

1924 FLOOD OF TRAVANCORE: A LITERARY REPRESENTATION

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Droughts and floods are as much social constructions as physical occurrences. In recent years, historians have begun to explore the ways natural disasters are in fact shaped by human actions.¹ Kerala witnessed a number of extreme floods causing considerable damages to the life and property and effected serious alterations in the natural landscape. Historians, though have taken note of such floods did not seriously engage with the phenomenon in the historical context and only narrated them within a chronological framework. On another parlance these floods remained as memories in the minds of the people and were transmitted from generation to generation, forming a web of oral traditions about floods. This was not a deliberate neglect of historicisation of floods by the scholars but due to their strong affiliations with the other types of histories current in those times. It is with the emergence of the school of environmental history that floods, famines, landscape changes, climatic changes etc began receiving the attention of historians. The present paper is about an important time marker in popular memory of the people of India's south-west coast. The flood that occurred in Travancore in 1924 was so extraordinary that it merits the description The Great Flood. Locally it is remembered as 'Thonnootti Onpathile Vellappokkam' (The flood of ME1099). The significance of the flood was such that many old people in Travancore used to anchor their memories in relation to the flood. Events were reckoned as having occurred before, during or after the Great Flood. The Great Flood of 1924 figures in both fiction and non-fiction in Malayalam. This includes poems, short stories, novels and autobiographies. Prominent among prose-works are Takazhi's short-story, *Vellappokkatil*; novels, Kovilan's *Thottangal* and Kakkanadan's *Orotha*; autobiographies, *Jeevithappaatha* by Cherukadu and *Ormakalude Nattil* by Puthenkavu Mathan Tharakan.² KCN Vazhunnavar and Panditan Kadathanattu E P Ramakuruppu and Kodungallur Kochunni Thamburan have penned long, narrative poems exclusively on the flood.³ In this paper, we continue with the historical narrative of the flood by exploring its literary and visual representations.

THE DOG ON THE THATCH-ROOF

In the flooded village that Takazhi depicts in his short story *Vellappokkatil* (In the flood-waters) even the deity in the temple located on a relatively higher altitude is neck-deep in water.

¹Isabel Fernandez Tejado. 2004. Conflict and Cooperation: Water, Floods and Social Response in Colonial Guanajuato, Mexico. *Journal of Environmental History*. Vol.9. 199.

²Kovilan. 1970. *Thottangal*. Current Books, Thrissur; Kakkanadan. 1983. *Orotha*. Current Books, Thrissur; Cherukadu. 1974. *Jeevithappaatha*. Current Books, Thrissur ; Puthan Kav Mathan Tharakan. 1978. *Ormakalude Nattil*. (hereafter, Tharakan. *Ormakalude*) DC Books, Kottayam; Takazhi Sivasankara Pillai. 2003. 'Vellappokkathil'. *Tiranjedutha Kathakal* (hereafter, Takazhi. *Vellappokkathil*) DC Books, Kottayam.

³KC N Vazhunnavar.1924. Vellappokkam. *Kavana Kaumudi*.(hereafter, Vazhunnavar. 'Vellappokkam').48:10; Kadathanattu E P Ramakuruppu.1924. Keralathile Vellappokkam. *Kavana Kaumudi*. (hereafter, Ramakuruppu. 'Vellappokkam')48:10; Kodugallur Kochunni Thamburan. 1925. *Athivathavarsham*. (hereafter. Thamburan. *Athivatham*) Kerala Book House, Kodugallur.

Water! Water everywhere! The villagers all fled in search of land leaving one man in every family to keep guard of the house. If you have your own canoe, well and good. The three room upper floor in the temple tower is crammed with sixty seven children, three thousand and fifty six people, dogs, cats, goats, fowls and other domestic creatures living together in perfect unity. No quarrels.

Chennaparayan has been standing in the water through one night and a day. He has no canoe. It is since three days that his master had fled for life. Right when water started peeping in to the house, Chennaparayan had built a platform of coconut petiole and twigs. He squat on it for two days hoping that the water would recede. Four or five banana plants were in full bloom and bearing fruit; there was haystack too. If Chennappan leaves, the thieves would have a gala time.

