

Confluence of Historical Memories: Interrogating Native Memories on Idukki

Dr. Sebastian Joseph
Assistant Professor Research Guide
Post Graduate Dept & Research Centre in History
UC College, Aluva-2

Abstract

In locating mindset of people coming within a hilly region of Idukki in the Kerala state, life narratives form a valid genre in reconstructing history. Attitudes of people belonging to different social categories, the affluent peasant migrant, the common peasant migrant and the adivasis mutually reinforce certain emotions and concerns and at the same time evokes memoirs that are self contained in their own realms of the social sphere. A researcher in the oral history of the region comes across narratives that contain these commonalities and differences which make textual analysis of the narratives vital for reconstructing histories of people in specific social ecologies of living. Three narratives from the above said classes are taken in this paper for a critical textual analysis that poignantly reveal the human stories missed in archival records of the region.

Key Words - Memory, Oral testimony, Migrant, Mindset

“All history depends ultimately upon its social purpose”¹

Memories are vital sources of information about the events, movements and processes of the past. Most often only ‘dominant memory’ finds its place in the columns of history and ‘marginalized memories’ are often neglected as areas of the wild and the rude. We might use oral testimony alongside other sources to recover neglected or silenced accounts of Past experience, and as a way of challenging dominant histories which underpin repressive attitudes and policy.² People in the urban and rural spaces like the non-industrial urban poor, the agricultural worker, the poor peasant and the tribal have a history to convey, but their histories are marginalized as they themselves are marginalized in the society. In this context, I would posit the argument that recording their testimonies that are the pronounced words from the archives of their memories empower those historyless people with a historical consciousness and at the same time find for them a place in the domains of historiography. This process finally democratizes the practice of history and produce what are called histories or alternate versions of the past. More than that, memory studies help methodologically work about history of mentalities, history of everyday life and popular culture. What is attempted here is the hermeneutical analysis of a minute part of an oral historical interview which I had with a Panchan Sooryan, a tribal, Thaadi Achen, a rich peasant and Kunjettan, an ordinary peasant which revealed certain methodological as well as theoretical insights into the practice of making history in the context of Kerala historiography.

History writing is a contest of memories, and certain memories achieve centrality and luxuriate grandly in various forms of historical evidences like the official documents of the governments, institutional documents like that of the church or the temple and reminiscences left over by the elite classes. To a far greater extent, the memories of the common people, especially the marginalized are neglected by the professional historian who consider written documents as something sacrosanct and neglect spoken words of the people as fictitious accounts of the past. Memories of the past are, like all common sense forms, strangely composite constructions, resembling a kind of geology, the selective sedimentation of the past traces.³ From the individual memories the historian is able to go to the collective memory or popular memory, where the process of historical reconstruction transcends into wider areas. Historiography of Kerala needs such a break, a real departure from the dominant way of history writing. The present paper attempts to explore certain areas in this direction, through a hermeneutical analysis of oral testimonies of three different individuals who have much to say about their *histories*.

Idukki, the landlocked district of Kerala came into existence on 26th of January 1972. Its geographical area is 5019 sq km, which is about 13% of the total area of the state. Most part of the district is covered with forests; tropical evergreen, semi ever green and moist deciduous. Topographically divided into two divisions, the high ranges and the low, the district is famous for plantation industries and tourist places. It is having the second highest proportion of tribal population in Kerala state. Mannans, Muthuvans, Pulayans, Uralys, Mali Arayans, Malavedans, Mala Pandaram and Ulladans are the tribal groups in the district. Mannans form the subject of study in this paper. Mannans are a hill tribe of Travancore and are said to be the descendants of the King of Madurai whom they accompanied to Neryamangalam.⁴ The terrain they occupy is the hilly tracts of the state and traditionally they were hunter-gatherers and engaged in shifting cultivation. At present they are the agricultural workers in the area, who work in the farms of the peasant migrants. They are the tribal community in Kerala with a king and a Council of Ministers appointed by the King.

