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Colonial Disaster, the "Capitalocene" and Contemporary Lessons: The Great Flood of 1924 in Southern India

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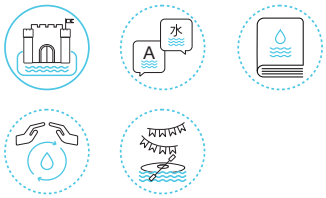
Abstract
Floods impact many Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and aspects of sanitation and water supply. They are especially detrimental to those in lower socio-economic strata. The 2018 Kerala floods disrupted the lives of 5.4 million people, resulting in funds and attention being diverted from SDGs priorities and toward rebuilding and rehabilitation efforts. Such ravages of nature often result from the over-exploitation of local natural resources and the mismanagement of infrastructure. Colonialism was a watershed in such ecological destruction. The Great Flood of 1924, which devastated parts of present-day Kerala, is an example of a colonial-era-induced natural disaster. A century later, revisiting this disaster in the light of Kerala's 2018 floods offers instructive pointers for achieving disaster resilience today – in a region known for its rich biodiversity and population density. This study also highlights how historical forces like colonialism contributed to transforming this once peripheral region into a "risk society."

KEYWORDS

Great Flood of 1924
Kerala Flood 2018
colonialism
disaster history
resilience

WATER VALUES



CLIMATE

Am: Tropical monsoon climate

Policy Recommendations

- Introduction of disaster history in the school and college curriculum.
- Prominently marking disaster memories (e.g., with flood marks) to create awareness.
- Co-production of resilience through local (e.g., flood memories, traditional knowledge) and scientific knowledge (e.g., dam management, flood mapping).
- Advocating sustainable development and thoughtful conservation of the Western Ghats.
- Turning the proactive popular response into a human resource bank mobilized through social networking.

< Fig. 1 Kerala Floods 2018 - Angamaly (Source: Ranjithsiji, 2018. CC BY-SA 4.0 via Wikimedia Commons).

Introduction: Disaster as Part of the "Capitalocene"

Disasters offer a unique lens for examining entrenched fissures in society, including social inequality and the vulnerability of particular groups. Scholars have described "the past" as a "laboratory" in which events and relations can be scrutinized to comprehend "the present." The past allows us to identify and compare "distinct and divergent social and environmental patterns and trajectories" (Bavel et al. 2020, 1). It must be noted that even when the trajectory of a disaster is the same, the outcomes would often be different, primarily because of socio-cultural and political differences. The emergence of human beings as significant "geological agents" – prompting the idea of "Anthropocene" – demands the supplementing of global histories of capital with the species history of humans (Chakrabarty 2009). Jason Moore (2016) attributes climate change to an "audacious accumulation strategy" termed "Cheap Nature" (the dual understanding of nature as "cheap" in an economical and "ethico-political" sense). This approach becomes particularly stark in the context of colonial expansion. The proponents of the use of "capitalocene" rather than Anthropocene, like Moore, argue that the effects of capitalism were especially evident in the peripheries – following Wallerstein's World System Theory.

Modern colonialism, which incorporated most of the world into the capitalist order through various regimes of violence, also handed a particular legacy of impunity regarding the overexploitation of nature, which the colonized were not hesitant to carry forward. Hence, the value of this study is of great relevance – given the continuities, and therefore, the identical and comparable nature of crisis and resilience over time.

The "Capitalocene" in Travancore

The environmental histories of princely states in India, which covered two-fifths of the Indian subcontinent, have been largely neglected. Focusing on disasters, can help reveal the ecological impact of colonialism. Travancore was a princely state (constituting parts of the present-day Indian states of Kerala and Tamil Nadu in southwestern India) under a native monarchy and indirectly controlled by the British. It was a narrow strip of land sandwiched between the Western Ghats on the east and the Arabian Sea on the west (the Malabar Coast). Numerous rivers – mostly fed by the monsoon – flow across the region, making it fertile and green (for the geography of Travancore, see Pillai 1940a). From time immemorial foreign traders sought to benefit from its spices, ivory and teak. After prevailing over other foreign players, the English East India Company established political dominance over the area through unilateral and uneven treaties that subjugated the princely state beginning in the late eighteenth century. By the nineteenth century, colonial capital had cleared the rich tropical evergreen forests to make way for monocropping plantations of tea, coffee and rubber (Baak 1997; Ravi Raman 2010). The expansion of the railway network resulted in further clearing of dense forests for precious wood (which was also exported to England for use in shipbuilding).

