

GULF TIMES onam

THE FESTIVAL OF KERALA

annual

27 August, 2023

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ONASADYA:
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EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEWS

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DIRECTOR BLESSY
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MESSAGE

I am glad to note that the Gulf Times in collaboration with M/s. Benchmark Events LLC is planning to publish a special magazine titled '*Onam Annual*' to commemorate this year's Onam Festival.

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

I wish the readers of '*Onam Annual*', a very happy Onam.

Pinarayi Vijayan

EDITOR'S NOTE

MORE THAN JUST A FESTIVAL

Kerala, the picturesque paradise in the southern part of India, is a land that captures hearts with its rich cultural heritage, diverse traditions, and warm hospitality. Known as 'God's Own Country,' the state's exquisite charm is a result of its distinctive geographical characteristics. The Western Ghats mountain range graces one side, while the other is caressed by the shores of the Arabian Sea. This creates a stunning contrast between the lush greenery of the hills and the tranquil backwaters that meander through the coastal plains.

At the core of Kerala's cultural tapestry are its festivals. Among these, Onam, the festival of harvest, is a cherished celebration that holds a special place in the hearts of Keralites around the world. It transcends cultural boundaries, uniting people from diverse backgrounds into a collective experience of happiness and companionship.

For expatriates, Onam often becomes a way to reconnect with their cultural roots and share their heritage with others. Even though they might be far away from their homeland, the memories of Onam from their childhood evoke feelings of warmth, nostalgia, and a sense of belonging. Consequently, many Malayalee communities abroad organise Onam festivities, including sadhya (traditional feast) and cultural performances, in an effort to recapture the enchantment of the festival.

There are around half a million Keralites in Qatar. As a leading English newspaper in this region, we

recognize the diverse and multicultural community that makes Qatar its home. It is with this spirit of inclusivity that we bring you this unique compilation that sheds light on the captivating beauty and rich heritage of Kerala. This special supplement titled 'Onam Annual' is dedicated to every Malayalees in Qatar.

As you flip through the pages, be sure to explore our exclusive interview with Mohammed Riyas, the Minister of Public Works and Tourism in Kerala, which is featured on page 7. Additionally, don't miss our engaging encounter with Mamta Mohandas on page 62 where she speaks about her journey in the film industry, recounting the highs and lows that have shaped her into the artist and person she is today.

We also bring you a free-wheeling conversation with Director Blessy (page 52), as he delves deep into his upcoming masterpiece, "Aadujeevitham," a prominent portrayal of a migrant worker's fight for survival. The director sheds light on the driving forces that led to the film's creation, the obstacles that were conquered during its production journey, and the tangible excitement radiating from the eager audience as the highly anticipated release of the film draws near.

We hope you enjoy reading it as much as we enjoyed putting it together.

Happy Onam to one and all.

Amjad Vanimal

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PAGE 62

AI created cover image
by Razal K Pareed



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GULF TIMES

onam annual

THE FESTIVAL OF KERALA

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THE BOUNDLESS POTENTIAL OF KERALA TOURISM

Mohammed Riyas, Kerala's Minister for Tourism and Public Works, shares his perspective with **Amjad Vanimal**, delving into the captivating realm of Kerala's tourism landscape

With an acute focus on the surging influx of both domestic and international tourists, the minister sheds light on the region's dynamic allure and the strategic initiatives that underpin its position as a prime global destination. We explore the intricate aspects of Kerala's tourism industry and find out the minister's perspective on achieving its sustainable expansion and lasting allure.



Q: How has Kerala's tourism industry evolved in the past few years, and what steps has the government taken to promote it both domestically and internationally?

A: As in the case of other destinations, Kerala too faced harsh realities of the global pandemic, and the recovery wasn't smooth. We faced challenges, but measures were taken regularly to bounce back. First of all, we did not sit idle- fingers crossed; rather we interacted with the industry, brainstormed and steps were taken together for meeting the challenges. Initially, we supported the private sector by way of financial packages which could help to boost the confidence. During the Covid-19 period itself, vaccination drive was initiated among the workers which could help them to sustain in the industry and to serve the travellers with confidence. Virtual tours were promoted and marketing and promotion efforts were undertaken. Initial focus was given on domestic tourism, which could support the industry to revive the businesses. Staycation and workation concepts were aggressively promoted, and that could stimulate domestic tourist influx into the destinations.

Simultaneously, we introduced new tourism products, like caravan tourism, which became a real boost to the tourism sector. Moreover, we successfully organized Bepore Water Fest which could instill demand for tourism in the northern Kerala. A series of other events were also organized which all could enhance the spirit of tourism in the state. Water-based adventure tourism was also promoted well. Without any delay, marketing and promotion efforts at national and international levels intensified, we took part in International trade fairs, organized road shows in major tourism markets, and the like. By the end of 2022, Kerala could bounce back extremely well, by posting incredible growth in tourist arrivals. In 2022, the state welcomed an impressive 1.88 crore domestic tourists, reflecting an unprecedented and unparalleled surge in tourist visits during the period after Covid-19. Moreover, there has been a gradual rise in the count of foreign tourists as well.

Q: Kerala has been a popular destination for foreign visitors. Could you share some insights into the recent trends in foreign tourist arrivals to the state, and what initiatives have been implemented to attract more international travellers?

A: In the post-Covid scenario, international tourism across the world is progressing at a slower pace compared to domestic tourism. The same is the case with Kerala too. Immediately after the pandemic, domestic tourism restarted and it slowly progressed. In a few months of time, there was a sudden rise in domestic tourists' arrivals which could pave the way for the revival of Kerala Tourism. Number of international tourists' arrivals too progressed gradually, and by mid of 2022 itself there was remarkable rise in international arrivals. The trend continues and we expect the international tourism return to normalcy by the end of this year itself.

With regard to marketing on foreign lands to attract more tourists, Kerala tourism has been taking aggressive measures. Our marketing efforts tend to be more oriented for promoting, positioning, branding and selling destination. We focus on both domestic as well as international marketing strategies. With regard to inbound tourism, our major source markets are from

European countries, and we understood the importance of such countries for the state's tourism. Therefore, we regularly undertake much focused promotion efforts in those regions. We take part in all leading Travel Marts, including World Travel Market, London, ITB Berlin, etc. Furthermore, we organize a series of road shows in major source countries. Lately, our attention has expanded to include Russia, in addition to our existing focus on GCC countries. During the year, Kerala made a deep impression at major tourism and travel fairs in India and abroad like BIT Milan, IMTM Tel Aviv, ATM Dubai and WTM London.

Q: Sustainable tourism is gaining importance worldwide. How does the government of Kerala plan to balance the growth of tourism with environmental conservation and the preservation of the state's natural beauty?

A: There has been an emphasis on tourism development in a sustainable manner in the state. In addition to it, Kerala is the leader in the promotion of Responsible Tourism (RT), and RT is fundamentally a form of sustainable tourism. Under environmental responsibilities amid alarming climate change, the RT Mission is decided to give high priority for reducing green-house gas emissions. Optimal consumption need to be promoted as resources are finite. Absolutely, safeguarding our natural heritage is of paramount importance, and ongoing endeavors are dedicated to the preservation of our diverse flora and fauna. The recently-introduced design policy places a strong emphasis on ecological conservation. There is a heightened emphasis on enhancing the natural beauty of destinations.

Q: Kerala is known for its unique culture and traditions. How is the government promoting and preserving the state's cultural heritage to enhance the overall tourist experience?

A: The restoration and preservation of the state's grand heritage stands as a foremost priority for Kerala tourism. Heritage based tourism promotion is taking place across the state, and in north Malabar the traditional art forms are well utilized for attracting tourists. Even the temple art and ritual forms are tourist attractions now. The recently introduced 'En Ooru,' a tribal heritage village at Pookode in Wayanad district which showcases the vibrant culture and tradition of tribal communities of the state, is a testimony to the efforts of the state to promote cultural tourism. It not only protects the endangered art and craft forms of the tribal communities, but also gives us a golden opportunity to learn about the heritage and lifestyle of people of the land. The Muziris Heritage Project is another example, which helps in reinstating the historical and cultural significance of the legendary port of Muziris. Heritage tourism has also been strengthened by phased development of projects like Travancore Heritage Tourism Project.

Q: Onam is one of Kerala's most important festivals, attracting both domestic and foreign tourists. Could you elaborate on the government's efforts to celebrate Onam on a grand scale and make it an unforgettable experience for visitors?

A: Onam is known for the cultural vibrancy offered in this period. The cities will have state Onam week celebrations and the visitors can enjoy the varieties

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THE STATE INITIATES A VARIETY OF ACTIVITIES DURING THE ONAM CELEBRATIONS, OFFERING A PLATFORM FOR LOCAL ARTISANS AND TRADITIONAL ART PRACTITIONERS TO DISPLAY THEIR SKILLS AND CRAFTSMANSHIP

offered. Competitions of different types of are taking place across the state. All the district headquarters and in other prominent locations will have Onam week celebrations. Food festivals are also there in parts of the state. Onam is a major cultural event with tremendous scope to attract tourists to the State. Foreign tourists are welcomed.

For this year's Onam celebration, special seating arrangements will be arranged for tourists, and innovative projects will be conceptualized to attract even more visitors during future Onam festivities. Certainly, Onam is to be promoted further as an event based tourism. Just like Thrissur Pooram, which garnered international attention among travellers, the events connected with Onam also need to be effectively marketed.

Q: Onam also offers an excellent opportunity to showcase Kerala's unique art forms and traditional performances. How does the government promote and support local artists and artisans during the Onam festivities?

A: Undoubtedly, Onam serves as an ideal occasion for showcasing the cultural facets of the state. The festival is marked by various customs, rituals, and cultural activities that showcase the rich traditions of Kerala. The state initiates a variety of activities during the Onam celebrations, offering a platform for local artisans and traditional art practitioners to display their skills and craftsmanship. During Onam, a number of cultural events are organized, including music and dance performances, plays, and traditional art exhibitions. These occasions offer locals and visitors to find a place for showcasing Kerala's rich cultural history, along with find out income-earning prospects.

