

# Literary Narratives as a Tool for the Conservation of Indian Cultural Landscapes

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*Abstract— The large majority of conservation and preservation projects tend to examine physical artefacts as 'primary documents' to effectively comprehend the multiple layers of a cultural landscape. There is the expectation that this analysis provides better insights into the transformation of these cultural landscapes over chronological time. However, besides built artefacts which undeniably carry history in their form and making, the existence of life events can also contribute towards an understanding of 'palimpsestic reality'. On these lines, cultures, beliefs, and traditions are encoded within recurrent social practices such as celebrations, festivals and superstitions, thereby creating strands of oral traditions. These oral traditions pervade the histories of place and space, becoming the essence of place and serving as forms of communication of a shared traditional knowledge of art, ideas and cultural materials transferred between successive generations. Song and dialogue – reflecting the content of historical and mythical time – including folklore, poetry, prose, verses, chants and ballads, are central to these transmissions. Deep narratives also allow landscapes to initiate their own creation stories with respect to the transformation and adaptation to the particulars of site location, society, culture and traditional knowledge systems. Through focused ways of examining the historical geographies of traditional Indian landscapes, this paper seeks to understand the diverse ways in which resident populations express their complex relationships with these landscapes, associating with the transformations of these landscapes and reformulating their relationships to society.*

*Keywords — cultural landscape, cultural heritage, folklore, narrative*

## I. INTRODUCTION

The landscape of any region can be considered as the repository of intangible values and human meanings that nurture our very existence (Taylor, 2008). These environments also share a special significance as dominant settings for human life, transcending time, place, and culture. To understand the interplay between landscape and narrative of that respective landscape is to explore the different layers encasing the place.

Cultural landscapes can be defined as a process of creating an identity via connections to physical site and place. Memories of landscape are associated with beliefs, oral traditions, social life, political condition, arts and crafts, myths and war. To understand the sense of a place and cultural landscape, the connection between landscape, memory and identity are very essential.

Every traditional knowledge and culture embodied within a landscape is transferred from one generation to another through songs, rhythms, legends, poetry, ceremonies and paintings[2]. Each place we come across has an oral tradition attached to it, but many of these are lost or remain

unknown over a period of time. Landscape narratives provide an approach for establishing meaning in the landscape which has been widely used by many cultural institutions. Dissemination of information of a cultural landscape is as important as the documentation, which is challenging. There are many places unexplored which lies outside the responsibility of cultural institutions and need to be explored.

A search for sense of identity and belonging is one of our deepest needs. A common factor in this is the attachment of a man to landscape and how we unfold identity in landscape and place. Therefore cultural landscape is not merely about what we see rather how this landscape is seen. Even though we experience it with our eyes, nonetheless we interpret it with our mind and attribute intangible, spiritual values to it. Can every narrative related to cultural landscape create this special sense of identity?

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

India is often referred to as the land of cultural plurality and diversity where two contrasting worldviews - that of the traditional and continuous and the formal and official (inherited from the British) thrive. These two views today coexist uncomfortably, often at cross purposes, clashing with the contemporary official and is impacting our cultural resources adversely.

In the context of the above, international principles of sacred values and categories can be examined on real ground situations through field experience to explore the more recent new category of cultural landscape within the context of India's multiple faiths /beliefs, plural communities and cultural diversities[8]

This research tries to articulate the questions and issues raised with focus on sacred significance and values through the Cultural landscape.

### *Sacred Groves of India*

Sacred groves exist all over the world as small patches of dense forest, which is a congregation of unique flora and fauna with perennial water resources nearby. Many sacred groves are considered as bio-diversity regions with sustainable resources. Sacred groves are a practice of expressing one's gratefulness towards nature which upholds and sustains life under a given agro-ecological condition. The ancient system of establishing a temple, a water tank and a sacred grove was a method of water harvesting in the region of Kerala, India. Water bodies adjoining the sacred groves were viewed as permanent sources of water. Every

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sacred grove was patronized with various Gods, Goddess and Spirits. No one was permitted to remove any plant or animal origin, or any material from the sacred groves. These unwritten rules were associated with myths and beliefs which stated that any conditions that disturbed the sanctity of the sacred groves and its surroundings were considered to be a sin, inviting the rage of the patron deity by bringing natural calamities, diseases, death or sufferings to people. Sacred groves could therefore be considered as the centre of cultural heritage.

