RIVER AS A CULTURAL CONSTRUCT: MYTH AND RITUAL ON THE BANKS OF BHARATHAPPUZHA

A Synopsis of the Thesis Submitted
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Kerala state is situated on the South Western part of the Indian peninsula. The land is rich in the availability of water and there are forty four rivers flowing throughout the state, out of which forty one are flowing towards west and the rest towards the east. Several places of politico-historical and cultural importance are located on the banks of these rivers. Such rich heritage reveals how the rivers of Kerala influenced different realms of the lives of the people. The water streams in Kerala are known as ‘puzha’. The Malayalam word puzha means a small river/stream of water or water flows. Generally in India, the large natural stream of water known as nadi. The word nadi is derived from Sanskrit root word ‘nad’ meaning channel, stream or flow. In the case of Kerala, almost all water streams are small comparing to other parts of India and the people name it as puzha (small water stream).

The Bharathappuzha is the biggest of all rivers in Kerala. It is also known as ‘nila’(means ‘long’) and ‘peraru’ (big river). The river originates from the ‘trimurthi sangam’ of Anamalai hills in Western Ghats and flows through the three district of Kerala (Palakkad, Thrishur and Malappuram). The river is located in the central part of the state and divides it into Northern and Southern area. Finally, the river joins with the Arabian Sea at Ponnani. The three districts have many villages on the river banks which are inhabited by different cultural communities. All the communities have their own worldview and perceptions of the river. Thus the river is considered not only as a material object, but also, as a symbol of their entire life of the people living in and around it.

Significance of the Study

The study on Bharathappuzha is significant for two reasons: Firstly, The River Bharathappuzha divides the state into Northern and Southern regions and flows through the central part of the state. Incidentally, this part of Kerala is known as Cultural Capital. Like any other river in India, Bharathappuzha has its own role in
molding knowledge, beliefs, customs, practices, material and culture of various communities which reside on its banks. The river has four major tributaries. They are thoothappuzha, gayathrippuzha, kalpathippuzha and kannadippuzha. All the folklore on the river banks are transmitted from one generation to another verbally and non-verbally. There are many shrines and worshiping places especially dedicated to Bhagavathi on the banks which eventually become the basis for the existence of different folklore forms. The first six months in a year is the time of festivals such as vela in the origin part of the river, pooram in middle banks and thalapoli on the end part of Bharathappuzha in the kavu (village shrine). A rich tradition is embedded in the folklore forms performed by the people belonging to different communities. Therefore it constitutes a vital source material for the folkloric study which points out how they construct, represent and view their own selves in relation to the river. Hence, folklore is the expression of the folk that speaks about their own understanding of their lifestyle patterns. It means they view the world around them in a particular way. It can be called as the ‘worldview’ of their community. Worldview is the fundamental cognitive orientation of an individual or society encompassing the entirety of the individual or society’s knowledge and perspective including natural philosophy; fundamental, existential, and normative postulates; or themes, values, emotions, and ethics. Different communities understand and interpret the river as per their worldview and call it by different names. It is a part of the cultural identity.

Secondly, Bharathappuzha is dying due to various natural and human interventions. The decreases of rain, sand mining, deforestation have been accelerating the death. The river is the sources of water to the villagers and agricultural activities on the banks. The life and lore of the people living on the banks depend on Bharathappuzha itself. Naturally, the changes which occurred in the flow and course of river may affect the life and culture of the people. Bharathappuzha is a centre of discussion both in the academic and the non-academic spheres of Kerala. The decay of river will affect the folk culture of different communities on the banks. With the onslaught of changes that have occurred in the geography on the river banks and due to modernisation and commercialisation, there

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is a transformation even in the consciousness of various communities living there. Thus, the river is regarded as a commodity since the ritual festivals performed on the banks have been changing in the course of time and space.

**Nature and Scope of the Study**

The Nature of present study is based on folkloric approach which focuses on the construction of various notions about an individual river and how they are expressed in the folklore of different communities in different ways. In India, rivers are centrifugal, centripetal and centrifocal forces that draw several communities to perform several rituals, sacred and secular not only on the banks but also in the places in and around their course. However, it is interesting to note that there are many Bhagavathi shrines that are situated on the banks of Bharathappuzha from its origin to end part and the folk communities conceive Bharathappuzha in their day to day life through the concept and ritual practices associated with the mother goddess, Bhagavathi. Each community looks at the river in relation to congregational annual festivals that are conducted on the banks of Bharathappuzha. In the process, each community articulate itself as being a part of the larger community and express overtly through the actions, objects, performance, ideologies etc., their own identity as well live in solidarity with the other communities.

