

The Queen, The Palace and The College: Sagas Untold

- *History of Maharani Sethu Lakshmi Bayi , Lalindloch Palace and
College of Agriculture, Vellayani*

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I count it my luck to study at the College of Agriculture, Vellayani. Since my first visit here for AIASA activities and some personal purposes in 2017, I could feel the historic legacy resonated in the nook and corner of this campus. The memories and experiences I gained here are priceless and couldn't be traded for anything else. I felt happy to be here since the campus stole my heart. The Dean's office is commonly called *The Palace*, and it is beyond doubt to be

called an architectural marvel. The board at the entry to Dean's office said the name of the Palace as *Lalindloch Palace*, which Maharani Sethu Lakshmi Bayi constructed for her daughters. It made my spine chill when I realised that the place I stand has many stories to tell. But it was evident that, apart from the palace, 'everything with a historical value' is



fighting with the test of time in withholding its elegance and grandeur. On my campus tour walks, I used to ask those whom I met regarding the stories of the campus, "Who lived here, who made it, and how did it become a college? and so on". Some didn't know; some said king and queen, and some smiled as if their smile questioned me, 'Why do you want to know these things?' My curiosity was ridiculed by the number of smiles I came across. I felt like, 'Whom to ask and whom to tell?' As days passed, my campus tour had finished, and I sat under the beloved *RainTree* of the campus, looking at its profuse branches. The *RainTree* said, "Hey, I know the answers to your doubts; maybe I can help you. But it will be a brief version." I looked at the *RainTree* with hope, curiosity, and shock. I looked at the palace for a few minutes, and the palace nodded to the *RainTree* to tell me the story. A breeze had blown, the *RainTree* waved its branches calmly, and leaves were showered on me, and I started to hear the untold saga.

Maharani Sethu Lakshmi Bayi – The Last Regent of Travancore

Pooradam Thirunal Maharani Sethu Lakshmi Bayi (Senior Maharani) was born on November 19, 1895, to Kerala Varma Koil Thampuran and Ayilyam Naal Mahaprabha Thampuratti. She was adopted into the Travancore Royal Family with her cousin Sethu Parvathy Bayi (Junior Maharani). She was throned as the Queen at six years old. She married Sri Rama Varma Valiya Koil Thampuran, giving birth to Uthram Thirunal Lalithamba Bayi (Lalitha) in 1923 and Karthika Thirunal Indira Bayi (Indira) in 1926. As the story continued, *RainTree* introduced me to Julie. She smiled and wagged her tail towards me, showing her love. I teased her, saying, ‘*You are so cute, Julie,*’ and she jumped joyfully. I fed her some snacks. We played *throw and fetch* for some time and heard the rest of the story.



The Senior Maharani was chosen to rule and named Maharani Regent of Travancore under the matrilineal inheritance (*marumakkathayam*) system in September 1924 until Chithira Thirunal Balarama Varma (Junior Maharani’s son) reached adulthood. The Junior and Senior Maharanis’ relationships deteriorated due to the tug of war for the Regency. Sethu Lakshmi Bayi resided at the Satelmond Palace in Poojapura while she was in power. The Senior Maharani’s reign in Travancore was marked by numerous reforms, such as opening roads to all, establishing credit facilities, donating land to the landless, establishing panchayats, enacting *Ezhava* and *Nanchinad Vellala* Acts, electrification in Thiruvananthapuram, outlawing polygamy, free mid-day meal programs at schools, replacing *marumakkathayam* system, the building of new roads, and granting public access to the telephone. She also eliminated the inhumane custom of exposing breasts for females and the *Devadasi* system. Creating a women’s college in Trivandrum and appointing a woman as department head and legislative council member happened for the first time in India. After regency, she preferred to reside at her "country residence" on the banks of Vellayani Lake with her consort and two daughters. The *RainTree* said, “Many had come and gone; she was excellent among all.”

