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The 2024 Wayanad Landslide: People's Experiences and Resilience from July to November 2024

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The Wayanad District of Kerala state suffered heavily from the effects of the devastating landslides that caused to the loss of more than 400 lives. The multiple landslides which happened on the early hours of July 30, 2024 triggered by torrential rains. Between 2 and 6 AM multiple landslides occurred in the villages of Mundakai, Chooralmala, Attamala and Noolpuzha in the South Eastern part of Wayanad District. The devastation was most severe in Mundakai and Chooralmala where landslide buried entire neighbourhood under mud and debris. This paper attempts to analyse the people's experiences on resilience and survival after the havoc since the Wayanad district was one of the backward districts in India and the affected people were very poor, mostly belonged to farmers and plantation workers.. Some time when people encounter difficult situations such as epidemics and natural calamities there forms a collective consciousness which bring people together. But these feelings are temporary and lasts only for a short period of time, usually in the initial stages of the disaster. This paper attempts to analyse all the experiences of the people during the first four months after the land slide.

Some changes happened in the landscape of Wayanad during last ten decades. In 1950s Wayanad had a forest area of 85percent, by 2018, 62percent of it was lost. Simultaneously plantation area has increased widely during the period between1950-2018[1]. A recent study conducted by Kerala Sastra Sahitya Parishad found that only 30 percent of the district's 2132 square kilometre can be useful for safe dwelling and agricultural activities[2]. The district has a population of nearly eight lakhs and majority of them were very poor. The Mundakkai and Chooralmala were plantation areas and populated place where developed a township for facilitating the plantation. About 59 percent of the total landslides in Kerala had occurred in plantation areas[3].Moreover,

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largescale human intervention was happened in this area in the name of tourism. In 2023, the then Divisional Forest Officer reportedly informed the Kerala Government that at least 2500 tourists engaged in off-road tours, provoking the possibility of landslides[4]. The Construction of multistorey buildings exert great pressure on land that accelerated calamities. "At least 30 resorts were functioning in the Thollayiram kandi forest region from where the aerial distance to landslide hit Chooralmala-Mundakai region was hardly one kilometres"[5].

Scientists observed that very heavy rainfall due to environmental changes was the reason to the recent land slide in Wayanad[6]. In a study on rainfall of Wayanad in 2018, the National Centre for Earth Studies said that 50-250 mm rainfall within 40 hours may lead to land slide[7]. During the days of the recent landslide, Wayanad had gained heavy rainfall and Mundakai and Chooralmala gained 570 millimetre rain within the last 48 hours of the landslide. People said that on July 29, they experienced an alarming and heavy rain fall and cloudy and darkness environment and felt a dreadful misfortune waiting for them[8].

During the 2018 floods too, Wayanad had witnessed a staggering 1132 small and medium landslides. There were two massive landslides in the following year. In these 86 percent of the victims were tribals and plantation workers[9]. The loss and impacts of the present land slide never assessed or studied yet completely. As per the report on August 14, 2024 more than 400 people died during this devastating landslide. As per the report of Kerala Government to the High Court of Kerala that Total 231 number of bodies were recovered, among them 151 from Meppadi and 80 from Nilambur. Additionally the total 212 body parts have been recovered, 39 and 172 from Meppadi and Nilambur respectively[10]. 128 individuals remain unaccounted for[11]. More than 200 bodies were recovered from the Chaliyar river in the low lying areas of Pothukallu in the nearby Malppuram District. As per government report to High Court an estimated rupees 1200 crores loss occurred by this devastating land slide. 1555 houses had been rendered uninhabitable and more than 7000 people who lost their land, house and livelihood took shelter into the rehabilitation camps and hereafter turned their position as 'climate refugees'.

Table 1.