Q: The backwaters of Kerala are a significant attraction for tourists. What initiatives are being taken to preserve these water bodies, and how is the government ensuring responsible tourism practices in the backwater regions?

A: Backwaters are ecologically fragile destinations and it is imminent to take sufficient measures to promote backwaters of the state as ideal sustainable tourism destinations. Responsible Tourism has been successfully implemented in the backwater tourism destination, like Kumarakom. The Responsible Tourism project, implemented way back in 2008 in Kumarakom became a big success. The project was successful especially in involving the local community in the tourism development, and in taking necessary sustainability measures.

Q: Ayurveda and wellness tourism are gaining popularity among foreign visitors. Can you shed light on the steps taken to promote Kerala as a wellness destination and the integration of Ayurveda into the tourism offerings?

A: Certainly, Ayurveda has been a USP of Kerala tourism for a couple of decades, and we are keen on further enhancing its promotion. Kerala has immense scope to promote wellness tourism. Monsoon season is ideal for Ayurveda, and tourists from far and wide visit Kerala to engage in wellness tourism activities as well. Ayurveda has already been integrated into the hospitality sector within the state. Yet, we would like to increase the number of travellers who seek wellness tourism.

Q: Kerala has a vast potential for adventure tourism, including trekking, wildlife safaris, and watersports. How does the government plan to develop and market these adventure activities to attract thrill-seeking travellers?

A: Adventure tourism remains one of the most untapped potentials within the state. To address this, there exists a dedicated Adventure Tourism Promotion Society focused on developing and promoting adventure tourism. Recently, we could progress much in promoting water-based adventure tourism activities. New destinations and activities are being identified, commoditized and marketed. Of late, we have decided to identify and map the popular trekking and hiking routes in 50 select locations, with the objective of bringing adventure travellers close to nature and enabling them to experience the diverse natural wonders of the state. We are also planning to have adventure tourism training programmes and courses for those who would like learn and get trained in adventure activities.

Q: Digital marketing and online presence play a crucial role in attracting foreign tourists. What strategies has the government adopted to leverage digital platforms to reach out to potential international visitors?

A: Kerala has been at the forefront of leveraging IT for the advancement of tourism. The state has received multiple awards for its innovative utilization of information technology in this realm. Its website is one that is offered in multiple languages. Kerala tourism extensively harnesses the power of social media platforms. The sector has effectively employed virtual reality to its advantage. It consistently stays updated with the latest information and communication technology for promoting tourism. There are plans to incorporate AI integration into marketing strategies.

Q: Finally, could you provide some insights into the vision and long-term plans of the government regarding Kerala's tourism industry, particularly in terms of increasing foreign tourist arrivals and boosting the overall economic impact of tourism on the state?

A: We are pursuing a multi-pronged strategy to elevate Kerala tourism to new heights. On one front, we are actively enhancing infrastructure development. This is receiving special attention through innovative design policy directives. Though development is the prime agenda, we still would like to adhere to the principles of Sustainable Development. Kerala tourism thrives on the natural heritage, and it is our duty to conserve it as well. Currently, corridors with national or international connectivity are being developed for tourism. Among the corridor-based tourism development plans, heli-tourism is set to take off in the near future. Enhancing international marketing is another focus area. Our tourism development agenda is firmly grounded in principles of conservation, financial equitability, and sustainable development.

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Onam

THE COLOURFUL HARVEST FESTIVAL OF KERALA

Onam, a joyous and culturally significant festival, shines as one of the liveliest and celebrated events in the Indian state of Kerala. This vibrant occasion takes place every year during the Malayalam month of Chingam, which typically falls in August-September. Spanning over ten days, Onam commemorates the legendary return of the benevolent king, Mahabali.

This enchanting festival serves as a unifying force, bringing together people from all walks of life in Kerala, transcending barriers of caste, creed, and religion. The spirit of unity, love, and prosperity fills the air, as the entire community revels in the festivities. Onam is a time for immense joy, where cultural customs and traditions take center stage, painting the state in a kaleidoscope of colors and merriment.

The tale of Onam revolves around the compassionate King Mahabali, who once ruled over the ancient land of Kerala. As the legend goes, Mahabali was a just and virtuous ruler, deeply adored and respected by his people. However, his growing influence and popularity began to worry the gods, particularly Lord Vishnu. To counter this, Vishnu assumed the form of Vamana, a diminutive Brahmin.

Approaching Mahabali with humility, Vamana requested a piece of land he could measure in three strides. Impressed by the young Brahmin's modesty, Mahabali granted the request. But as soon as Vamana took his first step, he expanded in size, covering the entire

THIS ENCHANTING FESTIVAL SERVES AS A UNIFYING FORCE, BRINGING TOGETHER PEOPLE FROM ALL WALKS OF LIFE IN KERALA, TRANSCENDING BARRIERS OF CASTE, CREED, AND RELIGION.

earth. With his second step, he reached the heavens, leaving no space for Mahabali to fulfill his promise. It became evident to Mahabali that Vamana was no ordinary Brahmin; he was a divine entity.

Realizing the true identity of his guest, Mahabali offered his own head as a stepping stone for Vamana's third stride. Touched by Mahabali's sacrifice and humility, Vamana granted the benevolent king a final wish before sending him to the netherworld. Mahabali chose to return to his beloved Kerala once a year to visit his subjects.

Thus, the tradition of Onam began, commemorating the annual homecoming of King Mahabali. This festival symbolizes his enduring love and bond with his people, celebrating unity, prosperity, and the spirit of benevolence that once graced the land under his rule.

The Legend of Mahabali



| A powerful demon & kind king, Mahabali was a ruler who loved his people. The fame of this benevolent ruler spread all over the universe.



| Devas started to fear Mahabali's popularity. Aditi, the mother of Devas, conveyed the concern to Lord Vishnu who decided to test Mahabali.

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| Mahabali started a 'yaga' called 'Vishwajith' to conquer the entire universe. Lord Vishnu took the Vamana Avatar & came as a Brahmin kid.



| To test the generosity of the king, Vamana request him for three steps of land. Mahabali instantly agrees to the request of Vamana.

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I Vamana grew in size. With his two steps, he covered the heaven and the Earth. He put the third on Mahabali's head and pushed him to netherworld.



I The lord granted Mahabali's wish to come back and see his subjects once a year. Malayalees believe that this happened on Thiruvonam day.

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Farming Rituals

In Kerala, the month of Chingam coincides with the bountiful harvest season. Legends and myths are a rich part of Onam. However, Onam is also Kerala's harvest festival. The first harvest occurs during the month of Chingam and is known as 'Chingakoythu'. As it extends to the month of 'Kanni', it is also referred to as 'Kannikoythu'. In places such as Kuttanad and Palakkad, harvest follows the rainy season. The lush fields of Kuttanad are all set to welcome the harvest season.

Illam Nira is a tradition that falls on the first Sunday after 'Karkidaka Vavu'. Rice is harvested and taken

to homes and filled on the worship rooms. It is still religiously observed in old households. Puthari is another observance of making rice dishes using the fresh harvest. Niraputhari observed in Guruvayoor temple is famous. Sabarimala temple also opens for Niraputhari that falls on August 4.

In the northern Malabar region, this extends from Karkkidakam to Uthradam days. 'Onakkazhchakal' is yet another ritual observed in temples where devotees make offerings. On the day of Uthradam, one can see rows of 'Kazhchakulas' or bunches of banana offered at the Guruvayoor Temple.



Pookkalam

FLORAL CARPETS ARE A SYMBOL OF PROSPERITY AND JOY

Pookkalam (floral carpet) can rightly be described as one of the faces of the Onam celebration. Athappokkalam is symbolic of prosperity and joy. Starting from the day of Atham, pookkalams are created in Malayali households across the State. It is believed that these pookkalams are made to welcome Mahabali. In earlier times, only locally available flowers were used to create pookkalams. These days, flowers from far and wide also find their place in these pookkalams, making them visually stunning.

The designing of these pookkalams are a popular recreational event these days. There are several regional differences in the way these pookkalams are created. On the first day, only one row of flowers will be created. On the second day, two rows will be created. The size of the pookkalam will keep increasing this way. On the day of Moolam, the Pookkalam will be square-shaped and will be known as 'Moolakkalam'. The largest Pookkalam will be designed on the day of Uthradam. These days, several clubs, offices and associations conduct Pookkalam competitions, adding to the zest of Onam celebrations.



Thiruvathirakali

Thiruvathirakali or Kaikottikali is a unique dance performed in Kerala on the auspicious day of Thiruvathira, the birthday of Lord Shiva. It is performed by women who seek blessings for eternal marital bliss. It falls in the Malayalam month of Dhanu (December-January).

Groups of up to eight or ten women are seen dressed in traditional Kerala attire, dancing in a circle. The graceful movements of the dance are both enchanting and elegant. The white saris with colourful borders along with fresh jasmines adorning their hair make for a wonderful sight.



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Onam Games

FESTIVE SPIRIT GOES TO THE NEXT LEVEL WITH THESE EXCITING EVENTS

The festive spirit of Onam is enkindled with a number of games that are played locally. Kerala has various such games and one of the most popular ones played during Onam time is the 'Pulikkali'. Though there are various versions of Pulikkali, the most popular one is played in Thrissur.

'Kummattikkali', an exciting Onam game, is also popularly practised in Thrissur. Sometimes Kummattikkali can be seen in between Pulikkali. 'Thiruvathirakkali' is also a much-performed dance form that is held across the

State during Onam. One of the more traditional Onam games is the 'Onathallu'. Being an agricultural festival, Onam also brings with it various games related to the fields. 'Maramadi' is one of these games and is practiced among agricultural communities.

Apart from these popular games, Onam is also a time when various other not-so-common ethnic games such as Thalapanthukali, Kaduva Kali, Karadikkali, Kilithattu Kali, Kuttigum Kolum and Manikya Chembazhukka are played.

