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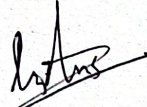


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## DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this project titled "*Onam Sadhya*: as an Identity Marker of Kerala's Rich Culture and Tradition" is the record of bona fide work done by me under the guidance and supervision of Dr. Priya K Nair, Assistant Professor, Department of English.



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March 2024



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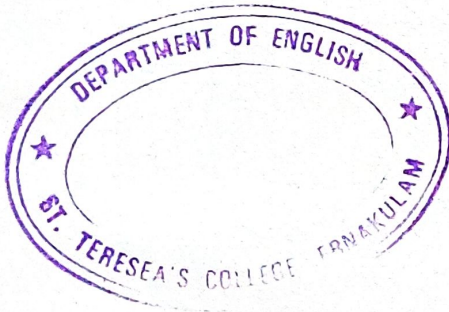
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I take this opportunity to thank God Almighty for showering his abundant blessings and grace upon me during the course of my project.

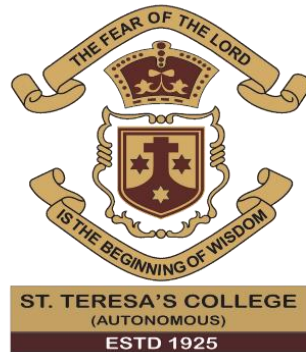
I would like to place on record my sincere gratitude to Rev Dr. Sr. Vinitha (CSST), Provincial Superior and Manager, St Teresa's College (Autonomous), Ernakulam and Dr. Alphonsa Vijaya Joseph, Principal, St Teresa's College (Autonomous), Ernakulam for their continued support throughout the course of my study in this institution.

I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude and appreciation to my supervisor Dr. Priya K Nair for guiding my thoughts in the right direction and for helping me to express them in the best possible manner.

I extend my sincere gratitude to the Head of the Department, Dr. Preeti Kumar and all the other teachers of the department without whose guidance this project could never have been completed.

Liz Anns Benny

***Onam Sadhya: As an Identity Marker of Kerala's  
Rich Culture and Tradition***



***Project submitted to ST. TERESA'S COLLEGE (Autonomous) in partial fulfilment of the  
requirement for the degree of BACHELOR OF ARTS in English Language and Literature***

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## Introduction

Kerala, a state in southern India, celebrates the grand harvest festival of *Onam*. With history, culture, and cuisine interlinked, it's a vibrant tapestry. The celebration honours the reign of the legendary King Mahabali, and its roots can be traced to ancient mythology. Mahabali's rule was considered a golden age of prosperity and harmony and he was well-known for his generosity and fair governance. When King Mahabali visits his subjects again around *Onam*, they have the opportunity to show off how prosperous his country has remained. Kerala's close ties to its history are demonstrated by this yearly event. The iconic *Onam Sadhya* is the centrepiece of *Onam* festivals. A feast that takes culinary creativity to a higher level. Servings of this sumptuous vegetarian feast typically consist of about 26 dishes, all presented on a banana leaf called *Thooshanila*. From the time the banana leaf is arranged until the very last lick of the dessert *Payasam*, Kerala's rich variety of tastes is captured in *Onam Sadhya*, an exploration of food. *Onam Sadhya* is more than just a meal. It is a representation of the warmth, harmony, and inclusivity of Kerala. Serving others and taking part in a *Sadhya* brings people together, tearing down barriers and making enduring memories. The celebration of *Onam Sadhya* preserves traditional practices and ceremonies, fostering harmony among generations. Every dish tells a story that reflects Kerala's emergence and its culinary culture. The eco-friendly banana leaves and locally sourced ingredients highlight Kerala's harmonious coexistence with the environment.

As the *Onam Sadhya* has such a significant role in the culture of Kerala, it is also important to know how the *Onam Sadhya* marks the identity of Kerala's rich culture and tradition. Thus, this project tries to make a clear statement about how the culinary feast becomes an identity of the culture of Keralites following Cultural Studies. The first chapter discusses cultural studies and its relation to food. Like, how the food culture of a certain

group represents its cultural identity through the clear study of references such as Chris Barker's "Cultural Studies Theory and Practice" and Rappoport's "How We Eat". This chapter also delves into the basic tenets of Cultural Studies. Points like class differences in food consumption, food and gender identity etc. are also viewed in this chapter. The first chapter will give you an idea of the discipline of Cultural Studies and how food represents cultures.

Chapter Two will discuss the thesis statement by going through the origins and historical backgrounds of the *Onam* Celebration and different aspects related to *Onam* like rituals, games, customs etc. It analyses how *Onam Sadhya* represents Kerala's culture. Further, it unravels the importance of different ingredients and dishes of *Onam Sadhya* and how they are proportional to the tastes, traditions and Religions of Kerala society. The preparation of *Onam Sadhya* and its serving, way of eating, etc. have been discussed in detail. The celebration of *Onam* and the making of *Onam Sadhya* in modern times also become a part of this chapter.



