We shall overcome

We shall
overcome

Message

Government of Kerala

In 2018, Kerala witnessed unprecedented rainfall leading to landslides and floods which could have crippled the lives and livelihoods of our people. However, the Government of Kerala, with the whole hearted support of people and institutions from all walks of life across the state and of well-wishers from outside the state, was able to contain its possible impact and overcome the disaster.

Local Self Governments in the state too played an important role at this juncture. Being the people and institutions closest to the site of the disaster, they rose to the occasion. This also showed the strength of the local government system in Kerala, which was established in the state through the People's Plan Campaign and is being strengthened through its Phase 2 and the Nava Kerala Karma Paddhathi. The lessons learnt from such interventions will be useful to the other Indian states as well as countries across the world, to portray how a state government can address such disasters and how the local governments can play a major role at the local level.

The book, "We Shall Overcome" is a compilation of the narratives of the elected representatives of the Grama Panchayats on how they were involved in the rescue and relief operations during the monsoon disaster. It would be useful for all those who are involved in disaster mitigation as well as those who are engaged in strengthening the systems of local governance.

I congratulate the local self government functionaries who contributed to this book as well as the entire team leaders at KILA who have made the publication of this book possible.

PINARAYI VIJAYAN
Chief Minister, Govt. of Kerala

We shall overcome

Government of Kerala

Message

Last year, the state of Kerala survived the biggest floods in its recent history. It was about a century ago that the state experienced a similar situation. The hardship and misery of the victims and the outbreak of diseases are the final result of any floods. But Kerala's resurrection from the floods was surprisingly fast. The way the people came together as a single unit to minimise the impact of the floods has now become a part of the region's history and a new 'model' for the rest of the world.

Even otherwise Kerala is known as a 'model state' for its achievements in the socio-economic front. The fact that some international agencies have shown interest in studying the survival stories points to the excellence in the performance of our state agencies and our people. It was the untiring efforts of the local bodies and the people's representatives that made the survival possible. Documenting these stories would help the next generations to understand the impact of the flood on the people. This book titled We shall overcome is the result of such an initiative.

Let me take this opportunity to congratulate the entire team that has worked for the production of this book.

A C MOIDEEN
Minister, Department of Local Self Governments

We shall overcome

From the director's desk...

Local self-governments, as the name implies, are governments closest to the people. They are also the platforms for deliberative democracy and participatory development planning and implementation. Apart from ensuring the effective delivery of services, they also act as a support system to the people in times of need.

Their importance comes from the fact that in a three-tier system of governance, local self-governments have a direct, one-to-one relationship with the people in its jurisdiction. Therefore, the people's first point of access for redressal is the Panchayat or the Municipality as the case may be. These factors, unfortunately, do not usually figure in the performance assessment of the local administration.

A classic example that highlights the critical role of local self-governments in recent times is the deluge that submerged most of Kerala in August 2018. The local self-government functionaries in the region, together with other agencies and systems of the State Government, effectively mobilised and orchestrated amazing rescue and relief efforts, helping script a survival story that have few parallels in history. In fact, the flood rescue and relief operations in Kerala demonstrated to the world that a crisis can be most effectively managed if there are strong and efficiently administered local governments.

The interventions made by local self-governments, during and after the floods, are truly inspirational. Recognising the importance of preserving their experiences for future generations and creating a point of reference, the Kerala Institute of Local Administration (KILA) has taken the initiative to bring out a collection of the survival stories of the various Grama Panchayats in the state.

I would like to congratulate the Panchayats across Kerala for their daring and selfless efforts in helping the state survive the unprecedented calamity. At the same time, I hope that this volume paves the way for due recognition of the local self-governments and further discussions on their role in disaster management.

Dr JOY ELAMON

Director, KILA

We Shall Overcome

Chief Editor

Dr Joy Elamon

Director, KILA

Editors

Mathew Andrews, Assistant Director, KILA

Prathap Singh A S, Training Associate, KILA

Editorial Assistance

P V Ramakrishnan, Coordinator, KILA

Documentation Team-RGSA District Coordinators

Alphonsa John

Arun Kumar CP

Binuraj K S

Dheeraj M Divakaran

Dr Anto S V

Elsa George

Jahana Jabin

Malavika C G

Nivedya M S

Rakhi Rajan

Rose Mary

Thresy James

Editorial coordination, Design & Layout

Thara N Menon

Sanandakumar S

Published by

Kerala Institute for Local Administration (KILA)

Mulamkunnathukavu P O, Thrissur – 680 581

Phone (Office): 0487 2207000 (Director) 0487 2201312

Email: director@kila.ac.in, info@kila.ac.in

Web: www.kila.ac.in

January, 2020

ISBN 978-93-84557-54-6

Foreword

Kerala would remember the night of August 15, 2018, for a long time to come. As the rest of the world slept, Keralites woke up to the fury of a fierce flood that came under the stealth of darkness, leaving behind a trail of death, destruction and displacement.

But the real story of Kerala's floods is not about devastation or loss. It is about the spirit of survival. And it has a sub text that lends a poignant dimension to the narrative; the underlying theme that weaves around tales of heroism, valour, humanity. The surreal imagery of the deluge and disaster had all the makings of a Hollywood blockbuster; only this was real and its heroes were thousands of ordinary, faceless men and women, who, armed with nothing but compassion and love for fellow beings, battled the forces of nature to save people they had never seen or knew before.

It was a powerful show of humanity. There were the fishermen, who launched a daring rescue mission to save thousands of lives, and later became national heroes for their efforts. Then there were hundreds of voluntary organisations, students, corporate houses, government officials, celebrities, public workers, political representatives, housewives, ordinary people – every Keralite came together in a united force to help the flood victims. And the strong leadership at the state level which steered and guided the entire operations.

Those who took up the extremely arduous challenge of coordinating and channelising this outpouring of humanity, on the ground, were the Grama Panchayat members and staff. Their tireless work in mobilising relief and rescue operations helped raise public service and disaster management to a whole new level.

This book records the role played by Kerala's local governments in combating the biggest disaster in recent times in the state. But more than that, this book is a tribute to the never-say-die spirit of Kerala and its people that unequivocally demonstrated to the world that "We are one and we shall overcome" any challenge that the future may have in store...

Contents

14 Adimali Grama Panchayat
RISING TO THE OCCASION

18 Aranmula Grama Panchayat
REBUILDING LIVES

22 AymanamGramaPanchayat
DYNAMIC LEADERSHIP

26 Budhanoor Grama Panchayat
TOUCHED BY TRUE COMPASSION

30 Chambakulam Grama Panchayat
WANTED: A HELPING HAND

34 Chendamanagalam Grama Panchayat
WEAVING A COLLECTIVE DREAM

38 Chittattukara Grama Panchayat
A BOOKMARK IN HISTORY

42 Eraviperoor Grama Panchayat
PHOENIX-LIKE RESURRECTION

46 Eriyad Grama Panchayat
BETWEEN THE FLOOD AND THE DEEP SEA

50 KadapraGramaPanchayat
CONCERTED EFFORTS

54 Kainakary Grama Panchayat
IT IS BUSINESS AS USUAL

58 Kalady Grama Panchayat
FOCUS ON FUTURE

62 KallaraGramaPanchayat
GETTING CLOSER TO THE PEOPLE

66 Kavalam Grama Panchayat
THE WAY FORWARD

70 Kodumon Grama Panchayat
THE GOOD SAMARITAN

74 Kozhenchery Grama Panchayat
A NEW DIMENSION TO PUBLIC SERVICE

78 Kumarakom Grama Panchayat
UNITED THEY STOOD

82 Kumily Grama Panchayat
WHERE THERE IS A WILL THERE IS A WAY

94 Mundrothuruthu Grama Panchayat
LIVING ON THE EDGE

90 Mallapuzhassery Grama Panchayat
PROMPT ACTION

86 Kurichi Grama Panchayat
SERVICE SANS BORDERS

102 Neendur Grama Panchayat
THE SUCCESS OF TEAMWORK

98 Nedumudi Grama Panchayat
RISING FROM THE DEBRIS

114 Peringara Grama Panchayat
A LESSON IN HUMANITY

110 Parapukkara Grama Panchayat
DISCOVERING STRENGTH IN UNITY

106 Padiyur Grama Panchayat
BREAKING BARRIERS

122 Pozhuthana Grama Panchayat
INNOVATIVE LEADERSHIP

118 Perinjanam Grama Panchayat
SURVIVAL OF THE UNITED

134 Thalayazham Grama Panchayat
WITH ITS BACK TO THE WATER WALL

130 Puthenvelikkara Grama Panchayat
LEARNING FROM THE PAST

126 Pulinkunnu Grama Panchayat
THE WILL TO SURVIVE

142 Vandiperiyar Grama Panchayat
DOING IT THE RIGHT WAY

138 Vadakkekara Grama Panchayat
PREPAREDNESS IS THE KEY

150 Vellathooval Grama Panchayat
LESSONS IN LIVING WITH NATURE

146 Vathikudy Grama Panchayat
MISSION IMPOSSIBLE

SREEJA GEORGE
President

RISING TO THE OCCASION

The disaster caused by the floods that hit Kerala was an occasion that demonstrated the strength and competence of its local administration. The way Adimali Grama Panchayat rose to the occasion in combating the catastrophe in an extremely arduous terrain ravaged by floods and landslides, is a fine illustration of this point

Adimali is a Grama Panchayat that belongs to the Devikulam Taluk of Idukki district. The Panchayat which consists of 21 Wards includes 10,336 families. Mankulam Grama Panchayat on the north, River Periyar on the south, Pallivasal and Vellathooval Panchayats on the east and Kuttampuzha Panchayat on the west form its territorial borders.

UNPRECEDENTED DISASTER

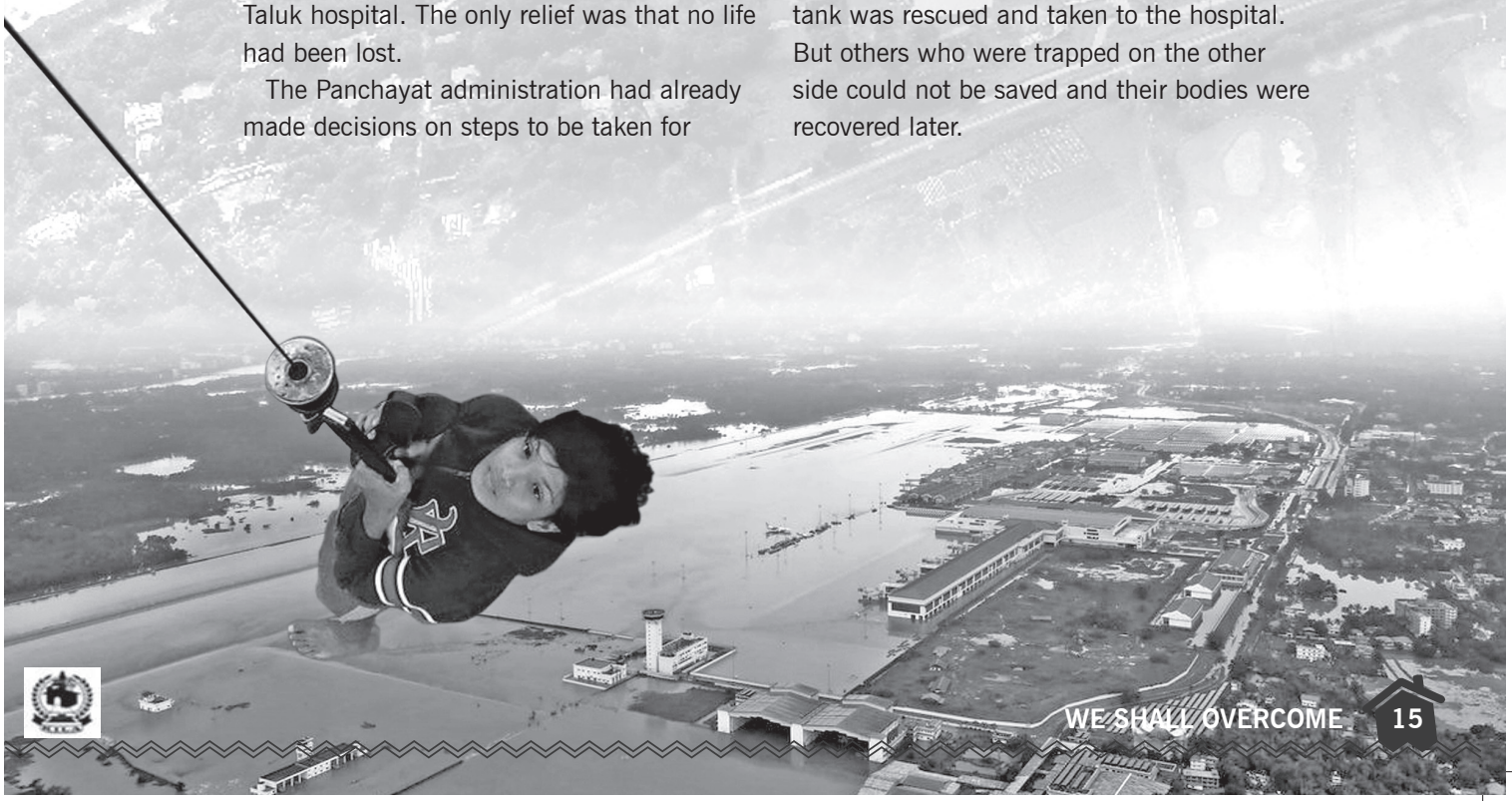
The downpour, which caused wide-spread floods, started on August 7, in Adimali Grama Panchayat. The rainfall intensified by around 11 pm the next day, resulting in heavy landslides and severe flooding. As a result of the landslides, traffic on the National Highways and other main roads was disrupted and some of the roads were completely ruined.

After the initial phase of floods a task force was formed under the Panchayat for disaster management. Each Ward had a separate task force

At the same time, frantic phone calls conveying news of disasters in several Wards started pouring in. Houses had collapsed and fields had become flooded, destroying crops. Immediately, on receiving the information, Panchayat authorities rushed to the spot although access across Wards had been rendered difficult by the rising waters and debris.

By 11 pm that night the Panchayat was shaken by the news that a house had been completely wrecked by the floods and four members of a family had been moved to the Taluk hospital. The only relief was that no life had been lost.

The Panchayat administration had already made decisions on steps to be taken for rescue and related operations. By 2 O'clock in the morning, people woke up to the terrifying news that a landslide had destroyed a home which was located on the Kochi-Dhanushkodi National Highway. Panchayat officials and the Fire Force immediately reached the site of the mishap to deal with the crisis and coordinate and monitor rescue activities. The local people displayed remarkable courage and dedication in their attempt to save fellow beings. It was after almost two hours of rescue efforts that a person who was trapped under the water tank was rescued and taken to the hospital. But others who were trapped on the other side could not be saved and their bodies were recovered later.



RESCUE MISSION

The rescue mission was arduous since it was night time and the environment was far from conducive. The area was prone to landslides and floods at the same time, so, precautionary measures did not turn out to be equally effective in all places. When one end flooded, there were landslides on the other. Fifteen houses and their surrounding areas were wiped out by the landslides. Seventy homes were completely destroyed. Homes of around 450 people were partially affected. Apart from that, the Panchayat suffered immense loss in its agricultural land area. The magnitude of the devastation caused by the floods was so huge that normalcy seemed impossible. In Punjaramkandam, an entire hillside was literally washed away by the floods. It is estimated that a large amount of money would be required to reconstruct the area.

Unscientific building constructions, land filling and other man-made factors definitely contributed to the multiplied impact of the floods. The Panchayat and district authorities view these as a real threat to the future sustainability of the area. An action plan to reduce the impact of environment-unfriendly man-made structures and other development projects on the ecology of the region, is

already under consideration.

Around 3,200 people found refuge in 28 relief camps in the Panchayat. All the camps were administered successfully with the help of the public and other voluntary organisations. Panchayat employees and officials took the lead in ensuring the smooth conduct of the camps and catering to the needs of the inmates. They took great pains to accommodate people from different areas in camps close to their homes as far as possible.

TEAM WORK

After the initial phase, a task force was formed under the Panchayat for disaster management. Each Ward had a separate task force. Each team consisted of people who owned JCBs; jeeps; trucks; tipper lorries or other vehicles that could be used for restoration work. Wood cutters and people who could undertake arduous tasks, volunteers and others were also included in these squads, each of which had around 20 people. Each team was mandated with completely resolving the situation they were assigned to. The result was that each member of the team gained expertise in handling such challenges, which could be put to use in similar situations in the future as well. This was a precaution that stemmed from the realisation of the inadequacies in the system to face such a big calamity.

Another fact that came to light was that the constructions in the area did not have strong foundations. It was therefore decided to make stringent regulations to ensure that all future constructions adhered to the parameters of strong building foundations, such as extra piling for reinforcement. It had to be acknowledged that strong foundations could have helped arrest the scale of the disaster to a great extent.

No one foresaw the real magnitude of the repercussions these unscientific constructions could cause. Forests, hills and mountains were indiscriminately destroyed to build structures with absolutely no consideration for the ecological fragility of the region. Their impact had become amply evident during the process of providing traffic facilities and other services to the tribal people.

About Rs 12 lakh was arranged by the Panchayat towards the expenses of running the camps. Even though the Revenue Department is usually the primary authority in carrying out disaster management, when the flood situation demanded urgent attention, the Panchayat was able to rise to the occasion and assume independent leadership in combating the calamity and overcoming it.

AYSHA PURUSHOTHAMAN
President

REBUILDING LIVES

During the floods of the century in 2018, it looked as though the rising waters would eventually submerge everything that Aranmula had – an arrestingly beautiful nature, a town made famous by its spiritual and heritage tags and the life and property of its people. Though the impact of the floods was particularly severe on the region, Aranmula could minimise the damage, thanks to the timely intervention of the Panchayat. Today, its return to normal life is a story scripted by its residents who are determined to do anything to restore their homeland to its former glory

Aranmula Panchayat is located in the Kozhanchery Taluk of Pathanamthitta district. It has an area of 24.4 square kilometres and a population of 28,679. Farming is the main occupation of the people of Aranmula. The Parthasarathy Temple, the Aranumla boat race and the Aranmula mirror are three things that make this picturesque land famous. The Pamba river, where the boat race is held, flows through the Panchayat. As a result, any rise in its water level affects most of the Wards in the Panchayat. However, the river had never been a threat to the people of Aranmula in the past.

WARNING SIGNALS

Due to the heavy rains that the region experienced from August 11, 2018, to August 13, the canals and streams of all Wards in the Panchayat started

The first phase of the reconstruction of 13 houses which were fully destroyed by the floods, has been completed. Measures are being taken for the reconstruction of the houses of the rest of the people

overflowing. On the night of August 14, at about 11.45 pm, the tehsildar called the Panchayat president to warn him about the possibility of the water level in Pamba going up to six metres. Immediately, an alert was issued to those who were residing on the banks of the river and also the traders about the emerging situation.

Sathrakadavu, the lowest point on the banks of Pamba was soon submerged and many vehicles were damaged. People did not get time to shift their vehicles or household items to safety. However, due to the timely intervention of the Panchayat administration, around 1,000 people from low lying areas like Ezhikkad Colony were shifted to the relief camps that were opened at the Vallana SNDP School.

The same night, there was further evacuation from Wards 1,2,4,6, 16, 17 and 18 which were located close to the Pamba river. People where shifted to five other relief camps that had been set up in and around Aranmula. The relief camp at Ezhikkad was flooded quite unexpectedly. People from this camp were shifted to the SNDP School.

The Panchayat's proactive steps in evacuating a large number of people, helped prevent flood casualties. Later, about 3,700 families from different parts of the Panchayat were shifted to relief camps that were opened in many parts of the area. Most of them had to leave all their possessions behind, including their livestock.

RESCUE LOGISTICS

By this time, the Panchayat was running nearly 15 relief camps. The death of a youngster who had volunteered for rescue operations turned out to be

one of the most tragic incidents during the period. However, it did not affect the pace or efficiency of the operations. This was a big factor that helped reduce human casualties during the calamity.

Many places in the Panchayat remained cut off due to flood waters. The supply of essential items stopped as most of the shops were fully or partially submerged. Since it was difficult to reach many Wards of the Panchayat, the help of voluntary organisations and people was enlisted to run the camp without disruptions. The Panchayat took steps to ensure regular supply of food and essential items to the camps.

In Ezhikkara, one person lost his life in the floods on August 16. About 450 houses were fully submerged in this region, which was one of the worst affected areas. More relief camps were opened to improve facilities for camp inmates. As per the initial estimate, about 75 houses were fully destroyed by floods while around 920 were partially damaged. About 70 per cent of the crops in the area were completely destroyed causing huge losses to 950 farmers.

The supply of food to those who were stranded in their homes turned out to be a major challenge. They were finally rescued by naval helicopters and fishing boats. There was a shortage of transport, so the Panchayat liaised with the Government and made arrangements for more boats for riskier rescue efforts. Since the camps were getting crowded, people had to be accommodated in camps outside the Panchayat.

Between August 17 to19, two people were reported missing from Aramula Panchayat. By then water level had started falling gradually. However, homes; institutions; transformers; farmlands and wells still remained under water.

The Panchayat assumed the responsibility of cleaning the houses so that people could go back home at the earliest. It was implemented with the help of cultural, political and voluntary organisations as well as general public. People forgot all their

differences and contributed their efforts to help Aranmula overcome the impact of the disaster.

PEOPLE RETURN HOME

On August 20, the work of clearing the remains of animals that had perished in the floods, started. Cleaning materials received from different sources were distributed at the Ward level. Hundreds of people who came forward to help were divided into groups and deployed in different Wards. The electric motors owned by the Panchayat were made available for cleaning wells. A specially formed committee was given the task of testing the quality of well water. Both ayurveda and allopathy treatments were made available to those who fell ill after the floods.

Disposal of bio degradable waste was done with the help of Clean Kerala Mission. The state Government and Kerala Institute of Local Administration (KILA) offered guidance to the Panchayat in many difficult situations during and after the floods.

All those who returned home from the camps were provided with a kit containing essential groceries; medicines; drinking water; household articles and other things. The cash compensation of Rs 10,000 offered by the Government was distributed to all the deserving people. Medical camps were held at various locations. Children who lost their study materials were given study aids at the earliest.

RECONSTRUCTION PHASE

The first phase of the reconstruction of 13 houses, fully destroyed in the floods, has already been completed. Measures are being taken for the reconstruction of the rest of the houses. With the help of voluntary workers, electrical and plumbing repairs in the area were completed. The roads that had become unusable were reconstructed.

A small scale Khadi unit in the Panchayat was completely destroyed by the floods. Around 50 persons had worked in this unit earlier. For the revival of this unit, a sponsor was identified, as a result of the Panchayat initiative. He donated 20 charkas (spinning wheels) and 10 looms. Each dairy farmer was provided with one bag of cattle feed, free of cost.

The Panchayat convened a special meeting to focus on rebuilding areas that had suffered maximum damage. The losses suffered by Aranmula mirror manufacturers were assessed. Eight such units were given essential items worth Rs 1 lakh donated by a Tamil Nadu based Non-Government Organisation (NGO).

It will take time for the Panchayat to restore its natural beauty and rich heritage to its former glory. For a Panchayat with very little funds of its own, it is an uphill task. A helping hand from the Government is what is needed in fulfilling the aspirations of the Panchayat and its people to rebuild their homeland.

A K ALICHAN
President

DYNAMIC LEADERSHIP

The unique geographical feature of having a major part of its area located below sea level, resulted in Aymanam Panchayat bearing the brunt of the floods that devastated Kerala. It was the dynamic leadership of the Panchayat administration and its systematic and pragmatic approach to relief operations that helped salvage the situation and mitigate the hardships of the people during the troubled period

Aymanam Grama Panchayat, with its endless vistas of green paddy fields, is one of the most beautiful localities in Kerala. Nurtured by numerous water bodies and its vast stretches of agriculture land protected and sustained by a unique system of dykes, it is a man-made wonder that brings tourists flooding to the region.

The Panchayat is situated in the upper Kuttanad region of Kottayam Taluk in Kottayam district. It is bordered on the north by Kudamaloor river and Pennar thodu, on the east by Kottayam Municipality, on the south by Enadi thodu, Chungom river and Elankavu thodu and on the west by the Vembanad lake. The Panchayat that covers an area of 30.03 square kilometres, consists of 20 Wards. A total of 36,436 persons live in 8,576 families here. The area is prone to floods during rainy season and the dykes constructed for cultivation have served as a protective mechanism.

Due to the unprecedented rains of July 17 and July 18, 2018, there was large scale flooding in the area. About 750 persons were shifted to relief camps during the period. The valuable lessons

learnt from this initial bout of flooding were put to use while dealing with the deluge that followed.

Prior to the heavy rains and floods that engulfed the state in August, sufficient warnings were given to the inhabitants of Aymanam Panchayat and precautionary measures adopted to deal with contingencies likely to result from heavy flooding. Alerts were communicated by boats and people were shifted to relief camps, pre-empting trouble.

SMOOTH OPERATIONS

Food and essential materials for relief camps were arranged by the Panchayat authorities from various sources, in cooperation with the village office. Gas supply and water for the camps were also organised without delay. The Panchayat provided shelter and food for all its flood-affected residents for more than 15 days. The services of allopathy and ayurveda doctors were also made available, along with adequate supply of medicines.

As the flood waters entered the Aymanam Public Health Centre (PHC), the facility had to be shifted to the Panchayat office. With rising flood waters, more people deserted their homes and shifted to the relief camps. The Panchayat mobilised all available forms of transport – boats; ambulance; school buses and tipper lorries - for rescue and relief work. Relief camps were also opened for the flood-affected Wards of 1 and 20 at Kumarakom and Kavanattinkara.

Following a request from the Panchayat, services of doctors from medical colleges and nearby hospitals were provided at the relief camps. In the meantime, the intensity of the floods kept increasing and the number of people moving into shelters rose, causing further strain on the running of the camps. Inadequate toilet facilities were a challenge, so Panchayat officials took the initiative to set up e-toilets at two camps. As the scale of flooding kept rising further, people were forced to leave their

livestock at higher plains and move into camps. Panchayat stepped in again to arrange veterinary doctors for providing care to the hapless animals.

Two medical camps were organised at the relief camp at Parippu under the aegis of various hospitals and organisations and medical kits were distributed to the inmates.

LIFE AFTER THE FLOODS

After the flood waters receded, 43 relief camps were closed. Relief kits, created from the reserve food and clothes mobilised during the relief efforts, were distributed to the flood-affected people. Arrangements were made for officials of cooperative banks to visit the camp and distribute pension to the pensioners housed there.

Cleaning up operations, chlorination of wells, collection of data on damages were all conducted in the flood-affected areas under the leadership of Panchayat employees with the help of Anganwadi, Asha and Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) workers. These teams were provided with a clear-cut action plan for the conduct of the operations. Even in those troubled days, the Panchayat took care to bring some cheer into the camps by arranging Tiruvona sadyas in all functioning relief camps. People's representatives and officials visited the camps and joined the inmates in the celebrations.

As many of the wells in the Panchayat were not usable after the floods, steps were taken to clean them through super chlorination and the Panchayat arranged the supply of drinking water to those who needed it. These operations helped prevent the spread of infectious diseases.

At first, food kits were distributed only to those who were housed in relief camps. However, realising that a large number of those affected by floods had not come to the relief camps, the Panchayat governing body decided to identify all residents whose houses were affected by floods and distribute relief kits to them to help their sustenance over the following days. These were distributed under the leadership of Ward members in their respective areas. A Union Health Ministry team visited the

Cleaning up operations, chlorination of well, collection of data on damages were all conducted in the flood-affected areas under the leadership of Panchayat employees

area to evaluate the relief operations and expressed appreciation at the work done.

The paddy fields at Aymanam Panchayat are located at 3 to 15 metres below sea level. Therefore water had to be pumped out of the paddy fields using electric motors. As the floods had submerged and damaged the motors in the area, it was decided to provide Rs 5,000 each to repair damaged motors for paddy fields covering an area of up to 100 acres and Rs 10,000 each for paddy fields in excess of 100 acres. The agriculture officer was entrusted with the task.

A HELPING HAND

Athijeevanam, a motivational programme was arranged for those who survived the calamity. A local church arranged for the supply of Rs 15 lakh worth of medicines to people affected by floods.

The Panchayat took up the task of drying up the wells, free of cost, as part of its cleaning operations. A Reverse Osmosis (RO) water purifier with a capacity of 1,500 litres per hour, donated by the Hyderabadi Malayali Association, helped tackle the shortage of drinking water in the Panchayat. Students were roped in to conduct an assessment of the losses. Relief materials donated by various organisations were distributed to families falling under the Ashraya scheme. The Panchayat also took care to distribute learning materials to students who lost everything in the floods.

It was the organised and systematic approach to flood relief work that made Panchayat interventions so effective. Operations under the leadership of various Wards, with support from officials and voluntary agencies, helped mitigate the hardships caused by floods as well as to ensure proper functioning of the relief camps. There was also a great deal of support and cooperation from government organisations and village office employees, all of which helped in making the relief efforts a great success. The invaluable services rendered by the Panchayat employees were also a big contributing factor.

It was because of the complete transfer of control by village officials to the Panchayat authorities that they were able to meet the daily needs of about 5,500 people housed in these camps. Food materials and other items received at various camps were distributed in a fair and equitable manner to all, under the leadership of Ward members. The excess quantity of food materials were transferred to other relief camps.

The fact that the Panchayat office assumed leadership in the coordination and monitoring of the operations at every stage helped streamline

distribution of relief materials and ensure the smooth conduct of camps. The effective intervention of the Panchayat during and after the floods helped prevent casualties.

The key role played by the Panchayat in providing relief during the natural disaster needs to be recognised. What is important is that the local administration is closest to the people and their role in dealing with any calamity is of great importance. In this context, Panchayats should be vested with greater powers in taking decisions and implementing measures in case of future occurrence of such natural disasters.