Now water has risen above the platform, knee-high. Of the coconut frond-thatched roof, two rows were already submerged under water. Chennan cried out from the window. Who is there to hear? Who is there nearby? His pregnant wife, four kids, a cat and a dog are all depend upon him. He had by now reconciled by the fact that in no time water would start flowing over the roof and the his own end and of his family are imminent. The down pour had been persisted through three days. Somehow Chennan manage to break through the roof thatch and he looked in all four directions. He saw a baggage-canoe passing by on the west. At the height of his walls Chennan called out to the boatmen. Fortunately the boatmen could understand the scene. They steered the canoe to his hut. Chennan pulled out his kids, the dog and the cat one by one through the gap in the thatch. By then the canoe had reached.

As the kids were boarding the canoe there was a shout from the behind. Chennan turned back his head. It was Madiyathara Kunjeppan shouting from his roof-top. Chennan hastily pulled his wife into the canoe. The cat too did not miss the opportunity and climb into the canoe. No one remembered the dog. It was roaming around on the west of the hut, sniffing here and there.

The canoe moved on; into the distance.

The dog climbed on the thatch-roof. Chennan's canoe was already far distant; it kind of flew away. The dog whined as if in throes of death. It started making a series of sounds that reminded the voice of a hapless human. Who is there to hear!⁴

The dog kept guard of Chennan's hut watching out from the roof-thatch. The water kept rising and eventually the hut collapsed. As water receded, Chennan swam home in search of the dog. All that he could find was its decayed carcass.

THE RIVER OF MIND

The narrative in Kovilan's novel *Thottangal* unfolds through the memories of a sixty eight year-old woman, Unnimol. The river figured significantly in her life. She was born and grew up on the banks of a river. The house of her in-laws too was by the river side. She was very attached to her dad and her childhood and adolescence were full of happiness under his love and care. But marriage changed her life. Her relationship with her husband was unsatisfying. Like the river that turned turbulent with the coming of the flood her mind was caught in turmoil after marriage. Kovilan's narrative beautifully interweaves Unnimol's mindscape and the surrounding riverscape.

⁴Thakazhi. 'Vellappokkathil'. 33-34.

The novel begins with her nightmare of the flood. The protective dyke of the rice fields collapsed in the flood. The whole village woke up. People were shouting for help. Coconut frond torches were lit and people ran towards the fields. She heard her father calling her. Suddenly she woke up. She stared into the darkness. The darkness flowed like flood water. She flowed in the flood water. Sixty eight years flowed down, rubbed down against the broken oar. Unnimol takes her life by smashing her head with a copper rod. "The river helplessly stopped at the bridge, its head smashed against the great stone walls"⁵

DAUGHTER OF THE FLOOD

Kakkanadan's novel *Orotha* is named after the central character of the story. Orotha was, so to say, the daughter of the flood. She flowed down with the flood-water into the hands of Paappan, the boatman on the River Minanchil:

The year 1099 (ME): The eastern high ranges let out a roar and burst all of a sudden. Skies opened up and flood waters rushed down the mountain slopes. All rivers, from Periyar to Thamraparni roared down shaking and swallowing their banks in their mad, blind flow. All the lands along the banks of the Meenachilar, the Pamba, the Manimalayar, the Achankovilar, and innumerable lesser rivers got flooded and the people believed that the world was coming to an end. The devout ardently prayed for the re-emergence of Varaha Avatar to bring the earth back from the ocean which had devoured it.

The arteries of the Kadayathur and Kudamurutty mountains burst with a bang, and the blood of these mountains thundered down through Meenachilar. The violent river rolled and roared washing away everything including trees, houses and market places on her path. Pala market and the surrounding areas were being smashed and rocked by the swirling waters. She continued her death dance as if she were going to bring the entire forest with its trees and animals, and villages and towns to their doom.

