

# Waterscape to Urban Landscape: Contextualizing the Transformational History of Marine Drive, Cochin

**BINU K.T.**

**ABSTRACT:** The study entitled ‘Waterscape to Urban Landscape: Contextualizing the Transformational History of Marine Drive, Cochin’ Drive’ attempts a historical and human geographical enquiry into the spatial structuring and restructuring of a geographical space to an urban landscape. Marine Drive is one of the most popular tourist attractions of Cochin City. In early period, the place was known as *Alumkadavu* a tiny halt for boats that connected the backwater to the market. With continuous backwater reclamations *Alumkadavu* later transformed into modern Marine Drive. The expansion of human interactions as in the form of large scale reclamations had changed the nature of space from the past to the present context. Therefore the study focuses on the nature of human activities in the backwater and how it reshaped the structure of space from waterscape to landscape and redefined it according to urbanization and modern commercial trends.

**KEYWORDS:** - *Space, landscape, human interaction, reclamation, urbanization.*

## Introduction

Marine Drive is a beautiful promenade located in the heart of Ernakulam, facing the backwater i.e., the *Vembanad* Lake. It is constructed by the Greater Cochin Development Authority (GCDA) of Cochin Corporation in 1980’s which has a walkway- starting from Rajendra Maidan to the high court junction including open spaces, boat jetties, shopping malls and hotels, residential and commercial places etc. We can see three bridges in the walkway- the Chinese Fishing Net Bridge, the Rainbow Bridge and

the Kettvallom Bridge that connects Rajendra Maidan to Gosree Bridge. It is a popular hangout for tourists as well as local populace, who gather during evenings to view the sunset and feel the gentle breeze coming from the backwater. Mr. Kuldeep Singh is the chief architect of Marine Drive who has drafted the Marine Drive Scheme with two phases of development for GCDA. The first phase has completed with the extension of Marine Drive towards the Gosree Bridge with a new walkway and a bridge- the Kettuvallam Bridge- on 28 April 2013. The second phase of development aims to the extension of Marine Drive up to Vaduthala with a ring road. Now the place is a major hub of socio- political-economic activities and an important shopping centre of Ernakulam.

## Historical Background

According to historians the place name 'Ernakulam' is derived from *Erayanarkulam* that means the abode of Lord Shiva. But according to the traditional view the place got its name from *Rishinagakulam*. The Revenue Settlement Register of Cochin State mentions Ernakulam as 'Anjikaimal' or a place under five important persons. They were Kaimals of Cheranallur, Kunnathunadu, Pulakkadu, Kurumalkuru and Vakuru. The word '*Kochi*' is supposed to be a synonym of a Sanskrit word '*gosri*' which meant 'prosperous with cows'.<sup>5354</sup> The earliest reference to the term '*gosri*' may be found in the inscriptions of Bhaskara Ravivarma, which refers '*Kosri Parakkara Iravivarman*'.<sup>55</sup> Kerala Mahathmyam and Keralolpathi refer Cochin as '*Balapuri*' which means 'small town'.<sup>56</sup> C Achyutha Menon points out that the word '*Kochi*' is derived from '*Kochazhi*' or 'small harbour'.<sup>57</sup> Kochi was known to the Greeks, Romans, Jews, Arabs and the Chinese. Foreign travelers like Ibn Battutta, Ma-Huan and Abd-ur-Rassak had mentioned on Kochi. Nicolo Conti called the region as *Kochchi*. During the fourteenth century, Kochi was an important centre of spice trade. From the sixteenth century, Kochi witnessed rapid changes through the trading and colonizing attempts of European powers. The Ernakulam district was formed on 1<sup>st</sup> April 1958 and witnessed unprecedented trend of urbanization during the past four decades.

The place where Marine Drive is now locating, known as *Alumkadavu*

in the past i.e. a tiny halt for boats that connected the backwater to the market. In those days, water transport was the backbone of trade activities and backwater served as the major water channel for transportation of men and materials. Boats from far and nearby places had made their voyages through the backwater moved towards the market by touching *Alumkadavu* and *Kovilvattom* areas.<sup>58</sup> Trade boats from long distances especially Kollam, Changanasserry and Malabar were reached to the market through *Alumkadavu*. From the memories of old local merchants the canals and small water channels around the market was filled with trade boats. In order to enter into the market canal, trade boats were awaited near Alumkadavu area for hours.<sup>59</sup> The place *Alumkadavu* got its name from a large banya tree (*Aal*) existed on the shore (*Kadavu*) of the backwater. Later the tree was cut for constructing a hotel called 'Sealord'.<sup>60</sup> From Old photographs, we can get a clear picture of Sealord hotel with its small stone fortification facing the backwater.<sup>61</sup> Later in 1930's the Cochin State reclaimed backwater near Sealord to construct a road.