Thus far not many studies have focussed on the ‘lore’ on the banks of the rivers connecting the physical landscape with cultural landscape and therefore, the scope of the present study can be extended to other such studies on rivers as cultural construct.

**Area of the Study**

To pursue the study in a meaningful way, after conducting several preliminary surveys, the area of study is fixed after considering convenience and feasibility. Bharathappuzha flows through three districts namely Palakkad, Thrishur and Malappuram. The river originates from the Western Ghats and enters Palakkad district. Then flows through Thrishur district and finally culminates into the Arabian Sea. The banks of Bharathappuzha are taken as the larger area of study. Within the banks of the river, the geographical area is categorised into three broad regions: one is the Palakkad area (origin part) and the second one is Thrishur part (middle part); and the third is found in Malappuram district (end part).
Review of Literature

The present study will comprise various literatures that discuss the concept of river in general and this will give a comprehensive idea to the research questions. In order to have a good understanding on the concept of river, the literature survey is done by looking at some of the works and then organised the literature survey in the following manner:

i. Literature related to theoretical and conceptual frame.
ii. Literature pertaining to river as natural landscape.
iii. Literature pertaining to river as cultural landscape
iv. Literature related to cultural life of the folk of Kerala especially, on the banks of the river Bharathappuzha.

The first type of literature gives an understanding on the issues related to ‘nature/culture’ dichotomy and how humans have negotiated with it through the ages by incorporating it with the sacral behaviour and religious ideology. The second type furnishes studies on rivers and their natural landscapes which constitute physical features of river courses and the human intervention against the river and how it affects the natural course of the river. The third type of literature provides a critical insight into the concept of sacred and secular notions of different cultures and how humans constructed their worldview on water which is a basic element of sustenance. The fourth type of literature is to construct a folkloric approach to understand rivers and their lore.

The literature survey gives different conceptual understanding about human, nature and culture. This literature survey helped in developing an outline of the river and cultural life associated with it in India. The outline looks at various concepts related to Indian rivers and the fairs and festivals on the river banks in India.

Lacunae in the existing literature:

The literature survey revealed certain gaps in the studies on rivers in general and the life on the banks in particular. Firstly, all the studies mentioned above viewed various aspects of cultural life associated with rivers, origin myths, and sacral behaviour associated with the rivers. No individual river is taken for a comprehensive study. As a result, cultural life associated with a (individual) river is absent in all the studies. In this thesis an attempt is being made to fill this gap by
studying a river known as Bharathappuzha and cultural life constructed around it. Secondly, Bharathappuzha has not been subjected to any serious academic enquiry. The limited works produced on this river were either confined to the literal aspects of river or have been less explanatory about the cultural specificities of the community or locality. Thirdly, inadequate scholarly attention paid to the dynamic nature of folklore among the various communities on the river banks is felt to be an omission in these academic inquiries. Folkloric approach which brings out the perceptions and the worldview of the folk, by the folk and for the folk is thus far not attempted by the studies mentioned above in the literature survey.

Hypothesis

After careful analysis of the data and the secondary sources from the preliminary survey it can be hypothesised that the cultural history of Kerala is knitted around the ritual performances of mother goddess, Bhagavathi. The prominent ritual performances are theyyam in the northern part, mudiyettu and padyani in the southern part and thira in the Central part of Kerala. The banks of Bharathappuzha seem to be epicentre (core region) for the ritual of Bhagavathi in Kerala and manifested as different cultural performances imbibing local versions and variations in other parts of the State. The process of dispersal can be found by studying the banks of Bharathappuzha form its origin in Palakkad ghats to the end of the river in Ponnani region where it joins the Arabian Sea. The myth of Bhagavathi in the form of narratives and the enactment of the myth in form of cultural performances coexist and densely concentric on the banks and hence, this hypothesis is arrived at. Perhaps due to this phenomenal prevalence of Bhagavathi worship the Central Kerala especially, the banks of Bharathappuzha acquired the status of ‘Cultural Capital’.