## Chapter 1

### Food and Culture Studies

The term Culture has its origins in the Latin noun *cultura*, which means “cultivation”, and the past participle verb form of the French word *colere*, which means “to till, tend, or guard”. The etymological history of the word “culture” holds the key to its meaning: culture embodies the human endeavour to develop something greater from what is merely available to us in the natural world. Therefore, the beginning of human agriculture and social living in small farming communities can be considered as the birth of culture. The emergence of common ways of working and living together enabled by the invention of agriculture served as a cornerstone for all human cultures. In the nineteenth century, the term Culture was given a broad social meaning to deal with and was used to refer to the collective ideas, beliefs and customs of people. The term “culture” was used by anthropologists and sociologists to refer to the way people think, act and communicate to define their experiences of living in a society in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. Since the 1960s and 70s, there has been a rising interest in the study of customs, beliefs and opinions of the middle class which in turn reoriented the implication of the term “culture” and brought under the academic discipline of Cultural Studies.

Marxism which is one of the basic strands cultural studies deal with and is also referred to as a materialist critique because it emphasizes examining the historical conditions of the production of literature, art, and other cultural forms and practices.

Cultural studies writers have had a long, ambiguous, but productive relationship with Marxism. Cultural studies is not a Marxist domain but has drawn succour from it while subjecting it to vigorous critique. There is little doubt that we live in social formations organized along capitalist lines that manifest deep class divisions in work, wages, housing, education and health. Further, cultural practices are commodified by

large corporate culture industries. Cultural studies have been partisan in taking up the cause of change. (Barker 13)

Marxian insights remain relevant and valuable instruments for analysing and comprehending culture and society. Cultural Studies to a large extent are a derivative of Marxist ideology. Since Marxist social theory served as the foundation for cultural studies as an academic discipline, its practitioners view culture as a place where class negotiations take place rather than just an instrument for expressing personal preferences and perspectives. Culture is not something we are born with; rather, it is the product of learning and using very specific speech, thinking, and behaviour patterns that enable us to define our positions in every domain of existence.

Culturalism stresses the ‘ordinariness’ of culture and the culture is ordinary active, creative, capacity of people to construct shared meaningful practices Empirical work which is emphasized within the culturalist tradition, explores the way that active human beings create cultural meanings. There is a focus on lived experience and the adoption of a broadly anthropological definition of culture which describes it as an everyday lived process not confined to “high” art. (Barker 14)

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, culture was only determined by people of the elite class or who had intellectual knowledge and formal education. Thus, the culture of the working class, the low culture has never been seen even as a culture. The concept of “high” culture functioned on two levels of discrimination: first, it established a universal “standard” of artistic merit and taste that was only available to the upper classes of society; second, it discredited the opinions and cultural expressions of the working classes for not living up to this “standard”. The distinction between “high” and “low” culture became not only theoretically but also strategically weak with the emergence of mass media such as television and cinema. This was

made particularly clear following the two World Wars when plenty of young people chose to pursue higher education and found that the syllabuses prescribed at colleges and universities completely ignored their cultural beliefs, practices, and preferences.

A universal distinction between high culture and low culture is unsustainable. This argument, combined with the rise in visibility and status of popular culture, has led critics to suggest that 'High culture becomes just one more sub-culture, one more opinion, in our midst' (Chambers, 1986: 194). However, though cultural analysts may question the universal validity of high-low cultural boundaries, this does not mean that such distinctions are not actively utilised to maintain social power. (Barker 64)

Social class has always been the most important factor in differentiating cultures. However, as industrial cities and networks of economies have grown, geographic location has also become an important factor in determining the kinds of cultural practices that people and groups choose to participate in. Cultural practices, like planting seeds or harvesting crops in agrarian societies, were limited to a comparatively smaller group of people living in a common geographic area. These customs and traditions, which originated in and are specific to a group of people with a shared economic means of livelihood, define what is now known as "folk" culture.

Cultural studies is a multifaceted discipline that enables the selective application of perspectives from various disciplines to explore the relationships between culture and power. "Cultural studies is concerned with all those practices, institutions and systems of classification through which there are inculcated in a population particular values, beliefs, competencies, routines of life and habitual forms of conduct" (Bennett as qtd. in Barker 6). Cultural studies examine a wide range of power structures, such as colonialism, gender, race, and class. it aims to investigate the relationships between these types of power and offer



different points of view on culture and the power that agents may bring in their pursuit of change. Cultural studies is an academic discipline like any other, with its primary institutional site being higher education.

“The argument, known as anti-essentialism, is that identities are not things that exist: they have no essential or universal qualities. Rather, they are discursive constructions, the product of discourses or regulated ways of speaking about the world. In other words, identities are constituted, made rather than found, by representations, notably language” (Barker 11). The foundation of all social acts of meaning-making is the mutually constitutive nature of culture and identity. Through the combination of unique characteristics and ideas of commonality, these acts of cultural expression help the individual find his or her identity within a web of relationships. According to the research, we can determine that:

Identity is self-identification, a sense of belonging to a group that reaffirms itself. It is the extent to which one is a representative of a given culture behaviourally, communicatively, psychologically and sociologically. It consists of values, meanings, customs and beliefs used to relate to the world. It reflects the common historical experiences and shared cultural codes that give us as one entity a stable, unchanging, continuing frame of reference and meaning. (Cultural Identity Theory)

Culture refers to the learned and shared values, beliefs, thought patterns, and behaviour that define a community. It guarantees a group's survival, strengthens the sense of community, and gives the group an identity. What defines a person is their identity, it is the lens through which an individual views himself. Language, social institutions, gender roles, and cultural norms all play a crucial role in the creation of identities. Identity and culture have a complex meaning. Cultural identity is flexible and fluctuating. It spans a person's whole life and differs constantly depending on their social environment. Cultural identity

refers to the dynamic perception of an individual's identity in relation to others. Cultural identity and intercultural competence are related. The Cultural Identity theory is concerned with the investigation of how people in specific contexts construct and negotiate their relationships and identities within cultural groups through communication processes. The theory states that culture is one of the various identities that are expressed during communication encounters. Social comparisons help to reveal cultural identity. During an interaction, a person's message will encompass a variety of cultural identities, including nationalist, racist, ethnic, class-related, sex-based, gender-based, political, and religious.

