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EDITOR
SEBASTIAN JOSEPH

On Present (in/g) Histories

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Editor
Sebastian Joseph



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Sebastian Joseph (Editor)

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'Great Flood of 1924', Perspective From a Documented Version

Meenu Jacob*

The paper is about an important time marker in popular memory of the people of India's south-west coast. The Great Flood of 1924 – popularly known as *Thonnoottionpathile vellappokkam* – persists as a nightmarish memory in the minds of elderly people in south west India. The rainfall intensity of the South West Monsoon was too voluminous that the havoc it wreaked was unprecedented. Heavy landslides in the Western Ghat Mountains resulted in the flooding of rivers flowing down to the Arabian Sea. The erstwhile Travancore and Cochin States and parts of Malabar were the most impacted regions. Travancore, the southern geographical part of Kerala, was particularly and disastrously hit by the flood. The incessant rain that poured for the three weeks continuously left innumerable human settlements both on the hills and plains got washed away, extensive areas of agricultural crops were destroyed and communication completely ruined. Accordingly, the flood that occurred in Travancore in 1924 was so extraordinary that it merits the description of 'The Great Flood'. It is locally remembered as 'Thonnoottionpathile vellappokkam' (The flood of M.E.1099). 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. Autobiographies are rich with description of the flood and also significantly figures in many a work of fiction.

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The midlands of Travancore were more populated, and the coastal lands even more so, than the highlands. While the highlands were covered with jungles and plantations, the midlands were the seat of a variety of cash crops including rubber and pepper. The inhabitants of the midlands were peasants who had migrated from the lower slopes and the coastal tract, especially, beginning from the early decades of the twentieth century. The coastal tracts were home to the cultivation of coconut and rice. Many of the rice fields were created from swamps and shallow backwaters through reclamation, a process which dates back to the nineteenth century. Considering the size of population, the density of human settlement and the wide range of economic activities, the impact of the flood was more severely felt in the midlands and especially the coastal regions as compared with the highlands. This paper traces the flood as it happened in the midlands and coastal tracts of Travancore. Section one of the paper examines the larger scene of flood in and around Travancore. In the subsequent section, the involvement of the various agencies in rescue and relief works are observed.

The Flooded Midlands and the Coast

The south-west monsoon arrives on the Travancore coast with intense rainfall in late May or early June. Such intense rain was considered normal. The year 1924 was no exception. In fact, unlike in earlier years when sea-erosion forced the closing down of the state port at Alappuzha during the early monsoon, in 1924, the sea was so calm that operations at the port continued unhindered. As the *Malayala Manorama* reported on June 28, 1924:

Mostly, as the monsoon begins, from about May 15, on account of sea-erosion, ships do not enter this port or load and off-load goods. Towards this an appropriate site to the south of the port is identified and the practice is to have the monsoon operations there. This year, however, although the time is well past, the sea continues to be calm and ships do anchor at the port. Very soon, the vessel SS Jalataranga is expected to arrive to load goods for Rangoon.¹

The state port had a network of backwaters, rivers and canals as its hinterland.

The Alappuzha port stretched itself out through the commercial canal to Vembanad, the biggest backwater tract in the state. It spread over an extent of 200 sq.kms. Vembanad extended up to the port of British Cochin. In Travancore, it skirted the taluks of Ambalapuzha, Cherthala, Vaikom, Ettumanur, Kottayam and Changanassery. Further Vembanad received into it the major rivers of central and northern Travancore via Pamba, Muvattupuzha Minachil. Many smaller rivers and canals joined up with these major rivers. Backwaters to the south of Alappuzha were linked to Vembanad through the Pallathuruthi river. However the Varkala cliff south of Kollam broke the line of communication to Travancore. Here travellers had to walk about 20 Kms along the sea beach to reach the next backwater.²

As the monsoon intensified, the hinterland of rivers and tributaries began to swell. Soon, the backwaters too, since these could not empty themselves to the sea which had by then turned rough and erosion was mighty. As the rivers over-flowed into the basins, the fields and houses were soon flooded. An overview of the calamities on the coastal tracts may be gained from the words of PK Narayana Pillai, Councillor from Ambalapuzha taluk, on the floor of the Travancore Legislative Council:

[T]he tracts and basins drained by a number of rivers, namely, the Kallada river, the Kulakkada river, the Pamba river, Minachil river, and the Periyar have been invaded by the inrush of water and the inhabitants of these region have been rendered homeless. Dead bodies, houses, and much moveable property are said to be afloat and people have been reduced to the most miserable position. Death appears to be at grips with life and the only option left to the surviving population in these regions is to perish either by submersion immediately under water or by comparatively gradual process of starvation. The precarious survival enjoyed by the remaining population in these regions is a matter of very grave concern and it is very difficult to contemplate the situation with anything like composure. Communications have been cut off; roads have been washed off and bridges broken down by the unprecedented and unparalleled floods experienced in these parts of