Kummattikkali





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THE VIBRANT MASK DANCE OF KERALA

Among the many traditional art forms that grace the festivals and celebrations of Kerala, Kummattikali stands out as a vibrant and colourful mask dance. Rooted in ancient folklore and ritualistic practices, Kummattikali is a captivating art form that reflects the spirit and essence of Kerala's cultural landscape.

Origins and History

Kummattikali has a history that can be traced back to ancient times. Its origins are believed to be associated with the Bhadrakali cult, a form of the Hindu goddess Kali. The dance form has been an integral part of the traditional harvest festival of Onam, which is celebrated with much fervor and enthusiasm in Kerala. The word "Kummattikali" is derived from the Malayalam language, with "Kumma" meaning mask and "Kali" referring to a performance or dance.

Performance and Costumes

Kummattikali is a highly structured group dance, typically performed by a troupe of male artists known as "Kummattikali Kaliyogams." These performers don vibrant and colorful wooden masks, representing various characters and mythological figures, and enact a series of well-choreographed movements. Each mask is skillfully handcrafted by artisans, showcasing meticulous attention to detail.

The costumes of Kummattikali performers are equally captivating. They wear long skirts made of plaited grass, adorned with colorful ribbons and other decorative elements. To complete their attire, the performers carry painted wooden sticks, known as "udukku" and "chenda," traditional musical instruments used to accompany the dance.

Themes and Narratives

The performances of Kummattikali are known for their entertaining and allegorical themes. The masks used in the dance often depict characters from Indian mythology, historical figures, animals, and even comical representations of social and political figures. Some of the common characters include demons, gods, animals like lions and tigers, and even European colonial figures.

The dance's narrative typically revolves around the triumph of good over evil, with the performers enacting various stories and episodes with lively movements and gestures. Through the art form, Kummattikali artists convey moral lessons, folklore, and societal messages while entertaining the audience.

KUMMATTIKALI HAS FOUND ITS PLACE ON LARGER STAGES, INCLUDING NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL FESTIVALS, THEREBY GAINING RECOGNITION AND APPRECIATION WORLDWIDE.

Significance and Cultural Importance

Kummattikali is not just a form of entertainment; it carries profound cultural and social significance. The dance form showcases Kerala's traditional artistic prowess and serves as a means of preserving the state's unique folklore and historical narratives. Additionally, it fosters a sense of community and unity among the performers, promoting the spirit of togetherness.

Over the years, Kummattikali has evolved from being solely associated with the Onam festival to becoming a part of various cultural events, religious ceremonies, and even social gatherings. It has found its place on larger stages, including national and international festivals, thereby gaining recognition and appreciation worldwide.

Preserving Tradition in Modern Times

While Kummattikali continues to thrive in the hearts of Kerala's people, the art form faces certain challenges in the modern era. As society evolves and the pace of life quickens, traditional art forms like Kummattikali confront the risk of losing their prominence. However, the government and various cultural organizations have taken initiatives to promote and preserve these art forms through festivals, workshops, and educational programs.

Kummattikali is a jewel in Kerala's cultural crown, blending art, tradition, and storytelling in a mesmerizing dance form. Its colorful masks, intricate costumes, and captivating narratives have the power to transport the audience into a world of wonder and delight. As we embrace modernity, it is essential to cherish and preserve the treasures of our heritage, and Kummattikali stands as a vivid reminder of Kerala's cultural identity and the timeless beauty of its artistic expressions.

Vadamvali



Vadamvali, a highlight of Onam in Kerala, is a gripping Tug of War contest where two groups' strength is pitted against each other. This sport melds teamwork, strategy, and energy as opposing teams pull a hefty rope in opposite directions. In a short span, it offers thrilling entertainment for players and spectators. Typically featuring two teams of eight, participant numbers can rise to 10-15 for added competitiveness. The total team weight must stay within set limits for professional matches. Teams prepare on marked courts with a 10cm diameter rope adorned with a middle mark and coloured handkerchief. By pulling opponents past the midpoint, a team secures victory. Some professional events even include heavyweight categories to amplify the excitement.



Pakida Kali

Pakida Kali is a game of dice popular during Onam celebrations. It is played on a platform made of wood in which segments (kalam) are drawn. The 96 segments are arranged in four columns. Pakida, a copper or brass instrument, is spread out like a chess board, and the movements are made using a tool called Choothu.

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THE COLOURFUL TIGER DANCE OF KERALA

With its vibrant colours, dynamic movements, and cultural significance, Pulikkali is a mesmerizing testament to the rich heritage of Kerala

India is a land of diverse cultures and traditions, and one such vibrant and exuberant celebration that captures the essence of Kerala's rich heritage is "Pulikkali." Known as the "Tiger Dance," Pulikkali is a unique and visually stunning folk art form that has been a part of the state's cultural fabric for centuries. This captivating festival showcases the artistic prowess and spirit of the people of Kerala, making it a must-see spectacle for anyone seeking an immersive experience of the region's traditions.



Origins and History

Pulikkali has its roots in the central Thrissur district of Kerala, particularly in the city of Thrissur, where it originated during the 19th century. The word "Pulikkali" can be broken down into two parts: "Puli," which means tiger, and "Kali," which translates to play or dance.

The festival is believed to have been started by the Maharaja Rama Varma Sakthan Thampuran, the ruler of the erstwhile Kingdom of Cochin, who initiated the celebration to boost the morale of his soldiers and foster a spirit of unity among the people.

The Performance

The main attraction of Pulikkali is the colourful and elaborate makeup and costumes donned by the participants. Local men paint their bodies to resemble majestic tigers, complete with intricate details that mimic the animal's fur and stripes. The transformation is so vivid and lifelike that one might momentarily believe a pack of tigers is roaming the streets.

During the festival, these "tigers" gather to dance and prance around in the streets, showcasing their agility and strength as they emulate the movements of real tigers. The participants also engage in playful acts, imitating the behavior of the big cat, which includes stalking, pouncing, and even roaring. The synchronization and coordination of the performers are awe-inspiring and provide an unforgettable visual treat for spectators.

Celebration and Significance

Pulikkali is celebrated annually during the Onam festival, which typically falls in August or September. The event attracts thousands of locals and tourists alike, creating a vibrant atmosphere of camaraderie and joy.

The festival also holds cultural significance as it celebrates the harmonious coexistence of humans and wildlife, emphasizing the importance of preserving the balance of nature. Tigers have been an integral part of Kerala's history, and the dance form serves as a tribute to the majestic animal while raising awareness about conservation efforts.

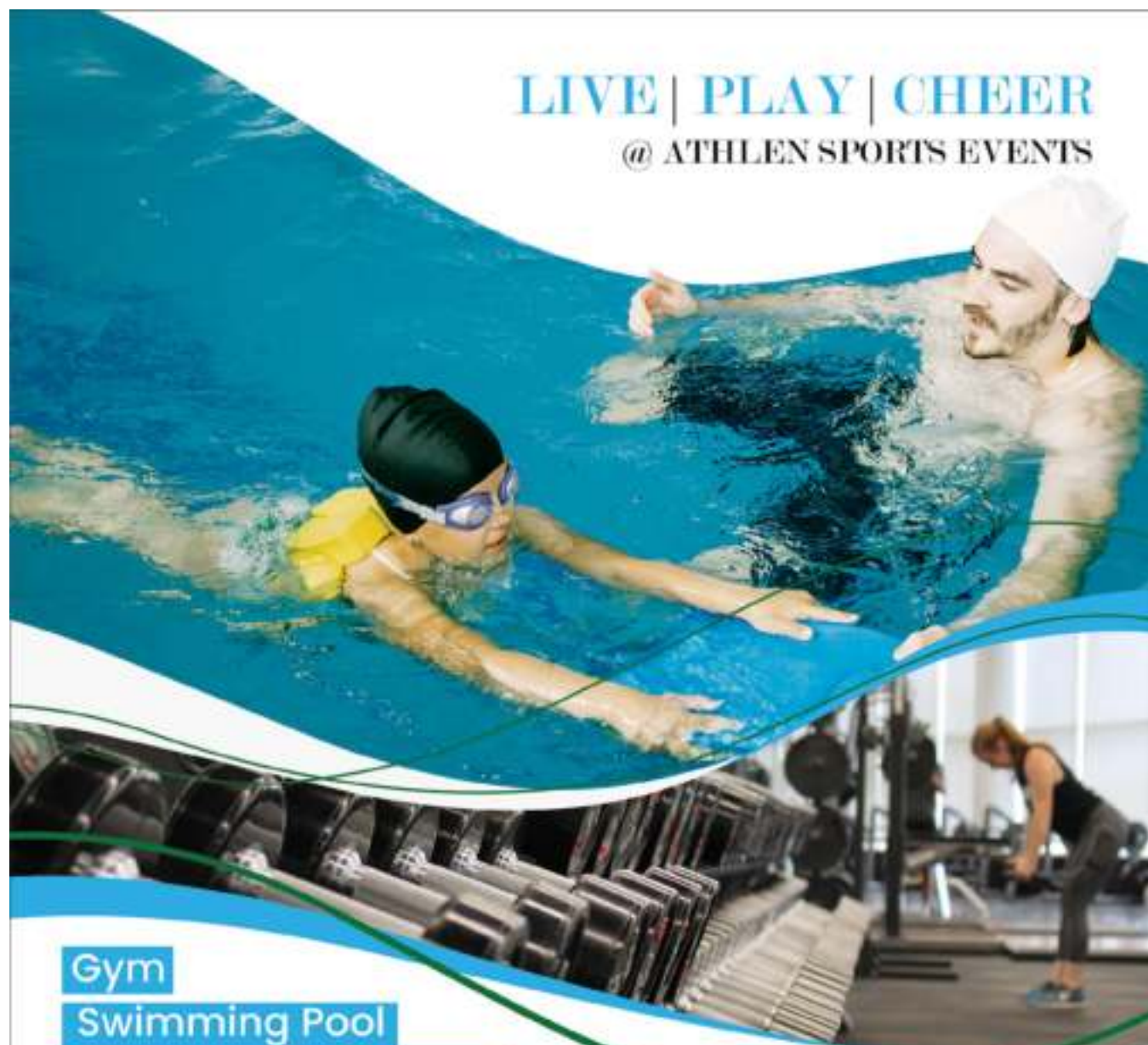
Evolution and Modern Times

Over the years, Pulikkali has evolved from a traditional art form into a competitive event with prizes awarded for the best performances. Various groups or "sangams" now participate in the festivities, each aiming to create the most captivating and artistic tiger makeup and dance routines. This transformation has helped preserve and promote the ancient art while also infusing it with a fresh and competitive spirit.