Aims and Objectives of the Study:

1. To study the river as a cultural construct of the, by the and for the communities living on the river banks.
2. To study the socio-economic formations on the banks of Bharathappuzha river from a historical perspective.
3. To study the role of river on the life and lore of the people and to probe into the mutual relationship between the people and the river.
4. To study various folklore on the river bank and to understand the worship of Bhagavathi on the banks of the river from a folkloric perspective.

5. To study the changing concept of Bharathappuzha river and the cultural life of the communities in the new socio-economic, cultural and political milieu.

In short, the study will cover various representations of the river through the life of the people, who live on the banks. It also concentrates on the issue of why the communities look at the river in different ways and how they use the river as a part of their life cycle ceremonies. From birth to death, the river takes a vital role in their life. A close study about the river system and its people’s life give a new insight into the representation of river in different forms. Moreover, the study tries to explore the changing pattern of nature in relation to the changing condition of human life in the present context.

Methodology:

As the thesis aims at studying the myth and ritual of Bhagavathi on the banks of Bharathappuzha, a systematic approach has to be developed and hence, in this thesis an intensive ethnography and social reflective research methodology is deployed. Research methods may be understood as all those methods or techniques that are used for conducting a research. It is a scientific enquiry and a systematic process which is adopted to follow. To distinguish from other academic disciplines, in folklore studies, the folk is understood as a group that talk about themselves through their lore. It means that, rather than imposing a theory or philosophical assumption, the folk have to be studied through their lore. In this research, discourse methodology technique is used for the data collection to bring out the folk perspectives.

Basically three methods are employed in the collection, analysis and interpretation of the data. Since the theme is on the river lore, it is imperative to understand the process of construction of the lore and its significant role in the life engagements of the communities living on the banks. For this reason, observation method is primarily employed. This warrants for watching the performances of the folk communities in their performance context living on the banks to understand their practices and the belief system. After observing, another method is employed.
which may be called as **ethnographic method** to understand the communities’ images and their conceptual understanding of the river. To achieve this goal using **discourse method**, unstructured interviews are conducted with the communities with regard to their ritual performances in general and the verbal performances in specific. This method further leads to the analysis of myths, which forms the basis of their images on gods and goddesses. This constitutes most in translating the images of those in the performance. Their attitude towards river and its ritual symbolism is also collected through discussions with the members of the community.

**Tripartite method:** As such, the flowing path of the river is divided into three parts: the upper, middle, and the lower parts. In the upper part, it flows through the hilly tract of the Western Ghats and falls into Aliyar dam, constructed at 300 metres above Mean Sea Level in Tamil Nadu. In the middle part, it is travelling with average gradient from the dam to the Moolathara regulatory in Kerala-Tamil Nadu border. From the regulator, it flows in to Kerala with a variable gradient and falls in the Arabian Sea at Ponnani. For the sake of study in this thesis the river Bharathappuzha is observed following the course of the river and it is divided into three parts which is called as the tripartite method; (i) origin part of the river, (ii) middle part of the river and (iii) ending part of the river-based on the flow of the river to understand the relationship between the communities and the river. It is found from the preliminary survey and reading of the secondary sources, the methodology adopted in the earlier studies is a vertical type wherein the ritual performances are studied from North Kerala (South Canara) to South Kerala (Trivandrum) and it is hypothesised that the ritual performances originated in the north with the influences from Tulu land (*bhootha* worship) and percolated to south in the form of *theyyam, thira, mudiyettu* and *padayani*. However, in this thesis the study of the ritual performances on the banks of Bharathappuzha postulate that the ritual performances originated in the middle part having Bharathappuzha banks as axis and dispersed to other regions of Kerala. This alternate model has developed by changing the very methodology from vertical to linear (or horizontal) and studying the ritual performances by juxtaposing them in order to find out the co-existence of myth and ritual on one hand, and on the other, its relationship with communities. Through this method it is found that the middle parts of the river banks have myth and performances in a co-existing manner and thus reinforces the ritual of
Bhagavathi. From the middle part which is considered as epicentre due to its intensity and density of the prevalence of the myth and ritual of Bhagavathi one can find the version and variations of the same in the beginning and end part.

