

# FLOODS, ARCHIVES AND MEMORIES

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**Project Proposal for Documenting Historical data  
on How People of Keralam Faced Natural Disasters**  
(With an Appendix on Experiences of Fisherpersons as  
Rescuers of Flood Victims of 2018 August)



*past for a positive future*

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## **FLOODS, ARCHIVES AND MEMORIES**

Project for Documenting Historical data on How People of Kerala Faced Natural Disasters (With an Appendix on Experiences of Fisherpersons as Rescuers of Flood Victims of 2018 August)

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## Chairperson's Message

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In August 2018, the State of Kerala was caught in the grip of a massive flood resulting in the death of more than four hundred persons and injuries for a number of people. The destruction in terms of holdings, assets and buildings were enormous. More than the loss of life and the loss of possessions, the floods left behind a society badly scarred. Nevertheless, the acuteness of the disaster showed up heroic deeds, extreme acts of kindness and unity in action by the people of Kerala. Coming immediately after the threat of Nipah virus, this incident of resisting and surviving the floods revealed the spirit of determination among the people of this region. Though almost everybody helped each other, the special roles played by fisherpersons as rescuers and young people as helpers in communication were noted by almost everybody.

This kind of experience should not be left unrecorded. Therefore, the KCHR as an organization for the promotion of historical studies would like to archive the experiences and the memories of the disaster by the people. This project proposal contains the details of how it is to be recorded. Our hope is that our recording will be of use for future generations in building up their own society in the context of unexpected upheavals.

We hope that everyone in the region would lend a helping hand.

With regards,

**P. K Michael Tharakan**

Chairperson

Kerala Council for Historical Research



Historians and other social scientists have been using social memory in a very productive manner to analyze and understand social experiences that are very complex in nature. Therefore, even if there are substantial written and other forms of documentation of particular events, they still leave room for historians of social memory to intervene and analyze them whether they are historical or contemporary. It is in this context that momentous researches on social memory had evolved. We may recall here examples of research on the Holocaust, slavery, and genocides of many kinds. They bear testimony to the power of social memory in the writing of the histories of such events. In Indian history writing, historians of partition had used the archive of social memory to write about the 'extreme' events. We may recall here the feminist and subaltern scholarships that have achieved remarkable strides. We are yet to see a similar deployment of social memory in history writing transforming the craft of historian in Keralam.

Not confining to the discipline of history, social memory is an area of research where we find the confluence of different disciplinary practices and the negotiations of different intellectual traditions and specializations. In the proposed research on 'Floods, Archives and Memories' the Kerala Council for Historical Research envisages to carry out substantial research on the 2018 August floods in Keralam through the analysis of the memory of the people who had experienced floods. It is important to note that while floods became the great proverbial leveler, it did leave the social craters visible once the waters have receded. Yet, the popular narratives of the days of floods have been

about how the people of Keralam overcame their historical as well as contemporary social differences and divides. The high point was the rescue mission in which thousands of fisher people participated leading to a kind of cultural encounter for those in the inlands who were not used to the spirit of the collectivity that mark the coastal lifeworld.

Significantly, the proposed project envisages studying through popular memory of the floods, questions of climate change, ecological disasters and the manner in which people cope up with them. The project involves collection of narratives from the flood-affected people irrespective of their social locations and social biographies. Substantial issues of contemporary political theory such as citizenship especially social citizenship is considered a problem to be raised in the context of post flood Keralam as we come across the particular experiences of Dalits and Adivasis who had hardly any resources to survive the disastrous floods. Social citizenship as it was (un)thought in Keralam comes to a halt in the post flood Kerala if we could listen to the stories of the marginalized sections of Keralam. Accessing social memory is perhaps the appropriate means to enter the domain of the intimate experiences of the marginalized communities. At the same time as the scholarship in the area of social memory has suggested we are also aware of the fact that 'memories are tricky'. Yet in the context of the proposed research on 'Flood, Archives and Memories' we are aware of the possibilities that the study of social memory offers in understanding disasters of great magnitude and the manner in which people survive them.

**P. Sanal Mohan**

Director

Kerala Council for Historical Research



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## Section A

### I. Introduction

Floods are terrible realities for communities and nations in all parts of the world. In the wake of recurring extreme weather events in Kerala, we realize, perhaps a little late, that climate change poses greater threat to our common livelihood and collective future. Kerala was hit recently by the heaviest rains and inundations in a century which killed more than four hundred people and displaced over 800,000. The monsoons have been a regular part of Kerala's life and living. Though Kerala is not the wettest part of the subcontinent, its average annual rainfall is highest among the big states in India. Many regions in Kerala are frequently inundated during the annual monsoon. But this year's flood was entirely different. Many believe that the August 2018 flood was the severest natural disaster that the region has faced in living memory: surpassing perhaps the Okhi Cyclone, Tsunami of 2004 and even the 'Great flood of 1924' (as it is often called). Exact comparisons may not be possible. According to the Indian Meteorological Department; Kerala received excess rainfall which was 37.5 per cent more than the usual. The worst hit district such as Idukki received 87.5 per cent excess rain than the normal. (*The Times of India: August 17, 2018*) Notably, the excess rainfall occurred during an extremely short period of time. The unexpectedness of the recent floods were backed by the fact that between 1<sup>st</sup> August and 19<sup>th</sup> August there was almost unbroken rainfall which measured 758.6mm; nearly three times higher than the 287.6 mm which was predicted. (*Study Report Kerala Floods of August 2018: September: 2018*) Such a heavy rain by itself was enough to cause great havoc to the lives of