It is a celebration that brings communities together, fostering a sense of pride and unity among the people. As an ancient folk art form, Pulikkali continues to captivate the hearts of those who witness it, ensuring that the tradition of the "Tiger Dance" lives on for generations to come. So, if you find yourself in Kerala during the auspicious occasion of Onam, be sure not to miss this awe-inspiring spectacle that celebrates the spirit of Kerala's artistic brilliance and cultural diversity.

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Maramadi

THE BULL RACE CELEBRATING HERITAGE AND UNITY

In the lush green landscapes of Kerala, an ancient and exhilarating tradition known as Maramadi has captivated locals and tourists alike for centuries. Rooted in rural culture and steeped in history, Maramadi is a traditional bull race that celebrates the spirit of unity, heritage, and camaraderie among the people of Kerala. This thrilling spectacle combines adrenaline-fueled competition with a deep appreciation for the bond between humans and animals.

Origins and History

Maramadi has its origins deeply embedded in Kerala's rural way of life, where agriculture and farming have been the backbone of the community for ages. Historically, farmers relied on bullocks to plow their fields, and these majestic animals were considered invaluable partners in their toil. To express gratitude to their bovine friends and to foster a sense of community spirit, the farmers began organizing bull races during the harvest season, culminating in what is now known as Maramadi.



THE RACE ALSO SERVES AS A PLATFORM FOR THE RECOGNITION AND PRESERVATION OF KERALA'S RURAL TRADITIONS, REMINDING YOUNGER GENERATIONS OF THEIR ROOTS AND CULTURAL LEGACY

The word "Maramadi" itself is derived from two Malayalam words: "maram" meaning tree and "adi" meaning to chase. The name signifies the traditional method of plowing fields with bullocks. Over time, the event transformed into a thrilling race that not only celebrated the hard work of the bulls but also the unity and collective spirit of the people.

The Maramadi Event

Maramadi is typically held during the post-harvest season, around the months of July and August, when the paddy fields are wet and muddy. The event takes place in various regions across Kerala, drawing large crowds from neighboring villages and beyond.

During the race, the bulls are adorned with colorful ribbons and bells, adding to the spectacle of the event. A traditional wooden plow, known as "urula," is attached to the bulls to mimic the plowing action, harking back to their historical significance in agriculture.

In an impressive display of coordination and skill, the bulls are led by their handlers, known as "Paalakkaarans," who run alongside them, guiding and encouraging their prized animals. The racecourse is a muddy track that requires both the bulls and the handlers to navigate with agility and determination. The sight of the bulls thundering down the track, leaving a trail of splashing mud in their wake, is truly awe-inspiring.

Significance and Preservation

Maramadi is not just a spectacle; it is a symbol of the age-old bond between humans and animals in Kerala. The event fosters a sense of community and togetherness, as people from different backgrounds come together to celebrate their shared heritage. The race also serves as a platform for the recognition and preservation of Kerala's rural traditions, reminding younger generations of their roots and cultural legacy.

However, like many traditional events, Maramadi has faced challenges in recent years due to concerns about animal welfare. As the popularity of the race grew, there were instances of mistreatment and exploitation of the bulls. In response, efforts have been made to modernize the event and ensure the well-being of the animals involved. Stricter regulations and guidelines have been introduced to protect the bulls and prevent any form of cruelty.

Maramadi remains an essential part of Kerala's cultural tapestry, representing the harmonious relationship between humans and animals and celebrating the spirit of unity and community. While preserving its historical significance, it is essential to adapt the event to ensure the welfare of the bulls and address any ethical concerns. As Maramadi continues to evolve, it will remain a vibrant testament to Kerala's rich heritage and a source of pride for the people, who cherish this exhilarating tradition.





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The Cultural Richness

Amidst the captivating shores of the Arabian Sea and the serene shadows of the majestic Western Ghats lies a blessed strip of land. This enchanting place boasts lush green forests, pristine lagoons, tranquil beaches, and picturesque backwaters. Its alluring cuisine and rich history add to the enigmatic charm of this region. Aptly known as "God's Own Country," Kerala stands out for numerous reasons. When you discover more about Kerala, what will truly amaze you is the cultural vibrancy that has captivated the world for centuries. This vibrant soul of the land houses countless art forms, each a splendid expression of the State's socio-cultural richness.

The Unique Art Forms

Kerala's art forms are steeped in the unique folklore and culture of the land. They draw inspiration from age-old traditions, customs, and the diverse ways of life of its people. Regardless of religious or social backgrounds, many of these art forms have been part of Kerala's heritage for centuries. Dance, drama, poetry, and martial arts come together in these performances, creating captivating visual and experiential spectacles for the audience. Despite originating from different chapters of history, these legendary art forms continue to be practiced and performed with immense passion in Kerala to this day.



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Kathakali

In the vibrant land of Kerala, a resplendent traditional lamp burns brightly, casting an enchanting aura. Adorned in elaborately colourful costumes and mysterious face masks, skilled artists take the stage. Their captivating

performance, accompanied by mesmerizing music and beats, holds the audience in rapt attention. This is the awe-inspiring world of Kathakali, a classical art form that deeply inspires and entertains the people of Kerala.



A visual spectacle that never fails to leave spectators in awe, Kathakali is performed throughout the state. Its fully developed style is said to have emerged in the 17th century. With roots in Hindu epics, religious legends, and folk tales, Kathakali weaves captivating narratives. The skilled ensemble of artists and singers use a Sanskritised version of Malayalam for the vocal renditions. Interestingly, Kathakali is believed to have evolved from another classical art form called Ramanattam.

During the performance, the characters adorned with colourful makeup, masks, and diverse costumes remain silent, neither speaking nor singing. Instead, the story unfolds through the artful presentation of songs playing in the background. Musical instruments like Chenda, Maddalam, Chengila, and Elathaalam accompany the soul-stirring Kathakali music.

The artists communicate the tale using a rich language of hand gestures, facial expressions, and graceful movements. Kathakali is a timeless treasure that continues to enchant and captivate the hearts of all who witness its grandeur in the magical realm of Kerala.



The process of applying make-up for Kathakali is intricate, requiring several hours to complete.



Ottan Thullal



Imagine a classical art form that seamlessly weaves together humour, sarcasm, and satire—sounds unbelievable, right? But believe it or not, here in Kerala, such an art has been thriving since the 1700s. Discovering the evolution of this art form is an entertaining journey in itself.

Ottan Thullal, presented with simplicity, wit, and humor, stands out as a distinct gem among the classical art forms of Kerala. While showcasing its comedic brilliance, this art form also serves the noble purpose of social criticism in the most charming way. Among the Thullal art forms—Sheetangan Thullal and Parayan Thullal—Ottan Thullal enjoys unrivaled popularity.



In line with the principles of Natya Shasthra, Ottan Thullal performers adorn themselves in colorful costumes and makeup. As they take to the stage, they blend dance with a unique physical motion, and their voices resound as they recite the verses of literature, often accompanied by another artist in the background echoing their words.

OTTAN THULLAL, PRESENTED WITH SIMPLICITY, WIT, AND HUMOUR, STANDS OUT AS A DISTINCT GEM AMONG THE CLASSICAL ART FORMS OF KERALA.

The credit for introducing this delightful art form goes to the legendary Malayalam poet, Kunchan Nambiar. His witty and sarcastic style struck a chord with the common people, propelling Ottan Thullal to newfound heights of appreciation. The sheer energy that the performers exude on stage alone is reason enough for Ottan Thullal to earn a spot on your bucket list. So, the next time you're in Kerala, don't miss the chance to witness this captivating blend of tradition and amusement.

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Koodiyattam



Koodiyattam, a venerable Sanskrit theatrical art form, holds a prestigious place on UNESCO's list of the oral and intangible heritage of humanity. With its origins dating back around 2,000 years, this ancient masterpiece is a true representation of temple art, aptly translating to "combined acting."

The performances take place within specially prepared venues called 'Koothambalams,' where Koodiyattam fuses elements of both Sanskrit theatre and Koothu, another age-old performing art form. A full Koodiyattam production is a spectacle that unfolds over several days, comprising three distinct parts: Purappadu, Nirvahanam, and the culminating Koodiyattam act. Each segment showcases the artistry of the performers, who use intricate hand gestures and various acting techniques to create captivating and extensive sequences.

The musical accompaniment for Koodiyattam is provided by traditional instruments like Mizhavu, Kuzhitalam, Edakka, Sankhu, and Kurumkuzhal, enhancing the overall experience with their melodious rhythms.

The skilled artists who partake in Koodiyattam belong to specific communities in Kerala. The Chakyars, a Hindu sub-caste, and the Nangiyarammas, who belong to the Ambalavasi Nambiar caste, are the custodians of this rich heritage, passing down their knowledge and talents through generations.

The allure of Koodiyattam is undeniable, and even a single day of witnessing this extraordinary performance leaves audiences thrilled and filled with excitement. Its timelessness and artistic brilliance continue to captivate hearts and minds, preserving an invaluable legacy of cultural expression and storytelling.



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Mohiniyattam

The captivating allure of Mohiniyattam lies in its enchanting grace, the mesmerizing and unhurried movements of the artist, which leave a profound visual impression on the audience. Among the most cherished classical art forms of Kerala, Mohiniyattam weaves a magical spell over its spectators.

Mohiniyattam predominantly embodies the Lasya style of performance, where the artist gracefully showcases feminine and slow-paced movements. Traditionally performed as a solo dance, it is accompanied by the melodious vocals of a singer and the harmonious sounds of musical instruments like Kuzhithalam, Veena, Idakka, and Mridangam.