A good deal of cultural studies is centred on questions of representation. That is, on how the world is socially constructed and represented to and by us in meaningful ways. Indeed, the central strand of cultural studies can be understood as the study of culture as the signifying practices of representation. This requires us to explore the textual generation of meaning. It also demands investigation of the modes by which meaning is produced in a variety of contexts. Further, cultural representations and meanings have a certain materiality. That is, they are embedded in sounds, inscriptions, objects, images, books, magazines and television programmes. They are produced, enacted, used and understood in specific social contexts. (Barker 8)

Each person's thoughts, feelings, and behaviours are shaped by their culture but it is not something that exists on its own. It is not something that is seen or tangible by itself. The way people interact with their surroundings, such as the economy and society, has a greater influence on culture. The way people interact with the world around them determines how well they fit into society; it's not just up to the individual. Concepts of culture are closely linked to representation. Culture is the numerous ways by which the human experience is expressed. And it is followed from one generation to the other which creates the whole human civilization. Representation not only creates the linguistic form of human experiences.

It also deals with the application of those experiences in arranging the various social relations between individuals and communities. Representation has emerged as one of the most important areas in the discipline of cultural studies as it reflects the basic structure of human thoughts and actions and how they are organized within a particular social group. The focus of a great deal of cultural studies is on representational questions. That is, how the world is meaningfully constructed and portrayed to and by us in society. The study of culture as the signifying practices of representation can be determined as the central strand of cultural studies. This means that we have to investigate how meaning is generated within texts. It also demands investigating the processes that generate meaning in all kinds of contexts. In addition, there is a certain materiality to cultural meanings and representations. They are integrated with TV programs, books, magazines, objects, sounds, practices and inscriptions. They are created, performed, utilised, and appreciated within particular social settings.

Food acts as a major element in defining and expressing the cultural identity of a particular group of people who share a common Identity as it represents some cultural meanings. The relationship between food and cultural identity is multidimensional. Food is an important indicator of a culture that incorporates many distinct elements and serves as more than just a source of nourishment. Historical backgrounds and geographical influences, social and communal aspects, the significance of food in festivals and rituals etc. are some examples of the close connections between food and cultural identity. Thus, food culture in cultural studies plays an important role in identifying one's own identity.

Culture is shaped and perpetuated by food. The maintenance of cultural identity as well as the promotion of diversity and understanding between cultures are dependent upon food customs and dining etiquette. People can learn about and appreciate other cultures through food, which acts as a bridge between them. According to Barthes "Food is considered to be multidimensional, as something that shapes us, our identities, and our cultures and in



the end, our society. Just as different clothes signify different things example the white coat of a doctor, the uniform of a police officer or army personnel, food also transmits a meaning. But the meaning varies from culture to culture” (as qtd. in Sibal 2). In most cultures, food plays a significant role in family life. The significance differs from culture to culture. Cooking and eating practices are often the focus of family rituals and celebrations. A host family's abundance of food serves as a sign of their wealth or social standing. The world's culinary customs are very diverse. Eating patterns differ even amongst individuals with similar cultural backgrounds and some same eating habits. Families also flee from their regular schedules on holidays, when they travel, and when they have visitors. Men and women eat in different ways. People of different age groups eat food differently.

Food is neither good nor bad in the absolute, though we have been taught to recognize it as such. The organ of taste is not the tongue, but the brain, a culturally (and therefore historically) determined organ through which are transmitted and learned the criteria for evaluation...Definitions of taste belong to the cultural heritage of human society. As there are differing tastes and predilections among different peoples and regions of the world, so do tastes and predilections evolve over the course of centuries. (Montanari 61)

All cultures have different food customs and according to their beliefs, practices, traditions. The food culture of a particular community is also largely influenced by its geographical location, climate and the religions prevailing there. Food not only contributes to physical health but also enhances mental health by fostering a sense of belonging and camaraderie which is accomplished by the sharing of food. In the journal, *Social Class Differences in Food Consumption*, Hupkens discusses about the class differences in food consumption:

Many studies in Western countries have reported social inequalities in food consumption. Social epidemiological and qualitative studies on food consumption patterns show that diets in the higher social classes are more often in line with dietary recommendations than those in the lower classes. The study reported here explores class differences in food consumption of women and aims to explain these class differences. Most studies on class differences in food choice considerations have a qualitative design. These studies confirm that there is a class difference in the extent to which mothers take health, costs and the taste preferences of their family into account when buying and preparing food. Middle-class mothers mention the 'goodness' or health value of foods more often as their primary consideration, while lower-class mothers mention the cost of food and the preferences of their partner and children more often as important considerations in their choice of food.

