



About the Author

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Tales and Tides: Climate Justice and Fishermen Community in Kerala

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കടലേ കലിതുളളണതെന്തേ നിന്റെ കലിയടങ്ങിലേ

കരകൾ കരകവിഞ്ഞൊഴുകും കുടികൾകടലു
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Elelo Elabalelo Ele Elelo
Elelo Elabalelo Ele Elelo
Are you still angry, Oh sea
When you overflow, our huts will be washed away
Elelo Elabalelo Ele Elelo
Elelo Elabalelo Ele Elelo

For the past few years, the anguished songs of fishermen have been echoing along the shores of Kerala. In the tumultuous battle against coastal erosion, a crucial narrative of climate justice and its denial has emerged from the fishing communities in the state. Various fishermen’s families started a rallying call for justice, demanding a fair and equitable response to the impending crisis. Climate justice, a concept firmly rooted in the recognition of historical inequalities, requires an understanding of intersecting socio-economic factors. From the drought-stricken communities in Africa to the hurricane-ravaged islands of the Caribbean, marginalised populations who have contributed the least to the problem bear the brunt of environmental degradation disproportionately.

With hundreds of families losing their homes and several people being relocated from their residences, coastal erosion has become a grave threat to the residents on the shore. It primarily affects the fishing community, which is socially and economically marginalised but has a long tradition of earning a livelihood from the sea. This problem forces them to choose between the ocean and the giant – either dealing with ongoing problems caused by erosion or giving up their fishing profession and moving to urban areas. Their situation is considered a grave injustice because coastal erosion has been worsened by thoughtless human activities done in the name of progress. In order to cater to the demands of a specific group in society, the livelihoods of fishermen have been abandoned and left without support.



Fishermen live in specific coastal regions where they adapt to the unique geographic characteristics of those areas. They participate in traditional practices and rituals to live in harmony with the ocean. These activities are not merely a source of income for them but are also deeply ingrained in their way of life. The customs and way of life of fishing communities differ from one coastal area to another. The causes and outcomes of coastal erosion are influenced by various development activities specific to each location. For instance, in the case of Chellanam, a fishing village in Ernakulam district, the erosion problem can be attributed to government projects such as the expansion of the Cochin port, as highlighted by researchers from the Kerala University of Fisheries and Ocean Studies. The drastic reduction in beach sand availability, along with the presence of strong and high seawalls built in Chellanam between 1978 and 1982, exacerbates coastal erosion. The dredging activities for the Cochin port have disrupted sediment availability, with most of it accumulating on the northern side of Cochin Harbour. Additionally, coastal works like groynes or stone embankments designed to break water flow for the protection of INS Dronacharya, the Indian Navy's gunnery school, contribute to the instability of seawalls. The lack of proper design considerations to rebuild the seawalls led to issues such as blocked drainage canals and subsequent flooding (John).



Image Credit: Deccan Herald

The unwillingness to relocate is pertinent among the elderly inhabitants who showed discontent with the alternate housing plan proposed by the Kerala government to construct flats in various parts of the state (EJ). Even though this would save their lives from the vigorous impacts of coastal erosion, most of the local residents expressed their reluctance to move to an alternate house. They suggest having a solid seawall to protect the shores where they had lived for ages from further erosion (EJ).

Surviving away from the sea is difficult for the locals as they are emotionally and economically dependent on the sea. Many families of fishermen, who have been displaced from their homes as a result of Cyclone Okhi and severe sea erosion, currently reside in camps or rented accommodations under extremely distressing circumstances. But the fear of moving away from their shores, which would alienate them from their livelihood, culture, and lifestyle, looms over them.

Various fishermen communities have made efforts to keep this tradition alive and pass it down as oral narratives to subsequent generations. For instance, fishermen portray the Kadamma (Mother Sea) as a powerful entity and resist the attempts of scientists and government activities to tame or control the sea. A story associated with this issue is the tale of the thirsty crow, a popular story among fisherman communities. The story explains that the water level in a nearly full pot rose when the crow put stones into it, just like how the water level in Eravipuram village in the Kollam district has risen with coastal developmental projects that involved tossing boulders into the sea to construct sea walls. This unfortunate situation is shared by several other villages in the district, like Alappad, Azheekal, and Vellanaturuth. These villages claim that illegal black sand mining supported by the state has significantly harmed the coastal ecosystem and their livelihoods. Large sand dunes, which served as natural barriers against coastal dangers, have been destroyed as a result of sand mining. This destruction has had a profound impact on the composition of the shore, affecting the fishermen's ability to engage in fishing activities.

Fishermen, through their longstanding coexistence with nature, have acquired a deep understanding of its capacities and have adjusted their methods to responsibly harness the available resources while maintaining ecological balance. Having relied on the sea for sustenance and economic purposes for generations, fishermen have acquired profound knowledge of the marine ecosystem.

