



# ROWING BETWEEN THE ROOFTOPS

MEHRE ALAM  
DOHA

KERALA is known for its majestic backwaters – a network of brackish lagoons and lakes lying parallel to the Arabian Sea coast. A world heritage site, the serene stretch of lakes, canals and lagoons is a major attraction for tourists. Unfortunately, and ironically, the woes the state has been grappling with over the past few years also relate to water – in the form of devastating, and lately recurring, floods.

With scores dead and thousands displaced in floods this year, it's been a repeat of last year's miseries for people in Kerala. The south Indian state had faced the century's worst floods in 2018. But then, adversities and tragic circumstances often throw up their heroes. In the case of Kerala, it were its fishermen who turned out to be the bravehearts – risking their lives to rescue thousands of marooned humans.

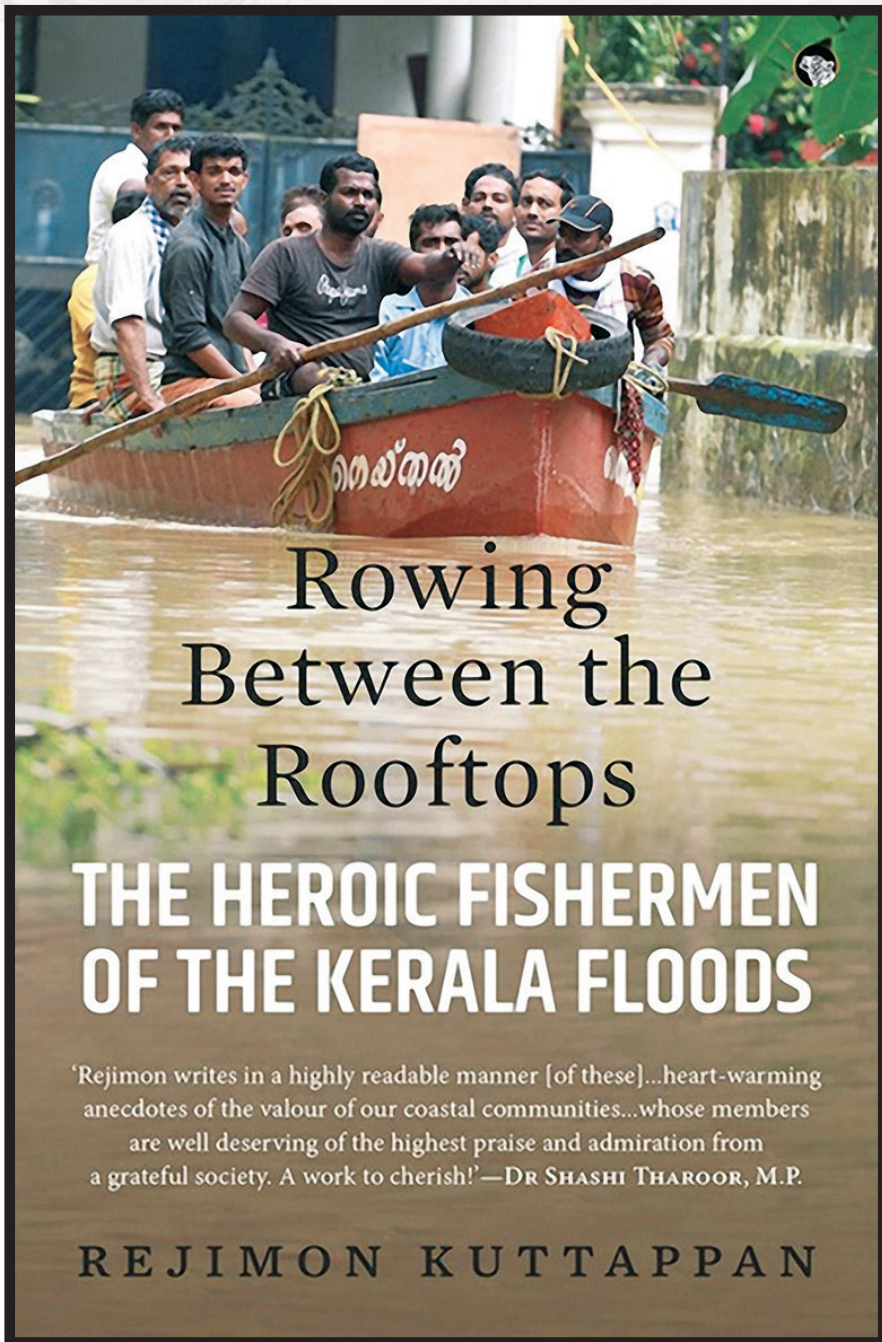
Rejimon Kuttappan's recently-released book, 'Rowing Between the Rooftops: The Heroic Fishermen of the Kerala Floods', is both a chronicle of heroism and a tribute to the enduring courage of a community that battled onerous circumstances to save people from flooded areas in August 2018.

"Reji", as the former Gulf journalist is mostly known among his peers (past and present), elucidates how these brave fishermen "spent days and nights soaked to the skin, steering on empty stomachs," to rescue the stranded people in the Central Kerala which was under water for a full week.

"They [the fishermen] had to navigate the wild flood's treacherous undercurrents and dive into dirty waters, risking disease and injury. Sometimes, they had to carry people or act as footstools to help them climb into the boats. They even had to swim alongside the boats, so that more people could fit in," says Reji, in an e-mail interaction with this writer.

## 2018 floods: A painful chapter

During the first two weeks in August 2018, Kerala witnessed its worst floods claiming some 600 lives and displacing nearly a million people.