'*Theyyam*' is a ritual dance performance offered to the God and Goddess resident in these sacred groves. These ritual performances were conducted for the prosperity of the village. The villagers believed that if village deities are not pleased through '*Theyyam*' performance, this can cause misery to the village through a cycle of floods and famines. '*Theyyam*', will facilitate an understanding of these processes and the manner of its propagating a micro setting around a sacred grove also known as the '*kaavu*'. It is also a ritual dance performance which narrates the relation of man to his environment and reminds him how the landscape of his region has moulded him and vice versa.

Human beings are understood as integral parts of nature in '*Theyyam*' performance. In '*Theyyam*' performance tree-symbolism played a major role. The importance of nature in our life and its protection is expressed through the performance. In many '*Theyyam*', the facial decorations are either in the form of a leaf, flower or fruit of venerated trees. Each '*Theyyam*' performance begins by paying respect to the trees. With a close examination, the materials used for the costumes, make-up, ornaments and headgear include rice powder, turmeric, millets, spices and leaves; give an indication of the type agriculture and vegetation.

Indian Cultural Landscape can be called 'intellectual landscape', a collection of religious, cultural and physical meanings ascribed to geographical components through collective memory, planted on the ground in active engagement of communities over generations, empowering nature and land from physical to the metaphysical[8]. Sacred groves can be considered as an 'intellectual landscape' wherein this collective memory can be translated into illustrations to examine the layers of transformation of cultural landscape.

#### *Riverine and Coastal Landscapes*

India is a land of rivers, lakes, streams and sea shores. Indian heritage reveals how these perennial water bodies influenced the different realms of the lives of the people. Every water body is inhabited by various cultural communities. Many folklore forms can be associated to such water-bodies which points out how they construct, represent and view their lives in relation to the water systems [5]

Myths and beliefs play a major role in protecting the water systems. Water is considered to be a primary element of life. Since life without water is difficult, it is considered to be very powerful to destroy as well as to create. Water is also expressed as a purifying object in rituals. The communities on river banks attribute these two meanings through cultural expressions both verbal and non-verbal. Through logical analysis of myths connected with river one can understand the role of river in people's culture. Every

water body, by default creates a cultural landscape which is intervened by man. Such cultural landscapes are mediated to next generation through folklore which includes myths, epics, legends, proverbs and song, thus transforming natural products into cultural products.

The myth of Parshuraman(sixth avatar of Lord Vishnu)creating Kerala by throwing an axe from Kanyakumari(Tamil Nadu) to Gokarnam(Karnataka), to create home for 64 Brahmin families explains the conception a coastal cultural landscape along with the Indian ocean.

These 64 families established 64 villages which were collectively known as *Gramakshetrams* (temple villages) since all villages were established around the temples. The controlling family stayed near to temple, took control of the temple and vast estates surrounding temple. Agriculture can be considered as the major source of income for these families. The communities who owned the temple is known as '*ur*' or '*urar*', among whom there was a strong sense of unity, which is still visible. If we cross-check the descriptions listed in the *Keralolpathi*(narrative of Kerala history) on site, we can find these settlements on either side of the present Kerala border and major rivers. So then question arises as on how these villages were divided initially? One assumption is that, these villages were divided physically based on topography and riverine. These Brahmanical settlement traditions continue till date, with temple as its center of focus. Based on the available literature review, we can trace about 32 Brahmin settlements within Kerala. When Kerala was reformed in 1956, many of the settlement became a part of Karnataka and Tamilnadu. Subsequently many of these inland riverines which once formed the borderline have also vanished. Therefore this collective memory of religious, cultural and physical meanings attributed to geographical components, attained through oral traditions, tangible heritage and literary works can help in re-creating the cultural landscape developed along the riverine and coastal regions.

### III. EARLY LITERATURE AS A TOOL FOR CONSERVATION & RESULTS

*Unnuneeli Sandesam* is among the oldest literary works in Malayalam language. It is called "*Sandesa Kavyam*" (message poem). A "*Sandesa Kavyam*" is a message written in poetry, on the lines of the famous "*Megh Dhoot*" of Kalidasa. In the case of this work, it is a message written by a lover to his lady-love staying at a far-off place. The message is therefore written as if it is sent through a messenger. The work was written in the 14th century AD, when transport and communications were very limited in Kerala. The messenger in the poem is, therefore, a carrier pigeon. Apart from the message, the poem gives detailed instructions to the messenger pigeon, including the route to be taken and the landmarks en route.