The essence of Mohiniyattam stems from its portrayal of Mohini, a female incarnation of Lord Vishnu, depicted

as an enchantress. This mythological character finds her place in Hindu puranas, where she cleverly assists the benevolent Devas in acquiring the nectar of immortality from the hands of the demonic Asuras. Her persona symbolizes the ultimate triumph of good over evil.

The roots of Mohiniyattam are deeply entrenched in the ancient Hindu Sanskrit text, Natyashastra, dedicated to the performing arts. During performances, the dancers adorn themselves in plain white or off-white sarees adorned with golden lace embroidery along the borders. To enhance their appearance, they embellish themselves with exquisite jewelry, while their feet and fingers are adorned with red hues derived from natural dyes.

For those seeking to be enthralled by the captivating allure of this classical dance form, Kerala stands as the perfect destination.

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SURVIVING AGAINST ALL ODDS

THE MAKING OF **AADUJEEVITHAM**

The story of “Aadujeevitham” extends beyond the scripted narrative, as the making of this cinematic gem was a saga of its own

| BY AMJAD VANIMAL



In the realm of cinema, there are some stories that transcend the silver screen and become powerful testaments to the human spirit. Director Blessy's upcoming masterpiece, "Aadujeevitham," stands as a prime example of such a narrative. This survival drama, written, directed, and co-produced by Blessy himself, is an adaptation of the 2008 Malayalam novel of the same name by Benjamin, which is based on a true story. The film has captured the attention of cinephiles worldwide, and for good reason.

At its core, "Aadujeevitham" revolves around the harrowing journey of its protagonist, Najeed, played by the versatile Prithviraj Sukumaran. Najeed, a Malayali immigrant worker, finds himself thrust into a nightmarish existence as he is coerced into slavery as a goatherd on a farm in Saudi Arabia. The film delves into the depths of human endurance, the resilience of the human spirit, and the unyielding pursuit of freedom in the face of overwhelming odds.

However, the story of "Aadujeevitham" extends beyond the scripted narrative, as the making of this cinematic gem was a saga of its own. As the world grappled with the unprecedented challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, the film's cast and crew found themselves in a real-life struggle for survival.

When the pandemic swept across the globe, approximately 70 crew members found themselves marooned in Jordan's Wadi Rum desert, where the movie was being filmed, enduring an astonishing two and a half months of isolation. This unforeseen circumstance might have brought production to a screeching halt, but the indomitable spirit of the team prevailed. United by their shared passion for the project, they weathered the storm together, demonstrating a resilience that mirrored the very themes of the film they were crafting.

Director Blessy's commitment to staying true to the source material and delivering a gripping cinematic experience is evident throughout every aspect of "Aadujeevitham." His vision, coupled with the dedication of the cast and crew, transformed a challenging situation into an opportunity for growth and creative expression. The film's behind-the-scenes struggles only serve to amplify the impact of its narrative, forging a unique bond between the audience and the creators.

As anticipation continues to mount for the release of "Aadujeevitham," it is clear that this film will not only showcase exceptional acting and filmmaking but will also stand as a testament to the triumph of the human spirit over adversity. The saga of its making, marked by resilience, determination, and the pursuit of excellence, will undoubtedly inspire filmmakers and audiences alike for years to come.

In a free-wheeling interview with **Gulf Times**, director Blessy delves into the driving forces behind the film's inception, the hurdles surmounted throughout its production journey, and the palpable excitement among the eager audience as the film's imminent release approaches.

Q: Can you tell us about your journey in bringing the novel "Aadujeevitham" to the big screen? What initially attracted you to this story?

A: In 2009, I delved into the novel "Aadujeevitham." While engrossed in its pages, I contemplated the potential for bringing its unique narrative to life visually. The tale's distinctiveness lies in its unconventional approach to storytelling. As one traverses a solitary journey across the desert, the portrayal differs significantly between the realms of literature and cinema. I painstakingly ensured that the film adaptation would convey the narrative in a manner that captivates the audience throughout, without losing their engagement.

Moreover, the challenge surfaced when portraying linguistic barriers, particularly within conversations where Arabic is spoken, and understanding is hindered. The book handled these instances by transcribing the Arabic dialogue into Malayalam. In contrast, the film demands authenticity, with Arabic dialogue remaining solely in Arabic for both speaking and hearing. The complexities of narrative adaptation for the screen are unmistakable.

My past experience, like with my film "Kaazhcha," where a child converses in the Kutch language and a village elder communicates non-verbally, prepared me for these challenges. Drawing from the confidence gained through that project, I found the assurance needed to take on the formidable task of adapting "Aadujeevitham" into a cinematic masterpiece.

Q: The film has been in development for a long time, facing various challenges along the way. How did you manage to overcome these obstacles and ultimately realizing the project?

A: In 2015, my journey into crafting the screenplay for "Aadujeevitham" began. Prior to that, I had already undertaken inquiries into the specifics of shooting the film - the where, how, and when. The year 2018 marked the initial plan to film Najeed's village and his life's journey there. However, owing to a few setbacks, the schedule experienced some delays. By 2019, we had arranged to shoot the desert scenes in Jordan.

Central to the story's presentation is the three-year narrative and the transformative journey of the main character, Najeed. In the book, delving deep into his evolution isn't a necessity, but in the cinematic adaptation, it becomes imperative to vividly depict the mental and physical metamorphosis he undergoes over this period. Preparing Prithviraj for his role as Najeed, encompassing rigorous physical changes, required time. Consequently, the filming recommenced in Jordan in 2020.

However, our plans were thwarted in March 2020 when the COVID-19 lockdown brought production to a standstill for two months. Only in 2022, when travel restrictions eased, did we finally find a conducive window to proceed with the overseas shoot.

This journey was not without its challenges, casting a shadow of disappointment upon us on numerous occasions. Yet, our unwavering determination and the guiding hand of providence propelled us towards our goal. Extensive deliberation led us to explore various desert locations across the Middle East - Tunisia, Egypt, Morocco - before identifying the perfect setting in Algeria's Timimoun.



AR Rahman's presence graced the filming location in Jordan for a span of two days, a resounding testament to his unyielding commitment and authentic passion for his artistry.

With the remarkable commitment of Prithviraj, the technical team, and the entire crew, we overcame these hurdles and brought our vision to life. Each team member shared a common objective: reaching the pinnacle of our artistic ambition, regardless of the sacrifices involved. In the end, our persistence paid off, and the fruits of our labour shone through brilliantly.

Q: The story of "Aadujeevitham" revolves around a Malayali immigrant worker forced into slavery as a goat herder in Saudi Arabia. What drew you to this particular story, and what themes or messages do you hope to convey through the film?

A: When someone engages with "Aadujeevitham," a variety of thoughts can arise. The tales of expatriates enduring diverse challenges in foreign lands are well-known to us. However, "Aadujeevitham" presents a distinctive narrative from an unusual realm. It encapsulates a struggle for survival and a pursuit of improvement over a prolonged period. These individuals persevere, unwavering in their determination to return to the lives they aspire to lead. It's the persistence of 'hope' that keeps alive the slender possibilities, much like Najeed, who senses a beckoning to reclaim his life. The resolute belief that life's journey isn't yet complete is what captivated me about this tale, ultimately compelling me to transform it into a cinematic experience.

Q: Could you discuss the casting process and why Prithviraj was chosen for the lead role of Najeed? What qualities did he bring to the character?

A: In the period of 2009-2010, I engaged in a conversation with Prithviraj regarding the film. His enthusiasm for the project was palpable. He was well aware of the character's need to undergo significant transformations, adapting to various situations. This involved both weight loss and weight gain as dictated by the circumstances. Regardless, he embraced the challenge wholeheartedly and swiftly grasped the depth of character required for the role. This unique quality sets Prithviraj apart. His unwavering determination played a pivotal role in his successful portrayal of Najeed's transformation. As an actor, he impeccably justified his role, effectively bringing the story to life through his character.

Q: A. R. Rahman composed the film's original score and songs. How did his music contribute to the overall atmosphere and storytelling of "Aadujeevitham"?

A: Upon considering this film, I immediately recognized that AR Rahman should play a pivotal role in this endeavor. After expending considerable efforts, we managed to establish contact with him, and he eventually expressed his wholehearted commitment to the project. A musician of such esteemed reputation, he willingly devoted his time to the film from the outset.

For a music director, grasping the essence of the movie and imbuing the music with its profound core is paramount. This very principle led him to allocate two days in 2022 to be present at the filming location in Jordan—an undeniable testament to his unwavering dedication and genuine enthusiasm for his craft.

Q: The film was shot in various locations, including the deserts of Wadi Rum, Jordan, and the Sahara, Algeria. Can you talk about the challenges and rewards of filming in such demanding environments?

A: The central essence of the film “Aadujeevitham” revolves around its location. Extensive journeys were undertaken across various landscapes – Dubai, Abu Dhabi, Sharjah, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt, Rajasthan, and others – in pursuit of the perfect filming site. Eventually, the search led to the remarkable Jordanian expanse of Wadi Rum.

Wadi Rum is an unparalleled desert expanse characterized by its expansive rocky terrain and vast stretches of sand. Similarly, Algeria’s Timimoun, an integral part of the Sahara, also played a role. Given the lack of filming infrastructure on-site, it became necessary to source equipment and facilities from India. However, beyond logistical challenges, safety was a paramount concern, particularly in regions prone to security risks. Special permissions from the relevant authorities were secured, especially in the case of Algeria’s desert which had a history of potential terrorist activities.

Numerous precautions were mandated, including restricted timing, predefined routes within the desert, and immediate return post-shooting. These demands posed considerable difficulties for the logistics team, but they were imperative to ensure the safety and success of the production.



Q: The crew faced a significant setback during the COVID-19 pandemic, being stranded in Jordan for 70 days. How did you manage the situation and ensure the safety and well-being of the cast and crew?