The rivers fury knew no bounds, and the people who heard the deafening roar of the on rushing waters lost their senses. They acted like madmen. Not only the people but the domestic animals too behaved likewise. Those who saw land ran amok bumping into one another. In their blind rush like insane beings they collided and fell. They were on their feet again, collided again and fell again. And this farce of running helter-skelter continued. Birds in their thousands soared into the skies and flew around. Their frightening cries filled the air with an ominous ring. Exhaustion brought them down into the angry flood, and the river moved forward in wrath carrying their dead bodies.

The fortunate few who could find shelter on the top of tall buildings or tree tops or hill tops were crust fallen. Still their hope helped them regain sanity. They raised their eyes heavenward and with their minds full of fear and piety, and their hearts throbbing cried out to the Almighty to save them from the monstrous waves. They had lost everything dear to them—their land, crops, and their kith and kin. They were witnessing the Dooms day. They were waiting anxiously for the approach of Noah's Arc for themselves to be picked aboard to safety. They promised profuse offerings to every god for sending the Arc. They trusted in the miraculous powers of St. Arithra, Sabarimala Sastha, Ettumanoorappan and goddess Kali and waited. But swaying their belief the river continued its devastating invasion.

⁵Kovilan. *Thottangal*. 80.

It was in such violent current that Orotha flowed down!⁶

LIKE A RUTTING ELEPHANT

Cherukadu, novelist and critic, devotes a whole chapter in his autobiography *Jeevitappaata* (Life-path) to depict the flood:

The storm carried the dense clouds of the Arabian Sea and smashed it against the Kalladikodan hills and caused the flood. The trees which stood with their heads held high were uprooted. It crushed the huts of coconut frond and mud bricks and shattered these into dust which dissolved the water. The fruits rot and dropped. The drenched cattle lay supine with infected hoof and mouth. Nature turned into a dreadful witch. Unfastening and spreading the black matted hair, it roared angrily and became the night of darkness.

Even in the midday, the clouded sky poured out heavily spreading darkness. The cold rough wind benumbed the veins of animals and men like a diamond needle...

The water came rushing like a rutting elephant, raising its head. The water in the fields rose as if to touch the sky. The dykes were under water. Water rose and surrounded the houses. The drenched houses collapsed and were dissolved in the water. The family members, beneath a tree gathering pots, pans, wicker basket and chicken coop, stood shivering in the rain hugging children on to their chest...

Our house was positioned in such a way that it was just appropriate to measure the water-level. Climb ten steps from the river, one reaches the patippura. Climb the three step alley from there to reach the upper alley. Climb another ten steps up to arrive at the temple alley. Four steps up from the temple alley is the courtyard. Another four steps above the courtyard is the veranda of the house. We measured the water-level by counting the number of steps submerged. If water reaches the first or second step in the lower alley it meant a fairly big flood...

Raghava Pisharody and Pangan Nair checked the level of water again and again.

'Has the current ceased?' Mother would ask.

'No, still racing ahead', she would get the alarming reply.

It must have been midnight; we heard an ear splitting sound.

'Was it the sound of our granary collapsing?' my sister asked.

'Sure, it must be the granary', I woke up and remarked.

'Check it out, Raghava', my mother said.

Raghava pisharody took a lamp and found his way through the dense thicket of the temple yard and approached the granary through the upper alley. My mother and sisters came out in the heavy rain and stood near the cow-shed. 'Is it the granary, Raghava?' they queried. 'Looks like that. I can't see for sure'. Suddenly a lightning struck. Raghava Pisharody raised the lantern in his hand and stared in the direction of the granary. The granary had leaned towards the east....

Cherukadu notes that the flood was not sheer evil. He was happy to see that his uncle, an oppressor in the family, had lost his house and all.⁷

⁶Kakkanadan. *Orotha*. 14-16.

⁷Cherukadu. *Jeevithappaata*. 90-95.

