

Oral History of the Mid-twentieth-century Migration to Highland Kerala

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Summary: *The oral history of the settlement of the Kerala Highlands by Syrian Christian migrants from Cochin-Travancore in the mid-twentieth century unfolds stories of settlement and adds context to an understanding of migration.*

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In the 1930s, my father migrated to Idukki alone, in search of a better life and farmland. As a child, I waited for the summer vacation so that I could visit Idukki, a dreamland, despite the difficult journey that included three to four hours of walking. Then, in the 1960s, the rest of us migrated to Idukki. I was twelve years old, and the pain of leaving my home and friends still haunts me.

- Leelama Palamalayil (72-year-old), 2023

Background to Idukki

Idukki, the largest district in Kerala, is known as the 'Spice garden of Kerala'. Nestled amid the Cardamom Hills of the Western Ghats, it was formed in 1972 with five Taluks, namely, Thodupuzha, Peermade, Udumbanchola, Idukki, and Devikulam.



Figure 1. Political map of the sub districts of Idukki district. Image: Wikimedia Commons, 2020

The district has a history of large-scale migration from mainland Kerala and Tamilnadu. The district lies in two physiographic divisions, i.e., highland and a narrow midland strip in the western part of the district. The name 'Idukki' means gorge in Malayalam, and arguably the place got its name from a gorge near Idukki town. About

44% of the district is forest area. Because of the undulating topography, a large area of the district is not suitable for cultivation.

In 1877, Kerala Varma, the Raja of Poonjar sold 227 sq. miles of the largely unexplored and thickly forested Kannan Devan hills to John Daniel Munroe, a British planter. He formed the North Travancore Land Planting and Agriculture Society. The members of the society developed their tea, coffee, cinchona, and cardamom plantations and estates in various parts of the high ranges, initially in the Munnar region, and later in the Kumily–Vandiperiyar area.

The Travancore Government passed the Patta Proclamation Act (state-wise), which provided the right of ownership of the land to farmers. They began to buy and sell their land for agricultural practices, which acted as a catalyst for the migration to Idukki. Migration from central Kerala (then the Cochin–Travancore region) began in the early 1900s, when people came to work on plantations. Roads were opened, transport organised, houses and factories were built, and production rose rapidly in the succeeding years.

Deforestation started in the high ranges with the advent of the plantation industry by the end of the 19th century. Additional areas of evergreen forests were destroyed in connection with the construction of several roads, factories, etc. The Pallivasal Hydroelectric Project (1920), the first hydroelectric project of the State, was initially constructed by the tea companies for industrial use.

The plantation estates in the earlier period specialised more in growing tea and coffee. Today, plantation crops mainly consist of tea, cardamom, coffee, eucalyptus, etc. Cardamom plantations are the next largest after the tea plantations in the area, and are a rarity in most of the other parts of Kerala. The residential/agricultural mixed land use primarily consists of mixed crops: coconut, areca nut, banana, tapioca, and rubber, along with individual residential uses as well.

Doors Open for Migration

In the early 1940s, when extensive food shortages occurred throughout Travancore, the government allocated large tracts of land in the forest for paddy cultivation on an emergency basis. Large migrations, particularly by Syrian Christians, occurred, and the following year, the government granted exclusive cultivation rights (known as *kuthakapattom*) in state forest areas. Under these rules, up to five acres of land could be distributed to individuals for food cultivation on a short-term lease basis. The 'Grow More Food' scheme, which was introduced in 1949, led to an increase in migration to the high ranges, and by 1951, as many as 70,000 Malayalis had migrated from Travancore to forest areas in the high ranges. Institutional factors like government, family, and caste were very beneficial to the growth of the plantation sector.

The intensive method of cultivation, which introduced two or more crops in a year in traditional farming regions, influenced crop productivity and was worked upon by a new, emerging, educated middle class. These landless tillers became aware of the increased potential of land as a livelihood resource and were willing to migrate for better prospects. In addition, a shift from the joint family system to a nuclear family also required more jobs and earning opportunities, which were demanded by the increasing population.

