thiruvonam or have limited time to prepare elaborate celebrations. As a result, restaurants and caterers become important partners in keeping the food traditions alive, while community organisations create opportunities for people to gather outside their homes.

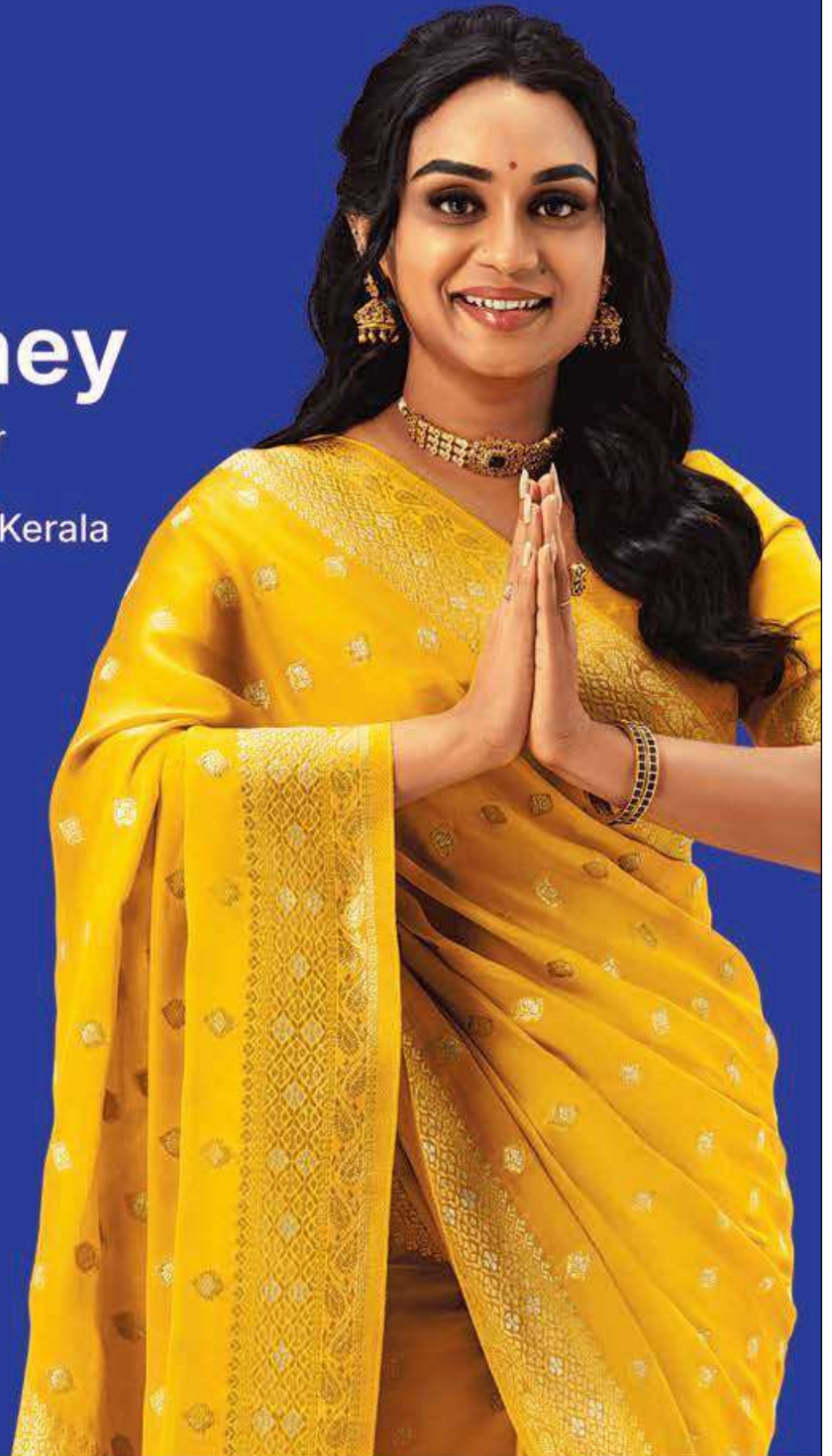
In this sense, the UAE's Onam is both traditional and distinctly expatriate.

It may not recreate Kerala exactly, but it recreates the feeling of Kerala.



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THE **SADYA**
THAT BRINGS EVERYONE TOGETHER

Nothing perhaps captures the emotional connection to Onam better than the Sadya.

In Kerala, the traditional vegetarian feast is one of the defining features of the festival. In the UAE, the demand for Onasadya has become a major part of the festive season, with restaurants preparing large quantities to serve families and community groups.

For many expatriates, the experience begins even before the first dish is served.

There is the anticipation of finding a restaurant offering a traditional Sadya, the sight of rows of banana leaves and the familiar parade of dishes—from rice, sambar and avial to olan, thoran, pachadi and payasam.

The meal becomes a shared experience, particularly for those who may not have the time, space or ingredients to prepare it at home.

The popularity of Sadya among UAE residents also illustrates how food acts as a powerful carrier of cultural memory. A dish can transport someone back to a grandmother's kitchen or a childhood Onam celebration in a Kerala village.

And increasingly, the Sadya is reaching beyond the Malayali community, introducing other nationalities to one of Kerala's most distinctive culinary traditions.



THE **POOKKALAM** FINDS A NEW HOME

The floral carpet is another tradition that has travelled remarkably well.

In Kerala, families traditionally create pookkalams using flowers collected or purchased during the festival season. The designs grow progressively elaborate as Onam approaches.

In the UAE, the same tradition has found new spaces and new participants.

Pookkalam competitions are common features of community and workplace celebrations, with teams spending considerable time designing elaborate patterns. Families too recreate the tradition in their homes, even when the practicalities of apartment living make it very different from a traditional Kerala household.

Recent accounts of Onam celebrations in the UAE have highlighted families creating elaborate pookkalam inside their homes and communities organising large-scale celebrations to recreate memories of Kerala.

For children growing up in the UAE, participating in a pookalam competition can be their first meaningful introduction to one of Kerala's most recognisable traditions.



THE ONAM GENERATION

Perhaps the most important question for the diaspora is not how the first generation celebrates Onam, but how the next generations will understand it.

Many young Malayalis in the UAE have been born and raised outside Kerala. For some, the UAE is not an expatriate destination but home.

They may speak Malayalam at home, follow Malayalam cinema and music, visit Kerala during holidays and celebrate Onam with their families, while simultaneously identifying strongly with life in the UAE.

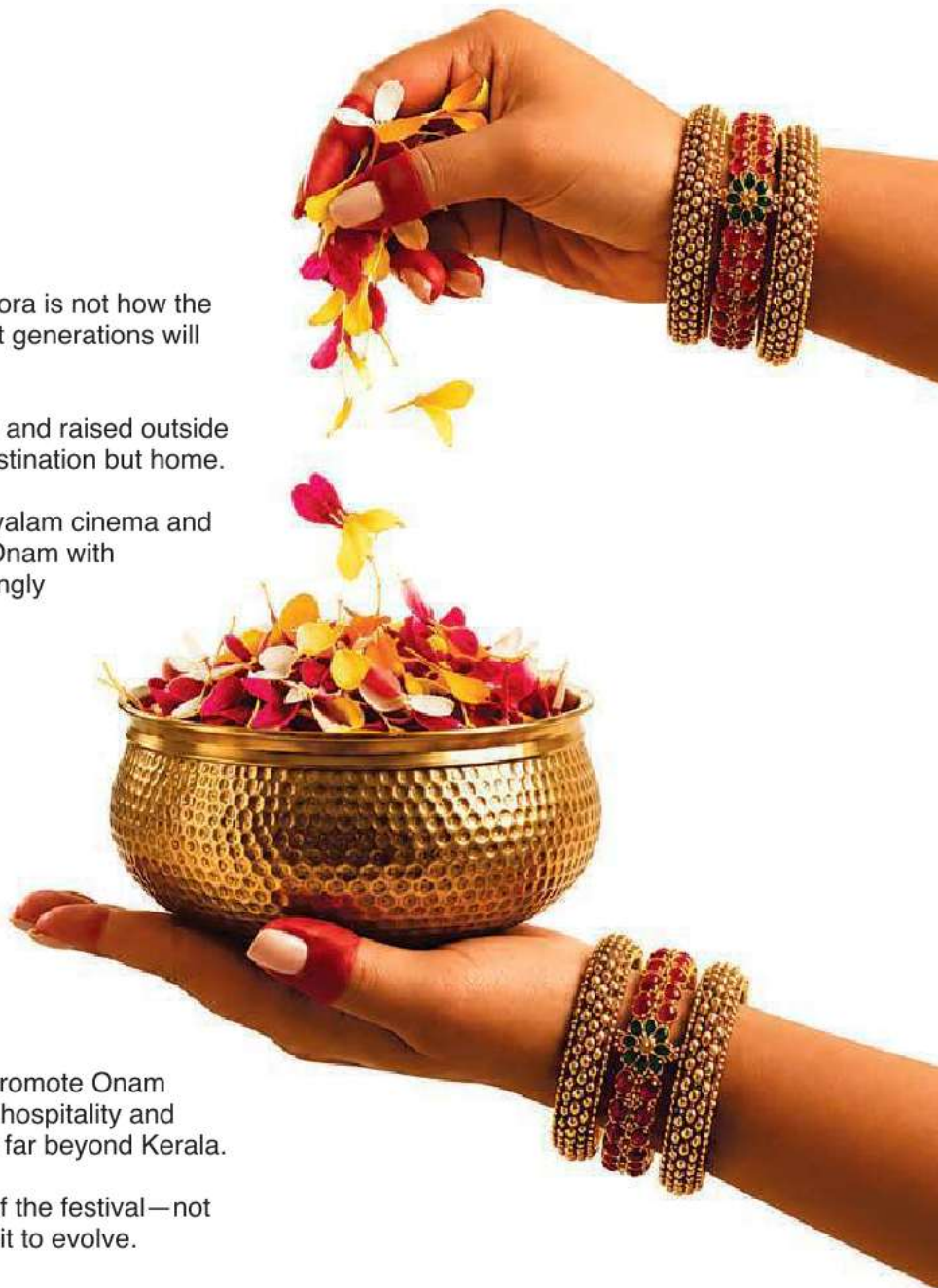
That creates a unique cultural identity - one that belongs to Kerala and the Gulf at the same time.

Onam becomes one of the ways this connection is maintained.

Rather than being something that has to be formally taught, traditions are experienced. Children see their parents dressing traditionally. They participate in games. They help create pookkalams. They eat Sadya. They watch Thiruvathirakali and listen to Malayalam songs.

As Kerala Tourism has noted in its own efforts to promote Onam internationally, the festival carries themes of unity, hospitality and cultural identity that can be shared with audiences far beyond Kerala.

That makes the diaspora an important custodian of the festival—not simply preserving it exactly as it was, but allowing it to evolve.



FROM COMMUNITY HALLS TO CORPORATE OFFICES

One of the most interesting developments in the UAE is the movement of Onam from homes and community organisations into workplaces.

Corporate Onam celebrations have become an opportunity for colleagues from different nationalities to experience Kerala's culture. Offices organise pookkalam competitions, traditional dress days, Sadya lunches and cultural performances.

For Malayalis, it provides a chance to share their heritage with colleagues. For others, it offers an introduction to a festival they may never have experienced before.

This reflects something fundamental about Onam: its ability to function as both a cultural celebration and an occasion for bringing people together.

Kerala Tourism has repeatedly highlighted the festival's themes of unity, hospitality and togetherness, values that become particularly meaningful in a multicultural country such as the UAE.



THE **DIGITAL** MAKEOVER



The diaspora's relationship with Onam has also been transformed by technology.

WhatsApp messages begin circulating weeks before Thiruvonam. Instagram fills with family photographs, traditional outfits, pookkalam designs and Sadya pictures. Malayalam radio stations run special programmes, while digital platforms allow people to participate in celebrations even when they cannot physically attend.

For families separated across countries, video calls have become another part of the celebration.

A family member in Dubai can share a Sadya with relatives in Kerala through a phone screen. Children can speak to grandparents while dressed in their Onam clothes. Photographs of the day's celebrations can travel instantly across continents.

Technology may have changed the way Onam is documented and shared, but it has also strengthened the diaspora's ability to remain connected.

MORE THAN **NOSTALGIA**

There is a danger in viewing diaspora Onam simply through the lens of nostalgia.

For Malayalis who have spent decades in the UAE, Onam is not only about remembering Kerala. It is also about acknowledging the life they have built outside Kerala.

The UAE has become home to generations of Malayalis. Their children attend UAE schools, their careers are built here and their friendships extend across nationalities and cultures.

Consequently, the Onam they celebrate is naturally different from the Onam of their grandparents.

It may involve a restaurant Sadya instead of a home-cooked feast, a pookkalam in an apartment instead of a traditional courtyard, and a community event in Dubai instead of a family gathering in Kerala.

*But the essence remains.
It is about coming together.
A festival that keeps evolving.*





Happy Onam

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A CELEBRATION

WOVEN

IN WHITE AND GOLD

For expatriates, the Onam outfit carries a deeper emotional significance, serving as a cherished link to Kerala, childhood memories and the traditions of home.

Few things capture the visual spirit of Onam quite like Kerala's traditional white-and-gold attire. As Thiruvonam approaches, wardrobes across Kerala—and increasingly across the Malayali diaspora—fill with kasavu sarees, set mundus, neriyathus and traditional mundus. For many, dressing in these understated yet elegant garments is as much a part of the festival as the Sadya and pookkalam.

But the Onam wardrobe is more than festive fashion. Behind the familiar combination of off-white fabric and golden borders lies a long history of handloom craftsmanship, regional weaving traditions, changing social customs and the continuing relationship between Malayalis and their cultural identity. Kerala Tourism describes the Kerala saree and mundu as iconic traditional garments that reflect the state's cultural heritage and simplicity. Traditionally associated with festivals, weddings and other special occasions, their distinctive off-white fabric and golden border have become one of the most recognisable visual expressions of Kerala.



