



Periyar River and the Cultural Geography of Kalady – Aluva Regions in Kerala

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Abstract: Rivers are integral to shaping the cultural geography of regions, acting as both natural and cultural entities that influence and are influenced by human experiences. This study examines the impact of the Periyar River on the cultural geography of the Kalady – Aluva region in Kerala. The cultural landscape of Kalady has been molded not only by the presence of the Periyar but also by the numerous spiritual centers located within this river basin. The river ghats of Kalady are deeply intertwined with the local culture, traditions, and beliefs. Aluva, an urban river basin known for the expansive sandy stretch called Aluva Manappuram, serves as a cultural landmark. The religious and spiritual centers, ghats, and river basin areas are vital for facilitating socio-cultural gatherings. These cultural hubs within the river basin highlight the significant role the river plays in shaping the region's cultural landscape.

Index Terms: Cultural Geography, Periyar River, Spiritual Landscape, Cultural Landscape

Cultural geography examines the intricate relationship between culture and place, exploring how culture—encompassing beliefs, practices, norms, values, and material traits—both influences and is influenced by geographical spaces. This subfield of human geography investigates the dynamic interaction between human culture and the environment, assessing how cultural practices shape and are shaped by spatial contexts. Carl O. Sauer, a pioneering scholar in cultural geography, posited that humans actively shape their landscapes through cultural practices, transforming natural landscapes into cultural ones. He famously stated, “the cultural landscape is fashioned from a natural landscape by a cultural group. Culture is the agent, the natural area is the medium, the cultural landscape is the result.” Thus, cultural geography focuses on how spaces, places, and landscapes are influenced by and in turn influence cultural processes.

Rivers have historically played a crucial role in shaping the cultural geography of regions. Beyond being mere physical features, rivers act as cultural agents impacting settlement patterns, religious practices, economic activities, and symbolic meanings within societies. Fernand Braudel noted the profound impact of geography, including rivers, on history, illustrating their significance as cultural spaces. Cultural geography provides insights into how humans assign meanings to rivers and how these waterways, in turn, shape human cultures. In this context, this study aims to evaluate the role of the Periyar River in molding the cultural geography of the Kalady – Aluva region in Kerala.

The Periyar River, the longest river in Kerala, originates from the Sivagiri peaks of Sundaramala in Tamil Nadu and flows into the Arabian Sea at Cochin, Kerala. Spanning approximately 300 kilometers, with 244 kilometers traversing Kerala, its catchment area covers 5,396 square kilometers, predominantly within Kerala. Situated between latitudes 9°15' N to 10°20' N and longitudes 76°10' E to 77°30' E, the river has several key tributaries, including Muthirapuzha, Mullayar, and Chalakudy River, among others. The Periyar Basin is situated in the Idukki and Ernakulam districts, with this study concentrating on the regions of Kalady and Aluva in Ernakulam district, areas deeply intertwined with the river's cultural landscape.

Periyar and the Spiritual Landscape of Kalady

Kalady, a town in the Ernakulam district on the banks of the Periyar River, is renowned as the birthplace of Sri Adi Shankara, the eminent Hindu philosopher who unified the teachings of Advaita Vedanta. This philosophy emphasizes the non-duality and unity of the individual soul with the ultimate reality, Brahman. Shankara's teachings continue to significantly impact Hindu spiritual thought and practices. Consequently, the cultural geography of Kalady has been shaped by both the Periyar River and the numerous spiritual centers established to disseminate Shankaracharya's doctrines.

Kalady is a significant pilgrimage site, home to several temples and ashrams. The Sringeri Math of Kalady is a notable site on the northern bank of the Periyar, housing two major shrines—one dedicated to Sri Shankaracharya and the other to Goddess Saradamba, the principal deity of Sringeri. The Sri Adi Shankara Janma Bhumi Kshetram, or birthplace temple of Sri Shankara, is a key pilgrimage attraction featuring exquisite architecture and tranquil surroundings, drawing numerous devotees and scholars of Advaita Vedanta. The Kalady Sree Krishna Temple, located to the west of the Sringeri Math, venerates Lord Krishna, the family deity of Jagadguru. It is believed that Shankara, in his childhood, diverted the Periyar River to flow closer to his home for his ailing mother. The submerged ancient shrine of Sri Krishna was subsequently replaced by a new temple. The area, once called Sasalam, was renamed "Kalady," meaning "footprint" in Malayalam/Tamil, attributed to Shankara's miraculous act. This site, including the Sringeri Shrine built a century ago, remains a focal point of spiritual devotion.