*Travancore. I understand that not only Central and North Travancore have been affected but that even South Travancore stands the risk of being so affected on a similar scale.*³

In Travancore flood was a familiar phenomenon for people living in low-lying areas, especially in the rice-bowl of Kuttanadu. People living there knew to what level the water might rise and what measures may be taken for safety. The flood of 1924 was, however, a different story altogether. It was seen as an affirmation of God's authority over man. In Paravur, regular floods never reached the Brahmin settlements of Madathumuri and Valiyangadi. In 1924, however, those living there were compelled to shift. These places, it was reported, resembled Vembanad Kayal. The Main-Central Road (MC Road), which was the trunk-road of Travancore connecting the south and the north, was under 5 feet of water in Chengannur and its surrounds.⁴

If such were the conditions in relatively higher low lands and the midlands, even more low lying areas like Kainakari, Kavalam, Mitrakkari, Kumarakam, Parippu, Vechur, Chambakulam faced greater destruction. As flood-refugees returned home to restart normal life, often, forget the house, they could not even identify the place where their house once stood. As rivers changed their course, many roads were turned into rivers, and some rivers became pathways. About the region around river Kallada, *Malayala Manorama* reported that "both eastern and western parts of Kallada faced such a scale of destruction that were nearly erased off the earth".⁵ The flooding of the Kallada River had wreaked havoc. The Chief Secretary's note was eloquent:

The inundation in the two Kalladas was due to the Kallada river and Sasthancotta Lake overflowing their banks. A detailed report about the western Kallada has been received from the Kunnathur Tahsildar. He inspected the place on the 20th July. He found four out of five square miles, comprised in the pakuthi submerged in four to eight feet depth of water. The bund close to Thiruvvara temple was first breached on the evening of the 17th to a length of 10 koles. By the 20th it had widened to

150 koles and sodden the banks on either side to a further distance of 15 koles. Another breach occurred on the 18th in the Mukkuthikkal culvert. The houses damaged are detailed in a list accompanying his report. They number 249. The people driven by the floods have taken refuge in temporary huts and in the buildings of the temple. The seedlings for the Kumbhom crops are also lost along with the Kanni crops. The Tahsildar does not recommend rice doles in the locality, but suggest the early repair of the breaches, the restoration of the flood gates and assistance to the riots in the shape of loans for cultivation and donation for buildings⁶.

Sankara Menon, a member of the Travancore Legislative Council noted that:

Within the memory of the oldest man living, the country has not experienced such a visitation. I had the opportunity to see some places and also to hear reports from others regarding the havoc caused by the floods. So far as the people of Kallada are concerned their condition is most distressful. Almost all houses on either side of the Kallada river have been completely washed away.

He collected such reliable information from the leading personalities of Kallada:

Some of the people are occupying, it is said, the tops of coconut trees, and there are only very few bits of land here and there which are not under water. The condition of the depressed classes particularly is most miserable. They lived mostly on the sides of the river or in the paddy fields in small huts and they are now rendered absolutely homeless and they are seen on the top of a hillock at the Chittumala temple.⁷

Of the Periyar, the widest river of Travancore, Malayala Manorama reported that while there had been two floods in the recent past, in ME 1057 and 1082 [AD 1881-1882 and 1906-1907], the flood of 1924 was comparable only to the mega flood of 1824-25. In 1924, however, the water level was higher by one-and-a half kole.⁸

The rush of water forced the authorities to open the shutters of all the dams in Travancore. The destruction caused by opening of Pechipara dam in southern Travancore was compared to 'Edna Volcanic eruption'.⁹ Similar scenes of destruction were witnessed

on the northern fringe in Alwaye. Most parts of the town, situated on the banks of river, were submerged. The Chief Secretary's Press Note reads:

The situation there was serious. Water had touched the girder of the Railway Bridge. There was a strong current sweeping the town and its suburbs. The market was one of the few elevated places in the town for refugees to repair to. Even the Municipal President's house was 10 feet in water, and he had a narrow escape from the capsizing of his boat on his way to see the Peshkar. Railway service had stopped from the 16th and the line from Ernakulum breached in several places. The ordinary roads to the town were all under water. The losses of lives and livestock have not yet been estimated¹⁰

Of the Union Christian College and its surrounds, the Malayala Manorama reported thus:

The hillock on which the Union [Christian] College stands is surrounded by rice fields and huts on all four sides. Viewing from the top of the hillock it would now appear that the Arabian Sea had shifted its location over to there. Those who live on the banks of the river are seemed holding their babies on their shoulder and crying out for help... The huts that have been carried away by the river are indeed numerous. As the college and hostel building have been used to accommodate flood refugees, the classes have been called off. The ground floor of the College is already filled with people. Even now people are being off-loaded from country boats to the College. They have no access to food. Houses are broken in, people rescued and brought to the College. Already over two thousand people of varied social group are here. Cattle is also numerous. Objects flowing down to the river are uncountable.¹¹

Flood situation in Kuruppampadi near Alwaye was described as follows:

Heavy rain continued for many more days and river Periyar was flooded. Traffic was completely blocked and people went back home disappointed. Direction of the flow of river changed from east to west which caused the low landed area to come under water.