THE SIGNIFICANCE OF ONAKKODI

The Onam wardrobe begins with a tradition that is deeply embedded in the festival itself: Onakkodi, or new clothes bought or gifted during Onam.

Kerala Tourism describes Onakkodi as an essential part of Onam celebrations. Traditionally, families would save money to purchase new clothes for the festival, and gifting new garments to loved ones was an important expression of affection and prosperity.

There was a practical dimension to the tradition as well. Historically, Onam followed the difficult Karkidakam period, and the arrival of the festival was associated with prosperity and abundance.

New clothes therefore represented renewal and the promise of better times.

Today, the tradition has naturally evolved. People buy new clothes throughout the year, and Onakkodi is no longer necessarily the only occasion for adding something new to the wardrobe. Yet the custom remains deeply popular.



For Malayalis, buying an Onakkodi is often an emotional experience. Parents choose clothes for children, spouses exchange gifts and families shop together. For those living away from Kerala, the purchase can also become a way of recreating a childhood ritual. And while contemporary Onam fashion has expanded dramatically, one garment continues to dominate the festive wardrobe: the kasavu.

THE UNDERSTATED ELEGANCE OF KASAVU

The word kasavu specifically refers to the golden zari used in the border of Kerala's traditional handloom fabrics, rather than the entire saree itself. The familiar Kerala saree, mundu and settu mundu are characterised by their restrained off-white or cream fabric, often contrasted with a golden border.

This simplicity is precisely what makes the style distinctive.

Unlike heavily embroidered or brightly coloured festive garments found in many other parts of India, the traditional Kerala aesthetic relies on a restrained palette. The off-white fabric provides a clean canvas, while the gold border introduces just enough richness to make the garment festive.

Kerala Tourism notes that kasavu-bordered clothing has been associated with festive occasions for centuries and that traditional handloom centres continue to produce these garments using established weaving techniques.

The result is an outfit that manages to look both traditional and contemporary.

A woman in a simple kasavu saree can appear just as elegant at a family Onam celebration as she would at a formal cultural event. A man wearing a kasavu mundu with a crisp shirt can move effortlessly between a Sadya, a community gathering and a workplace celebration.

A TRADITION WOVEN BY HAND

The beauty of the Onam wardrobe is inseparable from Kerala's handloom heritage.

Three of the state's best-known weaving centres are Balaramapuram, Chendamangalam and Kuthampully, each with its own history, techniques and distinctive characteristics. Kerala Tourism identifies these centres as important sources of traditional kasavu and other handloom products.

Balaramapuram, near Thiruvananthapuram, is among Kerala's most historically important handloom centres. Kerala Tourism traces its weaving tradition to weavers who migrated from areas of present-day Tamil Nadu and were brought to the region during the Travancore period to produce textiles for the royal household.

Kuthampully in Thrissur has another royal connection. The weaving community there is traditionally associated with the Devanga community, which, according to Kerala Tourism, was brought by the Kochi royal family to produce clothing for the palace. Chendamangalam in Ernakulam is another important centre known for its traditional mundus and neriyathus.



These histories demonstrate that Kerala's celebrated handloom tradition was shaped not only by local craftsmanship but also by movement, patronage and cultural exchange.

Today, the names of these weaving centres have become synonymous with quality handloom products.

FROM MUNDU TO THE KERALA SAREE



The traditional women's attire of Kerala has also evolved considerably.

The mundu and neriyathu, or settu mundu, consists essentially of two pieces of fabric. One is worn around the lower body while the other is used as the upper garment. Kerala Tourism identifies this as a traditional form of women's attire, while the modern Kerala saree is a later evolution of this clothing tradition.

Over time, the single-piece saree became increasingly popular, while stitched blouses became an integral part of women's festive clothing.

Yet the older settu mundu has never disappeared. In fact, it has experienced renewed popularity, particularly during festivals and cultural events.

For many Malayalis, the choice between a Kerala saree and a settu mundu is not simply a matter of fashion. It can reflect age, personal preference, family tradition and the kind of celebration being attended.



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WHY WHITE AND GOLD?

One of the most intriguing aspects of Kerala's traditional festive clothing is its limited colour palette.

Why white or off-white? Why gold?

There is no single universally accepted explanation. The restrained aesthetic is often associated with Kerala's natural environment and cultural preferences. Some interpretations connect the light fabric to the state's lush surroundings, while others point to practical and historical factors associated with textile production.

What is certain is that the combination has become inseparable from Kerala's visual identity.

Kerala Tourism describes the traditional attire as being characterised by simplicity, natural colours and craftsmanship. The golden border adds the element of celebration. It transforms a simple cotton garment into festive attire without overwhelming its minimalist character.

That balance between simplicity and richness is perhaps the defining quality of kasavu.

WHEN TRADITION MEETS FASHION

The Onam wardrobe is not exclusively about women's fashion.

The modern Onam wardrobe has moved far beyond the classic saree and mundu.

Designers and textile brands now experiment with coloured borders, contemporary blouses, different draping styles, embroidery, motifs and modern silhouettes. Kasavu-inspired fabrics have appeared in dresses, skirts, jackets, kurtas and fusion outfits.

The traditional palette itself has expanded. Kerala Tourism notes that while golden kasavu remains the most popular, coloured borders and combinations involving gold with other shades are also available.

This evolution is particularly visible among younger Malayalis.

A young woman may pair a traditional kasavu saree with a contemporary blouse. Another may choose a kasavu skirt or a modern Kerala-inspired outfit. Men may combine the traditional mundu with everything from a simple shirt to a contemporary kurta. The result is not necessarily a rejection of tradition.

Instead, it represents a new generation finding its own way to wear it.





THE JEWELLERY COMPLETES THE LOOK

The Onam wardrobe is rarely complete without jewellery.

Gold ornaments have long had a strong association with Kerala's festive and ceremonial dressing. During Onam, women often pair kasavu sarees with traditional gold necklaces, earrings, bangles and chains.

The simplicity of the saree creates space for jewellery to stand out.

This is another reason the white-and-gold aesthetic works so effectively: the fabric remains understated while accessories provide additional richness.

Today, younger women are also experimenting with lighter jewellery, temple-inspired pieces, contemporary gold designs and even statement accessories that reinterpret the traditional look.

The basic visual language, however, remains recognisable.



MEN AND THE KASAVU TRADITION

The Onam wardrobe is not exclusively about women's fashion.

For men, the kasavu mundu remains one of the most recognisable symbols of Kerala's festive attire. Usually worn with a white or coloured shirt, it offers the same combination of simplicity and elegance associated with the Kerala saree.

The mundu is essentially a rectangular piece of cloth wrapped around the waist and legs. Kerala Tourism notes that traditional mundu continues to be worn for festivals, cultural occasions and other special events.

For Onam celebrations, the kasavu border gives the otherwise simple garment its festive character.

From children attending their first Onam celebration to grandparents who have worn the same style throughout their lives, the mundu connects generations.

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THE DIASPORA'S ONAM WARDROBE

The story becomes even more interesting outside Kerala.

In Dubai, Doha, Abu Dhabi and other Gulf cities with large Malayali communities, Onam has created a seasonal demand for Kerala-style clothing. Shops and online platforms stock kasavu sarees, mundus and contemporary Onam collections, while community organisations encourage participants to dress traditionally for cultural programmes.

For expatriates, the Onam outfit can carry an additional emotional significance.

A kasavu saree worn in Dubai may remind someone of a childhood Onam in Kerala. A father buying a mundu for his son may be recreating a tradition passed down through generations. A young Malayali born in the UAE may wear a traditional Kerala outfit for the first time at a community celebration, discovering a part of his or her cultural heritage in the process.

The garment becomes a bridge between places. It says something about where a person comes from, even when they have spent most of their life somewhere else.

FROM HANDLOOM TO DIGITAL SHOPPING

Technology has also transformed the way people shop for Onakkodi.

Traditional handloom stores now exist alongside online retailers and social-media businesses. Customers can browse collections, compare designs and place orders from almost anywhere in the world.

For the diaspora, this has made accessing Kerala's traditional clothing significantly easier.

At the same time, the growing online market presents a challenge: distinguishing authentic handloom from mass-produced alternatives.

The value of a handwoven saree or mundu lies not only in its appearance but also in the craftsmanship behind it. Kerala Tourism notes that handloom products differ according to weaving centre, thread quality, weaving style and the materials used for the golden border.

For consumers, choosing authentic handloom therefore becomes more than a fashion decision. It can also be a way of supporting the artisans and weaving communities who keep the tradition alive.



A WARDROBE THAT TELLS A STORY

Perhaps the most beautiful thing about the Onam wardrobe is that it combines simplicity with memory.

The kasavu saree may appear straightforward: a light-coloured fabric, a golden border and a matching blouse. The mundu may seem equally uncomplicated.

But behind each garment are generations of weaving knowledge, regional traditions and changing social histories.

There are the artisans sitting at looms in Balaramapuram, Chendamangalam and Kuthampully. There are families passing down garments from one generation to another. There are parents buying their children's first Onakkodi. There are young people reinventing traditional styles for a new generation.

And there are Malayalis across the world who put on their traditional clothes each year and, for a moment, feel a little closer to home.

That is why the Onam wardrobe remains relevant even in an age of fast-changing fashion.

Trends may come and go, but the white-and-gold silhouette continues to return every Onam.

It is not simply clothing.

It is Kerala woven into fabric - and worn with pride.



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22 YEARS OF

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The voice that grew with Dubai's Malayali community

For more than two decades, HIT 96.7FM has been more than a radio station for Dubai's Malayali community. It has been a familiar voice accompanying listeners on their morning drives, keeping them company at work, sharing their celebrations and, at times, offering comfort during difficult days.

As the leading Malayalam-language radio station in Dubai marks 22 years on air, its journey is closely intertwined with the evolution of the Malayali community in the UAE. Generations have grown up, families have been formed and the meaning of 'home' has evolved, while the station has remained a constant presence.

For Mithun Ramesh, Head of Programming at HIT 96.7FM, the 22nd anniversary is therefore much more than a milestone for a media organisation.

"Twenty-two years is a very special milestone for all of us," he says. "More than anything, it means that HIT 96.7FM has grown along with the Malayali community in the UAE."

Over those years, the station has witnessed generations of listeners arrive in the UAE, establish careers, build families and make the country their home. "To know that we have been part of their everyday lives for so many years is something we are extremely proud of," Ramesh says.

That sense of belonging, he believes, is at the heart of the station's enduring relationship with its audience.

"We have always tried to be one among them," he explains. "We don't speak to our listeners from a distance. We talk about their lives, their celebrations, their struggles, their humour and everything happening around them."

The relationship, he says, has been built on familiarity and trust over 22 years – qualities that remain among HIT 96.7FM's greatest strengths.



GROWING WITH A CHANGING AUDIENCE

The world in which HIT 96.7FM began broadcasting 22 years ago bears little resemblance to today's media landscape. Smartphones, social media, podcasts and streaming platforms have transformed how people consume music and information.

Radio, however, has adapted rather than disappeared.

"We have always believed that radio has to evolve with its audience," Ramesh says.

Today, HIT 96.7FM is no longer confined to the traditional radio receiver or the car dashboard. The station has expanded its presence across social media, digital content, videos and events, creating multiple ways to interact with its audience.

"The platform may change, but our core remains the same – good music, good conversations and a strong connection with our listeners," he says.

That evolution has also been driven by a fundamental change in the audience itself.

When the station began, radio was among the primary ways for Malayalis in the UAE to stay connected with Malayalam music, cinema and news from Kerala. Today, almost everything is available instantly through a smartphone.

"The younger generation is also very different in the way they consume content," Ramesh observes. "So now our challenge is not simply giving them information or music – it is giving them a reason to choose us and spend time with us."

This changing audience represents one of the most interesting aspects of the Malayali experience in the UAE. While the community remains deeply connected to Kerala, the UAE has also become home for many.

"Some have spent most of their lives here, and we now have second and even third generations growing up in the UAE," Ramesh says. "They carry both worlds with them, and understanding that balance is very important when you create content for them."

For a Malayalam-language broadcaster, that means creating programming that reflects both sides of that identity – the memories, traditions and culture of Kerala, as well as the realities of everyday life in the UAE.



LISTENING TO THE LISTENER



Behind the programming at HIT 96.7FM is a simple but important principle: understand what people are talking about.

As Head of Programming, Ramesh says the team constantly monitors the interests and conversations of its audience. Those conversations could revolve around something happening in the UAE, a new Malayalam film or song, a social issue or something as ordinary as a shared everyday experience.

"We constantly listen to our audience and study how their interests are changing," he says.

Ultimately, however, the measure of successful content is its ability to create an emotional response.

"If the listener can relate to it, laugh with it, think about it or feel something from it, then it works," he says.

That emotional connection is perhaps one of radio's most enduring qualities.

TASTE THAT FEELS LIKE HOME



At Malabar Tiffin House, we serve the comfort of Kerala on every plate. Pathiri with thengapal and beef. Fluffy idly with rich mutton stew. Soft porotta with spicy beef roast. And a good hot cup of tea on the side.



A presenter can become a familiar voice during a daily commute, a difficult day at work or a moment of celebration. For expatriates living away from their families, that familiarity can be particularly meaningful.

"It is probably the most important part of radio," Ramesh says of the connection between presenters and listeners. "You may never have met that listener personally, but they feel like they know you. That relationship is something very special to radio."

Over 22 years, that relationship has produced countless stories. Listeners have shared marriages, births, personal achievements and difficult periods with the station. Some have even spoken about how something they heard on the radio helped them get through a particular day.

There are too many stories to single out, Ramesh says. But one simple statement from a listener can still have a powerful effect: "I've been listening to you for years."