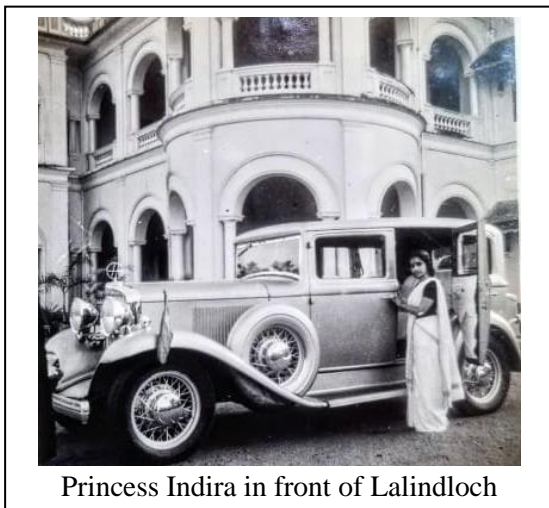


Maharani Sethu Lakshmi Bayi constructed a palace for her daughters in 1930, and Rama Varma named it Lalindloch Palace. In 1955, the Government of Travancore-Cochin proposed the palace and estate for a new agricultural college. Julie and I were all ears to hear the rest. She sat next to me by this time. The palace was handed over, and she left for Bengaluru with her family, leaving all her royal titles behind. An era came to an end as a result. Maharani Sethu Lakshmi Bayi passed away in 1985 in Bengaluru. Lord Mountbatten and Gandhiji were her great admirers. The present-day Travancore Royal family is the successors of the Junior Maharani. The *RainTree* sighed and said, "I will tell you the story of the Palace tomorrow." The day went well, and I said bye to Julie, *RainTree*, and the palace. Julie wagged her tail and walked away with a smile. I felt goosebumps while I walked to my quarters. It was through this same way the powerful Matriarch of Vellayani, The Last Regent Maharani and the Last Queen of the Travancore Dynasty, the Travancore Queen with the highest British honors system, The *Imperial Order of the Crown of India*, used to have her royal walk with her chieftain, companions, maids, and securities.



Senior Maharani's Country Residence, Vellayani

When I came to the *RainTree* the next day, Julie had already reached there to hear the story. I gave her some eatables, and she hopped with joy over me. *RainTree* continued to tell



Princess Indira in front of Lalindloch

the rest of the story. The country residence compound consists of the Senior Maharani's Palace, Lalindloch Palace, *mandapam*, guest house, *paachakappura*, *naalukettu*, *kulakkadavu*, boat jetty, boat house, the residence of cook and accomplices, *kaavalppura*, granary for rice and coconut and stable for horses. A temple and sacred grove exist nearby, which do not belong to this compound, but it shares some stories with it.

The Senior Maharani's Palace faces the lake with two-level rock-storeyed steps on its entrance with design-sculptured walls. A well and two frankincense trees of that era still exist. It is now used as the office of the Agricultural College Employees' Credit Cooperative Society.

The Lalindloch Palace

Lalindloch is a combination of the names *Lalitha* and *Indira* and *loch*, a Scottish word for "lake" (Vellayani lake). Depending on the angle from which it is viewed, it can be seen as a two, three, or four-storeyed building.

The palace is a hallmark of symmetry, with a central staircase for the first floor and a spiral stair for the second floor. The tiles on the floor are made in Germany by Villeroy and Boch. The roof is paved with tiles of three different shapes. The roof corners are designed with various royal designs. The open space on the second floor has



an electric light in the design of a lady bearing a fire torch. The lightning arrestors were earthed to the well situated outside the present-day cafeteria. The palace is currently the office of the Dean of Faculty and the Professor (Research and Coordination). The *mandapam* used to be the meeting place (sit-out) for discussions when visitors arrived to meet the Queen. It is used for student gatherings nowadays. The guest house of Senior Maharani became the department of community science. The cafeteria was the *paachakappura*, where the food for the Senior Maharani, princess, and other royals was prepared. The *naalukettu* was the administrative office of the Senior Maharani and is now the office of the Associate Director of Research, RARS (SZ).

As the story continued, Julie was taken for a walk by some juniors. She loved all of them; in fact, Julie loved everyone on the campus. The whole campus loved her. The *RainTree*, the palace, and Buddha are very fond of her. She is the *Hachiko* of Vellayani. She has the freedom to enter the classrooms, the hostels, and the hangout places. She is a leading participant in every activity on our campus. She showered her love on all, and everyone loved her back. *RainTree* said, "She is our heart-throb." I nodded YES and smiled, looking at her. *RainTree* continued that the *kulakkadavu* (the royal bath) is constructed as a house when viewed from three sides, and the pond can be seen only when viewed from its