TOUCHED BY TRUE COMPASSION

ADVOCATE
P VISWAMBHARA PANICKER
President

With its people displaced, crops lost, houses destroyed, the floods could easily be termed the toughest challenge that Budhanoor faced in its recent history. The images of death and destruction left behind by the floods would have left a permanent scar on the collective psyche of the people of Budhanoor, if it was not for the flood of human love, support and aid that came from people of different walks of life. Today, the people of Budhanoor are looking to move on in life, with their eyes fixed on future goals, not losing hope and treating past as past

Budhanoor Grama Panchayat is a region lying close to the rivers, Pamba, Achankovilar and Kuttamperurar. The small streams and canals from these rivers control the tide and ebb of water from Budhanoor. In August 2018, when a major flood engulfed most of central Kerala, the water that flowed through the canals that criss-cross Budhanoor, rose to unprecedented levels causing a major flood in the Panchayat.

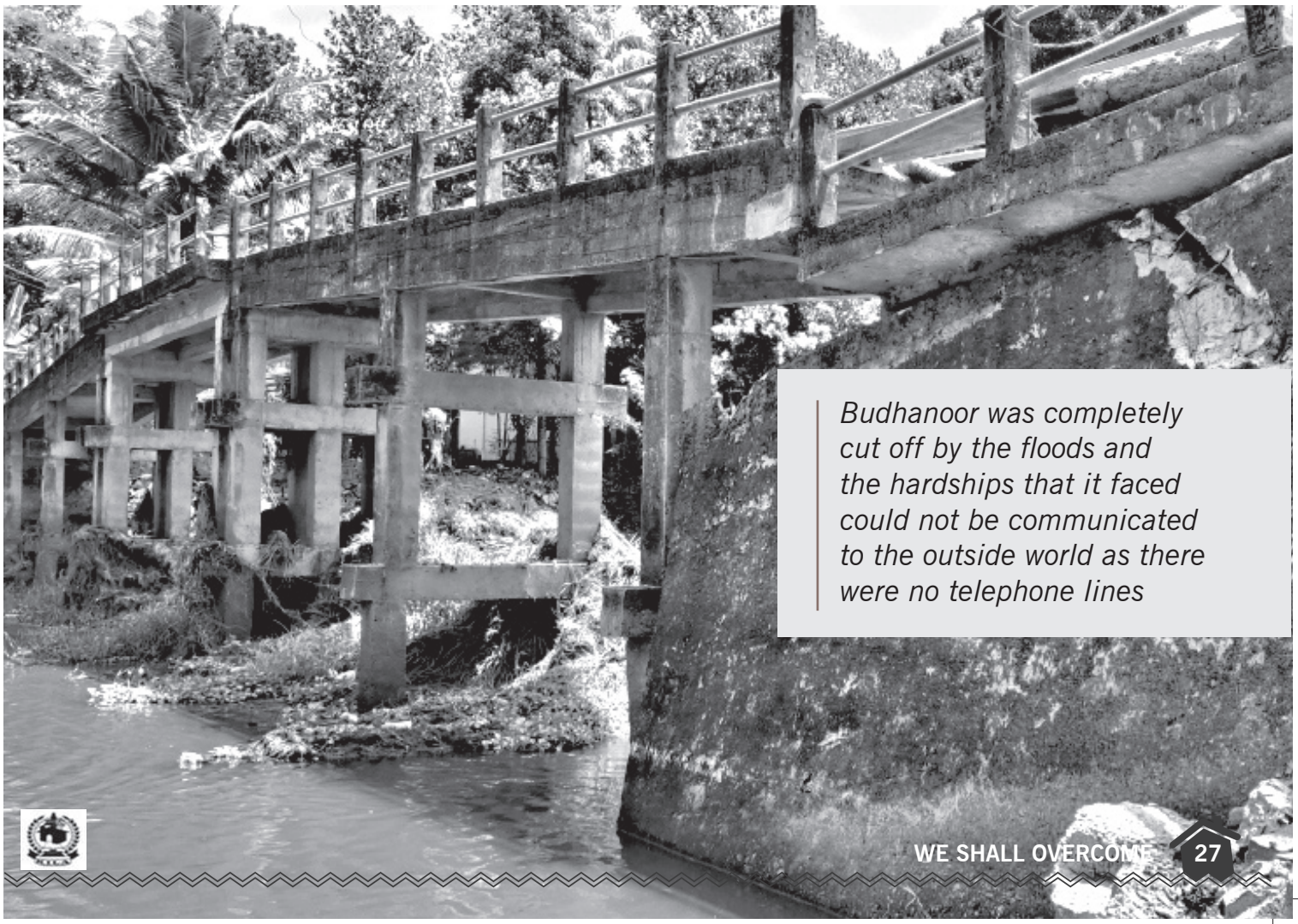
On August 15, when the Panchayat received the first warning signals about the possibility of a

flood, a meeting of the members, representatives of political parties, Revenue officials and Kudumbashree workers was convened. Following this, residents of all houses in the low lying lands of the Panchayat were warned about the possibility of floods, through public announcements. Steps were taken to shift people and their cattle to temporary shelters. However, this warning was not taken seriously by the residents.

A WALL OF WATER

On the night of August 15, except for 4 kilometres of the 18.5 square kilometres, the entire area of Budhanoor was submerged in flood waters. Barring three small boats, there was barely enough transport or equipment for rescue and relief operations. Tubes of cars and buses, small rafts made from bamboo and plantain trunks, big kitchen utensils and other makeshift contraptions were pressed into use to shift people to the next high building and from there to the terraces of still higher places. It was only by August 17, that all the people could be rescued. The police and the fire force extended their wholehearted support to the rescue operations.

Flood waters entered about 4,711 houses in the Panchayat. People where shifted in large numbers to the nearby schools, anganawadis, offices of political parties, places of worship and even two-storeyed houses located in high places. Temples and churches and buildings owned by Nair



Budhanoor was completely cut off by the floods and the hardships that it faced could not be communicated to the outside world as there were no telephone lines

Service Society (NSS) and Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam (SNDP) were thrown open to the public. The sight of the old and sick people being looked after by the family members of the Adimuttath Madom, an aristocratic Namboodiri family, stood out as a symbol of love, compassion and secularism that the calamity brought to the fore. On the east side of Budhanoor, the floods took the life of Vasudevan, a local resident.

Another tragic side of the rescue operation was that the rescue teams could not save many of the livestock. In fact, they had to encounter a large number of animal carcasses, during their operations. The wails of animals were heart-rending, a factor that added to the horrors of the turbulent times.

DESTRUCTION GALORE

The main Munnar road and the road to Chengannur were completely destroyed in the floods. Maveli Stores and provision stores were fully submerged. Food materials were damaged beyond use. There was no power anywhere in the Panchayat due to supply disruptions. The hardships that Budhanoor faced could not be communicated to the outside world as the telephone lines were damaged.

There was a severe shortage of food in the relief camps. Food was collected from people who were unaffected by the calamity and made available to

those living in the camps. Rain water was collected by voluntary workers and distributed among the people. It was only after August 18, that help from outside world could reach the people of Budhanoor.

In the following days, people of Budhanoor witnessed an even bigger flood, but this time, a very welcome one. In a great display of love and compassion, several consignments of essential items flowed into the Panchayat from all parts of the world. Rising above narrow divisions based on politics; religion; caste; faith; people from all walks of life participated in rebuilding Budhanoor by collecting and distributing everything that it needed to get back on its feet again.

Unending supplies of food packets; water; clothes; medicines and other essential materials flooded the Panchayat, to help it restore and rehabilitate the land and its people. Helicopters were made available to deliver food and water. Taurus trucks were used to transport and distribute food, medicines and other essential goods. The unparallelled rescue and relief operations were a refreshing change from the traumatic days of the flood.

The floods caused heavy damage in Budhanoor. Kadambur Public Health Centre (PHC), Ennakkad Ayurveda hospital, Budhanoor Kalaposhini Library and many other establishments were wholly or partially destroyed in the floods. Eighty houses were totally damaged while 2,800 houses were partially destroyed. Crops like rice, vegetables and tapioca were fully washed away. The mass destruction of cattle and other animals reared by people was a tragic aftermath of the floods that the Panchayat had to contend with. It also led to the loss of livelihood for many people.

POST-FLOOD OPERATIONS

The entire Panchayat had transformed into heaps of dirt, debris, animal carcasses and other waste. Waste removal was conducted through the combined effort of youth organisations; political party members; voluntary workers; Kudumbashree workers and others. As per the instructions of the District Planning Committee (DPC), Thiruvananthapuram, the elected members and officials of the village, block and district Panchayats, along with the district and municipal bodies and the officials of the Panchayat Directorate also joined the cleaning operations, leading and coordinating these efforts from the front.

The floods caused untold miseries to the people. But the nightmares of those hard days were erased from their memory as the floodgates of human love and compassion opened up in the form of relief work that helped bring food; clothes; water; medicines and all the essential things for those who lost everything. It was these helping hands that got the people of Budhanoor limping back to life again and induced a sense of purpose and meaning in their future.

Today, Budhanoor has got over the calamity and almost forgotten the hardships that it brought. Instead of thinking about what it lost, Budhanoor is now looking towards the future. The state Government, on its part, has declared that its aim is to rebuild Kerala in the shortest possible time, sending a message of hope to the people about a new Kerala.

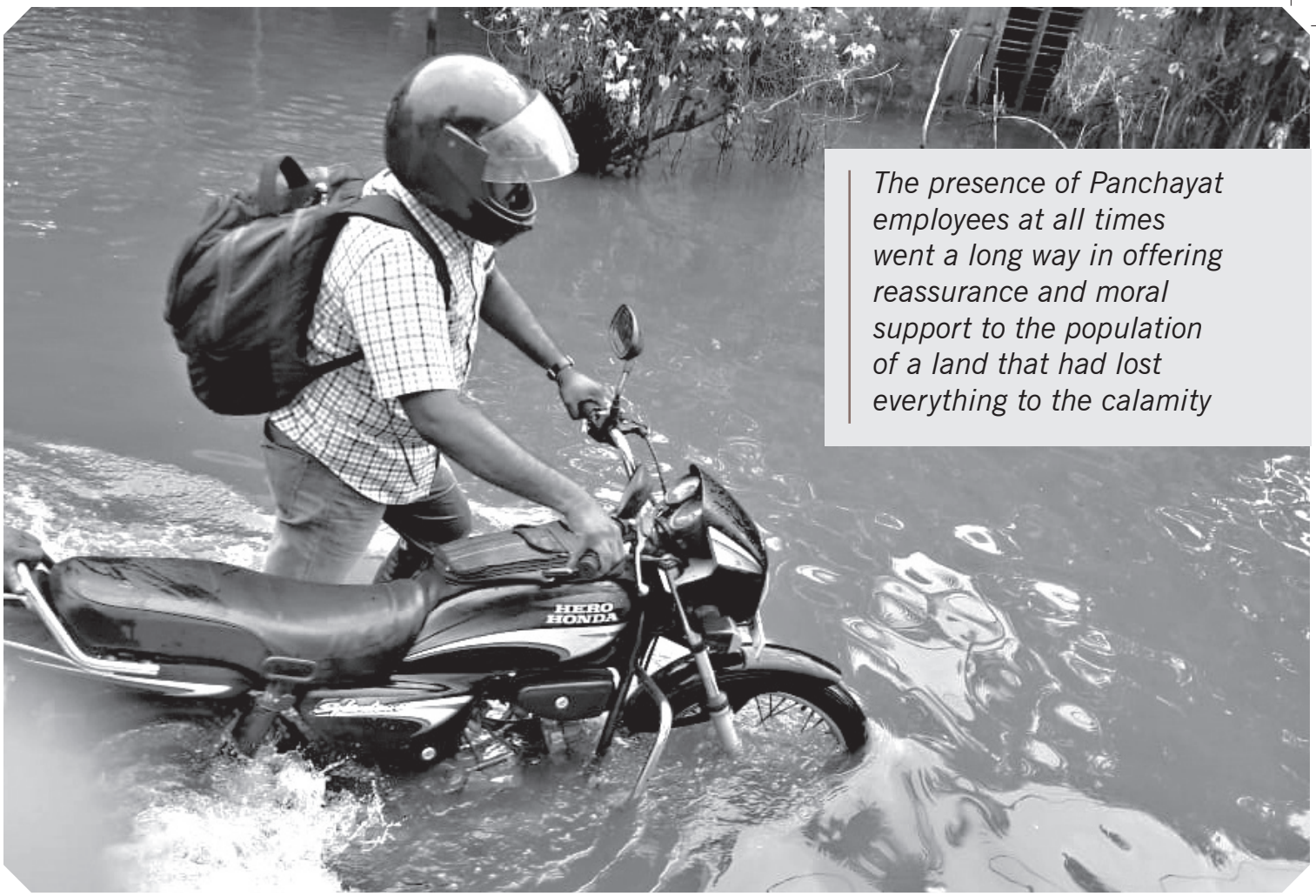
WANTED: A HELPING HAND

GEORGE MATHEW PANJIMARAM
President

Like most of the places in Kuttanad, Chambakulam was also hit hard by the floods of 2018, largely by virtue of its location below sea level. Even as the land limps back to normalcy what it needs is a helping hand from the Government and the private sector to implement projects that are critical to bring about the complete recovery of the land and the lives of its people

The village of Chambakulam belongs to the coastal plains, which is one among the three geographical divisions of Kerala. It falls in the Kuttanad agro-climatic zone. The Chambakulam Panchayat, that spreads over 16,280 hectares in lower Kuttanad, has a total area of 22.97 square kilometres under its administration. Lower Kuttanad forms the lowest point of landfall by Pamba, Achenkovil and Manimala rivers. Pamba river that flows through the Panchayat splits it into two. With so many large rivers in the vicinity, the region is prone to severe flooding during the monsoons.

The fertile soil that is enriched by sediments from the nearby rivers makes it a prime agricultural zone in the state with paddy cultivation in 1,723 hectares of land. As the basin of Pamba and Manimala, the Panchayat has 32 padasekharams (farmers' collectives), covering a total area of 1,663 hectares. It has a population of 17,639, covering 13 Wards.



The presence of Panchayat employees at all times went a long way in offering reassurance and moral support to the population of a land that had lost everything to the calamity

NATURE'S WRATH

Water level rose drastically in Kuttanad as a result of heavy rainfall in the second week of July, 2018. Pre-empting destruction of crops, the padashekara samitis were immediately asked to undertake repair of the outer bunds to prevent water seepage. However the heavy rainfall had already caused irreparable damage to the bunds, destroying crops. At the same time, some of the padasekharams were able to escape the wrath of floods.

Chambakulam Panchayat suffered the worst devastation after Kainakary Panchayat, in the Kuttanad region. Camps which were opened during the first phase of flooding in July 2018, were all disbanded by August 10. But the worst was yet to come. Heavy rains which intensified on August 13 and14, put the Panchayat administration on high alert. The Disaster Management Committee immediately swung into action and took preventive measures to combat the potential threat of a big flood.

PREVENTION AND RESCUE

The next day on August 15, Public Works Department (PWD) minister G Sudhakaran convened an emergency meeting of the Panchayat presidents and secretaries of the Alappuzha district to alert them to the fact that flood waters that wreaked havoc in the nearby areas of Chengannur, Ranni and Aranamula could affect Chambakulam as well. As the water level started rising dangerously in the morning, the Panchayat assistant secretary received a warning from the district collector on the impending calamity. This was passed on to the Panchayat

authorities. Immediately, along with Kudumbashree workers and others they set out in boats and issued warning announcements to alert the public. The next day, due to heavy flooding, only three of the Panchayat officials could reach office, so Panchayat operations were shifted to the office of the Deputy Director of Panchayats (DDP) in Alappuzha.

From DDP office, with the help of the Revenue Department officials, the Panchayat's Disaster Management team coordinated the efforts to evacuate people from their homes. By August 18, all those who were under threat of floods could be shifted to various rescue camps that were set up on the entire stretch from Ambalappuzha to Vadathala. As water submerged the area, electricity supply had to be shut down. With electricity and all means of communication shut down, the biggest challenge for the Panchayat officials was to deal with the instructions and demands of superior officers, through only email.

Panchayat authorities sourced boats and dinghies from the Alappuzha boat jetty for evacuation. Services of fishing vessels; private boats of those who volunteered to help; house boats and police speed boats were all put to use to shift residents to the relief camps located near Alappuzha town.

SELFLESS SERVICE

Panchayat and district administrations as well as voluntary organisations worked tirelessly to ensure adequate supply of drinking water and food to the inmates of relief camps. Even the Panchayat members who were directly affected by the floods, set aside all their personal tragedies to actively participate in the evacuation process. Apart from the few who chose to stay in their homes and face the calamity on their own, all the people of the village were transferred to relief camps. The entire team of the Panchayat including its officials and employees put in exemplary efforts in pulling off this operation successfully. Even the women employees worked tirelessly, travelling by boats in the dangerous waters to take part in difficult rescues.

The Panchayat staff was divided into groups of two, with each team given area wise responsibility to oversee the working of the relief camps. Their task was to understand the needs of the inmates in these shelters, especially those belonging to the Chambakulam Panchayat and provide solutions. With such focused approach, the Panchayat was able to

successfully ensure the safety and comfort of its people during the crisis. The presence of Panchayat employees at all times went a long way in offering reassurance and moral support to the population of a land that had lost everything to the calamity.

POST-FLOOD RELIEF

Once the floods started subsiding and people prepared to return home, Panchayat officials, as per instructions from the Government, visited each camp and gave awareness classes on the measures to be taken to ensure hygiene. They were advised on the precautions to be followed while operating electrical appliances and cleaning homes.

On August 28, the Panchayat launched a cleaning campaign under its leadership. Members of the public and voluntary organisations turned up in large numbers to help in these efforts. Basic amenities for these teams and all required materials for the operation were supplied by the Panchayat with the urgency it warranted. With the help of Kudumbashree, food was provided to all those who participated in the cleaning operations.

Waste accumulated in the village was collected and processed, with the help of the Haritha Karma Sena. Water kiosks in the Panchayat had been destroyed completely. So, 15,000 litres of water had to be sourced from Kidangara daily. Besides this, water from the Reverse Osmosis (RO) plants under the Kerala Water Authority (KWA) was distributed in every Ward of the Panchayat. Till September, water distribution by the Panchayat continued. The local administration incurred an expense of more than Rs 10 lakh for this alone.

Apart from the damage caused to homes and private properties, the Panchayat also suffered huge loss in the floods. Both the homeo and ayurveda hospitals in the village were completely destroyed. Roads were heavily damaged and there was extensive loss in other public areas. The repair of damaged roads has been proposed to be taken up as part of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS).

Post the floods, the focus of the Panchayat has been on the rehabilitation of its people. Its priority is to ensure that the financial and other

assistance from the Government reaches every deserving family; to help everyone procure new documentation in lieu of the ones they lost; to get adequate compensation for the farmers and to find solutions for the woes of those who lost their livelihood in the calamity. The objective is to have the work completed in a time-bound manner, and help people carry on with their lives as before.

Chambakulam, with its unique geographical feature of being located below sea level, suffered large scale devastation. What the village and its people look forward to, is the support of both government institutions and other organisations to come forward and lend a helping hand to implement projects that are critical for rebuilding and rehabilitating their lives as fast as possible.

WEAVING A COLLECTIVE DREAM

ANOOP T G
President

The people of Chendamangalam, the handloom centre in the state, are weaving a collective dream. After the particularly severe impact of floods, they have placed their hope on a slew of long term measures to minimise the impact of such calamities in the future. The same team spirit with which they tamed the floods has now been revived to train and equip the people of the region to withstand the fury of floods in the future

Chendamangalam Grama Panchayat falls in the Paravur Block in Paravur Taluk in Ernakulam district. The area of the Grama Panchayat is 10.75 square kilometres and the Panchayat has 18 Wards. Its boundaries are Puthenvelikkara and Vadakkekara Panchayats to the north and Puthenvelikkara and Karamalloor Panchayats to the east. Except for the Kottil Kovilakom hills in the first Ward, the rest of the Panchayat is in the midlands.

The area is surrounded on all three sides by rivers and has seven tiny islands also under its administration. It is made up of regions such as Palathuruth; Thekkumpuram; Kizhakkupuram; Manakkodam; Karimbadom; Koottukadu; Vadakkanpuram; Kochangadi; Thekkethuruth; Kanjavarathuruth; C P Thuruth; Valiya Pavimbillithuruth and Mattupuram.

Chendamangalam Panchayat is home to a population of 29,326. As the area has lots of streams and rivers, the fisheries sector, apart from agriculture, is an important occupation of the people. The main industries in the area are handlooms, coir and toddy tapping. There

Awareness classes were arranged at all Wards by the Panchayat through the Primary Health Centre to prevent spread of epidemics. Supply of preventive medicines was also arranged at many places

are a large number of people working in the construction sector.

A FLOOD-RAVAGED REGION

The heavy rains in the state during July and August of 2018, led to flooding in many districts of the state. Opening of many dams aggravated the flood situation especially in areas close to the rivers. After 26 years all the shutters of Cheruthoni dam had to be opened simultaneously.

Water released from the dam which flowed down Periyar did not take long to reach Chendamangalam where the northern tributary of the Periyar joins the Chalakudy river. On August 8, water levels began to rise alarmingly in Ward numbers four and seven. However, the situation did not turn serious because of low tides in the area.

THE AFTERMATH

The same day the District Disaster Management Committee issued an alert on the possibility of floods affecting those who resided along the river banks. A meeting was held in the presence of the chief minister Pinarayi Vijayan, which was attended by people's representatives and officials of the Panchayat.

Following the meeting, it was decided to convey warnings through microphones to people living along the river banks. A meeting of the Panchayat members was also convened which decided on opening relief camps and taking steps to ensure the supply of essential items and drinking water.

As water level began to rise on August 8, a relief camp was opened at V P Thuruth. The camp was closed after two days as rains subsided. When water

levels began to rise again on August 12, the camps had to be reopened. It was early in the morning of August 16 that the gravity of the flood situation was realised. Due to continuous rains, more areas began to be submerged.

As the situation worsened, it was decided to turn the Panchayat office into a relief camp. The Panchayat administration arranged facilities for a 40-member army team to carry out rescue and relief operations. Forty four camps were opened by the Revenue Department at Kottayil Kovilakathu, Gothuruth, Karimbadom and V P Thuruth. The Panchayat took the initiative to provide facilities for operating these relief camps.

A 15-member committee was constituted by the Panchayat president for coordinating relief work. On August 16, barring 126 homes of Ward numbers eight and nine of the Panchayat, the rest of the area was inundated by flood waters. By that time, it was possible to relocate the bulk of the population in the affected areas to safer places. However, when floods began to threaten the relief camps, the people who were housed in these camps had to be shifted to places like Paravur, Ernakulam and Thrissur. This was done using country and motorised boats as well as by helicopters. The Panchayat members were in the forefront of overseeing the rescue mission. Through the operation, which lasted for four days, it was possible to relocate about 25,000 people.

The Panchayat, through the Gothuruth Primary Health Centre (PHC), ensured the services of doctors and the supply of medicines to those in the relief camps. It also effectively coordinated the activities of various youth organisations and clubs which were involved in relief work. A meeting of Ward members was held at Paravur Taluk office during which the rehabilitation of the flood-affected was discussed.

SANITISATION CAMPAIGN

There were many challenges in the post flood period. A vast majority of houses in the Panchayat had become uninhabitable due to the floods. Voluntary organisations as well as the three Panchayats of Vazhappetty, Raimangalam and Chellanam, along with Self Help Groups were constituted into 10-member groups to carry out the cleaning work. Ward members were given charge of their respective Wards. The Panchayat arranged for the supply of cleaning materials to carry out the work.

The work of cleaning, bleaching and chlorination were carried out with the help of the Primary Health Centre (PHC). Chlorination of all wells in each Ward was conducted with the help of Asha workers. The relief camps worked for 10 to 15 days. Supply of essential items to those returning to their homes was arranged by the Panchayat under the initiative of the Ward members. Supply of drinking water was ensured through tanker lorries. The Panchayat was able to arrange piped water supply.

Another major problem in the aftermath of the floods was waste disposal. After the floods, waste had accumulated in various parts of the Panchayat. In addition, there were the carcasses of dead animals and birds which had to be disposed of. Arrangements were made to transport and bury them in the designated place.

The Panchayat, in cooperation with Suchithwa Mission, took steps to separate degradable and non-degradable waste. Steps were taken to arrange the supply of items collected by voluntary agencies and NGOs, to the flood-affected. Awareness classes were arranged at all Wards by the Panchayat through the Primary Health Centre to prevent the spread of epidemics. Supply of preventive medicines was also arranged at many places.

REVIVAL OF HANDLOOMS

As part of the rehabilitation work in cooperation with 'Rebuild Kerala' the Panchayat took steps to revive the handloom sector and make it functional. Meetings were held in cooperation with trade and industry organisations to arrange for providing tools and equipment to those who lost them during the floods. Counselling was arranged for those who had been traumatised by the floods and loss of their livelihood.

Having learnt valuable lessons from the experience, the Panchayat is now looking to make the area more flood-safe. It has mooted the idea of modifying the construction of houses in the region, to make them more durable to withstand the effects of floods. Changing the roof structure of the houses has also been mooted to facilitate speedy rescue operations in case of exigencies. Reconstruction of waterways in the area is another proposal.

Though the Panchayat faced many hurdles, the united efforts of the Ward members as well as its own timely interventions helped it overcome the perils of the calamity. What is more relevant is that the calamity which gave the area a taste of nature's brutality also led to the realisation that preventive measures need to be fortified to face potential disasters in the future.

NISHAD A K
President

A BOOKMARK IN HISTORY

Chittattukara gives credit for surviving the flood of the century to the concerted efforts of a well coordinated team consisting Panchayat staff, Ward members and local people. All the components of the team worked in tandem to see that life after the floods in the Panchayat returns to normal at the earliest. Learning from its experience in dealing with the calamity, the Panchayat is putting together working groups and voluntary forces to deal with natural calamities in the future

Chittattukara Grama Panchayat is in the north Paravur Taluk, located within the limits of the Paravur Block in Ernakulam district. The Panchayat covers an area of 9.46 square kilometres. The boundaries of the Panchayat include Chendamangalam and Karumalloor Panchayats to the east, Pallipuram Panchayat to the west, Paravur Municipality, Ezhikkara and Kothuvally Panchayats to the south and Vadakkekara and Chendamangalam Panchayats to the north. Chittattukara Grama Panchayat was formed in 1953 by merging Vadakkekara village union and Paravur village union that lie in the northern part of Ernakulam district.

The Panchayat is amply endowed with water resources and is situated in an area close to the Periyar and its tributaries. According to old timers, Chittattukara was formed as a 'place surrounded by rivers.' There are 18 Wards in the Panchayat and a population of 31,303. The main industries in the area are coir, handloom and fisheries.

MASSIVE FLOODS

Due to the massive rains that occurred in Kerala in July and August of 2018, the state experienced unprecedented floods in many districts. As the water levels in various dams rose at an alarmingly fast rate due to the rains, the shutters of many of them had to be opened. This led to severe flooding in many areas.

When the shutters of the Edamalayar dam were opened on August 9, the volume of water flowing into the Periyar river multiplied manifold resulting in the river overflowing at many places and submerging many areas along its course.

Chittattukara Panchayat is a village situated close to the tributaries of the Periyar. On August 9, water levels began to rise in Wards four, five and six. However, because of the low tide in the area the water level did not go up much.

The torrential rains that intensified from August 15, led to massive flooding and inundation of many areas of the Panchayat. Historically, in Chittattukara, water level rises very fast during floods. In the same way, it recedes equally fast when floods subside.

However, the floods of 2018, defied past trends in scale and ferocity. The people of the Panchayat are used to the rise and fall of water levels in the rivers of the area, during monsoons. But the sheer magnitude of flooding in 2018 took the villagers by surprise. The rainfall and floods of August broke all previous records and rose to unprecedented levels. This resulted in severe damage for the Panchayat and its residents.

RESCUE AND RELIEF

On August 8, a warning was received from the disaster control authority. The warning was that those residing on Periyar banks should be alerted to the possibility of heavy floods. On August 9, when water levels began to rise in some Wards, the Panchayat authorities decided to take action.

The Panchayat had already set up two relief camps. But soon water levels receded and under the belief that the worst was over, the camps were closed down.Water levels rose again on August 15, in the eastern areas of the Panchayat and on August 16, flood waters began to enter the western areas of the Panchayat. This time the situation was grim. By August 16, flood waters had entered almost all the Wards of the Panchayat.

As more and more people had to flee their homes to escape the fury of floods, 29 camps, both big and small, were started in the Panchayat. With no respite from rains, the scale of floods grew and water began to enter the relief camps. People in these camps had to be shifted to Paravur. From August 15 to 19, water level in the region continued rising. As power supply and means of communication were severely disrupted, rescue and relief operations became extremely difficult.

The floods destroyed 232 houses and resulted in partial damage of about 4,000 houses. About 10,000 people had to be shifted to relief camps. Ward members and Panchayat employees ensured the smooth conduct of these camps and also the uninterrupted supply of essential items to them. Water levels in places of human habitation in the Panchayat rose between five to eight feet.

As more and more people had to flee their homes to escape the fury of floods, 29 relief camps, both big and small, were started in the Panchayat

SUCCESS OF TEAMWORK

Having pulled off a successful rescue operation, the Panchayat faced severe challenges after the floods. Most of the houses in the Panchayat as well as the Panchayat office and other public buildings were filled with slush and mud that the flood waters had left behind.

Cleaning up operations were undertaken by teams formed with the help of various voluntary organisations; individuals; government agencies; students and institutions that had joined hands with the Grama Panchayat in its rehabilitation drive. Materials needed for the work in each Ward were supplied through the respective Ward members.