The first reference on reclamations at *Alumkadavu* area can be seen in the Record of Administration of Cochin State 1938, in which, the Diwan of Cochin, Mr. Narayana Ayyar had sent a letter to the Maharaja of Cochin on 28 August 1927 for the development of Ernakulam fore shore by reclaiming areas with a budget of Rs 15000.<sup>62</sup> In 1938, Cochin State had appointed Mr. Dann, the Town Planning officer of Madras Presidency, to prepare a Town Improvement Scheme for Ernakulam town. According to him, "We may without doubt accept the view that the reclamation- for public purposes- will be a great boon to the Town, and will be worth doing even at some considerable financial outlay for which the reclamation may to some extent indirect."<sup>63</sup> The bulk of reclaimed area will be reserved for recreation grounds i.e., public building sites, garden spaces and roads.<sup>64</sup> Later during the period of R K Shanmukham Chetty large scale reclamations from backwater have done for infrastructural development and beatification of the Cochin State such as construction of new parks and a new road.<sup>65</sup> It later known as Shanmukham Road and regarded to be the 'First Marine Drive' reclaimed from backwater.<sup>66</sup> From 1980's the Greater Cochin Development Authority (GCDA) had drafted the Marine Drive Development plan for large scale reclamations from backwater

to create a new land for constructing shopping complexes, hotels and apartments. By 1990's GCDA negotiated the Marine Drive Development Scheme for the expansion of commercial and economic activities and thereby to change the place as a major tourist centre. Thus we can see six stages in the development of modern Marine Drive. During the first stage, there was no large land- there existed *Alumkadavu*, a tiny stretch of land projecting towards the backwater and a halt of trade boats leading towards the market. The second stage had witnessed the disappearance of *Alumkadavu* and surrounding areas for constructing Sealord hotel. In the third stage backwater was reclaimed for construction Shanmukham Road. Large scale reclamations were done during the fourth stage and new plain land was created for constructing Marine drive in 1970's. In the fifth stage, GCDA conducted developmental activities for constructing buildings, shopping complexes, commercial centers and walkways in the reclaimed land. During the sixth stage, GCDA implemented Marine Drive Development Scheme for beatification of Cochin thereby to construct a new walkway upto Gosree bridge.

### **Spatial Transformations from Waterscape to Landscape**

According to Human Geography, spaces are socially produced places and spatial activities are the outcome of human activities. Geographic and social spaces are symbolically transformed into places thorough process of human interaction across time. In Marine Drive, the backwater itself represented space in the form of waterscape. When the area of Marine Drive was a part of backwater we can call it as a geographical space. In those days, the space was also represented by *Alumkadavu* and the tree itself stood as an image to specify the landscape. In other words, *Alumkadavu* and its surrounding areas represented the space as an empirical space of daily life.<sup>67</sup> The Record of administration of 1938 supports foreshore reclamations for public purposes and to create new spaces for recreation and roads. Here human needs or utility of time had played a crucial role in transforming a geographical space like back water to a land. This is the first instance on human interaction to a natural space.

In the second stage, when the Sealord Hotel came into existence, the tree was disappeared along with the place name. The hotel brought

a tremendous change in the entire landscape i.e., a small geographical place's space was forcefully changed to a commercial space, where the hotel itself became the centre of attraction. From that, the place got a social status or a reflection of high culture, which was accessible to the rich. The old generation recollects, it was treated as a prestigious moment for people who enter into the hotel for having a tea. People from far and nearby places visited the place to have a close view of the building. Therefore Sealord represented an image space that has produced new apprehensions of space and also providing a space for consumption thereby became a symbol of economic status.<sup>68</sup> Thus the emergence of Sealord hotel can be treated as the first instance for commodification of a particular place space.

The third important change in space emerged during the backwater reclamations for constructing the Shanmukham Road. We can notice a drastic change in the spatial pattern of the place with emergence of a new road. Shanmukham Road has become the major transportation route to Broadway and the market. Different people interacted in its open space, thereby it transformed into an empirical space of human interaction.<sup>69</sup> The road was pictured in Malayalam movies of 1970's especially in the movie *Anubhavgal Palichakal*. The song "Pravachakanmaare Parayuu..." gives a clear view of the newly reclaimed road the hero is walking through the Shanmukham Road and we can also see the police station on the right side and the backwater on the left side.

The fourth stage of spatial transformations emerged during the construction of Marine Drive in 1980's. Large area of backwater was reclaimed to construct a new land and GCDA had implemented different plans such as urban development schemes to transform the reclaimed space to a landscape. Literally the word 'landscape' includes all the visible features of an area of land.<sup>70</sup> Geographically it includes all the landforms and how they integrate with natural and manmade features. The character of a landscape helps to define the self image of the people who inhabit or use it and a sense of place that differentiates one region from the other. Defining a landscape mainly depends upon the context in which it exists.