OF LOSSES AND GAINS

Another autobiography that gives a vivid picture of the Great Flood is *Ormakalude Nattil* authored by Puthan Kavu Mathan Tharakan. He begins by describing the village street lined with houses on either side on that fateful night when the flood waters arrived:

The night fell. Kerosene lamps lit the houses on the street-side. Those dwelling on the northern and southern sides kept enquiring with each other about the water-level. From the low-lying road, the water rose to the courtyard. Those living in huts began to vacate these and move to higher altitude. From many houses, cattle and fowls were evacuated and taken in baggage-boats to places upland. Hay-stacks and chicken coops were swayed by the flood and kept appearing and disappearing in the waters and flowed down through the homesteads to the fields. We all kept awake. Water climbed on to the veranda from the court-yard. We moved the bench and other things on the veranda to the inner-room. By the time morning broke in, most of the houses by the street were submerged in water. We all boarded a canoe and reached the church. Most of the people including us began to dwell in the church.

Melukavu church is situated on a hill-top. The flood came in smashing the Western Ghats. As one viewed from the church's courtyard the whole world looked like a great ocean. Uprooted trees flowed through the middle of the river, complete with their branches. Snakes, mongoose, fox, fowl sought shelter on the raised branches. Elephants, gaurs, tigers and leopards kept going up and down in the whirlpool and rushed down like a train of connected bogeys into the Vembanattu lake. Thousands of tree-trunks from the eastern uplands were deposited in the coconut groves in the midland opposite Puthankavu. Coconut trees stalled their further movement down. The ara-nira wooden structures of nalukettu houses were plucked out of the foundation and came floating down like ships. Near about hundred families lived in the church.

People cooked food only once a day. Firewood and coconut frond torches were hard to come by. There were stones to make hearth but because of the storm and rain could not be lit...

Two days after we had moved to the church, water began to recede. The water-level dropped quickly. As people got to know that the water had receded from their houses, many returned. I got into a canoe and went to check the state of our house. The water had gone down to the lower veranda of the house. I got out of the canoe and viewed the roof-top. Red earth up to a height of one and a half feet had been deposited there. A freshwater shark (boal) weighing two kilogrammes was seen dead in the attic. The thickness of the red earth deposited on the roof-tops revealed the innumerable mountains that were pounded and dissolved in water...

Tharakan remembers that the flood meant not merely destruction and loss. There were gains to be made, if you had an eye for it. The flood had washed down tree trunks from the mountains and log stocks from state timber depots. As water flow receded, many of these came to rest in the midland and plains.

In Edanad, timber lay nearly up to thirty feet height, as if neatly arranged in pile. One could enjoy the odour of eagle wood and sandal wood trees even before getting to them. Among the many kinds of jungle trees deposited eagle wood, sandal wood, teak, rosewood, maruthi, mango tree, kambakam, karuthali, venthekku, unnam, and kalamavu--in fact all trees that poet Kunjan Nambiar had noted in 'Kalyana

Saugandhikam'—could be seen. The deposit also included the numbered logs from the government timber depots. I was not capable of carrying down the big trunks. Therefore I prepared to carry off smaller logs of the thickness of coconut a trunk and measuring about fifteen feet in length.

My little canoe boat has no hole to tie the logs. So I fastened the rope around a small log, placed the other end in the canoe, and sat on it and rowed..... I rowed through the whirlpools of Athimoodu and crossed the still enraged river Pamba and reached church gate. I manoeuvred through the neighbouring homestead that was dense with trees of all kinds--mango, jackfruit, tamarind, and poovannu—taking care that my canoe does not hit on these. Finally my little canoe tugging the log managed to reach the rear of my house. I repeated the exercise many more times crossing the river and adventurously collecting timber. When the water receded from the rear of the house I had to call off my fuel collection.

I remember that I had collected enough firewood for nearly two years. While the flood implied massive loss and destruction across Kerala I reaped two gains. First, my mother had enough stock of firewood for two years, and second, the horrendous flood inspired me to write a narrative poem on the Biblical flood, the story of Noah. In Karkatakam, 1099 ME I began writing 'Prathama Pralayam' (The first flood). Further, I also wrote a very long and rich narrative in prose depicting the country-wide flood which was published in the Nava Bharathi edited by Kandathil KA Kocheppan Mappillay.⁸

LEVELLER OF CASTE

Kodugallur Kochunni Thamburan in his poem *Athivathavarsham* (The great stormy downpour) penned during the times of the flood is a long narration of the calamities of the flood. He begins by describing the coming of the storm and the subsequent downpour, causing the mammoth trees and wild animals to drift down the rivers, and moves on to describe the collapse of bridges and houses, how the crops were ruined, and domestic pets and cattle washed away. To escape water, some people stood on their cots, others climbed to the attic, some fell down in water, some got on to the roof-top. There were cases where whole rubber plantations were washed away. The flood offered a golden opportunity for people with a devious mind, allowing them to grab the floating objects.