At the same time, awareness classes and medical camps were arranged to prevent the spread of epidemics. Preventive medicines were distributed to the affected areas and as a result of the concerted efforts, no incidence of infectious diseases was reported in the Panchayat.

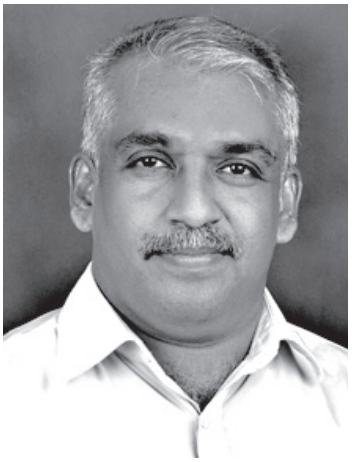
DISPOSAL OF GARBAGE

The disposal of garbage was another challenge. There was a huge pile of both biodegradable and non-biodegradable waste that had accumulated all over the Panchayat, following the floods. The Panchayat arranged for the disposal of carcasses of 236 cattle and 3,000 birds. About 100 loads of non- biodegradable garbage were transported using trucks to the Brahmapuram waste treatment plant. All the garbage was disposed of with the help of Suchitwa Mission.

SURVIVAL KITS

Kits containing essential items were distributed to those who returned home after the floods. They were distributed to all homes in all Wards under the leadership of the respective Ward members. The Panchayat helped in transferring the contributions and assistance from various organisations to the flood-affected.

The Panchayat overcame many challenges, but the calamity brought with it many valuable lessons that the Panchayat has imbibed and is now planning to implement. One of them is to start working groups and voluntary forces to deal with natural disasters like floods in the future. This is the Panchayat way of acknowledging the services rendered by Ward members, Panchayat officials, the general public and the unseen, unheard heroes who all worked selflessly to help the land and its people to safety.



ADVOCATE RAJEEV N
Vice President

PHOENIX-LIKE RESURRECTION

Despite being caught unawares by the mighty floods last year, Eraviperoor Panchayat displayed tremendous strength of purpose to put together an action plan for flood relief and rehabilitation. The smooth execution of their rescue and rehabilitation plan and the timely follow-up on every aspect demonstrates that people's power can take on any challenge if it is channelised properly by an effective leadership

Eraviperoor Panchayat in Pathanamthitta is surrounded on all three sides by water. On the north and west of the Panchayat is the Manimala river and on the south is the Pamba Varattaar, which was reclaimed as part of the Punarjeevanam scheme of the Haritha Keralam project.

Eraviperoor Panchayat, with 17 Wards, is spread over an area of 18.64 square kilometres. The Panchayat has a total population of 25,200 comprising 13,460 women and 11,740 men. Of the total population, 3,786 people belong to the Scheduled Caste community and 1,173 to the Scheduled Tribe category. Eraviperoor is bordered on the north by Kallooppara Panchayat, on the south by the Chengannur Municipality, on the west by Kaviyoor Panchayat and on the east by Koyippuram Panchayat.

Though the Panchayat experienced heavy rainfall in July 2018, the water level in the area did not rise to alarming levels. However, the rains on August 13 and 14 caused the water level in rivers to rise steadily, though it did not seem to be an indication of the scale of flood fury that was about to happen.

The Panchayat authorities, led by the vice president, personally took the efforts to procure essential items to be distributed to those in relief camps

Despite this, the Panchayat members issued directives to ensure the safety of people residing on the banks of the rivers. On the night of August 14, news broke out that shutters of various dams in Pathanamthitta and other districts were being opened due to heavy rains. It was at about 2.30 am that the revenue authority of the Panchayat received the alert from the collectorate.

A CALAMITY UNFOLDS

As it was Onam season, there were snake boats berthed on the banks of the river. The Panchayat officials immediately alerted those in charge of the snake boats; political leaders; religious institutions; voluntary groups and youth organisations. By about 3.30 am on August 14, teams led by Panchayat members were able to reach the banks of the river. They arranged to have bed-ridden patients, children and women shifted from the houses on river banks. Public announcements were also made to alert people about the likelihood of floods.

Since the situation worsened by 6.30 am, it became imperative to move people to relief camps as their homes were getting flooded. A relief camp was set up at the local government school. Steps were taken to have bed-ridden patients shifted to the Primary Health Centre (PHC). As the intensity of the floods was unprecedented and there was lack of sufficient relief camps, church organisations and voluntary agencies came forward under the leadership of the Panchayat to set up new ones. The Panchayat took up the onerous task of arranging food for those who were housed in these relief camps.

FLOOD FURY UNLEASHED

By 10 am, it became impossible to cross the river as there were strong currents. Single-storey houses on the banks of the river were all flooded. There were many people who were unwilling to move out of their homes despite warnings. The Panchayat took measures to shift them forcibly to safer places. Attempts were made to bring in big boats for rescue. However, it was difficult to take them to areas where they were needed. Following this, the Panchayat sought government help.

As there was danger from broken power lines, power supply in the Panchayat was cut off, following which mobile phone connectivity also became impaired. By the time revenue officials arrived at around 11.30 am, the Panchayat had already started relief operations. Local teams were in the forefront as they helped the village officer coordinate the rescue and relief operations.

All the routes to Tiruvalla and Kozhencherry on the Tiruvalla-Pathanamthitta road were badly damaged due to heavy flooding. So traffic on the main road came to a standstill. This made transport of essential items to the Panchayat and relief camps difficult. Soon shops in the area began shutting down resulting in shortage and price rise of essential items.

REHABILITATION DRIVE

The Panchayat authorities, led by the vice president, visited various shops and procured essential items to be distributed in relief camps. The Panchayat secretary stayed in the area to coordinate the operations and take speedy action when needed. All the Panchayat members and officials worked round the clock to help people out of the distress caused by the calamity. The Panchayat administration took direct charge of the relief camps to ensure their smooth functioning.

By August 19, rains started letting up and slowly the water levels on the roads began to subside. By August 20 and 21, it had receded completely. On August 20, the charge of the relief camps was transferred to the Revenue Department. However, Panchayat officials continued to take responsibility for ensuring supply of essential items to the people.

The local administration took the initiative of cleaning up the homes in flood-affected areas and completing it in a speedy manner. The first step was to restore the roads and homes. Teams were formed for cleaning different locations, to bring more focus and speed to the operations. These teams comprised college students; youth wings of political parties; members of voluntary groups; government officials from other districts; Kudumbashree as well as Asha workers.

On Tiruvonam day, August, 25, workers of voluntary groups took steps to distribute onasadya to the flood-affected people. The Panchayat took the initiative to ensure the return of displaced people to their homes. It also took steps to ensure that the amount of Rs 10,000 announced by the Government reached the real beneficiaries. Steps were taken to print application forms to make the process easier for the applicants.

The local administration also made arrangements for certificates to be issued by various authorities to those who had lost their original certificates or documents in the floods.

An effort to properly assess the losses suffered by the people was launched with the assistance of the Panchayat. It was carried out by students of an engineering college in collaboration with the Panchayat authorities and Kudumbashree workers. The expenses were met by the Panchayat.

CLEANING OPERATIONS

Counselling was held for the elderly in the flood-affected areas by the Health Department and for children by members of voluntary agencies. The Health Department gave support in sanitising the wells, implementing measures for prevention of epidemics and disposal of waste including carcasses of dead animals and birds.

Under the Haritha Keralam project, 138 tonnes of mud and plastic waste were totally removed from the Panchayat. The Panchayat ensured the supply of medicines worth Rs 8 lakh in the relief camps. Grama Sabhas were convened to coordinate the work of the Panchayat.

Under the Sulabha project, a sum of Rs 12 lakh was made available for the supply of 36,000 seeds of banana and 10,000 seeds of tubers to the farmers who had lost their crops. The cultivation of ginger and other agricultural crops was started in the Panchayat. The task of finding land for cultivation was entrusted to Kudumbashree.

A sum of Rs 1,500 each was provided by the Panchayat to clean the wells in the flood-affected areas. Besides, Rs 1,000 was allocated per family for the repair of damaged motor pumps. The Panchayat was also instrumental in ensuring drinking water supply to all affected areas which faced severe shortage after the floods. There were no reports of the spread of any infectious disease in the area. This is a reflection of the vigilance maintained by the Panchayat during the calamity as well as in its post-flood rehabilitation drive.

BETWEEN THE FLOOD AND THE DEEP SEA

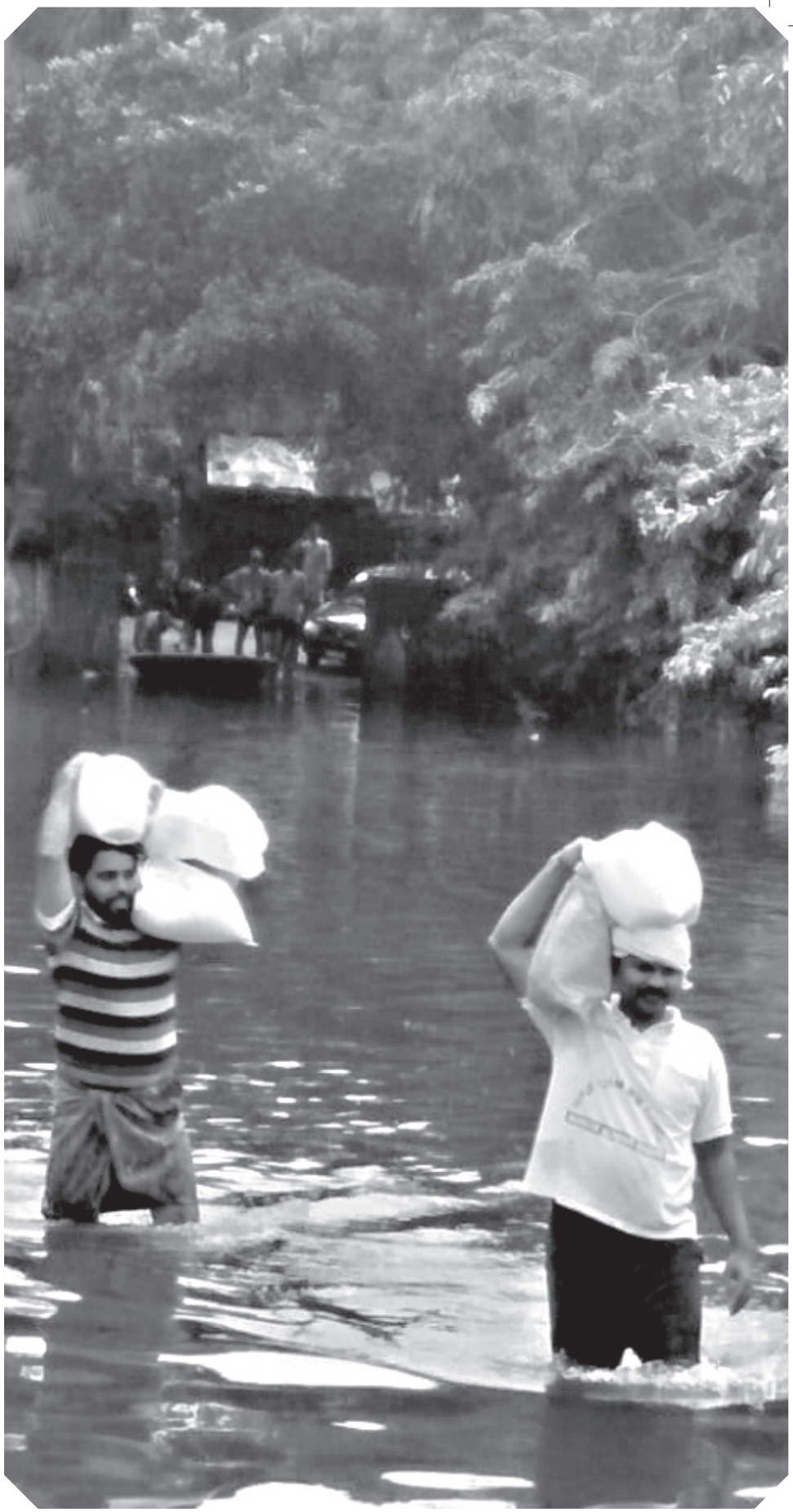
PRASATHINI
President

With the flood waters submerging it from one side and the Arabian Sea pounding it from the other, Eriyad went through a tough time during the last monsoons. However, a meticulously prepared plan and its methodical implementation helped the Panchayat to overcome the challenges posed by Mother Nature. The wealth of information on containing the impact of natural disasters that the people of Eriyad mined out of its older generation also helped them in taming the two monsters, the flood and the deep sea

With the Arabian Sea on its west and Kanjirapuzha, a tributary of Periyar in the south, Eriyad is one of the largest Panchayats in Thrissur district. On the north side Eriyad shares its boundary with Edavilangu Panchayat and on the east side with Kodungallur Municipality. Eriyad has some of the well-known tourism centres in Thrissur district such as Azheekkode Munakkal Beach, Azheekkode Marthoma Church and Mohammed Abdul Rehman Memorial history museum within its limits.

It has 23 Wards and a population of 46,213 as per the last Census. Agriculture is the main occupation of the people of Eriyad. Coconut; arecanut; nutmeg and pepper are some of the important crops in the region. The Panchayat has a total area of 16.75 square kilometres. The total literacy rate in the Panchayat is 88.07 per cent. Eriyad falls in the Kodungallur Block Panchayat.

In the third phase of cleaning, data on the houses, offices and other buildings that were damaged in the floods are being collected for future use



MONSOON MAYHEM

When the monsoons of 2018 intensified there were reports that the shutters of many dams including Idukki would be opened. Against the backdrop of such warnings, the Disaster Management Committee met in the Panchayat. The committee decided to warn the people in the low lying, flood-prone Wards of Eriyad about the threat of floods and to open relief camps in the Tsunami shelter and Eriyad KVH School.

It was on August 15, the day the flood struck with all its fury, that the Panchayat started its rescue and relief operations. With the Government declaring a red alert in the area, the Independence Day celebrations were completed quickly to enable the Panchayat representatives to start

their work among the people. A meeting was called to assess the flood situation in each Ward. Based on the data on the vulnerability of each Ward, the first step was to shift people from those Wards where the impact of the floods was going to be the worst.

In the most vulnerable Wards, those located in coastal areas, water had not entered the homes until then. However, water had submerged the canals, roads and compounds of houses in the first phase. It was, therefore, decided that there was no need to put up relief camps at that stage. However, the Panchayat Committee met and decided to launch cleaning operations in these areas.

Sea water had entered the coastal Wards of Eriyad Panchayat market; Aarattuvazhi; the dispensary; beach; Menon Bazar and Market East. Since the rivers and canals like Kanjirapuzha, Perumthodu and other small canals were overflowing and the monsoon was

intensifying, there were hurdles in the way of shifting people from flooded houses to relief camps.

EVACUATION AND RELIEF

About 1,408 families were evacuated to the camps in Azheekode functioning at Sarada Samajam Hall, Tsunami Beach Shelter, GUPS Menon Bazar and Azheekkode Hamadani School. In Eriyad village, about 2,521 people were shifted to six camps opened at Sishu Vidyaposhini, Eriyad Galaxy Auditorium and Jamiya Assissiya, Athani.

All essential items that the camp inmates needed such as food, water, clothes and medicines were arranged with the help of the Panchayat president; Ward members; staff; village office employees; social workers; political party representatives; voluntary workers and organisations. The camps were run very efficiently with the help of all those who came forward and pitched in with their efforts.

CLEANING BRIGADES

In the second stage, a supervisory committee was formed to oversee cleaning operations in places where water level had started receding. Later, cleaning brigades were formed in the Panchayat with a Ward member as the chairperson and Panchayat staff and social workers as members. Treatment of waste from homes, offices and other buildings that had flooded each Ward, chlorination as well as distribution of preventive medicines were the responsibility of the cleaning brigades. Clean drinking water was provided in tankers for the benefit of those who returned to their homes.

In the third phase of cleaning, data on the homes, offices and other buildings that were damaged in the flood, were collected with the help of the staff and students of the Engineering College, Thrissur. A meeting was called to prepare a detailed plan for rebuilding operations in the Panchayat. The preparation of a comprehensive document on the entire processes and activities undertaken by the Panchayat, during the floods, is under way.

CHALLENGES OF SURVIVAL

For Eriyad, which witnesses flooding frequently, surviving the monsoons every year is turning out to be a challenge. The Panchayat is planning to form a Disaster Management Committee with youngsters and fishermen as members. Their expertise and enthusiasm would help Eriyad to successfully meet the challenges of future floods, it is hoped.

Protecting the life and property of the residents of the Panchayat from the rough Arabian Sea in the west, during the monsoon period, is a responsibility that the Panchayat has already taken seriously. Last year the monsoons posed a new set of challenges for Eriyad, with the massive floods that wreaked unprecedented havoc in the regions under its administration. It was the presence of mind of many veterans who were experienced in combating natural disasters, along with the meticulous planning and implementation by the Panchayat that helped Eriyad survive a calamity of this scale. The learnings gathered from it will form the basis for the Panchayat's action plan for preparedness, to face natural disasters of such scale in the future.

SHIBU VARGHESE
President

CONCERTED EFFORTS

Kadapra Panchayat is a region truly blessed by nature. With the Pamba running across the heart of the land and small rivers surrounding it on all three sides, it is a very fertile land. However, the same factors made it one of the worst victims of the floods of 2018. That it came back to normalcy quickly is a demonstration of the Panchayat administration's single minded focus on sanitation and its success in bringing together multiple resources of manpower to accomplish its rehabilitation efforts

Kadapra Grama Panchayat is located in the Pulikkeezhu Block of Tiruvalla Taluk in Pathanamthitta district. The Panchayat, that covers 14.74 square kilometres over 15 Wards, forms part of the Kadapra village. It shares its borders with the Panchayats of Nedumbram in the north, Thiruvanvandur and Pandanad in the east, Mannar in the south and Niranam in the west. The Pamba river that splits into two at Kuthiyathodu in Pandanad Panchayat, flows through the heart of Kadapra, to join Achankovil river and flow through the east of the Panchayat again. Kadapra Panchayat is a very fertile land nurtured by the rivers that surround it.

WATER LEVELS RISE

On August 14, 2018, the Panchayat president received an alert from the district collectorate on the possibility of unprecedented floods. Immediately the Panchayat members were given instructions to take further steps. By 2.15 pm, people in the Panchayat were given

warnings about the impending calamity, through public announcements. By five pm, three rounds of announcements were made, by which time flood waters had risen beyond expected levels, rendering it difficult for the announcement vehicles to return.

FOCUS ON SANITATION

Since the floods started on August 15, 42 official relief camps were set up, apart from 60 small ones which operated in homes located in safe areas. Right from the initial stage, the Panchayat placed great focus on hygiene, anticipating sanitation challenges that a flood of such scale could precipitate. It lost no time in enlisting the help of various voluntary organisations to conduct regular cleaning in the relief camps. Fifteen squads were formed from Panchayat and Public Health Centre (PHC) employees, Asha and Kudumbashree workers and other voluntary groups to clean each of the 15 Wards.

On August 24, an 18-member Central Industrial Security Force (CISF) squad conducted a cleaning programme targeting the homes of Kottakkamali Colony in Ward nine. On August 26, a team of 42 policemen from SAP battalion of the Kerala Government and members of a voluntary organisation from Thiruvananthapuram undertook cleaning operations of homes and relief camps and chlorination of wells.

The next day 1,200 National Service Scheme (NSS) volunteers from various schools in Kollam undertook sanitisation of all the 15 Wards of the Panchayat with the help of Asha workers of the local Kudumbashree units. The same day, another group of 236 Kudumbashree members from the Pallikkal and Erath Panchayats of Parakkod Block joined hands with the Kudumbashree members in the area in an extensive clean-up campaign covering all the Wards. Ten wells in Wards five, six, seven, eight and nine were dried and sanitised. This was done at the initiative of the president, officials and staff of Karodu Panchayat from Thiruvananathapuram.

In the next two days, many of the houses in the Panchayat were cleared and made habitable through the efforts of another group of Kudumbashree workers.

Twenty five wells in the Panchayat were dried and cleaned up with the help of the members of another voluntary organisation from Palakkad. A 10-member team of agricultural officers from Kollam district, with the assistance of Kadapra agricultural officer, also joined the operations and helped clean many of the homes as well as the local anganawadi premises.

A team of 58 NSS workers from the engineering college at Parippally undertook cleaning of flood-affected areas in the Panchayat including Parumala D B college, which had accumulated a great deal of dirt and debris in the floods. On September 3, a team of 10 electricians visited the Panchayat, under the initiative of the district Harita Kerala Mission and completed repairs of all the electrical wiring that had been damaged by flood waters.

As part of the comprehensive rehabilitation programme launched by the Panchayat, 5,945 homes were fully cleaned and restored. Eleven public institutions which were affected by the floods were also cleaned and made functional. Of the 5,975 wells in the area, 1,298 were cleaned. Over 1,400 were chlorinated and made fit for use, under the supervision of the Kadapra Public Health Centre (PHC).

Three electrical motors owned by the Panchayat and six hired ones were put to use to clean the wells on a war footing. All the schools and establishments which functioned as relief camps, were cleaned and reopened without delay. Biodegradable garbage was buried safely in the Panchayat premises while non-biodegradable waste was transferred by trucks for processing by a voluntary organisation from Kollam.

DRINKING WATER FOR ALL

To ensure clean drinking water after the reopening of the educational institutions, the Panchayat installed new water tanks in Government Lower Primary School, Valanjavattom, Mannar Church M D Lower Primary

As part of the comprehensive rehabilitation programme launched by the Panchayat, 5,945 homes were fully cleaned and restored. 11 public institutions which were affected by the floods were also cleaned and made functional

School and Modissery Lower Primary School. The Panchayat also arranged for the purchase of a water tank in the Baselious M D Lower Primary School.

As a lot of the water sources still remained non-functional there was the possibility of drinking water shortage. Anticipating the contingency, uninterrupted supply of drinking water was provided with the help of a 5,000-litre tank and three 2,000-litre water tanks which were installed for the purpose. Till the date of this documentation, 12,74,000 litres of water had been distributed in the area.

DAMAGE ASSESSMENT

A digital survey was conducted with the help of engineering students and technical experts to assess the extent of damage caused by the calamity. The task was completed by August 23. The Panchayat suffered great devastation in the disaster that took the region by surprise. However, thanks to the prompt and constructive interventions by the Panchayat administration, normalcy could be restored much sooner than expected. At the same time, Kadapra Panchayat owes a lot to Kerala Institute of Local Administration (KILA) and the Government for their valuable inputs and action plans that helped the Panchayat and its residents survive with minimum of casualties.

SHEELA
President

IT IS BUSINESS AS USUAL

Kainakary Village Panchayat is located in the heart of Kuttanad and is the granary of Kerala. It is also one of the biggest tourism draws in the state, with its lush greenery and placid waterways that sport Kerala's very own brand of houseboats called Kettuvalloms. Though it faced the worst devastation in the floods of 2018, it has rebounded with great resilience, and today it is business as usual for Kainakary, thanks to the interventions by the local Panchayat in providing relief, rebuilding and restoring the area to near normalcy

The misery of rains left Kerala with no other choice than stand united. Never has a natural disaster impacted the state with such intensity as did the monsoon rains of the recent past. People of Kerala who went about in a business-as-usual mode, despite signs of an impending disaster, saw the ferocious face of torrential rains. The damage wrought by it in Kuttanad in Alappuzha, a district that depends mainly on agriculture; fishing; toddy tapping and tourism, is beyond imagination. Kuttanad is the gift of Mother Nature to Kerala. Kainakary Village Panchayat is located in the heart of Kuttanad, the rice bowl and cultural cradle of Kerala, attracting domestic and foreign travellers with its splendid natural beauty.

THE CATASTROPHE

The great flood of 2018 was the second witnessed by the natives of Kainakary after the massive deluge of 1924 recorded in history. Kainakary was perhaps the

worst affected Panchayat in the whole of Kerala. It is a collection of numerous small islets surrounded by the river Pamba. Nearly 58.87 per cent of the total area of the Panchayat is made up of water bodies. The countless number of small streams and lakes make the Panchayat a unique ecosystem, home to a population of 26,862. The Panchayat comprises fifteen Wards and belongs to the Chambakkulam Block.

Hurdles that block the natural flow of water have led to recurrent floods in Kuttanad. The great flood of August 2018 came even as the natives of Kuttanad were struggling to overcome the ravages caused by the floods of July. A warning was issued during a meeting held at the chamber of the district collector under the leadership of Public Works Department (PWD)s minister G Sudhakaran. Based on this, a meeting of the Disaster Management Committee was immediately held, chaired by the Panchayat president. Even remote areas were alerted through public announcements, thanks to the prompt intervention of the Panchayat Ward members.

However the natives of Kainakary who were used to minor flooding every season, did not take the warnings seriously. More stern warnings had to be issued to convey the scale of the impending danger. Rescue efforts were a herculean task in an area that consists of isolated islets. The district administration and local authorities provided all required assistance for the rescue efforts. The administration of the Panchayat was shifted to SDV School and all meetings and discussions were held there. One factor that makes Kainakary different from other Panchayats is that nearly 90 per cent of the households own small boats fitted with Yamaha engines. As the water level began to rise to dangerous levels by August 16, a few of these boats were seized for rescue work. Those who volunteered to help navigate the boats

were also pressed into service.

PRO-ACTIVE INTERVENTION

Nearly everyone was shifted to relief camps by August 17. The Panchayat authorities formed separate groups and visited every corner of the village to ensure that all had shifted to camps. Those who declined to move out were shifted with the assistance of the police. The most difficult part of this mission was to persuade a family with an autistic child to move. The assistance of a medical officer was made available for the purpose. For the next 10 days, people lived in relief camps. Two thousand five hundred camps were set up to accommodate people living in the area that stretched from Harippad to Pattanakkad.

People who had to leave their belongings on rooftops were forced to abandon their domestic cattle and pets. Panchayat representatives managed to distribute cattle feed and pet food supplied by individuals and Non Government Organisations (NGOs). Meetings of the Panchayat Committees were held in different camps to coordinate and provide leadership to ensure uninterrupted rescue operations. After the floods, Grama Sabha meetings were also held in many camps. The Panchayat also mooted the idea of police patrolling to address the menace of theft in deserted dwellings. Its members constantly intervened to defuse and solve issues arising in camps due to people from different backgrounds and areas living together and sharing common facilities.

REBUILDING EFFORTS

Of the 26 padasekharams (paddy collectives) in the Panchayat, 24 were totally destroyed. Kainakary has been in reconstruction mode since

Thanks to the initiative of the Panchayat, equitable distribution of food items and other relief materials was ensured in all camps. It also went that extra mile to restore supply of drinking water which had become totally polluted and disrupted

then. The cleaning and sanitisation drive started from August 29. In an area that saw a total disruption of power supply, the Panchayat joined hands with the Kerala State Electricity Board (KSEB) to restore power in every household. It also succeeded in supplying food to all those who were engaged in the cleaning and sanitisation drive. Ward members played a great role in reaching the emergency aid of Rs 10,000, released by the Government, to even those took shelter in far off places or in the houses of relatives and friends.

Thanks to the initiative of the Panchayat, equitable distribution of food and other relief materials was ensured in all camps. It also took pro-active action like chlorination and other measures to restore supply of drinking water which had become totally polluted and disrupted. Volunteers from different parts of the country reached Kainakary to offer aid to the flood-affected families. Teams of Panchayat officials conducted surveys in different wards to rectify mistakes in the data on damages caused so as to ensure that all those who deserved received compensation.

Regular medical camps were organised under the leadership of the medical officer. The result was that Kainakary Panchayat remained free from epidemics and other medical mishaps. Even today, clean water is being supplied by boats to houses that face drinking water shortage. The Panchayat office is currently functioning from the local community hall as the original building was completely destroyed in the floods. The Panchayat continues to be the backbone of the reconstruction efforts in the land devastated by floods. It disburses high-power motor subsidy, freely distributes seeds and provides 20 per cent advance payment to farmers whose bunds were totally damaged.

The village is currently under reconstruction with the help of rescue workers and the good human beings who have come forward to help. The flood has taught very valuable lessons and the people of the area have imbibed the virtues of sharing and caring. It also brought with it the recurring images of humanity and selfless service displayed by virtuous human beings who came in large numbers to carry their fellow beings out of an unprecedented catastrophe.

ADVOCATE THULASIBAI PADMANABHAN
President

FOCUS ON FUTURE

The experience of Kalady shows that real leadership emerges in a crisis. After the deluge of 2018 had receded, the flood-hit town looked like a battleground. It had not spared anyone or anything. From such a situation arose real leaders who took charge of the rescue and rehabilitation work. In fact, the real heroes of the flood are the hundreds of faceless rescue workers who volunteered to save the victims. If the victims recount stories of endurance and survival, the leaders of rescue work tell the stories of sacrifice and heroism

August 15, 2018, the Independence Day. The national flag was hoisted, Independence Day message was read out and the colourful rally by school children had come to an end. Within an hour or so a drizzle started, which developed into a steady downpour that pounded the entire state. In a few hours, Kalady, located on the banks of the Periyar, was under water. The water that flowed along the Periyar submerged all the 17 Wards of the Panchayat. All the main roads and by-lanes of Kalady were submerged.

RUSH TO THE CAMPS

As the situation threatened to go out of control, rescue and relief operations were launched on a war footing. Thousands of people were shifted from the flooded localities to makeshift camps. At the initiative of the Panchayat officials, relief camps were opened in all

available spaces like schools, colleges and churches. Committees were formed by the people themselves to manage 13 such camps.

In a wonderful display of unity in the face of adversity, elected representatives of different political parties; youngsters; farmers; workers and many others got together to launch a rescue mission. They used makeshift rafts, large vessels, rubber tubes and anything they could lay their hands on, for the operations. When the police and fire force also joined them, thousands of people could be shifted to relief camps without any untoward incident.