rear side, which is now on the verge of extinction. The boat jetty (now popularised as *KochuKovalam*) and boat house (waiting room for the boats and the residence of the palace steward, the *Kaaryasthan*) now function as the office of NCC. The residence of cooks, accomplices, and servants has now become the office of the Assistant Executive Engineers (civil and electrical). The *kaavalppura* was the security post of the palace compound, which currently acts as the office of the Kerala Agricultural University Employees' Association, Vellayani Unit. The granary exists even today. The horse stable is about to disappear as there are a few signs of its existence. The Palapooru Kaavu Bhagavathy Temple belongs to the Kunderathala family and is one of the rarest temples in Kerala to stand without a roof over the deity. The deity in the sanctum sanctorum is placed in seven forms (*saptamathrukkal*) along with the deities of *Veerabhadra* and *Balaganapati*. The temple has seven sub-deities and a never-drying spring of water that gurgles aside the deity's platform. The sacred groove is rich with rare species of trees and has been preserved as a perfect example of the temple's antiquity. The temple opens on all Fridays and some special occasions. *RainTree* shook its branches and said, "Let's keep the rest for tomorrow" I hugged *RainTree*, said bye, and walked towards Samrudha hostel for dinner.

College of Agriculture, Vellayani

Julie was absent when I came to *RainTree* to hear the remaining part the next day. Since we became more acquainted, I waited for her briefly by swinging the trapeze hung there. But my curiosity didn't like this intermission, so I nodded the *RainTree* to start. It said, "You are going to hear how a palace was turned into a college and how the emotion *AGRICOS* (the nickname of the student community at Vellayani) took its birth." Agricultural education in Kerala developed as water from a spring emerged to form a river that became a tributary later and finally found its way as a distributary. The agricultural training, courses in school curricula, middle schools, research stations, farms, pre-university courses, pre-professional courses, and diploma courses then existed along with the agriculture department, some departments from the erstwhile Travancore university, the refresher courses for agricultural officers and the agricultural periodicals have played their role in leading to the creation of an agricultural college in Kerala. It has other reasons if we look into the matter from an administrative and educational point of view at the national level. I won't tell you that today as I don't want you to get bored and sleep suggested *RainTree*. I replied, "Much obliged, Your Honour," with a scorned face and bowed mockingly. The Demonstration Farm in Karamana conducted a training programme in 1896 which paved the way for starting a college for

agriculture in the state. The Government of Travancore-Cochin started the *Government Agricultural College, Vellayani, Trivandrum*, 1955, initially under the agricultural department. The campus was laid out in one of the hillocks surrounded by the beautiful Vellayani freshwater lake. It was renamed *Agricultural College and Research Institute* when affiliated with the University of Kerala in 1956. The postgraduate and doctoral programs were started in 1961 and 1965, respectively. The college was renamed the *College of Agriculture, Vellayani*, when Kerala Agricultural University (KAU) started functioning on 1st February 1972. Staff was



Shri. M. C. Cherian

appointed from various departments in the state to run the college. Shri. M. C. Cherian was the first Principal of the College in 1955. Dr. J. Sam Raj was appointed as the first Dean in 1972. Mr. T. J. John was the farm Superintendent, and Mr. Britto Muthunayakam was the first Vice Principal. The college started with the first batch of 50 students for B.Sc. Agri, with the nominal staff, has become a temple of knowledge with 24 departments, a staff strength of 470, with almost 1300 students now. The instructional farm started functioning in 1955, along with the college. The area of this farm

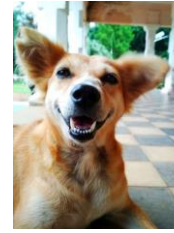


1st B.Sc. Agri Batch 1955

is 251.73 hectares, surrounded on three sides by Vellayani freshwater lake. A collection of around 100 bonsai is one of the attractions of this farm. A part of this farm is landscaped and preserved as *Kochu Kovalam*. The RARS was established at Vellayani on 30th November 1981. As the story continued, I saw a junior pass by and ask her, "Have you seen Julie?" She replied, "She is with seniors at Greeshma (UG ladies' hostel), having snacks and getting ready for their evening walk. I said, OK. The *RainTree* exclaimed, "Alas! I forgot to tell you about our Vellayani Lake. Let me tell you that, else I may miss it". I nodded a big YES. I started to stroll under the canopy shade for a change.

