

# Building a New Kerala

## Ideas and Reflections



**Can /Should Art Wait for Better Times?**

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## Can /Should Art Wait for Better Times?

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*“..all societies need to think about the stability of their political culture over time and the security of cherished values in times of stress. All societies, then, need to think about compassion for loss, anger at injustice, the limiting of envy and disgust in favor of inclusive sympathy. Ceding the terrain of emotion-shaping to antiliberal forces gives them huge advantage in the people’s hearts and risks making people think of liberal values as tepid and boring.”*

**Martha C Nussbaum, Political Emotions – Why Love Matters for Justice**

The state government order immediately after the floods to suspend art events and festivals for a year in the wake of the tragedy poses disturbing questions about governmental understanding and attitude towards art and culture. It seems the decision-makers consider art as a leisure time activity, a luxury that only the elites can indulge in, a pastime or an entertainment for prosperous times. In turn, art comes to be seen as an ‘expenditure’ that can (and should) be postponed for better times, and surely, something to be done away with during times of natural disasters, social turmoil and stress. Art is seen as an ‘event’ or ‘festival’ organized *by* the State, *for* and *to* the people, for them to watch, relax and enjoy. So obviously art can and should wait for better times when all the *immediate* problems are solved, *crises* overcome, and *normalcy* restored, as for them, art has nothing to do with immediacies, crisis and normalcy, or Reality. It is something to be used when necessary and kept aside when other urgent matters press upon us. So, is art a mere add-on, a luxury we indulge in or something integral to our everyday lives and entangled in our imagination, organizing our experiences, shaping our interface with the Other, and moulding and expressing our notions about life, living and livelihood?

These troubled times force us to think about and understand art and culture in more fundamental ways. Art is not a pastime in the present or a residue of the past; in umpteen conscious and unconscious, subtle and overt ways, art condenses and conserves the past, negotiates with and interrogates the present and imagines futures. It remembers and memorializes, it entertains but also heals and hurts, connects and also detaches.

### Warp and Woof of Social Imaginary

*“..only an artist can tell..what it is like for anyone who gets to this planet to survive it. What it is like to die, or to have somebody die; what it is like to be glad”*

**James Baldwin**

Coming out of a traumatic event is not just about physical rehabilitation, financial compensation and infrastructural reconstruction, but also about psychological overcoming and reconnecting with Life and World – a process of absorbing and transforming experience into memory, connecting the immediate past with the flow and lessons of history, exorcising

the pain and death into poignant expressions and durable memorials. It is not only the external, the visible, audible and readable creations that constitute artwork and aesthetic experience, but also the subterranean streams that courses through the veins of society and the individuals, constituting and expressing the warp and woof of our moral vision.

During the time of the floods, people rose to the occasion, and flung their body and soul into the rescue and relief operations, offering money and services, time, skills and knowledge. If it was a brilliant and spontaneous flash of *creative anarchy*. What inspired all to join hands in such collective action was primarily their cultural DNA, if we rose above the narrow divisions of caste, creed, religion and political ideologies, it is also thanks to the secular-democratic ambience we grew up that moulded the core of our social being. This instinctual uprising of human substance owes a lot to our arts and culture that always celebrated the essential continuity and entangledness of everything.. For, “every art object is a reflection of what we are and who we can be. Art rides the past, present and future, the ugly, dangerous, tenuous and hopeful. Art is our gift to ourselves; a mirror of the truth we know, and the truth that cannot be imagined. It can stun, alter and shift perception. When we allow art forms to explore and fill our social space, social conversations abound with life” (TM Krishna Reshaping Art).

A tragedy like this plunges us into the vertiginous exigencies of the moment, but also prompts us to look at the larger picture and ponder upon it – spatially and temporally, that is, in history and geography, and how we imagined and shaped them and vice versa. For this tragedy is not an accident or a freak incident but a culmination and after effect of our thoughts and actions, ideologies and policies. This tragedy forces our attention back to the entangled nature of things, and to apprehend the larger picture, one needs to detach oneself and stand back, which is what art does and enables; it unsettles our time scales and space sense, and breaks the strangleholds of singular narratives and tunnel visions we are imprisoned in; and prods us to imagine other futures, fresh trajectories of thought, collective action and alternative livelihoods.

### **Post-disaster Fatigue**

As in any disaster situation, there is the first flush of selfless and spontaneous voluntary action, physical involvement and financial assistance. But when the panic situation is overcome, and immediate issues resolved, the System takes over, the nameless volunteers return to their former vocations, and a certain kind of fatigue sets in. The government machinery takes over the operations fully, the formal sources of funds begin to flow ‘procedurally’. Now, with the field cleared of whistleblowers and voluntary activists, an array of vested interests enter the arena, claiming their role, credit and ‘share’ in the whole process. Master plans and holistic designs, which were thought of and argued for get sidelined, and piecemeal, localized solutions begin to gain upper hand. As in most government programmes, the only measure of performance and judgment will be *expenditure*. Caught in the exigencies of spending, the experiences and lessons learned fade from public discourses, the

fundamental principles we were reminded about once again get eclipsed. Such inertia can lead to a deadly kind of complacency, with all the old systems and procedures, structures and modalities, gradually, but duly 'restored'. If this danger of amnesia, inertia and back-to-the-routine mindset is to be offset, there is a need to sustain the sense of urgency and mission. It can only be done through art and memorials of various kinds that capture, re-live and remind us of the event; they function as pointers to the traumatic moments, keeping in view the agonies of the tragedy, the ignored warnings, the mistakes that should never be repeated.