Sources of Study:

The data is collected from the primary and the secondary sources.

Primary sources

A thick corpus of data is being collected during the fieldwork since field is the primary site of source for the study. The life and lore of the people and communities in and around the river banks along its course in different regions from its birth till it reaches the sea get expressed in their verbal and non-verbal expressive genres. The audio-visually recorded genres-myths, legends, tales, ballads, songs, proverbs, riddles, tales, personal narratives of the people from different culture groups, ritual observances, practices, performances, yelling, folk speech etc., - are best primary resources of the study because the text, texture and context of the utterances and performances reflects the dynamics of the worldview and culture of the communities associated with the river through the ages. The material culture associated with folk life and worship patterns with regard to river constituted the primary source material.

The secondary sources

The secondary sources constitute all published and unpublished written data viz: manuscripts, Journals, Gazetteers, District Manuals, Census Reports, and Scholarly articles and books. The literature survey in the above pages delineated the status of knowledge and represent secondary source on the issue under study. Some other secondary sources used in research are given below:

- **Literatures related to Bharathappuzha-** There are many fictions dealing with the natural beauty of this river and the life surrounding on this river. The literary fictions and poetry of the prominent Malayalam writers like V.K.N, Radhakrishnan, Idashery, Aattoor, P.Kunjiraman Nayar, M.T Vasudevan Nayar are some of them.

- **Cinemas that were scripted /shot on the river banks-** The nostalgic memory of Kerala people are clearly mentioned through the films that are created on the river banks. Most of the film narrates the life of the communities on the river banks. It means that, they considered the banks as the cultural region of
Kerala people. The films Aaraam Thampuraan, Narasimham, Naghashathangal, Naalukettu, Naatturajavu, Devasuram, Vadakkum Nadhan etc., are few among them.

- **Website related to Bharathappuzha** - There is some websites that disseminate the life and lore on the banks of Bharathappuzha such as [www.nilarivers.com](http://www.nilarivers.com), [www.theblueyonder.com](http://www.theblueyonder.com), [www.nilafounadation.org](http://www.nilafounadation.org) are some of them.

- In addition to it, Kerala Institute of Local Administration (KILA, Trivandrum) conducts various seminars and workshops to spread awareness among the Keralities about the death of Bharathappuzha due to the unnatural activities happening on the river banks like sand mining and the increase in concrete buildings on the river banks. Likewise the NGO’s such as Nilavu, Vayali Folklore Group and The Bharathappuzha Protection Committee has also worked for the conservation of the different cultures on the river banks through travelling on the banks, documentation of community life and making awareness among the public through different media.

**Brief Chapterisation:**

The thesis is divided into **Seven** Chapters.

**Chapter I: Introduction** deals with a general introduction to river and lore in India. Apart from the basic concepts, significance of the study, nature and scope of the study, area of the study, review of literature, gaps found in the existing literature, hypothesis, aims and objectives of the study, methodology, sources of study and chapterisation are also enumerated in this Chapter.

**Chapter II: River and Cultural Life - A Conceptual Frame** is divided into two sections; the first section discusses the general notion of river in different parts of the world and India in particular. The expressive behaviour associated with water and river has also been subjected to discussion. The second section, discusses the origin myth of Indian rivers and how river is represented in these myths. There are two qualities of water that accentuate its central place in cultures and faiths. Firstly, water is a primary element of life. Without water there is no life; yet water has the power to destroy as well as to create. In all most all creation myths one can find that life is created out of water. Secondly, water is depicted as purifying object in rituals. It means that water washes away impurities and pollutants and makes an object look as good as new. The communities on river banks attribute these two meanings to river through various cultural expressions both verbal and non-verbal.
Through analysis of myths connected with river one can understand the role of river in people’s culture.

**Chapter III: Natural and Cultural Landscape of Bharathappuzha** introduces the general notion of river in India and explains the geographical and topographical features of the banks of Bharathappuzha. At one level, this chapter discusses the natural settings on the river banks and at another level, it attempts to illustrate how the above natural settings create a cultural landscape on the banks of Bharathappuzha. In the cultural landscape human intervention with nature is done through the mediation of folklore such as myth, epic, legend, proverbs, songs etc., and transform the natural products into cultural products. On one hand it has enhanced the usage of water resources and on the other, abused the same affecting the natural landscape. As a result the river Bharathappuzha is at the verge of decline. Nevertheless, the communities engaged in various forms using the water attributing sacrality especially with the construction activities of shrines and temples and thereby conducting rituals and ceremonies on timely intervals.