ENDURANCE AND SURVIVAL

The deluge of 2018 threw up hundreds of new stories of endurance and survival that the rescue workers lived to recount. Though the experience of flood was painful, the comfortable atmosphere in the camps was a big relief to the flood victims.

By August 18, 2018, the water level had receded to normal levels. However, the spectacle that awaited those who returned home was heart-breaking. Many houses were completely destroyed in the floods. Others were covered with mud and slush. Household items were all drenched and poisonous reptiles were everywhere. Crops were destroyed and the animals they had raised were dead. All Government offices like Panchayat office; police station; the Electricity Board office; Krishi Bhavan and others were under heaps of dirt.

EFFECTIVE WASTE MANAGEMENT

The loss to the people was much more than the initial estimates. They had no clue what to do. The Panchayat looked like a battlefield. They soon realised that it was not the time to brood over the past, but to work for the future.

The action committee of the Panchayat launched a campaign to rebuild Kalady. On August 19 and 20, the committee, along with other volunteers, buried the dead animals and birds that the flood waters had brought. Several tons of waste materials from shops and houses had piled up on the road side. These were cleared with the intervention of district officials.

The wells in every Ward were cleaned and chlorinated. To ascertain the quality of well water the Pollution Control Board tested around 3,000 samples

About 950 tons of waste was shifted to the Brahmapuram waste treatment plant and to the Kerala Enviro Infrastructure Limited (KEIL) waste treatment plant at Ambalamugal. Kalady became the best-rated Panchayat in post-flood waste management operations at the state level.

The Ernakulam district organisation of merchants who deal in waste materials was contacted and they also helped with the waste disposal programme. The speedy and effective clearance of biodegradable waste helped the prevention of epidemics. The services of doctors of the social health centre also went a long way in achieving this.

POLLUTION CONTROL INITIATIVE

The well water in the region had become unfit for drinking. On August 20, a cleaning programme funded by the Panchayat was launched. About two dozens motor pumps were hired and the wells in every Ward were cleaned and chlorinated. Along with this, four tankers supplied drinking water to all the Wards. As the people were still sceptical of the quality of the well water, the Pollution Control Board (PCB) was brought in to test the sample from each well. About 3,000 samples were tested. For this, the services of 300 National Service Scheme (NSS) volunteers from the nearby colleges were made available.

The Panchayat also received the support of other elected representatives, voluntary workers, police and state excise officials to clean houses; schools; offices; anganawadis and other buildings in the region. About 100 Kerala State Electricity Board (KSEB) employees worked tirelessly to restore power supply in the region. The floods had thrown the functioning of the Panchayat out of gear. The service extended by all the officials to put it back on track was crucial. Water-drenched files were recovered to a great extent. About 20 computers that were rendered useless by the flood waters were restored with the help of technicians from Ernakulam.

STUDENT POWER HARNESSED

About 50 students of the NSS technical division of the nearby engineering college worked tirelessly under the guidance of their teachers to repair the generator worth Rs 8 lakh, the equipment in the slaughter house, the gas crematorium and the fish market. This was a big help for the cash-strapped Panchayat.

They also helped to publicise the damages of the Panchayat through the social media which helped mobilise funds for the post-flood reconstruction of Kalady. The Panchayat Committee and employees also worked in a committed manner to help people avail the cash assistance of Rs 10,000 announced by the state Government and to verify other complaints. As a result, all assistance from the Government was made available without any major delay.

Altogether around 48 houses were completely destroyed by the floods in Kalady Panchayat. Of this, the foundation stones for the reconstruction of 12 houses have already been laid. The state Government and the Department of Cooperation are taking key decisions in this area. The work of reconstructing the roads is being taken up with the help of the state Public Works Department (PWD).

CHILD HEALTH

Children were extremely traumatised by the calamity. The services of family counsellors and child specialists were ensured in every Ward. When the schools reopened on August 27, the Panchayat president, vice president and other officials went to each school and spent time with the children. *Balasabhas* were called in every Ward and talent festivals for students were organised to help children get over the trauma.

Realising the fact that the most critical support is needed in the agriculture sector of Kalady, the Panchayat has put together some important schemes. With the help of the state Agriculture Department, about Rs 50 lakh was disbursed as compensation for crop damage. In the case of dairy farming, free cattle feed and treatment facilities for the animals were provided.

EMPLOYMENT DRIVE

While preparing the Annual Plan for 2019-20, focus is being given to the priorities of post-flood of Kalady. Better livelihood options are being provided to improve the employment situation in the Panchayat. Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) is being strengthened to provide 150 days of employment to each employee by March. Plans are also being formulated to start new Kudumbashree units to empower the women in the Panchayat financially. Through Kudumbashree schools the women will be made capable of making meaningful interventions in the problems in the Panchayat.

Punarbhava Kalady, an initiative by the Kalady Sanskrit university students, is targeted at the post-flood reconstruction of Kalady. The project components - a survey of the Wards and a workshop on key issues - give the Panchayat a new hope for the future.

SOUMYA ANOOP
President

GETTING CLOSER TO THE PEOPLE

As one of the worst hit regions in the recent floods, Kallara Grama Panchayat survived, and survived with renewed vigour to tell the story. This story celebrates the power of united human efforts in disaster management. It is also a brilliant lesson in how empowering and enabling local bodies can in the future help bring more power to the people and better efficiency in taking policy implementation to the grassroots level

Criss-crossed by many rivers and canals, Kallara Grama Panchayat is home to a beautiful, lush landscape nourished by numerous water bodies. Two thirds of the Panchayat area is wetlands though most of the paddy lands are left uncultivated. It is located in Vaikom Taluk in Kottayam district.

The Panchayat has an area of 27.48 square kilometres with a population of 15,614 of which 7,155 are males and 8,459 females. It shares its borders with Kaduthuruthy Panchayat in the north and Manjoor and Neendur Panchayats in the east. On the south side lies Arpookara Grama Panchayat while on the west side Thalayazham and Vechoor Panchayats share its border. Historically many Wards of the Panchayat experience flooding during the monsoon season. Relief camps are usually opened when such natural calamities occur.

DAMAGE CONTROL

A notice received from the Panchayat director on May 23, 2018, sounded an alert on the impending

floods. The Panchayat immediately decided to take precautionary steps to contain possible damage from the monsoons and convened a meeting of the members to discuss measures to be taken.

The strength and fitness of school buildings were checked and certified by the Panchayat assistant engineer. Under the supervision of the Panchayat Committee trees that posed potential danger to life and property were pruned; and fences were built around public and private ponds and water bodies. Health workers and Kudumbashree workers jointly cleaned the drainages and other places prone to flooding. This work helped restore smooth water flow in such places.

With the help of homeopathy, ayurveda and allopathy medical practitioners preventive operations against water-borne diseases were launched. Awareness progammes were organised under the leadership of health workers. The Grama Panchayat issued notices on the preventive measures to be adopted before the monsoons and the details of concerned people to be contacted in case of need, were circulated.

RELIEF OPERATIONS – PHASE 1

On June 21, areas close to the sub-station in the fourth Ward of Kallara Panchayat became isolated due to the rising waters and immediately some families was shifted to a safe place at the nearby anganawadi. On July 15, five relief camps were opened in the area. By July 30, the water level had receded. Relief camps were shut down and a sanitisation drive was undertaken to have the houses cleaned and fit for people to move in.

PHASE 2

In the second week of August torrential monsoons created a much graver flood situation in the area. On August 16, an all-party meeting was called to discuss measures for disaster relief operations. After the low lying lands in Munnar, Kallara and Perumthuruthy

The Panchayat took care to distribute essential materials and services in the camps, with regular reviews to ensure smooth functioning

experienced heavy flooding and relief camps were opened to accommodate the growing number of people who had to leave their homes.

To oversee the operations at relief camps, Panchayat officials were appointed, who focused on providing essential services; food; drinking water and essential medicines in the camps, with regular reviews conducted by the secretary and assistant secretary. Medical officers were appointed in the camps to provide medical aid round the clock.

On Kallara-Vechoor road water rose by three feet, disrupting traffic. Traffic disruption occurred on the Kumarakom-Kottayam and Vaikkom -Thalayolaparambu roads as well. This was the only road for the fishermen of Alappuzha beach to reach flood-hit areas in Chengannur and nearby places. The night travel on this road was very risky as the road was bordered on one side by the canal and on the other, by the wetlands. Local youth stood on both sides of the road like a fence and controlled traffic. On both sides of the submerged road, lights were provided with the help of Kerala State Electricity Board (KSEB). This helped restore traffic on the road. Backup generators were provided as a safeguard against power failure. When Perumthuruthy bridge got submerged, the road by which relief materials were taken to the camps was blocked, so tipper lorries were deployed.

With water level rising in Muvattupuzha and Meenachil rivers, low lying areas of various Wards started flooding. As the flood situation worsened, more relief camps were set up. Constant monitoring by the Panchayat officials ensured smooth functioning of the camps and helped solve the grievances of camp dwellers as fast as possible.

Cattle owned by the people in the camps were shifted to a safe place and temporary shelters were erected for them. Shortage of cattle feed was addressed with the help of concerned departments. The services of the veterinary doctors were employed to take care of them.

RESOURCE MOBILISATION

As per a directive from the Panchayat director, collection centres for food products that were easy to distribute and with higher shelf-life and medicines were opened. This helped the efficient allocation of essential items, donated by aid workers, to relief camps and others trapped in isolated areas.

Following a government alert about the possibility of food shortage the Panchayat secretary coordinated with the Civil Supplies and Maveli Store officials to ensure sufficient stocks and

uninterrupted supply of food. As instructed by the executive director of Suchitwa Mission, the Panchayat organised awareness classes in camps with the help of the Health Department, to prevent the spread of infectious diseases. Measures were also taken to chlorinate drinking water sources on a war footing.

Led by the medical officer, Ayurveda medical camps were conducted at the relief camps. A survey to collect data about the extent of damage was undertaken under the leadership of the Panchayat.

An emergency meeting of the Panchayat was convened on July 23, to review relief operations and assess cleaning operations. To provide psychiatric help to the people in the camp a psycho-social care team was employed by ICDS, at the initiative of the Panchayat.

The Tamil Nadu Government and organisations like Save Animal Kerala, Dhyan Foundation and Mumbai Earth Brigade came together to distribute cattle feed and medicines. Besides, an amount of Rs 20,000 was made available through the Animal Husbandry Department for organising a camp for the cattle.

Once the water level receded by August 27, relief camps were closed down and people started returning home. Organic waste from the camps was managed from five schools and 125 kilograms of inorganic waste collected was passed on to Clean Kerala Company.

It was through a joint operation of the Panchayat Administrative Committee, officials and the public that Kallara Panchayat was able to minimise the impact of the biggest flood of recent times. As an administrative set up that is closest to the people Grama Panchayats can do a lot more in disaster relief. But they should be given more responsibilities and the power to do so.

POST-FLOOD REHABILITATION

A Ward-level sanitisation campaign was initiated with the help of 41 squads under the leadership of Ward members. Participation of voluntary organisations; Kudumbashree; workers of the rural employment scheme; youth organisations and others was ensured in these squads. Guidelines for effective and safe cleaning operations were given by the medical officer. Kudumbashree workers were entrusted the task of collecting and treating organic and inorganic waste from the camps.

The coordination of this programme was entrusted to the officials deputed from different Panchayats. Steps were taken with the help of Kerala Water Authority (KWA) to provide drinking water to the people who had returned home. Water kiosks were provided to Wards which experienced shortage of drinking water.

SANDHYA RAMESH
President

THE WAY FORWARD

Kavalam, which has been sustained by the maze of water bodies that define its geography, was also the victim of unprecedented devastation caused by them. And having survived the trying times of the flood, thanks to the untiring efforts of its Panchayat administration and thousands of people who pitched in, its residents are slowly rebuilding their lives. And without doubt, the invaluable lessons that the calamity taught would give a whole new direction in their way forward

The mighty deluge that Kerala witnessed in August 2018, was a grim reminder that man is both helpless and unarmed before the forces of nature. There were only two groups of people in Kerala during those days — those who were affected by the natural calamity and those who were not. Everything else was irrelevant. It was a period when Kerala rediscovered its human side.

It is difficult to fully assess the damage caused by the floods in Alappuzha, popularly known as the Venice of the East. It wreaked havoc in the Kuttanad areas of Kainakary; Kavalam; Veliyanad; Pulinkunnu; Nedumudi; Neelamperur; Chambakkulam; Thakazhi; Edathva and others. People from the locality are mostly engaged in farming, toddy tapping, fisheries and tourism.

In Kuttanad, the floods took everything except the lives of people. The misery that the people went through was deeper than the Vembanad Lake, which runs through it. The excess water that flowed through

the Pamba, Achankovil and Manimala rivers flooded the 13 Panchayats of Kuttanad. The 14,427 residents of Kavalam were also not spared by the floods.

The floods of 2018 were the biggest since the one recorded in 1924. People of Kavalam are yet to recover from its fierce impact. The organisational and administrative leadership that the Panchayat demonstrated in equipping its residents to survive the floods needs special mention.

LEADING FROM THE FRONT

The Panchayat got the first warning about the floods on August 15, 2018, even before the memories of the Independence Day celebrations had faded away. The same day, in a specially convened meeting of the Panchayat presidents, chaired by minister G Sudhakaran, the possibility of the water level rising by one to three metres was discussed. For the villagers, whose lives are intricately entwined with the surrounding water bodies, it did not appear to be a threat.

The Panchayat convened a committee meeting on the same day as a follow up measure, and issued alerts on potential floods through public announcements. Warnings were given to elected representatives, Kudumbashree units and rural employment agencies.

By the evening of August 16, water had started rising abnormally. The local Disaster Management Committee consisting of police and village officials met and reviewed the preparatory measures adopted. Ward members took the initiative to evacuate people in their localities to relief camps and safer areas. Those who ignored the warnings were eventually trapped in their homes as the situation worsened. All those who owned boats were alerted by the police to be ready for emergency evacuation.

As the rising waters threatened to engulf Kavalam Panchayat office, it was shifted to a farmhouse in a higher region at Krishnapuram. The office started functioning like a control room where two village officers, Public Health Centre (PHC) officials and volunteers from the Panchayat office engaged in a

The Panchayat spearheaded the rescue operations, with strict monitoring to ensure that all teams worked together as a single unit to miximise efficiencies

coordinated rescue operation, along with elected representatives. The Panchayat spearheaded the operations, constantly monitoring the situation to ensure that all these teams worked as a single, unified unit to miximise efficiencies.

OVERCOMING CHALLENGES

That the Panchayat did not have a boat of its own was a major handicap. Rescue operations were launched on August 17, using Yamaha engine-fitted boats owned by locals, under the leadership of Panchayat officials. Rescue of people who were trapped in their homes on the banks of the lake was a big challenge. But through joint operations every difficult rescue could be pulled off successfully.

Mobile communications were seriously affected after the flood waters damaged mobile towers. The Panchayat vice president undertook a risky journey to the Alappuzha collectorate in a small boat to request for more rescue boats. The same night, barring 163 people, all the others in the Panchayat were shifted to safe locations. During this period, the Panchayat Committee met regularly to discuss and review relief measures. All the Panchayat members worked long hours and participated in the rescue operations.

Most of the flood-hit people had left their homes, some of them leaving behind their cattle tied to poles before heading to a safer place. Even in the middle of the crisis, some decided to stay back with their cattle and pets. The frightened wails of the cattle prompted the Panchayat members to take measures to protect them and provide food for them. The district animal protection officer was entrusted with the task.

Thereafter, 50 bags of cattlefeed were given to each Panchayat. Arrangements were also made to feed the dogs in the Panchayat under the leadership of the president.

People from Kavalam Panchayat were housed in 200 to 250 relief camps, spread over the entire distance from Alappuzha to Pattanakkad. In every camp one could see an outpouring of human compassion, as people from different walks of life got together to contribute to the relief operations conducted under the leadership of Panchayat representatives.

HELPING REBUILD LIVES

An ideal example of this leadership was the post-flood grama sabhas. The grama sabha of one Panchayat was held in another, in the presence of both presidents. Floods could not dim the spirit of Onam, which was celebrated in all its traditional fervour and gaiety in the relief camps, helping people forget their miseries at least momentarily. Vegetables and provisions for relief camps were procured even from far off places.

By August 23, water had completely receded and everyone, except those who lost their homes, returned home. But the Panchayat efforts did not stop there. From August 28 to 30, a mega cleaning drive was organised in the district under the leadership of ministers like G Sudhakaran, Thomas Issac and P Thilothaman. Panchayat officials focused on coordinating the cleaning mission and providing food for all those who participated.

The death of two youngsters who ignored the safety precautions of the Panchayat was an unfortunate incident that occurred during the post flood days. Panchayat officials left no stone unturned to ensure that the financial support of Rs 10,000 announced by the Government reached every resident, even those who had shifted to other places. They also took the initiative to identify deserving people and distribute relief materials to them.

A special team of Panchayat officials conducted a survey to find out the exact number of people who had lost their dwellings. As per an estimate, about 141 houses were destroyed completely. The first instalment of Rs 95,000 of the Rs 4 lakh allotted to them by the Government has already been paid. Those who faced crop loss due to the destruction of the protective dykes, were given 20 per cent cash in advance, free seeds and motor subsidy.

The famous line, “water, water everywhere, but not a drop to drink,” captures the plight of Kuttanad after the calamity. To reduce impact of drinking water shortage, the Panchayat set up a Reverse Osmosis (RO) plant. Panchayat-funded water distribution still continues. Rigorous monitoring by health officials and regular medical camps helped keep diseases at bay.

Today the village is being rebuilt through the interventions of well-meaning individuals and organisations. One positive outcome of the floods is that it helped bring the Panchayat and people closer. The many valuable takeaways that the calamity provided for the local administration and residents should provide a definitive direction in their way forward.

KUNJANNAMMA KUNJU
President

THE GOOD SAMARITAN

Kodumon Panchayat too was ravaged by floods like many of its neighbours in Pathanamthitta. The local administration deserves credit for its focused and decisive action in effecting a quick turnaround to normalcy. But what warrants more appreciation is that not stopping with helping its own people survive, it went further, and worked for the next two months to help complete the rebuilding operations in the neighbouring Panchayats

Kodumon Panchayat is situated in the Adoor Taluk of Pathanamthitta district.On August 14, 2018, a phone call was received at midnight, by a resident of Kodumon Panchayat. It was to convey the news that a huge tree had fallen over the house of an old man living on Sion Hill in the Panchayat, destroying it completely. The resident of the house, who was sleeping inside, was injured in the incident. His hand was broken. The information was immediately conveyed to the respective Ward member, as well the member of Ward four. Those who gathered at the spot to offer emergency assistance conveyed the news to the relatives of the injured man. The orthopaedician from the casualty of the local medical centre was brought in to examine the patient. X ray and other tests were conducted and he was admitted to the hospital. A bystander was also made available to take care of him in the hospital.

HEAVY TOLL

In the meantime, heavy rains had caused widespread

destruction in the Panchayat and many houses were damaged. The next day, while the Panchayat officials were on their way to visit the accident spots, they witnessed a commotion in the Tharayilpadiyil Colony. The paddy fields and canals in the colony had become dangerously flooded, submerging homes in the area. Its residents, including old people, pregnant women and children had become stranded. They were holding up traffic clamouring for action to rescue them. All their possessions, all articles in their homes were taken away by the floods.

The Angadikkal village officer, local police station, Kudumbashree units and the Primary Health Centre (PHC) were all immediately alerted by the Panchayat office. An action plan was launched without delay; people were rescued from homes isolated by the floods and evacuated to the Angadikal Government Lower Primary School (GLPS). By this time, villages of Idathitta; Kodumon; Chandanappally; Cheruva; Mundukonam and others had got submerged.

THE RESCUE ACT

Meanwhile, members of the traders' association, youth organisations, church committees and Panchayat employees took the lead in undertaking rescue operations to evacuate people caught up in severely flooded areas. Help was also extended by the local Revenue Divisional Officer (RDO) and village officer, along with Kerala State Electricity Board (KSEB) employees and members of political parties who actively participated in these operations.

Adequate drinking water; food; clothes; beds and blankets which were collected, were immediately delivered to the Panchayat for distribution to relief camps and to others who needed them. As the situation got grimmer, pregnant women and people who were ill were shifted to the homes of their relatives.

The disaster proved to be a great leveller. People who had shifted to the camps were those who had lost almost everything. They were happy that they had at

The calamity was a great leveller. The inmates in the relief camps lived together for six days and mingled with each other, in an environment of sharing, caring and mutual help, irrespective of all material considerations – religion, caste or status

least some shelter to stay in. And these inmates lived for six days in the camps and mingled with other, in an environment of sharing, caring and mutual help, irrespective of all material considerations - religion, caste or status.

This was a valuable lesson that was imbibed from this calamity – a great lesson in humanity and consideration for fellow human beings. It also led to the realisation that man lives at the mercy of nature and that he should learn to respect it.

Once the water started receding, people began to return homes. Considering that they had lost everything in the floods, before they left the camps the Panchayat provided them with a survival kit containing adequate drinking water; food; clothes; basic utensils; buckets and medicines to help them sustain themselves for a few days, until some semblance of normalcy could be restored in the village.

One hundred and twenty two people had lived in the two rescue camps, as the flood waters played havoc in the Panchayat, turning its roads and pathways into one seamless stream of raging waters and destroying everything in its way. Fifty three houses in the area were fully or partially destroyed, whose owners had no option but to apply for compensation to restore their homes and make them fit for living.

THE CHALLENGE OF RESTORATION

Though the floods had receded and people had started returning homes after six days in camps, life in their dwellings had become impossible due to heaps of dirt and debris that the floods had left behind. Reptiles that had come along with the flood waters and the possibility of epidemics posed another challenge. All public areas, healthcare facilities and roads were also rendered unusable by the dirt and garbage that had accumulated.

To relieve the misery of its wards, and help them resume their life without delay, the Panchayat immediately set about the task of cleaning all the flood-hit areas and making them habitable again. Thankfully, a lot of willing public and voluntary organisations pooled in their efforts to help the job get done quickly and efficiently.

They helped clean the houses and public areas, and organised the supply of clean drinking water to wherever there was a shortage. Essential medicines, clothes, utensils and buckets were collected and distributed by them under the leadership of the Panchayat. Panchayat officials and employees worked round the clock to coordinate the efforts of all those who had come to help and to ensure that relief materials reached everyone who needed them.

Fifty three wells in the villages were dried with electric pumps and cleaned, while 18 wells were chlorinated, as part of the sanitisation programme. 14 houses were severely damaged. The Panchayat also intervened to assist people in processing and obtaining all the important documents that they had lost in the floods.

BEYOND THE BORDERS

Kodumon Panchayat administration did not restrict relief efforts to within its borders. It went out of its way to reach out and help the residents of other Panchayats in Pathanamthitta district, such as Ranni; Tiruvalla; Kozhenchery; Arattupuzha; Pandanad; Thekkemala; Thottapuzhassery and Mallapuzhassery which suffered extensive damage and casualties. It mobilised the assistance of Kudumbashree units; youth welfare associations; voluntary organisations; temple and church committees and political party members in the locality to undertake the operations, and completed them in two months. The Panchayat and its residents helped clean and restore vehicles, furniture, shops and godowns which were destroyed by the floods in the nearby areas.

In the midst of all these activities, Kodumon Panchayat also took the trouble to organise a sponsor to contribute money to the Chief Minister's Flood Relief Fund. What is a matter of great satisfaction for the local administration and its officials is that almost all its residents took part in this programme.

Equally gratifying for them was their success in bringing together various disparate groups, including political parties and general public and coordinating their work into one, comprehensive effort, towards a common goal. In the final tally, this is what helped the Panchayat and its people survive the worst natural calamity that Kerala has seen in recent years.

MINI SHYAM MOHAN
President

A NEW DIMENSION TO PUBLIC SERVICE

Nurtured by the Pamba, Kozhenchery Panchayat also saw the ferocity of its surging waters in the great deluge of 2018. Despite extensive damage to property, what saved the day were the efforts of the local representatives who, right from rescue to rehabilitation, worked untiringly to see their wards through the crisis. In the process they raised public service to a whole new dimension

Located in central Travancore in the heart of Pathanamthitta district, Kozhenchery Panchayat has a beautiful, lush landscape dotted with mountains, hills and an endless expanse of green paddy fields. As a well-known commercial hub of the Travancore era, the area occupied an important place on the map of the time. The place is home to a large number of non-residents from Kerala and therefore, receives a high quantum of foreign remittances. Maramon Convention, the renowned Christian congregation also takes place on the banks of the Pamba in Kozhenchery.

The Panchayat is situated in the Elanthoor Block of Kozhenchery Taluk in Pathanamthitta district and comprises the area of Kozhenchery village. The Panchayat which covers an area of eight square kilometres, shares its borders with Naranganam and Cherukol Panchayats in the east, Pamba river in the north and west and the Mallappuzhassery Panchayat in the south. The Panchayat is made up of 13 Blocks.

DISASTER DAYS

On August 15, 2018, the area witnessed an unprecedented rise in water level consequent to the numerous landslides in the area and the opening of the Kakki dam on Pamba. As soon as an alert was received by the Panchayat president at 1.30 pm from the Aranmula police station, it was communicated to all the public representatives in the locality and a danger warning was issued through public announcements.

Immediate steps were taken to evacuate people from the areas that had started flooding. Transport was mobilised from various sources for rescue operations. Five relief camps were set up under the leadership of the president and the vice president.

Five schools under the Mar Thoma Diocese were released to be converted into relief camps.

In Kozhenchery Panchayat, the fierce floods wreaked havoc in Blocks 1, 2, 3, 10, 11, 12 and 13. Flood waters almost completely destroyed 498 houses, which included all areas excepting ward number six. Counting the 221 homes that were partially damaged, 719 houses were totally affected by the floods. 952 people were rehabilitated in the 10 relief camps established in various parts of the Panchayat. Panchayat authorities also took the initiative to provide refuge to 250 people in the homes of neighbours and relatives which were safe from flooding.

The floods of 2018 were of an unprecedented scale, unseen or unheard of even by the people of the older generation in the vicinity. Braving the darkness, uncertainties and the fierce waters that rose at a furious pace, Panchayat members, through reassuring interventions, were able to successfully lead all efforts — right from warning the public, evacuating them and rehabilitating them in relief camps.

A Ward member ignored the rising waters of the Pamba that was slowly engulfing her own home and engaged herself in rescue efforts. By the time she returned, her home was almost under water. Ignoring warnings, she swam across the raging waters to save her husband and grandson who were stranded in her home. They had to wait a long time on the terrace of her home until they were rescued by an army boat.

Braving the darkness, uncertainties and fierce waters, Panchayat members, through reassuring interventions, were able to successfully lead all efforts -- right from warning and evacuating them to rehabilitating them in relief camps

LOCAL MACHINERY TO THE RESCUE

At 8 am on August 17, the first rescue boat arrived at Chingemukku. But even before that the Panchayat representatives and village authorities had made highly laudable efforts to overcome all limitations and spearhead the local relief operations.

With the rise in water level brought about by heavy rains, a meeting of the Governing Committee was convened on August 16, with participation from all local bodies. It was decided that the Panchayat office would function round the clock and operations would be coordinated under the leadership of the vice president.

By 12 O' clock, the flood situation was out of control, flooding the Panchayat building. By seven in the evening, in response to instructions from the secretary and president, Panchayat employees left the office. By then water in the area had risen to more than one metre. Traffic on the Thiruvalla - Pathanamthitta road had been affected. They had to walk to Thekkemala from where they were transported to Pathanamthitta.

With electricity and communications shut down, Kozhenchery was totally isolated. The nearby Thottapuzha and Aranmula Panchayat areas were also flooded. Once the water in Koduvalli receded, a team of Panchayat employees started the Kozhenchery Panchayat operations from a room at the Vallikode Panchayat office. As soon as water receded in Kozhenchery, they returned to the Panchayat office and immediately resumed operations. As normal procedures were impossible, operations were coordinated through Whatsapp messages.

By the evening of August 18, officials including the Panchayat president, government authorities and public representatives in the vicinity visited the camps and made arrangements to address people's grievances and provide all basic amenities. As all financial institutions including banks were unable to function, it was decided to use cash available at the Panchayat office to provide basic amenities and meet unexpected expenses.

EPIDEMIC PREVENTION

328 wells in the Panchayat were submerged in the floods. Anticipating that water shortage could lead to the breakout of water-borne diseases and fatalities, steps were taken to transport water to the camps and other affected areas. Water was collected from wells situated in the Blocks that were not affected by the floods, as well as from neighbouring Panchayats and distributed.

It was evaluated that a clean-up campaign had to be conducted before rehabilitative operations could begin. The vacant post of the Health Inspector was filled through the Employment Exchange. As tipper lorries and JCBs were in short supply, it was decided to mobilise transport from available sources and the overall supervision of the operations was entrusted with the vice president. At the same time, Ward level measures were left to the respective members. Steps were also taken to procure and supply materials required for cleaning the Panchayat office and public roads.

To meet the shortage of clothes in rehabilitation camps, especially among women, the Panchayat aligned with voluntary organisations which helped collect and distribute them. A joint meeting of the Health Department, voluntary groups and Kudumbashree was called to initiate emergency measures to prevent water-borne diseases like rat fever and provide super chlorination to sanitise drinking water resources. The president coordinated with the district administration and other organisations to enlist enough volunteers for rehabilitative work.

A senior veterinary surgeon was entrusted with the job of scientifically disposing of the corpses of animals killed during the floods. The Welfare Standing Committees of the Panchayat made arrangements through the District Medical Officer (DMO) and voluntary organisations to source essential medicines for relief camps and handed them over to Cherukol public health authorities.