It is in this context that the personal testimony of Panchan Sooryan, aged 87, a Mannan living in Idukki, the landlocked district of Kerala is placed for understanding the inherent logic encapsulated in the narration. Sooryan's ancestors migrated into Kerala from the Tamil country owing to some political conflicts and tensions and became the subjects of the Poonjar Rajah, a vassal of the Rajah of Travancore. Sooryan's testimonies rightly started with a detailed description of the floristic and faunistic traditions of the region, the climax vegetation system under which his community happily lived. Fresh was in the memory of Sooryan, the timber trade that had flourished in those days and especially he referred about Ankoor Rawther, a big timber merchant from the Tamil country who came to extract huge teak trees from the forests. Very big teak rafts were transported into the Tamil country in 'Pothu Vandies' (big carts pulled by draught animals) after laying to waste large quantity of timber in the forests. Towards the end Sooryan said,

"I was the *Kaani* (the guide) for Ankoor Rawther in the deep forests. I showed him the best teak trees in the forests, because we people know the nook and corner of the forests (looks to the greeneries out side and continues)...I got some *chikkili* (little money) from him. (Laughs).⁵

In the year 1954, the Pattom Thanu Pillai government of Travancore-Cochin State sponsored peasants to migrate to Idukki, with a view to populating the region with Malayalam speaking people. The peasants who were hard pressed with the effects of world war and the resultant food shortage migrated in large groups to the forested regions in the district. Pertaining to the migration Sooryan said

"Mr. Jacob, the forest officer told me that peasant migrants are coming from the plains and that within a short span of time the entire land would go to them. He told me this because I used to help his department in many works, including helping them in many departmental activities. I replied him that I am ready to help them also. I did not corner any piece of land. Why should I make fences inside the forests? I helped the peasants also in all agrarian activities. I helped them in locating the best suitable land for cultivation. I got '*muthira*' from them and also some money. They were good people. It's me who showed all good lands to Thaadi Achen"⁶

The testimony continued interestingly and Sooryan started speaking about the political, social and cultural aspects of his community. "We are the only tribals in Kerala with a monarch who lives in a palace built with contributions from us. It costed about eight lakh rupees. I have very good relation with our king"⁷ Commenting on certain peculiar traditions in their social life he said, "Before marriage our girls have to live in the would be's house for some period. She has to win over the hearts of the members of that family. In nights she stayed with her would be mother-in-law. Do you have any custom in your community? (Laughs)."⁸

"I was the *Kaani* (the guide) for Ankoor Rawther in the deep forests". "It's me who showed all good lands to Thaadi Achen." "Why should I make fences inside the forests? I helped the peasants also in all agrarian activities. I helped them in locating the best suitable land for cultivation." A hermeneutical analysis of the testimony reveals the attitude of Sooryan towards the new comers to his land. While on the one side we will be able to understand the ways and methods in which this poor man was exploited by the timber merchant, the forest officials and the peasant migrants and on the other side the self reflexivity of the man who was part of a collectivity, the Mannan community, who whole heartedly welcomed the new entrants without understanding the perils of marginalisation. In this way the individual remembrance or memory of Sooryan becomes a part of the wider context or the collective memory (his community memory).

These oral evidences from the subaltern can be tested against the testimonies given by a rich peasant and a middle class peasant who were there in the first wave of migration to Idukki. P.M John called by the people of Thopramkudy in Idukki as, Thaadi Achen (one with a long beard) is one among the earliest migrant to Idukki and Abraham Joseph, popularly called Kunjettan too belonged the first generation of migration. Achen migrated to Idukki in search of more land and further his economic assets, whereas Kunjettan was forced to leave his land in the low lands because of severe economic hardships. Testimonies from these peasant migrants are recalled here to understand the contextual variations in the art of memorizing peoples' past. Achen while reflecting on his first entry into the forested region said;

*"I entered the forests and moved ahead after clearing elephants (aanakale vaknju mattikondanu njan vanathiloode mupilekku kayariyathu). All the way, I was dreaming about the forested lands being transformed into fields. I got help from the Mannans and I have to pay them only muthira, their most favorite food..... I shot a wild buffalo, the size of which was equal to an elephant and about twenty five Mannans stood on the dead..... I have fought for getting the pattayam for the land from the government and went to the Thiruvananthapuram several times to meet ministers and other politicians. I had good rapport with the politicians and we were successful in getting the pattayam.... I have donated land for the church and the social service centre."*⁹