The Aryadevi Samadhi Mandapam, dedicated to Shankara's mother, Aryamba, is another crucial structure, maintained with daily lamp offerings. Evening prayers to Ganapati are performed here, and worship activities are primarily conducted by Tamil or Kannada Smartha Brahmins. The temples celebrate Navarathri with a ten-day festival, including a chariot procession and classical music concerts. Vedic scholars convene here for discourse and debate during Sankara Jayanthi, celebrating Shankara's birth anniversary. Sri Adi Sankara Keerthi Sthambam, an eight-story memorial tower, offers insights into Shankara's life through portraits and sculptures, including large statues of Ganapati and Shankara, built by the Kanchi Kamakoti Mutt. Open to all, the Kalady shrines welcome pilgrims regardless of religion or caste, making it a magnetic tourist and spiritual attraction. Meanwhile, the Puthenkavu Bhadrakali Temple, sustained from Shankara's time, remains an influential pilgrimage center.

Apart from these, the Periyar River basin in this region is also a house of two ashrams. Sri Ramakrishna Advaita Ashrama, Kalady in the riverine, is the branch centre of the internationally well-known Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission. It was started during the on the auspicious occasion of Sri Sankara Jayanthi Day (26th April, 1936). It was affiliated to Belur Math in 1941. The white marble statue of Sri Ramakrishna seems to be the very epitome of tranquility. The Ashram also runs a school, charitable dispensary and library. Adi Sankara Nilayam Ashram is another centre, which was founded to promote the teachings of Adi Shankaracharya. This ashram serves as a spiritual center where followers can engage in meditation, study, and worship. It conducts various spiritual programs, including classes on Vedanta philosophy, meditation sessions, and festivals celebrating Shankaracharya. It is dedicated to promoting Advaita Vedanta philosophy, spiritual studies, and cultural activities. The River in this side serves an ideal space for peacefulness, meditation and spirituality. The visitors frequently visit the river to feel this ambience.

Periyar River Ghats in Kalady

The Periyar River ghats in this area are inextricably linked with the life and career of Sri Sankaracharya. There are several stories associated with Sankara and the ghats. Thus, the river ghats in this area also interlinked with the tradition, beliefs and rituals of the people.

The Kalady Kadavu is the place where the river took its turn, and where Kalady was born. It was also the place where Shankara had first performed aarattu (river bathing of idol), a ceremonial river bath for his ancestral deity before installing it at its current location. For centuries, during the festival at Sree Krishna temple, the aarattu has been carried out at this ghat.

The Muthala Kadavu (Crocodile Ghat), another important ghat where in Sankara's life took another turn to Sanyasam (Ascetic life). Mother Aryadevi was not agreeing to the wish of her only son little Sankara to become a sanyasin. One day mid noon Sankara was touched by a dog and as per community custom Sankara had to take bath. Accompanied by mother Sankara went to River Periyar for taking bath. There a crocodile caught him and the drowning boy asked his mother to permit him for sanyasm so that the

crocodile may leave him. Helpless mother agreed and crocodile freed the child and then he took sanyasam. The Ghat thereafter was called crocodile (Muthala in Malayalam / Tamil) Ghat.

The Sree Sringeri Mutt Ghat where in Sree Sankara Acharya had done the Ápara Kriyas (the rituals after death and cremation as per Nambudiri rituals) for mother Aryadevi when she passed away after her due cremation with help of just two out of the 10 Nambudiri families of Kalady. Now the ghat is within the temple complex of Sree Sringeri Mutt.