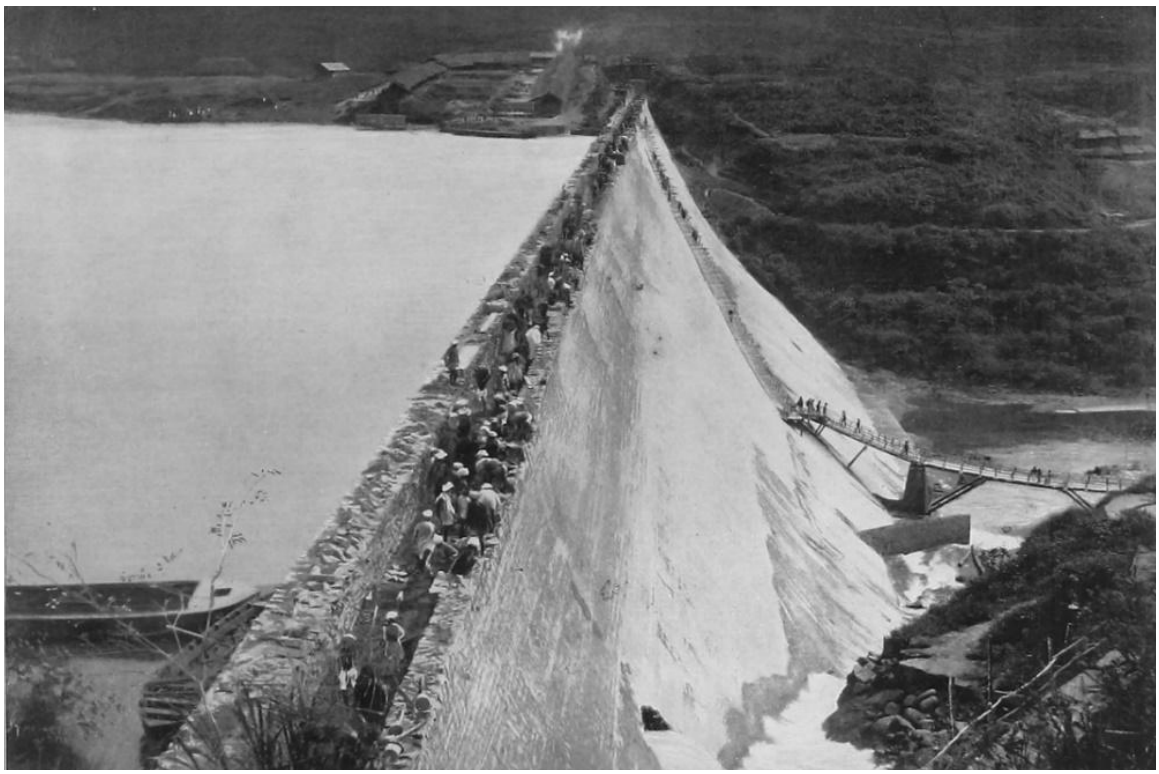
The post-independent development regime continued to follow patterns inherited from the colonial plantation era, including the continued depletion of forest land, government regularization of encroachments and population influx (Moench 1991). The colossal capital influx also resulted in massive rice-land reclamations from the Vembanad Lake (the longest lake in India and the largest in Kerala), where four major rivers drain (the Pampa, Manimala,

^ Fig. 2 1924 Munnar Flood. Image reproduced from original on display at the Tea Museum, Kanan Devan Hills Plantation (KDHP), Munnar (Source: Unknown, reproduced by Mahendranath Sudhindranath, 2025).

Achenkovil, and Meenachil). These, along with the construction of various dams and embankments, have significantly contributed to deviations in the natural courses of rivers in the region.

The Great Flood of 1924: A Disaster of the "Capitalocene"

The 1924 flood, popularly referred to as Thonnoottompathile Velapokkam or Flood of 99, (referring to the year 1099 of the Malayalam calendar), inundated significant areas of Travancore, resulting in an estimated loss of at least one thousand lives (there is no official record of mortality) and the displacement of tens of thousands. The monsoon of 1924 (June - August) brought the highest recorded rainfall - 64 per cent higher than normal. The heavy downpour of 16 - 18 July became the immediate trigger of the deluge, with all rivers overflowing and, causing significant damage to regions that witnessed the most anthropogenic transformations. The plantation belt suffered considerable destruction as a result of recurring landslides. Along with Parur and Kuttanad, this belt suffered the heaviest damage in terms of habitat, communication facilities, crops, cattle, and public buildings (Pillai 1940b). The flood destroyed the ongoing Kanni crop (usually harvested in August - September) and damaged the seedlings meant for the Kumbham crop (whose harvest period is February - March). Despite Travancore's history of flooding, the scale of destruction in 1924 and the slow recession of water caught everyone by surprise. The flood became etched in popular memory as "Great." The disasters of 1882 - 1883 and 1906 - 1907 paled in comparison with the devastation of 1924, while some contemporary commentators compared it to the mega-flood of 1824 (Jacob 2022). In India as a whole, it could be compared to another catastrophic flood in the upper Ganga and Yamuna that also took place in (1924) with huge loss of life and the destruction of much colonial infrastructure (Ramaswamy 1985).



^ Fig. 3 Periyar Dam, c. 1899 (Source: Nicholas & Co., Madras. Published in The Queen's Empire, Volume 4. Public domain via Wikimedia Commons).