The choice of food also plays an extremely significant role in determining an individual's socioeconomic status. The way people eat can satisfy their inner selves and also it can please other people. Like the fashion choices people possess their eating habits can be natural, personal, or part of a created public image. Some cultural critics have pointed out that those who have a preference for sweet food are typically undereducated or have low incomes. Many factors, including age, gender, race, and class, can affect a person's general taste or preference for sweets. Research indicates that men prefer stronger intensity levels than women do and that children have a stronger affinity for sweets than adults do. The folk wisdom that is widespread among North American women is that they don't eat spaghetti on a dinner date as it is hard to look attractive while eating spaghetti.

Ernst Dichter in his systematic marketing studies showed that meats, potatoes, and coffee were considered strongly masculine by consumers, whereas rice, cake, and tea were seen as feminine. These and other, more recent, studies have shown a relatively

clear pattern of traditional sexism associated with many foods. Most “light” foods- salads, yoghurt, fruit-have a feminine image, while heavy, smelly foods- herring, pot roast, corned beef, and cabbage-are seen as masculine. The linkage between these food stereotypes and those relating to typical male and female body images hardly requires elaboration. Some foods, however, such as chicken and oranges, were found by Dichter to be “bisexual” or gender neutral. (Ditcher as qtd.in Rappoport 62)

A significant part of cultural identity has always been food, and in recent years, as more people have developed an interest in discovering other cultures through their food, the importance of it has risen. Among people from diverse backgrounds, sharing food may develop connections. Food has the power to cut down barriers between people such as language, nationality, cultural differences etc. and build understanding. In short, it acts as a significant tool for cultural exchange and unity among different diversities. Maintaining a meaningful connection to your heritage and passing down cultural knowledge depends heavily on the preservation of traditional food. The distinct history and cultural identity of a community are reflected in its culinary traditions. Preserving these traditional recipes helps in sharing the heritage they are born with, with those who might not be aware of it and keep it alive over time. Traditional food preservation is vital to the long-term survival of cultural heritage. It enables people to communicate their unique history to forthcoming generations as well as maintain a connection to their roots. Food can be used as a tool to explore and understand the customs, habits, and culture of a particular community or the world itself.

## Chapter 2

### How *Onam Sadhya* Represents Kerala's Culture

“The way we eat is closely related to who we are and who we want to become”  
(Rappoport).

Food is an integral part of Indian regional and religious culture including their customs. Every occasion, from birth ceremonies to wedding festivities, is highlighted with specific meals and symbolic ingredients. To uphold cultural customs and values, special meals are made for these events. One of those kinds of food is *Sadhya*. *Sadhya* or *Onam Sadhya* lies in the heart of the *Onam* festival which is celebrated in the Indian state of Kerala.

*Onam* is celebrated as the Harvest festival of Kerala and it embodies Kerala's culture through its sumptuous spread of 26 Vegetarian dishes. Nowadays, *Onam* holds great significance not only among Keralites but also among people from various cultural and geographical origins. People joyously celebrate this grand festival with great cultural respect all over the world. Folk culture is something that originates from a community of people who share the same cultural and economic livelihood. Hence, rituals relating to the sowing of seeds and harvesting of crops which a particular community engages in, constitute the cultural experiences they share. Which in turn becomes the culture of that particular folk (group of people). These experiences or practices that they have in common give birth to a particular culture which is also known as Folk culture. Thus, *Onam* the harvest festival marks the culture of the people in Kerala and has become one of the most celebrated festivals or most practised customs not only by Keralites but also by people around the globe.

*Onam* has its roots in the legend of the mythical king *Mahabali*. It is also considered as a grand welcome for the homecoming of the same king. King *Mahabali* during his reign deceived by Lord Vishnu and offered his head as one of the three feet of land that Lord

Vishnu had asked for. It is said that during his time of reign, there was no poverty, no crime and no cruelty. He treated everyone equally and his subjects lived very happily with strong cultural and communal bonds. The great king who had been sent to the netherworld was allowed to visit his people once a year. *Onam* is the day on which *Mahabali* chose to visit his country and his people. Hence the grateful state of Kerala honours a ruler like this who selflessly sacrificed himself for his people. Various events are carried out in this celebration such as flower carpet-making, boat races, tiger dances and the great communal feast *Onam Sadhya*.

Vegetarianism in the food culture is one of the notable practices in India. It has its roots in Indian religious traditions and values. Certain religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism foster the idea of being Vegetarian as they believe in non-violence and their respect for all living beings and forms of life led a large number of people to adopt a vegetarian lifestyle. Apart from religious beliefs, this diet carries certain health benefits too. Vegetarianism in India has made a lot of changes in the food culture of not only India but also worldwide. It made available a variety of healthy and delicious vegetarian dishes throughout the country and most parts of the world. Vegetarian feasts are an indispensable part of many of India's festivals and celebrations. *Sadhya* is one such vegetarian feast that is celebrated with *Onam* and a lot of festivals and functions primarily of the Hindu tradition. Vegetarianism has become the popular culture and *Sadhya* acts as a representation of that culture. But there are some exceptions too, In the regions of northern Kerala *Onam Sadhya* has non-vegetarian dishes as well.