This was a crisis that showed the world that even the biggest disaster can be managed with the effective use of local machinery. It is hoped that the strong and safe interventions made by local bodies are duly recognised by the Disaster Management Authority in all future forums of discussions and formalisation of policies on post-crisis restoration and redistribution. Right from the very start of the floods to the rehabilitation process, Panchayat representatives were closely involved with the people and their problems, leading from the front, to raise public service to a whole new dimension.

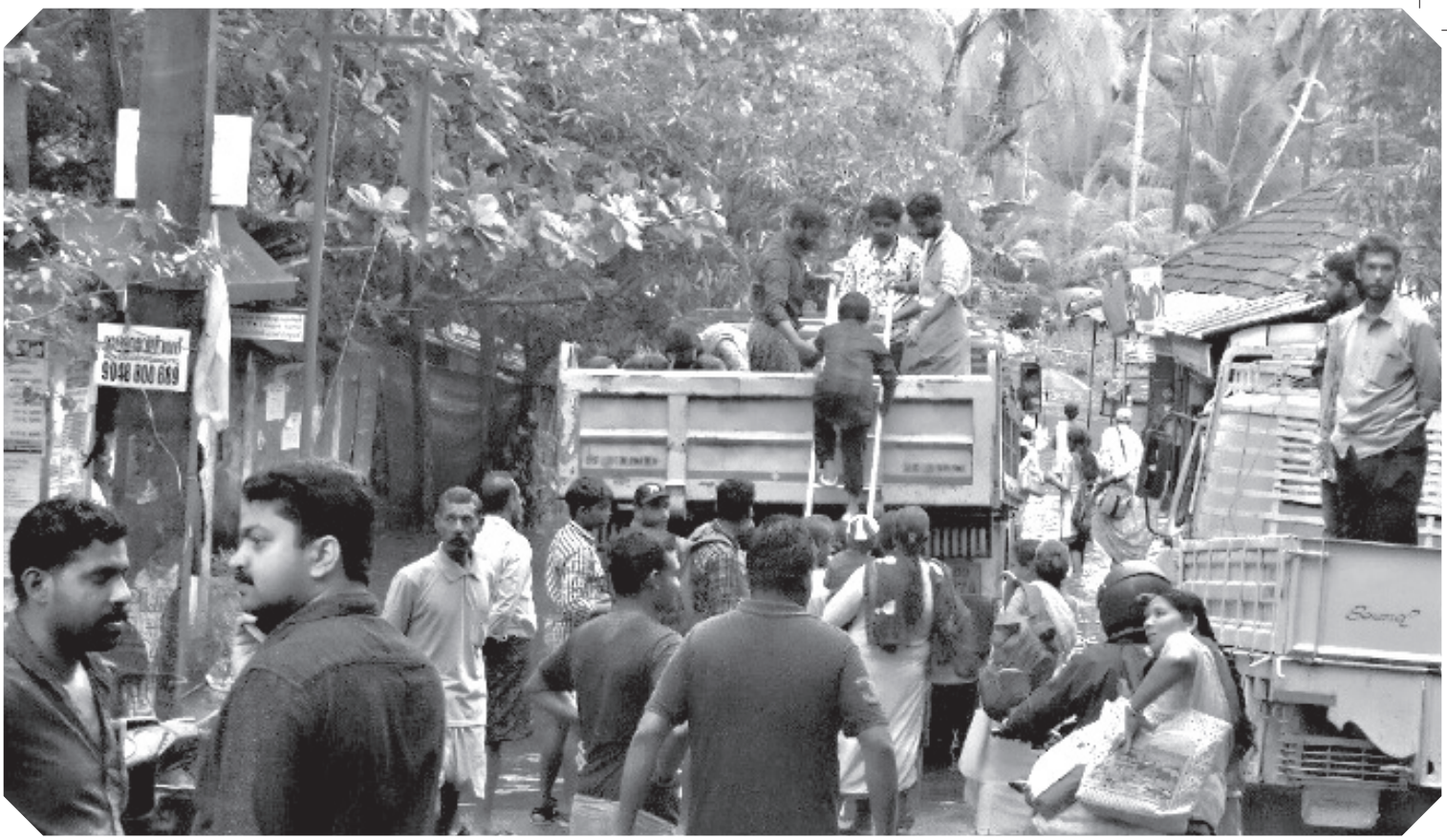
A P SALIMON
President

UNITED THEY STOOD

With Kerala's biggest lake, the Vembanad, covering a major area of Kumarakom, the magnitude of the floods that struck the Panchayat recently was of mammoth proportions. One key factor that helped the region surmount the calamity was the coordinated efforts of all the Panchayats in the area who stood together in an unprecedented show of unity and mutual help

Situated in Kottayam district, Kumarakam Panchayat is bordered in the north by Aymanam Panchayat, in the south by the Alappuzha- Kottayam canal, in the east by Thiruvarpu Panchayat and in the west by the Vembanad Lake. The Panchayat is home to a population of 22,422 and is made up of 16 Wards. The Vembanad Lake occupies 24.13 square kilometres, more than half of the total area of 51.57 square kilometres under the Panchayat. 24 per cent of the Panchayat region comprises agricultural fields and 30 per cent dry land.

As a result of the flow of water from the western regions during the monsoons, floods are a regular occurrence in Wards two, three, five, six, seven and eight of the Panchayat. Most of the houses of the region are, therefore, built on raised platforms. Others seek shelter in relief camps during flooding.



CALAMITY OF UNEXPECTED SCALE

For the first time in history, the floods of 2018 caused flooding in every Ward of the Panchayat. This was an unprecedented challenge for the Panchayat representatives and officials. However their timely intervention in organising rescue efforts with assistance from all available resources helped arrest the intensity of the disaster.

Having overcome the floods in the previous month, the Panchayat was not prepared for the magnitude of the catastrophe that struck the region from August 13 to 15. Alerted by the continuous rains that lashed the area, the Panchayat anticipated massive floods and took initiatives to open relief camps. The first one was started on the S K M School premises. 14 camps were opened, including one for the people of Aymanam Panchayat. In addition to this, more than 50 people were shifted to two-storey residences in the high ranges which functioned as mini camps.

Panchayat officials and people's representatives were actively involved in running these camps and took utmost care to satisfy the essential needs of the residents. They lived in the camps along with the inmates from August 16 to August 27, to ensure their smooth functioning. People who were bed-ridden or ill were admitted to the Primary Health Centres (PHC). Panchayat officials arranged to have differently abled persons accommodated in a lodge.

WEATHERING THE STORM

The Panchayat took all precautions to ensure smooth conduct of the rescue operations. Care was taken to promptly address all the needs of relief camps. Food, clothes and other essential items collected by government agencies and

Non-Government Organisations (NGOs) were immediately delivered to the camps under the leadership of the Panchayat. Cooked food was supplied to camps that did not have the facility to prepare meals.

Owners offered their boats to the Panchayat for rescue operations and diesel for these boats were brought from the fuel bunks in Kottayam. With the help of the Irrigation Department, the local administration distributed drinking water in tankers to the camps that did not have water connection.

Even in the midst of a hectic schedule, the Panchayat administration went that extra mile to organise Onam celebrations in the camps and bring a little cheer to its inmates

It also stretched beyond its boundaries to help people in the neighbouring regions. Food and essential items were distributed by Kumarakom Panchayat to the nearby areas of Ramapuram, Bharananganam and Marangattupalli. The bar nearby was closed temporarily to deal with the menace of alcohol consumption and sale in the camps.

Even as the number of people taking refuge in camps increased, the rains intensified, threatening the relief camps with flooding. The Panchayat lost no time in arranging to shift the inmates to new shelters set up in Nattakom, Athirampuzha and Panachikadu. Due to the scale of the rescue operations and flooding, the Panchayat faced a big challenge in the distribution of goods from August 18 to August 22. Though there were minor disruptions, Panchayat members went all out to ensure that essential goods reached wherever they were needed. The Panchayat also took the lead in having the goods in the local Maveli Store shifted to a nearby school when its premises got flooded.

The Panchayat maintained continuous contact with those who lived in their own homes and provided them with all essential materials. Support of the police, fire force, the Revenue Department and Kerala State Electricity Board (KSEB) helped the Panchayat in its operations. To ensure the availability

of medicines in camps, Panchayat took the initiative to reopen medical stores in the area. The Panchayat displayed exemplary leadership in mobilising and coordinating the work of the public and various organisations to deliver an efficient rescue operation.

POST-FLOOD RESTORATION

Around 13 houses were completely destroyed and around 2,000 damaged. The Panchayat took timely action to identify and distribute the Government grant of Rs 10,000 to all deserving people. Even in the midst of a hectic schedule, the Panchayat administration went that extra mile to organise Onam celebrations in the camps and bring a little cheer to its inmates.

Once the floods receded, people started leaving the camps. Accommodation was arranged for three families who had lost their homes to the flood. Subsequently, they were shifted to a temporary shelter built by youth welfare groups. All people were given a survival kit containing essential items, before they left the camps.

Kudumbashree; the Health Department; the neighbouring Panchayats; youth organisations; political parties; residents of Kumarakom Panchayat; all pooled their resources to help the Panchayat administration in its cleaning drive after the floods. The success of the post-flood sanitisation efforts can be gauged from the fact that the Panchayat reported no incidence of contagious diseases.

Awareness classes were organised for all the people before they left the camps, while counselling was arranged for the students through schools. Ward-based sanitation committees and healthcare teams, which were formed as part of the Ardram Mission, successfully accomplished the task of restoring hygiene in the Panchayat. The local administration also enlisted the services of anganawadi and Asha workers as well as the help of various organisations and groups for its clean-up programme.

All vegetable crops had completely perished in the floods. The matter was included in the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) and vegetable seeds were distributed to all farmers.

Floods affected Kumarakom tourism in a significant way. Eight out of the 22 resorts in the area were damaged by floods. It is a mammoth challenge for the Panchayat to restore tourism in the area, which is a major revenue earner. Many innovative schemes are being planned to turn the sector around. A marathon through the beautiful pathways of Kumarakom is being planned.

Undaunted, the Panchayat administration has also embarked on an ambitious mission for the complete rehabilitation of its people who lost everything to the deluge and the restoration of their livelihood. Discussions are going on with various stakeholders on the rehabilitation programmes to be adopted. The floods and the disaster management that followed are a clear pointer to the fact that the interventions of the local administration, that knows the pulse of the people, can be more effective in dealing with a calamity than the efforts of other arms of the state Government.

SHEEBA SURESH
President

WHERE THERE IS A WILL THERE IS A WAY

Despite the lack of resources, Kumily Panchayat could implement a comprehensive rescue and relief plan by bringing together the services of everyone who was willing to contribute to flood relief. With the floods affecting its transport, power and communications services, the Panchayat remained cut off from the rest of the world. However, Kumily proved that no adversity is too big to be conquered before the will of the people

Kumily Panchayat in Idukki district has an area of 824.39 square kilometres. More than half the area of the Panchayat is forest land. Two important centres of Kerala Tourism, namely, the Periyar Tiger Reserve and Thekkady fall within the boundaries of Kumily. The Panchayat shares its eastern boundary with Tamil Nadu and its northern boundary with Pathanamthitta district. On the west it is bordered by Vandiperiyar Panchayat and on the south by Chakkupallam Panchayat. The Panchayat, with 19 Wards, has a total population of 36,000.

READYING FOR THE FLOODS

The steady downpour the state experienced in August 2018, seriously affected Kumily. The Panchayat is located close to the Mullaperiyar Dam. In the context, the Panchayat Committee met and decided to take safety precautions in the event of a flood. When water level in the dam rose, people were put on alert. The Panchayat, quickly resorted to safety measures once the water level in Periyar started rising alarmingly,

without waiting for the revenue authorities to take action.

When the monsoons became vigorous, the Panchayat formed two committees. The precautionary measures to be adopted were listed out and a team put together to implement them.

The district collector had convened a meeting in connection with the opening of the shutters of the Mullaperiyar dam. On the basis of its outcome, the Panchayat decided on the immediate steps to be taken. The Panchayat Committee was divided into four groups. Each group visited flood prone areas to warn residents about the impending danger and made arrangements to evacuate them to safe areas. An all-party meeting was also organised to discuss the preparations and the help of police and fire forces were sought for rescue and relief.

WHEN FLOODS STRUCK

Wards 11 and 12 were the worst hit by the release of water from the Mullaperiyar dam. There was a ferocious flow of water to the low lying areas. Many buildings, including the Panchayat office, were flooded. Water entered in about 40 homes in the area and another 50 dwellings in the tribal colony were affected. People, whose homes were flooded, were shifted to safe locations. The people in Wards 11 and 12 were shifted to three relief camps that were opened.

With rains intensifying, about 135 houses were damaged in the hilly terrains of Ottakathalamedu and Pobsunmedu. Of this, 26 houses were completely destroyed. Eight houses had become uninhabitable. After August 19, landslips and landslides also started occurring in places like Onnam Mile and Randam Mile. In this area, reconstruction of homes remains difficult even today and it is proposed to be included in the Rebuild Kerala programme in the cluster housing scheme.

Landslides occurred again on September 2, leading to the nearly complete destruction of places like Ottakathalamedu, Pobsunmedu and Attappallam. About six houses were swept away. Water levels rose in Kumily and Thekkady towns. The Panchayat had to launch a major rescue operation during this phase of the floods.

In the landslide that took place in September, the waste treatment plant was damaged. The entire waste

During the relief and rescue phase, the health problems of children were addressed effectively. Medical camps were opened in all places. Though viral fever was initially reported from the region, it was successfully brought under control

in the plant got washed away and was deposited over three square kilometres of land, covering around 10 acres of farmlands. For the Panchayat, this turned out to be the biggest crisis as the job of shifting the waste and having them treated has not been completed till this documentation.

Since it is not possible to dispose of this waste by human labour alone, the Panchayat has prepared an alternative plan and submitted it to the Government. The Panchayat did not suffer any human casualty due to its proactive action in rescue operations. However, a large number of the livestock population perished in the floods.

THE RESCUE ACT

The biggest challenge faced by the Panchayat was in running the relief camps. However, many voluntary associations; people; and associations like the Vyapary Vyavasayi Ekopana Samithi; Rotary Club and Lions Club came forward to help and organise all essential items like food.

Children below three years and their mothers were accommodated in hospitals. They were provided with nutritious food, clothes, woollen blankets and medicines. Medical camps were opened in various places. Though viral fever was initially reported from the region, it was successfully brought under control.

The initiative for rescue operations was taken by the Panchayat. It was not practical to take external help to restore the telecommunications links during the days of the floods. The Panchayat brought in the Fire and Safety Department and offered them accommodation till the work was completed. Kerala State Electricity Board (KSEB) was also contacted to have the electricity lines repaired and restore power.

A Whatsapp group was created to share information on the opening of the Mullaperiyar dam. However, after the dam was opened, all telecommunication facilities stopped working. Kumily remained cut off from the rest of the world. There was a severe shortage of diesel and petrol. Petrol pumps were instructed to give fuel only to the rescue and relief vehicles. Help from the police force, fire force and medical teams were utilised in all areas. The Panchayat officials were working round the clock and evens their families did not know about their whereabouts for the first two days.

People refused to shift to the camps initially. But once they understood the gravity of the situation they moved out. It was decided to open relief camps in

places like Anavilasam and Pulikkadi. But people in these areas decided to shift to the houses of their relatives. People in Chenkara were shifted to the camps falling under Vandiperiyar Panchayat.

CLEANING PROGRAMME

Even before the flood victims returned to their homes the Panchayat carried out cleaning operations by using water jets and bleaching powder. They were given preventive medicines against infectious diseases. The medical check-up of everyone in the camps, including children, was done before they returned home. The Panchayat declared the week after their return as 'cleaning week'. Voluntary organisations; students; teachers; National Cadet Corps (NCC) and National Service Scheme (NSS) volunteers; trade unions; police; fire force; forest officials and many others participated in the cleaning programme.

The waste that came with the floods was disposed of with the help of Clean Kerala Company. Those who lost their homes had to live in rented premises for a long time. Data on the repair work to be done in houses has been collected. Once the Government issues order the rebuilding activities would be taken up.

Since traffic was disrupted, the tourism industry was adversely affected by the floods. For the people of Kumily Panchayat, tourism is the main source of income. With their incomes affected, many people in the Panchayat are facing hunger and poverty. The Panchayat has taken the initiative to provide schemes to lift them out of their poverty and misery.

MANOJ GEORGE
President

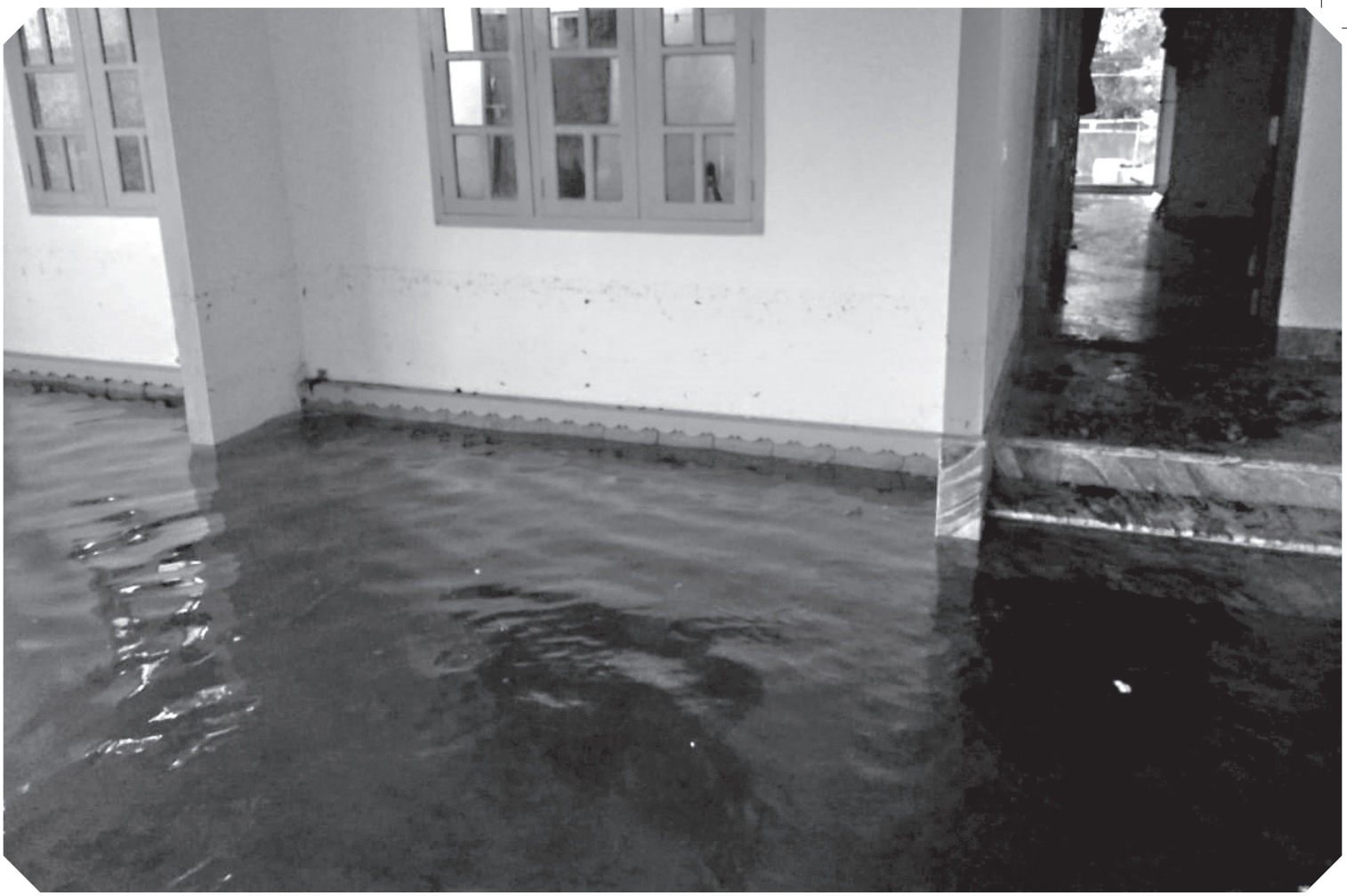
SERVICE SANS BORDERS

Kurichi Panchayat's survival of the floods tells the story of how a crisis can blur borders – be it territorial, cultural, religious or political. It was a fine example of mutual help between local administrations, between regions and between people. And of the power of staying together to win over the might of a powerful calamity

Kurichi forms part of the Pallom Block of Kottayam district and lies on the Main Central (MC) Road which runs through the entire state of Kerala. Located 11 kilometres east of the district headquarters, the Panchayat has a population of 35,815, according to the 2011 survey, of which 17,502 are males and 18,313 females.

Kurichi village, covering 1,622 hectares in area, belongs to the Changanassery Taluk and is located about seven kilometres from Changanassery town. It is a large Panchayat spread over 20 Wards and is home to 8,812 families. Kurichi is bordered by Vakathanam, Vazhappilly, Panachikkadu, Neelamperoor and Nattakom Panchayats. On the western side, the Panchayat also connects to Kainady and Kavalam which are part of Kuttanad.

Though every year the Panchayat suffers the impact of monsoons, it is usually restricted to no more than five Wards. Year after year flooding has been reported in Wards 1, 2, 3, 16 and 17, though these have never created any major disruption in the area. Occasionally heavy monsoons have led to some areas getting submerged, albeit on a small scale. Such



situations have necessitated the opening of one relief camp at the most; nothing more serious has even been witnessed in the area.

FLOOD RELIEF OPERATIONS

But the heavy floods of 2018 took Kurichi Panchayat and its residents by surprise. The rains did not leave any part of the Panchayat untouched. Only the scale of flooding differed from place to place. The magnitude of the devastation caused by the floods can be gauged from the fact that 21 relief camps had to be set up in the Panchayat. Seven of these catered to the people of the Panchayat itself while 14 were set up to provide shelter for people in the neighbouring Panchayats.

Out of the 20 Wards, eight Wards suffered severe losses. Apart from those that regularly witness flooding, Wards four, five and six also were ravaged by the heavy floods caused by the incessant monsoon rains in August. Residents of all the flood-hit areas were evacuated and moved to relief camps which had been opened by the Panchayat, in anticipation of trouble.

While the first phase of floods in July did not affect the Panchayat heavily, the floods in August were a different story. The first relief camp was opened on August 15, with the first hint of flooding and continuous rains. Though the responsibility of crisis management lies with the Revenue Department, considering the intensity of the calamity, the Panchayat lost no time in getting into the act. It immediately took the initiative to launch a comprehensive rescue operation, joining forces with the village office.

The Panchayat officials held meetings with other government authorities and drew up a plan of action. As part of this, they mobilised all available resources to identify areas of the Panchayat that were isolated and have people evacuated to relief camps or other safe places. Transport was arranged by the Panchayat

for this purpose as well as to deliver essential goods to the camps.

WELL-OILED EFFORTS

The 14 relief camps opened to accommodate flood-affected people from the neighbouring Neelamperoor Panchayat and Changanassery town, were also run under the responsibility of the Kurichi Panchayat. The same attention was given to the conduct of these camps as was provided to those that housed its own residents. All the Panchayat members and employees worked like a well-oiled machine, pitching in with constructive interventions, whenever required, to solve problems and meet the unending demands of the difficult times.

It was a herculean challenge to operate so many camps simultaneously, but thanks to support from all quarters, the camps were run efficiently

It was a herculean challenge to run so many camps simultaneously, but again commendable efforts by the Panchayat administration helped pull off the operations successfully. This was made possible by support from all quarters — government departments and agencies; voluntary organisations; members of political parties; elected representatives; the general public and others — who flocked to the area in response to the Panchayat's appeal for help. They arranged for food and other essential items like clothes, beds and blankets and distributed them in the camps, under the supervision of the Panchayat administration.

Credit is also due to the Panchayat for the way it efficiently coordinated and monitored the work of these different and disparate groups to ensure equal distribution of relief materials in all areas. Panchayat members used their personal contacts to arrange tipper lorries and other means of transport to shift people and materials to relief shelters. Help from the northern Panchayats, which were not affected by the floods, needs special mention.

In the beginning, when evacuation started, special facilities were arranged in a local college for bed-ridden patients. Panchayat officials saw to it that there was uninterrupted collection and supply of clothes and food for the relief camps. Every day, services of medical professionals were provided and medical camps were also held from time to time to detect incidences of communicable diseases. Panchayat members and officials took the responsibility for the smooth functioning of the camps, despite the mammoth scale of the operations.

HEALTH DRIVE

Panchayat officials were unrelenting in maintaining strict hygiene in the relief shelters, and this was a major factor that prevented the breakout of epidemics. Cleaning materials were regularly provided at the camps. Once the floods receded and people started returning home, steps were taken to wind up relief camps. The last camp was disbanded on August 30. As Kerala was celebrating its biggest festival Onam at the time, an onasadya was conducted, with the help of sponsors, at the camps which continued to function. This was a small gesture by the Panchayat to spread some festive joy among the people who had lost everything in the floods.

Post-flood sanitation was the next big task for the Panchayat. The floods had left the village under tons of dirt and garbage. In such an unhealthy scenario, the spread of water-borne infections and epidemics was a real threat. Those returning to their homes were issued clear instructions on the precautions to be taken while cleaning their homes and surroundings. Students were given counselling, through their schools, on the do's and don'ts of life after the floods.

The local administration enlisted the services of voluntary organisations, individuals and other groups to undertake an exhaustive cleaning campaign. Cleaning of homes was conducted on a war footing with the help of health workers as well as these volunteers, so that people could start living there again without any fear of health hazards. Public roads and buildings were also restored to a functional state through an arduous but methodical process. All water resources including wells were chlorinated and sanitised. Clean drinking water was distributed in areas where it was not available. Coordinated efforts of all stakeholders helped the Panchayat and its residents tide over the crisis and get going again.

The floods of 2018 were unprecedented. There is no doubt that the organisational prowess demonstrated by the Panchayat administration in rescue and rehabilitation operations, went a long way in cushioning the fierce impact of the floods and salvaging the lives of its residents. But apart from its work within its own borders, neighbouring localities also benefitted greatly from the competent efforts of the Panchayat in dealing with the crisis and the solace it offered. The camps which were set up for the benefit of the nearby Panchayats and Kurichi Panchayat's unsparing endeavour in running them are a fine testimony to the fact.

LATA VIKRAMAN
President

PROMPT ACTION

Mallappuzhassery and its residents survived the floods, thanks to the prompt and timely action of its Panchayat administration, along with local support. What is especially creditworthy is its unswerving focus on post-flood rehabilitation and prevention of epidemics which ensured zero casualties in a calamity that ravaged the land and life of its people

Mallappuzhassery Grama Panchayat is an important landmark on the tourist map of Kerala by virtue of the famed Arunmula boat race, a major part of which runs through this area. Situated at the sea mouth, the Panchayat comprises 13 Wards and is spread over an area of 12.45 kilometres. It is located in the Elanthur Block of Kozhenchery Taluk in Pathanamthitta district.

Mallappuzhassery is bordered by Kozhenchery Panchayat and Pamba river in the north; Naranganam and Kozhenchery Panchayats in the east; Elanthur and Mezhukkuveli Panchayats in the south and Aranmula along with Mezhukkuveli Panchayats in the west. Due to the region's proximity to the Pamba river, the rise in its water level poses a threat to most of the Wards in the Panchayat, though in the past it has not led to significant problems in the area.

RELIEF EFFORTS

On August 15, 2018, the Panchayat received an alert from the district collectorate about the rise of water level in Pamba. Immediately all the Wards that were likely to be affected were given alerts through

announcements on microphones and other means. As decided at the Panchayat Committee, its members took the lead in organising relief camps for those who had to abandon their homes. Public and Panchayat members were constantly kept informed about the facilities that had been arranged. Expert swimmers and boats were readied for rescue operations.

By the evening of August 16, the Panchayat was able to evacuate all those who were under the threat of floods, to 20 relief camps. Panchayat members and the police formed a task force to prevent theft in areas where people had abandoned their homes. Arrangements were made to provide amenities like water, food and toilet facilities in relief camps and camp officers were appointed for their smooth conduct. The Panchayat directly issued instructions to have the grievances of camp dwellers addressed on an urgent basis.

TIMELY SERVICE

From August 18 to 21, medical teams were arranged for check-ups and prevent water-borne diseases. A medical team was formed under the health inspector to ensure proper hygiene in camps. The Panchayat arranged to have drinking water distributed in places that had water shortage. What needs special mention is that the Panchayat leadership was successful in ensuring proper and timely distribution of relief materials that were received through government and voluntary organisations. Panchayat intervention in the time-bound delivery of grocery, vegetables and materials ensured that the Ward members were able to meet the needs of those in the camps and outside, without any delay.

Care was taken for the prompt distribution of relief materials received from Mudakkal Panchayat and the Panchayat director's office in Thiruvananthapuram, among the flood-hit people. A special squad was set up under the Panchayat to ensure proper sanitisation in all wards. All material requirements of the individuals, institutions and voluntary organisations who participated in the sanitisation campaign were provided promptly. Students; teachers; National Service Scheme (NSS) workers; members of

religious, cultural and political organisations; all came forward to become a part of the cleaning campaign. Under the Panchayat leadership they were all divided into teams and their services were utilised to clean up all the areas that were affected by floods. Materials and food requirements of these teams were immediately supplied by Ward level action teams, with the able coordination of Panchayat members.

A special squad was set up under the Panchayat to ensure proper sanitisation in all wards

SANITISATION CAMPAIGN

On August 22, the Panchayat employed the services of a JCB to clear the debris and waste that had accumulated in the residences and roads in its vicinity. The expenses for this were borne by the Panchayat. JCB was also used to dispose of the corpses of 21 cows which died in the floods, and this was done in accordance with standard procedures. All operations were completed in a time-bound manner. Care was taken by the Panchayat officials to collect details of the people who were living in camps as well as those who could not reach there. All assistance was provided to the Indo Tibetan Border Police (ITBP) members as well NSS and Suchitwa Mission volunteers

who came to help. The Panchayat was able to effectively coordinate the efforts of all volunteers in a cleaning campaign that helped restore 511 homes that were wholly or partially damaged and conduct primary sanitisation of 7,162 wells, all within the stipulated time.