Consequently situation became more tensed:

Water level went on increasing. As water entered houses, people were forced to the top floor. This happened at nearby 5 O'clock. By 6 O'clock water had completely flooded the ground floor. Soon water rose to the ceiling. Some of the people consoled themselves that water had not reached 1057 flood level. By 10 O'clock water entered upstairs too and there were loud screams.

It was a night of sustained horror:

On that fateful night, people who were stranded in their houses with water surrounding it from all sides stood all shivering and with their heads peeped out through gaps in the tiles and hay roofing, hoping that those coming by boats could spot them and help them escape. Then for long, no cries would come out. Those who came for rescue had to break open the houses, gather the people and transport them to safety by boat. The plight of cattle, goats, and ducks was even more miserable. While even human beings could be adequately protected who is there to attend to these beings? For some time, they sought to swim and follow their masters but eventually had to surrender to nature and their bodies floated away. Boat men saved people by breaking their homes. The condition of domestic animals was even more pathetic. When even saving the people was not possible what could be done about these animals? Animals started moving in waters with their masters giving into nature finally.

More damages were witnessed the next day:

By dawn, most parts of Kodanad, Koovapadi, Vallom, Chelamattom were under water. Only top of the taller buildings could be seen a little. Around fifty houses had collapsed under the rush of water. Roofs of some houses floated in water. As water level rose, people of Vallom and Chelamattom, along with about two hundred cattle sought shelter in the church compound of Vallom. As waters soon reached there too, they moved into church itself. When water level rose still high, people tried to save at least one or two from each flock. Soon even this was found impossible, and all the 200 cattle had to be given up and people sought to save themselves by moving to the topmost part of the church and spent the night. As morning broke in, the priest called for the boatmen and had the people shifted to safety.

The flood engendered a new economy, even if transitory. The shortage of foodstuff led to a sharp increase in prices. There were complaints of profiteering by traders. The press note august 1, 1924 noted that the price of rice shot up to 10 chakrams per edangali in Muvattupuzha. The local officials therefore had to intervene to bring down the prices to six chakram. The price rise had cascading effect. The official efforts were not evenly successful. At Quilon, for instance, while the traders formally consented to abstain from hoarding and profiteering on the ground these continued to occur. The traders lend their signatures on the copy of the government notification that banned hoarding and profiteering and this was even displayed at busy centres for the information of the people, price of rice continued to show a steep increase.¹² A large part of rice reached Travancore through Cochin. As shortage occurred in small centres the big merchants in Cochin also began to increase the prices. There the price of rice per sack varied from rupees 15½ to 18½. Therefore Travancore had to request Cochin to prevail upon the merchants there not to inflate prices unduly. Besides financial relief distributed by the government, charity from wealthy person emerged as a form of new circulation. Furthermore the food inflation did not go away with the receding of the waters. Thus we find that even into the third week of the food year rice prices remained extra ordinarily high. Interestingly, at Alleppey, there was a cry to institute a public distribution system for the supply of grain, which it materialised only two decades later in the context of the food inflation caused during the Second World War. As the fields and home gardens were covered with water cultivation came to a standstill. Consequently large numbers of agricultural workers were thrown out of employment. As coir prices crashed, processing was substantially scaled down and unemployment spread to industry. It was observed in the press notes: "The situation was so serious that looting was feared"¹³. The theft was reported from many places in the Ambalapuzha taluk. Massive theft of cocoanuts from standing trees in the deserted

homesteads was reported from Chertallai. Even worse affected were the fisher folk of Quilon, who, as the government admitted, turned into beggars: "On account of the roughness of the sea for some days, the fisher folk of the Quilon town were not able to go out to the sea and earn their livelihood. They consequently began to go into the town in large groups and beg"¹⁴. In Ambalapuzha too, "a good many of the people that came to obtain gratuitous relief were fishermen of the coast." The government attempted to start some local work to provide the labour for the unemployed. It was identified that some of them could be put to maintenance work of the roads and canals.

