Interpreting the Values of a Cultural Landscape: Case: Palakkad Gap, India

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Abstract

Cultural landscapes are continuing thresholds between nature and culture representing the tangible and intangible values and inter-relationships between local communities, their traditions and the indigenous landscapes. The objective of this study is to recognize the values of one of such native landscapes by looking into the role of natural resources in evolution of cultural landscape. Kerala, a small state to the south- western coast of India, is gifted with a tropical monsoon climate and unique topography that has moulded its diverse and biologically rich ecosystems and natural resources. The unique natural systems existed represented the harmony between nature and human societies which formed the basis for many self-sufficient living ways of a once robust society. The stability and sustainability of the society were thus closely linked with the stability and viability of its natural landscapes. However, these native landscapes are not well acknowledged today and are on the verge of desertion as a result of rapid urbanization, political reforms and socio- economic changes. The work presented owes its aspiration to Palakkad Gap, a very interesting geological formation in the otherwise continuous stretch of Western Ghats which resulted in the creation of a complex cultural fabric to natural landscape. The study tries to look at the some cultural units within this larger fabric and tries to understand the way of life and the many interactions they hold with their natural context.

Keywords: *Cultural landscape, mapping, natural resources, traditional settlements*

Chapter 1 – Overview of Palakkad Gap

The natural resources of a region which comprises climate, geology, hydrology, soils and vegetation creates the setting for any human civilization to sprout and spread. Just as natural systems evolve and flourish adapting to geological, climatic or ecological changes and become stable and capable of supporting more and more evolution of life forms, human communities also grow complex social organizations and very specific niches that result in

the evolution of knowledge systems, skills and livelihood means. These inter-dependent systems give humans creativity, autonomy, social status, identity and meaning in life.

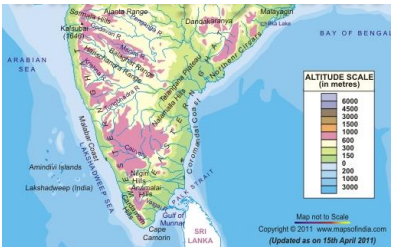

Figure 1: Map of Indian peninsula, Figure 2: The Palakkad Gap between Nilgiri and Anamalai hills

Broad Context

The region is located to the southern peninsula of Indian sub- continent and comes under the political state of Kerala. This region is endowed with tropical monsoon climate and unique topography that has moulded its diverse and rich ecosystems. These unique natural systems are the basis of the dispersed and self-reliant life strategies of a robust society. As the natural systems were diverse the survival and evolution of human communities were more sustainable and viable. People with complex knowledge systems and livelihoods survived on the interdependence and co-operation of several units in the society and ecosystems. The harmony that existed between nature and time-tested traditions gave each individual the opportunity to be part of some livelihood means. This must be the basis of the depth and vastness of the survival wisdom and its influence on the lifestyle of its people. The destruction of the ecological foundations of this region, which had thrived on the living Web of inter-dependent and diverse relationships of life forms and natural communities, is one of the biggest crises it is facing today. Along with this crisis comes the destabilization of the diverse life strategies and livelihood. Taking this basic premise into consideration, the study further extended in search of specific cultural units within this broader context. The area studied here is located in Palakkad, one of the fourteen revenue districts of Kerala, a beautiful settlement in the foothills of Western Ghats and is known as the land of Palms (Borasus flabelifer) and Paddy fields.

A glance into the study area

The story here begins with a Gap in the otherwise long and continuous stretch of Western Ghats. This major breach opened a connection of west coast with rest of Indian peninsula, resulting in amalgamation of various rich cultures to form one complex cultural fabric to the natural landscape. Steeped in history, Palakkad has settlements from the Paleolithic age;

a fact substantiated by the discovery of megalithic relics and urn and stone burials from this region. The natural landscape is believed to be comprised of impenetrable rain forests. These tribes used to wander around the forest and live in deep rock shelters to protect themselves from heavy rainfall. The political history of the Gap started with the invasion of the princely state kings and establishment of kingdoms in the hither to aboriginal territories later strengthened into smaller provinces by many inter family nuptials between royal descendants from south of the region between tribes. Over centuries the Gap being major breach in Western Ghats evolved into one of the most prominent migratory routes for the later day political and trade associations the region had and also became home to many wandering populations of diverse cultures who settled down and merged their way of living with the aboriginals to form a unique cultural fabric.