Panchayat level and Ward level coordinators were appointed and the sanitisation programme was completed on time. An emergency meeting of the Panchayat ensured prompt delivery of requisite materials for the volunteers who were involved in the cleaning operations. A sanitisation hub was created under the assistant secretary to register the services of volunteers, which were then used to clean all the flood-affected Wards. Facilities were arranged to collect and process both organic and inorganic waste matter from homes, with the help of Green Revolution. Volunteers from Attingal in Thiruvananthapuram cleaned the wells in Ward 12. Four electricians who came from Kollam undertook repairs of all damaged wiring in the Wards. Three workers were employed to clean wells in various Wards using pumps owned by the Panchayat.

Under Panchayat supervision, by August 28, almost all the people could return to their homes from relief camps. By August 29, steps were taken to clear plastic and other forms of waste that had littered the entire area. Panchayat sanitation team undertook the task of removing all the inorganic waste matter that had accumulated in the Aranmula temple compound. The services of the Fire and Rescue team were enlisted to clear the temple premises.

Various volunteers mobilised by organisations such as Suchitwa Mission and Harita Kerala Mission along with polytechnic and ITI students, jointly undertook wiring, plumbing and repairs, led by the task force of the Panchayat. Concerted interventions made by Kudumbashree Kottayam and Pathanamthitta district teams in all activities – right from running the camps to sanitisation and rehabilitation – deserve special mention. Teaching and non-teaching staff and students from the nearby ITI institute also pitched in to help with the Panchayat's rehabilitation and rebuilding efforts.

BINU KARUNAKARAN
President

LIVING ON THE EDGE

Mundrothuruthu, or Munroe Island, once a victim of the Tsunami, is dangerously poised, on the verge of being submerged. It suffered a double whammy with the recent floods that hit Kerala, as the calamity caused extensive devastation, destroying the land almost entirely. Yet miraculously it survived the tragedy, and its residents have a lot to thank the Panchayat administration's efforts for it

Mundrothuruthu, known in tourism circles as Munroe Island, is an inland island in Kerala that assumes its name from Resident Colonel John Munroe who was the administrative head of the princely state of Travancore, during the British era. It was under his rule that the island was reclaimed. Situated at the delta of the confluence of Kallada river and Ashtamudi Lake, the fertile soil of the land makes it the centre of coconut farming and coir manufacture. The island is accessible by road, water and rail and is located in Kollam district, 25 kilometres from Kollam city. The Panchayat includes the neighbouring villages, and is spread over an area of 13.4 square kilometres, housing a population of 9,599 people.

With the innumerable canals; waterways; lagoons; mangroves and the vast coconut groves that lace the lakeside, Mundrothuruthu is a veritable tourism delight that attracts nature lovers by the hordes. Its historical links with the colonial era lends a quaint dimension to the place, already rich in natural beauty. The Dutch church built in the nineteenth century, on

the beautiful banks of Ashtamudi is a fine specimen of Dutch-Kerala architecture. Coir retting and coir weaving, the main occupation of the people, add to the rustic charm of this man-made island.

Today, the low-lying areas of this island are on the verge of submerging in high tides, a fall-out of the Tsunami that hit the region a few years ago. Already precariously poised on the edge of extinction, it became one of the biggest casualties in the deluge of 2018 that hit Kerala.

FLOODS OF DISASTER

By noon, August 15, the Panchayat received an urgent message warning about the possibility of an unprecedented rise in the water level of Kallada river. Immediately, the Panchayat put out alerts through public announcements to inform people who were likely to be affected.

A relief camp was set up at the Mundrothuruthu Government L P School, as a precaution. However, as the water level continued to rise alarmingly, two more relief camps were opened at Bethel L P School at Kidapram North. Patients who were bed-ridden were shifted to relief camps in Panchayat ambulances. Under the leadership of the Grama Panchayat president, an emergency control room was set up at the Grama Panchayat office, to provide 24-hour ambulance services and other assistance.

By the night of August 15, the water level in Kallada river had risen to dangerous levels and the Wards of Kidapram North, Kidapram South and Perungalam were entirely submerged. In the darkness, the waters continued to rise menacingly and people in the flood-hit areas were isolated, with no means of escape. Elected representatives and employees of the Grama Panchayat, along with members of various voluntary organisations, worked together on a war footing to evacuate all those who were stranded, to the relief

camps. Considering the growing intensity of the calamity it was decided to open more relief camps. Five more camps were opened, taking the total number to eight.

As the Public Health Centre (PHC) as well as the ayurveda and homeo clinics in the Grama Panchayat were flooded, their operations were immediately shifted to the PHC sub-centre and government L P School.

Under the supervision of the village office authorities and the Grama Panchayat, it was ensured that essential articles were distributed in relief camps as and when needed. For their smooth running, members and employees of the Panchayat were assigned charge of these camps. They were tasked with procuring and distributing relief materials, providing help and moral support to the inmates as well taking care of their needs and ensuring proper sanitation.

Officers were specially deputed for regular monitoring of their functioning and for assessing and streamlining operations. With help from the Health Department, healthcare workers were assigned to each camp to provide adequate

Under the leadership of the Grama Panchayat president, an emergency control room was set up at the Grama Panchayat office, to provide 24-hour ambulance services and other assistance, during relief operations

medical assistance for all and prevent the spread of water-borne infections.

Essential materials which were handed over by voluntary organisations to the Grama Panchayat were distributed to the relief camps on a priority basis. With the help of these groups and the Department of Health, medical camps were organised in every relief camp. They also conducted awareness programmes on the precautions to be taken to prevent contagious diseases, once people returned home.

Through the health workers, necessary medicines and cleaning materials were provided to those who were leaving the relief camps. Workers under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS); people from various voluntary organisations; Grama Panchayat employees; health workers and elected representatives initiated a cleaning marathon on August 22 and 23, to clean homes, public institutions and roads and other flood-affected areas.

OPERATION CLEAN-UP

After the water level had receded completely, by August 23, the last of the relief camps was closed down. Surplus flood relief material available with the Panchayat was shifted to S D College and handed over to the Alappuzha district collector for distribution to the flood victims in the area.

The elected representatives and employees of the Panchayat, who led the disaster relief operations, derive great satisfaction from the fact that they did everything humanly possible to help the residents of Mundrothuruthu survive the catastrophe. Along with the systematic approach of the Panchayat administration, the whole-hearted cooperation and support of the local people and other volunteers also went a long way in helping the region overcome a disaster of such unprecedented scale.

M K CHACKO
President

RISING FROM THE DEBRIS

A Panchayat that was almost completely devoured by the floods, Nedumudi literally rose from the debris and made a remarkable recovery. The Panchayat administration deserves special kudos for pulling off a mammoth rescue and rehabilitation programme to get the residents of the area back on their feet again

Nedumudi Panchayat has the distinction of being the first Panchayat in Kerala to achieve 100 per cent literacy. A part of the Kuttanad Taluk of Alappuzha district, it is situated below sea level, a distinctive feature of the region. It sits on the banks of the river Pamba, which flows towards the eastern side of the Panchayat and reaches the west to flow towards Pookaitha river. During the rainy season, overflowing of the Pamba causes flooding, which is a common occurrence in the area during monsoons.

FIRST PHASE OF FLOODING

Right from the first phase of the floods that started on July 15, and lasted till August 10, Nedumudi bore the brunt of the calamity. By the end of July, 2018, weeks before the deluge that struck in the second week of August, all the Wards of the Grama Panchayat had become completely flooded. In the first phase, 29 relief camps were set up. The Panchayat administration actively got involved in organising rescue operations as well as in running the camps. Uninterrupted supply of food; drinking water; medical

aid and sanitation were all provided in the relief camps, thanks to the pro-active action taken by Panchayat representatives.

The Grama Panchayat Disaster Management Committee convened a meeting on July 17, to discuss the plan of action for relief operations and make arrangements to provide all essential facilities in the camps. Panchayat officials and employees were assigned charge of the camps with the mandate to ensure adequate supply of drinking water, hygiene and basic amenities for the inmates. They also looked after the medical needs and sanitation of the camps. Medical camps were organised to prevent infections and treat flood-related diseases.

The Disaster Management Committee conducted regular reviews to assess the effectiveness of the operations. Out of a total of 1,326 families residing in the Panchayat, 6,402 members were shifted to 29 camps. Kerala Water Authority (KWA) provided uninterrupted supply of drinking water through public taps as well as the drinking water projects of the Panchayat in all Wards. In Wards three and four which faced a shortage of drinking water, a PVC tank was installed to provide adequate supply.

Daily an assessment report on the functioning of the camps as well as the status of drinking water supply and sanitation in the Panchayat was submitted to a District Level Disaster Management Committee, set up under the Panchayat deputy director's office. In subsequent days, the monsoons weakened and floods receded. People were able to return home and relief camps in the Panchayat were shut down.

The local administration roped in the services of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) workers, Community Health Centre (CHC) employees and Asha workers to clean the schools and public places that were affected by floods. Since flood waters from the first phase had not subsided fully in many areas, the District Disaster Management Committee met and decided to be vigilant, anticipating more trouble.

The heavy rains that flooded the Pamba and Pookaitha rivers and the numerous canals in Nedumudi Panchayat, submerged it in a vicious deluge

DIRE CRISIS

The heavy rains of August 14 and 15, that flooded the Pamba and Pookaitha rivers and the numerous canals in the Panchayat, submerged it in a vicious deluge. On August 15, an emergency meeting of the Panchayat Disaster Management Committee was convened. As decided in the meeting, alerts were issued to the people, under the leadership of Ward members, and considering the seriousness of the calamity, residents were asked to move into relief camps opened in Alappuzha.

But many refused to heed the warnings. By the midnight of August 16, water level in Pamba rose dangerously, unleashing a deluge that submerged the entire area. By the early morning of August 17, there was an exodus of people rushing for safety. The Grama Panchayat members and staff, along with political and social organisations and other departments, swung into action to mount an extensive rescue operation and take them to safety.

The Panchayat, which suffered a severe crisis in the calamity, saw road traffic disrupted right from the initial phase that took place in July. The floods in August completely submerged it rendering road transport impossible. With the help of private boats and fishing vessels, the Panchayat administration arranged for people to be taken to Karumady from where they were transported by road to the relief camps in Alappuzha. By August 17 and 18, all the people trapped on various islets of the Grama Panchayat and on the terraces of homes were rescued and shifted directly to the boat jetties in Alappuzha. By August 18, the evacuation was almost complete. The next day, based on the information conveyed

by the district collector's control room and details obtained from other sources, people stranded on isolated islands were identified. The Panchayat administration then organised a risky operation to reach and rescue them with the help of boats. In the meantime, some of the villagers had moved to camps in other areas or relocated to the homes of relatives.

Panchayat staff and those from other government institutions were deputed to oversee the operations of the relief camps and take care of the needs of all the people who had been shifted there. They carried out the operations as directed by the Panchayat deputy director and the district collector. Their services continued till the day the floods subsided and people returned home from the camps.

MEGA CLEANING DRIVE

The District Food Sanitation Committee conducted a Maha Shuchikarana Yajna (the great cleaning drive) on August 28 and 29, in the Kuttanad area. Grama Panchayats of the areas which were affected by floods conducted two post-flood Grama Sabhas — one under the chairmanship of Nedumudi Panchayat president and another which was presided over by the vice president. Panchayat employees, Health Department officials and anganawadi workers were present at these meetings. It was decided to extend all guidance and support to the people who had returned home from the camps and provide all facilities to the volunteers who were expected to participate in the cleaning mission organised by the Panchayat on August 28 and 29.

Ward level responsibility of the cleaning operations was given to each Panchayat employee and Ward members were instructed to align with the Health Department workers on the sanitisation drive.

On August 28, 12,000 volunteers representing various political parties, public and private institutions, National Service Scheme (NSS) units from various colleges and medical teams from various hospitals arrived at the Panchayat, and successfully completed a mammoth cleaning process under the leadership of the Panchayat administration.

Over the next few days, all public institutions and public areas, including the 15 schools in the Panchayat; 23 anganawadi centres; temples and churches were cleaned and made operational. An important achievement of the Panchayat is that despite the scale of the floods, 5,660 houses out of the 5,860 in the Panchayat were successfully cleaned and made habitablein quick time. At the initiative of the Panchayat, Kerala State Electricity Board (KSEB) took immediate steps to restore power in the area. As a result of these efforts the Panchayat was able to rehabilitate almost all those who returned home from the relief camps. For the few whose homes were destroyed, the Panchayat opened a camp to offer shelter.

A G VIMALAKUTTY AMMA
President

THE SUCCESS OF TEAMWORK

In Neendur which suffered much less damage than many other Panchayats in the area, rehabilitation, not rescue, was the major challenge. The quick and efficient restoration that it accomplished shows the effectiveness of its Panchayat leadership in mobilising and channelising various resources towards a common goal — of putting people's lives back in gear

Neendur Panchayat is located to the west of Kottayam district, and belongs to the Ettumanoor Block. Bordering northern Kuttanadu, it sports a lush, green landscape, much like its neighbour Kuttanad, though the punchapadoms or the paddy fields that were a distinctive feature of the area earlier, have given way to the landscape of a non-agrarian economy.

A total area of 26 square kilometres, spread over 15 Wards, comes under its administration. The Panchayat is home to a population of 20,765. Bordering the Panchayat is Devagiri road on the eastern side and Mudakkali thodu in the west. In the south it shares its border with Thanneermukkom and in the north, with Kuzhiyanchal.

The plains on the western side extend up to the banks of the Vembanad Lake. The Penna canal, a tributary of the Meenachil river, joins the Vembanad Lake through the western side of the Panchayat. As many canals in the area are linked to the Meenachil river, rain water flowing into the river causes flooding in Wards 12, 13, 14 and 15, during heavy monsoons.

DEALING WITH THE FLOODS

The catastrophic floods of 2018 caused widespread damage in Neendur and were of a magnitude the village had never witnessed before, despite its history of annual flooding. Even then, the scale of impact was much less compared to its neighbouring Panchayats which suffered extensive destruction.

The floods in the first phase in July passed with very little disturbance in the area. But in the second phase of rainfall in August, 2018, water level started rising dangerously in Wards 12, 13, 14 and 15. With many parts of the area under the threat of floods, the Panchayat opened four relief camps on August 16 and 17. Initially, people from the wards of 14, 15 and 16 were reluctant to leave their homes and move to camps or safer localities. But once the Panchayat officials convinced them about the gravity of the situation, they cooperated with the evacuation efforts.

The Panchayat opened four relief camps in its vicinity. As the main roads were not damaged, the Panchayat faced no difficulty in procuring supply of essential goods for distribution to the camps or to others who needed them. The roads could be used for transportation during evacuation, which was a great boon to the local administration in the rescue operations. Panchayat members and officials held discussions and coordinated with revenue officials to ensure smooth functioning of the camps. Individuals and institutions from in and outside the Panchayat took the initiative to collect food and other essential materials and distribute them in the relief camps in coordination with the Panchayat.

Thanks to such efforts, from August 16 to 27, except on Onam day, the necessity to cook food in the camps never arose. Panchayat officials and local representatives worked constantly to alleviate the hardships of the people, reassuring and encouraging them with their presence at all times. The local administration joined hands with government agencies and others to ensure proper distribution of relief

materials and sanitation in the crowded camps.

To address medical contingencies arising out of the rains and flood waters, arrangements were made in all the four camps. Services of medical teams comprising allopathy, ayurveda and homeopathy doctors were made available to people who lived in camps and facilities were provided for the medical team to stay on site to provide immediate medical aid.

Post-flood operations posed a bigger challenge. The floods had brought with it large amounts of debris and dirt. Most of the houses in the five Wards that were affected by the floods had become uninhabitable and it was not always possible for the owners to undertake the arduous cleaning process on their own. The floods also posed the threat of infections and epidemics.

RESTORING SANITATION

The Panchayat lost no time in taking up the uphill task of cleaning and restoring hygiene in flood-affected areas. A sanitisation campaign was launched with the support of the Health Department. Water resources were chlorinated and clean drinking water supply was restored. All cleaning materials required for the operation were promptly delivered by the Panchayat.

Panchayat officials and local representatives worked constantly to alleviate the hardships of the people, reassuring and encouraging them with their presence at all times

A strict monitoring and supervision mechanism by Panchayat representatives was put in place to ensure an effective and foolproof cleaning process. With such interventions, along with active participation from general public, the cleaning of the Panchayat was completed in quick time allowing the residents to return home and resume their life without further delay.

ITI students coordinated with Panchayat officials to assess the damage and collate the data on losses. As a result, deserving flood victims were easily identified and the financial assistance announced by the government could be provided to 125 deserving families in a time-bound manner. Relief kits of essential food articles supplied by Kerala Civil Supplies Corporation (Supplyco) could be distributed a second time to the affected people. Apart from this, goods and materials collected by the Panchayat at its own initiative were supplied to 200 families.

A HELPING HAND

Although the flood situation caused serious disruptions in the village and the life of its people, Neendur Panchayat was fortunate that the severity of the floods it faced was far less than the hazards encountered by other places in the vicinity. As ten Wards in the Panchayat remained unaffected, Ward members and officials were able to focus on the affected wards and deliver prompt and efficient service. The good condition of the roads also helped in the uninterrupted supply of goods and services which was carried out without any difficulty.

Members and employees of the Panchayat led the relief and rehabilitation efforts from the front. At the same time, what needs to be acknowledged is that it was the success of a team effort. Relief operations and related activities could not have reached every needy person and the remotest corner of the village, but for the teamwork and manpower provided by voluntary workers; organisations; private and government institutions; students and others who came in large numbers to help out. The Panchayat can also take pride in having successfully brought together the various and disparate groups and steering their efforts to achieve the ultimate goal — of helping Neendur residents survive the calamity.

CS SUDHAN
President

BREAKING BARRIERS

Padiyur Panchayat, which has a geography dominated by wetlands, suffered the brutal impact of floods. But it recovered admirably, and what emerged from its youth-led revival was a new face of humanity that broke all barriers of religion, politics and culture. It was a bonding that has given a new hope for the state and would certainly inspire its efforts to build a resilient, resurgent Kerala

Spread over an area of 36 square kilometres, Padiyur is a village that has a largely agrarian economy, with equal focus on both paddy cultivation and dry land crops. With large tracts of wetlands that make up its territory, Padiyur was one of the worst affected regions in Thrissur district in the deluge of 2018.

It has 14 Wards under its administration, with a population of 17,204. Almost 75 per cent of the families in these Wards suffered the severe impact of floods. With the first bout of heavy rains on August 14, the agricultural lands of Padiyur were submerged. Even as the heavy rains wreaked havoc on the land and people of the Panchayat, nearby dams were opened, taking the intensity of the flood to a level never seen before. Flood waters invaded the homes of people, reaching up to several feet. Roads were also destroyed by the raging waters.

RESCUE OF MAMMOTH SCALE

From then on, what Padiyur witnessed was a relief operation of unprecedented scale, launched by the youth

in the region. They swam through the turbulent waters to rescue people who were gripped by fear at the ferocity of the unexpected floods. In areas where they were not able to swim across, they used katamarans to rescue people and shift them to relief camps. The Panchayat kept a close scrutiny on the operations, coordinating them and leading from the front. The homes of many of the Panchayat members were under water by then, but undeterred by personal considerations, they went ahead with the rescue operations.

All the roads to Padiyur were submerged, rendering vehicular traffic impossible. On the Potta-Moonupeedika State Highway, connecting Padiyur and the neighbouring Irinjalakuda, one kilometer of road on the Edathirinji-Chelur sector was completely destroyed. Kakkathuruthy, which connects the NH17 to this road was also under water. Once the roads connecting Padiyoor to the neighbouring Panchayats of Poomangalam and Mathilakam also went under water, Padiyur became completely isolated from the world for the next few days.

From August 16, the Panchayat started opening rescue camps. Ten rescue camps, including one on the Panchayat premises, were made available to the flood victims. Some of the camps were subsequently flooded and the Panchayat arranged to have their inmates shifted to camps at Irinjalakuda and Poomangalam Grama Panchayats. There were many families in the Panchayat who took shelter in the homes of relatives who lived in safer locations. Edathirinji HDP school was the biggest camp in the Panchayat. More than 2,000 people from 350 families were put up there.

Along with Panchayat representatives who spearheaded the rescue and relief work, interventions

from many quarters -- the Revenue Department; other government and non-government agencies; people's representatives and the public, helped add more muscle to the efforts. A number of individuals and organisations collected food and essential articles and distributed them to the inmates in camps.

Apart from the medical team under the medical officer of the Primary Health Centre (PHC), services of doctors from other hospitals were also made available. All measures to ensure hygiene and prevent epidemics were undertaken by the Panchayat team.

Along with Panchayat representatives who spearheaded the rescue and relief work, interventions from many quarters like voluntary groups and government organisations helped add more muscle to the efforts

TOGETHER TO REBUILD

What was more difficult than the rescue efforts was the task of cleaning up the Panchayat and making homes fit for people to live in. On August 22, the Panchayat started a drive to clean the areas where water had receded. Non-Government Organisations (NGOs), other active community organisations, and the public took over the cleaning activities, under the guidance and scrutiny of the Panchayat administration. All the cleaning equipment and materials required for the sanitisation campaign were organised by the Panchayat.

Even in the midst of the chaos and devastation caused by the floods, local authorities took the initiative to celebrate Onam, the traditional festival of Kerala, in the rescue camps. The inmates were served a sumptuous sadya and many of the Panchayat officials, local authorities and people's representatives joined in the celebrations.

By the evening of August 26, all the camps were disbanded and people returned home. Apart from essential kits provided by the district administration, other individuals and voluntary groups also distributed the relief materials they had collected. Some people had lost all their possessions, including cooking utensils, beds and household equipment. The most important issue was the scarcity of drinking water, which has continued long after the disaster.

Many homes were damaged during the floods and many were completely destroyed. There were many who had no home to go back to. The Panchayat still runs a shelter to accommodate them. Many cattle and other animals were killed in the floods. The heartening fact is that even in such a big calamity no human life was lost. All the Anganawadis and Primary Health Centres in the area were also flooded.

The Engineering Department of the Panchayat has collected the data on the extent of damages, with the help of engineering students. The data will evaluate the destruction to houses, roads and public assets. Psychology students of a nearby college took the active initiative of visiting homes of the flood victims and providing them with moral support and counselling.

The devastation caused by the tragedy is huge. It is not going to be easy for the place and people to get over its catastrophic effect. For a small Panchayat with no funds of its own, it is an even more uphill task. However it was a time when humanity was rediscovered, when a new bonding and unity that overcame the barriers of politics, status, religion and caste came to the fore. And this would provide the inspiration and incentive in the Government's efforts to build a new state — a resurgent Kerala.

KARTHIKA JAYAN
President

DISCOVERING STRENGTH IN UNITY

Parapukkara Panchayat could overcome the crushing impact of the floods only because of the unity that its people showed in the face of adversity. Today, despite the untold miseries that the floods have caused, people are optimistic about their future. For, they know that they can rebuild Parapukkara through their unified efforts

Parapukkara Panchayat was one of the most flood-ravaged Panchayats in Thrissur district. More than 85 per cent of the households under its administration were affected by the floods. The lower ranges of the Panchayat and places near the Kurumali river were under water. The flood waters reached even the National Highway that passes through the area.

The opening of the shutters of Chimmini dam was not properly communicated to the Panchayat. Parapukkara Panchayat did not find a mention in the list of places facing threat from the dam. However, Panchayat employees and Ward members did not wait to take emergency measures to strengthen the bunds and communicate the potential danger through public announcements and warn people near the banks of the river.

It was August 15, and the rains had intensified. After the flag hoisting ceremony of the Independence Day celebrations in the Panchayat, the president, secretary and members went to Manjamkuzhi shutter area of Kurumali river to discuss the consequences of rising flood waters. Considering the worsening situation precipitated by continuous rains, the

evacuation process started on the night of August 15, and camps were opened in various areas of the Panchayat.

THE RESCUE PHASE

An emergency situation arose the very next day when the bund collapsed and the river started overflowing. Efforts to shift the people of the 18 Wards of the Panchayat to relief camps were launched. Panchayat employees made an attempt to shift the files and computers in the Panchayat office to a safe place, even in the midst of the rescue operations. But their efforts turned out to be futile as the water level increased uncontrollably.

On August 17, due to continuous rains, rescue operations were interrupted, and many areas in the Panchayat became isolated, without any access to help. People were trapped inside their homes in these isolated areas. Those who were trapped on the terraces of their homes were rescued by fishing boats. More than 10 boats of the National Disaster Relief Force (NDRF) and the Defence were also used for rescue operations.

Thanks to the unrelenting efforts of the Panchayat, evacuation of all the residents could be completed without any loss to life. The Panchayat took the initiative to ensure that the inmates of relief camps were provided with all essential materials like food; clothing; bedding and others. A medical camp was also organised in Thottipal area under the guidance of the Health Department.

From the next day medical camps were regularly organised in all the 23 relief camps of the Panchayat under the leadership of a medical team from the District Medical Officer's (DMO) office and the Primary Health Centre (PHC). The ayurveda dispensary of the Panchayat also offered its expertise.

Nearly 9,000 disaster victims lived in 23 camps. Some of the residents lived in their own homes, which were located on the high ranges of the

region. The functions of the Panchayat were shifted to the Thejus Auditorium in Nandikkara, when the first floor of the office became completely submerged.

HELPLINES OPEN UP

Officials of the Panchayat visited each camp the following day and evaluated the facilities provided to the people. They took the lead in providing the inmates with all the basic necessities and ensuring good sanitation. Moreover, the Panchayat sought the help of the Irrigation Department to remove uprooted trees and dead bodies of animals that had accumulated in the Manjamkuzhi shutter vicinity.

Another major initiative of the Panchayat was to conduct awareness classes regarding the precautions to be followed while cleaning houses and wells once the water level came down. This initiative was launched on August 20. C Raveendranath, minister for education, visited each camp and spent quality time with the inmates.

A cleaning campaign was launched under the leadership of the Panchayat from August 21. Many volunteers and organisations joined the operations, and they were divided into several squads to ensure a systematic process. Cleaning operations started from the Panchayat office. To supplement the Panchayat efforts, a National Disaster Relief Force (NDRF) team visited the camps and handed over basic necessities, including medicines, for distribution to the inmates. Members of the Defence Academy also

Data regarding the number of houses destroyed by the huge deluge was collected using an app called REBUILD. This was done with the help of volunteers form NGOs and students from local engineering colleges

visited the camps and handed over essential items and medicines. Relief materials that came from Maharashtra were distributed in the camps.

Doctors visited the camps and carried out precautionary measures to avoid contagious diseases. Army's medical team also visited the camps.

The Panchayat president called an all-party meeting to enlist the cooperation of various organisations and volunteers to conduct regular cleaning activities in the camps. The Panchayat and its allied institutions were cleaned under the leadership of volunteers from Clean Kerala Company. Cleaning equipment and cleaning materials were provided to the squads by the Irinjalakuda Block office.

District coordinator, Life Mission; Project director; ADC; the Performance Audit Supervisor and other officials visited the Panchayat the next day to evaluate the damage. From the following day, the Panchayat focus turned to the distribution of drinking water at the Ward level. It was Onam time and the Panchayat took the effort to arrange a *Tiruvona sadya* for all the inmates in the camps. A rehabilitation kit containing basic necessities like food, groceries and other items were also distributed to those who returned to their homes.

The Panchayat office was shifted back to the first floor of the Panchayat building on August 27. The staff cleaned the office surroundings with the help of Kudumbashree workers, which was subsequently evaluated by the district mission coordinator, Kudumbashree.

THE REHABILITATION

By August 29, floods had receded and the number of camps was reduced to two. People, whose homes were destroyed, continued to live in relief camps. Students from the nearby colleges and volunteers of Clean Kerala actively participated in the cleaning of flood-affected homes and other public areas. The institutions under the Panchayat such as the Krishi Bhavan, the Primary Health Centre, the Government Lower Primary School and anganawadis were also damaged during the floods.

Agricultural crops were destroyed on a large scale.

More than 200 cattle were dead. Both dairy farmers and fishermen suffered heavy financial losses.

More than 800 houses were damaged. About 150 houses were not fit for habitation. Data regarding the number of damaged houses was collected using an app called REBUILD. For this, the Panchayat sought the help of volunteers of different Non-Government Organisations (NGOs) and engineering students.

Panchayat representatives and officials worked tirelessly from the very first day of the breakout of floods. The whole Panchayat cooperated in catering to every need of the flood-affected people.

It will take a long time for the Panchayat to overcome the aftermath of the flood. But Panchayat officials and people are optimistic about the future. The recurrent theme during the floods was unity and humanity. The Panchayat hopes that it would continue to be the slogan as it looks forward to rebuilding the land and reestablishing normalcy in the immediate future.

ELIAMMA THOMAS
President

A LESSON IN HUMANITY

A region surrounded by water, Peringara Grama Panchayat and its people suffered extensive damage in the recent floods. But the calamity and its survival gave a wonderful lesson in humanity. It saw people and resources flowing into the Panchayat from all over the world, in a united effort to assuage the sufferings of fellow beings and help them rebuild their lives

Peringara Grama Panchayat belongs to the Pulikeezhu Block of Thiruvalla Taluk in Pathanamthitta district. The place prides of a unique ecology and distinctive climate. The village that is spread across Peringara and Kavumbhagam, covers an area of 16.5 square kilometres. The Panchayat, which was formed in 1953, currently has 15 Wards. The eastern part of the Panchayat comprises higher plains while the southern part is home to banana plantations that are below sea level. This Panchayat is also a part of Kuttanad, and like Kuttanad, it also has an abundance of water bodies that surround it.

