

Monsoon in Kerala

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When I look out of the window, it is green. The monsoons are here, and the room smells of humidity. The previous day, I'd walked to the beach a couple of kilometers away and watched the clouds roll over the Arabian Sea. I wasn't alone; a small crowd milled about on the sands to size up the heavy grey clouds gathering over a churning sea, the colour of muddied waters. The whole town waited in anticipation for the onset of the monsoons. Fishermen were already rigging up their boats; there wouldn't be fishing trips for a few weeks.

As I walk back home in the afternoon, a bleak sun shines through the manjadi trees of the town park. Young couples seek to kiss furtively under the trees, away from the eyes of retired men taking their strolls. Umbrellas hang by clotheslines strung on storefronts. Each year, a new innovation is introduced to the umbrellas: four-fold umbrellas that fit in the palm of your hand, umbrellas with a whistle at the end, umbrellas that can (ironically) spray water. As if the deluge from the skies wasn't enough. In a region where people are loyal to specific umbrella brands, the advertising of these new designs takes up valuable broadcast time at the end of April.

Every school child in India studies about the monsoons. The country is subject to two monsoon cycles each year: the summer or the south-west monsoon and the winter or north-east monsoon. The former forms out of a depression in the Arabian Sea, and the latter in the Bay of Bengal. Kerala, where I come from, is the first region to be hit by the south-west monsoons, which make landfall by the end of May or the beginning of June. Edavapathi, it's called, for the rains arrive at the mid (pathi) of the Edavam month. The Meteorological Department announces well in advance the expected date of the monsoons, and the whole country waits with bated breath, for this brings the rains that determine the agricultural output and food availability for a whole year. For a few days, the eyes of the nation are focused on a tiny state on the western coast of south India, trained to look for the first rainfall, and then, to track the monsoon as it moves upwards along the coast and across the country, showering water on a land which desperately needs it.

Apart from the agricultural and the economic significance, the kaalavarsham, as the summer monsoons are called in Malayalam holds immense cultural and social meanings. The Ramayana is read during the days of the heaviest rains. Books are written about life during the monsoons, and these rains are etched into the collective psyche of the Malayali as something with nostalgic definitions, of romance, of old songs on an old radio in a grandparents' house, of dusks spent in the warmth of a candle because of power cuts, of the last mango before the rains hit, of new raincoats and umbrellas, and of the sudden spurt of delicate white thumba flowers everywhere.

At home, my mother has tied a clothesline in my bedroom. The incessant rains make it impossible for clothes to dry completely, and only a few hours under the ceiling fan would take away the musty smell off the clothes. New slippers have been brought: ugly rubber flip-flops which do not snap no matter how much you wade through water with them. On the TV, there are constant warnings against going out to sea, and advice on how to protect oneself against monsoon maladies such as malaria and dengue.

The next day, as predicted, the rains begin. "SW Monsoon makes landfall in Kerala," says the headline on a news channel.

It rains for days on end. There are short breaks when the rains thin down into a drizzle, before resuming with all its strength. The whole house smells damp, and I wonder how many Malayalis die premature deaths because of the mold that may be a constant feature of our households. Clothes are spread on lines, armrests of chairs, and on the dining table at night. This, for me, is the first image of a monsoon: clothes spread out all over the house.

At night, the power goes. There is a stillness between the rains. You know to savour this calm because it won't last long. Nocturnal noises saturate the air. The croaks of frogs drown the chirps of crickets. From afar, I can hear the sea, the swish of angry waves against the land.

In the dawn, I see a rain-drenched squirrel reach for a fruit on the wild almond tree outside my parents' window. Through the haze of the drizzle, the sun shines meekly, a cameo performance. According to a fable, when the sun shines as it rains, the fox and the crow are getting married somewhere.

My mother and I sit at the table, ironing underwear to dry them completely. I snicker at the absurdity of our actions. There is a light drizzle outside, but there is a noise like the trample of wild horses, the herald of a heavy downpour, the fall of fat raindrops, beating down with immense strength on the jackfruit and mango trees in our yard. I think of Tagore's lines: The wind is roaring and struggling among the bamboo branches like a wild beast tangled in a net.

Except this is no wind, this is the rain.

That night, the power lines go off again. My mother and I eat rice gruel by the light of a lamp. She tells me that these months are also called panja maasam, months of scarcity. For all the lushness of Kerala, and for all the fertility promised by the monsoons, during these months, people in the past had to stick to minimal diets. Hence the Ramayana readings, she adds. There were little opportunities for amusement: no pilgrimages, very few weddings, and so the reading of the epic tale of banishment of the king in the jungle, a monkey god, and a ten-headed demon king was the only entertainment.

The next day, I go for a walk. Dark green carpets of moss spread on every wall, wild fern sprouts in crevices. Tumba plants have grown everywhere, their delicate white flowers still standing, in spite of the heavy rains. I have been warned of snakes. More frogs mean more food for snakes. At the beach, the sand drops not in a gentle slope but in an abrupt cliff into the sea. The waves have chipped away the incline. From a nearby mosque, the call for prayers has begun. I sit on an unused pier and take in the view: the gushing sea underneath, boys playing football on the beach, and men collecting mussels from rocks that jut into the sea. Afar, over the sea, a column of water. It's raining over the sea and the winds are bringing it towards the shore.

Back home, my mother is back at that monsoon ritual: finding new places for the damp clothes to dry. I ask her if she ever gets tired of the rains. After all, this is her life for at least three months in a year. She shakes her head.

When I was a child, I liked listening to my mother talk about the day she got married to my father. "It was a sunny day, but just as the ceremony ended, it rained heavily. We couldn't even take proper pictures after the wedding."

"Wasn't it a terrible inconvenience?"

"No, it's a good sign. The rains always bring good fortune."