

Pot bellies and mustaches (Article)

Sunil M S, Moothakunnam

We, the Keralites, feel elated whenever Kerala figures at the top of national rank lists. Here is one rank list where we are near the top, and are about to be the topmost, but we don't really want to be there; it's the ranking on obesity. Kerala is the second most obese state, means people, in the country, second only to Punjab. As it is, the caricature of Mahabali, coming out by the dozen these days, is the right reflection of a modern day, obese Malayali. One Onam greetings email that arrived the other day had a delightful caricature of Mahabali with the largest paunch ever seen in similar cartoons. Poor Mahabali! If he really has a pot belly of that size, his journey from hell to earth and back, though only annual, must be quite strenuous. A paunchy Mahabali is a sharp warning to Malayalis against obesity.

During the Onam festival days, Mahabalis are every where, not merely in cartoons. The other day, one channel showed a Mahabali - a fake one, of course - visiting a formal Onam reception. Dozens of Little Krishnas come out on Ashtami Rohini day; likewise, every town now proudly flaunts several Mahabalis during the Onam season. What could be the criteria for getting selected as Mahabali? What else other than the size of the paunch, of course! Probably, this could be the only time when having a huge pot belly will be an advantage; no pot-belly, no selection!

The ever bulging paunch of Mahabali in caricatures seems to have irked one of the Devaswom Boards (Kerala has four of them). They say that Mahabali should not be caricatured as a laughable comedian. Caricatures are definitely allowed as well as enjoyed worldwide. There have been cartoons criticizing even President Obama, the most powerful person on earth as of now. But, when gods become the themes in caricatures, all hell breaks loose, as it had in France. Here in India too, fanatic devotees would have screamed at caricatures of Mahabali, and taken up cudgels for protecting him, if Mahabali had been a god instead of an Asura. Thank god, Mahabali is not a god! In case some Mahabali's devotees rise against his caricatures, how protruding the caricatured paunch is would be the determining factor. They might measure the girth of the cartoon-Mahabali's middle. The moment they calculate and realize that the girth exceeds a certain length, say one meter, they might rush to pelt stones at the cartoonist.

The Devaswom Board's objections to Mahabali's exaggerated pot belly notwithstanding, Hindus, of whom I happen to be one, do not hate paunches per se; here is the evidence: one of the most adored Hindu gods is pot bellied: Ganapati. He has one of the cutest pot bellies, which many a devotee must have wished to pat affectionately. Ganapati has other peculiarities too: he has trunk and tusks like an elephant. His paunch, trunk and tusks do not deter him to be the second most adored Hindu god. If people can love Ganapati's paunch, they can love Mahabali's too. I don't have any particular dislike for pot bellied people; only their pot bellies make me worry for their health.

That's why I did not object to today's greeting mail for showing an exceedingly capacious pot belly in its Mahabali caricature. But, there was something else which I had disliked and to which I readily objected: a thick, terrifying mustache under Mahabali's nose! Mahishasura and Bhasmasura are always shown to have intimidating mustaches. Such terrifying mustaches also remind me of Veerappan, the fearful bandit. While I have no difficulty associating thick mustaches with Mahishasura, Bhasmasura and Veerappan, I hate to think that Mahabali, who was more kind and generous than all the gods put together, had an intimidating, Veerappan-brand mustache. No, he cannot have had a mustache of such a horrible kind. So, I protested to the sender of the email greetings, and suggested that either the mustache be made very thin and aesthetic, or be totally removed. Their response is keenly awaited.

Mahabali's fame as a kind and generous king had spread even to heaven. I had always thought that being kind and generous was a good thing and was readily appreciated especially by gods. But, gods had a different view; at least in the case of Mahabali. They feared that if Mahabali was too kind to his people and gave them whatever they wanted, no one would pray to gods any more, and soon, the gods will be rendered jobless. The peeved gods went in deputation to Mahavishnu and pleaded him to stop Mahabali from being generous to his people. Mahavishnu's reincarnations have always been for doing good. You would have thought that Mahavishnu tore the gods' petition and threw it in their own faces. Alas! It was not to be. The Almighty meekly accepted gods' petition, and promised action against Mahabali for having been generous to his own people!

Mahavishnu had always been adept at assuming fake identities. The shape he assumed this time was Vamana's. Vamana was diminutive and, needless to mention, deceptive. The rest of the story is well known. What I am trying to drive at is that Mahabali did not have a paunch; because if he actually had a huge, capacious paunch, he would have shown it, instead of his head, for Vamana's third step. Compared to his head, Mahabali's paunch, if he had one, would have been vast enough not only for Vamana's third step, but for several more steps if Vamana had desired them. In that case, Mahabali would not have had to abdicate his throne and be condemned to hell, at all. Since Mahabali offered his head, instead of stomach, we can deduce that he did not have a paunch. No doubt, the present caricatures are all wrong, and need to be changed: lock, stock and barrel.

Happy Onam to everyone who reads this article till its end.

sunilmssunilms@rediffmail.com