"That's when you realise that you have actually been part of someone's life journey," he says.

KEEPING MALAYALAM ALIVE



HIT 96.7FM has evolved with changing audiences while preserving its core connection through music, conversations and community.



For a community spread far from Kerala, Malayalam media has a role that extends beyond entertainment. It can help preserve language, culture and a sense of belonging, particularly among younger generations growing up outside India.

Ramesh believes this role is becoming increasingly important.

"It doesn't have to be taught or forced," he says. "Through music, humour, cinema, festivals and everyday conversations, radio can make Malayalam a living part of their everyday life."

This is where radio's traditional strengths intersect with the changing digital landscape.

Social media has made the relationship between presenters and audiences more immediate and personal. Whereas listeners once knew presenters primarily through their voices, they can now see their lives, comment on their content, send messages and respond instantly.

"That has made the relationship much more personal and two-way," Ramesh says. It also gives the station immediate feedback about what listeners like, dislike and want to discuss.

Yet despite the rise of digital platforms, he believes there remains something uniquely powerful about live radio.

"Radio gives you companionship in real time," he says.

A streaming service can deliver a favourite song, but live radio can respond to what is happening around the listener at that precise moment. It brings together thousands of people experiencing the same city, events and conversations.

"Live radio has spontaneity, personality and a sense of community," Ramesh says. "You never completely know what is going to happen next, and I think that is still the magic of radio."



AN **ONAM** CONNECTION

For Malayalis in the UAE, Onam is no longer simply a single day of festivities. It has evolved into an extended season of celebrations across workplaces, schools, community organisations and families.

For HIT 96.7FM, it is consequently one of the most exciting periods of the year.

The station reflects the festive mood through music, conversations, special programmes, events and interactions with listeners. The aim is to bring the feeling of Onam to people wherever they happen to be – whether they are celebrating with family, working or driving alone.

That sense of community becomes particularly visible during Onam.



The station continues to connect younger generations with Kerala's language, culture and festive spirit in the UAE.



THE **NEXT** CHAPTER

The next 22 years will undoubtedly look very different from the first 22.

Technology will continue to evolve, audiences will consume content across an expanding range of platforms and radio itself will become increasingly digital, visual and interactive.

But Ramesh believes the fundamental need that brought listeners to HIT 96.7FM in the first place will remain.

"Malayalam radio will become more digital, visual and interactive, but I believe the need for a trusted voice and a sense of community will always remain," he says.

For HIT 96.7FM, the challenge is therefore not simply to preserve what worked in the past, but to evolve without losing the qualities that created its connection with listeners.

The ambition, Ramesh says, is straightforward: "Wherever our listeners go next, HIT 96.7FM should be there with them."

After 22 years, the station's story is ultimately not just about radio. It is about a community that has changed, grown and established roots in a new home – and a familiar voice that has travelled alongside it.

That ability to make people feel connected, even when they are physically apart, is perhaps what best defines the role HIT 96.7FM has played in the Malayali community over the past 22 years.

For Ramesh himself, being part of that community has become deeply personal.

"After so many years, you don't feel like you are simply presenting a show to an audience," he says. "You feel like you are part of a much bigger family."

The station and its listeners have celebrated together, laughed together and stood together during difficult times. The affection and acceptance received from the Malayali community, he says, is something for which he remains grateful.



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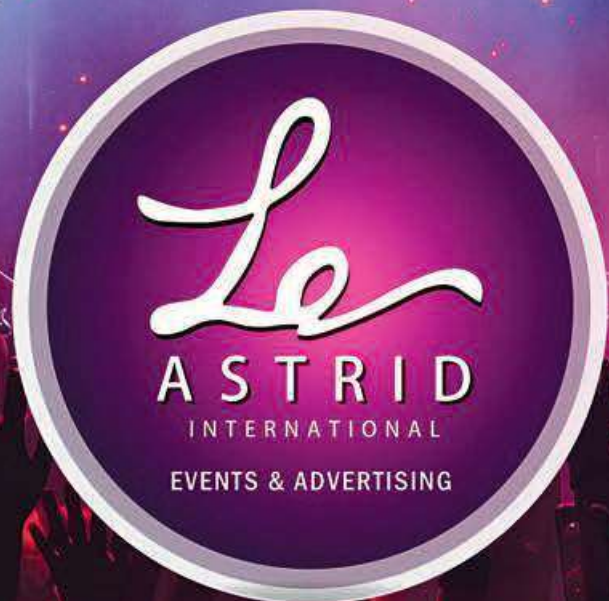


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ONAM 2.0

How technology is changing the way we celebrate

Onam has always travelled with the community, adapting to new homes, new generations and new circumstances. Now it is adapting to the digital world.

Onam has always been a festival rooted in togetherness. Families gather around the Sadya, children create pookkalams, people dress in traditional attire and communities come together for music, dance and games. But the way Malayalis create and share those moments is changing rapidly.

For a global Malayali community spread across continents, technology has become an unexpected bridge between tradition and modern life. From WhatsApp groups and Instagram reels to online Sadya orders, digital pookkalam competitions, virtual family gatherings and livestreamed cultural programmes, technology is giving some of Onam's oldest traditions a distinctly contemporary expression.

The result is an Onam that can be celebrated almost anywhere—and shared instantly with almost anyone.

Weeks before Thiruvonam, social media feeds begin filling with Onam wishes, traditional attire, pookkalam designs, Sadya photographs, family portraits and festive videos. WhatsApp groups become virtual noticeboards for community events, Sadya bookings and family plans. Instagram and other platforms have also transformed the way Onam is presented, with the festival's colourful flowers, traditional clothing, elaborate food and cultural performances lending themselves naturally to digital storytelling.

A pookkalam that once existed for a few days outside a family home can now be photographed, filmed and shared with relatives and friends around the world within seconds. The celebration no longer ends when the flowers fade; the memory lives online. The pookkalam perhaps best illustrates how tradition and technology are coming together. Families photograph their designs and share them online, while schools, offices and community organisations organise competitions and publish entries digitally. Younger participants are also bringing their own visual language to a tradition inherited from their parents and grandparents. Traditional circular patterns now coexist with contemporary designs, logos and elaborate themes.

What was once primarily created for neighbours and family members can now be viewed by an international audience.

Food, too, has entered the digital age.



For expatriate Malayalis, preparing a traditional Sadya can be challenging. Family members may be working on the festival day, kitchens may not be large enough for elaborate preparations, and sourcing all the ingredients can be difficult. Online ordering has changed that equation.

Restaurants and catering companies across the UAE and other Gulf countries increasingly promote Onam Sadya menus through websites, social media and food-delivery platforms. Customers can browse menus, select quantities, book meals and arrange delivery without leaving home.

A family in Dubai does not necessarily need to spend an entire day preparing dozens of dishes to enjoy a festive Sadya. A few taps on a smartphone can bring the meal to their doorstep.



At the same time, social media has turned the Sadya into a form of cultural storytelling. Photographs of banana leaves filled with colourful dishes are shared widely, often accompanied by descriptions of individual dishes and family traditions. For younger generations and non-Malayalis, these posts can become an introduction to Kerala's culinary heritage.

Increasingly, the Sadya is not just eaten - it is documented, shared and discovered digitally.

Perhaps technology's most meaningful contribution to Onam, however, is its ability to reduce the distance between families.

For generations of Malayalis living outside Kerala, Onam has meant negotiating separation from parents, grandparents, siblings and extended family members. Video calls have transformed that experience.

A family in Dubai can connect with relatives in Kerala while preparing for the Sadya. Grandparents can watch grandchildren dressed in traditional Onam clothes. Relatives can exchange greetings and share the day's celebrations even when they cannot travel.

For migrant families, these moments can be particularly significant. The technology may be modern, but the emotion is familiar. The desire to see loved ones during Onam remains the same; only the means of doing so has changed.

Radio and other traditional media have also embraced the digital transformation. Malayalam radio stations can now engage audiences across multiple platforms, with listeners tuning into live programmes while simultaneously watching videos, commenting on social media, sending messages or requesting songs.

The relationship between presenter and listener has consequently become more interactive. Audiences are no longer simply receiving content; they can participate in conversations, share photographs and voice messages, and become part of the programme itself.

Community celebrations have similarly moved online. Cultural organisations, schools and associations use social media to promote Onam programmes, share schedules, showcase performers and broadcast events. A traditional dance performance taking place in Dubai can potentially be watched by family members in Kerala or elsewhere in the world.

The Onam reel has become another defining feature of the digital celebration. Families create short videos showing the preparation of the Sadya, a pookkalam being made, children dressing up, cultural performances or groups of friends celebrating together. For younger Malayalis, this is increasingly the natural language of celebration. Instead of simply telling someone that they celebrated Onam, they can show them.

Technology is also helping preserve cultural memories. Old photographs, family recipes, songs, stories and videos can be digitised and passed on to younger generations. A grandmother's recipe for an Onam dish can be recorded. An elderly family member can explain how Onam was celebrated during their childhood. Traditional songs can be archived digitally, while photographs of earlier generations can be shared with children who may never have met those relatives.

For the global Malayali community, this is creating a kind of digital cultural archive. The impact may be most significant among second- and third-generation Malayalis living outside Kerala. For children growing up in the UAE, the UK, the US, Australia and elsewhere, their connection to Kerala may be based on family, food, language, cinema and annual visits rather than everyday life.

Digital platforms can make that connection more accessible.

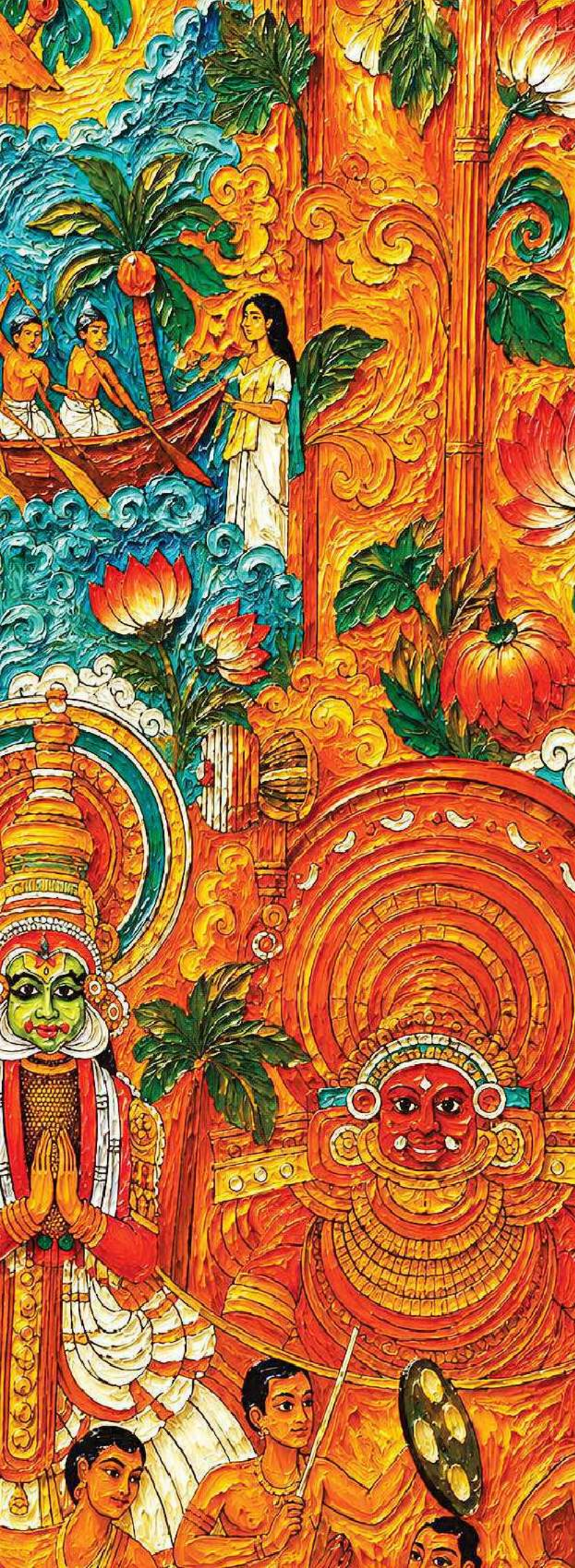
A child in Dubai can watch a traditional Kerala dance performance, learn about Sadya dishes, see how Onam is celebrated in different parts of Kerala and discover the story of Mahabali—all through a smartphone or tablet.

Social media can also make traditional culture feel contemporary rather than distant. When young people see others of their age participating in pookkalam competitions, wearing traditional clothes or creating Onam videos, cultural traditions become something they participate in rather than simply something their parents explain.

Technology has helped Onam become increasingly global as well. Malayali associations around the world use digital platforms to organise events, connect members and promote celebrations. Families in different countries can exchange greetings and share their celebrations, while a Malayali living in Dubai can see how Onam is being celebrated in Kerala almost in real time.

The diaspora is therefore not simply receiving traditions from Kerala. It is also creating its own interpretations of Onam and sharing them with the wider community.





Yet, despite all these changes, there are things technology cannot fully reproduce.

A video call cannot completely replace sitting beside a parent during Sadya. A photograph cannot capture the fragrance of fresh flowers. A livestream cannot replicate the energy of being surrounded by hundreds of people during a cultural performance. And no Instagram reel can quite reproduce the sound of laughter around a family dining table.

Technology can connect people, document celebrations and make traditions accessible, but the emotional core of Onam remains physical and human.

The festival is ultimately about togetherness.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of Onam 2.0 is that technology is not necessarily replacing tradition. It is giving tradition new ways to survive.

The pookkalam remains a pookkalam, even when its photograph is shared online. The Sadya remains a Sadya, even when it is ordered through an app. A family greeting remains a family greeting, even when it happens through a video call.

The tools have changed. The emotions have not. For Malayalis living far from Kerala, this flexibility is particularly important. Onam has always travelled with the community, adapting to new homes, new generations and new circumstances. Now it is adapting to the digital world.

