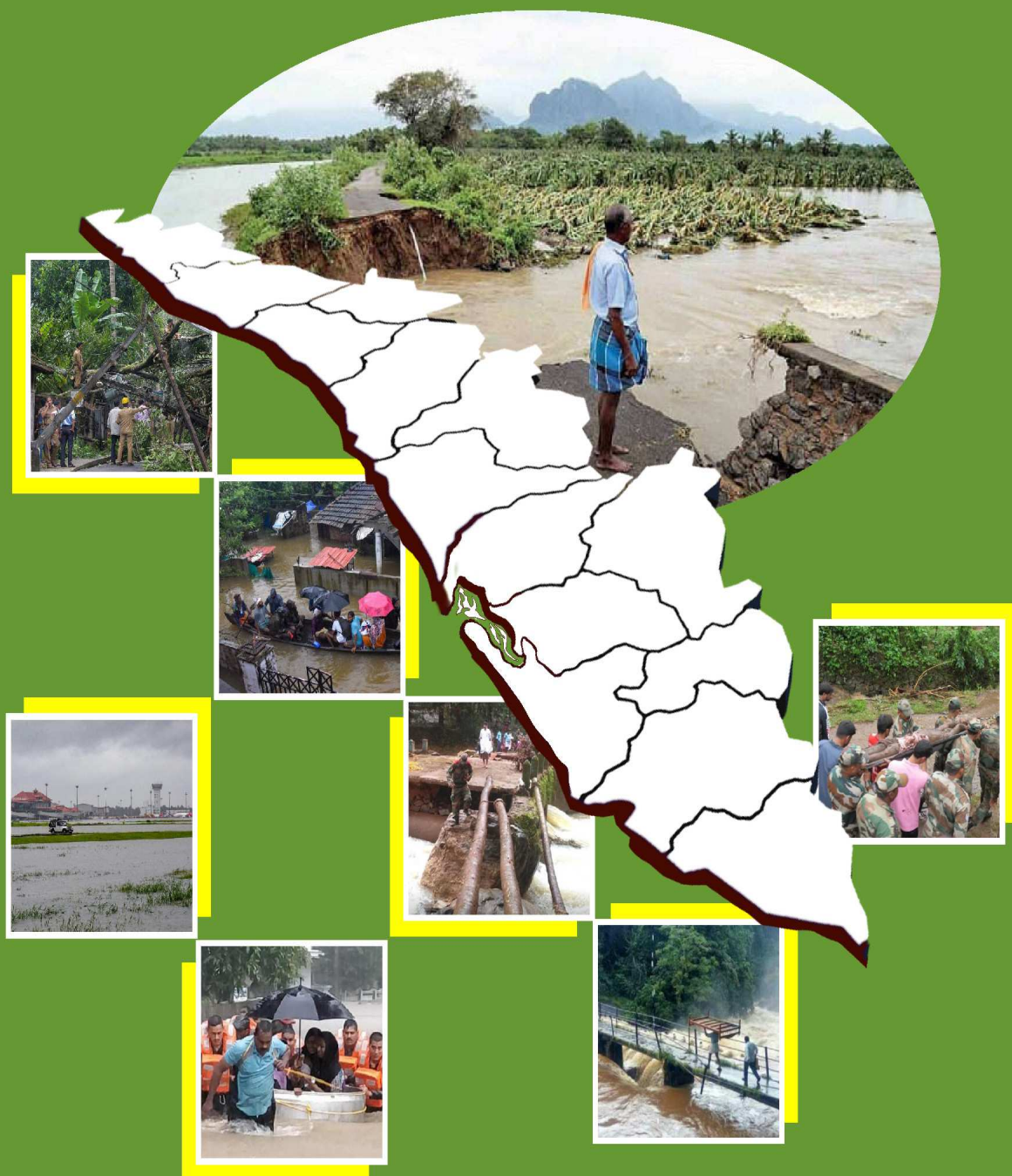


# Building a New Kerala

## Ideas and Reflections



### **Some Priorities for Rehabilitation in the Kuttanad Region**

**A.V. Jose**

**Research Unit on Local Self Governments**

**RULSG-Policy Pointers Series : 9**

**CDS**  
Thiruvananthapuram



---

## Some Priorities for Rehabilitation in the Kuttanad Region

AV Jose

There are geographical and demographic features, which mark Kuttanad in sharp contrast with the rest of Kerala. It is a deltaic region of 900 square kilometres, spread into the districts of Alappuzha and Kottayam. The region is the confluence of several rivers flowing westward to the Arabian sea, and on an average, it is two meters below the sea-level. Alappuzha, one of the most densely populated districts of Kerala (with a total population of 2.13 million in 2011), accounts for the largest share of Kuttanad region, both in terms of population and geographical area. Among the seven administrative units (taluks) of the district, Kuttanad is the lowest lying taluk with a total population of 193 thousand in 2011, all of them entirely based in rural areas.

More important, the population of Kuttanad taluk and quite possibly that of the entire low-lands has consistently declined over the decades. In Kuttanad taluk, it came down from 210 thousand in 1991 to 204 thousand in 2001 and there on to 193 thousand by 2011.\* Such decline has taken place parallel to a consistent increase in the total population of Alappuzha district. However, there was a proportionately larger decline of rural population in all other taluks of the district; but it was mitigated by increased urbanization, as more people adapted themselves to working and living in the adjoining census towns and statutory towns of the district. The urban centres, where more than three-quarters of the workforce are engaged in non-farm activities, have grown into prominence over the years. In the low-lands, most notably in Kuttanad taluk, there was very little room for any urban-centred demographic growth. As a result, its inhabitants have been fleeing to far-off places for decades.

