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Local History Writing: Initiatives of the Vayanasalas of Kasaragod

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We the humans have the basic nature to know the things that happened around our surroundings. *Vayanasalas*[1] fulfill this eagerness to a great extent. This article examines the relevance of *Vayanasalas* in enquiring, recording and thereby preserving the local history and culture of a region. It concentrates on the activities of public libraries/reading rooms in the villages of Kasaragod district in northern Kerala and it analyses how effectively they introduce the innovative step of preserving local history and culture to develop their knowledge and social consciousness about the past.

Normally libraries have the responsibility to preserve, conserve and restore local history and locally important materials. Preservation is the action taken to anticipate, prevent, stop or retard deterioration. Conservation is the maintenance of each item in the collection in a usable condition. Restoration is the act of returning the deteriorated item to its original ordinary condition[2]. These threefold activities are done by most of the public libraries. However the act of enquiring and collecting the details about their past are done only by the village libraries. The village libraries of Kerala initiated a new scheme of writing local history of their region which can be considered as a new step towards preserving indigenous knowledge, culture and heritage.

From an investigation in the libraries of the villages I came to know that the collecting of manuscripts and other reliable local history items has been more successful and necessary than the preservation of library institutional archives. When we visit library, we have some questions like what kind of reading materials are available in the library? What varieties of books/journals are preserved in the library? How effectively the books are being utilized by the reader? What kind of care have given to the materials in the library? These libraries contain records of enduring value. What emerges from these libraries is the systematic habit of reading among the

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people. In the evening, after completing their daily job the villagers gathered in the library and share their day experiences and hear the daily news. This was the normal procedure till the 1990s. But now this system disappeared and newspaper reached the home of almost all the individual.

These village libraries, through the years, have collected significant bodies of documentation regarding the everyday life of its members. Personal purpose of library readers led to the development of academic libraries and library institutions. Today these village libraries have often been placed or based in academic settings. Recently they started collecting local knowledge and tried to record them and preserve them as documentary sources. They deserve much support from the government and from the people in this activity.

The survey of village libraries provides an accurate portrait of the reading nature of the villagers. Here the librarians are not professionally trained. They were neither historians nor academicians. Through their contacts with notable educated old men of their village, they refine their knowledge about the past. Manuscripts related to national movement, papers and diary of individuals, families, associations, old notices of different political programs are maintained in the village libraries. This is in fact a huge repository of knowledge. Some personal documents are also kept in the libraries. Collection of local manuscripts are more successful than the preservation of library institutional archives. It is only their interest in local history and culture which inspired them to write history of their locality. It is in fact a turning point in the realm of historiography. Here are some examples of local history works prepared by the village libraries of Kasaragod district of the Kerala State.

Oduk: History of Ravaneshwaram

C Achutha Menon *Grandalayam* and *Vayanasala* Ravaneshwaram tried to find out the history of their village[3]. They started with the origin of the place name. The confusing thing is that in a village there are different region and each region has its own name and each name became a problem for them as some of the names are very ancient while some are of modern. The first attempt is to find out the meaning of each place name and they realize that each name is a treasure of their culture and history. It is not an easy task to find out when and how it originated or when they started calling

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that particular region with a particular name. Another thing is that the same region has different names or differently pronounced names by the people of that locality. For example Ravaneshwaram is also known as Ravaneeshwaram which has another meaning. Ravaneshwaram means a place where Ravana got the blessings of Ishwar/Shiva while Ravaneeshwaram indicates that a place where Ravani got the blessings of Ishwar. Now the entire story turned up down and it lost the importance of the legendary hero Raavan. A special characteristic feature of each place name is that some names are related with legendary heroes while most of the names are related to the geographical peculiarity of the region. The essence of social relations is seen in the place names. Each place name is mentioned with details of how these names may be arrived or used.

Oduk: History of Ravaneshwaram has eleven chapters. The first is on placename and the geography of the region. The second discuss the people of the locality with the classification of different castes and their occupation and how these castes acquired prominence in the society. The third chapter discusses agriculture and agricultural relations, the methods used for agriculture, traditional method of cultivation, preservation of grains, irrigation facilities, methods of irrigation used, their food habits and so on. One chapter is for explaining the education system existed in the region from the ancient period up to the modern, from the prevalence of the earliest known education system up to the modern learning system; the emergence of modern schools. The fifth chapter is on health. It mentioned the diseases that trapped them and the medicines used by the local physicians. One chapter is for art and culture; *theyyam*, *mangalamkali, poorakali*, *kelipathram, Kavadi*, *Alamikali*, *kolkali*, *thidambu nritham,* cock fighting, folk songs. It also has the reference about entertainment activities of the people. One chapter is dedicated for Sobhana Kalasamithi/Sobhana Arts and Sports Club. This cultural organization was started by the teachers who came to this region from Thiruvithamkoor. It promoted the cultural activities of the region and organized several dramas, medical camps, sports tournaments and celebrated Onam and other festivals. It acted as a center for practicing *kolkali*. Infact, it united the people of the region socially and culturally. It also contains detailed description of the persons who associated with cultural and social activities. Separate chapters are also arranged for Places of worship, temple

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festivals, rituals and ceremonies, cultural activities, political history. occupation and economic conditions and Nadum nattu prayagalum is about the village and its language. Thus, they tried to find out and record somewhat a total history of the region. They are not professional historians, but it was their eagerness to know about their land and region which forced/helped them to find out the past.