From a pookkalam photographed for Instagram to a Sadya ordered through a smartphone, from a family video call connecting Dubai with Kerala to a cultural programme livestreamed across continents, technology is helping an ancient celebration find its place in a modern, global world.

YUSUF BHAI

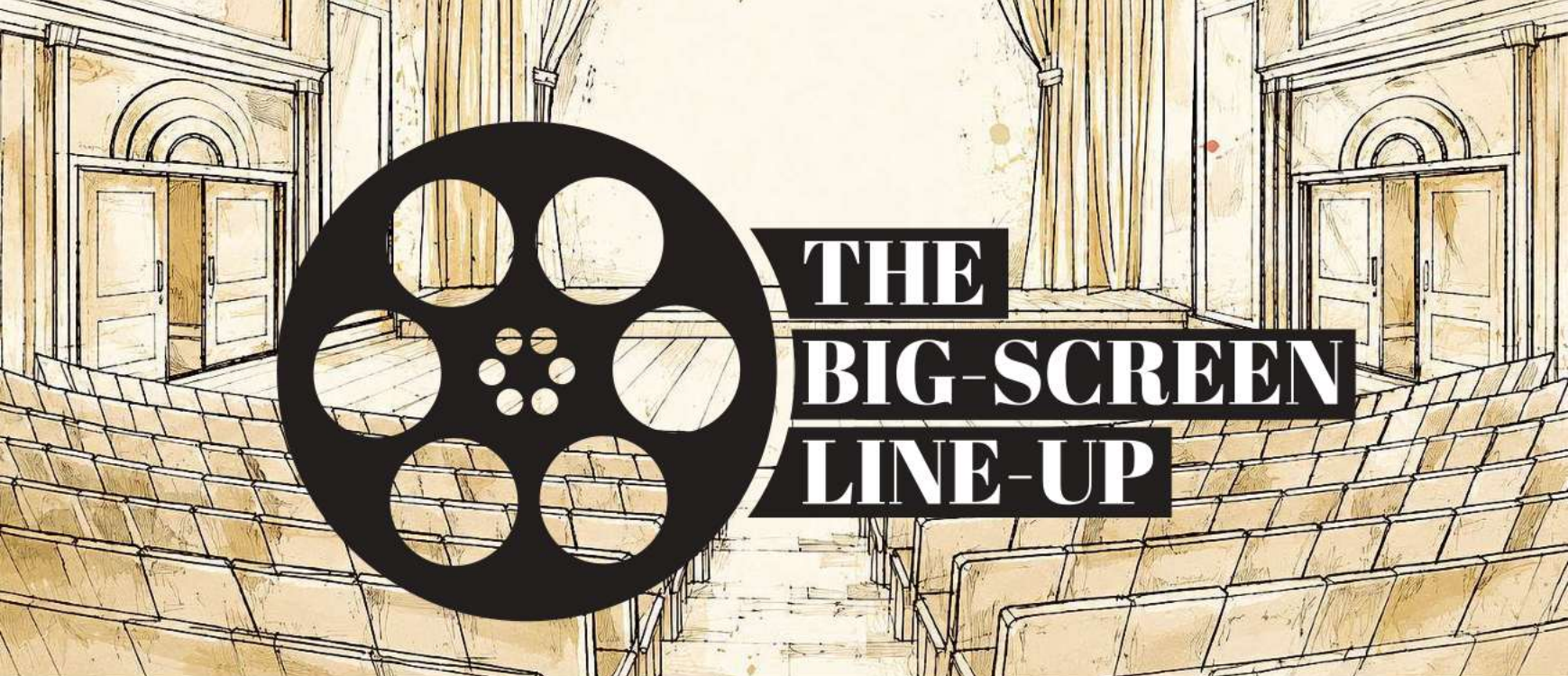
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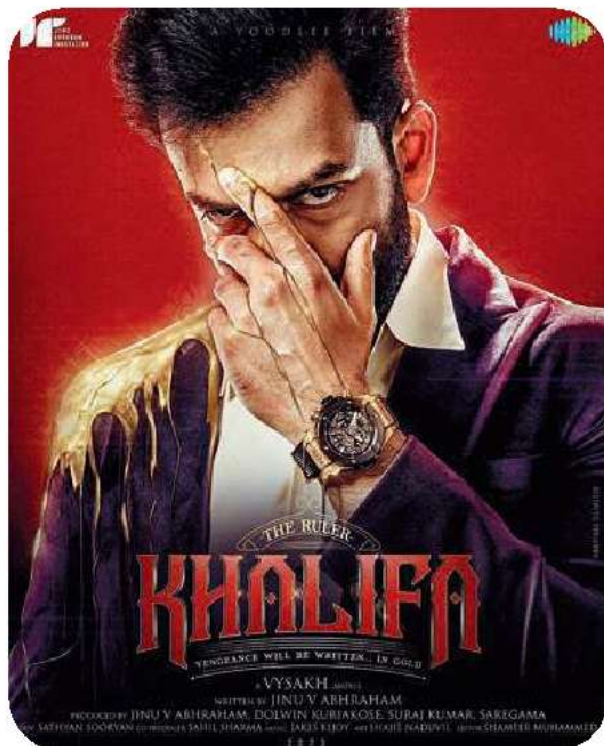


A star-studded festive season brings action, thrillers, family drama and big-screen spectacle to cinemas

Onam 2026 is shaping up to be an exciting season for South Indian cinema, with a diverse line-up of highly anticipated films competing for audience attention. From Prithviraj Sukumaran's action-packed *Khalifa* and Nivin Pauly's family entertainer *Bethlehem Kudumba Unit* to Vismaya Mohanlal's debut *Thudakkam* and Geetu Mohandas' much-awaited *Toxic*, the festive period offers something for audiences across age groups and language preferences.

The season had initially promised an even bigger Malayalam box-office clash, with Dulquer Salmaan's *I'm Game* expected to arrive on August 20 alongside *Khalifa*. However, the makers have postponed the film's worldwide release to September 3, taking it out of the Onam race and allowing the other releases more room at the box office.

With major stars, ambitious productions and contrasting genres, the Onam period once again underlines the importance of the festival season for the South Indian film industry.



KHALIFA

Prithviraj takes centre stage

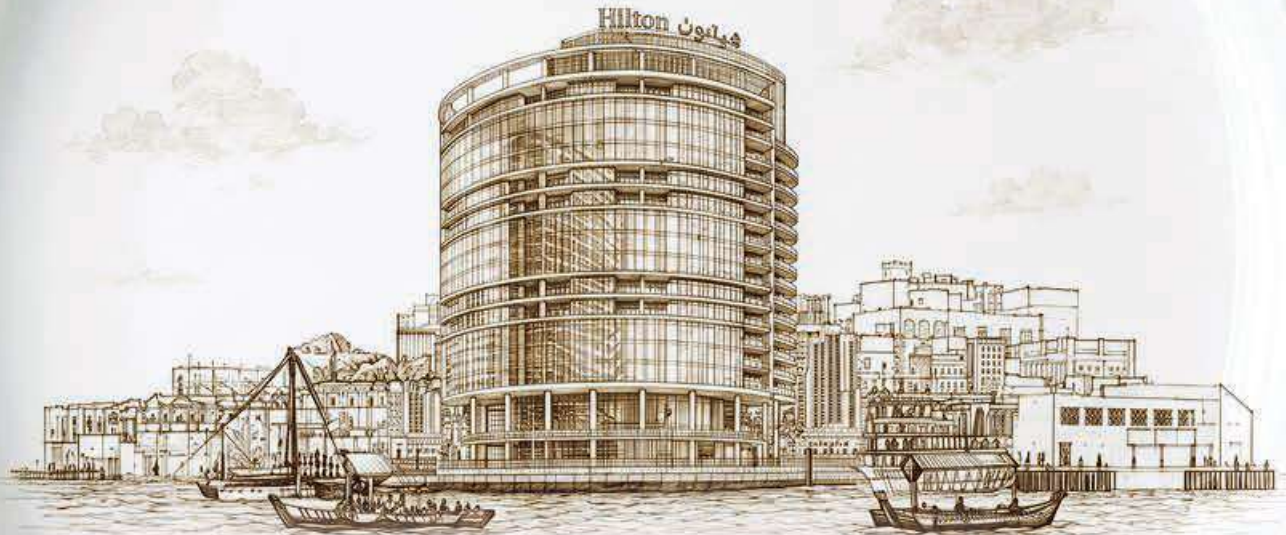
The Onam theatrical race gets off to a high-voltage start with Vysakh's *Khalifa*, starring Prithviraj Sukumaran. The action-crime thriller arrived in cinemas on August 20, bringing together a prominent cast that also includes Mohanlal, Tovino Thomas, Neil Nitin Mukesh and Krithi Shetty.

Written by Jinu V Abraham, the film is set against the backdrop of gold smuggling and revolves around revenge and retaliation. Prithviraj plays Mambarakal Aamir Ali, while Mohanlal appears as Aamir's grandfather, adding another major attraction for Malayalam cinema audiences.

The film marks another collaboration between Vysakh and Prithviraj and arrives with the kind of action-driven scale traditionally associated with a major festive release.

For fans, however, the biggest talking point is the combination of Prithviraj and Mohanlal, giving *Khalifa* an additional layer of star power.

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BETHLEHEM KUDUMBA UNIT

A family affair

Following Khalifa, Nivin Pauly's Bethlehem Kudumba Unit brings a completely different flavour to the Onam season. Directed by Girish A D, the film released on August 21 and stars Nivin Pauly and Mamitha Baiju. The director returns with a family-oriented story following the success of his earlier work Premalu.

The film revolves around Justin, played by Nivin, and Ashley, played by Mamitha Baiju. The trailer has highlighted an unusual romantic relationship shaped by an age difference, while retaining the director's familiar interest in relatable characters and everyday situations.

For an Onam audience, Bethlehem Kudumba Unit provides a lighter alternative to the action-heavy Khalifa. Its family-oriented appeal could make it particularly attractive to audiences looking for a relaxed festive outing.

The contrast between the two films also makes the Onam box office more interesting: audiences can choose between large-scale action and a more intimate, character-driven family entertainer.



THUDDAKKAM

Vismaya Mohanlal's new beginning



One of the most talked-about Malayalam releases of the festive period is Thudakkam, which marks the acting debut of Vismaya Mohanlal, daughter of superstar Mohanlal.

Directed by Jude Anthany Joseph, the Malayalam thriller was released on August 7, making it an important early entrant into the Onam movie season.

The film follows Meenu, played by Vismaya, whose life changes dramatically when unexpected danger enters her world. The story combines suspense, action and emotional drama, with the protagonist forced to rely on courage and determination to survive.

Vismaya's debut naturally gives Thudakkam a unique place in the season. Although she comes from one of Malayalam cinema's most prominent families, the film represents her own entry into acting.

The response has been encouraging, with Vismaya receiving attention for her performance. The film has also reportedly recorded a strong worldwide opening for a female-led Malayalam film.

With Mohanlal also appearing in the film, Thudakkam carries both the curiosity surrounding a new performer and the familiarity of one of Malayalam cinema's biggest stars.

TOXIC

Geetu mohandas and yash go big

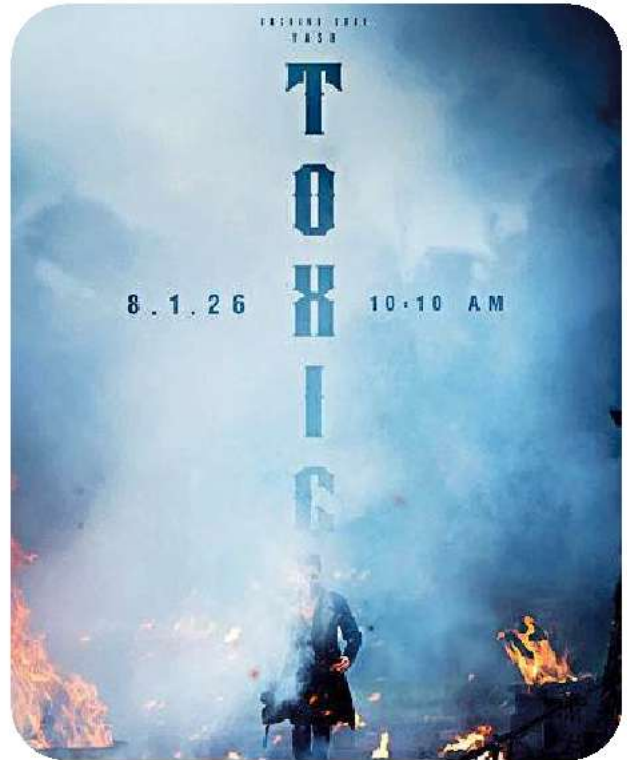
Adding a major non-Malayalam title to the Onam entertainment mix is Toxic: A Fairytale for Grown-Ups, starring Yash and directed by Malayalam filmmaker Geetu Mohandas.

The film is scheduled for a worldwide theatrical release on August 26, following multiple changes to its release schedule.

Although Toxic is a Kannada-language production rather than a Malayalam film, its connection to Kerala audiences is significant because of Geetu Mohandas, one of Malayalam cinema's acclaimed filmmakers.

Yash headlines the film, which also features Kiara Advani, Nayanthara, Huma Qureshi, Tara Sutaria and Rukmini Vasanth. The film has been positioned as an ambitious action drama with a strong international theatrical footprint.

Its August 26 release puts it squarely into the extended Onam holiday period, potentially drawing audiences looking for a large-scale action spectacle beyond Malayalam cinema.



I'M GAME

The big clash that moved



Few films were more closely associated with the original Onam box-office battle than Dulquer Salmaan's I'm Game.