On another plane, the testimonies of Kunjettan are also vital sources for the reconstruction of the history of Idukki. Kunjettan opened the memory bank with these words,

*"Severe economic problems and poverty in the keezhmalainadu (Thodupuzha and adjoining places) forced me to join a band of young men venturing into the forests in search of land for cultivation. I have left my wife (whom I married a few months ago) and the dear family members in great pain.... It was indeed a life risking situation inside the wilderness, but circumstances at home were so compelling, that we decided to fight the nature..... It was too cold inside the forests even during the noon and I was seeing for the first time such huge trees growing high into the skies and which were the abodes of a number of birds, monkeys and giant squirrels..... These forests were the habitat of wild elephants and we moved inches by inches with a throbbing heart expecting a wild elephant.... We also started encroaching forests and fixed our boundaries and if we were to take land from the already encroached areas we were to pay five rupees for an acre. Five rupees was a big amount in those times (laughs... and looks at me) We were really happy to see the harvest in the forested lands were we cultivated and our sorrows and sufferings were then transformed into joy and happiness. I found paddy and ginger growing in all its luxury and abundance and decided to extend cultivation..... Slowly we started pepper cultivation.... I saw with certain degree of surprise the transformation of the forested landscapes into cultivated fields..... More than the wild animals we feared the Vanarajakkanmar (forest officials) whom we paid regular Kappam (bribe).... I was brutally assaulted along with other members of the Malanadu Karshaka Union by the police during the Churuli-Keerithodu anti-eviction struggle..... Now when I look back at this age, I feel pained to see the ecological destruction.... And the days when we had abundant water and rain have become part of history and the peasant of Idukki faces crisis in all its aspects."*¹⁰

The role of memory, both individual and collective is not merely cognitive; it is also normative. That is memory does not simply transmit information from the past to the present; it also transmits responsibilities¹¹. On the face of it, the individual and the cultural phenomena are different kinds of memory. The former is grounded on experience and traces; the later on objects and practices. Individual memories often and perhaps always have a social component. Sooryan's memories in this respect are part of his community's collective memory and therefore important historical evidence. Individual interviewees select and splice their memories from disorganized clusters of words, images and feelings, with unconscious traces, which are mediated through language and culture to frame a sense of self.¹² It gives us information about illiterate people or social groups whose history is either missing or distorted.¹³ There is deeper structure which which organize the seemingly unorganized flow of words. If read properly, they do reveal to us hidden levels of discourse. The facility to produce memories and the human instinct to wish to recall events make sense only if there are people to whom one can relate one's memories and who, in turn, can interpret them within the same referential system.¹⁴

The question that confronts in the present context is the interchangeability of the domains of individual and collective memories. This is a debated problem among many sociologists, anthropologists and historians and a consensus has not reached so far; memory studies are on the way of finding out its methodologies and theoretical directions. Despite such developments, Memory studies have become a central concept in the humanities and social sciences. History itself should be more appropriately defined as a particular type of cultural memory.¹⁵ Every individual memory is shaped in a particular social milieu. Even on

a neurological level, our ability to store, recall and reconfigure verbal and non verbal experiences and informations cannot be separated from patterns of perception which we have learned from our immediate and wider social environments.¹⁶The very language and narrative patterns that we use to express our memories, even autobiographical memories, are inseparable from social standards of plausibility and authenticity that they embody.¹⁷In this sense there is no such thing as individual memory.¹⁸

While the relationship between memory research and history may be equivocal, a quest shared by memory research and oral history is to understand how experience is lived and remembered-and how that remembering contributes to the formation of senses of self, or of identity, which in turn give shape to the broader contours of influential narratives of events, of nations and so on.¹⁹More broadly, what is at stake in memory studies is the elaboration of the relationship between lived experience and the broader field of history, understood here as something more than the conglomeration of individual past experience, and including within its purview questions of broad social forces and power relations that exceed those of relationship between individuals.²⁰ The memories shared by the three individuals are to be read against the broad contextual background of the migration process and the resultant social change. As they share their experiences in the forested land, on some planes they share identical concerns. No land record or any other governmental record could speak about the emotional character of the migration process and it is here the testimonies serve a great purpose for the historian. The mindset of the people during the active phase of migration and the successive stages can be gleaned through the emotionalized history they transmit. This is the strength of oral history and as this history comes out from the memorization process of the informant, there are areas where the informant himself makes a sense of the past.