The lake is a wetland transformed from marshes over the years. The shore of this lake used to be laden with whitish-golden sand with waves of water embracing it. The lotus offered in the Padmanabhaswamy temple was cultivated here. It supports the livelihood of many people. Non-scientific road construction across the lake, non-removal of mud deposited, irregular bund creation, illegal encroachments, cultivation of paddy and coconut palms, the 'lake reclamation scheme,' waste dumping by the municipality, the tourism departments' failed boating between bunds scheme, dumping of leftovers from hotels and slaughterhouses, and

using the lake as a water-wash spot of vehicles have their respective share in declining the area of the lake from 750 ha to 450 hectares, sighed the *RainTree*. “I felt that the current generation is less interested in conserving the lake. It was not like this”, the *RainTree* complained and glared at me. I looked back helplessly and said, “What can I do alone? I am a newbie on this campus, so I need time to know how things work here. I will do what I can.” Meanwhile, I saw a group of girls walking toward the *RainTree*. It seemed that they were carrying something, and they were laughing. The sight made me burst out laughing as Julie was carried in their hands, beautified with cosmetics, and someone had made her wear a T-shirt. Everyone took her happily, and the ‘*procession*’ proceeded to *Kochukovalam*. She seems so happy to be the gigglemug of the campus.



I sat on the trapeze, looked at the palace, and started to lose in my thoughts and as I came to reality, I gazed at the *RainTree* and asked, “You still have a lot more stories, haven’t you?”. *RainTree* started unfurling the pages of the forgotten past. The degree programme was a three-year annual system till 1971, and it was changed to a four-year trimester system in 1972, which was replaced by a semester system in 1986. The admissions were given to those candidates who have completed pre-university and pre-professional courses. The 1st year classroom was the council room in the Dean’s office.

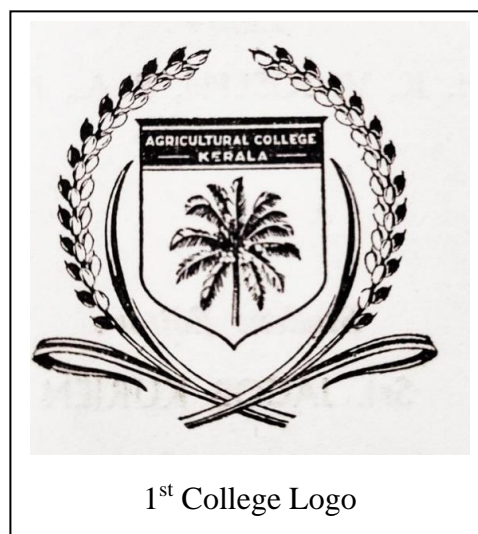
The *mandapam* was the classroom for second-year students, and the heritage class was the classroom for third years during the inception. The ground floor of the palace had a staff room, departments of agronomy, agricultural entomology, soil science and agricultural chemistry, agricultural bacteriology, the Dean’s office, and a library (at veranda), and the first floor had



Classroom at *Mandapam*

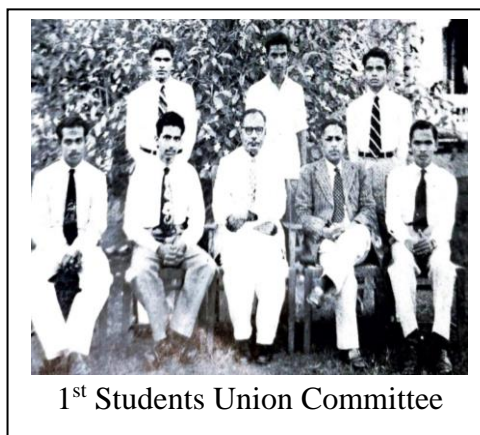
the departments of plant pathology, agricultural botany, and agricultural engineering. The working hours of the college were from 8 am to 3 pm. The department of animal husbandry has worked in a separate building since 1955. The uniform for field practicals was a khaki shirt, half pants for boys, and a khaaki top, pyjama, and shawl for girls. The educational tour programme started as an all-Kerala tour for the 1955 batch, a south Indian trip for the 1956 batch, and an all-India trip for 1957. The village stay and the billeting programme started in 1955 and 1956, respectively. The *Agricultural Research Journal of Kerala*, a newsletter named *Agres News*, and an abstract research booklet named *Agri-Abstract* were published. During the 1950s, the community science department and the *Greeshma* used to be the men’s hostels, and Senior Maharani’s palace and *Tharangam* were the lady’s hostels. The cafeteria wasae student