The film, directed by Nahas Hidayath, was initially scheduled to release worldwide on August 20, setting up a much-anticipated clash with Khalifa and Bethlehem Kudumba Unit. However, the makers announced on August 13 that the release would be postponed to September 3 to facilitate a wider theatrical rollout.

The postponement means Dulquer will not be part of the actual Onam theatrical race, but the film remains one of the season's biggest talking points.

I'm Game marks Dulquer's return to Malayalam cinema in a leading role after King of Kotha. He plays Dan John, a man deeply involved in gambling who believes in an algorithm behind the game rather than luck. The film also features Antony Varghese, Mysskin, Kathir and Kayadu Lohar.

The new September date will also see the film release simultaneously in Malayalam, Tamil, Telugu, Hindi and Kannada, giving it a broader theatrical footprint.

So while I'm Game has stepped away from the Onam clash, it may simply be preparing for a bigger game of its own.

Designing for Feeling.

Inside studio hum's approach to emotionally resonant spaces.



For Studio Hum, architecture begins with a question beyond how a space looks: how should it feel?

The Kerala-based architectural design practice approaches architecture as an emotional experience as much as a physical one. Light, material, colour, texture and landscape are not simply design elements, but tools that shape mood, memory and the way a person feels. A room can feel intimate, contemplative, energetic or familiar, and these sensations are considered as deliberately as structure and function.

This becomes particularly meaningful in homes created for those who have spent much of their lives away from Kerala. For them, returning home can be less about recreating a familiar architectural image and more about rediscovering a feeling of belonging. Studio Hum explores this through spaces that reconnect contemporary living with memory, landscape and the rhythms of everyday life.

At the heart of this approach is a pursuit of timelessness: spaces that are not defined by a particular trend, but remain relevant because they respond to the people who inhabit them.



ultimately, architecture is not
only something we see. It is
something we feel.

@Studiohum_



Proposed design for an office lounge, Dubai

The same philosophy informs the studio's approach to contemporary interiors. Quiet luxury, for instance, is understood less as a visual language and more as an atmosphere; one of restraint, tactility, comfort and permanence. Familiar references can be reinterpreted rather than replicated, allowing a space to feel rooted without becoming trendy.

For Studio Hum, the most successful spaces are not necessarily those that demand attention, but those that quietly change how we feel within them.



Recently finished residence.



GULF MALAYALAM MUSIC AWARDS

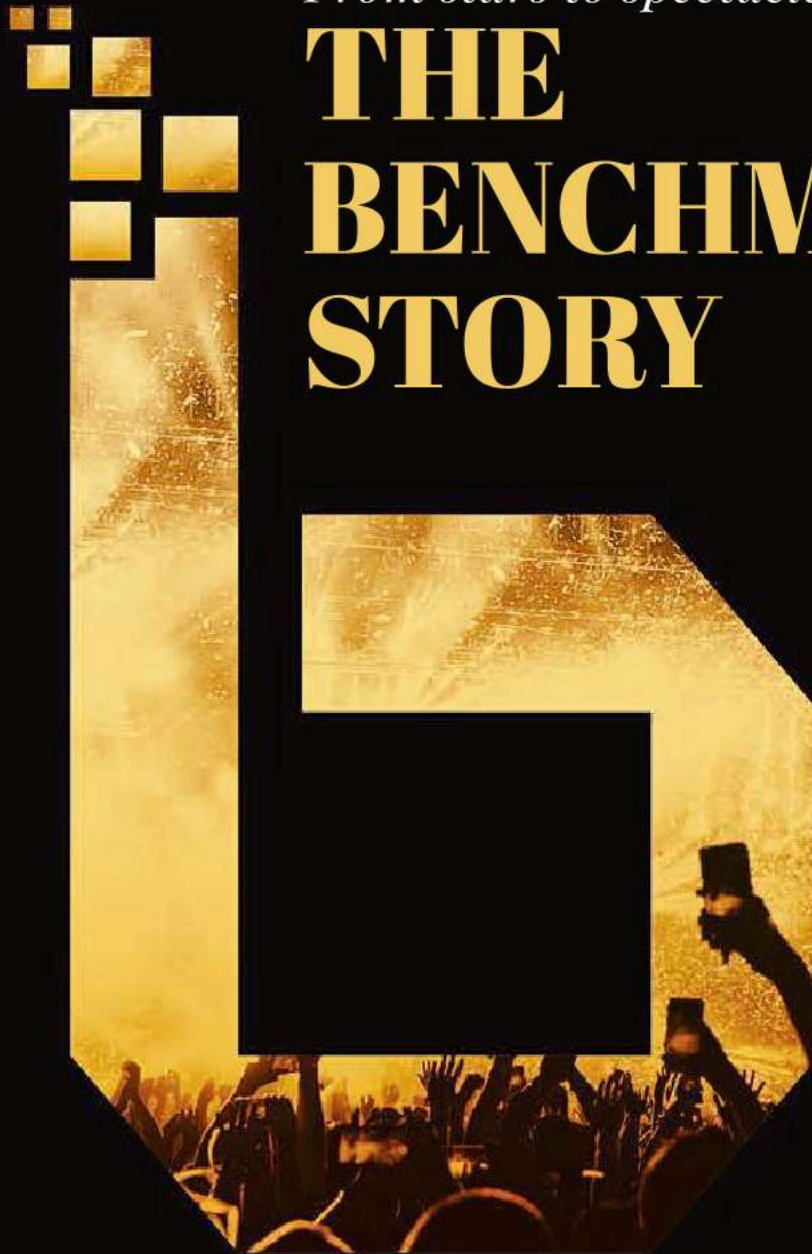
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THE BENCHMARK STORY



Two decades of events, entertainment and media

For two decades, Benchmark has been creating memorable events and entertainment experiences for audiences across the UAE, Qatar and beyond. What began with a simple idea—to create events that people would remember long after the lights went out—has evolved into a full-service company working across events, entertainment, media, television, sports, exhibitions and cultural initiatives.

The Benchmark journey has closely followed the growth and changing aspirations of the Indian community in the Gulf. Over the years, the company has moved from major celebrity appearances and entertainment shows to family festivals, award ceremonies, sporting events, television productions, business exhibitions and special publications. Throughout this evolution, its core philosophy has remained centred on style, creativity and quality.

A VISION LAUNCHED BY A LEGEND

The Benchmark brand was launched in 2006 by Malayalam superstar Mohanlal, under the leadership of founder Habeeb Rahman. From its early days, the company set out to offer more than conventional event management.

Its role extended across the entire event experience—from developing the initial concept and designing the venue to managing artists, production, sound, lighting, branding, logistics and the many behind-the-scenes details that audiences rarely see. That approach has helped Benchmark establish a strong presence in the Gulf's competitive events and entertainment industry.

The company's philosophy has remained consistent: Style. Creativity. Quality. These principles have guided its approach to projects ranging from large-scale celebrity events and awards ceremonies to cultural festivals, corporate exhibitions and media initiatives.



Habeeb Rahman



GROWING WITH A CHANGING AUDIENCE

The audience Benchmark serves today is considerably different from the one it encountered in 2006.

The Gulf's Indian community has become younger, more diverse and increasingly digitally connected. Bollywood and Malayalam cinema remain hugely popular, but audiences are also interested in sports, influencers, digital creators, lifestyle and interactive experiences.

Social media has fundamentally changed how people discover and experience entertainment. A celebrity appearance is no longer confined to the stage. A performance can become a reel within seconds, while an event can generate conversations online weeks before it takes place.

Benchmark has responded to these changes by expanding its formats and platforms while retaining its focus on creating experiences that connect with audiences.

CREATING NIGHTS TO REMEMBER

Some of Benchmark's most memorable projects have centred on major personalities and cultural icons.

The Mammooty Hit Parade, for example, brought Malayalam superstar Mammooty to audiences in the Gulf in a major celebration of his popularity. The Gulf Malayalam Music Awards (GMMA) created a platform to recognise and celebrate Malayalam music and its artists.

Kerala Fest took the concept further by bringing together food, culture, music and entertainment for audiences across generations.

Such events have a significance beyond entertainment. For the large Malayali community in the Gulf, cultural programmes provide opportunities to reconnect with language, music, cinema and traditions from Kerala.

They also create spaces where different generations can celebrate together. Parents can revisit familiar traditions while younger audiences discover them through contemporary formats.



AIBA BRINGING BOLLYWOOD TO THE ARAB WORLD

One of the most ambitious projects associated with Benchmark was the Arab Indo Bollywood Awards (AIBA).

Conceived as a first-of-its-kind initiative, AIBA sought to celebrate Indian cinema in an Arab setting while strengthening its connection with audiences across the region.

The scale of the event reflected the growing importance of the Gulf as an international market for Indian entertainment. Some of Bollywood's biggest names came together for the awards, including Salman Khan, Priyanka Chopra, Anil Kapoor, Karan Johar, Varun Dhawan, Shraddha Kapoor and Jacqueline Fernandez, along with nearly 150 artists and personalities.

The event was hosted by Manish Paul and Karan Johar.



AIBA was more than an awards ceremony. It helped position the UAE as a major international platform for Indian cinema and demonstrated the potential of the Gulf as a meeting point between Indian entertainment and the Arab world.

For Benchmark, it was also an opportunity to demonstrate its ability to conceptualise and execute an international-scale production involving major artists, media organisations, sponsors, production teams and audiences.

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BEYOND ENTERTAINMENT

Benchmark's portfolio has never been limited to celebrity events.

The Influencer Cup brought sport and digital creators together, reflecting the changing nature of celebrity culture and audience engagement. As social media personalities became increasingly influential, the event created a platform where sport, entertainment and digital culture could intersect.

The company has also been involved in trade expos, the Japan Kyoto Exhibition and Indian Property Expos, including B2B and G2G events at Dubai World Trade Centre in association with organisations such as the Dubai Department of Economy and Tourism and Dubai Chamber.



These projects demonstrate Benchmark's ability to move between entertainment, corporate and institutional events, where the objectives may differ but the need for strong planning, creative presentation and seamless execution remains the same.



FROM STAGE TO SCREEN

The company's expansion into television added another dimension to its creative portfolio.

Programmes such as Shahru Ramadan marked Benchmark's move from live entertainment to screen-based content. Television production requires a different approach from live events, involving content development, production planning, technical coordination and post-production.

The move also reflected the changing relationship between audiences and entertainment. Television, streaming and digital platforms have created multiple ways for audiences to consume content, making it increasingly important for event and entertainment companies to think beyond a single platform.

TURNING CULTURE INTO CONTENT

Benchmark has also explored the relationship between events, culture and publishing through its association with Onam annual editions with Gulf Times and Khaleej Times.

Onam is one of the most important cultural celebrations for Malayalis in the Gulf. For the diaspora, it represents food, family, fashion, music, traditions and a strong emotional connection with Kerala.

Special Onam publications extend that celebration beyond the event itself. Through interviews, features, recipes, personalities and cultural stories, they create a lasting record of the festival and provide readers with content they can revisit long after the celebrations.

In this sense, publishing complements event management. While an event creates a moment, a publication helps preserve it.

FOOD AS CULTURE

Benchmark's work has also extended into food and lifestyle content through Cook Books magazine.

Food has always been a powerful expression of cultural identity, particularly for expatriate communities. Kerala cuisine, for instance, has travelled across the world with the Malayali diaspora and become an important link to home.

A food publication can therefore be much more than a collection of recipes. It can explore chefs, restaurants, ingredients, culinary traditions and changing food habits while presenting food as an important part of culture and lifestyle.

This expansion into publishing reflects Benchmark's broader approach to content and audience engagement.



THE WORK BEHIND THE WOW

For audiences, a major event may last only a few hours. For the team behind it, the process can begin months in advance.

Venue arrangements, permits, contracts, artist schedules, travel, accommodation, rehearsals, stage construction, lighting, sound, security, audience management, branding and media coordination all have to come together.

The audience sees the red carpet, the celebrity entrance and the spectacular stage. Much of the real work happens behind the scenes.

The ability to deal with unexpected challenges is equally important. Artist schedules can change, technical problems can occur and logistical issues can emerge at the last minute.

After two decades in the business, Benchmark's experience provides an important advantage: understanding what can go wrong, preparing for it and finding solutions without allowing the audience to see the disruption.



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WHEN AN EVENT BECOMES CONTENT

Technology has transformed the event industry.

Today, an event begins long before the audience reaches the venue. It may start with a teaser on Instagram, a promotional video, a celebrity announcement or an online countdown.

During the event, photographs and videos can be shared instantly. A celebrity entrance can become a viral reel, while a performance can reach audiences around the world within minutes.

The event no longer ends when the lights go out.

It continues across digital platforms.

This has made media and content an increasingly important part of Benchmark's work. A single event can now live in multiple formats—live performance, photography, video, social media, interviews and digital stories.

The objective is therefore no longer simply to fill a venue. It is to create an experience that can travel far beyond it.



TWO DECADES, ONE CONSTANT

Technology changes. Trends change. Audience expectations change. But people still want to feel connected. They want to be entertained, inspired and part of something bigger than themselves. For expatriate communities, that emotional connection can be particularly powerful.



A Malayalam song can evoke memories of Kerala. A favourite actor can bring back childhood memories. An Onam celebration can make people feel closer to home. This emotional connection has remained an important part of Benchmark's work.

The company has also witnessed a generational transition. Parents who attended major celebrity shows during the early years are now bringing their children to contemporary, digital-first festivals and entertainment programmes.

The technology may be different, but the desire to celebrate together remains.

It is tradition with a new twist, and heart with high production value.



LOOKING AHEAD

The next chapter of event management is likely to be shaped by artificial intelligence, immersive technology, hybrid events and influencer-led formats.

AI can influence event marketing, audience analysis and content creation. Immersive technology can transform venues into interactive environments, while hybrid events can connect physical audiences with viewers around the world.

Influencers and digital creators will also continue to play a greater role in entertainment, creating new communities and new forms of audience participation. For Benchmark, the challenge will be to embrace these technologies while retaining the human element that makes an event memorable.