“*Kaanam vittum onam unnanam*” is a famous Malayalam idiom used by Keralites concerning the culinary feast related to *Onam*, *Onam Sadhya* which embodies the importance of having *Onam Sadhya*. It means people must have *Onam Sadhya* even at the cost of selling their properties or valuables. This saying marks the vital and unavoidable role of *Sadhya*

among Keralites. *Onam Sadhya* the vegetarian feast consists of an extravagant spread of almost 26 variety delicious vegetarian dishes presented on a banana leaf, which represents abundance and acts as a link to the natural world. This magnificent feast beautifully weaves together traditions, tastes, and togetherness.

Celebrating *Onam* in all its festivity is what all Keralites want irrespective of caste, religion, region and race. What matters here is the identity each and everyone as a Keralite. Wearing Kerala's traditional dress called *Settu mundu* and having events like *Vallamkali* and *Pulikali* which have their origins in Kerala, showcases how much it is dependent or related to the traditions and culture of Kerala. An Individual who identifies as a Keralite can represent their culture through such practices or customs. Culture is a representation of various beliefs and customs in a society and these various beliefs and customs also represent different cultures. Like those practices and customs, *Onam Sadhya* is also an Identity marker or representation of Kerala's rich culture and tradition.

The *Onam Sadhya* is a tasty treat that plays an inevitable part in marking Kerala's rich culture and religion. The iconic *Onam Sadhya* is the heart of *Onam* celebrations. Kerala's cultural unity and respect for its ancient history are embodied in *Onam Sadhya*, the grand welcome and feast prepared for King *Mahabali's* yearly visit. A feast that enhances the standards of culinary creativity to a spiritual realm. Traditionally, presented on a banana leaf, this vegetarian feast offers an amazing array of 26 different dishes. The preparation of *Onam Sadhya* is a work of love that requires much thought and coordination. Every dish, including the flavourful *sambar*, crunchy golden banana chips, spicy pickles, and delicious *Payasam* dessert, is a work of culinary art that combines tradition and tastes. Every taste is authentic because of the use of locally sourced ingredients and traditional recipes. Each dish served on the *Sadhya* has a story to tell or it holds great significance in Kerala's culture and tradition. The various dishes that comprise an *Onam Sadhya* make it special. They are *Parippu*,



*Pappadam, Ghee, Sambar, Kaalan, Rasam, Moru, Aviyal, Thoran, Erissery, Olan, Kichadi, Pachadi, Kootu Curry, Injikkari, Pickles of Lime and Mango, Banana chips (Nendran variety of banana), Sarkaravaratti and Payasam.*

Matta rice, this native rice variety is renowned for both its unique flavour and reddish-brown colour. Its inclusion in the *Sadhya* highlights the abundance of local produce of *nellu* and Kerala's agricultural richness. This red rice main course dish is served with a variety of other side dishes, which is what makes the *Sadhya* complete. *Rasam, Sambar, and Parippu* curries are mixed varieties of vegetables and lentils and are the most prepared daily source of protein not only hold such great significance in *Sadhya* but also almost all over South India. Spices and flavours are blended to perfection, highlighting the state's talent for flavourful blending. Their inclusion in the *Sadhya* makes it more flavourful and diversified. *Aviyal* is an everyday dish for most Keralites and a significant component of *Sadhya*. This dish, which is a medley of vegetables cooked in a gravy made of coconut and yoghurt, represents the unity of multiple sides of Kerala's culture. The vivid colours of *Aviyal* symbolize the diversity of the state. *Thoran*, a dry vegetable panfry seasoned with spices and coconut, exhibits Kerala's expertise in creating tasty and nutritious vegetable dishes. Plantains, elephant foot yams, beans, string beans, and cabbage are all suitable choices to make *Thoran*. *Erissery, Pulissery, Kalan, and Olan* based on different vegetables and buttermilk or curd enhances the overall flavour of the *Sadhya* and its presence displays Kerala's skill at transforming basic ingredients into mouthwatering treats. *Injipuli* and different Pickles bring a spicy pop of flavour, highlighting the love Kerala has for spices. Crispy lentil-based Pappadam, adds a crunchy texture to the meal. Its inclusion signifies the importance of a variety of textures in a *Sadhya*. Banana chips and *Sharkkaravaratti* also known as *Chakkaravaratti* both emphasize the widespread banana cultivation of Kerala and its love towards that. *Payasam* is one of the most important dishes of the *Sadhya* and with this dessert, the *Sadhya* concludes. Kerala's

love for sweets and festivities is embodied in this variety of sweet treats made with rice, lentils, and vermicelli. Aripayasam, Semiyapayasam, Ada Pradhaman etc. are the different types of Payasam served.

It is evident from the dishes and ingredients used that the usage of or the significance of Coconut also known as *Nalikeram* in the *Sadhya* is unavoidable and it showcases the identity of Kerala as a land of coconut. Kerala has been well-known as “*Nalikerathinte nadu*” (the land of coconut). Another mostly used ingredient is Banana, its cultivation and the prominence it holds among the Keralites are the reasons for the inclusion of different variety dishes of Banana in *Sadhya*. Not only does the love towards bananas mark the importance but also the various significance it has with the religions and culture itself. Bananas are one of the most selling fruits in Kerala as it has many uses in different aspects. For instance, the use of bananas in the Hindu religion for Pooja and *Prasadam* etc. So, it is well understandable that the inclusion of each and every dish and ingredient holds such great significance and is a symbol of Kerala’s culture and tradition. Fresh banana leaves are said to be a natural source of polyphenols, which are antioxidants. *Sadhya* is best enjoyed with hands. According to Ayurveda, eating with hands helps in digestion and also it is considered as one of the hygienic ways of eating. A signal goes to the brain when one touches the food with their fingers which stimulates the stomach and other organs for digestion. Eating with hands gives a person more sense of what they are eating, how much and how fast they eat, those are very important factors that help for a healthy digestion.

