

Mauritius: Flash Floods Hit Lalit's Party Offices and Archives

Thursday 11 April 2013, by [COLLEN Lindsey](#) (Date first published: 5 April 2013).

This is an article just to say we in LALIT have been in total crisis mode after the terrible flash-floods which happened just in and around Port Louis, floods in which some people lost their lives in the centre of town, caught in underpasses and underground parking garages. Others were stranded on top of their houses or left hanging on to mango tree branches in the flood waters, others still trapped inside vehicles carried away on top of each other like Dinky toys, all ending up jumbled up in a mess. There was 153mm of rain in two hours in Port Louis.

The LALIT offices, in the area hit by 179mm of rain in less of a timespan, were under 3'6" of water.

This means all the computers, printers the duplicators, the scanners, and other tools for organizing, and most dear of all, most mourned, over half our documentation, of our living archives, if not more, mostly primary source stuff, were all under water. The water, full of thick mud, was over a foot above all the tables, and three out of five of the bookshelves with files on them were under water, under this thick muddy water, which as the flood subsided left from 3 to 6 inches of pure mud sludge. The next day we found a dead 8-inch tilapia fish inside the building! The tragedy of the timing for LALIT, is that exactly 3 weeks ago we had already begun the swift 5-month process of digitizing our entire documentation centre full-time, an estimated 400,000 items. This was something we have been planning and working on for over five years. The process, an organic one, was just perfectly set up and running. It means, however, that we have an off-site back-up of this first 5% or so of the work. (Small mercies.) A team of 10 people were at it all day long in the front section of our building. All that is, as a write 6 days after the flood early on a Friday morning, now in total ruin. The sheer irony of the timing.

The kitchen we use, slightly lower than the ground floor of the Grand River North West Building where Lalit rents space from the Workers' Education (LPT) and shares the documentation centre with LPT, was 5 foot under water. The fridge was floating around on its side, still plugged into the wall. Tupi, the lovely, affectionate stray dog that moved in with Lalit in about 2007, was sheltering on the kiosk on top of the kitchen and half way up to the upstairs Hall. She was unable to swim through the debris floating on the waters to join us when we first got to the main building, once we waded to it, when half-an-hour after the highest point in the flooding, the water was already subsiding fast enough to get through waist-deep to the back door. The poor dog was shivering with apprehension. Fortunately, and quite by chance, no-one was in the building at that exact time. Alain and Hamid were last to leave at 1:30 pm, (there had been various activities on the Saturday morning, 30 March), and they left in a light rain. By 3:30, two hours later when, hearing the news of flooding, one or two of us had already got there - by foot because of the traffic jam provoked by the floods on our Main Road by the Canal that overflowed its banks - the waters were already subsiding. A true flash flood.

That first day, we, some seven or eight Lalit members who had managed to get there, came home after a few hours of wading around in the debris in the building, doing things like picking computers up out of the water on to tables, tables that had began to appear as the flood waters receded, putting chairs upright so that there was space to circulate inside the building, and not being able to

do anything else much at all, once night began to fall. Of course, everything would go pitch dark that night in the whole area. There was just the odd eerie sound of the odd UPS beeping on its own battery. One was still flashing its blue light and beeping away under water. So, as the flood waters descended that first day, water was trapped one foot deep in the building (by our own totally inadequate anti-flooding devices) and we had to break down one of these little holding walls in a doorway, with a hammer, a big iron lever, and an axe. The water inside the building then poured out like rapids, back outside. Before leaving, we gave Tupi a whole can of sardines for supper up on the kiosk on top of the kitchen, and some water from the tap upstairs, and left. The building was left that first night under inches of thick mud and debris. The kitchen stayed under about two foot of water that first night.