Physiography of the Region

Figure 3: Physiographical features

Physiographically, the Palakkad Gap can be divided into two units. Viz. the high land and the mid land. The most important physiographic feature is the Palakkad gap, which is 30-40 km in width in an otherwise continuous mountain chain of 960 km long Western Ghats, with an average elevation of above 600 m. above msl.

Climate and Rainfall

Palakkad gap is the largest convergence zone in the Western Ghats, it influences the orographic input on wind direction. The study area has a tropical climate with an oppressive hot season and plentiful and fairly assured seasonal rainfall. The study area receives on an average 1190 mm of rainfall annually, while it is 2398 mm for the district and 3000 mm for the state.

Geomorphology, soils and landuse

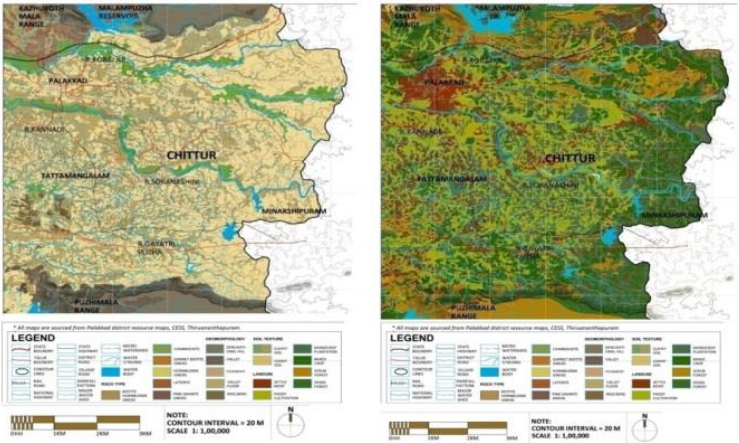

Figure 4: Geomorphology and land use maps

Three physiographic units – valleys, plains, undulating midlands comprise the gap. Gap area is an westward sloping old peneplain. Erosional remnants, inselbergs are found between 152m and 381m level. Around 50% of Gap area is covered by flood plain, followed by pediments. The soil types are Alluvial, Black Cotton, Laterite and Forest Loam.

Hydrology of the Gap

The gap proper is drained by consequent, broad dendritic higher order rivers namely Kalpathi, Amaravathi (Chittur river), Kannadiar, and Gayathripuzha in east west direction, while margins are drained by closely spaced lower order streams. The major river courses are principally controlled by the shear fractures.

Some salient cultural practices

A cultural resource comprises of the knowledge gathered from daily context in a particular cultural setting that is markers of the quality of life of the individual or the society. The study tries to find linkages between the way of living of people and their associations to nature. The study revealed that most of the rituals have been originated from an ancient agrarian society which had a deep-rooted stand in farming culture. It was also seen that these rituals, through myths and beliefs prompted the community to conserve the ecosystem.

Cultural Association

Every matter is constituted of five elements of nature also known as Panchmahaboota as described in ancient Indian philosophy. Fire is the representation of the Ultimate source of energy source – The Sun, hence is represented in physical and spiritual realm together. A very similar instance can be seen in the daily life, the process of cooking in an earthen pot on a stone hearth with water as medium for cooking and fire and wind as source of energy. Association of Ether or space can be considered as the event itself and material that is cooked. A similar adaption is seen in the religious rituals of the study region – the festival icalled 'Pongal' or 'Pongala' and is considered to be an auspicious ritual to follow on a new year day or as a reverence to the Hindu Goddess Shakti (source of Power) .

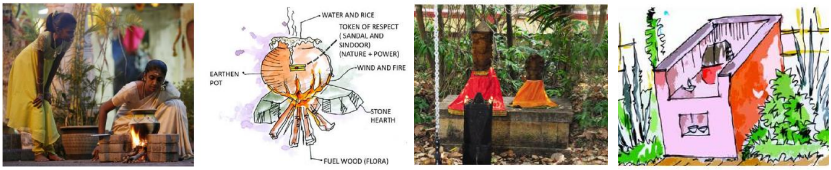

Figure 5: Association to elements of nature - "Pongala" and Thara (The guardian god shrines)