Perumbalayude Innlegal: Short History of Perumbala

Perumbalayude Innlegal: Short History of Perumbala[4] is prepared by N E Balaram Vaynasala and Grandalayam, Perumbala. Through this book they tried to bring out the social structure, geography, Jenmi system, transportion facilities, hospitals and treatment, education, temples, rituals and ceremonies, political activities, the emergence of communist party, the formation of communist cell, demonstration against Second World War, resistance against landlordism, local resistance movements like Vilakkuyith Samaram, Muliariyal Samaram, Rebellious with activities during famine, the formation of Aikya Nanaya Sangham, processions, list of prominent political and social leaders of Perumbala, the division of communist party and also a brief note on the contemporary period.

Local History of Pardijatam Kozhuval

Neeleshwaram Pothujana Vaynashala prepared the Local History of Pardijatam Kozhuval[5]. Even though it lacks detailed description of events, it provides some details of the region especially of the more recent period. They started with agricultural history and then goes on to art, culture, education, social and cultural aspects, clubs and its activities, commerce, temples and places of worship, and finally references about national movement and system of democracy. From this work we did not get any details on the remote past, they just tried to present the events only after 1920s and that too is not in detail.

Padav

Bala Kairali Grandhalayam of Polapoil, Kodakkad prepared their local history titled 'Padav'[6]. It is a detailed history of Kodakkad village, It covers social, political and economic history sf the region. It was prepared mainly on the basis of memory of elder people and a separate chapter titled Ormayil Ninnu is dedicated for the interview with notable personalities of the region. Almost all the aspects of Kodakkad

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village are included in the study like agriculture, culture and tradition, education, health, economic development, role of cooperative sector in the development of the village. A chapter is dedicated to mention the impact of Muslim occupation in the region in a place called Vellachal. It has also reference about the impact of Kudumbasree[7] in the life of the people.

Pradeshika Charitram of Udinur

Kairali Grandalayam of Tadiyan Kovval wrote Pradeshika Charitram of Udinur. The term Tadiyan Kovval means big ground. It also has reference about some of the place names, methods of agriculture, the seeds they used for cultivation and reference about Pananmar, local tribal group with their profession as singers like the *sutas* and *maghatas* of ancient India. In Kannada the team 'pana' means song those who sing song is known as panar. This pana community through their singing preserved the political history of the locality and passed it from generation to generation. This is also a kind of description and not evaluation. They tried to just present the facts and tried to explain how the village lives/moves. It also has a short description of the origin of Kairali Grandalaya.

Payama

Kairali Grandalayam of Tadiyan Kovval Prepared another Pradeshika Charitram titled 'payama'[8]. The term Payama is a locally used malayalam word for old. It includes brief discussions on place names, occupation, different phases and methods of agriculture, tools and manure used for agriculture. During emergency the members of the Grandalayam suffered a lot. The activities of the libraries were disturbed and its secretary K Kunhambu was arrested and they destroyed the pictures of Karl max and Engels. Most of the members of the Grandalayam are imprisioned during emergency. Onam celebration was prohibited and after continuous effort they get permission after agreeing to follow the specified conditions[9]. It also has reference regarding the introduction of electricity, radio, newspaper and telephone. Lighting the lamp with kerocine was a regular activity of the Grandasala members. During 1940s one or two newspapers are available and the members of the Grandalayam had to collect the paper. The villagers visited the library in the evening after their regular work. It

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mentions some of the festivals like *niraputhari*, *ethirp/erppu*. *Nattuvaidyam* and the name of local indigenous physicians are also mentioned.

Kanal: Pallikkareyude Pradeshika Charitram

Kanal: Pallikkareyude Pradeshika Charitram[10] is the local history of Pallikkara region published by People's Reading Room and Library, Pallikkara. It is a detailed history of the region, its geographical peculiarities, methods of agriculture, religious belief and practices, cultural contributions, development in education and sports, Indian national movement, development after the formation of Kerala State, woman empowerment, transportation facilities, occupation and improvements in health, and notable figures in politics and cultural sphere all are included in this book. For preparing its history, they elaborately collected data from various sources and they arranged the meetings of elder members of the village called Karanava kootam[11] and collected the details from their memory and for writing this book. They got the support of professional historians and it is indeed a true attempt of the people in a village to find out their history, their past.