Once the *Onam Sadhya* is ready, a lamp is lit in the south-west corner of the house called the *kannimoola* with an incense stick and the dishes are served on a tender banana leaf which is known as *thooshan ila* for Ganapathy and Mahabali. The dining of *Sadhya* would be on the floor. According to tradition, the plantain leaf’s tapering end should face the seated guest's left. The lower half of the leaf is used to serve rice. The way of serving of *Sadhya* is

diverse in different regions of Kerala. *Sadhya* rice is served only after all the side dishes and savouries have been served. The side dishes including *aviyal*, *olan*, *thoran* and savouries like *upperi*, *kichadi* etc. are served first. Then goes the rice. The feast officially starts with the serving of *Parippu*, a liquid curry made with small grains and ghee, after the rice and side dishes have been served. The second course starts with *Sambar*. In the middle of the meal, the dessert *Payasam* is served. *Pazham* and pappadam are also usually taken along with the *Payasam*. Rice is served again with the *Pulisseri* or *Kalan* after the *Payasam*. Spicy *Rasam* comes next. The feast ends with plain sour buttermilk that comes with chopped green chillies, ginger and salt to taste. It is in Trivandrum that the *Payasam* is served in the middle of the meal but it is served last in most of the other regions of Kerala.

In “The Culinary Triangle” (1966), Levi-Strauss points out that “cooking is a “truly universal form of human activity”; just as no society is without a language, there is no society which does not cook in some manner at least some of its food” (28). The ingredients in food and different recipes of the food are formed according to the culture or society it belongs to. The distinctive flavours and textures of traditional dishes are the result of the different ingredients and cooking methods used by different cultures. Just consider how *Sadhya* employs spices or the serving of which on the banana leaf. The *Sadhya* now has many dishes that were not part of it earlier and includes dishes from different cultures. For example, *Sambar* in *Sadhya* is a dish from Tamil Nadu. It is understood that the food system of a particular society has been greatly influenced by the ingredients that are readily available locally for example, the use of Matta rice and the inclusion of Coconut and banana in most of the dishes in *Sadhya*. A blending of culinary traditions is a byproduct of historical exchanges between various cultures, including colonization and trade, which brought new ingredients and cooking techniques. Cooking techniques vary among cultures these methods add to the distinctive tastes, textures and histories connected to a specific culture. While talking about

the cooking techniques it is important to mention that the traditional way of cooking or cooking based on particular cultural significances has a very prominent impact on the earth too as it was the sustainable ways of production. The use of clay pots in Kerala's food culture for cooking not only follows its traditional ways of cooking but also helps in the increase of nutrition enrichment, unlike the use of aluminium vessels which would cause bad effects on the body over time. Serving on sustainable banana leaves ensures there is no plastic waste in the celebration of this feast. The way of eating *Sadhya* which is eating with hands and eating in the banana leaf ensures *Sadhya*'s prominence in marking Kerala's Identity and also having a healthy food culture. Methods of food preservation that have been passed down through the years, like pickling, smoking, or fermenting, are often deeply entrenched in cultural traditions. By being passed down through the generations, certain dishes aid in sustaining a cultural legacy. These recipes provide a means of fostering a sense of cultural connection in addition to providing nourishment. Thus, traditional cooking techniques are not just a way of preparing food but also a way through which the cultural heritage and identity of a community take a medium through food.

The *Onam Sadhya* is a communal event that is frequently made by families and groups of people. A sense of camaraderie is nurtured through the delight of preparing, serving, and enjoying the *Sadhya* together. The preparation of the *Onam Sadhya* is a communal event as well as a culinary endeavour. Families, neighbours, and friends gather to help with peeling vegetables and assembling the elaborate spread on banana leaves. The sense of unity that defines *Onam* is enhanced by this group effort. With people from all walks of life coming together to take part in its preparation and consumption, *Onam Sadhya* is a potent symbol of unity. Kerala's values of equality and harmony are emphasized by the act of sharing a meal with one another, despite social or economic divides. The cultural identity of Keralites is reflected in the preparation and serving of *Onam Sadhya*. The authenticity of the feast is

enhanced by the use of traditional ingredients, the method of cooking, and the precise arrangement of dishes on the banana leaf.