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Details showing the loss due to Land slide[12]

Sl NO	Details of Loss	Number/Acre/area
1	Number of Body recovered	231
2	Number of Body Parts recovered	212
3	Individuals remain Unaccounted	128
4	Number of Bridges collapsed	3
5	Collapsed or damaged building belonged to local government institutions	136
6	Number of Shops destroyed	209
7	Number of Schools collapsed	02
8	Number of other structures collapsed	100
9	Damaged roads	15KM
10	Electricity cables	124 kilometers
11	Transformers	2
12	Cattles	226 numbers
13	Number of houses	1043

In order to analyse the nature and character of the relief and rehabilitation programme, for our understanding the relief programme can be divided into two stages., (1) Rescue operations and immediate relief programmes (2) Rehabilitation programmes.

During the first stage, the rescue operation was very severe because of the debris, rocks and other materials accumulated over the areas with 32meter height. Relief camps were opened immediately and Government and other organizations worked together for the rescue operations. More than 50 numbers of relief camps were opened in different parts of Wayand and about 8000 people were accommodated there. 16 relief camps were opened in Meppady Grama *Panjayath* alone and more than 2500 people from 723 families were accommodated in these relief camps. People from different walks of life and many NGOS and other organizations contributed on different ways. People's sympathy towards the victims and the collective consciousness of resilience prompted the people to work together for the relief programmes. The victims of this landslide will severely suffer once the altruistic mentality of people get ends, so a permanent rehabilitation programme is the only a way out to this problem. Large numbers of promises were given in the form of land, house, educational facilities, treatment and job assured to the survivors. Following table shows the details of land promised by people, institutions and other organizations

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Table2.

Details of Houses Promised by People, Institutions and Organizations[13]

Sl No	Details of people/institution/ organisations	Number of houses
1	Owners of Reporter T V	300
2	National Service Scheme	150
3	Government of Karnataka	100
4	Congress Party	100
5	YouthCongress	30
6	DYFI	25
7	World Malayali Council	14
8	Kanthapuram Usthad	100
9	Muslim League	100
10	Gokulam Group	25
11	Tamilnadu Merchant Association, Nilagiri District	40
12	PNC Menon	50
13	Orthodox Church	50
14	Marthoma Church	25
15	Catholic Church	100
16	Shobha City	25
17	KPSTA	10

The Government of Kerala declared the Wayand Landslide Relief Fund for the victims of the landslide. A person with 60 percentage above disability and those who lost eyes, legs and hand got Rs 75000, between 40 – 60 percent disabled got 50000 from the Chief Ministers Relief Fund. Family of a dead or his close relative got 6 lakhs rupees as compensation. They were also provided rupees 2 lakhs from the Central Government's fund. Those who have shifted to rented houses or stayed with relatives' family were got 6000 rupees as rent. Those who lost their original certificate and documents due to flood will get its Duplicate from the facilities arranged by the Government for those purposes[14]. Two adult members within a family had got rupees 300 each on daily basis as relief. Every family in the relief camp got rupees 10000 as an immediate financial support.

The second stage, The Rehabilitation, which requires more money and resources. Revive Wayand Post Rehabilitation Project started at the initiatives of Advocate T Siddique, MLA of Kalpetta, for the welfare and rehabilitation of the survivors of Wayand land slide of 2024. Many agencies and organizations extended their support to the victims of landslide through contributing this project. For instance, Malabar Group promised rupees 3 crores for the education and welfare of the victims[15].

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Pinarayi Vijayan, the Chief Minister of Kerala announced the Wayand Rehabilitation Scheme on 29th August 2024. As per this Scheme, the rehabilitation can be implemented through two stages. During the first stage, the rehabilitation should be done to those persons who had lost land and house. Rehabilitation should be provided to the person or family whose places were not suitable to live. The Collector of Wayanad was entrusted the task of preparing the draft list of beneficiaries and final list should be prepared by the Revenue Department by considering the issues and problems of the victims. The Chief Minister's declaration also promised Rupees 10 lakhs and 5 lakhs to the children who had lost parents and lost one parent respectively[16].