THE PRELUDE

The area, that is a part of upper Kuttanad, is prone to floods every year. Due to the heavy rainfall on July 14 and 15, many places of the Panchayat got flooded. This was just a harbinger of the calamity that was to strike a month later, but no one realised it at the time.

In the first phase, the low lying Wards were flooded and water level rose alarmingly. As a result, more than 3,200 people had to be shifted to relief camps. Food and basic amenities for the camps

were arranged by the Panchayat, with help from the Revenue Department.

As the water started receding, most of the camps were shut down with only 1,575 people left in the remaining ones. There was considerable damage to property, crops and the means of livelihood of many people. An assessment by the Panchayat engineer reported loss of 10 kilometres of tarred roads, 8 kilometres of pavements and 13 kilometres of concrete roads.

THE CALAMITY

Even as the process of rehabilitating the flood victims was under way, the monsoons intensified again in August. On August 15, 2018, at 3 am, the Panchayat received a telephone call from Kavumbhagam village officer to inform that a landslide had occurred at Ranni and that there was the possibility of the Pamba dam being opened immediately. The message was conveyed to the members of all the Wards without delay, instructing them to sound an alert to the people through public announcements and evacuate them if necessary.

Announcements were made the same night and Ward members and other officials, with the help of the public started evacuating people who were in immediate danger from the opening of the dam. But many people were reluctant to leave their homes under the surmise that the floods would not be worse than the usual flooding that the area witnesses every rainy season.

Soon the water level in the area rose from one metre to five metres, flooding 99 per cent of the Panchayat. By the dawn of August 16, all the Wards of the Panchayat were flooded, leading to widespread panic. Government offices, schools, public institutions and shops had to shut down due to the floods. All business and industrial units in the area, including the Panchayat office were flooded. Many people moved into double-storey houses in the vicinity for safety. Others moved to the residences of relatives in safer localities or to the relief camps in order to

save their lives.

In the meantime, Sajilal, a resident of Ward 11 and a retired village officer, who was returning after rescuing his family, went missing in the heavy currents. The unfortunate incident added to the panic. The days that followed were those of untold hardships and suffering for the people of the Panchayat.

SAFETY FIRST

By August 15 and 16, around 15,000 people were living in 74 camps. Due to the rapid increase in people moving to relief shelters, it became difficult to assess the actual number of inmates in these camps. Grama Panchayat members and employees worked day and night to evacuate people and take them to safety. All available types of boats were used to rescue people who were stuck on the islands. Cooperation and active participation of the local public went a long way in helping minimise the impact of the disastrous floods.

The Panchayat lost no time in organising help from government institutions and agencies; fishermen; the navy; the police and all available sources. The timely intervention of the Government,

Grama Panchayat members and employees worked day and night to evacuate people and take them to safety, catering to 15,000 people who lived in 74 camps in the first two days alone

which provided useful inputs and suggestions, also helped reduce the effect of the floods and arrest the number of casualties to a great extent.

Though rainfall decreased by August 17, water levels did not fall and a strong current persisted in the flood waters. So, elderly people and children had to be transported to safer places with the help of JCBs and trucks.

Officials of Peringara Panchayat and neighbouring Panchayats took over the duty of overseeing the functioning of the relief camps. Despite damage to the Panchayat office, the president and secretary held meetings to discuss measures to standardise rescue and camp operations. Voluntary organisations and workers also came in large numbers to help the Panchayat in its rescue operations and the conduct of the camps. All relief materials that came in were segregated into kits and were distributed in all homes and relief camps. Over 6,530 families stayed in various camps during the calamity.

By August 21, floods had receded completely. To restore hygiene and make the houses liveable again was a big challenge that the Panchayat administration faced. Undeterred, the Panchayat launched into the long and arduous process of making the areas under its administration habitable again.

OVERWHELMING SUPPORT

Resources to aid post-flood rehabilitation flowed into Peringara Panchayat from all parts of India and from abroad, in a great demonstration of humanity and concern for fellow beings. The Panchayat divided the entire force of volunteers into different squads for the sanitisation campaign that began on August 25. But for the whole-hearted support of all the people who came to help, the cleaning process could never have been completed so fast and so efficiently.

The Panchayat took measures to bury the bodies

of animals and birds which were killed in the flood. The services of carpenters, electricians and plumbers were arranged to repair homes.

75 public institutions were cleaned. Biodegradable and non-biodegradable waste were segregated and processed. In the midst of all these, six people from different Wards were reported with Leptospirosis which raised concern initially, but its spread was arrested.

Schools in which camps were held, were cleaned and re-opened on August 29. 6,530 houses were sanitised and 5,720 wells chlorinated. 2,000 litres of water was distributed to various Wards. The Panchayat's efforts in rescue and rehabilitation got due recognition from the world as is evident from the fact that it won aid from reputed international organisations including the UNICEF and Save the Children. And that is indeed a tribute to the spirit of the land that fought the forces of nature and came up trumps.

K K SACHITH
President

SURVIVAL OF THE UNITED

Perinjanam Panchayat maybe one of the smallest in Kerala, but the land and its people demonstrated a big heart in the way they fought and survived the recent calamity of floods. Along the way they have imbibed and taught the world the valuable lesson that the key to survival lies in unity and humanity

Perinjanam Panchayat, in Thrissur district, hit the headlines in 2015 when it became the first ISO-certified Panchayat in the country. Recently, it created news once again by becoming the first Panchayat in the state to use solar energy to achieve self sufficiency in power. This coastal village is one of the smallest in the state, sharing its borders with the neighbouring villages of Mathilakam, Padiyur and Kaipamangalam. In the east it is bordered by the Canoli Canal and in the west by the Arabian Sea. It is located 12 kilometres away from Kodungallur and 13 kilometres from Triprayar, and is home to a population of 20,340.

DAYS OF DEVASTATION

Perinjanam Grama Panchayat suffered great devastation in the deluge of 2018. As the monsoons intensified in the second week of August, the local administration anticipated trouble and started flood relief activities without delay. People were alerted and the first relief camp was set up at Perinjanam Government UP School on August 15. Around 200 men and women took refuge in the first camp. As the

Panchayat had no previous history of flooding during monsoons, the magnitude of the disaster that followed was unexpected.

With every hour the situation worsened. As the first camp was not able to provide refuge for more than 200 people, a second camp was set up. The chairman of the Development Standing Committee of Perinjam Panchayat and other Panchayat employees spearheaded the running of the camps, along with the coordination of all work related to these camps. Emergency contact numbers were circulated which made it easy for those who were stranded, to seek help. This quickened the pace of rescue operations.

IN MISSION MODE

Local people and the Panchayat administration got together to collect materials like blankets; mats; drinking water; food; medicines and clothes and distribute them in the camps. Toilet facilities posed a major challenge in relief camps which were overflowing with people. Providing transport for rescue was another.

Different committees were formed, which included the president; secretary; vice-president; Standing Committee chairman and others, which were tasked with finding solutions for all the problems that arose from time to time. This focused approach helped the Panchayat to successfully overcome the hurdles. No effort was spared to ensure hygiene, adequate supply of drinking water and transport in the camps as well as in other places that needed the facilities.

Considering the scale of operations, the Panchayat office moved to a 24-hour working schedule. An emergency meeting held by the Disaster Management Task Force on August 17, laid out an action plan for effective disaster management. It also discussed the immediate steps to be taken and the processes to be followed to organise the operations.

As the intensity of the monsoons continued unabated and the disastrous aftermath of the floods mounted, the Panchayat sought the help of fishermen to conduct a risky evacuation of about 100 people who were stranded on the river bank. In the days that followed Perinjanam saw a dedicated team of Panchayat employees and social workers joining forces in a large scale rescue and rehabilitation mission. It was one that greatly helped the residents of the village recover from the disruptions caused by the calamity and pick up their lives again.

By the time the flood fury had subsided and order was restored in the area, sanitisation volunteers had completed the cleaning work in all the homes of the Panchayat

POWER OF COLLABORATION

On August 21, after the waters had receded, a meeting of various departments, volunteers and elected representatives was held to discuss the plan of action and initiate a massive cleaning programme to make the Panchayat liveable again. Ward level cleaning committees were put into action to coordinate

the efforts to tidy up the worst affected Wards of 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 10, 11 and 12. The cleaning process started on August 22. Subsequently squads were formed to lead the cleaning drive. A 33-member squad was able to pull off a remarkable restoration in the worst affected Wards of 5, 6 and 7.

On July 28, around 20 people from three camps were moved to another relief camp at the Polasserry Community Centre. By the time the flood fury had subsided and order was restored in the area, sanitisation volunteers had completed the cleaning work in all the homes of the Panchayat. Even during the days of the restoration, 24 people from seven families continued to live in the Perinjanam Kuttilakadavu camp. With the help of a mobile application, the Panchayat collated the data of houses damaged by floods.

As part of the rehabilitation efforts, each family that was affected by the floods, was given kits of essential articles like food; clothing; beds; mattresses and chairs. The Panchayat took the initiative to provide cattle to people who had lost their livelihood. This was both an achievement and a boon to the Panchayat in its post-flood efforts.

The local administration, with the help of the Kerala State Pollution Control Board, took samples from 51 wells in the Panchayat to test the quality of water in the flood-affected areas and take adequate steps to make them safe for use.

The Panchayat administration and all those who came in large numbers to help with the rescue, restoration and rehabilitation operations can be proud of what they achieved. This survival is a fine testimony to the successful collaborative work between the Panchayat, people's representatives, organisations and individuals who worked round the clock, hand in hand, irrespective of their political and cultural differences. Such an effort was the result of the valuable lesson and realisation that the calamity gave them – that staying united is the only way to survive disasters of this magnitude.

N C PRASAD
President

INNOVATIVE LEADERSHIP

Isolated from the rest of the world, ravaged by floods and battered by landslides, Pozhuthana bore the brunt of the natural disasters that ravaged it during the monsoons of 2018. But Pozhuthana Panchayat has always been resourceful and has been recognised by the Government for its imaginative programmes. Instead of wilting under the fury of nature, the Panchayat members introduced a well-coordinated plan to rescue people and minimise losses

Pozhuthana Panchayat, in the Kalpetta Taluk of Wayanad district, is one that witnessed widespread damage due to the floods. Pozhuthana has an area of 71.3 square kilometres. Due to its geographical characteristics, the Panchayat experienced both floods and landslides at the same time. The disaster relief operations that were started on August 8, 2018, were called off only on August 28, 2018. It was the untiring work under the leadership of the Panchayat Committee that helped Pozhuthana survive the natural disasters during the monsoon months of 2018.

LANDSLIDES, LANDSLIPS...

Pozhuthana experienced the maximum number of landslides during the rainy season. Many people shifted on their own from places where landslides were likely to occur. Many others were shifted under the initiative of the Panchayat. As a result of

this, casualties due to landslides were contained effectively. However, many roads and bridges were destroyed. A family of four miraculously escaped from a house that was completely destroyed in a landslide. The number of landslides that took place in Kurichiar Hills was so high that the Panchayat administration could only watch helplessly as the tragedy unfolded before it.

COMPLETE ISOLATION

Due to the heavy rains on August 8 and 9, Pozhuthana was completely isolated from the rest of the Panchayats. For the first two days, people survived with the essential items supplied by the Panchayat. The driving force behind the relief operations was the cooperation, trust and mutual support of the people. The Panchayat officials also played a major role in coordinating the activities that helped tide over the difficult times. Though the Panchayat members had to undergo many hardships it was the anchoring role that they played that brought the situation under control. For example, a Panchayat member risked her life and swam through the dangerous flood waters to save a human life. Her story would have inspired many people to jump into relief operations.

DUAL IMPACT

Since water level in the rivers and streams swelled up due to the heavy rains on August 8, about 20 families from Meenchal, an area close to the Pozhuthana town, were shifted to the Government LP School, Achuranam. With the water level rising to unusually high levels, many places remained cut off. People were trapped on the first floor of their homes. There was an acute shortage of food and water. The Panchayat contacted the district collector on August 9, seeking the services of the disaster management force. Following the landslides in Kurichiar Hills many people were shifted to relief camps. A 24-hour

The number of landslides that shook Kurichiar Hills was so high that the Panchayat could only watch helplessly as the tragedy unfolded before it

disaster management cell started functioning.

Transport services and power supply were restored partially. In the relief camp at Sugandhagiri plantation, about six people went down with fever. Medicines stocked in the Panchayat office were damaged by flood waters that had entered the office. With the help of the medical officer, medicines were arranged for the camp. Landslides ravaged places like Amba and Ambathreka. Relief operations were launched with the help of the disaster management force. Two new relief camps were opened. Altogether 3,000 people were shifted to 16 camps with the help of revenue officials.

On August 11, the local MLA and district collector visited the Kurichiar Hills. The two tributaries of Kabani river, that flows through the Panchayat, overflowed to a width of around 500 metres. The next day, there were more landslides in Kurichiar Hills. Landslides followed in a place called Ammara. Three houses were fully damaged. In Sugandhagiri landslips caused havoc in around 50 different areas. Since the water in 600 wells in the area was contaminated, the Panchayat started water supply in tankers.

MANAGING RELIEF WORK

An emergency meeting was convened to review the situation and take necessary action. Coordination committees were formed at the Ward level.Except for the staff in the emergency cell, all others were asked to be active on the field to coordinate relief operations. They were asked to do prompt reporting on the relief camps. The Health Department workers were entrusted with the task of controlling the spread of infectious diseases. They were also tasked with assessing the number of birds and animals that had perished in the flood.

Voluntary organisations, social networks and students from different parts of the state extended their support and provided leadership in disaster relief operations. The process of assessing the loss in the Panchayat was launched on August 15. According to the report of the agriculture officer, about 105 hectares of agricultural land was damaged.

Relief materials received from various sources were distributed to all the needy in the Panchayat. Panchayat deputy director visited the camps and public institutions that were flooded. Preventive medicines were distributed

to control the spread of infectious diseases.

With the help of the voluntary organisations, a plan of action was put in place to remove the waste the floods had brought in. Experienced National Service Scheme (NSS) volunteers were assigned various tasks related to flood relief in the Panchayat. About 674 wells were cleaned. The services of a JCB and tractor were employed by the Panchayat administration to remove the large amounts of waste that had accumulated in homes and public places.

Meanwhile, all holidays were made working days for the government officials. The Panchayat president and secretary visited all camps. Arrangements were made to provide the people a sadya on Onam day.

TAKING STOCK

Four camps were retained while all others were closed down. A meeting was called to discuss the functioning of the LP School that was damaged by the landslides in Kurichiar Hills. The meeting attended by the MLA and Panchayat president discussed the matter with the residents and decided to shift the school temporarily to the local Madrasa.It was decided to submit a statement of the losses suffered by the Panchayat to the Government.

On August 28, a meeting of the Panchayat Committee and staff reviewed the flood relief operations. As per advice from the district collector, the Public Health Centre (PHC) could function from an old building and all efforts were taken to upgrade facilities in other offices.

Around 2,195 people consisting of Ward members; voluntary organisations; students; political party representatives; rural employment scheme workers; Kudumbashree workers; local residents and many others participated in the Clean Kerala programme and 6,820 tons of waste was cleared. They also planted saplings of trees in all Wards to replace all that were destroyed in the floods.

Pozhuthana Panchayat has received much recognition from the Government for its programmes. The Panchayat's successful track record of taking up new projects perhaps was the reason for the efficient way in which it could coordinate its rescue and relief operations and survive such a major tragedy.

JOSEPH XAVIER
President

THE WILL TO SURVIVE

With torrential rains disrupting transport facilities, Pulinkunnu remained cut off from the outside world in the devastating floods that hit Kerala in 2018. However, one of the most successful alliances that the floods forged, that of people, Panchayat and Ward members, came to the rescue of the region. The coordinated action by these three crucial components of rescue forces worked against heavy odds to save life and property and to minimise losses. Yes! Like elsewhere in Kerala the rescue and relief operations in Pulinkunnu was the victory of team spirit and of the collective will to survive

Pulinkunnu is an island in the Kuttanad region of Alappuzha district, one of the main rice growing centres of Kerala. It is the biggest Panchayat in Velliyanadu Block. The land is a part of the many islands dotting the famous Kerala backwaters, a network of lakes, wetlands, and canals that crisscross the area. The Pamba river joins Manimalayar in the region and flows through the Panchayat.

The land area of Pulinkunnu includes 1,050 hectares of dry lands and 2,395 hectares of paddy fields. 500 hectares of the Panchayat is made up of the Vembanad Lake. The coastal area of the Panchayat is about one metre above sea level while

the paddy fields lie about half a metre to two metres below mean sea level. The Panchayat, with an area of 3.53 square kilometres, has a population of around 23,667. Of this, the male population is 11,645 while that of females is 12,022. Pulinkunnu has a literacy rate of around 99 per cent.

However, the main occupation of the people is farming, fisheries, toddy tapping and others. Of late, tourism has emerged as one of the leading employers in Kuttanad. Pulinkunnu is the largest Panchayat in Kuttanad Taluk. There are 16 Wards in the Panchayat. The place is also famous as the hometown of the great Indian scientist Dr M S Swaminathan.

DOUBLE IMPACT

In 2018, the flood waters reached Kuttanad region twice. The first phase of floods took place in the middle of July. Water entered the homes of many of the residents of Kuttanad. So they had to be shifted to safer locations. The second phase of floods caught the Panchayat and its entire team of officials unawares. On August 16, water level of Pamba river started rising and Pulinkunnu Grama Panchayat faced the second bout of floods in 2018.

On the morning of August 17, most of the areas of Pulinkunnu were under about one metre of water. Since the Panchayat is only one metre above sea level, a serious flood situation could wreak havoc in the region and the lives of the people. By evening, water level began to rise further. One of the worst affected buildings was the Panchayat office. The officials shifted the office computers and most of the important files to a building at a higher location.

It was a day that residents of Pulinkunnu will not forget easily. The flood situation was already grim and the level of flood waters kept rising further. Life in the region came to a standstill. Kerala State Road Transport Corporation (KSRTC) bus services stopped as roads were submerged by the rushing waters. Boat services also became

impossible as the rivers became a raging swirl of flood waters.

People of Pulinkunnu were trapped on the island without any contact with the outside world or access to help. The threat of a huge flood loomed large. Flood waters had entered most of the homes in the area and people had no idea what to do.

EVACUATION AND RESCUE

Due to the continuous and intense rainfall, water levels started rising further. Most of the homes in Pulinkunnu Panchayat were flooded. With no help at hand, the Panchayat administration decided to step in and launch a rescue operation. Available boats and other means of transport in the area were mobilised to evacuate people and shift them to safer locations. By night, water had entered buildings that were located even in the higher terrains of the region. The Engineering College in the Panchayat was also not spared.

Panchayat provided the facility of pakal veedu for the people whose houses were completely damaged in the flood

On the morning of August 17, the Panchayat and district administrations hired boats and started a large scale rescue operation. Relief camps were opened in the safer areas of the island and most of the people were moved to these camps. Those who could not be accommodated in them were shifted to other camps in Alappuzha district. Many people were housed in camps set up at Changanassery. Some of the residents showed reluctance to move into relief camps. But within two days as the floods worsened, they had to be rescued and shifted to safe places.

Animals were tied to high bridges. Panchayat officials made arrangements to deliver food to them from time to time. One person from Ward number two lost his life due to an electric shock. After the tragic incident, officials of the local body took extra precautions to avoid further mishaps.

CLEANING SQUADS

From August 16 to August 27, the Panchayat made arrangements for flood victims to stay in relief camps. Before they returned home, squads were deployed to clean all the areas and homes that had been affected by the floods. A comprehensive cleaning campaign was undertaken with the help of political parties, volunteers and the district administration to clear the dirt and debris from all the homes and public places. It was completed by September 2. The Panchayat office resumed its normal operations from August 30.

Once the cleaning process was completed, all those who had taken refuge in rehabilitation camps returned to their homes. The floods had completely destroyed the houses of many people in Pulinkunnu, making them totally uninhabitable. Those who lost their homes, continued to stay in camps organised by the local authorities. The Panchayat provided the facility of pakal veedu or daycare homes for the people whose houses were completely damaged in the floods.

HYGIENE AND SANITATION

Five trucks and another five pick-up vans were pressed into service to provide clean drinking water as all the drinking water resources had become contaminated in the floods. Samples of drinking water were collected from different locations of the region with the help of the Environment Pollution Control Board. These samples were checked for their quality and the data obtained was used in the successful implementation of the sanitisation process.

One of the challenges the Panchayat faced in its rescue operations, was the reluctance of many to leave their homes despite dire warnings about the calamity waiting to happen. Their rescue at a later stage was a very risky process, which caused undue pressure on rescue work. In the entire Kuttanad belt this was one common feature that was observed during the floods. This was a clear indication of the unprecedented ferocity with which the calamity struck and how unexpected its scale was.

However, despite all the odds, Pulinkunnu Panchayat was able to weather the storm and survive. The story of this survival has become a telling commentary on the power of united human efforts in fighting the forces of nature and winning over them.

PV LAJU
President

LEARNING FROM THE PAST

Flood relief work in Puthenvelikkara is an example of the collective will of people overcoming hurdles in the way of relief operations and learning from the experiences of the past. After the calamity, the Panchayat administration is now reviewing its preparedness to face future challenges. They are in the process of creating a database of officials, relief workers, doctors and volunteers who are ready to stand with them in the event of natural disasters in the future

Puthenvelikkara Grama Panchayat is located in Parakkadavu Block in Ernakulam district. The Grama Panchayat is spread over an area of 19.87 square kilometres and includes 17 Wards. The total population of the Panchayat is 27,000. The Panchayat's boundaries are Poyya and Methala Panchayats in the north, Karumaloor and Kunnukara Panchayats in the south. Chendamangalam and Vadakkekara Methala Panchayats lie on the west side while Parekkadavu, Kunnukara and Kuzhur Panchayats form the eastern boundary.

Puthenvelikkara is the name given to the basin of the Periyar and Chalakkudy rivers as well as the Kottappuram canal. The area, therefore, has fertile soil. Farming is the main livelihood. Puthenvelikkara Panchayat consists of Thurithipuram; Thuruthur; Vellottupuram; Kalleparambu; Puthenvelikkara; Panjippalla; Manancheri Kunnu; Vattekattu Kunnu; Kodikuthiya Kunnu; Elanthikara; Kizhoorpadam;

Kozhithuruth; Thelathuruth; Cherukadappuram and some other islets.

THE FURY OF FLOODS

It was during August, 2018, that Kerala experienced one of the worst floods in its history. It caused the biggest devastation in the state since the great floods of 1924, and was caused by the unusually high amount of rainfall that was received during the period. As the catchment areas of many dams experienced heavy rainfall, the shutters of Edamalayar, Idukki and Mullaperiyar dams were opened. Elanthikara village in Puthenvelikkara is the meeting point of the Periyar and Chalakkudy rivers. The rising waters in these rivers led to ten Wards of Puthenvelikkara being fully submerged and five Wards, partially.

RESCUE TEAMS FORMED

The floods first occurred in the Panchayat on August 8, following which 11 flood relief camps were opened. On August 14, water receded and the relief camps were wound up. However, water levels in the area suddenly rose once again and relief camps had to be re-opened. Following a warning issued by the Disaster Management Authority, an all-party meeting was held in the Panchayat.

It was decided to constitute emergency response teams in various regions of the Panchayat to meet the exigencies arising out of floods. The members of the team mainly comprised expert swimmers and those who had skill in cutting down trees. Ward members led the emergency response teams in each Ward. As soon as alert on the impending flood was received, it was conveyed to all the people in the area through public announcements.

During the night of August 14, water began to enter more Wards. More than 20,000 people had to be evacuated to about 28 camps in the Panchayat, as a result. On the night of August 15, flood waters began to submerge the Panchayat office building as well as the Krishi Bhavan and village office. As water rose on the roads from and to the Panchayat, it became

isolated. Despite this, rescue and relief operations were launched, using the boats of local boat clubs as well as those of the army. As there was no power supply and communication channels were disrupted, relief operations became difficult.

The Panchayat administration took up the onus of providing food and drinking water to those in relief camps, in coordination with the Revenue Department. Services of doctors were made available in all relief camps. There were 12 deaths in the Panchayat during the floods. Barring three Wards, water levels receded in the rest of the Wards by August, 21.

REHABILITATION MEASURES

One of the greatest challenges the Panchayat faced was the rehabilitation of the places and people that were hit by floods. There were numerous hurdles in the aftermath of the floods, with many homes, offices and roads still under water. There were also other challenges like disposing of the carcasses of animals that had perished in the floods. About 7,000 houses were affected by floods. 89 houses were completely destroyed and 2,355 houses suffered partial damage. Five people in the Panchayat lost both their homes and lands in the floods. About 2,615 wells in the Panchayat were contaminated and 248 ponds were totally destroyed.

REPAIR AND RESTORATION

The cleaning operations of flood-affected homes were done with the help of voluntary agencies, Panchayat employees and members of political parties. Volunteers were divided into different groups and were deployed in various Wards. Cleaning operations were carried out in offices and other public places as well. Essential materials were arranged by the Panchayat for those who had undertaken the work.

Cleaning was completed by August 30, and relief camps were closed. JCBs were used to clear the roads as well as to remove broken electric posts and tree branches. By August 26, roads were repaired and made ready for vehicular traffic. Power supply was restored within four days. The floods had contaminated 2,615 wells in the Panchayat. Water from 25 wells was tested with the help of the Pollution Control Board and chlorination was done with the help of Asha workers.

By August 26, the roads were repaired and made ready for vehicular traffic. Power supply was restored within four days after the flood waters receded

WASTE DISPOSAL

After the floods, one of the most pressing issues faced by the Panchayat was waste disposal. A large amount of biodegradable and non-biodegradable waste had accumulated in the aftermath of the floods. Carcasses of 88 dead animals were buried. The dirt and debris that had accumulated in many houses were collected and deposited in the vacant areas by the roadside. This waste was subsequently transported to two collection centres using JCBs.

Clean Kerala Company collected about 35 loads of waste. Arrangements were made to transport the remaining 65 tonnes of waste to be treated at the Brahmapuram plant. The Panchayat was able to remove the entire waste that had accumulated from August 18 to September 18. Medical camps and awareness programmes were held in all Wards after the floods. The local administration also ensured the distribution of preventive medicines in all Wards. Due to timely interventions by the Panchayat and the Health Department there were no incidences of communicable diseases or epidemics.

OTHER ACTIVITIES

Electric water pumps which were washed away during the floods were recovered using JCBs. With the assistance of voluntary agencies and the Kerala Water Authority, the Panchayat was able to ensure supply of drinking water in all Wards that faced shortage. The mini community hall of the Panchayat functioned as a camp to anchor the rehabilitation operations.

Steps were taken to provide agricultural equipment to all farmers who had lost everything during the floods. It was also decided to constitute a working group that would devise measures to deal with any possible flood disaster in the future. There are also plans to build a database. It will map the areas in various Wards where the intensity of flooding was the highest and will include names of tree cutters in the area; details of health and voluntary workers; doctors; as well as data on all people functioning in various fields.

It was an uphill task wrought with difficulties and challenges. But with the cooperation of Ward members, Panchayat officials and general public, the Panchayat was able to overcome these obstacles and challenges and script a survival story that has created a new benchmark in disaster management.

USHA KUMARI
President

WITH ITS BACK TO THE WATER WALL

Often it takes a crisis to realise that the basic unit of administration, the Panchayat, would have to assume many roles to deal with the problems on the field. It takes a crisis to expose the fault lines in the administrative system. Even in the case of a natural calamity like floods, which does not spare anyone, it is up to the Panchayat to think on its feet and act. In the recent floods in Kerala, Thalayazham Panchayat was able to carry it out admirably, to diffuse tension and to ensure the safety of all

Thalayazham Panchayat falls within the Vaikom Taluk of Kottayam district. The area is a part of upper Kuttanad, known for its black paddy fields. Agriculture is the main source of income for the people of Thalayazham. Just like Kuttanad, the area lies below sea level. Cultivation is done by pumping out water from the fields. Kariyar river, which is a branch of Muvattupuzha river, flows through different parts of Thalayazham and reaches the Vembanad Lake. Most of the places in the Panchayat are surrounded by water. Many streams and canals that flow through Thalayazham play an important role in determining the water flow of the area.

Thalayazham was severely affected by the floods that ravaged Kerala on August 15, 16 and 17. As it is a coastal area and situated below sea level, certain areas of Thalayazham were already affected by the monsoons, much before the state was hit by the deluge. During every rainy season, the low lying areas of Thalayazham experience floods. The people of the Panchayat, who live near the water bodies,

are accustomed to the aftermath of regular but minor flooding. But the floods in August were different. It unleashed a fury never experienced by the people of the region, causing severe damage and ruining their lives in one ferocious sweep.

WATER-BORNE DISASTER

As the heavy rainfall, which had spread across Kerala, intensified by August 16, 2018, the low lying areas of the Panchayat were flooded first. With incessant rains, people were gripped by fear and helplessness. Taking into account the warnings issued by the Government and media reports, Panchayat members met to assess the situation. It was decided to take immediate action to evacuate residents from the affected Wards to a safer place.

The idea of public announcements to issue alerts was abandoned for fear that it would cause panic. So warnings about rising water level and the need for evacuation was directly communicated to the people by the Panchayat members who went from door to door. The Panchayat Committee met and reviewed the situation again on August 16, and decided to make the rescue mission foolproof, considering the potential scale of the floods. It was also decided to work in coordination with the Health Department, Revenue Department and other authorities. Relief camps were set up in schools and large halls located in the higher regions of Thalayazham.

TRAUMATIC TIMES

The floods shook the lives of the people living in geographically vulnerable areas of Thalayazam, especially those of farmers. The second phase of flood and heavy rains started when people had come back home after the first bout of floods. During the second phase, the same people had to be shifted back to camps. A mentally challenged woman swimming to the camp carrying her daughter in her hands was one of the most unforgettable and painful memories of the rescue operations in Thalayazham.