people who live in thickly populated settlements even in rural areas. The torrential rain triggered massive flooding and landslide. One must also note that many casualties were caused by landslides in the districts of Malappuram and Wayanad in northern Kerala and Idukki district in central Kerala. Many people were rendered homeless as their dwellings got washed away. The state of Kerala has 80 dams of which 42 major ones had to be opened to ease the pressure of water. There are factors that make Kerala particularly vulnerable to floods. The high population density is a major factor. While the national average is 382 persons per square kilometre, in Kerala it is around 860 persons per square kilometre. The geography of Kerala played a crucial role in the floods as well. Around 10 percent of the land area in Kerala lies below the sea level. The coastal plains and lagoons together account for more than 16 percent of the total land area. (*Kerala Development Report: 2008, 48*) The low-lying region like the Kuttanad faces floods quite frequently.

Disasters occur unexpectedly. They encounter their victims when they are without proper defences. The victims have to do with whatever inadequate objects that is available around them to build bulwarks against the onrush of flood water. In desperation they have to turn to themselves and those who are nearby. There are moments of recognition in which people become aware of their inevitable proximity to the fellow beings. Their collective human effort to stop impending onslaught of the disaster will mark the emotionally highest and lowest point in this whole experience. The emotionally highest points are derived from the willingness of people to help each other; to the point of sacrificing factors most dear to one, including life itself. It is in this context that the availability of helping hands and the arrival of rescuers from other sections of the larger community, who are not affected by the disaster as much as the direct victims, become a matter of special attention. A new community is formed; at least for

a short period of time, a community where normal divisions of caste, creed, language, social status or locality do not matter.

## II. Why this Project?

How people respond and recalibrate amidst an ecological disaster, remains mostly as a story untold. Future studies have to take into account the role of disasters in bringing various cultures and communities together. The fisherfolk collective that is traditionally hidden from historical writings has performed extraordinarily heroic deeds, risking their own lives to help others. They have emerged as the indisputable heroes in the rescue missions. Thousands of fisherpersons, mostly from the southern districts of Kerala joined the rescue missions with more than 4500 boats. According to some estimates, more than 70,000 people were rescued by the fisherpersons (*Tricontinental Dossier: 2018*). Defying stereotypes the 'new generation youth' also rose to the occasion and volunteered in the relief efforts. It is also important to note that social media platforms and contents were used extensively to aid the relief and rescue missions of various groups and governmental agencies during the flood. Along with the fisherpersons, the role of the Kudumbasree collectives and such other mass organisations in the rescue and relief activities during the flood need to be studied. More than 40,000 police officers and 3,200 fire fighters across the State as well played a leading role in the rescue missions (*Tricontinental Dossier: 2018*). So did a large number of teachers and government officials.

All this can be correlated with the fact that Kerala is the State in India with the highest human and social development indicators. It has achieved commendable progress in the fields of education and health. As it is pointed out by recent studies, the ethos of self-reliance and mutual help displayed by Kerala society at large at the time of the flood disaster is one that has developed over a period of

many years, through literacy campaigns, cooperatives, local social organisations, trade unions and peasant organisations (*Tricontinental Dossier: 2018*). Keralam's experience of surviving the worst flood in a century, therefore, needs to be properly archived and understood. In this project, collective and individual experiences will emerge as crucial witnesses of history. Drawing insights from previous studies, we aim to document memories of floods in the society of Keralam through art works, paintings, literature, social media, and news reports and so on. This project is keen to identify and interweave some of the missing threads and knots in historical knowledge. There are testimonials of hope, benevolence and survival. They are to be faithfully heard and preserved for the future generations. In the absence of initiatives to document people's story of suffering and survival during the flood, the lessons that we have learnt from this disaster at a great expense are likely to be forgotten as a new issue clouds our atmosphere. We may say that the present flood was partly a man-made disaster as it occurred in the backdrop of extensive stone quarrying, destruction of natural water storage systems, illegal construction of resorts and so on. It goes without saying that unbridled human greed has played its role in the making of this disaster. Therefore, rebuilding of Keralam could not be taken to mean 'a return to business as usual.' There should be a collective effort to correct erroneous public policies that result in ecological imbalances and disasters. We also need to pay greater attention to the issues of women's flood experiences and to ask if they are significantly different from their male counter parts. There is a need to visualise and learn from the plight of women in circumstances of floods and other such natural disasters so that we can make plans for the future.