Only art makes such connections, and keep us inspired about the need to dream of a different future rather than dam our imagination and imprison ourselves in the present. For this, the State and society have to realize that art is not merely an instrument. Maybe, a disaster like this should trigger new thinking about art and culture.

### **Art Interventions**

During the time of the floods, along with others, artists, writers and intellectuals too rose to the occasion, and actively took part in the rescue, relief and rehabilitation programmes; singers performed at the camps, painters and artists organized art camps to mobilize funds, writers and intellectuals joined hands for relief and fundraising activities at every stage. Libraries were rebuilt with the books donated by readers, writers and other citizens, and film screenings organized in many camps and in affected areas. Art, at that stage, was part of the healing process.

Now that people are slowly returning to their homes, repairing, rebuilding and replacing, and trying to put their life back on rails, art needs to reposition and re-address the new context as a repository of memory, archive of facts and as a pointer to more humane and ecologically-sound future.

### **A Monument for the Great Deluge**

One major function of art is to remember, remind and memorialize. There should be a poignant memorial of the flood, one that captures the trauma and agonies of the tragedy, pays homage to those who lost their lives, and salute and celebrate the heroic intervention of the fisherfolk and other volunteers. Such memorial should be conceived, designed and executed by artists and art organizations.

### **A Museum to Record, Remember & Remind**

There was a virtual deluge of images, information and narratives during and after the floods, minute-to-minute account of the dams and water flows, the devastations caused, the rescue operations, first-person stories of the affected and the rescuers, the life in the relief camps, scenes from the collection centres, networking for transportation and distribution of food and other essentials, medical services, counselling, rehabilitation activities etc.

A lot of data sheets and scientific materials about water resources, geological formations, land use, water management, dams, waste management, urban planning, etc. were also brought into circulation, excavated from the archives, and those currently produced. As a point of comparison, diverse information and narratives about the Great Flood of 1924 also circulated and were part of the discussions.

All these need to be preserved, archived, annotated and displayed to give the viewer a comprehensive and scientific perspective of the Flood along with the various factors leading to it, how people took up the challenge, the current state and future of our dams and water resources, and also the state of preparedness in the case of similar emergencies.

The museum should also showcase

- **Audiovisual archive** of rescue operations, relief camps, collection centres, rehabilitation centres etc.
- **Scientific data about the rivers and dams** in Kerala
- **First person accounts** of the affected and those involved in rescue operations;
- Press and audiovisual **media coverage** of the floods,
- **Perspectives** about the reasons and scale of the flood, its impact, potential repercussions, futuristic solutions etc;
- **Flood Mapping**
- An audiovisual and factual comparison of the two great floods of **1924 and 2018**
- **Interventions** of Institutions, political parties, community organisations
- **Planning** for a flood-resistant Kerala

### **Water Festival - Celebrating and Commemorating Collective Social Action**

One should also memorialize Social Action – the spontaneous energy of people to come together to take up the challenge, organize themselves, garner resources, plan actions and execute them without the help of any power structures or command systems. This disaster brought forth the resilience and collective creativity of various sections of our society – the fisherfolk who took the first plunge, the young techies all over the world who put in place communication networks to organize, monitor and enable rescue and relief operations, the student/youth community who came forward to help run collection centres, and many civil society organizations that raised donations, enabled transportation, distribution, accommodation, management of camps etc. These initiatives point towards potential civil society synergies that cut across political, religious, caste and class affiliations for collective action.

How does one acknowledge, commemorate and celebrate such social action? Firstly, through documentation and archiving so that it is remembered and preserved for future generations, secondly, by producing research material/studies, books, monographs and documentary films, thirdly, by organizing an annual event - a **Water Festival** - that mourns the dead, re-dedicates

oneself to the core principles of ecological sustainability, a Festival that combines Arts and Science, ie., by showcasing cinema, theatre, music, painting, sculpture, and performance on the one, and an exhibition of eco-friendly urban design, land use planning, architecture, water management etc. on the other.

### **Annual Water Report of Kerala**

Lastly, the proposed Museum can also think of an Annual Water Report of Kerala every year critically documenting and reviewing the state of rivers, water bodies and dams in the State, and water resource management.

### **Design Repository for Architecture and Urban Development for Future Kerala**

The flood most strikingly and terrifyingly exposed the fragility of our landscape and also the unsustainability of the ‘development’ philosophy we have followed so far. The eddies and currents of the flood, the locational pattern of the landslides etc. have erased and re-drawn the map of the region, washing away certain boundaries and reclaiming some new terrains. Our agriculture, land use plans, urban planning, real estate expansion, water resource management, waste management, infrastructure development etc. of the future will have to follow the outlines and flows of this new map.

Innovative and sustainable water management, urban/settlement planning, infrastructure and architectural design etc. form a crucial part of it. The task is not to *restore* the status quo but to conceive of new forms of habitat and ecologies of living, that we have to convince ourselves of to begin with. Artists, architects, designers, ecologists and landscapists have a huge role to play in this transformation of land, habitat and mindset.

Drawing upon lessons from the past and local wisdom, and also from international experience, a **design repository** for the State with master plans for affected region must be prepared in consultation with architects, artists, civil society organizations working in this knowledge area, and the local citizens.

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