mess. The monk Srimat Swami Bhajanananda ji Maharaj is our alumnus. The NCC office was the quarters of the assistant warden. The ADR's office used to be the Dean's quarters. The *annus mirabilis* of the college was in 1957. It marked the arrival of the first batch with lady students and the inauguration of the old UG block and the *Greeshma* hostel. Adopting a college logo, an affiliation for PG courses, and the inauguration of the social science block occurred in 1958. During the 1960s, the classrooms were shifted entirely to the old UG block. The inauguration of *Tharangam*, Kerala Agricultural Research Council, Agricultural Research Journal of Kerala and the Entomological Association occurred in 1961. The mess was common for both hostels and food for girls was taken from the men's hostel. The publication named *PG Reporter* was started with the inception of PG courses. The department of agricultural extension was started in 1962. A cooperative society named Agricultural College and Research Institute Cooperative Society was formed in 1964. The *Samrudha* PG Hostel was opened in 1965. Agricultural statistics, agricultural economics, and physical education departments started in 1966. The department of horticulture was started in 1968. The T&V hostel (*FLAT*) was constructed in 1971. The crop museum was established in 1972. The all-Kerala and all-India educational tours were initiated in 1977. In 1978, it became a north Indian, a south Indian and an all-Kerala tour programme. The departments of plant breeding, community science, and plant physiology were started in 1979, 1983, and 1993 respectively. The students from *Tharangam* and *Greeshma* were shifted to each other in 1993. The year 1996 marked the inception of the department of olericulture, followed by the departments of plantation crops and spices, pomology and floriculture, agricultural meteorology, post harvest technology, plant biotechnology in 1998, agricultural microbiology in 2006, and seed science and technology in 2019. The college library was shifted from the palace to the social science block and later to the present library building. The college ground took its current form in 1963. The ground hosted various cricket tournaments like *P. Ramachandra Rao Trophy* in 1989, the *Ranji Trophy* in 1990, 1995, 1996 and 1998, the *Vijay Merchant Trophy* in 1988, 1990, and 1991 and the *Cooch Behar Trophy* in 1990, 1991. The ground witnessed an *under-19s Test Match* between India and Australia in March 1994. The legendary cricketers VVS Laxman, Michael Hussey, Andrew Symonds and Brett Lee have showcased their talent in our college ground. Our college hosted South zone and Interzone football in 1960, the All Kerala Intercollegiate Drama Festival in 1988, and the South Zone



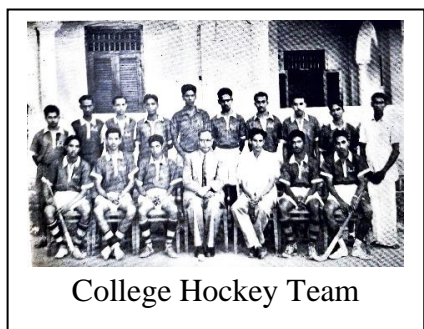
Inter University Shuttle Badminton in 1997. In 2015, the National Games had its venue in our college. The ‘*procession*’ towards the *Kochu Kovalam* had returned to the *RainTree* by then. They carried Julie on their shoulders, and they handed her to me. She was calm in my arms, wagging her tail. Julie and I walked to the cafeteria for tea and biscuits. On our way back, we looked at the fountain in the garden and returned to *RainTree*.

The *RainTree* said, “The glory of this campus seated in a remote hillock was the efforts of the previous student unions. They were so energetic that their activities transformed the campus”. *RainTree* seemed energetic and confident when it said that, but little did I know that the story I was about to hear was a journey of transforming a building into the most prestigious agricultural institution in the state. The student association was inaugurated on 13th August 1956 and remained apolitical until 1978. College day was celebrated on the 2nd of March 1957. The later years saw a three-day annual function with the farmers’ day, the college



1st Students Union Committee

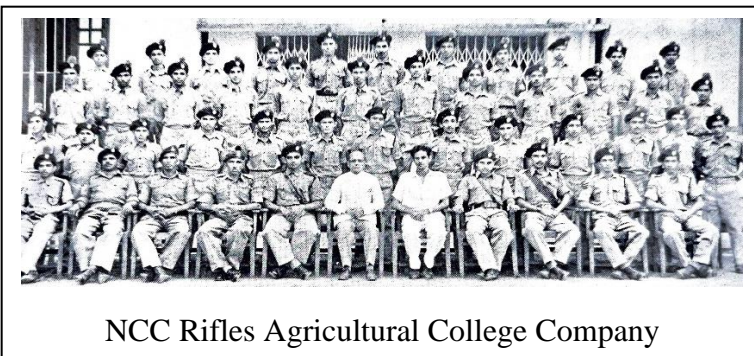
day, and an agricultural conference consecutively. The initial interclass arts were conducted in the open space between the Dean’s and ADR’s offices. The sports competition was conducted in the first week of February for football, volleyball, table tennis, tennis, hockey, badminton,