With the floodwaters receding, the scale of disaster and the stories of people's loss and displacement are beginning to unfold. Recovering after a catastrophic flood is a long and painful process. For the people

who have lost all their possessions in the flood, the life after the flood is never the same again. As they try to put their devastated lives back together, we aim to pay attention to the issues of rebuilding life such as mental trauma, loss of physical memories (photo albums, family documents, and certificates). Documenting flood experience is an important way of keeping the flood high on the agenda for the future society. The testimonies from victims and witnesses can be used to understand their changing perceptions of environment and society. By archiving and sharing the experience of the flood victims and rescuers, we aim to build a repository of flood memories which can be used in flood prone areas in Keralam or elsewhere with suitable modifications.

### **III. Project Aims**

#### **I. Curating Ecological Memories in the Wake of a Flood**

For long, environment has simply been viewed as a mute and passive backdrop of active social life. Now that inhabitants of a post flood society have become painfully aware of their precarious relation with the environment, it is important to ask how they made sense of an ecological disaster. Another pertinent question is how did people connect their individual experiences with social contexts? By bringing together environmental history and oral history, we intend to develop ‘sustainable flood memories’ in which communities share their experiences of local flood events. By studying the flood memories of people in the inundated regions of Keralam, this project aims to provide a long term perspective on memories and how they shape people’s perceptions of environment and society. Oral testimonies may provide rare insights to people’s perceptions and beliefs about environmental changes. One would also like to know whether communities with a history of past flood events develop any means of resilience to future flooding.

We wish to ask the following questions to our sources:

- What were the key factors that influenced local inhabitant's perceptions of floods and other extreme weather events?
- How did flood memories take shape? Whether they were in any sense shaped by inter-generational accounts and testimonies?
- Do memories of extreme weather events create opportunities for environmental interventions or for developing community resilience to future ecological disasters?
- We may also probe whether the memories of past flood events come in the way in which people deal with present flood experience.

We propose to adopt a two-fold approach in exploring various flood events which include immediate societal impact of the flood, and how people have adapted to the ways of exchanging information and knowledge. Strategies of 'digital storytelling', for instance, emerge as a powerful tool of transmitting information and a critical aid in the rescue efforts. These efforts can be studied through newspaper reports, digital media accounts and so on.

In addition to the highlighting facts and contexts of flood memories, we aim to provide a platform for multiple views, and to give voice to the disadvantaged sections of the society, in particular, Dalits and Adivasis.

## **II. Following the Floods: Towards an Archival and Photographic exhibition of disasters**

By aiming to reconstruct past flood events through lesser known images and photographs, we intend to provide a greater dimension to the existing historical records. This resource base includes governmental reports, photographs from private collections, magazines, news papers, paintings and so on. The purpose of this archival exhibition is to provide

sustainable flood memories to the society. In the context of floods, images and visual representations play a vital role in understanding how these events were perceived and experienced by individuals and communities.

### **III. Building 'Conversational Narratives'**

With the same spirit, this project proposes to build 'conversational narratives' around flood memories. There may be reason to assume that flood memories are fragmented on the lines of caste, gender, age and so on. Though the inhabitants of the inundated regions may share a common landscape; they live very different realities, based on their social status, age, level of access to education etc. We would like to record the testimonials from various groups of people such as street vendors, police officials, school children, doctors, nurses, and drivers. These oral narratives may not be as coherent as we wish. But people's traditions, beliefs and practices of everyday life are so intimately interwoven. It is the task of the historian to be suspicious of the 'fanciful explanations' of past. But knowing how local communities live their lives with these memories and traditions is an important historical exercise. Therefore, we need not wish to force the memories to have a single conclusion.

When we look at the experiences of the August 2018 Floods in retrospect, we are faced by the following points, which are to be documented.

- a) Keralam, a region not unused to floods, was suddenly caught in the grip of a severe one, which forced significant rise of water level even in the Vembanad Lake; the largest backwaters of the region; and rivers detouring into unknown paths. This forced a large number of people to relocate themselves at least temporarily with implications of having to find more 'secure' and settled places of habitation or settlement at least for the short run and

on some occasions even for the long run. This study proposes to understand perceptible factors which could have initiated such a swell of water, the immediate impact of floods and the ways in which it affected various communities of people. It should work out to be an ex-post road map of flood in August 2018 which will provide useful information for building up strategies for escaping from and preventing such floods in future.

- b) The first or at least the earliest responses of people in the face of increasing water levels are important to be recorded. What would have been their main or priority concerns; breakdown of energy supply and electricity, conditions which can cause the spread of health problems, damage to their house or other properties including vehicles, breakdown of communications, threat to pets and other domestic and farm animals, pollution of water, threat to life, safety of the sick, the pregnant, children and old people? What could have been the earliest steps they took in the face of impending danger? In other words, this project should, from the memories of those who were affected, try to record their initial perceptions and responses.
- c) How do people affected by floods perceive their individual, family-level or collective preparedness to face the disaster? Was the ability or lack of ability to swim found to be a crucial factor? Was there tangible or intangible assistance from local, taluk level or district level government or public agencies immediately after the floods?
- d) Ultimately when the flood descended upon the lives of the people in its strongest severity, how many found solidarity, sense of cooperation and camaraderie among neighbours or people living nearby? How were these factors expressed?
- e) What were the requirements that they lacked most? Ability to



swim? Familiarity with boats? Speaking time on mobile phones? Directions to be given on where exactly were they? Lack of light and sign giving equipment? Lack of ability to be picked up by the helicopters?