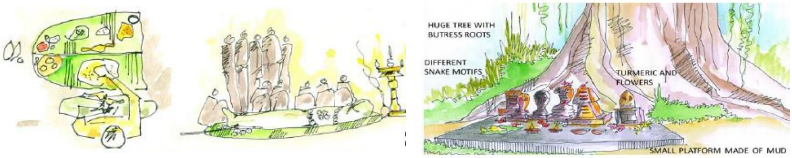

Figure 6: Tip of Banana leaf "Thump ila" on which the traditional feast is served and the entire leaf with stalk for laying the body for last rituals and Figure 7 :Snake motifs made of stone placed along the buttress roots of old trees clad with turmeric and flowers known as " Sarpa Thara"

There also existed the concept of guardian gods in many communities. These gods were symbolized by primary elements of nature such as rocks, big trees, and certain keystone species in ecosystems that prevailed such as snakes, kite etc. These shrines also were markers of territories with these ethnic groups and are often placed near sacred groves, ghats of river, or natural water bodies like lakes or pond. Association to native flora : Banana - called as Vaazha in the local language and fruit called pazham or palom is a common plant seen throughout Kerala, its fruit being a part of staple diet. The description of this plant can be seen in many ancient scripts and later stage literature and travelogues of many a scholars who had visited this region. Traditional feast is served on one forth portion of banana leaf from apex called as "Thump ila" forbidding the people from cutting the entire leaf from the plant. On the other hand the entire leaf is only removed when it is used for laying the dead body when offering last rituals. Association to Fauna: Similarly snake being the keystone species associated with sacred groves many myths and ritualistic values

are associated to it. SARPA THARA - Usually placement of serpent gods are seen between buttress roots of old trees most often Banyan(*ficus bengalensis*) or Peepal (*ficus religiosa*), which in turn is a home for many key stone species. Even today, 'deepam' a small lamp is lit by the virgin girls (considered to be bearers of the culture) of families at twilight, the girl will be chanting 'deepam ' (means the sacred light) loud to probably avoid stumbling upon the snakes and to let family members know that she is going to the groves . This indeed signifies that every ritual followed had a deeper purpose to serve. Such idols are observed in many parts of Palakkad gap and acts as important elements of cultural identity throughout the Gap.

The places of public interaction

Natural Ghats - Most of the rivers that are flowing in the Gap are in their meandering middle stage of growth. The natural levees and the riparian corridors are places of natural beauty. The people of this region still depend on the river that flow through their rear yards making it part of their daily routines such as bathing, washing or even casual chatting and play

Figure 8: Sketch representing natural ghats of river along the fertile natural levees, Figure 9: Hay drying areas

Figure 10: way side rest areas

The society being majorly agrarian the small open patches of land used for hay drying and thrashing seem to be another identifying feature of the cultural landscape. Mostly women from the agrarian communities gather here to take break from their daily work and relax, while some will sing an old folklore others will stomp the hay rhythmically to the music. Also another similar space typology identified are the way side resting places. Interestingly the occurrence of these tends to follow the ancient migratory routes of people through the forest areas. Located very close to the foothills and in fringes of settlements, these are temporary structures – "Chumadu Thaangi" ,a shoulder high wooden/ stone post and lintel frame anthropometrically convenient to unload weight from your shoulders or a small bamboo and thatch structure under huge trees to sit in shade and relax,

Festivals

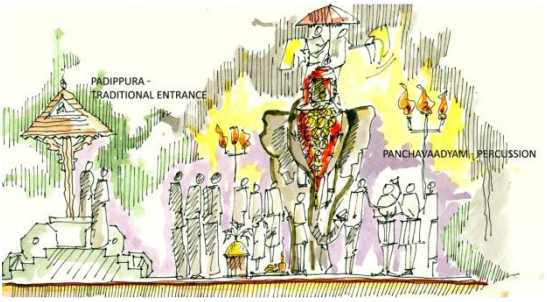

Figure 11: Illustration showing Temple procession - Elephant , god's idol, percussion and offerings

Most of the festivals are associated to the harvest of the major crops such as paddy and sugar cane. "Ezhunallippu" (The temple procession) a festival ritual include the following : Idol of god is taken over elephant in a procession all over the village to bless people and agriculture harvest. Rice along with coconut inflorescence and banana to elephant are given as offerings in a traditional measuring unit made of palm leaves called 'Nirapara'. The Maramadi festival is held post-harvest in the villages of the rural Kerala. This exiting Oxen race held on flooded paddy fields will churn the soft rich top soil back to the surface before the next sowing is done.