A: Similar to the rest of the world that became immobilized by the Covid-19 pandemic, we, a group of around 70 people, found ourselves stuck in the heart of a desert for roughly two and a half months. Just like people everywhere, we were taken aback and compelled to quarantine in a resort. This period proved to be one of the most challenging ordeals we had ever encountered. Initially, many among us struggled to adapt; being far from our homes and stranded in a desert triggered intense anxiety in some, while others questioned whether we’d ever make it back home. A few even sought flight tickets, willing to trek for hours to find transportation to the airport. It was a traumatic experience for a handful.

‘THE AFFECTION FOR ONAM TRANSFORMS OVER TIME AND PASSIONS, KNITTING TOGETHER A CANVAS OF EXQUISITE MEMORIES THAT ENHANCE MY CURRENT MOMENTS’

However, we managed to reassure and assist those individuals in finding their footing. We facilitated conversations with their families, engaged them in activities promoting well-being, and gradually helped them settle into the situation. Over time, we collectively found ways to adapt and grow accustomed to our circumstances. In the process, the group transformed into a tightly-knit unit akin to a large family. Bolstered by strong connections and a shared commitment to surmounting challenges, we weathered the difficulties and maintained our focus on the goals we had set.

Q: “Aadujeevitham” is planned to have its world premiere at the 2023 Venice International Film Festival. How does it feel to have your film showcased at such a prestigious event, and what are your expectations for its reception?

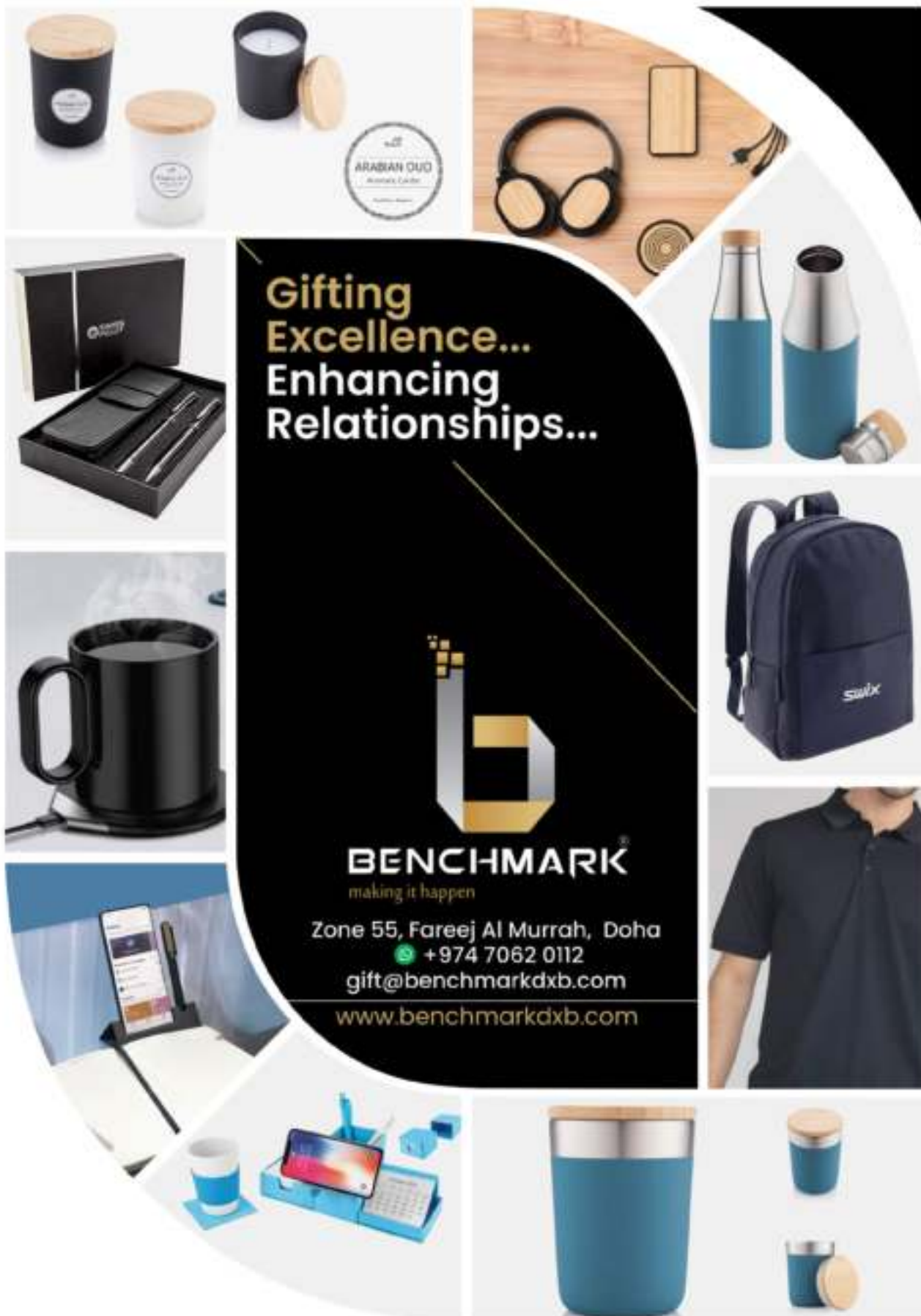
A: The movie is currently in the final stages of editing, with ongoing work on visual effects and related elements. Regrettably, this means that we are unable to seize certain opportunities such as participation in major film festivals due to our inability to submit the completed movie. Given the extensive post-production requirements for this film, our aspiration remains fixed on achieving a world premiere at one of the renowned festivals across the globe.

Q: What does a typical Onam festival look like to you? Could you share some of your memorable experiences from the past?

A: I’m sure that every Malayali holds a cherished Onam memory. This reminiscence is often tied to one’s childhood, triggered by the Onam exams at school, which mark the beginning of thoughts about the festival. The added joy of receiving a vacation further enhances this experience.

Crafting flower carpets during Onam creates enduring and delightful recollections. For someone like me residing near Kuttanadu, the Thiruvalla Neerattupuram boat race is a treasured memory. The Pulikkali performance is another Onam tradition that brings back fond thoughts. As I grew older, especially when my reading habits developed, the Onam special editions and songs became beloved keepsakes. Additionally, the release of movies during Onam played a significant role. Thus, the fondness for Onam evolves with age and interests, weaving a tapestry of beautiful memories that enrich my present.

On this special occasion, I extend my heartfelt wishes to all Malayalees around the world for a splendid and prosperous Onam. May the spirit of love and harmony radiate far and wide.



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Kerala Fest 2023

Kerala Fest is a jubilant commemoration of Kerala in Qatar, a grand event that unites over half a million Malayalees residing in Qatar

The 'Kerala Fest' is an attempt to bring the rich tradition, culture, heritage, delectable cuisines, distinct mood, fragrance, music etc. of the God's Own Country to Qatar. The first of its kind experience of having them all under one roof, where half a million strong Malayalee population in the country would get an opportunity to take part in the festivities that come with the occasion of Onam. The Kerala Fest would be conducted on 29th September 2023 at Al Arab Stadium from 10am to 11pm. The event is organized by Athlen Sports Events, Me Visual and Benchmark Events under the patronage and association of World Malayalee Council (WMC).

Kerala is the single largest expatriate community in the country which contributes a sizeable workforce in the whole Gulf region. Majority of the successful businesses

Kerala Fest, The Togetherness

Kerala Fest is the celebration of Kerala in Qatar, a grand occasion of over half a million Malayalees in Qatar. It's a multi-sensory celebration that showcases Kerala's abundant heritage through art, music, and dance, while also honoring diverse cuisines through a food festival. The event highlights the state's natural resources, including tourism, in a vibrant display. Keralites have the opportunity to relish captivating entertainment from the region, presenting a fusion of traditional and contemporary elements. The lineup features appearances and acts by movie stars and skilled artists. There are also competitions designed for children and families, including contests for crafting "Pookkalam" (floral designs) and preparing "Payasam", which will evoke cherished memories of bygone times.

The entry to the venue will be free except the ticketed show starting from 7pm to 11pm. The Al Arab Stadium will host a collection of more than 20 stalls, each showcasing and offering a range of exquisite products and services related to Onam. The expo will also feature special offerings from well-known brands.

The World Malayalee Council was formed on July 3, 1995, in New Jersey. It was inaugurated at the first ever World Convention of Non Resident Malayalees. The main objective of this organization is to provide a non-political forum to bring together the widely scattered community of people of Keralite origin and strengthen the common bonds of culture, tradition and way of life. WMC works towards an international brotherhood of people of Kerala origin to bolster their cultural, artistic and social uniqueness and give resilience and understanding towards other cultures with which they have to co-exist and interact.

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are owned by Keralites in the region. It is estimated that over half a million Keralites live and work in Qatar alone, contributing to a repatriation of over \$6.5 billion back to India through transactions. Kerala is a community with a very high buying power and investment capacity.

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Onakkodi

'KASAVU' DRESSES ARE MOST PREFERRED ATTIRE DURING THE SEASON

O**nam** remains incomplete without 'Onakkodi,' which refers to the tradition of purchasing new clothes associated with the festival. In the past, Onam used to be the primary occasion for most Malayalees to acquire new outfits. While times have evolved, the significance of buying new clothes during this season remains unchanged. Among the various choices available, 'Kasavu' dresses have emerged as the most favored attire during this time. Kasavu Mundus and Kasavu Sarees are widely sold across the State in substantial numbers. The garment sector in Kerala experiences its peak during Onam, making it the most lucrative season for the industry.

In Thiruvananthapuram, Balaramapuram Kaithari is the popular choice for Kasavu dresses. Kochi prefers Chendamangalam Kaithari and Thrissur goes for Kuthampully Kaithari. Kannur Kaithari and Kasargode Sarees are also much famed for the same.



SHINING BRIGHT

MAMTA MOHANDAS' FILM JOURNEY, RESILIENCE, AND INSPIRING TRIUMPHS

| BY AMJAD VANIMAL

In the vast and dynamic realm of Indian cinema, few names shine as brightly as Mamta Mohandas. With a versatile career spanning across Malayalam, Tamil, and Telugu films, Mamta has earned herself a prominent place in the hearts of movie enthusiasts. Not only is she an accomplished actress and film producer, but she also captivates audiences with her melodious playback singing. Her undeniable talent has garnered her multiple accolades, including prestigious Filmfare Awards and a Kerala State Film Award.