- f) Do they have any clear memory of the high and low points in the emotional experience of being gripped by the floods and subsequent rescue?
- g) Who were the rescuers? Official, non-official, private, armed forces, state forces including Police and Fire force, fisherpersons, race car drivers, local people, political activists and trade union workers. Perceptions about how and why did they come? Were they mobilized? Was their involvement voluntary or accidental?
- h) Were the things required at the time of rescue, and resettlement elsewhere including relief camps like drinking water, blankets, change of clothes, sanitary napkins, inner wears and basic food distributed in time and adequately?
- i) Can we distinctly identify three types of persons the victims, the rescuers, the relief workers/officials?
- j) Victims' perceptions on why did the fisher people get involved in rescue work. Were they mobilized; if so, by whom? Were there any problems in dealing with people whom they do not usually encounter in their daily life?
- k) Was the act of the Fisherpersons universally accepted? Were there some exceptions?
- l) Was there any caste, party-political or religious differences at any level of rescue and relief works?
- m) Were the victims aware of the fact that the housing/ settlement pattern in water logged area benefitted socially and economically

advanced groups better than the rest?

- n) Perception of media/social media.
- o) The role of local representatives and their initiatives in the rescue mission and subsequent post-flood cleaning and sanitation mission.
- p) The gradual and perceptible decline of social solidarities in the aftermath of Keralam's flood disaster raises many interesting questions. One may wonder to know whether the solidarities in the face of disasters could only be momentary and short lived. Could there be any effective and desirable ways of sustaining the camaraderie and community resilience that we witnessed at the time of flood disaster for the long term reconstruction agenda? Similarly when we assess the widely commended feat by the Fisherpersons in having played a major role in the rescue mission, there are several points which require documentation for posterity.
  - 1) Have the Fisherpersons thought ever before of themselves as rescuers of others in distress, except when accidents occur at sea or coastal area?
  - 2) What prompted them to undertake such a risky mission-confidence (even excessive confidence) in their abilities to tackle sea-like waters, attitude of helpfulness, feeling that if not them, then there could not be anybody else who can do this job so effectively?
  - 3) Were they mobilized? If they were, who did that? Who gave the idea that fisherpersons and their crafts are useful in this kind of a situation?
  - 4) The experiences while they were on the mission of rescue.
  - 5) Were they welcomed everywhere and universally accepted?

- 6) Have the differences in terrain in the thickly populated hinterland as opposed to the open sea caused any impact upon their mission?
  - 7) Speed in preparation and manoeuvrability of their crafts; how do they themselves perceive these aspects?
  - 8) Who met their expenses as well as the expenses of running their motorized boats? Did they get compensated adequately for damages occurred during the rescue mission?
  - 9) Besides magnanimity, motors and manageable crafts (probably restricted to southern and northern Keralam) did any other factor play a contributing role in the mission?
  - 10) Did they suffer loss in terms of fish catch during the period when they were engaged in rescue missions? How did they manage that loss?
  - 11) Were inland fisher people also involved in rescue?
  - 12) Were adequate number of lorries available in time to transport the crafts to and fro the places of distress and places of origins?
- q) The Navy and the Military might have lacked adequate knowledge of the difficult terrains. But the fisherperson's skills of navigating through local waters helped the rescue efforts. For instance, they rescued people from places that helicopters could not access. How do we benefit from their experiences in preparing for future eventualities?
- r) There is an unproven supposition that a significant majority of fisherpersons who voluntarily joined the rescue mission hailed from the areas with a legacy of progressive social movements. This proposition need to be investigated.

Most of these questions are of a nature where responses can be sought from three types of people; the Victims, the Rescuers and the Relief workers/ Officials. The questions will also concentrate upon the first few days of the floods and its aftermath. One may seriously wonder whether it is the job to be undertaken by a research organisation in History, a subject normally considered to concentrate on past events only. The KCHR nevertheless can certainly undertake to cull out the levels of perception and understanding of people who were involved in a phenomenon of tragic proportions through unstructured and semi-structured questionnaires and interviews. Other academic disciplines also may use the same approach. But KCHR with its background in history will be able to rearrange the data collected in a chronological and systematic manner in order to contribute to problem- solving and policy-making in the future. Whatever happens in the contemporary world will soon become history and unless these happenings are recorded at the time of their occurrence, a future understanding will not be possible in a near perfect state. The archives work on the same principle. When we collect records and preserve details of important contemporary events, such data can make problem solving, decision-making and policy making easier, by strengthening an understanding of past information through non-specialist traditional approaches in communities which are dependent mainly on local knowledge and traditional know- how. Here also, the same factor operates. Local and traditional knowledge are strongly fed by memories of past events and experiences. If they are recalled, they can be used for effective solving of current problems. This would add to the methodological excellence. Various modes can be initiated in the study of flood memories in Keralam. The following methods are provisionally suggested:

1. Collecting ethnographical data through oral historical methods and techniques and they are to be recorded and preserved for future use. Ingenious methods resorted by people in such contexts

of disaster are capable of providing possible solutions, for future eventualities of the same nature.