In the context of Marine Drive, the land transformed to a landscape

according to the process of urbanization. Spatial interaction and human behavior are begun to be influenced by economic urges. The land use pattern also changed with the construction of shopping malls and complexes and multiple uses of land have changed the landscape to an urbanscape. The symbolic representation of the area is different in different periods or contexts. In the past context, from old photographs- Marine drive is depicted by Shanmukham Road and seaload hotel. The memories of old generation also evoked the same picture which represented a space that will be a part of image space. In the present context this particular space has reduced to an object with least importance comparing to other spaces of interaction. Now the space became an area with different building and features and also a hub of economic activities and events. The word Marine Drive now brings the picture or image of three bridges, walkways and open spaces. We can identify the shrinking of space -as open space is sub divided by shopping malls, hotels, apartments etc. Actually the open space or public space is privatized or changed to a 'private space' with luxurious apartments and sky scrapers. Sometimes, entry to these spaces are restricted to a particular group of people- the entry to the star hotels confined to those who have a particular status, entry to luxurious apartments confined only to its owners. In present context, spatialization or spatial representations are influenced by consumerist mentalities. According to the modern life style and food habits new shopping malls and commercial complexes sprang up by reducing the open space. In the present context, spatialization or spatial representations are influenced by consumerist mentalities. Now Marine Drive is a place with different spaces, a place of different symbolic representations, which differentiates it from other region.

## **Conclusion**

Geographically, Marine Drive is a cultural landscape that is changing according to the trends and urbanist mentalities of time. Human intervention on backwater transformed it from a geographical space to place through reclamations. We can identify different stages in the transformation of space i.e., from *Alumkadavu* to Seaload Hotel, then to Shamnukham Road, and from the road to Marine Drive and finally

to the large scale developmental activities in the landscape. In the old days, the place had a more public space that was changed in the modern context. The process of urbanization began to play a vital role in the transformation of space and spatial development plan is subordinated to capital interests and political decisions. Today, Marine Drive is not only a popular hangout or a public place for interaction but also its space has a varied nature and the surrounding spaces are on gradual privatization process of capitalist hyper urbanism.

---

**Binu K.T.** is a Research Scholar affiliated with IUCSSRE (Inter-University Centre for Social Science Research and Extension) at the School of Social Sciences, Pullarikkunnu, M.G University, Kottayam, Kerala.

## Notes And References

1. C Achyutha Menon, *Cochin State Manual*, (1911), Kerala Gazetteers Department, Trivandrum, 1995, p.3.
2. *Ibid.*, p.43
3. *Bulletin of the Ramavarma Research Institute*, 'Kochi alias Gosri', Vol VIII, part I, Trichur, January, 1940, p.55.
4. C Achyutha Menon, *op.cit.*, p.3
5. *Ibid.*, p.4
6. *The Record of Administration- Cochin State*, Part III, Government Press, Cochin, 1925-27.
7. Source- Personal Interview with Raghavankutty, 75 years, local merchant of Ernakulam Market, 21 July 2019, Ernakulam Market
8. Personal interview with Elamana Hari, 70 years, local historian of Cochin, 10 August 2009, Residence near Kalikotta Palace, Tripunithura
9. Ramachandran N, *Anchor Cochin*, Cochin Port Trust, Cochin, 2009, p.10.
10. *The Record of Administration*, Part III, Cochin Govt. Press, Cochin, 1925-27. p 140.
11. *The Record of Administration*, Dann's Report on Ernakulam Foreshore Reclamation, Part V, Cochin Govt. Press, Cochin, 1938, p.40
12. *The Record of Administration*, 'Dann's Report on Ernakulam Foreshore Recalms', Appendix XXI, 1938
13. *Ernakulam District Directory*, Parkson Company, Alwaye, 1984-86, p 51.



14. *Ernakulam Chamber of Commerce Souvenir*, Ernakulam Chamber of Commerce, Cochin, 1982, p.71.
15. Empirical space refers to the process whereby the mundane fabric of daily life is constructed. Nigel Thrift, *Space: the Fundamental Stuff of Human Geography*, *Key Concepts in Human Geography*, Sara Holloway, S.Rice & Gill Valentine(Ed), Sage Publications, London, 2003
16. Image space refers to the process whereby the proliferation of images has produced new apprehensions of space.
17. Nigel Thrift. Empirical space refers to the process whereby the mundane fabric of daily life is constructed.
18. The word landscape /landscape/ landscape referred to a system of human made spaces of land. Olwig K.R, *Recovering the substantive Nature of Landscapes*. Annals of the A.A.G, London, 1996, pp.630-653