As a part of the rehabilitation programme, a model Township was declared and for that purpose, 65.41 hectares of Nedumbala Estate of Meppady Panjayath and 78.73 hectares of Elstone Estate of Kallpetta Municipality should be taken over by the Government as per the Disaster Management Act of 2005 which can help the Government to take possession of the land without any delay. The proposed plan prepared by the KIFCON Consultancy under Kerala Infrastructure Investment Fund Board (KIIFB) consisted of 500 houses, hospitals, schools, worshiping places, amusement facilities, playgrounds, markets and roads[17]. The proposed township for rehabilitation fell in troubles and under judicial consideration. High court of Kerala by considering the petitions of the owners of both estate, Nedumbala and Elstone, prevented its acquisition for township by the Government until this petition is settled. Secondly, there were some practical problems such as the proposed houses have common pattern without considering beneficiary's family size, this was pointed out by the victims of the landslide[18]. Victims are also feared about the delay of rehabilitation and uncertainty of their future caused majority of them to relocate far away from Puthoormala and Mundakkai in rented houses.

Their anxiety further increased by considering their future on the sources of fund in the context of the existing confusion between State Government and Central Government on the issue of Relief Fund[19]. The Government of Kerala calculated as rupees 2200 crores needs for the reconstruction of the landslide affected areas of 2024[20]. The Central Government argued that it granted rupees 388 crores to Kerala

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as the Central Government's share for State Disaster Relief Fund for the financial year of 2024-25. The High court of Kerala registered a case voluntarily by considering the pathetic conditions of people of Chooralmala and Mundakkai. The special High Court Bench consisted of Justice A.K Sankaran Nambiar and V.M Syamkumar were entrusted to hear the cases related the landslide of Wayand. This High Court Bench directed that it was not feasible to create a situation which compel the people to depend and meet the authorities frequently to settle their rehabilitation issues. By considering the Central Government's share for relief fund to Kerala, the amicus curiae reported to the High court that the neighbouring States of Karnataka and Tamilnadu had got financial support on similar cases however the Kerala State didn't get such financial support on this tragedy [21]. These issues were still under the considerations of the Central Government of India.

It was true that during the initial stages the victims got support from the different parts of the society and had some positive experiences. Now four months left after the landslide the reality of the resilience were very tough. The first and the most important reason to such experience was the lack of coordination and less practicability of the existing relief and rehabilitation programmes[22]. Ambili, one of the victims of Mundakkai-Chooralmala landslide revealed that there was some uncertainty regarding the list of beneficiaries of the rehabilitation programmes and the fund and other support went to the unreserved due to many reasons[23]. It was true that many people and organisations were willing to extend their support to the victims but they were misled by the persons whom they contacted. Sometimes the 'privileged' among the victims gained more financial and other helps than the deserved. Similar opinion was made by Fr. Jibin Vattukulathil, the vicar of St. Sebastian's Church Chooralmala. He said that, the hospitalized people had failed to contact the outsiders because they were in hospital, but those people who were escaped from injury got an opportunity to show their loss and availed help from various means.[24]

There were different controversies that crippled the smooth working of rehabilitation programmes. The publication of the draft list of the beneficiaries itself created confusion and criticisms. As per the reports there were 983 families were living in

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rented houses due to the loss of their houses or have houses which are unable to occupy after the land slide. But, 396 number of families of whom 142 from Mundakkai, 141 from Chooralmala and 113 from Attamala were only included in the draft list[25]. The Meppadi Grama Panjayath and Revenue Department blamed each other in the anomaly of the draft list. Later Meppady Grama Panjayath prepared a list of 560 beneficiaries and waiting for getting the approval of the Wayand District Collector[26].

It was found that during the initial stages of rescue and relief programmes the experiences of the victims of landslide were very hopeful because of the support of state, NGOs and other citizens. The primary objective of the stage was to protect the life of the affected people. The nature and character of the second stage was more complex, and this stage actually determines the future of the victims of land slide. In spite of some hopeful experiences on the early rescue and relief operations, second stage provided some bitter experiences to the survivors. These situations even invited the judiciary to interfere in the landslide issues. The landslide further put forwards more insights into the alarming issues of climate change and a clear cut picture of climate refugees in future.

ENDNOTES

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