2. The Kerala State Archives, private archives, newspapers and journal archives may be used to extend the knowledge on how people of Kerala have faced natural disasters in the past. We can try to extend the exploration of this material as far back in history as possible through the earlier events, though data on them may be less detailed. Kerala has very strong memories of a flood or a Tsunami like occurrence as far back in history as 1341 CE which is supposed to have created Kochi and to have closed the marine entry paths to Kodungalloor. There are several other such events in the memory of the people of Kerala. While Okhi and Tsunami are still live in our memories, there are records and memories of the 1924 (1099 Kollam Era) floods. Two leaves from the diary of Sri. Thuppan Namboodirippad, dated Karkitakam 4 and 7 of Kollam 1099 mentions two floods beside the 1099 floods - one in 1057 and the other in 1000 KE. In one of them the Ambalam (temple) at Chelemittam was fully flooded, while in another such incident, the 'Mala Vellam' (water from the hills) is said to have come up to Vadakke Kotta Vathukkal at Thripunithura. Such already available information opens up immense possibilities for further information forthcoming from detailed archival work.

## IV. Justification

Ardra Manasi in her study, talks about a group of researchers in the University of Gloucestershire, in United Kingdom who embarked on an academic journey to explore the association between floods and memories. In 2010, the Centre for the Study of Floods and Communities of the University, along with the Countryside and Community Research Institute (CCRI) researched and compared three different communities affected by the disastrous floods of July 2007 around River Severn, which originates in the middle of Wales in England and flows into the

Atlantic Ocean. They investigated the concept of ‘Sustainable Flood Memory’. This was an effort to understand how exposure to events of past flooding can “physiologically and practically” better equip local communities to face similar future flood events. Their aim was to study how this could lead to long-term influence among communities. Through indepth semi-structured interviews in both urban and rural settings, the researchers examined memories at multiple levels – the individual (micro-memory), household/community (meso-memory) and social/historical/political (macro memory). (Manasi: 2018)

The study mapped the multiple means by which the community ‘memorized’ the flood of 2007 – instance of trauma and triumph during the flood (‘emotional highs, and lows’), epigraphic marking of water level in public settings, flood albums, photo sharing on social media and other forms of storytelling. The community was also found to conceal the memories to portray a situation of ‘back to business as usual.’ This was to deal with the reputational damage to economy caused by the floods (affecting tourism, local house values etc.) For the researchers, the greatest challenge was to see how these memories and lay knowledge could be transformed into ‘actionable knowledge’ and ‘coping strategies’ that would aid the communities in dealing with future flood events. Their argument was that ‘archiving and sharing’ these memories are the crucial step towards this end. (Hansen& McEwen, 2016)

Similarly, the book “Laval: Life, Love and Death in Port-au-Prince”, 2017, Verso: London, edited by Peter Orner and Evan Lyon collected oral testimonials from those who survived a huge earth quake that struck Haiti on January 12, 2010. The study was done by former students of Kittaridge Fine Arts College. They interviewed the survivors several times during a period of four year. Their experiences as well as hopes for the future were also collected. With time, desperation

over difficulties and sadness changed, and their minds got prepared to face life anew (*Deshabhimani*, 2018, Sept 2, Sunday). In 1910, Paris and its surroundings were threatened by flooding of the river of Seine. Jeffrey Jackson, Professor of History at Rhodes College in Memphis, tells the story of Paris flood in his book titled “Paris under Water.” Though there are passing references to recent natural disasters in the study, its narrative focus is mainly on the 1910 Paris Floods. It is a tale of adversity and survival. The courageous efforts of Parisians to save their city and themselves from the flood are carefully archived in this book.

Taking cue from these studies, we wish to define our role as collectors and listeners of stories and memories of a flood. We may not necessarily authenticate the stories to know whether they conform to geological or historical facts. The oral testimonies are, nonetheless, crucial for understanding the complex interaction between traditions, memory and cultural practices. While archiving these flood memories in the society of Keralam, we shall remain passive listeners and allow the narrators to tell their own stories.

## **V. The Search for Method**

There is a pervading scepticism among the historians about the credibility of oral history. Oral history, as a method, involves collecting and interpreting oral evidences and using interviews and participant observations as a form of evidence. For many practitioners of history, reliability of memory remains a serious question as memory is more about the present than about the past. AJP Taylor once described oral history as “old men drooling about their youth” (Gildia: 2010:69). The framing and presentation of a project such as this one, is bound to raise number of questions relating to historical method. Historians are supposed to be dispassionate chroniclers of events and facts. They are

usually not involved in the current events. Such being the case, one may wonder, as noted above, whether it is the job to be undertaken by a research organisation in History, a subject normally considered concentrating on past events only. We acknowledge the fact that these questions cannot be dismissed so easily.