For the greedy, the flood was a season of quick income:

A man was sitting on the roof-top of his house clutching to the belongings. A boatman, a Muslim, who came along demanded Rs. Five to take him, his dog and the buffalo overboard. But on finding that the man had only 12 annas with him, discarded the dog and the buffalo to the flood-waters.¹⁵

Flood came as a rude shock to the cultivators. Standing crops were destroyed. As seed-stocks were soaked and spoilt, this, in turn, affected the succeeding Kumbham cultivation. In Vaikkom taluk, as much as 20,000 acres of 28,400 acres of wetlands under cultivation, and in the Kuttanad pakuthies of Changanassery, 16,356 acres of wet land out of 22,042 acres went under water. Further, in the latter, seed-stock estimated at about 50,000 paras and another 75,000 paras of paddy stocked for consumption were damaged. In Thiruvalla 8000 acres of sugar cane were destroyed. Kartikappalli lost standing crop in 5000 paras of fields, in 1000 acres of homesteads, and cattle numbering over 10000.

The majority of those uprooted by the flood were of socially marginalised sections like Pulayas and lower castes like Ezhavas. The press note dated August 1, 1924 issued by the government stated that in Changanacherry, "about 1000 Ezhavas and Pulayas

are reported to be housed in school buildings". The situation was similar in Chertallai, where "the houses on the lake-side had been washed off and several huts of the poor have given away". Of Karthikappally, again, it was noted: "The Pulayas, Parayas, and other people rendered homeless by the flood are reported to number 2000. They are housed in the public buildings of Haripad. According to the latest reports; their number in the Haripad town comes to nearly 3000." The worst perils were in the Ambalappuzha taluk, including Kuttanad and Alappuzha. Kuttanad was especially vulnerable as a greater part of its landmass was rice-fields reclaimed from the Vembanad backwater and where cultivation was done at below sea-level.¹⁶ The press note of August 7, 1924 noted that "the entire population of Kuttanad had to leave their homes and seek refuge at Alleppey and its suburbs, Ambalapuzha and Changanacherry". Officials inspecting flood damage found that "from Alleppey to Changanacherry "[there was] one sheet of water with only heads of coconut trees and a few roofs seen here and there"¹⁷. Narayana Pillai, the Assistant Engineer at Quilon reported that from Trikunnappuzha to Thottapalli, he "could not see any land above water". As the press note of August 1, 1924 proceeded to note,

[h]e found the basement of the TB at Karumadi only 7 inches above the flood, and the building was crowded by nearly a hundred people who resorted thither for safety with their cattle and belongings. The lock was under one and a half ft. of water. The big boats were not passing the Karumadi bridge. This state seems to have continued without appreciable difference till the 24th. Struck with the seriousness of the situation the Navigation, Syndicate and Darragh Smail Companies placed all their boats at the disposal of the rescue party organised in Alleppey. Some boats were sent even to Changanacherry to do rescue work for that town¹⁸

By the time the Dewan visited Kuttanad the water level had lowered but the waters had not receded:

From Kayamkulam, where Kuttanadu practically begins, there was about two feet of water still standing all over the country, but the level of water had gone down by a little over four feet and the basements of many houses were already above the water level. A large number of mud houses, and the small houses even with laterite walls, were found to have settled down, the walls being broken. But the roof and wood work were in the bulk of cases intact.¹⁹

The social relations of caste influenced the spatial distribution of flood-refugees. The Pulayas and other depressed castes and lower castes like Ezhavas found shelter in public buildings such as government offices and schools. The Nayers appear to have had other options:

At Ambalapuzha the buildings surrounding the temple were occupied by the Nayar refugees. About 1,000 Nayers were said to have taken refuge, but about 500 of them had already left for their homes. In the vernacular school to the west of the temple there were about 500 Christians and Ezhavas and in the Sub Magistrate's office and other buildings on the beach there was a large number of Pulayas.²⁰

MR Madhava Warriar, Member of Legislative Council who visited the flood-ravaged areas reported:

I was truly horrified at the deplorable plight of the poor labourers and indebted petty farmers. In Chegannur, near the Punja fields and the Pamba River, there are very few houses with mud walls which have not crumbled down. Houses were destroyed, crops were damaged, and cattle were killed and maimed. In my village itself, five persons have succumbed to inundation. Farmers are deprived of seeds and livestock. Coconut trees were uprooted. I found that in two or three compounds whole forest had settled down and crushed all fruit-bearing trees. These compounds present the appearance of large timber depots. Underneath the heaps of timber are found remnants of many valuable timber houses which are being pilfered away by bands of fuel-hunters.²¹

People noted that within few hours about one fifty houses were drowned into the river.²² By using thick ropes, people tied their houses to big trees to protect from flood. But such precautionary measures were not at all sufficient. CP Kochukunju Pillai, a member

of legislative council visited Kottarakkara and Kunnathur and directly witnessed the real condition of that region:

I saw hundreds of houses under water and I could see only the roofs of certain big houses. Most of the houses had crumbled down under water. Then I enquired about the cattle of the place, and the information I received was that the cattle were untied and sent out and that the people did not know where they had gone. My next question was about the saman - furniture and other things - belonging to the people there, and the reply I got was that they had gone to Ashtamudi lake, the sea or something of that sort. Again I asked about the inhabitants of the place. They told me that people of western Kallada had gone to the surrounding hills - Sastancotta, Tevalakara and other hills, while the people belonging to the eastern Kallada were living on the Chittumalai hill. When we went there, we saw thousands of person's helpless and homeless gatherings around us. The disaster there was equally terrible.²³