Food offerings play a vital role in religious rituals in India. In religious beliefs, it is assumed or seen that offering food seeks god's blessing and it is also seen as a form of expressing love and affection and it is carried out as a token of gratitude. It is believed that consuming *Prasadam* will bestow blessings and divine Favour upon devotees. *Prasadam* is viewed as a means of achieving inner contentment and tranquillity, seeking growth in faith, and cleansing oneself of sins. Also, the purity of food and treating food with sanctity beholds unavoidable significance in the Indian culture. The rituals like taking a bath before cooking, treating food with ultimate value etc. are some of the practices that ensure the sanctity of food. Practices such as that help in maintaining purity and cleanliness and help to avoid impurities while preparing or consuming food. Being vegetarian holds the motive of not only avoiding bad health effects but also the value of compassion towards animals and nature in Indian cultures and religions. The Indian culture greatly depends on the agrarian society so the harvest festivals are an essential component of the country's culture. Celebrating the abundant harvest and expressing gratitude towards farmers and the natural world are the themes of harvest festivals. Festivals such as *Onam*, *Baisakhi*, and *Makar Sankranti* in India are a source of immense joy. These festivities act as a reminder of the mutual dependency of people, the environment, and the food they eat. Certain dishes are made with freshly harvested fruits, vegetables, and grains during harvest festivals. *Onam Sadhya* is one among them. Sesame and jaggery-based desserts like *gur rewari* and *til laddus* are prepared during *Makar Sankranti*. A staple of South India's harvest festival is *Pongal*, a dish made with newly harvested rice. These foods not only symbolize the abundant harvest but also call forth blessings for wealth and health. Indian culture places a high value on hospitality, and one of the most important ways to show warmth and generosity to visitors is through food. The

belief that one can get into someone's heart through their stomach is a well-known cliché. Whether it's a way to celebrate special occasions or a way to greet guests, providing food is regarded as a fundamental component of hospitality, this is so especially in India. Traditional Indian snacks and sweets have a special place in Indian gift-giving customs. As a sign of affection and well wishes, people exchange boxes of sweets like *laddoos*, *barfis*, and *jalebis* during festivals and special occasions. In India, sharing food is more than just a gesture—it's frequently accompanied by a variety of social customs and traditions. Like that, people in Kerala also try to make the *Onam Sadhya* available to those it is unavailable or to those who are not capable of celebrating *Onam* to such an extent. It is not just in words Keralites try to keep up their well-known harmony and coexistence but also in their deeds. Doing so proclaims Kerala's Identity in companionship.

Cultural bonds emerge through eating together, sharing meals and food-related social customs. Mealtime customs can differ greatly between cultures and add to the uniqueness of each culinary tradition. The arrangement of meals, the number of courses included and served and the pace of eating are some of the instances of such customs above mentioned. Cultural customs determine what, when and with whom individuals eat. For example, sharing a meal or individual portions has specific rules in some cultures. Food acts as a prominent initiator of social and individual bonding and for the mixed building of a community all over the world. Especially in India, food is considered as a medium through which people can find connections and bonding. Food has this powerful gift of connecting people irrespective of language, religion, region, caste, creed etc. (whereas exemptions are also there in some cases) and provides unending opportunities for the people to bond together, spend time together and to know each other. It also creates relationships that transcend beyond the food realm.

Culture and Identity are something that cannot be seen as fixed or unchanging, They change over time and when developments happen in places and in an individual. In the



modern era, there are a lot of changes happening in the cultural and behavioural patterns of Kerala as everyone runs behind the so-called westernisation. The way of dressing, the way of eating and the way of living have gone through a lot of modifications in the process of Westernising. Thus, Globalisation and westernisation affected all walks of life not only in Kerala but also in a lot of communities, It includes the cultural customs and traditions and also the way people celebrate their festivals.

Folk culture is the practices, customs and traditions of a particular community by which the meaning or their identity is created differs from the popular contemporary culture which has its origin in the idea of profit-making. Let's see the celebration of *Onam* and *Onam Sadhya* in the modern world. While talking about the *Onam* in contemporary culture it is not possible to avoid but acknowledge that the capitalist economy has overpowered the cultural significance of *Onam*, by making *Onam* a source of profit-making in the shifting consumer culture. For example, the so-called *Onam* sales in the shopping industry and the ready availability of *Onam Sadhya* in the market have replaced a lot of cultural practices like making the *Sadhya* and enjoying it with family.

With the spread of Keralites all over the world, it is seen that almost all non-Keralites have also gotten to know about the great festival of *Onam* and have begun to take part in the celebrations conducted by the people of Kerala and enjoy this cultural fest. Changes are also seen in the way *Onam Sadhya* is prepared, arranged and in the ingredients used. The availability of a vast variety of ingredients from around the globe has been made easier by globalisation. As a result, *Onam Sadhya* now uses nontraditional ingredients, broadening culinary options. Additionally, it has promoted culinary fusion, leading chefs to infuse traditional *Onam Sadhya* dishes with flavours and cooking methods from around the world. This might lead to the development of modern variations on conventional recipes. The way *Onam Sadhya* is prepared and presented may change as a result of exposure to international

cuisines and culinary trends. Prominent of these is the inclusion of the non-veg items in the pure vegetarian *Sadhya*. Home cooks and chefs alike may experiment with various cooking methods and styles that they have acquired from other cultures. Cultural exchange is encouraged by modernization, and the *Onam Sadhya* menu reflects this. A more diverse and exciting culinary experience could result from people being more willing to include ingredients from different cultures in the feast. *Onam Sadhya* may become more commercialized as a result of improved global connectivity, particularly in metropolitan areas. To appeal to a wider range of individuals, restaurants and catering services may offer alterations of *Onam Sadhya*. The ability to find traditional Kerala ingredients more easily across the globe is another benefit of globalisation. This guarantees people who belong to Kerala and residing overseas can continue to celebrate *Onam* by making a customary *Sadhya*. Global communication and travel have expanded people's understanding and admiration of other cultures, including their traditional foods. This may lead to *Onam Sadhya* being celebrated and recognized more widely outside Kerala.