History is arguably the best method to understand human experiences in the past. As time passes, memory is subject to vagaries of space. The questions of memory, history and social context are very central in understanding oral traditions as a source material for history writing. However, critically looking at oral traditions and folk tales helps to raise certain questions on the nature of interaction between past and present, the relation between individual and collective memory, and the role played by different forces and dynamics in the social production of memory. The inquiry into the social context of oral narratives similarly entails the process of interrogating the function of ideology and hegemony in making oral traditions and popular beliefs in the given space and time. Factors of power relations might be present in transforming individual stories into dominant cultural narratives. Therefore, historical reading of oral traditions should be conscious of these factors such as hegemony and dominant ideology in shaping the cultural narratives of the time and to recognize the fact that cultural productions do not exist in a vacuum.

By initiating new conversations in the practice of history, we believe that there is a need to move beyond the traditional methods of understanding social history only through the prism of archival data. In fact, one may argue that memory is part of an archive too. History and its axioms are not seductive enough to believe that we will be able to represent how things actually happened in the past. The imperative of the present is to recognize that every society in the past had different forms and structures to express their historical consciousness and the



realization that there could be varied methods of recording it (Veluthat: 2004). The discipline of history, as noted by Dipesh Chakrabarthty, "exists on the assumption that our past, present and future are connected by certain continuity of human experience" (Chakrabarty: 2009: 197). The present is made out of tradition. And it is in traditions that most people rest their beliefs. There can be no doubt that archiving oral traditions is one of the things historians do. This project would like to present the community response to contemporary ecological events from a historian's point of view. From this perspective, the KCHR shall make the case for ecological awareness and actions in Kerala society. Studying the past is often the best way of predicting the future. E. H Carr noted in his classic work, *What is History?*, that, if people can widen the range of experience beyond what they have encountered as individuals, and if they can draw upon the experience of others who have had to confront comparable situations in the past, then—their chances of acting wisely should increase proportionally (Gaddis, 2002:9). We are therefore, interested to investigate how people in the past lived their life during the time of flood and other ecological disasters in Keralam. More significantly, we would like to know whether the people knew about the level to which the river would rise, the duration and frequency of flooding, safe spots to which they could move and many such details.

## **VI. A Brief Note on Procedure**

The project wish to interview three type of people who have directly experienced the Flood 2018; the Victims, the Rescuers and the Relief Workers. The people who are to be interviewed are also active participants in this project. We expect the participation of students and prospective researchers in helping with a variety of tasks including interviewing, archiving, and transcribing oral history material. Training is often required for oral history interviewing. We wish to offer such

training to the volunteers to provide them a good starting point to the methods in oral history which will also be useful for a range of related research activities in the future. The study on previous flood events in Keralam involves archival resources that include governmental reports, newspapers, photographs, and so on.

There are many questions that arise with respect to oral history interviewing methods; which respondents to select, which questions to ask, how to interpret the material gathered after the interviews, and so on. These issues are to be considered in advance. While people are more concerned with the immediate issues of relief and rehabilitation, other concerns are possibly relegated to the background. Scholars have pointed out that, as time passes, even flood victims do not want to discuss it anymore, and they are more concerned with the issues of survival than with the flood itself. We may be confronted with these practical issues as we proceed with the interviewing process.

We propose to limit our interviewing of the rescuers to two different districts: Kollam and Thiruvananthapuram. The rescuers will be identified in consultation with various governmental agencies and community organizations. Interview of victims, on the other hand, involves a long process in which the residents of the inundated regions and their immediate environs will be carefully chosen and interviewed multiple times. The victims to be interviewed will be selected from six flood affected districts viz., Pathanamthitta, Idukki, Kottayam, Ernakulam, Thrissur and Alappuzha. In the course of this project, we wish to conduct victims' interviews on multiple occasions to know whether their perception of the event changes over the period of time. Rather than aiming to statically represent the population of flood victims, we are concerned to ensure that our selection procedure represents a historical process. Interviewees would be, therefore, chosen purposively to reflect the diversities of life—such as, class, gender, caste, religion, age and so on.

## VII. Project Summary

Floods are not novel to our civilizational experience. Legends of great floods can be found in the mythologies of different cultures. It is a part of our great fears. Flood is also an important time marker in history. In many historical traditions, flood is seen as a metaphor to mark the decline of cities and civilizations. According to scholars, a momentous flood of Periyar River in 1341 is believed to have destroyed the ancient port town of Kodungallur or supposedly the old Muchiripattanam in the Malabar Coast, leading to its demise as an 'Indian Ocean emporium'. Natural disasters are among the important markers of chronological changes. Pinarayi Vijayan, the Chief Minister of Kerala has described the August 2018 flooding as the worst flood in a century. The memories of the 1924 flood have come back to life in this context.