AG Menon - President of the North Paravur municipality - in his report to the government stated that ninety percent of the houses in Paravur had collapsed or were seriously damaged. He accompanied the Dewan during his visit to the place. He informed the Dewan that there were about 8000 refugees in Paravur town alone.²⁴ While AG Menon stated that thousands of people died in Paravur alone, the Dewan Peishkar was of the opinion that "AG Menon's estimate of thousand human lives lost was excessive and that some lives were lost in the attempt to cross the rivers during the floods and that there was generally no loss of life among the people who took the refugee on high ground".²⁵

Communication was thrown into disarray as roads, bridges, and railway lines were submerged. A Hoogwerf, nominated member, invited the attention of the Travancore Legislative Council to the situation obtaining in Alleppey: "There is no communication between Alleppey and other sides evidently. We are more or less having floods similar to that at the time of Noah."²⁶

The temporary cessation of *anchal* or the Travancore mail service further aggravated the loss of connectivity. Parts of Malabar and

Cochin were also affected by floods disrupting the transit of mail. Travancore lost internal connectivity too. The situation in the anchal office at Chengannur was a clear pointer:

As Anchal from the south failed to arrive, the authorities were compelled to send only the Anchal articles originating here to Tiruvalla. Subsequently, later in the evening, the Anchal from the south arrived from Tiruvalla. It is understood that these arrived by boats from Quilon via Alleppy. Anchal articles right from the first of this month are lying in a huge heap in this office waiting to be sent. As days passed the situation assumes alarming proportion.²⁷

In terms of water level and destruction caused, the 1099 flood outstrips other floods experienced earlier and has a place in the history of Travancore. The great flood figured in the pages of the magazine of the H.H. Maharaja's College of Science, Trivandrum of the year:

It is a bad year, this year of flood. It comes once in a cycle of sixty years with floods and famines following close at its heels. And such floods! Old people who had seen many a ravage sweep over the country could only shake their heads and say they had not the like of it before. Well, some sixty years back, when they were boys, they had witnessed floods but they were not as bad as this year. Trivandrum was in happy oblivion of what the rains were like in the North. A few pedestrians indeed felt that anything at all serious was the outcome of these rains was the delay of communications. Next came sad and touching news of the suffering of the people in the North. Those who visited the areas have said that no exaggeration of the tragic happening was possible.²⁸

Rescue and Relief

The rescue and relief operations were undertaken by the state, community organisations, college students, local magnates, and private capitalists, often jointly. Most of the relief operations were jointly undertaken by the state and the wealthy and influential local people, who could organise funds, people, and resources such as boats. An extract from the government press note:

The Inspector and Division Assistant report of rescue parties sent regularly from the 18th. Under the influential lead of Mr Krishna

Aiyengar the public of Alleppey have energetically begun to organise succour for those rescued from the neighbouring parts and to the many that are fleeing to that town of their own accord. Here also the rescue parties came across women confining before their time from the fright and the anxieties brought on by the unusual danger. They report also of some who could not be persuaded to leave their assets unattended.²⁹

Another press note mentioned that the Peishkar first collected as many boats as possible, all locally. The help from local merchants and professionals like lawyers were critical in "this laudable endeavour". The Brunton Company, boat-builders and water-transport operators based in British Cochin, organised boat services, co-ordinating with the local Christian priest in Alleppey. Likewise Kochi-Alleppey motor bus syndicate, Navigation Syndicate and Darragh Smail companies placed all their boats at the disposal of the rescue party. The students of UC College at Alwaye, risked themselves to save lives; boys and girls of Thiruvalla, ministered to the destitute; the students of Trivandrum went door to door to collect rice and clothes for the needy and naked in the flood ravaged parts.³⁰

To form an idea of the magnitude of distress, the Dewan and his colleagues visited the affected localities of Quilon, East Kallada, Chavara, Thottappalli, Ambalapuza, Kayamkulam, Alleppey, Kottayam, Chaganassery from 28th to 30th July, 1924³¹. On the basis of this trip, the Dewan recommended constituting committees for the reconstruction of the affected areas through voluntary contributions, making arrangements for agricultural loans, and the appointment of a special officer. The special officer was expected to co-ordinate the above work and to collect information for the government so that it could ascertain the requirements of relief and reconstruction. The Registrar of Co-operative Societies and Tahasildars were asked to ascertain the nature of requirements and to report these to the government through the Peishkars.³²

