

Nila and Colours of Life

Banks of Nila is the fertile land for arts. Many of the prestigious art institutions of Kerala are situated along these shores. In fact, many arts form originated here, like when Kunjan Nambiar conceived the theatre art Thullal.

Documentation of Nila is also recording the evolution of cultural history of Kerala. It covers the birth and growth of Kerala Kalamandalam as the premier art training institute in Kerala's traditional art forms. It also tracks the listless journey of the traveller who never rested that was Njaralath Rama Poduval, the Edakka maestro. It also captures the vibrancy of mehfilis of Ponnani, where Mappilapattu scored a new realm for Muslim music genre.

Nila and Tale of Migration

The myth of Parayi, a woman of lower caste, bearing 12 children to a Brahmin traveller and these 12 children going on to form different communities or sects lies at the back of Kerala's social matrix. At one end, it is an attempt to stamp the Brahminical authority over castes and creed in the land. At the other extreme, it is a sweet tale of communal harmony, where a spectrum of society evolving out of union between two extreme castes.

It is also a representation of the endless travel that Kerala society has been making. This exodus, at times emotional too, still continues.

Nila and Rush to Sunset

Senseless urbanisation drive has taken its toll on the ecosystem of Nila. During summer, the river is reduced to small streams at many parts. The situation is compounded by sandmining that goes on despite protests from various quarters.

A river, which created the backbone of the land's culture, is rushing to its end. Many eminent writers like Jnanpith award winner M.T. Vasudevan Nair continue to rally support for the cause of the river.

Unless a major intervention is made at this point, Nila will soon cease to flow. It will be relegated to a memory of good times past. This project is an attempt to move upstream, against the bulldozing of urbanisation. One last attempt to help Nila flow.

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Nila

Droplets of myth, history and reality

Objective

Document the complete life of Nila or Bharatapuzha, the longest river in Kerala and initiate steps to conserve spin-offs like a vibrant culture and living literature that is pegged around the river.

Methodology:

A project of this magnitude demands a methodology that exists above the constraints of conventions. So we evolved a new one – that of tapping traditional wisdom.

We arrange meetings of senior members of the local community. The group called 'Karanavakkootam' will be a treasure chest of information and myths regarding the past. We also plan to involve all educational institutions and NGOs in the region in our effort to collect the Local Knowledge (LK) / Traditional Knowledge (TK).

By documenting the information thus gathered, we are making sure that it is not lost for generations to come. Also, the information is vital tool in our continuing efforts to garner support for the cause of Nila. Established connections would be used to impart the wisdom we have collected, through workshops, symposiums and joint imparting methodologies.

Quiet flows, Nila ...

Like all rivers, Nila or Bharatapuzha flows through the lives, and minds, of the population that has settled on its banks. Documenting the progress of Nila means documenting the myriad of life and culture that exist along its banks.

Kerala boasts 44 rivers, three of which flow eastwards. The rest flow down

west and end in the Arabian Sea. Nila belongs to the latter. It originates from Aanamala and covers nearly 250 km before touching the Arabian Sea at Ponnani.

Originating from Aanamalai, near Pollachi in Tamil Nadu, Amaravathipuzha or Chittoorpuzha joins Kalpathipuzha to become Nila. Palar, Aliyar and Uppar are main tributaries of Amaravathipuzha. Besides Amaravathipuzha and Kalpathipuzha, the other two main tributaries of Nila are Gayatripuzha and Thoothapuzha.

Malampuzha joins the river near Valayar at the Kerala-Tamil Nadu border. The catchment area of Nila is spread over 4400 sq.km. Kerala and 1768 sq.km. in Tamil Nadu.

During its course, Nila meanders through different and distinct cultures. Before entering Palakkad, the river reflects shades of Tamil culture. As it reaches Ottappalam, it becomes the lifeline for Valluvanadan or Central Kerala ethos. Valluvanad was a small independent kingdom that fostered folk culture like Kudachozhi, Dharigavadham, Chovittukali and Pothanum-thirayum. Potters also find livelihood off the banks of the river in this region. They have an annual festival, setting up a temporary temple for the river, worshipping Mariamman with protectors Delabadran and Veerabadran as a manifestation of the river.

Finally, it reaches Ponnani region merging with the Arabian Sea. There it supports Kerala Muslim culture giving it a name for

fishing, trade and the ship-making industry towards its last lap at Malappuram. Mappila songs are among the better known forms of the region. Marriages often have performances by Hindustani singers. Mylanji Kalyanam is the name given to the Mehndi ceremony.

Few other rivers pass through this big a spectrum of culture. That makes conservation of Nila significant in terms of anthropological frames of references as well.

Nila and Stream of Words

Nila is a recurring motif in Malayalam literature. It remains as a perennial allusion to the goodness of past.

It is said that Malayalam literature was born, and came of age, along the banks of Nila. Though there are many theories about association of Nila with Malayalam literature, history has it that many of Malayalam's illustrious writers were born by the side of Nila. The long list starts with Thunchathu Ramanujan Ezhuthachan, known as the first recognised writer in Malayalam.

The literature that Nila created went on to change the social matrix of Kerala. Writers, from Ezhuthachan to V.T. Bhattathiripad to V.K.N., worked towards cleaning the dirt accumulated in our culture. Thus, literary tradition borne by Nila becomes a record of social evolution of Kerala.

Nila and Patterns of Life

It is interesting to note the patterns that lives take along the banks of Nila. For example, Kalpathipuzha has settlements of Brahmins, in agraharams. Myths have it that this is a settlement of Brahmins who were translocated from Mayavaram. The Gayathripuzha tributary runs through agricultural land and Tamil folk art forms or rituals like Gopliyalavum kottumpappiyum, Mulakotu and koganpada are practised here.

Then there are myths and legends on almost all temples in the region. All of them show divine powers going out of the way to interact with simple human beings. That, in a way, is the message that Nila transmits.

Nila and Waves of History

Deep inside its heart Nila keeps the history of Kollangode dynasty or the Vengunadu Swaroopam. Myths say that the dynasty is linked to Gandharvas. Truth has it that stories of lust and unbridled passion filled the corridors of palaces here.

Downstream, Nila becomes witness of mindless cruelty and gory of death. Mamankam is a dark spot in Kerala's history, where innumerable warriors laid their lives in attempt to challenge the reign of the king. The endless, mindless tale of aggression and death formed the basis of Valluvanad. But now, the land exists only in literature and nostalgia of Malayali. This is perhaps the revenge of history.