The historical flood records can be classified into two different groups. The first set of evidence is based on a wide range of archival data, including newspaper reports, diary notes, and so on. Another set of evidence is in the form of epigraphic markings on public buildings, indicating the flood level of previous floods. There have been numerous attempts to mark the height of the floods on different public buildings. One such marking of the flood level of 1958 at Manimala Bridge in Southern Kerala, reads, "The present flood reached 12ft above 1099 flood level "(Ramaswamy: 1985: 65). In the post-flood Kerala society, epigraphical markings begin to function as an important device of social memory. A case in point is the physical markers which we suddenly discover in the wayside temples, churches and elsewhere. The marking of the maximum flood level at the Parthasarathy temple in Aranmula, about 40 kilometres from Kochi, is an interesting specimen. A stone inscription in the temple, indicating the water mark of the previous flood in 1924 has now transformed into a repository of local memory and knowledge. As we wish to delve deep into the past, previous flood

in 1924 which figures even in the fictional accounts in Malayalam, returns to the public memory. As some studies suggest, those times are told most authoritatively in Thakazhi Sivasankaran Pillai's short story, titled "Vellapokkathil" ("In the flood") The well known story written in the mid 1960s is said to have inspired by the great flood of 1924, when the author was a boy of 12. (*Frontline*, September, 2018) Researchers have shown that the great flood of 1924 figures both in fiction and non-fiction writings in Malayalam. (Pillai: 2016:73) An equally important context is provided by Kodungallur Kochunni Thamburan and E P Ramakuruppu who have penned long, narrative poems, focusing on the flood.( Jacob, 2016: 73) Writers inescapably mine their own experiences when they write. Reflecting on these writings, one could assume that knowledge of this flood has long been a part of local people's oral traditions.

The nearly one century gap between the great flood of 1924 and the present flood, and their commemoration in the public memory reflect the importance of oral traditions. Interestingly, there are still old people to tell us what they saw and heard at the time of the 1924 flood (*The Indian Express*, October, 12, 2018). But with the passage of time, the first hand memories that people have about the flood events are bound to decay. One such personal remembrance is now shared by the 100 year old Marthoma Valiya Methrapolitha from Tiruvalla. Recounting the experience, he says, "in comparison, the current flood are more devastating...I have painful memories of witnessing houses with helpless inhabitants and cattle being washed away in the Pamba nearly almost a century ago." (*The New Indian Express*: October, 26, 2018) There may be more such personal remembrances which have survived the ravages of time. In short, the human experiences, stories and memories and their relation to each other are the central concerns of this project. As this project is a work in progress, we believe that new problems and questions would present themselves in the course

of time. In the course of this project, we wish to invite feedback from subject experts and community organisations and their involvement is greatly expected.

## VIII. Ecological Disasters in Keralam: A Historical Perspective

*“In this country there are two seasons, the wet and dry. In the first two months of the rainy season there are only passing showers during the which time the people lay in a stock of provisions; in the next two months there is a continual downpour day and night , so that the streets and market places are like rivers , and no one is able to go out of doors” (Sastri: 1939:305)*

From the Ma Huans’ Account of Cochin

The recent flood in Keralam is not without a historical precedent. Ma Huan, a fourteenth century Chinese traveller, has left us an interesting description of the monsoon miseries in pre-modern Keralam. Though there has been a limited scholarship on the pre-modern flood events and other similar ecological disasters in Keralam’s history, historical records on the previous flood events are being increasingly recognized in the wake of the recent flood. We wish to undertake an extensive study of the archival data on previous flood events which cover the time frame of nearly a century. According to the Kerala Development Report, Keralam experienced major flood problems in 1961, 1968, 1974, 1981, 1986, 1989, 1992, 1994 and 2002. In 2002, “776 villages and 2335 homes were affected by heavy rains and floods.” Adding on to this, it noted that “twenty one persons were killed and eight persons went missing in the floods of that year” (*Kerala Development Report: 2008: 50*)

As we turn to the literature of these times, it reveals crucial perspectives on culture and society. If contemporary press reports are to be believed, during the 1924 flood, towns were flooded, roads and bridges were washed away and people were trapped in their homes. The plight of the Tribal and Adivasi people in the flooded areas of Puliur and Chengannur were particularly mentioned in the news paper reports of this period (*Malayala Manorama, August, 25, 2018, reprint*). An interesting fire incident is reported at the time of a flood in Mundankavu. Report says that the fire was caused when people who were huddled on rooftop of the house, tried to keep themselves warm with fire. According to some recent studies, Travancore government at that time was very careful in dealing with post-flood situations. Following the 1924 flood, a Flood Relief Committee was immediately setup by the government in Travancore. The government announced that the amount proposed for agricultural loans was to be increased to Rs. 5.5 lakhs and all district officials were commanded to deal with 'utmost sympathy' with all the applications. (Pillai, 2015: 133). While reading the news paper reports of 1924, one may be struck by the fact that the worst affected regions of the 1924 flood were more or less the same as today. A report in Malayala Manorama, in 1924, says not only the people of low-lying regions like Pandanad, Budhanoor, Prayar and Mazhukeer were affected by the flood but also the people in the highlands of Mundankavu and Puthankavu. In this newspaper report, the 'Great Flood of 99' was compared with the previous flood that the Ernakulum region witnessed in the year 57 (Malayalam Era). It is interesting to see how people keep harking back to the earlier flood events of their time.