The mindset and ambition of the pioneering migrant peasant, Achen reveals the nature of the type of people who want to dominate the nature. All through his narration, we notice the elements of heroism, one which was the moving spirit of such people who went in search of more lands, like the Californian gold rush, for expanding the domains of their economic structure. An effort in putting *his role* into the history of the region, especially being a donor for the Church and also as one who played a dominant role in the struggles for getting *pattayam* from the government is seen in his testimony. Achen being an elite is not left out in the documented history, though not official, because he is part of the group who dominated the region. This aspect is revealed through his narrations. It is not argued that Achen's spoken words are not relevant in the local historiographical discourse, but to show that written documents are representative of the dominant memory group of even a locality.

The testimonies from the memory data bank of the peasant migrant, Kunjettan reflects the mindset of the majority in the region. The economic reasons behind the migration and the initial hardships in the first phase of the process the struggles for the *Pattayam* are highlighted in his life history review, which is again a celebrated memorial practice of the common peasant migrants. His testimony that the migration and extension of cultivation in the forested lands led to ecological imbalance and seriously affected the fertility and water sources of the region is an explanation in the presentist stand point. Still vibrant in his memories are his impressions about the biological diversity of the region. Such recalls, like his, are important sources of information for the ecological historian. The role played by people like him in the struggle for *pattayam* and the brutalities committed by the police, which are not part of the dominant history is well placed in his testimonies. A migration story can be very personal account and at the same time an incarnation of the peopling of an era, the exigencies of pioneering and the aspirations of all who risk relocating to find a better life²¹. So the individual testimony contain references to the larger group and articulate a shared reality.

The testimonies from Sooryan are vital for a reconstruction of the history of the region and it very well reveals the perspective of the individual, which is part of shared memories of his own community. We get information about the timber trade, the coming of the peasant migrants and some traditions of the tribal community from it. More than that, the mindset of the poor tribal, finds reflected in the spoken words. The fact that he showed good teak trees to the timber merchant, good land to the peasant migrants and helped the forest department are indicative of the 'innocent', 'unambitious' (in the sense that he was happy with what he had) nature of the poor man. Both the peasant and the merchant was ambitious to tap the natural resources and are material oriented. Sooryan was not and he served both, as a 'captive', never understanding his 'captive'. He witnessed in silence the landscape changes, the transformation of his forests where his gods resided in to golden fields of cardamom, rubber and pepper, which altered the relationship he had with nature prior to the coming of the peasant migrants. In the course, Sooryan was marginalized and his histories too.

In documenting the history of the region, the historian usually rely much on the government reports, D.O Correspondences, Forest Records, and other important land records. These documents, as they were created by the governments in power are devoid of any reference about the men and women and their plight in the high lands. In a sense these records are constructed from the memory of those people who wielded power or by other agents appointed by them. They are part of the dominant memory. So long as the alternate memories are neglected, history will again remain like an elitist construction and that the memories of the people will die with them. Recording the evidences of the people is a way of democratizing the domain of historiography and empowering the historyless people belonging to different social classes.

The professional historians, including the one's in Kerala, exhibit a sense of contempt towards these testimonies, as they still hold the positivist logic of historical reconstruction. Why this attitude continues in India and a more literate state like Kerala is a matter for serious debate. When one thinks of the democratic state structure under which we live, it is a mystery that oral historical studies are very much neglected. There are many areas in Kerala history, where the historian can use oral testimonies for research. This is crucial in shedding light on many dark areas and liberating many histories. The attitude of clinging to written sources and material remnants restrict historicisation of people's history to a far greater extent. The life history reviews or memories of Sooryan, Achen and Kunjettan have much to contribute for the historical research world. As original sources and also as corroborative evidences, these testimonies are to strengthen the practices in Kerala historiography. So called historical evidences for the Kerala historian lies not only in the conventional repositories and some sites, but also in the memory archives of the people, where they document their life experiences. For an imaginative historian, archives is at the next door step.

ENDNOTES

¹ Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past: Oral History* 1978, New York, P.1

² Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson(ed), *The Oral History Reader*, 1998, London, P.21

³ Popular Memory Group, *Popular memory: Theory, Politics and Method* in Perks and Thomson(ed), op.cit, P.78.