Beyond the glitz and glamour of the silver screen, Mamta's life story is one of remarkable courage and resilience. Her battle against cancer is a testament to her unyielding spirit, inspiring countless individuals facing their own challenges.

In a candid conversation with **Gulf Times**, Mamta opens up about her journey in the film industry, recounting the highs and lows that have shaped her into the artist and person she is today.

Excerpts:

Q: Your journey in the entertainment industry has been quite remarkable. From being a playback singer to a successful actress, what inspired you to pursue a career in both fields?

A: I believe that not everyone who achieves success actually experiences the feeling of being successful. True success is a product of significant effort and the willingness to make sacrifices. I'm grateful to have reached this point without compromising my identity, and I'm pleased to maintain relevance in the ever-evolving realm of filmmaking.

To be honest, my pursuit of excellence only intensified when I confronted the fear of losing everything permanently. It was at that moment that what initially seemed like an accidental opportunity in 2005 transformed into a career I was determined to construct, explore extensively, and ultimately leave a lasting legacy within.

Q: You've worked in various languages, including Malayalam, Tamil, and Telugu. How do you manage to adapt and perform effortlessly in different film industries?

A: Acting might exude an air of effortless, yet this is the essence of the craft. The more seamless the façade,



the greater the actor's prowess. I must acknowledge my own rigorous self-assessment and the formidable critique of my mother. Extending kindness to my own work, when observed on screen, proves challenging for either of us. This is rooted in my unshakable belief in the potential for perpetual enhancement. Regardless of the language I engage with, I aspire to articulate with elegance. Irrespective of the spoken tongue, the subtleties beneath the content's surface hold paramount significance. Neglecting these nuances, whether by the actor's oversight or the filmmaker's lapse in conveying them, leads the audience astray from the emotional undercurrent. Consequently, the scene loses its intended impact, gradually eroding the film's resonance.

Within my role as an actor, I am entrusted with immersing myself in the scenario I enact. For me, it invariably circles back to principles and fundamentals. This cyclical return is what rekindles my passion for my craft, time and again. In truth, many actors encounter recurrent screenplays and scripts, which can potentially drain their well of inspiration, thereby hampering their performances. During such junctures, it becomes imperative to unearth avenues for staying connected to the art. Occasionally, venturing into different languages, each accompanied by distinct approaches and mindsets in the work milieu, serves as a valuable means to rekindle affection and significance for this artistic pursuit.

Q: Your courage in facing and overcoming cancer has been an inspiration to many. Can you share some key moments or experiences during your battle with cancer that have had a significant impact on your life?

A: I've discussed this topic extensively, so I'll now focus on what truly inspires me to persevere. First and foremost, it's the challenge itself. Despite the immense love and support I receive, it's astonishing how many individuals harbor envy for my resilience. Some have even attempted to undermine me, lacking empathy for the struggles one faces when battling multiple health issues over an extended period. It's impossible to convey the genuine experience of being in my shoes, leading me to develop the ability to disregard negativity and move forward.

Secondly, I've come to realize that letting go is an art in its own right. It demands a degree of selfishness, a commitment to self-care, and a heightened awareness of one's surrounding environment. This environment should be a source of joy, imbued with positivity, laughter, and nurturing elements. On better days, I actively seek out these positive influences, and on tougher days, I gravitate toward places that radiate happiness and tranquility. For individuals grappling with health battles, most days are challenging, and while none of it adheres to the norm, there's an ongoing effort to accept and normalize this reality.

Thirdly, observing children born with life-altering disabilities, growing up in fractured or abusive homes, or battling cancer, offers profound lessons. Survival isn't a choice for them; it's an inherent necessity. These children embody an innate curiosity, an eagerness to explore, and an unyielding commitment to realizing their full potential. I draw immense inspiration from their innocence. I also find solace in various art forms, particularly music. I consciously distance myself from toxic influences, whether they be people, thoughts, or relationships. Even

ONE OF THE MOST CHERISHED ASPECTS OF GROWING UP IN BAHRAIN WAS THE MONTH-LONG ONAM CELEBRATIONS THAT WE WOULD PARTAKE IN AT VARIOUS FRIENDS' HOMES OR DIFFERENT ASSOCIATIONS WE WERE INVOLVED WITH.

in dire situations, I strive to uncover the silver lining and address challenges with a peaceful approach, then ultimately releasing them.

Life is far briefer than our perception often grants us. From childhood onward, societal norms condition us to operate like automatons. It's not until a life-altering event jolts us from this routine that we recognize the illusion of the rat race. In reality, life is simple and beautiful.

Q: What advice would you give to others who are going through a similar challenging health journey?

A: Don't get caught up in anyone else's race or fight. This journey is uniquely yours to traverse and to evolve with. The beacon of hope shines in the distance. Your duty is to foster positivity, gather abundant wisdom and assistance from reliable sources, thereby easing your personal struggle. Act prudently in your decisions, uphold the well-being of your body—strive for at least a reasonable level of health—engage in physical activities or yoga, exhibit self-discipline, and endure for as long as possible to attain the utmost "quality" of life. The duration of years is of secondary importance; the essence lies in the quality of those years lived. Scientific advancements will contribute to the remainder. I am optimistic that cancer treatments will progressively simplify, allowing individuals grappling with it to experience a complete life while self-administering care within the comfort of their homes.

Frequently, it appears that advice should be directed towards caregivers more so than those engaged in the battle. I consistently urge caregivers not to make the fight about themselves, and to clearly differentiate between extending sympathy and truly empathizing—between providing care and being genuinely caring. The nuances among these terms are subtle, yet your choices hold immense influence over the individual who confronts a battle they did not willingly choose to undertake.

Q: Having spent a significant part of your life in the Gulf region, how do you perceive the influence of Gulf Malayalees on the film industry and culture, both in India and the Gulf?

A: The Gulf Malayalees have consistently constituted a significant portion of our wellspring of creative inspiration, and they remain cherished members of our audience who engage with content without undue judgment or preconceived notions. Presently, our industry boasts an expansive reservoir of talented individuals of ex-Gulf Malayali origin, all flourishing and prospering within this evolving market landscape. The interplay of commerce,



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culture, and skills facilitates a unique prospect, fostering exponential growth in both spheres. Furthermore, the advent of social media has further condensed this bridge, effectively shrinking the world and amplifying opportunities for individuals and small business proprietors in search of avenues for advancement.

Q: How do you celebrate Onam, especially when you are away from Kerala?

A: Usually, the enjoyment comes from sharing it with a family friend who resides abroad. Alternatively, I might opt to purchase an instant sadhya package from a restaurant and savour it at home while watching an old Malayalam movie on television, all by myself.

Q: Are there any specific Onam traditions or rituals that hold a special place in your heart? How do you keep those traditions alive even in your busy schedule?

A: While filming, it's usually celebrated on location with everyone. I always anticipate the variety of payasams that are served, particularly the traditional method of pouring hot paripu payasam onto a banana leaf, where traces of the savoury meal just consumed linger. Adding a crushed papadam and a small banana to it, then relishing the mixture off my fingers, is a personal highlight for me during any Malayali festival or wedding. Yes, I openly indulge in finger-licking and hold no qualms about it.

When it comes to shopping, it's an opportune time to hunt for enticing deals as well. During my childhood, one of the most cherished aspects of growing up in Bahrain was the month-long Onam celebrations that we would partake in at various friends' homes or different associations we were involved with. Those days are undeniably missed in the present.

Q: Can you tell us about any exciting projects you are currently working on or any recent releases that you would like to share with your fans?

A: I've recently finished shooting for a Tamil movie called "Maharaja," starring Vijay Sethupathi. Additionally, there's an upcoming Malayalam film involving Dileep, although it hasn't been officially announced. I'll share more information soon. After these projects, I'm contemplating a brief work hiatus to prioritize other significant aspects of my life.

Q: Is there any specific genre or type of role that you haven't explored yet, but you would love to take up in the future?

A: I aspire to envision myself in roles like an action hero, an anime character, and a mute girl.

Q: How has your journey in the entertainment industry and your experiences shaped you as a person over the years?

A: It has molded and transformed me in various ways, largely for the positive, though some effects were less favorable. However, this continuous process of breaking down and rebuilding is what enhances the brilliance of a diamond. My journey spans 18 years within this industry - from being the prominent actress in "Mayookham" to holding the lead roles in the more recent films "LIVE" (Malayalam) and "Rudrangi" (Telugu). I'm confident that my enduring presence and ability to persist signify that I've made significant contributions and maintained my standing over time.

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Onasadya

The feast on a leaf

Onasadya represents more than a mere culinary delight; it stands as a jubilant tribute to the essence of unity and abundance

There's simply no chance that a Malayali would ever want to skip an 'Onasadya' (Onam feast). The tradition dictates that every Malayalee warmly welcomes Mahabali and joyously commemorates the occasion with a lavish feast. The grand feast is a symbol of the state's rich culture, heritage, and communal harmony, as people from all walks of life come together to partake in this elaborate meal.

A feast fit for a king

Onasadya is a grand vegetarian feast, showcasing a wide array of traditional Kerala dishes served on a banana leaf. The meal consists of numerous courses, each meticulously prepared and served in a specific order. The meal is typically enjoyed while sitting on the floor, bringing a sense of equality and camaraderie among people of all social backgrounds.



Preparation and rituals

The preparation for Onasadya starts well in advance, with families and communities coming together to plan and organize the elaborate feast. Women, especially in joint families, take on the responsibility of cooking and preparing the dishes, ensuring the highest standards of taste and authenticity.

On the day of Onam, people clean and decorate their homes, and the highlight of the decorations is the intricate flower carpet (Pookalam) created using various colourful petals. The aroma of the dishes being prepared fills the air, adding to the festive ambiance.