The government accordingly appointed SCH Robinson, Land Revenue and Income Tax Commissioner as supervising officer of

reconstruction for a period of six months from August 1924. The support sanctioned was, however, not adequate and Robinson was forced to depend on the services of typists "even of private firms or persons". The staff, as Robinson reported, had to "work up late at night to dispose of the papers with promptitude".³³ Robinson noticed that most people – flood-victims as also lower officials were not acquainted with the new agricultural regulations of special assistance because these were published in English. Therefore he recommended the government to publish the rules in Malayalam. Thus about 450 copies of the new regulations were printed in Malayalam. These regulations were supplied to proverthicers and relief committees in the flood affected areas.³⁴

By end-April 1924, Robinson disposed off 10000 applications and disbursed a total amount of Rs. 33 lakhs. The Tahasildars conducted enquiries to verify the actual status and requirements of the applicants. The maximum amount of loan was restricted to Rs. 500 per applicant. Applications for loans up to Rs. 50 were considered first; then the applications for loans up to Rs.100; followed by requests for loans up to Rs. 200. The applications for 300, 400, and 500 were taken up last.³⁵

Special loans were also granted through the co-operative societies. Registrar of Co-operative societies reported that this "involves considerable responsible work [which is] urgent and imminent". He noted that "the need for more [cooperative] inspectors was being keenly felt even to cope with the normal work". The government positively responded to his request for additional staff.³⁶

Many public and private institutions were evacuated and turned into camps for flood victims. In Alleppey, Muhammadan High School, Sanathana Dharma Vidyasala, and Satrom; in Chaganassery, the Travellers Bungalow and the St. Berchman's training convent; in Chegannur, the Salvation Army Head Quarters were turned into refugee camps.³⁷ North Parur was one of the worst affected taluks, with nearly 20,000 refugees³⁸. An overwhelming

majority of the refugees were of the depressed castes. On account of huge size of the refugee population, most of the camps in the taluk were cramped and congested. The town of North Parur alone accounted for 10,000 refugees, and here, besides mosques and temples, private houses had to be turned into refugee shelters.³⁹

Local magnates and heads of communities and institutions moved in to provide food to the victims. At Kottayam, Bishop Alexander Choolaparambil of the Roman Catholic church, CE Squire, the Principal of CMS College, TN Kurian, the Manager of the CMS Press, travelled in boats, escorted by relief teams and supplied rice, salt and provision, to the flood-affected in the low-lying Kumarakam.⁴⁰ The Ezhavas opened a common kitchen Narayana Bhakshanasala named after the spiritual teacher and social reformer Narayana Guru and provided free food to the victims. Alummottil Govindan was designated as a treasurer for raising funds for the venture.⁴¹ At Thazhangadi in Kottayam, the annual boat-race in River Meenachil was called off and funds raised for the same used for feeding the flood-victims.⁴²

Contemporary newspaper reports carried the names many of prominent donors: The donors included both individuals like Krishna Varmaraja, Kuttathur Mooppil Warriar, Manarkkad Mooppil Nayar, Menel Perumana Ashtamoorthi Namboodiripad, Vandala Narayana Pillai, Chavara Parameshwaran Menon, Changanalathu Kunjan Pillai, Ithiparambil Govindan Pillai, Palummoottil Kunjuran Mathai, Pilammoottil Unnunni, Aruna Bhatt, KG Sankara Pillai, KG Sangar, Govindapillai, Ramalinga Pillai, Visangandra Mathai, Poopallil Joseph, Pakir Sait, Kollakulathu Kunju Varkey, Karivina Kunnil Kuruvila Thomas, Pottakkulam K. V. Joseph, Koodathuriyil Eapen Varghese, Vengal Kocheepu and families such as Mechery mana, Kallamtala mana, They distributed paddy and rice and extended interest-free loan to the poor. While many of them were landed elites, in the port-towns, the main donors, as could be expected, were traders and industrialists. The prominent donors at Alleppey, for instance were P John and Co.,

PK Bava and Co. and others who had stakes in coconut oil-milling and coir-weaving industries.

Travancore's longest ruling king, Sri Mulam Tirunal passed away during the flood-year but not before contributing Rs. 5000 to the Central Floods Relief Committee. There was also significant extent of localised assistance. These were often routed through organisations but individually sourced. A devotee contributed Rs. 100 to Sivananda Swamikal, the president of the Sri Ramakrishna Mission, specifically for flood relief. Of this, Rs. 20 was distributed among the people who lived in the eastern pakuty of Plappuza and nearby regions in Karthikappali. The balance Rs. 75 was distributed among the Pulayas of Koduppana and its surrounding areas. *Samadarsi*, the newspaper, offered an assistance of Rs. 25 for distribution in Aryanadu.⁴³ External assistance also came in. The Bombay Congress Committee contributed Rs. 1000 to the Kerala Congress Committee at the instance of Sarojini Naidu.⁴⁴ Ramanlal and Kesav Lal Company donated Rs. 850 for providing clothing Rs. 200 for re-construction of houses in Alleppey.⁴⁵

The relief and rescue work undertaken by the Maharaja's College of Science, Trivandrum unfolds vividly in the pages of the college magazine of the year.

