

Understanding the Cultural Landscape of Kuttanad: Life within the Constraints of Nature

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Abstract : Landscape is a setting that informs the way of life of a set of people, and the repository of intangible values and human meanings that nurture our very existence. Along with the linkage that it forms with our lives, it can be argued that landscape and memory cannot be separated, as landscape is the nucleus of our memories. In this context, this paper studies landscape evolution of a region with unique geographic setting, where the dependency of the inhabitants on its resources, led to the formation of certain peculiar beliefs and taboos that formed the basis of a set of unwritten rules and guidelines which they still follow as a part of their lifestyle. One such example is Kuttanad, a low lying region in Kerala which is a complex mosaic of fragmented agricultural landscape incorporating coastal backwaters, rivers, marshes, paddy fields and water channels. The more the physical involvement with the resources, the more was the inhabitants attachment towards it. This attachment of the inhabitants to the place is very strong because the creation of this land was the result of the toil of the low caste labourers who strived day and night to create Kuttanad, which was reclaimed from water with the help of the finance supplied by their landlords. However, the greatest challenge faced by them is posed by the forces of water in the form of floods. As this land is fed by five rivers, even the slight variation in rainfall in its watershed area can cause a large imbalance in the water level causing the reclaimed land to be inundated. The effects of climate change including increase in rainfall, rise in sea level and change of seasons can act as a catalyst to this damage. Hasty urbanization has led to the conversion of paddy fields to housing plots and coconut/plantain fields giving no regard to the traditional systems which had once respected nature and combated floods and draughts through the various cultural practices and taboos practiced by the people. Thus it is essential to look back at the landscape evolution of Kuttanad and to recognise methods used traditionally in the region to establish a cultural landscape, and to understand how climate change and urbanisation shall pose a challenge to the existing landscape and lifestyle. This research also explores the possibilities of alternative and sustainable approaches for resilient urban development learned from Kuttanad as a case study.

Keywords : ecological conservation, landscape and ecological engineering, landscape evolution, man-made landscapes

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