Such depopulation is the inevitable outcome of prolonged periods of flooding, which people have been exposed to. The severity of recent floods in Kerala and their devastating effects on the economy of Kuttanad – extensive destruction of field crops and a complete collapse of all economic activities during the months of July and August in 2018– will only accelerate the pace of demographic depletion in the years to come.

Now as we look ahead and plan for the rehabilitation of all people in the flood-affected regions, there are some important facts to be borne in mind. First, the floods will keep recurring in the plains, worsening the ecological damage and environmental degradation already in place. Whether or not we can control such damage, at least in future remains to be seen. Second, the agriculture of the region, mostly based on rice cultivation, and the livelihoods of people dependent on agriculture, are likely to get worse in the years to come. More people currently in the work-force are poised to withdraw from agriculture and enter into non-farm occupations, if only such employment opportunities were available. It is hard to find more non-farm employment opportunities in the low-lands of Kuttanad.

Therefore, sustaining the entire eco-system of Kuttanad essentially implies working on two fronts. One, is to reduce the scale of distress induced out-migration, bound to occur in the region. In other words, people should be incentivised to live in their existing habitats. A more important goal is to wean the work-force, especially new entrants, into remunerative employment outside agriculture. The two, objectives together constitute an agenda of a tall order, more easily said than done.

The first objective implies a concerted effort to encourage people to hang on to their present houses, irrespective of the intensity of floods that frequent the region. It is pointless to suggest that people should live in flood-proof houses like they do in parts of South-East Asia. People no

---

\* For the population figures discussed in this note, I wish to thank D Narayana for sharing his paper titled “Kuttanad: The Key to Sustainability is Water Resources Management” and Shency Mathew for compiling the rural-urban estimates from Registrar General of Census Operations: *Primary Census Abstracts of Kerala 2001 and 2011*.

longer build stilted houses either on bamboos or on wooden logs as they used to in the *Chao-Phaya* basin of Thailand. The cost implications of building modern stilted houses on concrete structures are enormous and well beyond the reach of most people in the low-lands. All the same, there are practical and financially viable initiatives, which if launched, can go a long way to making their current houses more liveable, and the entire region more hospitable, even in the face of severe floods that frequent the region.

In Kuttanad, most people leave their houses during floods, because their kitchens become dysfunctional and the toilets unusable. One feasible option is to help people build an extra-room to their houses with an attached toilet, sufficiently elevated to withstand the floods. This can be done using modular structures for which subsidized inputs of financial support or interest-free loans could be extended to the needy after means-testing them. Even a modest venture to “extra-fit” the houses can have serious cost implications. In the entire low-lands of Kuttanad, there are some 200,000 plus houses in need of such support. If the state were to provide the extra-facilities free of cost to a quarter of the households (at a minimum cost of 1.5 lakh rupees per household), that would amount to 750 crores (7.5 billion) rupees. When more households are added to the target group, the cost estimates will go up further.

An equally important objective could be the building of multi-purpose community centres in each village of the low lands, where people can be accommodated in relief camps if and when floods strike with the same ferocity as during the month of July 2018. (Kuttanad was already reeling under heavy floods, when a second one, far more devastating than the first, struck the whole Kerala in mid-August). Ideally, the community centres should be elevated structures with adequate facilities for board and lodging, built in the proximity of public institutions like schools, hospitals and transport stations. Funds for the community shelters, using modular structures which will vastly reduce the cost, can be mobilized on a co-financing basis by the local self-government institutions and self-groups of the flood-affected regions. The day-to-day management of the centres can be entrusted to appropriate agencies affiliated to local self-governments. Attached to these centres, some additional facilities can also be built for renting out to tourists, visitors and guest-workers of the region.

The question of creating non-agricultural employment opportunities is equally important. Given the fact that mobility of people is limited on account of inadequate transport facilities, thus reducing the scope for commuting to work in the neighbouring urban centres of Kottayam and Alappuzha districts, it is time to consider the promotion of non-agricultural employment in the neighbourhood of their habitats. Indeed there are abundant prospects for employment creation in a number of industries such as tourism, transport, boat-building, food processing, purified drinking water, value addition to commercial crops, notably coconut and bananas, hospitality and catering services. In this regard, government should consider the extension of concessionary packages including tax benefits to small and medium establishments that can boost employment generation in the low-lands of Kuttanad.

These call for public policy interventions that go well beyond the traditional domain of all governments on the supply side of labour markets through education and skill development. A more pro-active role of the state primarily for employment promotion has become a compelling requirement in the changed circumstances of environmentally fragile zones such as Kuttanad.

24 September 2018

(Dr. A.V. Jose is Honorary Visiting Professor at the Centre for Development Studies, Thiruvananthapuram.)



**Research Unit on Local Self Governments**  
**Centre for Development Studies**

Prasanth Nagar, Ulloor, Thiruvananthapuram - 695011, Kerala, India  
Tel: +91-471- 2774200, 2448881, 2448412 Fax: +91-471- 2447137  
[www.cds.edu](http://www.cds.edu)