After two decades, the company's journey demonstrates that successful events are not simply about stages, stars or spectacular production. They are about creating moments that audiences can connect with and remember.

From celebrity shows and music awards to Bollywood spectacles, cultural festivals, sporting events, exhibitions, television programmes and publications, Benchmark has continued to evolve with its audiences and the markets it serves.

The platforms will change. Technology will become more sophisticated. New generations will bring new expectations.

But the fundamental promise remains the same: to create experiences that people want to be part of and memories they will carry with them.

From stars to spectacles, Benchmark's two-decade journey has been about turning ideas into experiences and experiences into lasting memories.

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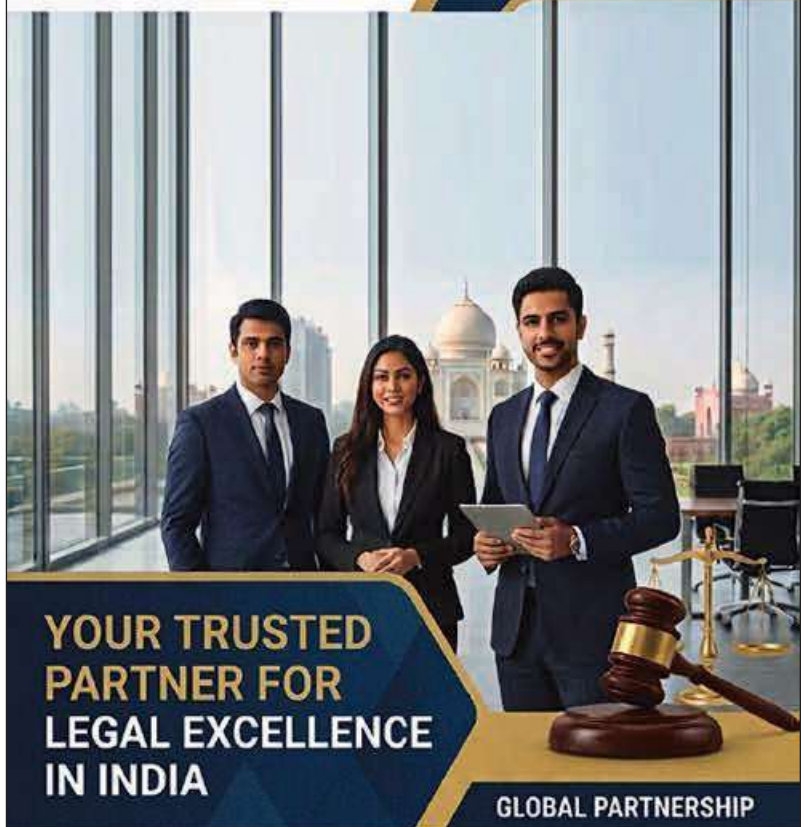
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THE SOUNDS OF ONAM



From the rhythmic beats of the chenda and panchavadyam to Thiruvathirakali, vanchipattu and modern Malayalam songs, music gives Onam its distinctive soundtrack and keeps Kerala's cultural traditions alive across generations and borders.

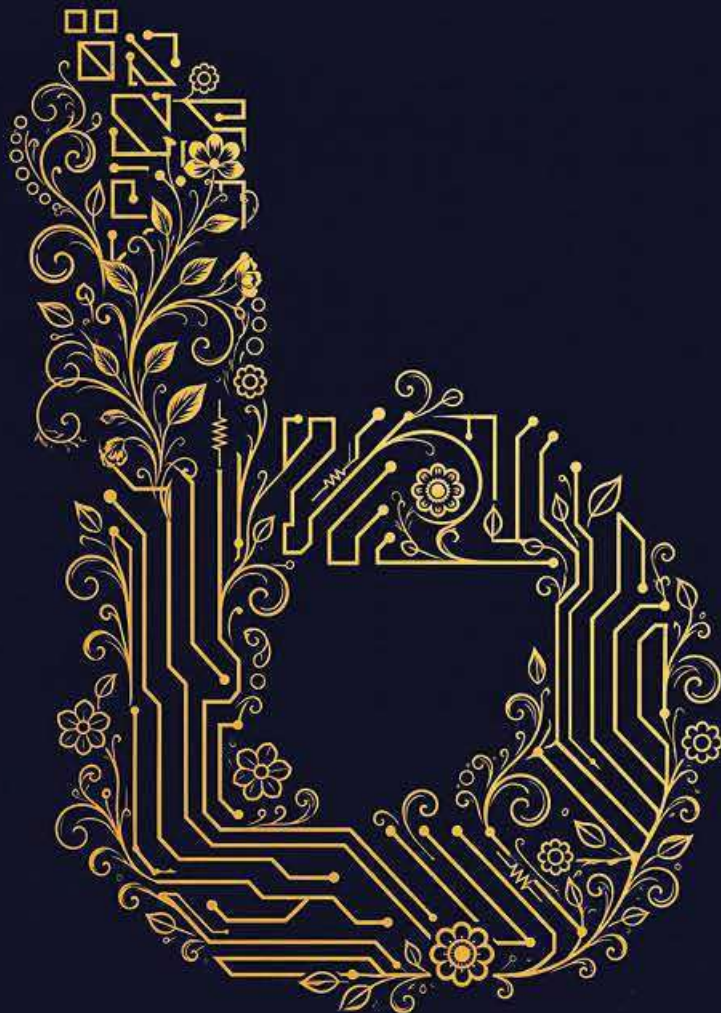
Onam is often remembered through its colours and flavours—the bright pookkalam, the white-and-gold kasavu attire and the elaborate Sadya served on a banana leaf. But listen closely and the festival has an equally distinctive soundtrack

It is the rhythmic beat of the chenda, the majestic sounds of panchavadyam, the songs sung during traditional games, the graceful music accompanying Thiruvathirakali, the lively chants of boat races and, in more contemporary celebrations, the familiar Malayalam songs that fill homes, community halls and radio stations.

For generations of Malayalis, these sounds have been inseparable from the experience of Onam. And for the diaspora, they have become an important way of bringing the atmosphere of Kerala to cities far from home.

Onam is not simply something that is seen and tasted
It is heard.





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THE RHYTHM OF CELEBRATION



Traditional percussion occupies a special place in Kerala's cultural landscape, and Onam provides some of its most vibrant settings.

The chenda, the cylindrical drum traditionally played with sticks, is perhaps one of the most recognisable sounds associated with Kerala's temple festivals and cultural celebrations. Its powerful rhythms can transform an ordinary gathering into a spectacle.

During Onam, chenda ensembles and traditional percussion performances are frequently incorporated into community celebrations, cultural programmes and processions. The sound has an immediacy that requires no translation. Even someone unfamiliar with Kerala's musical traditions can recognise the energy it brings to a celebration.

The chenda is often heard alongside other instruments in panchavadyam, a traditional ensemble that literally refers to an orchestra of five instruments. The combination creates a layered rhythm that can begin slowly and build gradually into an exhilarating crescendo.

For Malayalis who have grown up hearing these sounds at temple festivals and cultural events, the experience is deeply nostalgic.

For those who grew up outside Kerala, it can be an introduction to an important part of their heritage.

PANCHAVADYAM: MUSIC THAT BUILDS WITH THE FESTIVAL

Panchavadyam has a distinctive structure and energy. Traditionally, the ensemble features instruments such as thimila, maddalam, ilathalam, kombu and edakka, each contributing to the overall rhythm and progression.

The performance is not simply background music. It is an experience in itself.

The gradual increase in tempo and intensity creates a sense of anticipation, eventually reaching a powerful climax. In a festival setting, this progression can mirror the emotional journey of the celebration itself—from anticipation to excitement and finally to collective joy.

For Onam programmes organised outside Kerala, including those held by Malayali communities in the Gulf, such performances can instantly establish a Kerala atmosphere.

A ballroom in Dubai may be thousands of kilometres away from a Kerala temple courtyard, but the sound of traditional percussion can temporarily erase that



THIRUVATHIRAKALI: THE MUSIC OF GRACE AND TOGETHERNESS

If chenda and panchavadyam represent the energetic side of Onam, Thiruvathirakali offers a more graceful expression of the festival.

Also known as Kaikottikali, Thiruvathirakali is traditionally performed by women standing in a circle around a nilavilakku, moving rhythmically while singing traditional songs.

The dance is particularly associated with Kerala's cultural identity and is commonly performed during festive occasions, including Onam.

The songs accompanying Thiruvathirakali are an important part of the tradition. They are passed from generation to generation and often reflect themes of love, devotion, folklore and everyday life

In community celebrations, the performance becomes more than a dance programme. It is an opportunity for women and girls from different generations to participate in a shared cultural tradition.

In the UAE, Thiruvathirakali performances have become a familiar feature of Onam programmes, helping younger generations encounter traditional Malayalam songs and movements in an engaging way.

In community celebrations, the performance becomes more than a dance programme. It is an opportunity for women and girls from different generations to participate in a shared cultural tradition.

In the UAE, Thiruvathirakali performances have become a familiar feature of Onam programmes, helping younger generations encounter traditional Malayalam songs and movements in an engaging way.



THE SONGS OF THE BOAT RACE

Few sounds are more strongly associated with Kerala's festive culture than the songs of the vallamkali, or traditional snake-boat races.

The sight of long, narrow boats moving through Kerala's backwaters is spectacular, but the experience is incomplete without the rhythmic songs of the rowers.

The vanchipattu, or boat songs, help create rhythm and coordination among the rowers. Their repetitive structure and powerful delivery provide the energy needed to maintain the pace of the race.

The songs also turn the race into a collective performance.

Rows of oarsmen move in synchronisation as their voices rise above the sound of water and drums. Spectators lining the banks respond with cheers, creating an atmosphere that is both competitive and celebratory.

The Nehru Trophy Boat Race and other vallamkali events have become major cultural attractions associated with Kerala's festive season, drawing spectators from within India and abroad.

For the Malayali diaspora, images and recordings of these races provide another sensory connection to Onam in Kerala.

Stories written in light

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FOLK PERFORMANCES **BRING ANOTHER VOICE**

Onam's soundscape is not limited to classical or formal traditions.

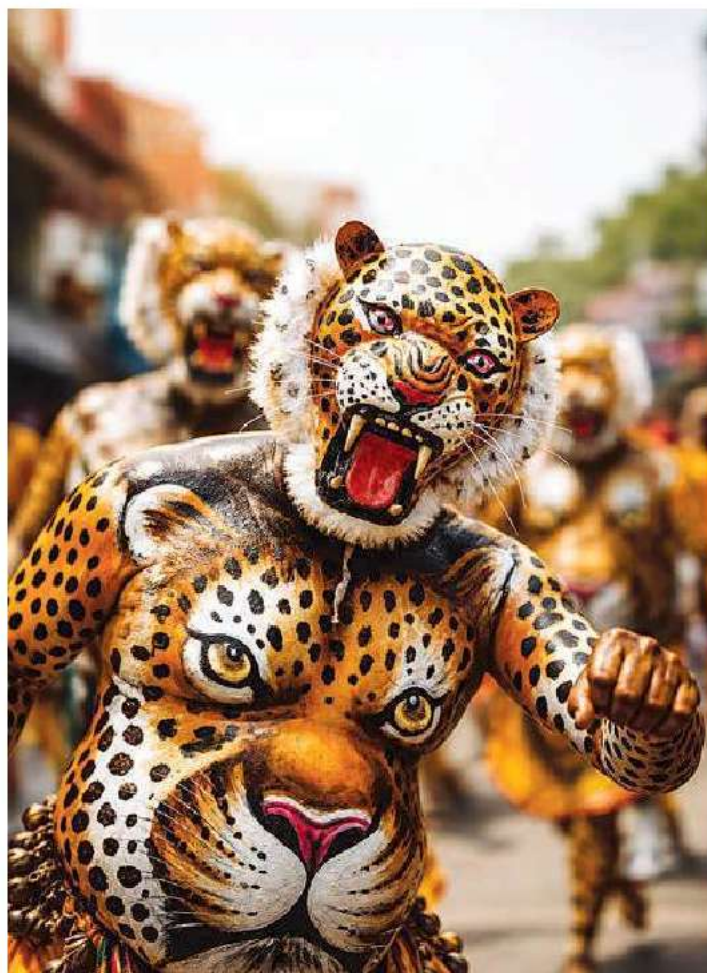
Kerala's folk arts and community performances bring humour, storytelling and popular culture into the celebration.

Pulikali, or the tiger dance, is a colourful folk performance traditionally associated with Onam, particularly in Thrissur. Performers painted like tigers dance to the rhythm of percussion instruments, creating an energetic spectacle.

The music accompanying Pulikali is loud, rhythmic and deliberately dramatic.

It is a reminder that Onam has always been a people's festival—not confined to formal stages but celebrated through public performances, games, music and shared entertainment.

Other folk traditions and regional art forms also find a place in Onam programmes, creating a diverse soundscape that reflects Kerala's cultural richness.



THE **ONAM SONGS** EVERYONE KNOWS

Alongside traditional songs, modern Malayalam music has become an integral part of contemporary Onam celebrations.

Certain songs have acquired almost an anthem-like status, returning every year during the festival season. Families play them at home, radio stations include them in special programmes and community events use them to create a festive atmosphere.

Malayalam cinema has also played an important role in shaping the modern sound of Onam.

Over the decades, songs from films associated with family, celebration and Kerala's cultural landscape have become part of the festival experience. Some have remained popular across generations, while newer songs are constantly being added to the Onam playlist.

This has created an interesting blend.

A traditional Thiruvathirakali song may be followed by a popular Malayalam film song. A chenda performance may lead into contemporary music. At a community event, children may perform to a modern Onam song while older generations sing along to a familiar classic.

The soundtrack of Onam keeps expanding.





RADIO: THE FAMILIAR VOICE OF ONAM

For Malayalis living away from Kerala, radio has historically played a particularly important role in creating a sense of connection.