The History of Kariyil: Deshavum Charitravum

Kariyil Pothujana Vayanashala prepared the History of Kariyil: Deshavum Charitravum[12]. It has description of agriculture, occupation, beedi Industry, history of education, the coming of Sidha Samaj, worship and belief, art and culture. It also has reference about transport, sports, food habit and important personalities of the region. And it is only just a description of their village.

Kizhakemuri: Nattu Charitram

Kizhakemuri Pothujana Vaynashala and Grandalayam Prepared their history as Kizhakemuri: Nattu Charitram[13]. It contains details of place name, geographical peculiarities, life and culture, development, history and important political leaders. They just presented the facts and never tried to analyze the events.

Cheruvathur Smritikal

Kunhirama Poduval Smaraka Grandalayam prepared the history of Cheruvathur with the title 'Cheruvathur Smritikal'[14]. It discusses in detail the history of Cheruvathur, its place name, geography, important temples and places of worship, *theyyam*[15], *thira*,

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education, cultural heritage, political leaders and social institutions. It contains references about *idu*, *chumadu thangi*, *azhcha chanda* or weekly market.

These local history writings are the result of a group of young dedicated members of the village library. To them it is not an easy task as they were not professional historians or academicians. Recently the local history writing process gathered momentum and people from all walk of life came forward to participate in this mission. The main source for writing these are the memory of the old generation. Some remnants of the past like megalithic monuments, remains of forts, temples and mosques, ritual practices, folklores, proverbs place names all are used for preparing the local history. These are prepared by the villagers themselves through discussions. It is the history of the people prepared by the people themselves.

Memories of old generation is the main source and there is no alternative for their memory. They recollect their memory and it is not an easy task. When we ask something to this old people they share even minute things. But when they talk with the same age group people, they became very talkative and they talk more in detail for which we arranged karanava koottam. This is the meeting of old people of almost the same age group that is between 60 to 70 then 70 to 80 and above 80. This categorization helps to get more details from their memory. When the old people come together for discussion they share a lot of things which is accidentally came to their memory and we as the students of history tried to record them. They knew each other and there was a feeling of unity among themselves and they share their memory. Each locality had its own geographical, social and cultural peculiarity. Some of the proverbs, stories, folk songs, place names, slogans are peculiar to that particular region. These are the symbols of their life experience.

As the neoliberal policies tried to convert all the region in the same model by consciously neglecting the importance of regional identity/peculiarities, for their exploitation process, this kind of local history writing has a resistance value/power. And it is the need of the hour. Cares should be taken in this matter. Libraries should provide adequate funding for preservation, conservation and restoration. We should develop A good practice of preserving and recording our native culture, tradition, knowledge system and everything particular to a particular locality. We should

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prepare a priority list of items of locally important materials. It is better to develop cooperative data collecting programs with the help of elder numbers of the society. Here they successfully used this method as *Karanava koottam*.

Endnotes

1 Vayanasalas are reading rooms or local libraries in Kerala
2 Wesley L. Boomgaarden, Preservation Planning for the Small Special Library, *Special Libraries,* 76 (Summer 1985): 204 -11
3 Othuk; History of Ravaneshwaram, C Achutha Menon Grandhalayam and Vayanasala,Ravaneshwar,p.18
4 Perumbalayude Innalekal, N E Balaram Vayanasala and Grandhalayam, Paravanadkam, Affiliation,No.14KGD/7286
5 Local history of Padinjatam Kozhuval, Poduja Poduja Yana Shala Vayana Shala and Grandhalayam, Nileshwaram, Reg No. 1961,pp.1-208
6 Padavu, Bala Kairali Grandhalayam, Pollapoil, Kodakkad,pp1-163
7 Kudumbasree mission is a poverty eradication and women empowerment programme implemented by the Kerala state. it means prosperity of the family
8 Payama, Pradeshika Charithram,Kairali Grendalayam, Tadian Kovval, Reg No.3912.pp.1-50
9 Ibid.p.21
10 Kanal: Pallikkarayude Pradesika Charitram, People's Reading Room and Library, Palikkara, Vol.1 pp 94-97
11 Karanavar Kottam Is the meeting of elder numbers of a village to recollect and share their memory for writing local history
12 Kariyil; Desavum Charitravum, Kariyil, Podujana Vayanasala, Reg. No.HDG.2203
13 Kizhakkemuri Nattu Charithram, Kizhakkemuri Podujana Vayanasala and Grandhalayam Reg. No. 5072
14 Cheruvathur Smrutigal, Kunirama poduval Smaraka Grandhalayam, Cheruvattur, Reg. No.3757
15 Theyyam is a kind of ritual art performance in North Malabar. This art form was performed by the lower caste people of the region. While performing it, they believed that they had the blessings of the god or they turned themselves as God in that particular moment and gives blessings to the people.

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