The cultural resources- Ethnic groups and their way of life

The mapping of traditional settlements and their culture were based on site observations and statistical information attained from secondary sources. Also an attempt was made to evaluate the dependency and interaction of these communities with the natural settings so as to estimate the nature of change these cultural landscapes are undergoing.

Tamil Brahmin settlement – Nuclei of cultural development

The study area : "The agraharams of Thekkethara" - Transformed from Vedic study centre to derelict edifices

Figure 12: Documentation of A Tamil Brahmin settlement 1. Visuals,2. Plan grain,3. Sections,4. Typical residence plan, 5. Human nature interactions matrix, 6. Architectural spaces

The mass migration of "Tamil Brahmins" a class of nobles and priests from the South - Eastern coast of India to the region about 600 years ago was prompted by Muslim invasion, restructuring of the territorial limits and the continuous drought over many years in the Kaveri Delta. The relentless hostility between the thus far priest and noble class and the rulers relating to a royal marriage feud with the tribal community led to easy acceptance of these migrants into the societal structure of then. They established a number of Agraharams – traditional homesteads with a temple as the focal element. They were the scholars of the society and spread vedic knowledge to the future generations. They were the land lords and had brought in a specific traditional way of farming that is unique to the region.

A garland of houses the simplest synonym to an 'Agraharam' is a derivative of grid pattern settlement. These pieces of land were granted generally on the banks of rivers where the Brahmins built row houses (two rows facing each other) with the upper end culminating in a temple with a flag post – 'Dwaja sthampa' , being the tallest element ,whose visibility marked the extend of territory. The temple tank formed an interactive community space with the Peepal tree *(ficus religiosa)* known as 'Sthala Vriksha' as a identifying feature of these village commons. Farming on the lands given by the royal family was the tradition that was followed in the past, later the lands were leased out (kanam – a lease of 12 years) to the labour class on the basis of "Paattam" (an age old leasing method that existed in these parts of the Country). Such scholastic and prominent footholds gradually vanquished,

enumerated by a lot of changes pertaining to nature, technology and socio- economy. This strong foothold in history is slowly being vanquished by the ravages of modern times.

A typical plan house hold plan has semi open verandhah (Thinnai) opening on to the street. From there onwards there is a linear organisation of utility rooms one after another. Immediately after the entrance is the granary to store harvested paddy. The narrow corridor connects different spaces. Kitchen opens into the backyard consisting of well and a bath. The rear end of kitchen yard is cattle shed with a Tulsi planter .

Agriculture community - Change in life style due to social and political reforms

The study area: "Aryanpallom" Agriculture village (Sustainable communities to fragmented population)

Figure 13: Documentation of the agrarian settlement 1. Visuals,2. Plan grain,3. Sections,4. Typical residence plan, 5. Human- nature interactions matrix, 6. Handicrafts and raw materials

Usually the settlement shows a very scattered typology, Developed along valleys due to availability of water and wetlands for farming. The unawareness about scientific agriculture practices and large scale migration of population to other jobs of daily wages has resulted in the decline of economic status of these communities. Due to unequal and very small landholdings as a result of various land reform acts, many agriculture lands have turned into wastelands. A very temporary built form with walls and roof made of cadjan (matted coconut leaves)and bamboo, floor is just a mud base finished with cow dung. At the entry the roof is extended to cover the goat shed. The kitchen is extended to rear yard which is planted mostly with Yams, tapioca, banana and other herbs. Utensils are mostly of terracotta and some of stone. Together with agriculture many other traditional vocational skills like reed mats, handicrafts out of coconut husk, coir products, pottery etc, are also on its last legs due to non-availability of local market base.

Weavers community – Transformations due to Technical invasion and trade revival

The study area: "Devangapuram" (Migrated communities to lost traditions)

Figure 14: Documentation of the weaver settlement 1. Visuals,2. Plan grain,3. Sections,4. Typical residence plan, 5. Human- nature interactions matrix

The weaver community consist of people migrated from the east of the gap, a few hundred years back. Their living style has modified to meet the existing living conditions in Kerala even though rituals and customs have remained true to their origins. The religion followed being Hindu, their temple architecture is unique and very different from the rest of the state. Typical settlements are organized in a linear manner. The veranda in front of the every house has got a place for the spinning wheel, an extended work space promoting interaction among community. Most of the houses have a small garden consisting of one or two fruit trees and small flowering shrubs, with creepers over bamboo fence.