'Rejimon writes in a highly readable manner [of these]...heart-warming anecdotes of the valour of our coastal communities...whose members are well deserving of the highest praise and admiration from a grateful society. A work to cherish!' —Dr SHASHI THAROOR, M.P.

REJIMON KUTTAPPAN

"These fishermen ignored the heavy downpours during the rescue operations with their boats repeatedly catching on the rooftops of submerged houses," says Reji, adding: "Many had to dock their boats on the second floor of the marooned houses and climb into the buildings to find the stranded people."

What made him write this book? "In the fast-moving world, which is flooded with news anyway, people would've forgotten the brave acts of these fishermen very soon," he replies.

"And I didn't want that to happen. If they had not jumped into the rescue work, the death toll would have been higher. Some newspapers did carry stories of their bravery but other than that nothing happened."

Citing the Kerala government's statistics, Reji points out that these heroic fishermen were able to rescue some 6,50,000 people from flood-hit areas, mainly in Chengannur and other parts of Central Travancore.

Published by Speaking Tiger, the

book, written in a simple and moving narrative, is based on interviews with fishermen, government officials and flood victims, while also drawing on extensive research. It brings to life the events of those terrible days, the daring heroism and the heart-wrenching sorrow. Reji also shines light on the precarious lives of the fisherfolk communities – threatened as they are by climate crisis, increasing coastal erosion, and a rapidly changing way of life.

The author also delves into the history of these fishermen – for example, how their forefathers played a vital role in helping the Kerala kings in thwarting the Dutch Navy in the 18th century.

## Prepared for future exigencies?

When asked if Kerala – after battling these harrowing floods – is now better prepared to meet such exigencies in the coming years, Reji says, "No! Kerala had been struggling financially due to the 2018 floods. The loss was to the tune of Rs40,000 crore. The state has failed to raise enough money. To make it worse, this year [2019] too the floods have caused huge losses. Kerala is a small state, densely populated. This time the landslides claimed lives."

"Experts say the exploitation of land and building resorts in ecologically fragile land in Western Ghats, led to the landslides this time. Even though the disaster was scary, the government has not come up with any plan to curb the land exploitation. So, for sure, if there are floods next year, landslides will repeat, and the toll could be high as well."

He adds, "Unfortunately, even though a disaster management authority is there in the state, other than issuing alerts, they don't have any proper effective plans on the ground as yet."

(Based in Kerala, Rejimon Kuttappan is an India-Arab Gulf Senior Investigator for UK-headquartered Equidem Research and Consulting probing migrant workers' rights. He is also an ILO-Panos fellow on Labour Migration and an advisor for the Ethical Journalism Network.)

Former Gulf journalist Rejimon Kuttappan's book is both a chronicle of heroism and a tribute to the enduring courage of a community that came to the rescue of people hit by Kerala's worst floods. The book collates anecdotes of personal courage, innovative use of social media, and how the community came together in a time of looming climate crisis and natural disasters

(COLLAGE PHOTOS: TIMESNOWNEWS.COM, NOTV.COM, NEWSANDPRESS.COM, NEWS18.COM, DECCANCHRONICLE.COM)



Rejimon Kuttappan



## Wilfred's account: Excerpts from the book

AFTER two days of tiring rescue operations, ignoring hunger and danger, we decided to end our task. We loaded our boat on the truck and were ready to go. We were waiting to sign some official papers with the government officials about the rescue operations, when there came a request from the government.

They asked us to transport some food and medicines to about 350 people who had taken shelter on a small hilltop across the Pamba river.

All of them were from nearby areas. When the flood water had started to rise, they had moved to the hilltop so at least their lives would be safe.

As the hilltop was full of trees, the Navy and Army choppers had failed to drop medicines and food for the

stranded people and they had been literally starving for at least three days.

The time was around 6 p.m. We were aware that by the time we reach, it would be dark. However, we decided to go.

It was also raining heavily. Without any delay, we unloaded the boat from the truck. The officials and volunteers loaded the medicines and food. A local who knows the way also joined us.

According to Wilfred, it was a risky task. To reach the spot, he and his team would have had to cross

the Kuttanad lake and the ferociously flowing Pamba.

The water level in the lake was quite high. As we had to be more cautious, we were driving the boat a little slowly. Crossing the lake itself took more than one hour. And by then the light was disappearing. Somehow, we entered the Pamba river. The river was flowing at its full. Even the sight of its flow was scary. We had to drive in the opposite direction, against the current, which, again, was a risky job—and

time consuming too. As it's a river that flows down from the hills, there were uprooted trees and many other floating objects coming down, threatening to capsize us. To avoid a head-on crash, we had to divert the boat many times. Finally, after a two-hour drive, we reached the destination.

When Wilfred docked their boat and climbed the hilltop with medicine and food, the stranded people were really surprised to see them. "More than getting the medicines and food, they were happy to learn that the government was aware of them and hadn't given up on them."

Wilfred and his team could only spend a few minutes with them as it was becoming dark very quickly.

Returning was riskier. Now, we

had to drive along with the flow of river. So, most of the time we were losing control. We were thrown up and down many times by the river. At one time, we even thought that we would all fall into the water and drown. But somehow, we reached the shelter.

Upon reaching the shelter, Wilfred and his team were given a heroic welcome by the officials and volunteers as they hadn't been sure that they would be able to complete the mission successfully where the well-trained Navy and Army personnel with their choppers had failed.

By going to the rescue operations, what we could do is help people with our limited resources. We believed in our experience of braving the killer waves in the sea. That helped us a lot.