Eating habits are among the many lifestyle changes brought about by globalisation. This could have an effect on how people prepare and eat *Onam Sadhya*, and it might even lead to changes in the traditional recipes to suit contemporary tastes. It's crucial to remember that, despite the potential for change brought about by globalisation, maintaining cultural traditions and legacy is highly valued. Many attempts to preserve the originality of *Onam Sadhya* while blending flavours from around the world of cuisine. Depending on personal preferences, regional variations, and level of exposure to global influences, *Onam Sadhya* may be influenced by globalisation to a certain extent.

While accepting modern changes, the celebration of *Onam* today adheres to these essential tenets of *Onam*. The flower carpets known as *Pookalam* are now expressed digitally. To create virtual *Pookalam*, families and individuals can utilize design software or

mobile apps. Social media sites like Facebook and Instagram are frequently used to share these digital works of art, giving a larger audience a chance to enjoy the artistry. Social media is a major factor that fosters a sense of belonging among Keralites across the globe. The *Onam* custom of buying new clothes and presents for loved ones has embraced the ease of online shopping. There are many options available for traditional items, clothing and accessories on online shopping platforms. Online recipes and cooking tutorials have made preparing the elaborate *Onam Sadhya* easier. The people of Kerala communities gather for elaborate *Onam* celebrations across the globe. It includes cultural gatherings, customary performances and delicious feasts in nations like the United States, the United Kingdom and several Gulf states. These get-togethers strengthen cultural bonds in addition to celebrating *Onam*. The technology guarantees that the traditional *Onam* rites are carried out correctly. To obtain the appropriate prayers, ceremonies and music that go along with these rituals, many people use online resources. Via live streaming and virtual performances, classic Kerala art forms like *Kathakali* and *Mohiniyattam* along with catchy *Onam* songs, are presented to a worldwide audience. This makes Kerala's culture visible on a global level. Charitable donations have always been an important factor of *Onam*. Donations to charitable organizations are made easier in the modern era by online platforms. These platforms are used by a lot of people and organizations to help the less fortunate during this giving season. Contemporary *Onam* celebrations seamlessly blend traditional customs with modern technologies. The festival will continue to be preserved important and accessible to Malayalees in Kerala and around the globe because of this fusion. It serves as evidence of the long-lasting value of a culture and community in a world that is constantly changing. So, it has to be accepted that like a coin has both sides, globalisation has positive and negative impacts on cultural heritage.

*Sadhya* is mainly served during *Onam*. Even though Keralites do prepare and serve *Sadhya* on some other celebrations and festivals, especially in Hindu tradition. It has been an essential item not only for the *Onam* but also for the wedding festivities and now often on Vishu too. On special occasions like birthdays, some families also give *Sadhyas*. While some temples offer special *Sadhya* on significant festivals and auspicious days, others offer it every day as voluntary work. The balanced and rich in nutrients *Sadhya* meal promotes healthy digestion and ideal body absorption of nutrients.

Every element of the *Sadhya* is reasonable, including the selection of ingredients for the dishes, the arrangement of the plantain leaf, and the arrangement in which they are served. Gaining insight into the science underlying the *Sadhya* allows people to more clearly appreciate the ingredient choices and identify deeper meanings in these recipes.

## Conclusion

*Onam Sadhya* is a precious identity marker of Kerala's rich tradition and culture. This elaborate vegetarian feast, served on banana leaves, is more than just a culinary treat; it captures the spirit of Kerala's cultural legacy and historical significance. *Onam* is a celebration of harmony, giving, and hospitality that helps Keralites feel a sense of belonging and a common identity. The mastery in preparation and presentation of *Onam Sadhya* highlights the rich variety of flavours and culinary greatness found in Kerala's traditional cuisine. A cultural phenomenon that spans generations, the feast's authenticity is enhanced by the use of locally sourced ingredients, traditional cooking techniques, and the particular arrangement of dishes on the banana leaf.

In addition to being a culinary delight, *Onam Sadhya* is a symbol of the values and ideals that define Kerala's society. With its lavish feast, the *Onam* festival brings together people from many communities and backgrounds, highlighting the idea of harmony and unity. Kerala's cultural identity is preserved and passed on to future generations through the annual celebration of *Onam Sadhya*. It acts as a reminder of the glorious past of the state, the story of King *Mahabali* and the timeless principles that support Kerala's diverse cultural heritage. *Onam* encapsulates the spirit of unity, abundance, and tradition. With each passing year, the festival continues to bridge the gap between generations, ensuring that the legacy of *Onam* remains alive and cherished. It's a celebration that stays in an individual's memory long after the last bite, because the *Sadhya* embodies the true spirit of Kerala, beyond its mouthwatering cuisine.

In essence, *Onam Sadhya* is a powerful representation that embodies the camaraderie, compassion, and sense of cultural pride of the Kerala people. It's more than just a meal; it's a

celebration of diversity, an expression of tradition and an indication of the versatile spirit of a community that is firmly anchored in its cultural history.

Considering all the facts, theories and ideas discussed throughout this paper, it doesn't make any opposition to state that *Onam Sadhya* as an identity marker of Kerala's rich Culture and Tradition. It represents Kerala's cultural heritage, traditions, tastes, and togetherness unitedly through the medium food.



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