Mitigating the 'Great Flood'

The flood relief operations of 1924 were decentralized in character, with a Flood Relief Committee overseeing the efforts of local committees. The government, missionaries, affluent sections of society, community organizations, and even protesting political groups (like the Indian National Congress) immediately aided the affected by distributing food, clothing, and money. Newspapers reported the disaster locally and internationally. This resulted in coming in from outside the state to supplement the free grants from the government to rehabilitate the poorest among the victims. The Forest Department provided building materials such as bamboo, reed, and grass to farmers (Pillai 1940b).

Travancore had a very hierarchical society based on the caste system, which was more rigid than in the rest of India. Even in the face of a disaster, caste showed its ugly face with segregation manifested in the rehabilitation measures. The diary entries of S. C. H. Robinson (the land revenue and income tax commissioner, appointed as the state's special officer for flood relief) offer considerable insights regarding the relief operations. The caste Hindus were accommodated in the temple buildings, while the lower castes (who were considered polluting) had to stay in boats or public buildings. Mealtimes in the relief camps were also based on caste hierarchy (Robinson 1924). On the positive side, Robinson's diary alludes to widespread community participation in feeding the refugees and arranging motor boats to res-

^ Fig. 4 SNC initiates Operation 'Madad' in Kerala (Source: Indian Navy, 2018. CC BY-SA 4.0 via OpenStreetMap Wiki).

cue people and bring them to shelters – long before the state could lend its support (Robinson 1924). Afterward, many temples, public buildings, and houses that survived the deluge displayed plaques to mark the flood-water level and remind the coming generations of the tragedy. However, the tragic experience does not seem to have left a 'mark' in terms of lessons learned, as some of the contributing factors persisted.

Return of the "Flood of the Century" in 2018

After 94 years, another deluge, widely recognized as the "flood of the century," afflicted Kerala (the state linguistically formed in 1956 with most of the erstwhile Travancore territory). The downpour of 25 trillion liters of water in a state with the third-highest population density in India caused massive damage (Venkitesh and Kuttappan 2018), with 450 deaths, the displacement of a million people to relief camps, and property losses of 2.8 billion USD (Basak et al. 2018).

There are interesting similarities between the deluges of 1924 and 2018 in terms of cause, extent, and response (Mani 2021). The more-than-average precipitation and unprofessional dam management (releasing dam water into already flooded rivers) were the causes of both disasters. The core affected areas remained the same (of course, with a difference in the scale of damage given the denser population in 2018). There were similar immediate and long-term responses from civil society and respective governments.

^ Fig. 5 Volunteers at the Central Collection Centre for Relief Materials, Trivandrum (Source: Mahendranath Sudhindranath, 2019).

Addressing Historical Factors to Achieve Resilience

The historical data of a disaster offers valuable insights into the interconnected socio-political-environmental factors that contributed to it. As Mike Hulme (2008, 5) argues, understanding the "complex interweaving of our ideas of climate with their physical and cultural settings" is essential to prepare ourselves for "different configurations of this relationship in the future." The Western Ghats, an ecological hotspot, has suffered significant degradation due to unchecked capital-driven exploitation. In post-independent India, deforestation and granite quarrying have surged, with human activity and rapid urbanization severely degrading 35 percent of the forest cover over the past 90 years (Viju 2019). Moving forward, conservation efforts must be strategic and collaborative, with the government and local communities working together to protect the ecosystem.

Kerala of the twenty-first century is increasingly a "region of risk." There is an over-emphasis on the flood-of-the-century narrative concerning mega-floods worldwide (Skilton 2023) and such disasters may likely recur with increasing frequency in this region. Yet, people have not developed a "culture of disaster" by developing resilience through frequent exposure to risks (Bankoff 2003). Resilience becomes ambiguous when the "autonomy of technical expertise" and "role of politics in environmental discourse" collide (Gandy 2014, 214). This disconnection often aggravates the situation, especially in the "landscape of hydrological uncertainty" (Gandy 2014, 203).

Historical memory is pivotal in enabling a society to prepare for disasters of the future. One way to enable this is the inclusion of disaster history in the school/college curriculum. A pragmatic approach to disaster studies is to make it an interdisciplinary field "that active-

ly embed(s) conceptual insights derived from cultural and historical analyses into broader, collaborative research projects that are oriented toward achieving change in real-world practices" (Carrigan 2015, 123). Proper dam management (using past failures as lessons), effective public communication of reliable forecasts, updating researchers with high-resolution terrain data, sensitisation through local flood mapping, and reorientation toward sustainable construction could improve resilience.

Conclusion

The two floods that ravaged Kerala within the span of a century underline the importance of popular memory in achieving resilience. The critical factor that led to the floods was the degradation of the Western Ghats, a result of the "capitalocene." Environmental degradation and disaster mark a continuum in the ecological timeline of the region. The stark similarities of the causes and extent of the floods and people's proactive response in the two instances also characterize that continuum. Understanding past floods' physical and cultural settings and absorbing the appropriate lessons will prepare us better for future incidents.

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