The feast unveiled

Pappadam and Banana Chips: The meal begins with crispy and crunchy snacks like pappadam (thin, round crackers) and banana chips served as appetizers.



Parippu (Dal Curry): This creamy and mildly spiced lentil curry is an integral part of the feast, served with ghee (clarified butter) and a mild tangy flavour.

Sambar: A flavourful and tangy lentil and vegetable stew. Sambar is an essential dish of South Indian cuisine and a staple in Onasadya.

Rasam: A spicy and tangy soup made from tamarind, tomatoes, and spices, Rasam serves as a palate cleanser.

Avial: A unique and delectable dish made with a medley of vegetables, grated coconut, and yogurt, Avial is a must-have delicacy in Onasadya.

Thorans: These are dry vegetable dishes made with grated coconut, mustard seeds, and various vegetables like cabbage, beans, or carrots.

Kaalan: A dish made with yogurt, raw bananas, coconut, and spices, Kaalan adds a creamy and tangy touch to the meal.

Olan: A light and simple dish made with ash gourd, pumpkin, coconut milk, and black-eyed peas.

Erissery: This dish features a combination of vegetables and lentils cooked in a flavourful coconut gravy.

Pachadi: A sweet and sour dish made with ripe pumpkins, yogurt, and jaggery, giving it a unique taste.

Kichadi: Similar to a raita, Kichadi is a mildly spiced yogurt-based dish with cucumber or lady's finger.

Pickles: An assortment of pickles, such as mango, lime, or ginger, are served to add a spicy kick to the meal.

Payasam: The grand finale of the feast, Payasam, is a traditional sweet dessert made with rice, milk, jaggery, and various flavours like coconut, lentils, or bananas.

TRADITIONALLY, THE MEAL
IS RELISHED WITH BARE
HANDS, AND PEOPLE EAT
WHILE SEATED ON THE FLOOR,
SYMBOLIZING EQUALITY AND
HUMILITY

Eating etiquette

Onasadya is served on a clean and fresh banana leaf, and there is a specific order in which the dishes are placed. Rice forms the central part of the meal, and the different curries and accompaniments are served around it. Traditionally, the meal is enjoyed with hands, and people eat while seated on the floor, signifying equality and humility.

Unity and communal harmony

Onasadya is not just about indulging in delectable dishes but also about fostering unity, kinship, and harmony among people. The feast brings together family members, friends, and even strangers, as people invite others to join them in their homes for the grand feast. The spirit of sharing and camaraderie during Onam exemplifies the true essence of the festival.

In short, Onasadya is a culinary extravaganza that reflects the cultural richness and diversity of Kerala. Beyond its delightful flavours and aromatic dishes, the feast embodies the essence of the Onam festival - the celebration of togetherness, prosperity, and unity. As people come together to partake in this grand feast, they experience a sense of oneness and joy, making Onasadya not just a meal but an unforgettable experience that leaves a lasting impression on the heart and soul of every participant.

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Palada Payasam

Ingredients

Rice Ada - ½ cup
Water - 2 Cups
Milk (full cream) - 1 litre
Sugar - ½ cup
Condensed Milk - 1/4 cup
Ghee - 1 tsp

Method:

1. Boil 2 cups of water in a saucepan. Turn off the heat and add Ada. Cover with a lid and let it sit for 30 minutes.
2. Place milk, sugar, and ghee in a pressure cooker. Set the cooker on high flame and allow it to pressure cook for one whistle. As soon as the initial whistle sounds, lower the flame to a gentle setting and continue cooking for an additional 20 minutes.
3. Strain the Ada and wash it until it is not sticky anymore.
4. Add the Ada to a pan along with the reduced milk. Cook for a further 15 minutes on medium flame, or until the mixture has reduced significantly.
5. Add the condensed milk and bring to a boil. Turn off the flame.



Salwa Shoukath

Vanilla Sponge Cake

Ingredients

Sugar Breakfast - 125g
Egg - 4 no.
Vanilla Essence - 1g
Wheat Flour - 88g
Salt - 1/2 tsp
Oil - 10g



Method:

Whisk eggs, vanilla essence, and sugar until they become foamy. Gently incorporate the sifted dry ingredients by folding them in. Carefully add the oil while ensuring that the mixture retains its volume. Pour the mixture into a cake tin that has been coated with oil. Preheat the oven to 180°C for 10 minutes, and then bake for approximately 30 to 35 minutes.

Ingredients:

Whipping cream - 2 cup
Roasted cashews and almonds for layers and decorating

Method:

1. Once the cake is prepared, allow it to cool entirely. Divide it into three layers and generously pour the payasam over each layer. Let the layers soak for approximately 5 minutes.
2. Gently coat the cake layers with the whipped cream and payasam, adding roasted almonds to each layer as you go. Repeat this step to fully cover the cake with the cream, and finally, crown it with the roasted cashews and almonds on top.
3. Refrigerate the cake for a few hours to achieve the desired flavor.



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Nehru Trophy Vellamkali

A CELEBRATION OF KERALA'S
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Every year, the tranquil backwaters of Kerala come alive with vibrant energy and fierce competition as boats adorned with colourful flags and rowers in traditional attire race against each other, creating a spectacle that attracts thousands of spectators. This captivating event is none other than the Nehru Trophy Vellamkali, a traditional boat race held in Alappuzha (Alleppey), Kerala, India. The race is a tribute to India's first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, who visited the region in 1952 and was presented with a snake boat race in his honor,

which gave birth to this now-iconic event.

Origins and Significance

The Nehru Trophy Vellamkali traces its origins back to a friendly race between two snake boats (chundan vallam) held on the occasion of Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru's visit to Alappuzha. Impressed by the display of the grand snake boats, Nehru decided to institute the Nehru Trophy, a silver snake boat-shaped trophy, which would be awarded to the winner of the annual boat race.

The Snake Boat Race

The snake boats, known as chundan vallams, are traditional longboats, measuring over 100 feet in length and with a capacity to carry around 100 rowers. These boats are a significant part of Kerala's maritime heritage and culture. The boats are beautifully decorated with intricate designs and vibrant colours, with a dragon-shaped head at the front and a tail at the rear.

Preparation and Training

Months before the event, boat clubs and communities from various parts of Kerala begin their preparations. The rowers undergo intense training and practice sessions to build their strength, stamina, and coordination. The unity and teamwork displayed by the rowers are essential factors for success in the race.

The Race Day

The Nehru Trophy Vellamkali takes place on the second Saturday of August every year at the Punnamada Lake

in Alappuzha. The event attracts not only locals but also tourists from all over the world who want to witness this grand spectacle. The rowers, clad in traditional white dhotis and turbans, row their respective boats with synchronized precision, accompanied by the rhythmic chants and cheers of the spectators.

Cultural Extravaganza

The Nehru Trophy Vellamkali is not just a boat race; it's a celebration of Kerala's vibrant culture. The event is accompanied by traditional music performances, dance forms like Kathakali and Mohiniyattam, and local cuisine stalls. The festive atmosphere reflects the rich cultural heritage of Kerala, making it a unique experience for visitors.

Preservation of Tradition
The Nehru Trophy Vellamkali plays a crucial role in preserving Kerala's traditional boat-building techniques, rowing skills, and community spirit. It has become a symbol of unity, as people from different walks of life come together to participate in and witness this grand event.



AMMA

NURTURING THE SOUL OF MALAYALAM CINEMA



In the state of Kerala, Malayalam cinema holds a unique position, known for its artistic excellence and compelling storytelling. At the heart of this vibrant film industry is AMMA, the Association of Malayalam Movie Artists. Established with the goal of safeguarding the interests of artists and contributing to the growth of Malayalam cinema, AMMA has evolved into a significant institution that plays a pivotal role in the industry's development.

AMMA was founded on June 24, 1994, in Kochi, Kerala, with the visionary aim of fostering camaraderie and unity among actors and actresses in the Malayalam film industry. The association's formation was a response to the need for an organized body that could address the challenges faced by artists and promote their welfare. As of June 2023, AMMA boasts a membership tally of

498 individuals, comprising 253 men and 245 women. Among these members, 117 hold honorary status, while an impressive 381 are esteemed life members.

Since its inception in 1995 with an initial fund of 1000 rupees and 10 members, the "distribution initiative" has expanded remarkably. Over the years, this endeavor has grown to include 117 members who receive a generous monthly sum of 5000 rupees for life. By 2021, this initiative supported 140 members, with 23 members having passed away. This sets AMMA apart as a unique organization, providing substantial assistance unmatched in India.

AMMA, the Malayalam film industry's cornerstone, prioritizes its senior members, offering them exclusive benefits including waived entry fees and honorary memberships, in addition to their ongoing allowances.

AMMA Annual General Body Meeting - 2023



The "Medical Insurance Scheme" guarantees 5 lakh rupees coverage at prominent Indian hospitals, alongside a 15 lakh rupee accidental death insurance. Further, it provides 2000 rupees per week during accident recovery and now covers COVID-19 treatments, with AMMA covering member premiums.

Collaborating with Kozhikode Baby Memorial Hospital, AMMA established a scheme providing free essential medications for conditions like cancer and dialysis. This spirit of support extends beyond its members to individuals in various fields. During natural disasters, AMMA Shows generate funds and offer financial aid, reinforcing the group's commitment.

Supported by government advertisements, AMMA's members contribute without compensation, illustrating

their dedication. Amid recent disasters, AMMA donated 50 lakhs to the chief minister's relief fund, with members also contributing personally. The "Navkerala Nimmiti" initiative, in partnership with Asianet TV, raised over 5 crores for government relief efforts.

The "Amma Veedu" scheme builds houses worth 5 lakhs for the needy. This initiative has successfully completed and handed over 10 homes across Kerala, exemplifying AMMA's commitment to social welfare.

In essence, AMMA is a vital force in the Malayalam film industry, fostering unity, support, and artist advocacy. Its achievements and initiatives have indelibly shaped Kerala's cultural landscape. As challenges persist, AMMA's dedication to excellence, unity, and artists' well-being will continue to elevate the world of Malayalam cinema.

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