The beauty is that the above 3 adjacent ghats lay west to east in chronological order. All these ghats are very active throughout the year with pilgrims. Apart from these three ghats, there is also a ghat near to the Chengal Bhagavathy Temple. The *arattu* festival of the temple is carried out in this ghat. It is also a public bathing and recreation spot. All these ghats are playing a significant role in shaping the socio-cultural life of the people of this region.

Periyar and the Cultural Landscape of Aluva

Aluva is an urban river basin located on the long sandy stretch of the banks of the Periyar River and its tributary, the Mangalapuzha. This basin area is linked with the religious and cultural tradition and practices. The most important among them is the Aluva Mahadeva Temple located on the sand bank in between the Mangalppuzha and Periyar River. Aluva Mahadeva Temple is managed by Travancore Devaswom Board. The unique feature of Aluva Mahadeva Temple is that the Shivalinga is not enshrined in a Sreekovil. It is believed that the Swayambhoo Shivalinga installed by Lord Parasurama and worshipped by Lord Sree Rama rises out of the sand banks of the Periyar River. This place is called the Aluva Manappuram (land with sand) and it is the venue of the famous Shivarathri festival. Other important temples in this river basin are Sree Krishna Swamy Temple, Chembakassery Bhagavathy Temple and Sree Narayana Advaita Asramam Temple. All these worshipping centres are located in close proximity and the Periyar River is the venue for the ceremonial practices of all these temples.

Advaita Ashram is a unique spiritual centre established by the Sri Narayana Guru, the great social reformer of Kerala in 1913. After the consecration of the famous Sarada Mutt at Sivagiri (ME.1087) the guru visited Aluva and he was impressed with natural beauty and an enchanting river Periyar. This made him to establish an ashram. This ashram served valuable contributions to the social reform process of Kerala. Currently, the ashram engages in spiritual, educational and charitable works. The Advaita Ashramam compound also has a temple and a river ghat. Thus, this ashram is a popular centre of pilgrimage and religious studies. It is also famous as tourism and cultural spot. Pilgrims, scholars and tourists from different regions, frequently visit this centre. The River Periyar serves as a calm and peaceful environment for the needs of an ashram.

Aluva Manappuram: A Cultural Landmark

In Aluva, the Periyar River widens and decelerates, forming extensive sandbanks known as Aluva Manappuram, which stand as one of the town's most prominent landmarks. These sandbanks are exposed during the dry season, particularly during the festival of Sivarathri, and have become integral to the town's cultural and religious activities. Sivarathri, meaning "Night of Lord Shiva," is a major Hindu festival celebrated in honor of Lord Shiva. During this auspicious occasion, thousands of devotees gather on the sandy banks to take ritual baths in the sacred waters of the Periyar River. Overnight, devotees remain on the riverbank, engaging in fasting, performing rituals, and chanting hymns dedicated to Shiva. The celebrations are marked by prayers, the lighting of oil lamps, and various offerings. People from across the state converge here, transforming the riverbank into a vibrant spiritual hub with temporary shelters and marketplaces accommodating the influx of pilgrims.

Beyond its religious significance, the festival serves as a vital platform for local artisans, performers, and merchants to showcase their crafts and talents. The celebrations feature music, dance, drama, folk arts, and makeshift markets, creating a lively and festive atmosphere. Cultural programs and folk performances contribute to the event's social and communal spirit, fostering both spiritual devotion and cultural interaction. The entire area of the riverbank and nearby temples is beautifully decorated with lights, flowers, and oil lamps. Temples conduct processions featuring statues of deities, accompanied by traditional music and dance, enhancing the festival's grandeur. Additionally, colorful rangoli—artistic designs made from colored powders—are commonly created on the sandbanks, further enriching the celebratory ambiance. The harmonious blend of spiritual activities, cultural displays, and the natural beauty of the Periyar River makes Sivarathri in Aluva a uniquely immersive experience.