⁴ Edgar, Thurston, *Castes and Tribes of Southern India*, Vol.V, 1909, Madras, PP86-103

⁵ Personal Interview, Panchan Sooryan, 19/9/2009

⁶ Personal Interview, Panchan Sooryan, 20/9/2009. Note-The name Thaadi Achen about him Sooryan was referring is a rich migrant peasant in the area who owns about one hundred acres of land in the Thoprakudy, Daivamedu and Vaathikudy regions. I have interviewed him also, and his and another peasant migrant's testimonies are used in the paper are to indicate certain differing perspectives, which emerge from their testimonies.

⁷ Personal Interview, Panchan Sooryan, 20/9/2009

⁸ Ibid

⁹ These are excerpts from my interview with Thaadi Achen during the months of July, August and September, 2007. Achen was aged 92 at that point of time, but recalled things from the past with accuracy and precision due to a very sharp memory.

¹⁰ These are excerpts from my interviews with Kunjettan who was 71 when I interviewed him in 2007 and as I found the testimonies very deeper and sharp, continued my interaction with him in the subsequent years upto his death on 20th of October, 2011. He is the author of a book in Malayalam, *Porattom: Kudiyetta Smaranakal*, published in the year 2009. I have noted the perspective of a local historian in him, who used to look at the past from the present. He had migrated to Idukki in 1959 and actively involved in the public life of the region.

¹¹ Ross Poole, 'Memory, History and the claims of the Past', *Memory Studies*, 1:149, <http://mss.sagepub.com/content/1/2/149>

¹² Sean Field, 'Beyond Healing: trauma, Oral History and Regeneration', *Oral History*, No.34, No.1, Spring, 2006, p.34

¹³ Alessandro Portelli, *Oral History Reader*, op.cit, p.64

¹⁴ Elisabeth van Houts, *Memory and Gender in Medieval Europe 900-1200*, London, 1999, p.6

¹⁵ Wuf Kansteiner, *Finding Meaning in Memory: A Methodological Critique of Collective Memory Studies*, *History and Theory*, Vol41, No.2, May 2002, P.184

¹⁶ Ibid.185

¹⁷ Ibid

¹⁸ Michael Schudson, 'Dynamics of Distortion in collective Memory', in Daniel Schacter(ed), *Memory Distortion: How Minds, Brains and Societies Reconstruct the Past*, Cambridge, 1995, P.346

¹⁹ Susannah Radstone, *Reconceiving Binaries: the Limits of Memory*, *History Workshop Journal*, Issue59, 2005, P.139

²⁰ Ibid

²¹ Samuel Scharger, *What is social in Oral history?*, *International Journal of Oral History*, 4, No.2, June, 1983, p.80

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Field, Sean, 2006. Beyond Healing:trauma,Oral History and Regeneration. Oral History. No.34. No. 1. Spring: 44-56
- Kansteiner, Wuf, 2002. Finding Meaning in Memory: A Methodological Critique of Collective Memory Studies. History and Theory. Vol41. No.2. May Perks. The Oral History Reader: 485-496
- Personal Interview, Panchan Sooryan, Kani, Vathykkudi, Idukki, Kerala on 19/9/2009
- Personal Interview,Panchan Sooryan, Kani, Vathykkudi, Idukki, Kerala on 20/9/2009
- Poole, Ross, Memory. History and the claims of the Past. Memory Studies. 1:149. <http://mss.sagepub.com>.accessed 1/2/149
- Radstone, Susannah, 2005. Reconceiving Binaries: the Limits of Memory. History Workshop Journal. Issue. 59.
- Scharger, Samuel, 1983. What is social in Oral history?,International Journal of Oral History, 4, No.2, June: 855-966.
- Schudson, Michael, 1995. Dynamics of Distortion in collective Memory. [Memory Distortion: How Minds, Brains and Societies Reconstruct the Past] London, Cambridge.
- Thompson, Paul, 1978. The Voice of the Past: Oral History. New York
- Thurston, Edgar, 1909. Castes and Tribes of Southern India Vol. V. Madras
- Van Houts, Elisabeth, 1999. Memory and Gender in Medieval Europe 900-1200. London.