College Hockey Team

athletics, and basketball. The students, teaching staff, and non-teaching staff participated in sports and art competitions. There was a *Young Farmer Association* under the student’s union. Hostel Day was started to celebrate on 17th February 1959. The rifle shooting was an event at sports in 1959. In 1960, our college Tennis Team participated in Davis Cup. The student union initiated the

P. D. Nair Rolling Cup for the ‘Best Student of the Year’ in 1960. In 1961, the NCC Rifles Agricultural College Company was formed. We bagged the 1st prize at the flower show in Trivandrum in the same year. The awards like the *M.C.*



NCC Rifles Agricultural College Company

Cherian Rolling Cup for the Athletic Champion of the Year, the *T.C. Joseph Memorial Rolling*

Cup for the Best Athlete of the Year, the *Interclass Championship Shield* for the Best Batch of the Year, and the *Best Cadet of the Year* award for the Best NCC Cadet were started in 1961. We won the 1st KAU Intercollegiate sports championship in 1972. The union conducted a *PG Day* for giving sent-off to the PG students. Since 1978, various political party-based student units have come and competed for election. The union used to conduct a '*Merit Evening*' for the prize distribution of various academic and co-curricular activities. Our students' union had conducted All Kerala Intercollegiate Competitions named the *M. R. G. K. Nair Debate Competition* and the *ALCO Rolling Trophy Quiz Competition*. A programme called '*Pratibha Sangamam*' in which the Kalaprathibha and Kalathilakam of various universities in Kerala performed a programme on our campus. The union instituted *Sri. E. J. Thomas Memorial Ever Rolling Trophy* for the champions of the Interclass Arts Champions. We won the second KAU Intercollegiate Arts Festival in 1977, and the KAU Intercollegiate Arts Festival Ever Rolling Trophy, commonly called the *Swarnna Penkutti* (The Golden Lady), reached our campus. Miss. Mercy Thomas, our alumna, cleared a height of 1.54 m in the High Jump, where she secured second place at the All India level, the



Sri. E. J. Thomas Memorial Ever Rolling Trophy



Receiving the *Golden lady*

first of its kind in the College. The NSS Unit helped to construct a bund road across the lake connecting Kakkamoola and the college campus in 1978. In 1986, the drama "Prometheus", staged by the students of this college, bagged first place in the All Kerala Inter-collegiate Drama Competition. Our students' union had fought continuously to remove discrepancies in filling the job opportunities in banks, NABARD, and the agricultural department. In 2007, a

documentary fest, Academic Open Forum, *Cross-Campus Running Competition*, Bonsai exhibition, Mock Parliament, and Film Fest were conducted. A six-day agricultural exhibition named *Harithotsavam-2011* was conducted. In 2012, AIASA started its activities on campus.

I was amazed to hear the variety of programmes that occurred here. Julie was sleeping on my lap by then. I patted her gently, and she woke up. Words couldn't describe my feelings after hearing all this. My mind was filled with mixed emotions. I stood up and looked at the palace for a few minutes. Sun was about to set. The *RainTree* was mum. Julie wagged her tail and walked towards the *mandapam*. I was short of words, and I touched the trunk of *RainTree* for some time. A leaf fell calmly over my shoulders. My questions are answered. It is strange to feel sad when doubts are cleared and answered., but I felt sad. It was the poetic justice of the time that the story behind this beautiful campus was told by the omniscient *RainTree* and was listened with me by the omnipresent Julie and the silent witness of our campus, the Buddha statue. I walked to my quarters. The evening news headlines say that all educational institutions in the state, including professional colleges, were closed for ten days due to the COVID outbreak. I felt nothing as my head was mesmerised by the stories I heard. The following day, I boarded the bus to go home. On my way, I decided to do something from my side to pay my respect to the magnanimous legacy of the first agricultural college in Kerala and the efforts of our previous Student Unions.