Since then, every day from 7am to 7pm members and supporting members have been helping - with an unbelievable energy and devotion - every minute of the day. Some 73 people in all. Getting the mud out of the building first with spades and wheelbarrows, and then washing down inside the building with a Karscher (an electrician got the upstairs sockets up and running for us, the very next day) and a team pushing the mud made liquid by the Karscher, with squeegees all the way to the front door in waves and out of the building. Then later, in a second phase, another team mopping the muddy water left with bales of old dry cloth, meanwhile moving all the documentation files we could save, up into the Hall upstairs, and getting the computers, etc into someone's van and out of the area altogether for drying, and then seeing what can be done with them later (We still don't know the state of our hard disks and things, but will start to get an idea tomorrow and Sunday). All the tables and chairs that had been upside down and shifted around by the water, and afterwards left impregnated with the most vile, stinky mud, were hozed down with a Karscher, and put up on the kiosk to dry. Outside a team of members then dug the entrance from the road and the driveway free of mud, heavy back-breaking work done with lightness of spirit, so making tracks on which we could circulate outside the building on at least two sides. They moved what constituted two huge truck-loads of mud and muddied documents that were taken away for us by at cost-price by drivers helping out. A BobCat driver the next day volunteered to remove another whole load of mud, with its rapid, unexpected movements, up on to a lorry parked in the driveway.

The next day, mud oozed out of all the furniture and books and documents back on to the floor we had Karschered. And thick mud formed under all the furniture and on all the bottom shelves, once again.

The task had seemed insurmountable, those first three days.

Some members burst into tears when they arrived. Others refused, seeing the ruination outside, to set foot inside for a few hours, preferring to help sort out things outside first, while building up the courage to go inside and take a look.

But so many members and supporters have chipped in hours and hours, of the most back-breaking work and also the most finicky work - separating one sheet of sodden document from another, to place one dry sheet inbetween - that we have gained in courage and spirit. This hard labour accompanied by meticulous work means we may just have been able to save (if we can continue drying them out) some 20,000 primary source documents that were part of the half of our archives that fell below the level of 3'6". Everyone has been using those strange words "catastrophe" and "cataclysm", and "disaster", especially when referring to the loss of our unique, primary sources in the the documentation centre. It is after all the loss of the history of our collective thinking. The loss also of part of the unique repository of the development from scratch of the written form of our language, Mauritian Kreol. And yet, we are up and running, big teams continuing the process of hardening our hearts to chuck out the documents that have become pure mud, and meticulously saving the half that are saveable. One member arranged for us to get dry paper of all sizes, paper

that is both absorbent and does not break up, to put inbetween two wet pages. Reams and reams of dry paper have already been put between the leaves of books, and between pages of documents, leaflets, posters, invitations, analyses, internal documents. We have also lost many books, and what hurts most is of course, the precious and much read and re-read copies of the great socialist thinkers, activists and writers like Marx, Engels, Lenin, Trotsky, Victor Serge, Rosa Luxembour, Gramsci, and more recent favourites of different members, like Raymond Williams, Franz Fanon, Stephen Jay Gould, Noam Chomsky, Neville Alexander, and John Bellamy Foster.

Of course, in those first worst two days, everyone had a slightly different idea about what to keep and what to hurl out as fast as possible to limit the size of the overall problem, so people kept digging "important" things out of the huge tips left in front of the building, things that other members had thought best jettisoned because they could be replaced, or that it left time to concentrate on their "important" things. No time for people to share, test and together rationalize our thinking into some common understanding. Some members well known for not wanting to throw away anything at all, were flexible enough during the crisis, to be amongst the most avid of throwers-out. Others, famous for saying "let's get rid of that" in normal times, were flexible enough to say, "We must save that file!" and dig it out of the tip.

All was in good spirits. All still is. It's a miracle.

And still is. Spirits have been so good that when a member arrives for the first time, having not gauged the depth of the problem earlier or having been away, his or her horror and despair are in sharp contrast to the humour and determination of those already working away.