Aluva Manappuram also holds deep spiritual significance as a site for Hindu rituals dedicated to honoring ancestors. It is especially associated with bali tharpanam, a ritual performed to pay homage to departed relatives. During auspicious occasions such as Sivarathri and Karkidaka Vavu (the nakshatra day dedicated to ancestor rites), thousands of devotees visit the sandbank to offer prayers and perform rites. These rituals typically involve offering rice, sacred items, and symbolic offerings into the river to seek blessings and ensure the peace of their ancestors' souls. The riverbank becomes a sacred space for these ceremonies, with devotees bathing in the river, believing that the holy waters purify their spirits and wash away sins. The combination of religious fervor, cultural tradition, and the natural environment of the Periyar River makes Aluva Manappuram a revered site for spiritual renewal and communal harmony in Kerala's religious landscape.

The Public Space in Periyar River Basin

The Periyar River basin in Aluva serves as a vibrant public space that offers a diverse array of tourism and recreational opportunities. One of the prominent recreational areas is the Aluva Municipal Park, which plays a vital role in the leisure and social life of the urban population. This park is widely used for morning and evening walks as well as various recreational activities. Its proximity to the Periyar River, along with nearby attractions such as the Aluva Palace, ashrams, and temples, attracts large crowds, making it a key socio-cultural hub within the city. Another significant park is the Aluva Manappuram Park, located near the Bharathan Memorial Mandapam. The natural beauty of the river basin and the unique environment of the area draw both tourists and local residents for relaxation and leisure. These parks exemplify the integration of natural environment with urban life, providing spaces for community gatherings and recreational pursuits.

Ghat areas in Aluva hold especially important cultural and religious significance. The ghats near the Aluva Mahadeva Temple and Aluva Manappuram are regarded as sacred sites where various rituals, particularly bali tharpanam (ancestral worship), are performed. During auspicious occasions, thousands of devotees gather at these ghats to take ritual baths in the Periyar River, seeking spiritual cleansing and blessings. Another notable ghat is situated near the Advaita Ashram, which attracts both pilgrims and tourists due to its scenic beauty and spiritual ambiance. The Aluva Kadathu Kadavu, an ancient ghat historically used for transportation and fishing, continues to hold cultural importance for local communities. It played a vital role in livelihoods along the river, serving as a hub for accessing river resources and cultural activities. Today, it has been transformed into a viewpoint ghat, offering a scenic setting for visitors.

An additional important ghat is located near the Bharathan Memorial Mandapam and the nearby park. This site functions both as a bathing spot and as a place for connecting with nature, offering visitors a chance to relax and enjoy the natural splendor of the Periyar River valley. Collectively, these ghats and river spaces contribute significantly to the socio-cultural and spiritual fabric of Aluva, blending natural beauty with traditional practices and community life.

Conclusion

The study highlights the significant influence of the Periyar River in shaping the cultural geography of the Kalady–Aluva regions in Kerala. In Kalady, alongside the centers dedicated to Advaita philosophy, the river fundamentally determines the cultural and social life of the area. The numerous religious centers and ashrams situated within the river basin, along with their reliance on the river for ritualistic practices and festivals, reflect a vibrant urban and spiritual environment. The ghats and cultural sites along the river provide vital leisure spaces for the local population, fostering community engagement and spiritual activities. Over the years, the Periyar River basin in Kalady has evolved into a prominent pilgrimage destination, largely due to its association with Sri Shankaracharya's spiritual legacy. This area remains actively frequented by locals, pilgrims, and tourists alike, emphasizing its continued importance as a spiritual hub. Similarly, the Aluva riverfront exemplifies how the river affords the urban population a space for religious rituals and leisure activities. The Aluva Manappuram, in particular, functions as the most bustling site, attracting crowds throughout the year—pilgrims, residents, visitors, and tourists—each engaging in spiritual and recreational pursuits. Fundamentally, the Periyar River plays a decisive role in shaping the geographical identity and cultural fabric of the region. Its flow and presence define the physical landscape, while the religious and cultural centers, ghats, and associated spaces serve as vital venues for socio-cultural and spiritual gatherings. These cultural sites underscore the river's importance in constructing and maintaining the region's cultural landscape, illustrating how natural waterways like the Periyar are integral to the region's identity and communal life.

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