Water level started rising uncontrollably from the Kariyar river which flows through Thalayazham Panchayat. Along with it, the high tides in the

Vembanad Lake made it extremely difficult for Panchayat workers to reach areas that were the worst hit. Huge trucks and boats were used to shift people to the camps, as more and more residents needed evacuation. The tension in the air was palpable. It was up to the Panchayat members and the government officials to take care of the situation and diffuse the tension.

Panchayat members, including women, were fully involved with rescue activities, often setting aside serious concerns about the safety of their own families. The rescue mission suffered temporary setbacks when many families refused to leave everything behind and move to camps.

The limits of endurance of flood victims and rescue workers were severely tested when, at night, flood waters entered a relief camp in Palliyad school where thousands of people were housed. In a midnight operation that lasted till morning the inmates were shifted to another camp. Shifting people in traditional boats during night time was very dangerous. Though their own family and children were living in relief camps, all the Panchayat members and officials continued to participate in rescue operations.

The limits of endurance of flood victims and rescue workers were severely tested when flood waters started submerging a relief camp in Palliyad School where thousands of people were housed

PRO-ACTIVE LEADERSHIP

Many a time, rescue operations and rehabilitation plans had to proceed, despite the hurdles posed by the technical aspects of the Government's administrative system. For instance, camps were technically the sole responsibility of the Revenue Department. But practically it was not possible, and as the situation demanded, the Panchayat, from time to time, assumed pro-active leadership to run the camps efficiently. In another instance, Panchayat had to organise additional power generators for relief camps. In the absence of Revenue Department officials, the Panchayat had to fund the purchase. The Panchayat spent more than Rs 2 lakh from its own funds during the floods.

The Panchayat office transformed into a collection centre for materials donated from different sources. By August 20, hygiene became a major concern in relief camps. Workers were organised for a cleaning up operation. As the toilets in one camp became unusable, bathrooms and toilets of a nearby church were thrown open for flood victims. People started leaving the camps by August 22, as water levels receded. At the initiative of the Panchayat, the premises that housed relief camps were cleaned up after they were closed.

POST-FLOOD RECONSTRUCTION

The officials in the regions that were unaffected by flood were called for a meeting which was held on August 23, by the Panchayat administration. It discussed measures to be taken for the post-flood reconstruction of the region. A five-member team, including Panchayat members and government officials, was allotted to each Ward to drive the reconstruction activities there.

With the help of many other voluntary groups, the teams started cleaning operations on August 24. Kudumbashree members and Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) workers were also roped in by the Panchayat. About 700 houses, 520 wells and 12 anganawadis were cleaned by August 28. An emergency meeting was called to streamline cleaning operations and make them more efficient. All the camps in the Panchayat were closed by August 29. By August 30, 4,947

houses, 3,388 wells, 37 public institutions and 7 schools were cleaned, led by the Panchayat administration. By August 31, the Panchayat was able to distribute relief materials, received from various sources, to the flood-hit people.

K M AMBROSE
President

PREPAREDNESS IS THE KEY

Vadakkekara Panchayat and its residents are proud of their achievement in overcoming the worst disaster witnessed in recent history. But they are not ready to rest on their laurels. Armed with the invaluable lesson that preparedness is the key, the local administration is now focusing on building a framework to meet future exigencies like natural calamities. Together, they are gearing up to take the future head on

The naturally formed tributaries of the Periyar and several canals define the geography of Vadakkekara Panchayat. Vadakkekara lies in the plains and its proximity to the sea gives it a saline soil, ideal for coconut and arecanut cultivation. A majority of the population of the Panchayat are labourers. Coconut, arecanut, paddy and vegetables form the main agricultural produce of the region. Residents are also engaged in traditional sectors like coir, handicrafts and toddy tapping. Fishing is another occupation of the area.

Vadakkekara Panchayat comprises the Moothakunnam and Vadakkekkara villages located in the Parur Block of Parur Taluk in Ernakulam district. It has a population of 32,745 people. Situated on the north-west corner of Ernakulam district, the Panchayat is bordered by the Kodungallur backwaters in the north, Chittattukara Grama Panchayat in the south and the backwaters of Pallippuram in the west.

THE DAYS OF TURBULANCE

The unprecedented floods of 2018 left its tragic impact on every human life in Kerala and the state is still trying to come out of the sweeping damage caused by it. The massive crisis was the result of heavy rainfall received during the south-west monsoons, which submerged most of the districts in Kerala. For the first time in history, all the five shutters of the Cheruthoni dam were opened. Flood waters coursed through the Periyar to submerge many low-lying areas in Ernakulam district. The ferocious flow of the Periyar and proximity to Pallippuram backwaters literally submerged the entire Vadakkekara Panchayat.

FLOOD RESCUE OPERATIONS

Residents of the Panchayat had never imagined that the 2018 monsoons would turn out to be such a disaster. Initially there were no warnings issued. On August 15, it was reported that Sathar Island in the Panchayat had got flooded. It was not taken seriously as this low-lying area with 103 houses has historically been susceptible to occasional flooding. However, with the help of revenue authorities a relief camp was set up at Kottuvallikkavu H M High School. By then, flood warnings and alerts had started coming in from the district collector, tahsildar as well as the media.

Soon news spread that wards 8, 9, 10 and 11 were under water. It was then that people realised the magnitude of the crisis. Immediately the Panchayat called an unofficial meeting and decided on the course of action for starting relief camps and rescue operations. 42 camps, both small and big, were set up in the Panchayat. With the help of revenue authorities alerts were communicated through microphones and ward members. By August 16, every house in the Panchayat was under water. Every resident

was evacuated to safe areas, with the help of the navy, police and the fishermen of Vypeen and Chellanam.

By August 18, telephone communications had completely shut down. Subsequently members of the navy, police and fishermen gathered at the Labour Junction at Kottappuram and conducted further rescue operations as per instructions from Ward members. In a short time everyone who was stranded was located and shifted to safe locations.

The Panchayat ensured adequate supply of food and other essential materials to the camps with the help of local people and voluntary organisations. Almost 35,000 people were put up in various camps. The Panchayat arranged for medical aid for them through the Moothakunnam Primary Health Centre (PHC). Rescue operations through dinghies, boats and helicopters continued till August 19 and 20. Flood waters which had risen to 4-10 feet in various places lasted for two days.

Every house in the Panchayat was affected by floods. However everyone could be rescued as a result of the concerted efforts by the Panchayat, various organisations and local people

RESTORATION PROCESS

Water started receding by August 21. The Vadakkekara Panchayat president attended a meeting conducted by the district collector to discuss the programme for rehabilitation and rebuilding, post the floods. Subsequently a meeting was called at the Panchayat office to streamline the rehabilitation process. A cleaning campaign was launched under the leadership of Ward members. Many members of youth and teachers' organisations, police personnel and Panchayat workers came forward to participate in this programme. They were divided into teams and assigned specific Wards, and the work was coordinated by the Panchayat.

All materials required for the operation was delivered directly by the Panchayat. Within a week electricity was restored while for repairs of electrical damage caused by the floods, a team of electricians was roped in by the local administration. 30 houses

in the Panchayat were completely damaged while 500 suffered partial losses. The Panchayat also took the initiative to rehabilitate such people. Services of organisations such as Sai Gramam and Reliance Foundation were utilised for the purpose.

WASTE MANAGEMENT

The biggest challenge the Panchayat faced after the floods was waste management. It was a tough task to get rid of the bodies of animals that had died in the floods. Lack of vehicles for the purpose posed a major hurdle. Panchayat authorities had to resort to help from the regional transport officer (RTO) and district collector to mobilise and sometimes confiscate private vehicles for this. Organic waste was processed locally in unused land. With the help of Suchitwa Mission about 300 loads of organic waste was processed at the Brahmapuram plant. The Panchayat ensured that every resident took preventive medicines and other measures against rat fever and dengue.

In the days following the floods, the Panchayat organised medical camps in all Wards with the help of the Revenue Department. Doctors from major hospitals in Kochi city pitched in to help in this campaign. In more populous areas the Panchayat directly organised medical camps with the help of government doctors. Water was supplied through trucks to all the Wards in the Panchayat. Asha workers were roped in to clean the wells in the area.

OTHER EFFORTS

The Panchayat enlisted the help of students to make a survey to evaluate the losses of those who had lost their livelihood. The report was brought to the attention of government authorities at relevant forums. Kits containing essential items were distributed by the Panchayat through its Development Committees. The cash relief of Rs 10,000 given by the Government was distributed to the deserving, through Block level officials.

The Panchayat was able to overcome the severe catastrophe without caste, religious or political divisions or considerations. Every house in the

Panchayat was affected by floods. However e veryone could be rescued as a result of the concerted efforts by the Panchayat, various organisations and local public.

The Panchayat now aims at building a framework to meet future exigencies caused by natural calamities. The first step towards this is to select a 200-member team and train them. The Panchayat believes that such a measure would help make rescue operations easier and lessen the impact of such mishaps in the future.

SHANTHI HARIDAS
President

DOING IT THE RIGHT WAY

As a mountainous region, Vandiperiyar had to encounter the double impact of floods as well as landslides that ripped open the region and altered its landscape forever. Credit goes to the local administration led by the Panchayat for its pro-active action in mobilising resources, managing the crisis and helping people rebuild their lives in quick time

It was from May 10, 2018, that the monsoons that had been lashing Kerala became vigorous in the Vandiperiyar region. There were already reports of heavy rains disrupting traffic in many places. Traffic was disrupted many times on NH 183 due to incessant rains.

PREEMPTING THE CALAMITY

The Panchayat had taken necessary precautions against heavy monsoons considering the early warning signals of abnormally high rainfall. Since these conditions persisted even up to June 10, a meeting was convened. Peermedu MLA, Panchayat Administrative Committee members, political party representatives, NH executive engineer, assistant engineer and others attended the meeting to discuss the course of action to be taken.

Major landslides in the region started from August 7, 2018. Since preparatory measures had started early and disaster relief groups had been formed in advance, the authorities were on high alert. Teams could reach the scene of the landslides and start relief operations immediately, without losing focus on the gravity of the situation. Communication about the likelihood of the Mullaperiyar dam being opened had come in. There was concern that the impact of

opening the dam, which had remained closed for several years, would be severe. So the Panchayat authorities quickly set about strengthening the core team while other voluntary groups were kept ready.

Even as measures were taken to deal with the havoc caused by monsoons and destruction brought about by landslides, the local administration knew that the scale of disaster could be much higher. The Panchayat beefed up its defence on a war footing. On August 14, reports about the immediate possibility of the dam being opened came in. Officials from all departments and Ward members led from the front and prepared for rescue work, especially in places that had a high chance of being hit by the calamity.

Ambulance services, disaster management officials were all kept ready to be deployed in areas from Vallikadavu to Shanthipalam, which were likely to be affected by the release of dam waters. In the meantime rains continued in all its fury. The Panchayat had to cope with a flood of frantic calls from panic-stricken people, media and senior officials. Even as the Panchayat geared up to meet the challenges posed by the release of dam waters, landslides continued to cause significant damage in different localities. The deafening sounds of land cracking open reverberated in the sky.

ROUND-THE-CLOCK SERVICE

Two relief camps were opened by then. It was difficult for those who were fully dependent on agriculture to leave their homes and land behind and move to another place at short notice. Some of them ridiculed the whole idea. Following the release of the dam waters at night, the water level in Periyar starting rising by 4.30 in the morning. As the situation became alarming, people started shifting to safer places and camps. Suddenly the situation had turned sombre and there was fear among people. In some areas people had to be forcefully

evacuated. In many cases, as soon as the people shifted, their houses went under water.

It was while rescue operations were in full swing on August 15, that it came to be known that the house of the Panchayat president had been fully submerged. Undaunted, she continued to engage in flood relief activities keeping aside all personal considerations. As the number of people taking shelter in camps swelled, the number of relief camps had to be scaled up.

All the people who were contacted responded positively. It was painful to watch people, who were well-known to everyone, taking shelter in camps with whatever they could save from their water-logged homes. The Panchayat had arranged for food, medicines, clothes and other essential items for those who moved to the camps. Even in the middle of the chaos and hectic activities, the Panchayat gave special focus on collecting data on the damages caused, accounting for donations and issuing receipts. The Panchayat members worked round the clock for relief operations. They lost all sense of time, day and date during those trying times. With everything shut down, the whole ambience resembled that of a hartal day. In some places shops were forcibly opened by the Panchayat to make essential goods available to people.

Panchayat members worked round the clock for relief operations while giving special focus on collecting data on damages, accounting for donations and issuing receipts

Soon rescue teams were informed that some officials were trapped in the Community Health Centre (CHC). During the rescue operation that followed, Panchayat members and volunteers had to carry bags of food grains on their heads to the camps. It was an unforgettable experience that taught many valuable lessons. The Panchayat Samiti visited all camps until the crack of dawn. Though there were minor differences of opinion among voluntary organisations and some departments, the Panchayat could successfully take them along together to achieve the goal of the moment.

IN RECONSTRUCTION MODE

Water level started to recede by August 19, and the rehabilitation and rebuilding phase started. As part of the cleaning operations, the Panchayat distributed bleaching powder, doxy tablets and first-aid kits to every home. Sanitisation started in residences from Vallakkadavu to Chappath on August 20. The Panchayat was able to bring together people from all walks of life to help in the mission. It was not possible to clean more than five houses a day. During those days the Panchayat contacted the Air Force to air-lift three pregnant women to the hospital.

Cleaning operations gained momentum when National Service Scheme (NSS) volunteers; college students; Kerala Tourism Development Corporation (KTDC) employees, Kumily; government departments and service-minded individuals joined the operation. Estimates were taken to assess the loss to public property. Articles that could be used after cleaning were kept aside while waste materials were disposed of.

Temporary arrangements were made for accommodating those who had lost their homes. With the help of engineering and IT students, electrical wiring of damaged houses were completed. By August 19, almost all camps were disbanded. However for those who lost everything and had no home to return to, another camp was opened. Subsequently, after temporary arrangements were made for them, all camps were shut down by August 29.

Neither the local administration not the volunteers who participated in disaster management had any prior experience in dealing with such a calamity. Vandiperiyar and its people owe a lot to all those who helped them overcome the tragedy and stolidly stood with them to deal with it. The flood was a crisis that was devastating in its ferocity. But it also taught the lesson that with humanity, unity and pro-active action any calamity can be overcome.

P K RAJU
President

MISSION IMPOSSIBLE

Vathikudy Panchayat is one of the regions that suffered vast devastation in the floods. Yet if its inhabitants survived the near annihilation caused by landslides and dam waters, it is the result of determined, selfless and often risky interventions made by the Panchayat officials. What they pulled off is a near impossible mission to save human lives and limit casualties to a single digit

Vathikudy Panchayat, located in Idukki district, covers an area of 80.09 square kilometres. On the northern border of the village lies Konnathadi. On the eastern side it shares its border with Kamakshi and Mariapuram. On the southern side, Vazhathoppu is the bordering area while in the west its neighbour is Kanjikuzhy. The population of the village is 32,673. The Block divisions of Murikkassery, Vathikudy and Thopramkudy fall within the Panchayat limits.

CALAMITY COMES CALLING

The Periya river, which witnessed a rising tide of flood waters on August 15, flows through the heart of the Panchayat. The Idukki arch dam on the Periyar is also in its suburbs. Therefore the Panchayat took the brunt of the floods in Periyar caused by the highest rainfall recorded in the region.

Rains had started in May 2018. It was never expected that water in the Periyar would swell up to such terrifying levels. When rains continued unabated

even after a month, the situation became extremely grim. The continuous downpour caused landslides on the nearby hills. Notices issued by Kerala State Electricity Board (KSEB) officials warned that Idukki dam water would have to be released and that people on the banks of Periyar would have to be evacuated. A high alert was declared in the area.

The Panchayat formed a separate committee and decided to shift the families residing in the Periyar valley, on the lower side of the arch dam, as the first step. The Panchayat also convened a meeting of KSEB officials; police personnel; doctors; ayurveda practitioners and relief workers to discuss the steps to be taken if rains continued and water level rose. Local machinery was strengthened to meet the challenges that could arise due to the floods.

When the Panchayat officials started their door-to-door campaign after July 28, to inform people about the impending threat and shift them out of the Periyar valley, people refused to take it seriously. They felt that unnecessary panic was being created and that they had lived in the place long enough to be able to gauge the situation. The stubborn attitude of the public posed a major challenge for the Panchayat .

As situation began to worsen, the Panchayat and village offices issued notices asking residents to relocate. Measures to rehabilitate people were taken, along with intimating the village authorities and police about the evacuation plans. With their help, relocation of those affected by the floods began.

On August 7, three people were killed by landslides at Rajagiri. Panchayat officials rushed to the spot. The scene there was terrifying. Large blocks of earth and soil had fallen from the slopes of big mountains bringing with it trees, mud, rubble and huge boulders. Seven families were caught in the landslide.

At around the same time, another landslip had wreaked havoc in Murikkassery. The vehicles of relief workers could not reach the site due to traffic blocks en-route. With the passage of time, the lives of those who were isolated were increasingly under threat. As all the entry routes into the villages were blocked by debris, the prospects of outside help had dimmed. It was then that the Panchayat staff decided to launch the rescue operations on their own.

PANCHAYAT TO THE RESCUE

Many parts of the Panchayat were torn apart by landslides. Panchayat officials, volunteers and local people met at the Panchayat office to coordinate and conduct rescue work at different localities. Since vehicles could not reach many places where landslides had destroyed the terrain, relief workers had to walk several miles to shift people to safe

Since vehicles could not reach many places where landslides had destroyed the terrain, rescue and relief workers had to walk several miles to shift people to safe localities

localities. The Panchayat arranged vehicles owned by local people for rescue work. The district collector and other officials also reached the place without delay and directed the operations.

However, the flood situation was getting grimmer. It was decided to provide more facilities to the relief camps and open larger ones. Accordingly, a camp was opened at a college at Murikkassery, which was considered a relatively safe place and thousands of people were shifted there.

From August 9 to 16, rains continued without a break. There were more landslides at many places. Electricity posts were felled by rains and power supply was affected. Telephone communications had shut down completely. The village became totally isolated from the rest of the world. No communication was possible and travel was possible only in the vicinity of the Panchayat office. The local administration provided the police department with three JCBs on rent to clear the debris caused by landslides. This helped ensure that traffic blocks did not hinder rescue operations.

When the situation threatened to get out of hand, Panchayat officials intensified the evacuation process. Those who were reluctant to move were forcibly evacuated, in some cases, with the help of the police. Rescuing 40 isolated families in the Periyar valley was a big challenge. They had chosen to ignore warnings and stay back. Subsequently, however, they were rescued by the Panchayat authorities with the help of the police and local people.

Just as grave was the situation in the Chinnar-Perinjamkutti area. Pre-empting the possibility of 200 families being drowned in the event of Kallar and Irattayar dams being opened, the authorities opened a camp at Betheland and shifted them there. By evening the dams were opened and about 100 houses were submerged. The foresight and pro-activeness displayed by the Panchayat was a major factor that minimised casualties of humans as well as animals. Voluntary and government organisations and the public worked jointly to provide relief to the calamity victims.

GOING THE EXTRA MILE

The Panchayat spared no effort to ensure that the operations were conducted smoothly. Vehicles were arranged to carry essential articles to all the relief camps. Electricity was restored in just five days, thanks to the efforts of the Panchayat and the prompt response from KSEB. Loss of life was arrested as a result of the timely and sometimes risky interventions by the local administration in many places.

In an area that was totally isolated from the outside world, traffic blocks were cleared without delay and roads were made navigable. Relief camps were ensured uninterrupted supply of essential items throughout the period they remained open. At the initiative of Panchayat officials, the local MP intervened, to deal with the shortage of essential items, and helped procure them from Tamil Nadu.

Medical camps were held in the relief camps and preventive medicines were distributed to control infectious diseases. The Panchayat provided leadership in the cleaning operations after the flood. Voluntary associations, Panchayat members and Self Help Groups like Kudumbashree came together to complete the cleaning operations in 68 houses and 70 water sources. About 14 roads were repaired and vehicular traffic was restored.

At the end of the day, the magnitude of the destruction was huge. Yet the story of the survival of Vathikudy that faced near annihilation, is a huge inspiration and a valuable lesson on the do's and don'ts for the large population in the state which lives in the lap of nature and at its mercy.

P K SATHEESH KUMAR
Secretary

LESSONS IN LIVING WITH NATURE

It was one of those rare moments in the history of Vellathooval when its people realised that to tame their land they need new lessons in living with the nature around them. For, the continuous rains and the higher outflow from the dams led to the twin trouble of floods and landslides in this high range Taluk. They learned that, to contain the dual impact of the two disasters in the future, they need to master a new rescue drill

Vellathooval Panchayat is part of the Devikulam Taluk in Idukki district. The Panchayat, with 17 Wards, has an area of 43.06 square kilometres and a population of 25,701 as per the 2011 census. Vellathooval shares its borders with the Panchayats of Pallivasal in the north, Konnathadi in the south, Rajakkad in the east and Adimali in the west.

PREPARING FOR THE FLOODS

The monsoons gained strength on August 17 and 18, 2018. As soon as information about the likelihood of a flood was received, the Panchayat started taking precautions. Early warnings were issued by the district administration about the impending natural disasters and people were immediately alerted in all Wards, through public announcements. Since the monsoons had become vigorous, people from many areas were shifted to relief camps.

Subsequently as the situation became grave, relief camps were opened in all Wards and residents were evacuated to them. It was decided to convert schools,

anganawadis, churches and halls maintained by religious institutions, into relief camps. Around 28 such camps were established in Vellathooval. Prompt action was taken to shift people to these camps. Panchayat members, officials and other voluntary workers worked as a single unit to effect rescue operations. Even then, about 137 houses were completely damaged by the floods, of which 35 were without proper title deeds.

Vellathooval is a place where both floods and landslides are common. This time when floods and landslides gained strength, the land was split open in many places, disrupting traffic. As roads got damaged, Vellathooval remained cut off from the rest of the world. The sorry state of the roads, continue even as this is being documented. Since floods and landslides took place repeatedly in the area, the Panchayat opened a control room in an area called Thousand Acres. The simultaneous occurrence of floods and landslides was the result of the shutters of three dams, namely, Mattupetty, Karukutty and Ponmudi being opened due to the heavy monsoons.

RELIEF CAMPS

Altogether 35 camps were opened in Vellathooval. As a result of the proactive steps taken by the Panchayat from the beginning, most of the people could be shifted to relief camps without delay. The decision to open relief camps in all centres led to the rescue of all and reduced the magnitude of the tragedy. Along with the Panchayat administration, youth organisations in the area and other social organisations pitched in to help shift people to relief camps and in the running of the camps.

In places where the Public Health Centre (PHC) officials could not reach, the Panchayat stepped in to arrange medicines and volunteers from Tamil

Nadu. Medical camps were organised and the services of doctors from all systems of medicines like homoeo, allopathy and ayurveda were ensured in all camps.

The control room that was started earlier was converted into a store house for essential articles and medicines that came in through voluntary workers. It also doubled up as a centre to receive and send messages and as an office to coordinate activities with other voluntary organisations. As a result, the Panchayat could efficiently allocate essential items to camps as and when the need arose. Timely delivery of food for people trapped in isolated houses also became easier due to the coordination from this office.

Adequate supply of food and drinking water was ensured in all camps. The role played by voluntary organisations and the public in organising food and water was very critical. The most noteworthy aspect of this work was that the people worked with great unity. There were no differences of opinion based on religion, caste, language or gender.

Timely delivery of food for people trapped in isolated houses also became easier due to the coordination from the control room that was set up

Every link in the rescue-relief chain, namely, the Panchayat Committee; staff; the people; the Revenue officials; the volunteers and others worked 24 hours till the operations were completed. By August 25, people started returning home. Relief camps were closed down by August 29. Except for Ward 5, all other regions in the Panchayat suffered damages due to floods.

DAYS AFTER THE DISASTER

Application for the rehabilitation of the people without proper title deeds for their land was forwarded to the Government through the Panchayat. This was to help them procure titles to their land and avail of financial assistance offered by the Government, to rebuild their homes.

The agricultural economy of the region was completely wrecked by the flood. An estate with 650 nutmeg trees was completely destroyed in the floods. A dairy farm was also wiped out. Altogether 81 stables; 21 pigs; 412 hens; 32 goats and many other farm animals and birds perished in the flood. The Agriculture Department of the Panchayat also did a survey of the crop loss.

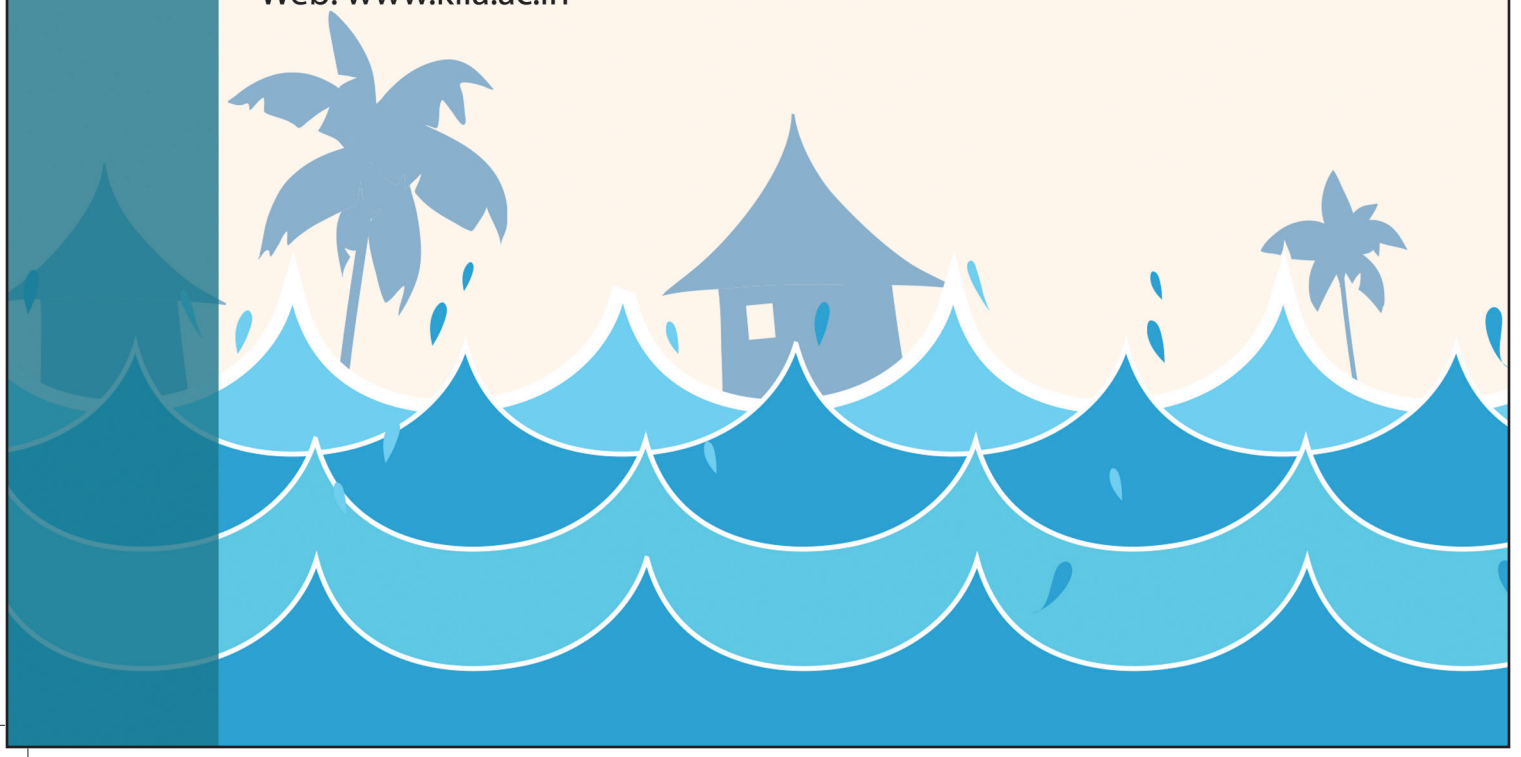
Since the roads were damaged it was difficult to commute from one part of Vellathooval to another. To restore normalcy in traffic, the help of Police and other departments was sought. An organisation called Rotary Public expressed its willingness to build 10 houses for deserving people. The Panchayat has already given them the list of candidates who qualify for assistance.

All families were given survival kits containing essential items. The data on the losses suffered by people was collected and passed on to the authorities. Two people in Vellathooval donated 30 cents of land each to build homes for those who had lost theirs.

MEANINGFUL INTERVENTIONS

The Panchayat has already initiated steps to start constructing houses in the area. People whose homes were completely destroyed were provided with alternative accommodation. In the next annual plan the Panchayat plans to give more focus on rebuilding roads and public assets. The control room that was opened at the time of the disaster helped ensure the intervention of senior administrative officials in the problems of the area.

In the case of waste management also the local body could make meaningful interventions. Waste that could be reused was stored separately. The others were buried as per anti-pollution protocol. Houses, toilets, offices and many low lying areas were cleaned by the joint initiative of the Panchayat and Health Department. Cleaning materials for this campaign were made available by the Panchayat administration.

In the post crisis meetings of the Panchayat, a comprehensive list of the loss in the Panchayat was prepared. Steps were taken to settle the cases of loss of documents. To avoid such tragedies in the future a training programme was also organised.

Kerala Institute of Local Administration (KILA)
Mulamkunnathukavu P O, Thrissur – 680 581
Phone (Office): 0487 2207000 (Director) 0487 2201312
Email: director@kila.ac.in, info@kila.ac.in
Web: www.kila.ac.in