Promptly responding to the duty, the staff and students of the college of science, met together in the college hall to concert measures to relieve the distress of the people. The principle presiding on the occasion dwelt at length on the suffering of the people in the flooded areas and emphasised upon the necessity of taking immediate steps to mitigate the horrors of the disaster. Dr. Moudgill supported the chairman and outlined a scheme of work by which the object of the meeting could be achieved. In accordance with the above scheme, which was approved by all present, it was resolved (1) that the college do offer to help government in relief work by organising a volunteer corps and, (2) that a corps of volunteers be organised to make house to house collection of food and clothing.

A list of those who volunteered was dawned up and Dr. Moudglil was entrusted with the work of organising and utilising their services to the

best advantage. On the 26th July the volunteers were divided into eight batches, each of which was placed under the guidance of a member of the staff. Each batch was assigned a particular ward, from which they were to collect rice and clothing. The collection of money as such was outside the scope of the organization but wherever rice was not forthcoming and money was offered. Specifically towards the purchase of rice, the volunteers were advised to accept such contributions also.

The volunteers managed to collect 40 bags of rice, 1098 pieces of clothing, and cash about Rs.470 which were placed at the disposal of the Central Relief Committee. The committee deputed K.R. Krishna Ayyar, Assistant Professor of Chemistry with the task of distribution:

Mr. Krishna Aiyar accompanied by two student volunteers went first to Kallada, and found that the government and the charitable people of Quilon had amply provided for the stricken people. With great discrimination he withheld the distribution of rice and returned to Trivandrum. He was then asked to proceed to Kuttanadu, with six student volunteers. They left Trivandrum on the first August and went first to Karumadi, where Mr. B Nanu Pillai, the DSP of Quilon, helped them considerably by arranging for their transport and for the necessary Police help. The party worked in co-operation with the revenue, police and Devaswom officials, the most prominent among the latter being Rao Bahadur KA Krishna Aiyangar.

As the area to be recovered was very extensive, Mr. Krishna Aiyar divided his party into six sections and each section was directed to proceed to a central place and distribute rice and clothing in consultation with the local officials. In this way, relief was speedily carried to out-of-the way places in Karthigapalli, Ambalapuzha and Sherallai.

Another team, headed by CR Abraham, the Secretary for South India of the Students Christian Movement, who was on a visit to Trivandrum, visited the isolated villages near Panthalam, where the people had not been able to secure government help. The team spent about a fortnight in the area, during which "they came across many touching incidents of want and suffering".

From the report, we also understand that it was not merely

the teachers and students who took part in the relief work: "Too much praise cannot be bestowed upon the indefatigable exertions of Mr. CM Velayudhan Pillai, the store keeper of the Chemistry Department, who worked for a whole fortnight without rest."⁴⁶

The social relations of castes too were redefined, as a consequence of the flood. "Before the coming of the flood, the local savarna elite used to avoid going anywhere near the agitators for fear of caste pollution. Now the severity of flood compelled people of both upper and lower caste to travel in the same boat. They had no other alternative to participate in the feast and attending other functions".⁴⁷ After flood receded they again renewed their old customs. Naturally they are ready to make some kind of alteration in their routine life for a short period. Gandhi opined that 1924 flood of Travancore would be beneficial to low caste. In about ten to twelve places temples were thrown open to people of all castes whereas in some places Misrabhojanam was conducted. Gandhiji stated that, "a common calamity had the power to bring rich and poor under the same roof for a common purpose irrespective of their caste and regional differences".⁴⁸

Conclusion

From the narratives contained in various documents of archives and contemporary newspapers, one could perceive the magnificence of the flood of 1924. Various adaptation patterns were adopted by the people and the administration that the impact of the flood could be minimised. Non-administrative structures were also involved in the rescue and relief programmes as we see in the case of Churches and temples which played several significant roles. At some instances the barriers of caste, sect or religion was transcended that people overwhelmingly prioritised the value of life than other identities.

Relief activities conducted in asylums were continued up to or till mid August of 1924. When they settled in their respective places, once again there was a sign of flood though severity was

not that high. The flood psychologically impacted the people that the destructive effects of weather created an pessimistic outlook to those who had nothing of their own to live by after the floods, who then instead preferred to die than taking advantage of the temporary help offered by the relief party. Affecting their confidence of overcoming the geographical determinism imposed by the nature on their lives, it took a significant span of years to resuscitate to the normal way of living.

