

Dressed in a blue lungi and blouse and with a thorthu on her shoulder, Thankamma walks down the narrow steps behind her little home. There are in all about 30 old granite steps tinged with moss, making them slippery. She carefully comes down and waits for her son, a driver in Kerala Police, who would soon bring her a parcel-kit with some vegetables.

Standing on the last step wearing sturdy male slippers, she looks at the white arch dam between the two hills that has been hogging so much media attention of late. "Not many people come here. They don't allow people here," she mumbles. "We came in when the work had started for the dam. I even learnt a little bit of Hindi and Marathi. There were so many thousands of people in this forest area and it was a sight to watch. Once this work was over, we went to work at Kulamavu and later Idamalayar dams," she goes on to recall.

Her family went back home to Koothattukulam, their native place, but Idukki beckoned them back. "The government gave us home and work and my husband died here. Now this is home," she says. Her son comes in a police jeep along with a colleague. They go and check the gate and the premises. On the way back, he hands over the kit, inquires with his mother on visitors and speeds away.

Security has been beefed up in the past few days in this otherwise sleepy hill-locked town of Cheruthony, which nestles in the valley of the Idukki and Cheruthony dam. While Malayalis from far and near have been lapping up every bit of news on Idukki in the last fortnight, the residents of this hinterland are relaxed and cool. The settlers in this erstwhile forest area of Nagarampara shrug off fear of the dam and its rising waters. They get out of the house and the sight that greets them is the green and imposing mountains. The roads are good and you find the latest cars moving around. But that is limited to just a 5-kilometre radius. After that the houses are few and far between. Any commercial activity is restricted to this one road which could not be more than two kilometres, but you can get much of the stuff here.

# Forget The Deluge, Behold Idukki's beauty

## *Cheruthony and its inhabitants have a pristine quality that touristy Munnar and Thekkady sorely lack*



Jipson Sikhera

The rising water level doesn't worry them. But the curiosity and a slight apprehension that has trickled down because of the district administration and KSEB can be felt. "We don't know the impact of this water flow. It needn't go by the marked

path," says N J Varghese, who runs a photo studio in the town. Even the 400-odd members of the two Kerala vyapari vyavasaya samithis are not worried about the business impact in the region. "We have been neglected in the name of being in a forest area

high security and what not. All promotion is happening at Thekkady and Munnar. Look at Pathnamthitta district's prosperity," says Joyce Joseph, a shopkeeper who belongs to one of the oldest families in Cheruthony.

There must be about 100 families in the Vazhathopu panchayat who have been there before the Idukki dam was built. Some families were already living in small villages right in the midst of the dense forest on the banks of the Cheruthony river. "We lived just behind this town area. Every house had a fire lit in front of the home when dusk fell. People made noises and called out to check on each other. Wild animals, especially elephants and leopards, came in search of food. Elephants came for jaggery and salt. One night a herd came in when my father and elder brothers were away. My mother heard one side of the wall being pulled down. She picked up two of us and held other two in her hands and ran to the next house. But the couple in that house were newly married and they all moved to the next house even higher. Later, when the men returned, they fired at the elephants and chased them away," recalls Mathew Anthony who has never left the place since they moved here.

Now, many families refuse to admit it but they all had guns then and many of the patriarchs have shot elephants. "They shoot at the stomach. It just

runs away. The moment you stand in front of the elephant with a gun, it goes away," said another resident who had gone hunting those days. Mathew recalls the late tribal chieftain Chempan Kolumban. "I used to accompany my father when they went hunting. My father would ask Kolumban which direction to go and what animal could be caught. We didn't need to go far. After the hunt, we would return by night and Kolumban would be sitting by the fire-side with some ganja. He would roll a nice cheroot and my father would take a few puffs. He would then tell my father to go home as it had got darker."

Though the dam brought civilization to the forest areas, the settlers were discriminated against when work began. It was easy to get into KSEB. They needed drivers, linesmen and other operators. "Many people joined then. Suddenly the culture in this area changed. We, who were farmers, didn't have cash while they had. We were called encroachers and looked down upon. Those who lived in government quarters were 'prosperous people' and we were 'nadan' outsiders. It, however, didn't last long. The government gave us pattayams and after the Idukki dam, we had started establishing shops and hotels. Now, every big car that you see in this town is owned by the older families," says Kunjachan alias Ulagannan. Kunjachanchettan, as he is known around here, had walked about 40 miles through the forests from Thodupuzha looking to become a farmer.

The state government started welcoming people to come and cultivate in some of these places here after the Bengal famine, recalls George Anthony, block member, Vazhathopu division. "We came in to cultivate paddy, tapioca, bananas and spices. But somewhere along the line, our's suddenly became a neglected place by officialdom both at Centre and state."

The locals here complain that some moneybags bought lots of land in Thekkady and Munnar and diverted all the tourism projects there. "We are a mountain and waterlocked land. The beauty of these high ranges has no parallel. Yet every time we propose development, we are shunned in the name of dam's national security and forest area," says George.

The dam scare has done one good thing to the locals here. People are beholding Idukki's beauty.