

APOCALYPSE NOW...

Rising waters is not the 'spectacle' made out on TV. When experienced up-close, they reveal the fragility of things and the futility of our egos. At ground zero in Cheruthoni, TOI reporter M K Sunil Kumar and photographer Jipson Sikhera have an epiphany

Fast forward to 4pm, Friday, Cheruthoni

We are at the bridge in the heart of Cheruthoni town, right in the sightline, so to speak, of columns of water hurtling down from all five shutters of Cheruthoni dam that have been opened. It's raining here and it's raining even more heavily uphill, which means the catchment area of Idukki reservoir continues to rise despite water being released at – hold your breath – eight lakh litres per second.

Even as we stand on the bridge a couple of uprooted palm trees are swept past in the torrent. The water is gaining height and force, it is palpable. The wind is no longer something that tugs at our jackets, it is fast becoming something that will wrestle you down. We think it's wise to leave the bridge.

7.30am, Friday, near Cheruthoni

It's just daybreak, though it looks like the sun has already gone down. Dark clouds hovering around Kolumban Mala, adjacent to Idukki reservoir, have shrouded the entire area. There is also heavy mist. On a rock at the top of a hill stands a woman in her early sixties. Staring at the distance, solitary and stationary, she resembles a statue. She is gazing at the water falling through the spillway of Cheruthoni dam, which is a few yards away. There is a kind of awe in her eyes.

Hearing footsteps, she turns around and sees us. Notwithstanding the surrounding gloom, Jipson, as always, is on the hunt for exclusive pictures. In fact, it's his search for an ideal vantage point that's got us here on the top of this hill.

10am, Cheruthoni

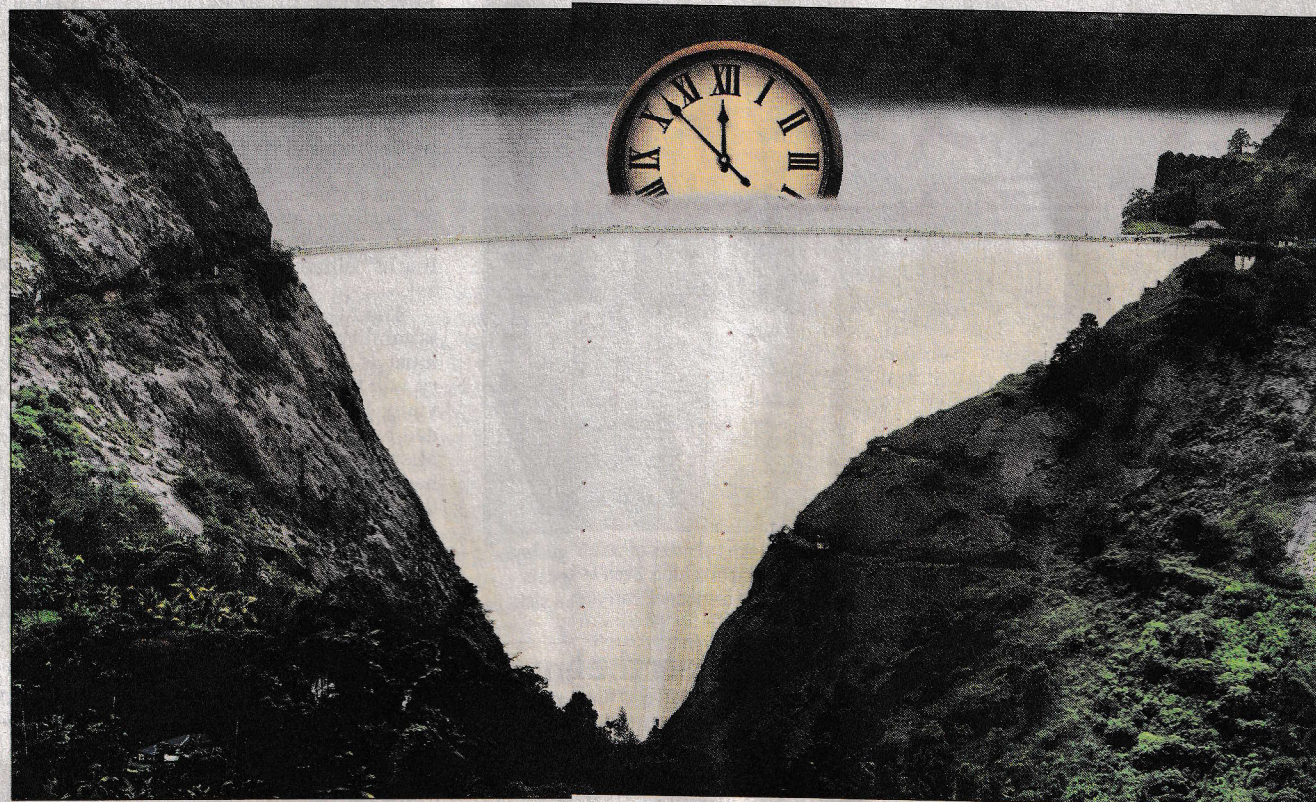
The town, which is dotted with a few government offices, a hospital and some shops, is already flooded with OB vans of television channels and vehicles of print and other media. Vehicles carrying officials pass by as we walk through the potholed road leading to Point Two – a small place overlooking the spillway of the dam. A wayside vendor sells umbrellas and tries to cajole us to buy at least one. A board next to him states that his umbrellas are being sold at a fair price. No fleeing yet, we notice. That's a good sign. We, however, politely turn him down. After all, we have our parkas and windcheaters. It's not exactly a mountain expedition but, honestly, we had come prepared if the water were to rise calamitously and Noah came calling.