In short, it is a project on Floods, Archives and Memories. By providing a historical background to the ongoing debates on the extreme weather events in Keralam, we aim to learn more about the past flood events and the public perceptions and collective memories that

revolve around them. The aim of this project is not merely to recover the memories of those who had experiences of the natural disasters but to make use of oral traditions that passed down as stories from the past. There will be a conscious effort to retrieve these experiences and collect popular stories on floods and other natural disasters. For example, in his work, *Native Life in Travancore*; Samuel Mateer has described about boatmen singing ballads of a “great fire in Alleppey and inundation in Trevendrum.” (Matteer, 1991: 249) This clearly illustrates that the memories of floods has long been part of people’s oral traditions.

This project is also envisioned to reflect a chronological order. The time frame of this project, at this stage, is not rigidly defined, but the archival and oral traditions of the severe flood events of a hundred years will be chronicled. As noted by various scholars, building a repository of flood memories is useful for replicating the strategies of survival when such a need if at all arises in future.

## I. Duration of the Project

This project is estimated to require two years of collective effort. The project task consists of surveys, interviews and archival investigations in six flood affected districts; Pathanamthitta, Idukki, Kottayam, Ernakulam, Thrissur and Alappuzha. At the initial stage, only two research assistants are involved in this project, but as it evolves, more project staff may be required for transcribing and processing the oral interview materials. The time allocation for the project can be split into the following schedules:

- The 1<sup>st</sup> survey, data collection and preliminary report to be completed in 2019
- The 2<sup>nd</sup> Survey and data collection to be completed in 2020
- Final report writing /2021

## II. Proposed Expenses of the Project

Topics	Amount
Two Research Assistants @ Rs.25000/month (30 months)	15,00,000
Advisory Committee Meetings @ Rs.25000/month (30 months)	7,50,000
Seminar	2,00,000
Honorarium for Interviewers	30,00,000
Training of Interviewers	5,00,000



Purchase/Hiring of Equipments	10,00,000
TA/DA	5,00,000
Accommodation	2,00,000
Documentation	2,00,000
Miscellaneous Expenses	8,50,000
<b>Total</b>	<b>87,00,000</b>

The eighty seven lakh (87,00,000) of Rupees is already allocated to the 'Contemporary History Archives', 'The Oral History Project' and 'The Local Histories and Institutional Histories' within the 'Conservation of Historical Heritage of Kerala' and also to the 'Digitizing Kerala's Past' projects.

(Refer: Re-prioritized Proposal for releasing fund from Electronic Ledger Account - KCHR)

### III. Project Outputs

- a. A preparatory seminar and it's report.
- b. Two books (one in English and one in Malayalam) to be published by leading publishers which aim to be a major contribution to the Historiography of Kerala
- c. A Report based on this study (bi-lingual) is to be submitted to the Government of Keralam. Copies of the report should also be made available to other government and non-governmental agencies.
- d. Three working papers/published papers on this subject.
- e. The material and data collected for this project are to be made available to the public in electronic form.

- f. We will take the initiative in preparing a small museum to commemorate the experiences of the flood 2018 along with the past natural disasters, preferably at Pattanam, where the people who suffered from the flood took shelter for a short period within the KCHR campus.

(Project Proposal prepared by **Abey Thomas** in association with **P. K. Michael Tharakan**)

## IV. Project Organisation

Pt organisation will be carried out by the following KCHR Personnel:

- **P. K. Michael Tharakan**, Chairman, KCHR
- **P. Sanal Mohan**, Director, KCHR

Field level organization to be carried out by:

- **Dr. Rachel A. Varghese**, Research Officer, KCHR
- **Dr. Suneesh K. K.**, Academic Coordinator, KCHR

Research work to be coordinated by

- **Abey Thomas**, Digitizing Kerala's Past (DKP), KCHR

Technical Work to be coordinated by

- **Hitha V.**, Digitizing Kerala's Past (DKP), KCHR

Project Advisory Committee

1. **Jose Kaleekkel**, Social Activist
2. **Mercy Alexander**, Social Activist, Sakhi
3. **Robert Panipilla**, Social Activist, Friends of Marine Life
4. **A. P. Kuttikrishnan**, State Project Director, Samagra Shiksha

Abhiyan, Kerala

5. **N. Ajithkumar**, Director, Centre for Socio- Economic and Environmental Studies
6. **A. J. Vijayan**, Social Activist
7. **Gopinath Ravindran**, Vice Chancellor, Kannur University
8. **J. Rejikumar**, Director, Directorate of Archives

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