Besides the literary value of the work, it throws light on the geography of Kerala of that period. It, therefore, reads in part like a travelogue too. The journey starts



in Thiruvananthapuram the capital of the (Travancore) Kingdom of that era, and ends at Kaduthuruthy a port town then. What amazes today is the fact that Kaduthuruthy is no longer a port town, as the sea receded several miles down apparently following a tsunami in 1341, changing the whole landscape. Also, some of the land and water bodies mentioned in the poem are not to be seen now. The water bodies which were once the major mode of transportation has now been encroached by the people to construct their houses and commercial units; thus narrowing the size of the water body.

While undertaking my Master's thesis, this literary review of *Unnuneeli sandesham* helped in understanding the topography and the political condition of Kerala during the 15<sup>th</sup> century which was then translated into political and topography maps. At that point, Kerala was politically divided into 5 regions namely *Venad, Kuttanad, Kudanad, Karkanad, Puzhinad* and also into 5 regions namely *Kurinji*(hilly region), *Palai*(midlands), *Mullai*(forest areas) *Marutham*(lowlands) and *Neythal*(coastal region) depending on the topography. These maps thus generated were overlaid with the present physical map to understand the transformation of the cultural landscape of Kerala over the centuries, taking into account the socio-economic and political condition of the region.

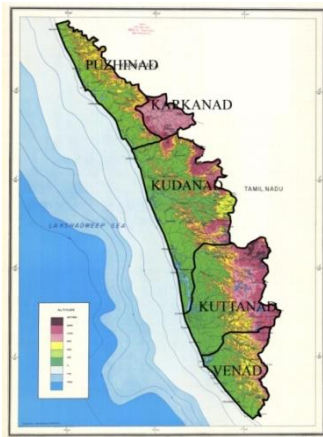


Fig. 1. Map showing the political divisions of Kerala during 15<sup>th</sup> century CE



Fig. 2. Map showing the divisions of Kerala according to the topography

These illustrations were purely based on the literary review of '*Unnuneeli Sandesham*'. From the above mentioned literary reviews, we can also assume that either topography or riverine became the border line for physical division of regions. Many inland water-bodies formed the borderlands for many regions. Secondly, my research will address the question on how one can re-trace the riverine borderscapes by critically examining socio-cultural and ecological settings that lie in close proximity to rivers and other water bodies and translate this information into physical maps, which critically raise questions about to re-frame the history of cultural landscapes. .

#### IV. PRELIMINARY SUPPOSITION AND IMPLICATIONS

Can the identity of any settings be narrated as a story? Does every narrative attached as landscape explains its evolution over time? What are the chances of a narrative to get transected over a period of time and does not imply the true legend?

One of the main aims of the research is to understand the convolution and the importance of the ways people establish their relation with their environment, keeping in mind the way people live in controlled by the place they live in and the oral traditions attached to it.[3] Without the control of such narrations, human will start exploiting the environment to a greater extent.

Does a cultural landscape narrative unite the people together? To what extent any narrative can influence the people? Will the narrative help in understanding and re-writing the history of a place which has been written purely based on the evidences of a tangible heritage?

#### V. INFERENCES

The Indian Cultural Landscape is a repository of the collective perception of geography, where memory, information and imagination converge to shape the landscape. The physical form of the landscape that still survive have a capacity to regenerate itself when associations, ideologies and continuity are re-established to engage the contemporary minds of the nation.[8]

The relationship between cultural landscapes and the oral traditions attributed to it depict complexity and are always thought provoking. Finally, I would like to explore whether the descriptions or narrations associated with any site of rapidly transforming cultural landscape provoke contradicting theories which requires re-writing of cultural history geography of a place and translate the theories into graphical illustrations. All the observations need to be undertaken with respect to rapidly changing socio-cultural aspects to understand the shifting meanings of cultural landscapes. This research paper has a clear objective to understand how the narratives underpin the survival or degeneration of any cultural landscape.

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