And, meanwhile, leading members have had to register with the authorities as "people in the disaster area", hold press conferences together with neighbours (the rare sight of Lalit members together with the Break Lining factory manager and the Assembly of God preacher and the secretary of the National Car Centre), bringing up all the letters and petitions we have organized about the drains and the stupid walls built against nature's floodwater paths in our area, in the past. We even managed to get four muddied pages, of petitions and letters, from 2002, 2007, 2008 and 2012, addressed to all the various authorities to blame for the severity of the effects of the flood. After the Press Conference, the Minister of Gender Equality (whose prison-style wall built last year around a not-yet-opened battered women's shelter) exacerbated the flooding in our area, announced yesterday, 3 April, in writing that she had no objection to the offending wall being partly demolished or whatever in order to respect the route flood water usually takes to the nearby sea, and that the engineers are free to take their decision on rational grounds.

And, in all this, we Lalit members, are all having to keep our "political minds" together, picking up on branch meetings and central meetings and actions as best we can from the day after tomorrow. But it has been and still is an excellent experience in working together in crisis.

All day long Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, and again today, Friday, people have been co-operating in short-term, medium-term, long-term thinking, all at once. Top electricians and mechanics getting the beautiful old Heidelberg Cord 64 seen to (imagine it being flooded by 3'6" of water), another fine technician trying to make ONE working duplicating machine that we use for shorter runs, out of two flood-ruined ones, an electrician desperately trying to give us at least lights and one or two high-up plugs in our downstairs area. Members bringing dhal purees or gato pima to eat, juice and soft drinks, others bringing pillow-cases full of dry old clothing to use to clean up, one working to save dozens of threatened photographs, rescued from the water and now all hanging up on little clothes lines all over the place in the hall upstairs.

And the Meteo services are predicting more rain for today. Imagine when you have shovelled out

two truck loads of mud, thinking of so-called acts of so-called god, bringing in two more of that same kind of mud!! It only takes two hours of renewed flooding to do this!

All this to say our humour and our tenacity is so far holding out well. All those helping are so dead beat at night that we fall into bed, into deep but fitful sleep, with those images of desolation in our dreams and waking: I was the first one to get there, to the Lalit offices. We were in a huge traffic jam, so I left Ram in the car, and walked alone to Grand Rivyer. I could not get my bearings when I got there, at first. And, once I had climbed over the front wall, I made a pure spectacle of today's humanity: Wading in there in water up to my waist, with my mobile phone and electronic car key (on which I had a Lalit key) up in the air, both hands out of any useful action. Alain and then Ram arrived, both having walked the last lap, too, as the road was completely cut off by the floods, leaving traffic completely stuck.

Strange it was, that just a week before the disaster, LPT was awarded the Linguapax International Prize for 2013 - for everyone in LPT's courage, persistence and love of humanity over all those years of fighting for the mother-tongues. The announcement of this honour now seems a long time ago. Ante-deluvian, to be exact. And yet somehow, the internationalism in the spirit of the linguists who set up such a prize gave me an added courage, as it was juxtaposed against the flooding of the richest archive of written Mauritian Kreol that exists, or is in the process of being partly rescued, being brought back to life. Because it is a growing creature. Alive.

Even as we are, two weeks later, reminded of "big nature, little humans" and "careless ruling class, trampled everyone else". In cruel sharp focus.

But, we ordinary humans have our resilience, I suppose, and our sheer lively love of life. I see it before my eyes every day. And we all have each other. We remember this, as we rebuild our party documentation, which is what we call our collective memory, including 36 years of minutes of Lalit and LPT (all in written Kreol) and as we continue our political struggle against capitalism and for the building of a better life for working people everywhere, and for everyone on the globe. And we remember it as we mourn with the families of the eleven people who lost their lives. And as we share solidarity with those who lost everything in their homes.

Lindsey Collen

P.S.

* <http://www.lalitmauriti.us.org/viewnews.php?id=1488>