**Chapter IV: Folk Communities on the Banks of Bharathappuzha** examines different folk communities living on the banks and how they engaged with the river in their day-to-day life. On the whole, the migrations into the land of Kerala contributed to the development of history of the region. An overview of the time frame of the migrations of different religious and racial groups shows that all races and communal groups inhabited this region. The history of Kerala is the history of migrations which led to composite and complex social formation. However, the settlement pattern reveals that the tribals and indigenous communities which are the inhabitants of the banks and hilly terrains of Bharathappuzha replaced or subdued by the process of ‘Aryanisation’ wherein the ‘jatis’ (occupational ranking i.e. castes) of upper ‘varna’ (ritual ranking) encouraged to immigrate into the Kerala soils and expand the settled agrarian economy. The ‘Parasurama myth’ and the ‘Vararuchi myth’ as explained in the chapter attest to this fact. The Bharathappuzha banks are much used for acculturation of native communities into the ‘Hindu fold’ by attributing mythical origin and relationship between the ‘Aryan Varna system and the native jati matrix’. As a result the social hierarchy emerged on one hand, negating the ‘Aryan varna system’ and on the other, incorporating it with the native hierarchical system.
Chapter V: Bhagavathi: Myth and Worship discusses the myth and worship of Bhagavathi. The myth of Kali seems to have migrated from the Northern and Southern parts of India into the land of Kerala and formed as Bhadrakali myth/Dharikavadham and worshipped as Bhagavathi in sacred groves. In the process of incorporation of the myth several ethnic categories in the form of legends are deployed in ‘oico-typification’ of the entire worship Bhagavathi. The native cultural landscape has even affected the ‘mythification’ process of Bhadrakali. As a result, it is not only the incorporation of narratives but also the communities were brought under one umbrella through the worship of Bhagavathi. Ritual spaces are created to engage each and every community in the worship of Bhagavathi.

Chapter VI: Ritual Performances on the Banks - Towards Identity Formation elaborates the ritual practices on the banks of Bharathappuzha. It also examines the vela, pooram and thalapoli from the origin, middle and ending part of the banks respectively as case studies and looks how each community identifies themselves from the other communities in connection with the sacred space and ritual practices. The ritual performances of Bhagavathi on the banks of Bharathappuzha reveal that there is a pattern that emerges in the worship of Bhagavathi. Following the course of the Bharathappuza if one study the performances of Bhagavathi in the kavus in a linear/horizontal manner, a complete story of Bhadrakali emerge having the beginning and progressing then culminating with an end thus making it as a comprehensive story. Only when the performances of the three parts of Bharathappuzha are studied together, the story as narrated in the myth of Bhadrakali can be understood in a meaningful sequence. In the beginning part as stated already, the concept of Bhadrakali is in the formative stage and variedly depicted in the myths of kannyarkali and pavakoothu. Neither of them is directly connected with Bhadrakali. In the middle part the myth of Bhadrakali is proportionately connected with the enactment. In the ritual performances of the middle part, visual enactment in the form of floral drawings and in the performative enactment as play is crystallized and even supported by the narrative in the form of thottam. Both narrative (myth) and enactment (ritual) reinforced the concept of Bhadrakali as a goddess. In the end part, the ritual thalapoli is performed to seek the blessings of the deity. Thus the story of Bhadrakali is represented in its totality as the story of Bhagavathi.
Chapter VII-Conclusion gives a brief summary of all the chapters along with findings and suggestions. The major finding is that the Bharathappuzha played a central role in the culture of Kerala especially, the rituals and enactments connected with Bhagavathi. Kerala is known for art and culture associated with performing traditions and even some of them are used as national identity. The performing arts such as theyyam, thira, mudiyettu and padayani having colourful costume and make up influenced the classical genres such as kathakali, krishnattam, koodiyattam etc., the basis for such eruption of performing art tradition in Kerala, as found in the thesis, can be attributed to the epicentre which is on the banks of Bharathappuzha.

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