Endnotes

- ① *Malayala Manorama*, 28 June 1924, 3.
- 2 KT Rammohan. *Material Process and Developmentalis, interpreting Economic Changes in Colonial Tiruvitamku, 1800-1945*. 110.
- 3 *Proceedings of Travancore Legislative Council*, July 21, 1924, Vol. 5. 20.
- 4 The MC Road , 155 miles long , was built in 1877 - 78. The road connected a string of inland centres of trade such as Kilimanur, Kottarakkara, Pandalam, Chegannur, Tiruvalla, Chaganassery, Kottayam, Muvattupuza, Perumbavoor and joins the Cochin road at Angamaly. The aythor of the state manual notes that the road was built to " develop the internal trade of the country as it opens up was fertile tracts highly advantageous to cultivation ... Simultaneously with the construction of this road traces for new roads running to the western frontier and to the foot of the hills to the east were also laid down" . *Aiyya. Manual*, 224.
- 5 *Malayala Manorama*, 29 July 1924, 1.
- 6 Government of Travancore, Press Note No.2, Land revenue files, B.No.425, F.No.1588.
- 7 *Proceedings of Travancore Legislative Council*, July 21,1924, Vol.5, 25.
- 8 *Malayala Manorama*, 18 October 1924, 1.
- 9 *Malayala Manorama*, 22 July 1924, 3.
- 10 Government of Travancore, Press Note No. 2, Land revenue files, B.No. 425, F.No. 1588.
- 11 *Malayala Manorama*, 26 July 1924 p., 4.
- 12 See the report on paddy and rice trade at Quilon published in *Nazrani Deepika*, 5 August 1924.

- 13 Government of Travancore, Press Note No. 2, Land revenue files, B.No. 425, F.No. 1588.
- 14 Government of Travancore, Press Note No. 3, Land revenue files, B.No. 425, F.No. 1588.
- 15 *Malayala Manorama*, 24 July 1924, 3.
- 16 For a historical account of agricultural technology and agrarian relations in Kuttanad, see, KT Rammohan. 2006. *Tales of Rice: Kuttana, South-west India*. Centre for Development Studies, Thiruvananthapuram.
- 17 Government of Travancore, Press Note No. 2, Land revenue files, B.No. 425, F.No. 1588.
- 18 Government of Travancore, Press Note No. 2, B.No. 425, F.No. 1588.
- 19 Government of Travancore, Press Note No. 3, B.No. 425, F.No. 1588.
- 20 Government of Travancore, Press Note No. 3, Land revenue files, B.No. 425, F.No.1588.
- 21 *Proceedings of the Travancore Legislative Council*, February 5, 1924, Vol.5, 92.
- 22 *Nazrani Deepika*, 26 July 1924, 7.
- 23 *Proceedings of Travancore Legislative Council*, July 21, 1924, Vol. 5, 27.
- 24 Government of Travancore, Press Note No. 2, B.No. 425, F.No. 1588.
- 25 Government of Travancore, Press Note No. 3, B.No. 425, F.No. 1588.
- 26 *Proceedings of Travancore Legislative Council*, July 21, 1924, Vol. 5, 22 - 23.
- 27 *Malayala Manorama*, 29 July 1924, 1.
- 28 *The Old College Magazine of HH Maharajas College of Science*, 1 December, 1924. 41.
- 29 Government of Travancore, Press Note No. 2, B.No. 425, F.No. 1588.
- 30 *ibid.*
- 31 *ibid.*
- 32 *ibid.*
- 33 The Land Revenue and Income Tax Commissioner, Chief Secretary, 24 April 1925, Land revenue files, B.No. 524, F.No.1471.
- 34 The Land Revenue and Income Tax Commissioner, Chief Secretary, 15 September 1924, Development departments files, B.No. 44, F.No. 1823.
- 35 The Land Revenue and Income Tax Commissioner, Chief Secretary, 25 October 1924, Developmental departments, B.No. 45, F.No. 2256.
- 36 The Registrar of Co-operative Societies, Chief Secretary, 11 october 1924, Developmental departments, B.No. 45, F.No. 2298
- 37 *Malayala Manorama* dated 24 and 29 july 1924, P.1 and P.1 respectively.
- 38 Government of Travancore, Press Note No. 3, B. No. 425, F.No. 1588
- 39 *ibid.*

- 40 *Malayala Manorama*, 22 July 1924, 1.
- 41 *ibid.*, P. 3.
- 42 *Malayala Manorama*, 2 August 1924, 2.
- 43 n.a. 1100 ME. Jalapralaya Sangada Nivarana Report, *Prabhudha Keralam*. 10:1. 35 – 36.
- 44 *Malayala Manorama*, 14 August 1924, 3.
- 45 *Malayala Manorama*, 4 October 1924, 4.
- 46 *The Old College, Magazine of HH Maharajas College of Science* 1 December, 1924. 41-43.
- 47 *Malayala Manorama*, 16 August 1924, 2.
- 48 *Malayala Manorama*, 26 August 1924, 4.