10.10am

The sound of water cascading down the shutters gets louder. Earlier, it was a constant thrum, a droning sound, now it's a veritable boom. Some cops are busy taking selfies with other people, locals-turned-tourists for this once-in-a-lifetime spectacle. Remember, the shutters are being opened after 26 years!

11am

Rain in the catchment area continues unabated. Sensing the danger, top officials including the district collector hold a meeting. They appraise chief minister Pinarayi Vijayan, who too is holding a high-level meeting in Thiruvananthapuram. The priority now, we are told, is dam safety. A few vehicles bearing Government of Kerala number plates



HISTORICAL MOMENT: Ammini, niece of late Kolumban who laid the foundation stone of Cheruthoni dam, watches the opening of shutters from Kolumban Mala on Friday. It was as a gesture of gratitude that the Canadians, who designed the dam, let the old man from a tribal hamlet lay the foundation stone

dam by another 50 centimetres releasing 300cumecs (cubic metres per second).

11.45am, Idukki

We learn that there is a mudslide near Idukki, so we rush there to cover the incident. Though Idukki is just three kilometres away from Cheruthoni by road, the bridge connecting the two towns has been submerged in the flood. The only way to reach Idukki is via Karimban and Thankamani and we take that route – it's a winding 14 kilometres! All along the way, people are thronging the river banks watching the hurtling water. Many of them are taking pictures on their cellphones.

Many families are being moved from the

you can note fear on their faces. They are in a way documenting their travails.

1.30pm, Chuthoni

Back in Chuthoni, we see government vehicles rush past. There is frantic activity and soon the fifth and last shutter is being opened. The waters are clearly rising but there is a shortage of credible news. Incredibly, there's a festival atmosphere here. Lots of people are perched atop buildings to watch the dam's water now at full flow; it's as though they are cheering a temple elephant running amok.

2pm

Power supply in the area shuts down to

3pm

At 'Point Two', the rush of people, interestingly, continues to grow. There are women, children, and even infants. The crowd resembles one of mourning the death of a celebrity. Anxiety, an undefined sadness, but also a sense of being part of a spectacle. An unlikely mix, but then perhaps that's what life is even when death stares you in the face.

6pm, Kulamavu

This is one of the catchment areas of the dam, but the release of water hasn't affected normal life yet. The mist swirling in along with dusk, however, seems ominous. Hopefully, only in our imagination.

7pm, Thodupuzha

There is a ban on tourist activity and most hotels along the Thodupuzha-Idukki Road are deserted. This town remains unaffected, but the talk here is all about the release of water from the dam. Most people are glued to television sets. The streets are mostly empty.

Rewind to 7.45am, Friday, near Cheruthoni

Jipson cracks a charming smile and starts a conversation with Ammini, the old woman. It was her uncle, the late Kadatha aka Kolumban who laid the foundation stone of this dam. It was as a gesture of gratitude that the Canadians who designed the dam let the old man from a tribal hamlet lay the foundation stone. It took years to complete the construction of the dam and Kolumban passed away, though it was his dream that he would live to see this completed.

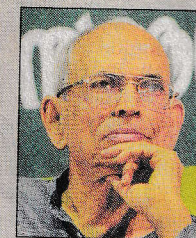
His niece tells us all this and in doing so she honours her uncle's memory. It's a small thing but amidst these hills, in the midst of nature's fury it reminds us city-slickers of how transient life is. We don't talk about it but instinctively the two of us re-adjust our moral compass – we silently remind ourselves that

Realty CHECK

Kerala is paying the price for ignoring the WGEEP report

Madhav Gadgil

I was delighted when four years ago Prime Minister Narendra Modi declared in his victory speech: "Vikas ko Jan Andolan



Banayenge" (we will make development a people's movement). I fervently hoped

that this would mean concrete action in favour of Western Ghats Ecology Expert Panel (WGEEP) report, for this report provided a blueprint of how to make environment-friendly development a people's movement. Moreover, Kerala's BJP unit had strongly endorsed it prior to the elections.

But reality soon took over; all political parties always take care of moneyed interests, and what the new government embarked on was not a Jan Andolan, but a Dhana Andolan. A

friend of mine who is a seasoned bureaucrat says that what governments have in mind when talking of sustainable development is "Sustainable development of real estate interests". So, a flurry of rampant, ill-planned, often illegal

construction and quarrying has been let loose throughout Kerala and is responsible for the mayhem currently triggered by rains.

There has been widespread

activities would be banned within the limits of Western Ghats but fully permitted outside these limits. WGEEP would like to submit that we should move away from such inflexibility to development processes. Instead, development plans should be tailored to prevalent locality and time-specific conditions with full participation of local communities. What should be 'go' and 'no go' development options ought to be decided on a case-by-case basis, in tune with the specific environmental and socio-economic context, and aspirations of local communities. Therefore, WGEEP advocates a graded or layered approach, with regulatory as well as promotional measures appropriately fine-tuned to local ecological and social contexts within the broad framework of Regions of highest sensitivity or Ecologically Sensitive Zone 1, Regions of high sensitivity or ESZ2, and the Regions of moderate sensitivity or ESZ3."

Kerala leads the country in democratic devolution of powers and in people-oriented plan-

ning and management of natural resources. It was Kerala that pioneered panchayat-level natural resource mapping which led to the Kalliasseri plan that proposed how prudent systems of local water resource man-

agement might be revived. It was Kerala legislature that recognized rights of Plachimada panchayat to halt destructive development. Had the people of Kerala properly an-

A flurry of rampant, ill-planned, often illegal construction and quarrying has been let loose throughout Kerala and it is responsible for the current mayhem