Some lost their paddy; some lost money

Some lost their wife; some lost their intelligence

Some lost their house; some lost land

Some lost their child; some lost life.⁹

Tamburan then goes to describe the salvage operations and the conditions in the flood-refugee camps. The taboos of caste pollution and the differences of class too were washed away by the flood:

Those who survived sought asylum on the hill-top

Stayed together with no space left vacant

The Brahmins wearing ear-studs, with the pulayas and ulladas

⁸Puthan Kavu Mathan Tharakan. *Ormakalude Nattil*. 133-136.

⁹Tamburan. *Athivatham*. 7-10.

The nazrani trader with the sudra
 Multitudes of castes
 Lived in harmony.¹⁰

The poem concluded with a description of the post-flood challenges. The entire stock of seed intended for the next crop was lost; the stock in the granary reserved for daily consumption until the next harvest had sprouted and rendered inedible; it would be long before the fields and the homestead ravaged by the flood could be got back to their earlier state; house had to be repaired, and all this to be done when one is hard-pressed for both cash and grain.¹¹

A SHEET OF WATER

Another eye-witness poem on the Great Flood is by E P Ramakuruppu. Like Tamburan, he begins by describing the great storm that preceded the rain. Then follows a description of the calamities that were so immense that the poet admits that he is incapable of describing such a great disaster.

The mountain-water leaped in umpteen ways
 Into the river, causing it to overflow
 As buildings collapsed
 The Kerala surface became an expansive water body
 The fertile fields and homesteads
 All submerged in water
 Alas! Most of southern Malayalam land
 Was devastated.

This is followed by a description of the most hapless sections of the people. The poet especially takes note of the suffering of the coir fibre workers--who beat coconut husk to fibre. This could have been because their workplace was out door which was flooded and inland water transport for movement of husk and fibre came to a standstill. These workers were fated to starve and if they work was available, forced to work on empty bellies.¹²

THE ANGRY SERPENT

KCN Vazhunnavar's *Vellappokkam*, another eye-witness poem on the flood, is packed with details of devastation as in earlier mentioned work but, perhaps, richer in imagery.

Breaking open the mountains with momentous force and speed
 From the nether world
 The angry great serpent arrogantly emerges
 Alas! It has angrily swallowed part of the globe
 Quickly, its poison spreads across the sky.

¹⁰Tamburan. *Athivatham*. 13.

¹¹Tamburan. *Athivatham*. 29.

¹²Ramakuruppu. 'Vellappokkam'. 58-59.

Again,
 From within the heart of a crying Kerala
 A massive flow of blood ensued
 Its limbs go numb¹³

CONCLUSION

Thus the fictional world of the flood presents the multi-faceted identity of the flood which is shaped in the minds of the writers and readers. The identity of the floods as a facilitator of agriculture underwent change, when people found its identity as the massive destroyer of life. In course of time, people linked their life with the natural phenomena and thus flood began to be seen with increased significance as a brutal destroyer. In a sense Great Flood became a time marker of common history and the timeline of events were set with reference to the Great Flood of 1099. In 'flood' the language of man and nature becomes one. In that natural process, man is seen united. Thus flood contributed creatively to literature also, especially in the form of compound metaphors like 'The Dog on the Thatch-roof', 'The River of Mind', 'Daughter of the Flood', 'Like a Rutting Elephant', 'Of Losses and Gains', 'Leveller of Caste', 'A Sheet of Water', 'The Angry Serpent'. Flood has also nurtured in literature archetypes of helpless old women, the survivors of flood, victims of flood, guarding dog.

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¹³Vazhunnazar. 'Vellappokkam'. 57-58.