In the UAE, Malayalam-language radio stations have long been part of expatriate life. During Onam, their programming takes on an even more festive character. Special shows, Malayalam songs, listener conversations, celebrity interactions, competitions and Onam greetings fill the airwaves.

For someone driving to work in Dubai, an Onam song playing on the radio can evoke memories of home almost instantly.

This is one of the unique powers of radio. Unlike a playlist, live radio provides companionship and context. The presenter speaks directly to listeners, shares stories and connects people who may be celebrating in completely different places.

As radio has moved into the digital space, that relationship has expanded. Listeners can now interact with presenters through social media, send voice messages, request songs and watch video content.

The sound of Onam has therefore moved beyond the traditional radio receiver and into a much larger digital ecosystem.

THE SOUND OF ONAM IN THE UAE

For the Malayali community in the UAE, Onam has developed its own distinctive soundscape.

Community halls and event venues come alive with traditional percussion, Malayalam songs and cultural performances. Restaurants play festive music while serving Sadya. Schools organise Onam programmes featuring children singing Malayalam songs and performing traditional dances.

Corporate offices, too, increasingly mark the festival with cultural activities, including traditional music and performances.

In Dubai, Abu Dhabi, Sharjah and other emirates, these sounds serve a purpose beyond entertainment.

They create a sense of belonging.

For an expatriate who may not be able to travel to Kerala every year, hearing chenda beats or a familiar Malayalam Onam song can provide an emotional connection to home.

A NEW GENERATION DISCOVERS THE SOUND

Perhaps one of the most important roles played by Onam music is introducing younger generations to Kerala's cultural heritage.

Children growing up in the UAE may not have experienced an Onam celebration in a Kerala village. They may know the festival primarily through their families, schools and community events.

Music can become their entry point.

Learning a Thiruvathirakali song, participating in a chenda performance or singing a Malayalam Onam song at school allows them to experience culture rather than simply hear about it.

This is especially important for second- and third-generation Malayalis.

The challenge is not merely preserving traditions exactly as they were, but making them meaningful to a generation growing up in a very different cultural environment.

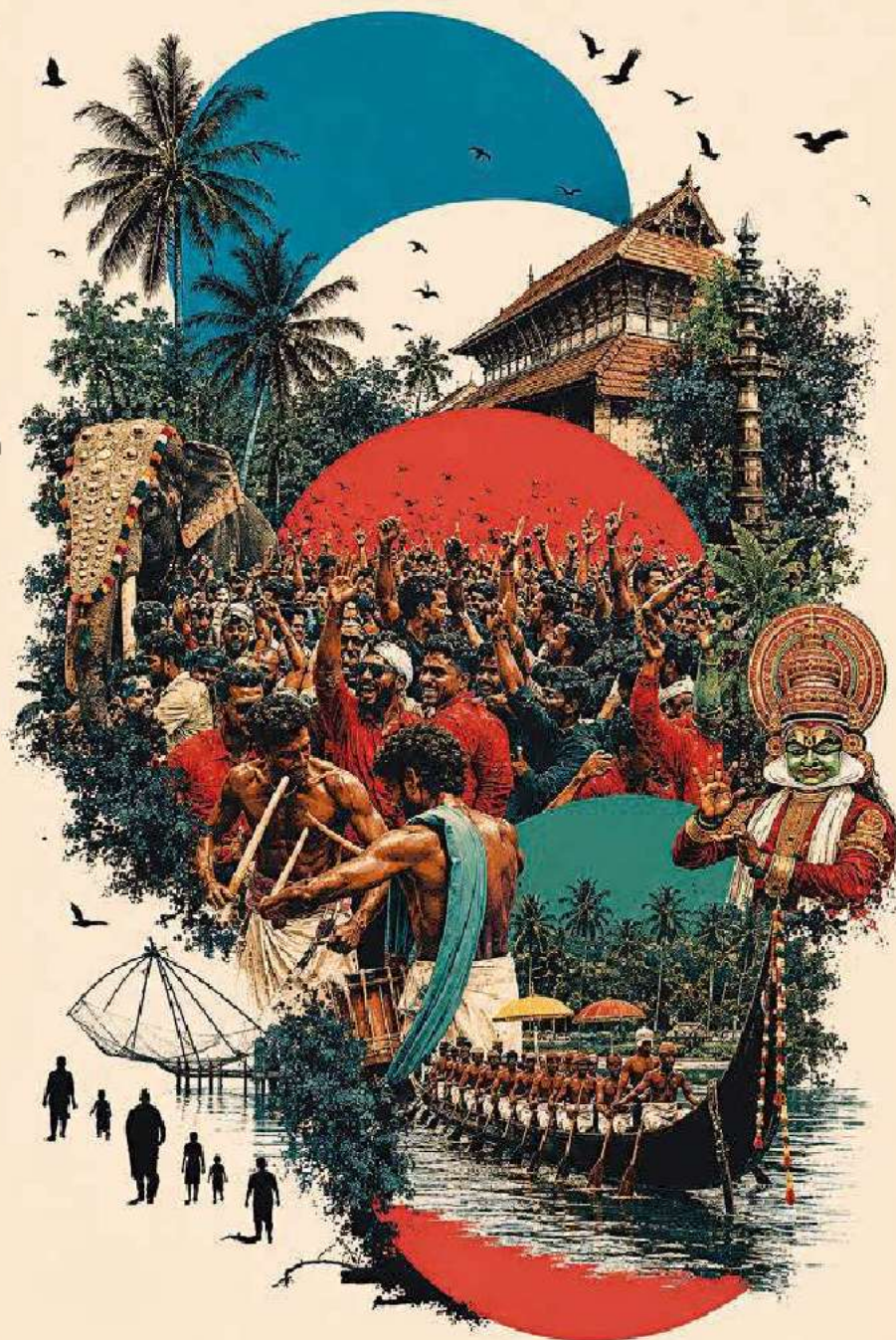
Music has an advantage here: it is participatory. Children can sing it, dance to it and perform it together.

WHEN MUSIC BECOMES **MEMORY**

The emotional power of Onam music lies not only in the sounds themselves but in the memories attached to them

A particular song may remind someone of school celebrations. A chenda rhythm may recall a temple festival. A Thiruvathirakali performance may bring back memories of a grandmother or mother preparing for Onam

For expatriates, these memories can become even more powerful.



A song heard thousands of kilometres from Kerala can suddenly transport someone back to a family home, a schoolyard or a village celebration.

This is why the sounds of Onam matter.

They preserve something that photographs cannot fully capture—the atmosphere of a moment.

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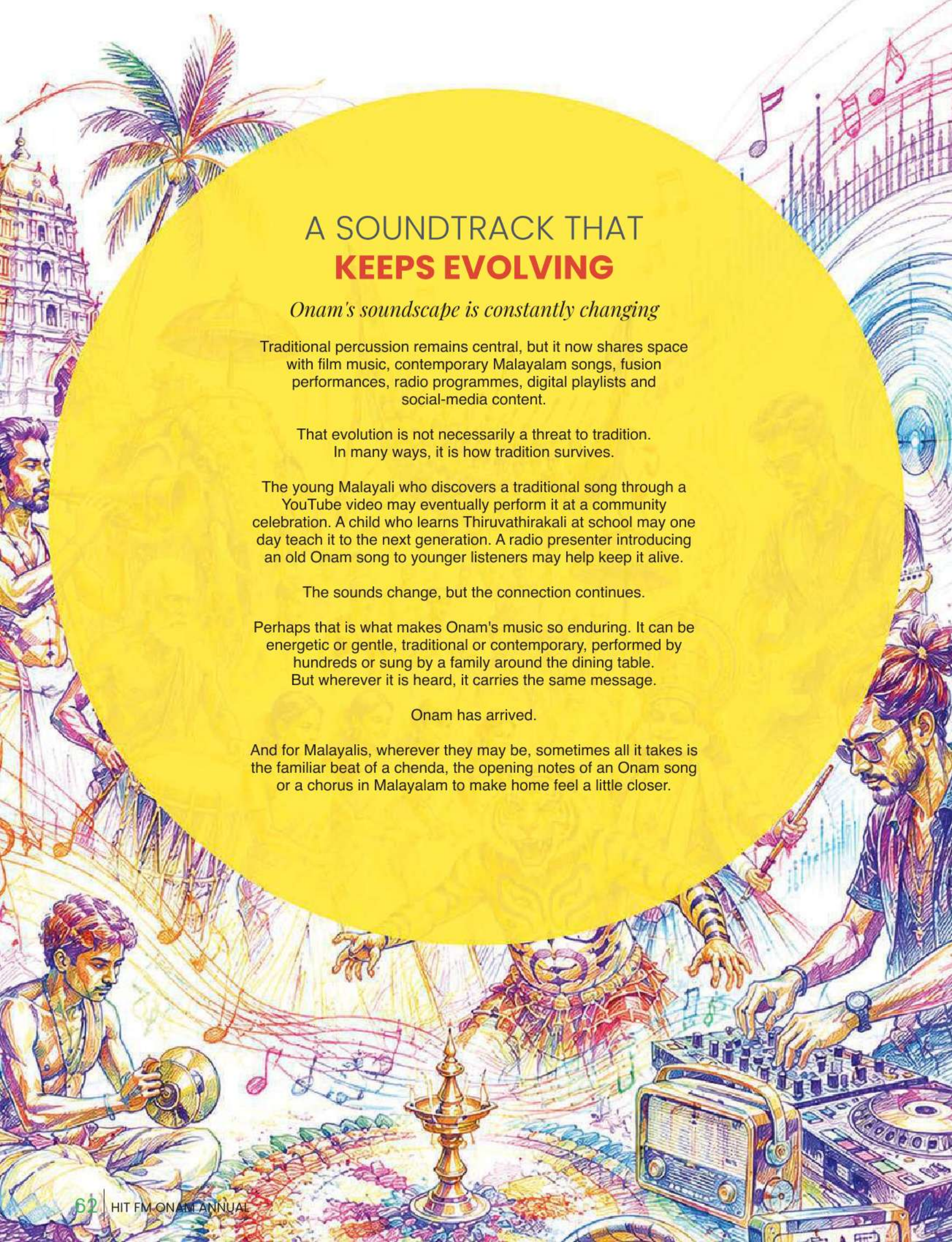
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A SOUNDTRACK THAT **KEEPS EVOLVING**

Onam's soundscape is constantly changing

Traditional percussion remains central, but it now shares space with film music, contemporary Malayalam songs, fusion performances, radio programmes, digital playlists and social-media content.

That evolution is not necessarily a threat to tradition. In many ways, it is how tradition survives.

The young Malayali who discovers a traditional song through a YouTube video may eventually perform it at a community celebration. A child who learns Thiruvathirakali at school may one day teach it to the next generation. A radio presenter introducing an old Onam song to younger listeners may help keep it alive.

The sounds change, but the connection continues.

Perhaps that is what makes Onam's music so enduring. It can be energetic or gentle, traditional or contemporary, performed by hundreds or sung by a family around the dining table. But wherever it is heard, it carries the same message.

Onam has arrived.

And for Malayalis, wherever they may be, sometimes all it takes is the familiar beat of a chenda, the opening notes of an Onam song or a chorus in Malayalam to make home feel a little closer.

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*Food, inevitably, occupies
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celebrations.*

Take a look at the evolving South Indian culinary landscape through a collection of creative recipes by Chef Sammya Majumder.

Bringing together familiar regional flavours, contemporary techniques and imaginative presentations, these dishes offer fresh inspiration for festive entertaining and everyday indulgence.

The selection reflects how traditional Indian flavours can be reinterpreted for today's diners while retaining their distinctive character and culinary roots.

Chef Sammya Majumder is an accomplished Executive Chef and culinary innovator with more than 18 years of experience across India and the UAE.

He has worked with reputed hospitality brands including Oberoi, Radisson Blu, Hyatt, The Raintree Chennai and The Ananta Udaipur, gaining extensive expertise in Western and Indian regional cuisines, contemporary gastronomy, menu innovation and large-scale culinary operations.

Known for blending traditional Indian flavours with modern techniques and presentation, Chef Sammya is passionate about culinary storytelling and preserving the rich heritage of India's diverse food culture while giving it a contemporary identity.

Currently based in Dubai, he continues to create innovative dining experiences through distinctive menus, food festivals, chef-led concepts and contemporary interpretations of Indian cuisine.

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KOVAI KALAN MASALA IN CRISPY DOSA TACO

Ingredients

Yield: 10 tacos

For the Kalan masala:

500 g button or oyster mushrooms, 100 g cabbage, 80 g onion, 20 g ginger-garlic paste, 2 green chillies, 1 tsp turmeric, 2 tsp Kashmiri chilli powder, 1 tsp coriander powder, 1 tsp cumin powder, 1 tsp garam masala, 1 tsp black pepper, 80 g rice flour, 30 g cornflour, salt to taste, 30 ml oil, 10 ml lemon juice and 15 g coriander.

For the dosa taco:

300 g dosa batter, 20 ml oil and 1 tsp sesame seeds.

For garnish:

Sliced onion, coriander and curry leaves.

Process

1. Finely slice the mushrooms and cabbage. Combine them with onion, ginger-garlic paste, green chilli, spices, rice flour, cornflour and salt. Add lemon juice and just enough water to form a thick coating.
 2. Heat the oil in a pan and cook the mixture over medium-high heat until the vegetables are tender and the masala is dry and well roasted. Finish with coriander.
 3. Spread a thin dosa on a hot non-stick tawa. Cook until crisp, lightly oiling the edges. While still hot, fold the dosa over a taco mould or rolling pin and allow it to set into a crisp taco shape.
 4. Fill each dosa taco with the hot Kalan masala. Garnish with sliced onion, coriander and fried curry leaves. Serve immediately.
-



PRAWN OOTHUKUZHI VENNAI ROAST ON COIN PARATHA

Ingredients

Yield: 10 portions

For the prawn roast:

500 g cleaned prawns, 60 g shallots, 30 g onion, 20 g ginger, 20 g garlic, 3 green chillies, 12 curry leaves, 1 tsp black pepper, 1 tsp fennel powder, 1 tsp coriander powder, 60 g butter, 20 ml coconut oil, 80 ml coconut milk, salt to taste, 15 ml lemon juice and coriander.