Cultural resources and its present state

The region is presently under great economic stress and low development issues and hence facing large scale migration of the communities to other areas and hence the values associated with the cultural landscape is dissolving and disappearing. The community shows an intense and direct interaction and huge dependency to its natural resources in day to day life whether it being occupation, staple foods or religion and rituals. The changing attitude towards hither to systems of survival is leading to loss of traditional values attached to nature .E.g.: Conversion of rice fields to coconut groves are posing a threat to all the harvest festivals carried on the vast open cracked mud fields of paddy in summer and post-harvest seasons.

In the particular study area many of the traditional Tamil Brahmin settlements - "Agraharams" are locked up as the inhabitants have migrated to the cities for better education and job opportunities. Many sacred groves and temple tanks associated with such communities hence are in a degraded state due to lack of maintenance. Vedic schools associated to such communities are converted to community halls and in course of time locked up. Power looms that has come up in adjoining urban nodes has affected occupation of weaver community severely. The daily wages and profit of each produce has hence declined considerably. Economic crisis had forced many weavers to leave their occupation and chose to be daily wages labourers and are forced to migrate to other regions. This result in again stagnant infrastructure facilities as each housing unit in the weaver community used to be a weaving unit with individual looms and related facilities for storing raw materials and processed goods. Shifting agricultural practices mainly conversion of rice fields to coconut, mining of top soil from wetlands by newly sprouting brick industries and pollution are turning rich wetlands and paddy fields into wastelands and are posing huge threat to the associated festival, customs and even lifestyle of community. Economic crisis due to failure in agriculture practices is the resultant of ignorance towards the traditional knowledge and practices of sustainable livelihood and a revival based on these principles together with scientific management of resources will prove to be advantageous.

Proposal of some ideas are explored with respect to Tamil Brahmin settlements and weaver settlements

Case 1: Tamil Brahmin community

In the study area many of the traditional Tamil Brahmin settlements - agraharams are locked up as the inhabitants have migrated to the cities for better education and job opportunities. This unique architectural setting can be developed as economic home stays as these residences in the present state are well equipped with kitchen. Living areas, individual well, good sanitation systems, old granaries and cattle shed flora rich backyards and well developed access routes. Most of the sacred groves are located on the ridges. The reason behind this was sacred groves contain a large number of medicinal plants and hence the runoff and recharge from this area will purify and add medicinal values to water in the ponds. Owing to the many traditional beliefs attached to the sacred groves they remain somewhat intact in this region. The Vedic school attached to the Tamil Brahmin communities can be developed as traditional Ayurveda centres promoting herbal dietary and medicinal tradition of Kerala. The sacred groves attached with these communities can be readapted for housing the ethnic medicinal garden for this centre and still hold ample amount of public interaction space along with the existing built structures.

Case 2: Weaver community

They are people who migrated from Andhra Pradesh which is the neighbouring state of Kerala in around 1700s.The weavers of this region are very reputed as traditional handloom weavers with their unique products and designs. Introduction of silk weaving with high value products in these clusters can lead to value addition and the much needed product diversification.A way forward is to. Ensure availability of raw materials at low budget by utilizing the natural setting optimally. Example: Mulberry cultivation- The natural conditions prevailing in the region are much suited for mulberry farming. Mulberry leaf is a major economic component in sericulture since the quality and quantity of leaf produced per unit area has a direct bearing on cocoon harvest. Mulberry is a fast growing deciduous woody perennial plant. Community Joint ventures: The settlement grain of weaver community consists of many small niches of public interaction spaces. The rows of houses arranged opposite to each other with looms adjoining the veranda promote social interaction among community. Also most of their festival and rituals take place in the village commons and there is a sense of unity that prevails in the community due to this aspect. Imparting managerial and technical training to the required staff selected from the local community (educated unemployed youth) and make them accountable and responsible for executing the task entrusted to them can bring in great success to community silk weaving.

Summary

Study of cultural landscapes will help to create awareness in indigenous communities to empower and grasp easily with the challenges of cultural resources management and conservation. Such studies which catalogue and analyse the natural and cultural resources of indigenous landscapes will help build intercultural dialogues about identity of cultural groups and its deep relation and dependency to the nature.

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