Image Credit: Deccan Herald



Another example is Alappad, a small fishing village in Kollam district, which has experienced a significant reduction in size over the past 50 years. The decrease from 87.5 square kilometres to 8.7 square kilometres can be attributed to the beach wash mining process undertaken by state-run companies, IRE and KMML. These companies collect sand from the beaches but do not replenish the areas, causing the sea to erode the coastline (Rawat). According to the Shoreline Change Assessment for Kerala report by the National Centre for Sustainable Coastal Management, erosion is prevalent along a major stretch of Kerala's coastline, with Thiruvananthapuram experiencing the highest erosion rates (John). Areas like Valiyathura, Poonthura, and Puthiyathura of the district witness progressive erosion that happens during turbulent times and is not offset by natural replenishment during calmer seasons. Apart from these, Cyclone Okhi and the sourcing of quarry stone for the construction of Vizhinjam harbour have contributed to the destruction of coastal areas and hills in these regions. Cyclone Okhi hit the shores of Kerala in 2017, aggravating life near the shores for the fishing community. Due to the cyclone and subsequent coastal erosion, numerous people had to relocate.



They possess an intimate familiarity with the sea, being able to discern changes in wind patterns and water currents, to navigate by observing celestial bodies, to predict fish availability based on lunar cycles, and to identify fish shoals based on colours and seasonal occurrences.



Image Credit: The Statesman

For instance, fishermen across Kerala tend to personify various elements of nature, believing that they can influence their lives positively or negatively (Houtart and Nayak). Hindu fishermen in Trivandrum, Kollam, and southern Ernakulum follow rituals like Ponkala, a yearly festival honouring the mother sea by offering puffed rice, jaggery, pulses, ghee, and coconuts to appease the wrath or retaliation of natural forces (Kelkar-Khambete). The fishing community's culture and mindset are deeply influenced by their natural surroundings, particularly the sea, which fosters a sense of unity among them and shapes their collective memory. In cases where communities derive their unity and distinctiveness from geographical factors, the attachment to their environment plays a significant role in their psychological well-being when faced with changes to the landscape. However, due to the increased displacement of older people as a precaution against shore encroachments, this practice has been disrupted and is now unfamiliar to younger generations.

The tendency to abandon traditional practices or beliefs with factual explanations occurs through the transmission of informal stories within family networks, preserving collective and communal identities through religious and communal practices. Yet another instance is the recent photography exhibition on the life of Chavittu Nadakam artists, a highly colourful art form combining dance, music, and storytelling, which held a mirror to the link between the artists and the sea, as well as the rich heritage of the art form (Menon). This art form is believed to have originated in the coastal regions of Kodungallur-Kochi-Alappuzha during Portuguese rule. Numerous artists inhabit the outskirts of the Kochi-Chellanam coast, depending on the sea to sustain their livelihoods. Nevertheless, they persistently encounter the difficulties posed by the shifting climate. Even the traditionally peaceful month of December brings about tidal flooding in the area.

The living conditions of artists sharply differ from the roles they embody on stage, such as kings, queens, and warriors. Such narratives and art forms retain the identity and conception of their livelihood as one's perception of who they are now and what they want to become affects what they think they have been in the past.

Climate change affects different regions and communities disproportionately. Vulnerable populations, including those living in poverty or marginalized groups, often lack the resources and infrastructure to adapt to or mitigate the effects of climate change. This exacerbates existing inequalities and manifests the intersection of environmental issues with economic and other hierarchy-based injustices in the society. The fishermen's cry for climate justice echoes their need to remain in the place they have considered home for decades. And most importantly, it is an emotional plea to save and preserve their socio-cultural memory and traditions. This is one of the most overlooked aspects of climate justice. Most people reduce it to materialistic claims, whereas what is actually lost is the art, culture, and many memories formed from the contact interaction of a group of people with their immediate geography. Fishing is not only an occupation but also a deeply rooted cultural activity for fishermen. Despite external pressures from hegemonic or capitalist forces, the fishermen's intrinsic need for continuity in their identity as fishermen cannot be overridden. Even in adverse situations, such as the encroachment of the sea, individuals remain loyal to their traditional beliefs, as abandoning these practices would mean a transformation of their very selves.

During the recent flood in Kerala, the fishermen's potency was evident through their heroic rescue efforts. The media celebrated them as Kerala's own "army," and the highly praised Malayalam film by Jude Anthany Joseph, 2018 (2023) depicted the suffering of people from Kerala during a flood and highlighted the heroic actions of fishermen who emerged as saviours, actively participating in rescue operations. Yet, they have not received substantial support from the government or others to protect their homeland from being washed away. In the face of the catastrophe, they voluntarily utilised their invaluable assets—indigenous knowledge and experiences with the sea—to save people from being swept away. This knowledge, derived from the collective memory of the fishermen, is shared with society through the oral tradition, serving as a means of remembrance and preservation.



Image Credit: The Statesman



To truly understand the urgency of climate justice, we must acknowledge that climate change is not a standalone issue — it is deeply interconnected with human rights, equity, as well as cultural memories and identity crises. This interconnectedness is etched into the experiences of frontline communities, whose struggles against environmental degradation serve as a stark reminder of the urgent need to address climate change in a manner that leaves no one behind. Since they are put in this situation by fellow human beings, the profound significance of climate justice unfolds. The government or authorities should adopt a vision that seeks to rectify the injustices perpetuating environmental degradation and build a future where every individual, regardless of their socio-economic or occupational status, can thrive in a sustainable world.

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Malavika P Pillai is an independent researcher with a Master's degree in English Language and Literature from Mahatma Gandhi University, Kerala. Her research interests include Memory Studies, Environmental Humanities and Postcolonial Studies from the vantage point of South Asian socio-political conditions. With demonstrable experience as editor, writer, teacher and researcher, she aims to revive hitherto unexplored events and narratives of the overlooked sections of society through her writings.

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