For the coin paratha:

10 mini parathas and 30 g butter.

Process

1. Marinate the prawns with pepper, salt and lemon juice for 15 minutes.
2. Heat the coconut oil and half the butter in a pan. Add the curry leaves, then sauté the shallots, onion, ginger, garlic and green chilli until golden.
3. Add the fennel and coriander powders and roast briefly. Add the prawns and cook until just done.
4. Add the coconut milk and simmer until the mixture thickens. Finish with the remaining butter and coriander. Adjust the seasoning.
5. Roll small portions of paratha dough and cut them into coin-sized discs. Cook on a tawa with butter until crisp and golden.
6. Spoon the Prawn Oothukuzhi Vennai Roast over each coin paratha and garnish with curry leaves.

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PICHU POTA KOZHI TART

Ingredients

Yield: 10 mini tarts

For the chicken filling:

500 g boneless chicken, 100 g onion, 25 g ginger, 25 g garlic, 3 green chillies, 1 tsp fennel, 1 tsp black pepper, 1 tsp turmeric, 1 tsp chilli powder, 1 tsp garam masala, 12 curry leaves, 25 ml oil, 40 ml coconut milk, salt to taste, coriander and 15 ml lemon juice.

For the tart shells:

250 g shortcrust pastry, flour for dusting and 1 egg for egg wash.

Process

1. Season the chicken with turmeric, chilli powder, pepper and salt. Poach or steam until cooked. Allow it to cool, then shred finely by hand.
 2. Heat the oil in a pan. Add the fennel and curry leaves, followed by the onion, ginger, garlic and green chilli. Sauté until golden.
 3. Add the shredded chicken and spices. Roast until dry, then add the coconut milk and cook until completely reduced. Finish with lemon juice and coriander.
 4. Roll out the pastry to approximately 3 mm thickness. Line mini tart moulds, prick the bases and blind-bake at 180°C until lightly golden. Brush with egg wash and bake briefly again.
 5. Fill the tart shells with the Pichu Pota Kozhi mixture. Garnish with curry leaves and coriander.
-



KOLA URUNDAI

Ingredients

Yield: 12–15 pieces

For the meatballs:

500 g minced mutton or lamb, 100 g finely chopped shallots, 2 green chillies, 20 g ginger, 20 g garlic, 1½ tsp fennel seeds, 1 tsp black pepper, 2 cm cinnamon, 3 cloves, 2 cardamom pods, 2 dried red chillies, 1 sprig curry leaves, 2 tbsp fresh coriander, 50 g grated coconut, 2 tbsp roasted gram dal (pottukadalai), ¼ tsp turmeric, salt to taste, 1 egg and oil for frying.

Process

1. Prepare the spice mixture: Dry-roast the fennel, pepper, cinnamon, cloves, cardamom and dried red chillies until aromatic. Cool and grind coarsely.
2. Make the masala: Grind the ginger, garlic, green chilli, curry leaves, coriander, coconut and roasted gram into a coarse paste.
3. Combine: Mix the minced mutton with the ground spice mixture, masala paste, chopped shallots, turmeric, salt and egg.
4. Bind and rest: Mix thoroughly until the mixture becomes sticky and cohesive. Refrigerate for 30–45 minutes.
5. Shape: Lightly grease your hands and shape the mixture into small, smooth balls.
6. Cook: Deep-fry over medium heat until golden brown and cooked through, approximately 5–7 minutes, depending on the size.
7. Drain: Transfer to a wire rack or a plate lined with absorbent paper.

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MADURAI LAMB SHANKS WITH BUN PARATHA

Ingredients

Yield: 6 portions

For the lamb shanks:

6 lamb shanks, 120 g onion, 80 g tomato, 30 g ginger, 30 g garlic, 4 green chillies, 2 tsp chilli powder, 1 tsp turmeric, 2 tsp coriander powder, 1 tsp cumin, 1 tsp fennel, 1 tsp black pepper, 1 cinnamon stick, 3 cloves, 2 cardamom pods, 80 g curd, 50 ml oil, 500 ml stock or water, salt to taste, coriander and mint.

For the bun paratha:

500 g refined flour, 10 g sugar, 8 g salt, 8 g yeast, 250 ml warm milk or water, 40 g butter and extra flour or oil for laminating.

Process

1. Marinate the lamb shanks with curd, turmeric, chilli powder, coriander powder and salt for 2 hours.
 2. Sear the shanks in oil. In the same pan, roast the whole spices, onion, ginger, garlic and green chilli. Add the tomato and powdered spices and cook until the oil separates.
 3. Return the shanks to the pan, add the stock and cook, covered, over low heat until fork-tender. Reduce the gravy until rich and thick.
 4. For the bun paratha, combine the flour, sugar, salt and yeast. Add the liquid and knead into a soft dough. Rest for 1 hour. Divide the dough, layer with butter, fold, rest and roll into thick rounds.
 5. Cook the parathas on a hot tawa with butter until puffed and golden. Serve with the lamb shank and reduced Madurai masala.
-

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MINI APPAM WITH QUAIL'S EGG

Ingredients

Yield: 10 portions

For the appam:

250 g raw rice, 50 g cooked rice, 75 ml coconut milk, 1 tsp sugar, ½ tsp instant yeast, salt to taste and water as required.

For the topping:

10 quail eggs, 50 g onion, 1 green chilli, 1 tsp black pepper, 1 tsp curry leaves, 15 g coconut oil, salt to taste and coriander.

Process

1. Soak the raw rice for 4–5 hours. Blend it with the cooked rice and coconut milk until smooth. Add the yeast, sugar and salt, then allow the batter to ferment for 6–8 hours, or until lightly bubbly.
2. Adjust the batter to a pourable consistency. Heat an appam pan and make small appams, keeping the centre slightly thick.
3. Crack one quail egg into each mini appam. Cover and cook until the egg white is set while the yolk remains soft.
4. Heat the coconut oil and temper with curry leaves. Add the finely chopped onion and green chilli and sauté lightly. Season with pepper and salt.
5. Top each appam with the onion mixture and coriander.



MUSHROOM FILTER COFFEE WITH TRUFFLE BAO

Ingredients

Yield: 10 bao

For the mushroom filling:

500 g mixed mushrooms, 80 g onion, 20 g garlic, 10 g ginger, 10 g green chilli, 2 tsp roasted coffee powder, 1 tsp black pepper, 1 tsp coriander powder, 1 tsp garam masala, 60 ml cream, 20 ml soy sauce, 15 ml truffle oil, 20 ml oil, salt to taste and coriander.

For the bao:

500 g bao flour or all-purpose flour, 8 g yeast, 20 g sugar, 250 ml warm water, 10 g baking powder, 20 ml oil and salt to taste.

Process

1. Finely chop the mushrooms. Sauté over high heat until the excess moisture evaporates. Add the onion, ginger, garlic and chilli and cook until fragrant.
2. Add the coffee powder, pepper, coriander powder and garam masala. Deglaze with soy sauce. Add the cream and reduce to a thick filling. Finish with truffle oil and coriander. Allow to cool completely.
3. Combine the bao ingredients and knead into a soft dough. Rest for 45–60 minutes. Divide into 10 portions, roll into ovals, lightly oil and fold. Proof for 20–30 minutes.
4. Steam the bao over simmering water for approximately 10–12 minutes. Allow them to rest for 2 minutes before opening.
5. Fill each bao with the mushroom and filter-coffee mixture. Finish with a small drizzle of truffle oil and fresh coriander.

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CHICKEN AND EGG KOTHU PARATHA

Ingredients

Yield: 10 portions

500 g paratha, 500 g cooked shredded chicken, 10 eggs, 150 g onion, 100 g tomato, 50 g capsicum, 30 g ginger-garlic paste, 4 green chillies, 20 g curry leaves, 2 tsp chilli powder, 1 tsp turmeric, 2 tsp coriander powder, 1 tsp garam masala, 1 tsp black pepper, 50 ml oil, 60 ml chicken stock, salt to taste, coriander and lemon wedges.

Process

1. Cook the parathas until crisp but still flexible. Allow them to cool slightly, then chop into small pieces.
2. Heat the oil in a wide tawa. Add the curry leaves, onion and green chilli and sauté until golden. Add the ginger-garlic paste, tomato and capsicum and cook until soft.
3. Add the spices and shredded chicken. Toss over high heat and add a splash of chicken stock.
4. Push the mixture to one side of the tawa. Add the beaten eggs and scramble until just set. Add the chopped paratha and combine.
5. Chop and toss vigorously with two spatulas on the tawa until smoky and well combined. Finish with pepper, coriander and lemon.



BLUE CRAB RASAM

Ingredients

Yield: 10 portions

1.5 kg blue crab, cleaned and cracked, 250 g tomato, 80 g shallots, 20 g garlic, 20 g ginger, 3 green chillies, 1 tsp turmeric, 2 tsp black pepper, 1 tsp cumin, 1 tsp fennel, 1 tsp coriander seeds, 1 tsp mustard seeds, 15 curry leaves, 30 ml tamarind extract, 1.5 litres water or stock, 20 ml oil, salt to taste and coriander.

Process

1. Lightly roast the coriander, cumin, fennel and pepper. Allow to cool and grind coarsely.
2. Heat the oil in a pan. Add the mustard seeds and allow them to crackle, then add the curry leaves. Sauté the shallots, ginger, garlic and green chilli.
3. Add the chopped tomato, turmeric and roasted spice blend. Cook until the tomato breaks down.
4. Add the crab and water or stock. Simmer gently for 15–20 minutes to extract the crab flavour. Avoid vigorous boiling.
5. Add the tamarind extract and salt. Simmer for another 3–4 minutes. Strain for a clear rasam or serve with picked crab meat for a richer presentation. Finish with coriander and freshly ground pepper.

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SAFFRON TRES LECHES

Ingredients

Yield: 10 portions

For the sponge:

6 eggs, 180 g sugar, 180 g flour, 5 g baking powder, 1 tsp vanilla and a pinch of salt.

For the three-milk soak:

300 ml whole milk, 200 ml condensed milk, 250 ml evaporated milk, 0.3 g saffron, 1 tsp rose water and 1 tsp cardamom powder.

For the finish:

400 ml whipping cream, 40 g icing sugar, saffron strands, pistachios and dried rose petals.

Process

1. Whisk the eggs and sugar until pale and voluminous. Sift the flour, baking powder and salt, then gently fold them into the egg mixture. Add the vanilla.
2. Spread the batter in a lined 20 × 30 cm tray. Bake at 170°C for approximately 20–25 minutes, or until the sponge is springy to the touch. Allow it to cool completely.
3. Warm the three milks with saffron and cardamom. Do not boil. Allow the mixture to cool slightly, then add the rose water.
4. Pierce the sponge all over with a skewer or fork. Gradually pour the milk mixture over the sponge, allowing it to absorb evenly. Refrigerate for at least 4 hours, preferably overnight.



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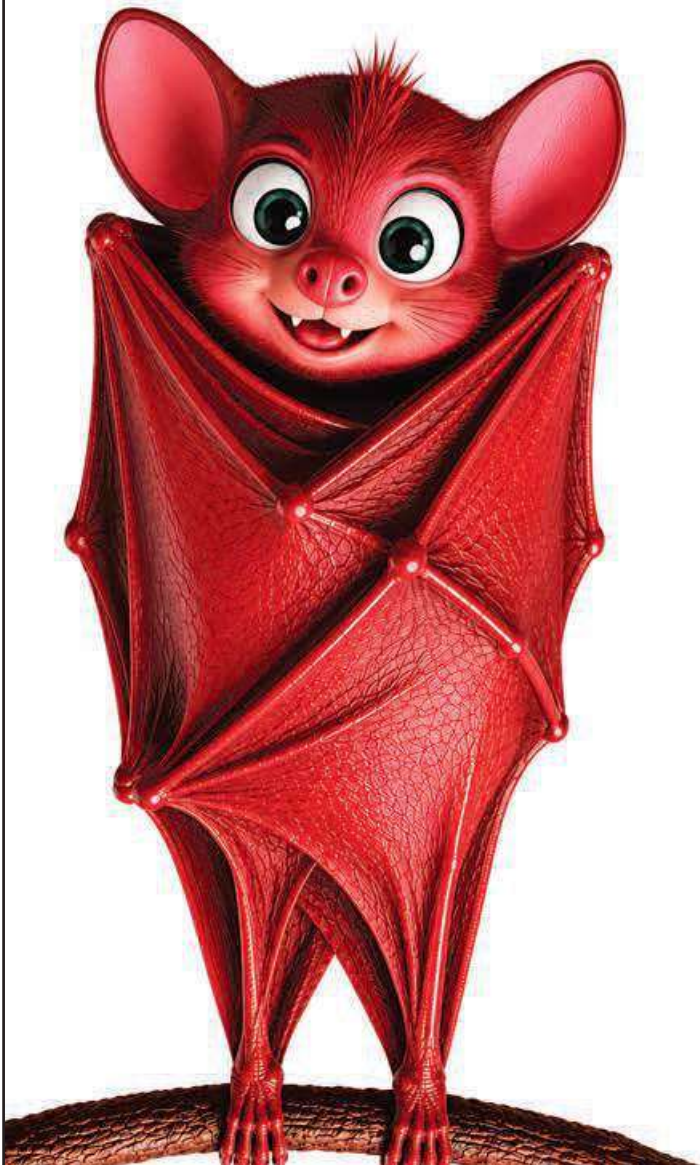
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