When Musi was in spate

Kalakriti Archives encapsulates memories of the great floods of 1908 through original photographs

NOTES FROM THE PAST

The floods on September 28, 1908, caused large-scale destruction to life and property. Loss of property and goods stood at an estimated three crore rupees.

When the Musi broke both its banks in the early hours of the day, very few buildings and familiar landmarks were even visible in the area abutting the river. Several buildings crashed one after another.

The northern bank of Musi bore the brunt of the flooding. About one square mile of densely populated areas was flattened.

- Kalakriti Archives

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How long does it take for nature to show us who’s the boss? Not much, really. It can happen within a day, over a few hours or minutes. A natural disaster and the devastation it leaves in its wake rewrites history and the destinies of several hundreds of people affected by it. The tsunami and earthquake in Indonesia this past week and the recent floods in Kerala are among the several telling reminders of nature’s fury.

September 28 marked 110 years since the great floods of Musi that cut off Hyderabad’s Old City from the new. Its scars ran deep. The floods, according to archival information, destroyed nearly 19000 homes, left 80000 people homeless and killed nearly 15000 people.

Original photographs of 1908/09 from Kalakriti Archives, are now on display at Kalakriti Art Gallery. The exhibition ‘After the Deluge: Memories of the Flood’ held in collaboration with Krishnakriti Foundation shows us how Hyderabad was brought to its knees.

The images, in gelatine silver prints, reveal the extent of damage to the city’s bridges, bazaars, hospitals, bungalows and other residential spaces. It all began with a cyclone in Bay of Bengal and from September 27 evening, as Musi began to swell owing to torrential rains.

Bridges submerged

The archival information gives viewers an idea of Hyderabad city in 1908. River Musi runs west to east and separated the Old City on its southern bank to the new city on its northern bank. From west to east, several bridges connected the two parts of the city – Purana Pul, Musallam Jung bridge, Naya Pul or Afzal Gunj bridge, and the Chaderghat bridge.

By 2am, flood waters reached Purana Pul and continued to rise through the wee hours of the morning, until 11am on September 28, submerging several bridges. A photograph at the entrance of the gallery shows Musi in spate over the submerged Afzal Gunj bridge, with only the bridge’s entrance arch being visible.

A photograph taken a few hours later shows the aftermath. By 3pm, the bridge was visible as water receded. Purana Pul stood strong but the approach to the bridge from both banks were cut off; several bridges were breached but Chaderghat bridge was most the most affected – it partially collapsed. The old and new parts of the city were cut off.

Rescue operation involved searching for people stranded inside their homes, on rooftops, and clinging on to trees. Search operations continued for days, looking for bodies within the rubble. One of the photographs shows corpses on a heap of ruins after a building collapsed.

A portion of the City Wall between Afzal Gunj and Musallam Jung bridges was broken. Elsewhere, debris was all that remained of shops outside Dewan Deodi. Victoria Zenana Hospital and Afzal Gunj hospital suffered ceiling and roof collapses. Those stranded in Begum Bazaar were rescued by boats.

Long road to normalcy

Soon, relief centres were set up – images show the kitchen at Badshahi Ashurkhana (which was one of the 10 kitchens that served more than six lakh people), and food grains being distributed at Purani Haveli whose gates were opened to public.

Relief camps came up in the area flattened by the floods between the river banks, and at Afzal Gunj Hospital. Panch Mahalla palace, Julukhana Shahi, Asad Bagh and Fateh Maidan had temporary shelters.

Central Relief Committee was formed and a Relief Fund channelised contributions that poured in from Nizam’s Dominions and several parts of British Empire.

(‘After the Deluge: Memories of the Floods’ is on display at Kalakriti Art Gallery till October 14. Anyone who has archival material or personal stories of the floods can email info@kalakriti.in and info@krishnakriti.in)