Consequently, peasants were in search of arable land within Travancore and Cochin, both intensively cultivated areas, which pushed them towards migration. The 'Grow More Food Campaign' was formally inaugurated, and forest lands were given for cultivation. Encouraged by the attitude of the government, people from all parts of the state came to the high range area and began cultivation of forest adjoining the area allotted for cultivation, and the authorities did not obstruct entry into the forest at that time.

Migration to Idukki happened in different stages. The migration of settler families to

the highlands increased after the government allowed migrant farmers to get full ownership rights, enabling them to convert their existing free leasehold forest land clearings to a '*pattayam*' (a land deed)-based ownership.

The Migrants and Their Memories

The town of Upputhara in the Idukki district can be called the migrant's gateway to the highlands. Two famous Malayalam books on the Idukki migration, *Highranginte Kudiyettacharithram* and *Malanadinte Ithihasam* mention how a group of adventurous and hardworking young people first migrated to the highlands.

Their journey was barefoot through a forest full of stones, worms, thorns, and cobras. They had only the bare necessities of life and travelled in groups of eight to ten. Their goal was to encroach on the land and they lived with acquaintances until they built their shelter. The shelter was built high up on trees to protect them from wildlife at night. They used bamboo ladders to climb up to it. Their meals consisted of kappa, porridge, packed and dried channayila and kuvayila. Other food items included wild honey, wild boar, boiled squash, green bananas, and wild pumpkin.

The migrants faced many direct challenges, such as malaria, cholera, and smallpox, which were prevalent in the area. They also had to deal with worms, which were a common problem. Despite the odds, they persevered and found ways to treat their illnesses. For instance, they used a root wrapped in jaggery to treat malaria, an effective remedy. Food shortages were the immediate cause of the migrations for these people. Population growth, land fragmentation, and heavy dependence on cash crops, which experienced wide fluctuations, may also have been underlying factors.

In the 1940s and 1950s, most of these migrants were Syrian Christians from Kottayam, Thodupuzha, Kothamangalam, and Muvattupuzha regions. This was because of the custom of weekly

community gatherings at their home churches. At these get-togethers, recent migrants were able to make others aware of the potential of migration and take advantage of it. Most migrants were small cultivators who settled and planted paddy, tapioca, rubber, and spices.

Memory-keepers and Memories

The following memories of six individuals were recorded in January and February 2024. The conversations covered their memories of migration, from the impetus to travel and settle down to the creation of a community. Each of them had migrated to the highlands between 1930 and 1970, providing a record of hope and hardship, of perseverance and adaptation.

1. Paily Kuriakose Peediyikal, the eldest at 105, offers a glimpse into the distant past, recalling his arrival in the region around 1940. His narrative spans decades of transformation, from forested landscapes to cultivated fields, marked by government interventions and communal efforts to build essential infrastructure.
2. Varghese A.M. (89) and his wife Sisily Varghese (75) recount their migration from Kothamangalam to Adimali in 1971, driven by aspirations for a better life—their struggles with agriculture, eventual transition to small-scale entrepreneurship, and finally building a home together.
3. Thomas Kaattachara, now 81, reflects on his relocation to Adimali in 1964 in search of better opportunities and agricultural land. His journey encapsulates the evolving landscape of the region and his struggles to make a life in a new place.
4. Leelama Palamalayil, 72, shares her childhood memories of migration to Idukki as a twelve-year-old in 1960 and highlights the emotional toll of

leaving behind familiar surroundings for an uncertain future.

5. Mariyakutty Chenoottumalil, 66, vividly recalls her family's journey to Adimali in the 1960s, when they settled in Kathipara. The arduous trek, lack of infrastructure, and struggle to establish themselves in a new environment are etched in her memory.
6. George, a 60-year-old born at Cheruthoni, Idukki taluk, recounts his family's conversations and migration memories from around 1930, when they were one of the earliest land buyers. They faced the daunting task of clearing wild lands for cultivation, relying on traditional methods and encountering wildlife disturbed by the settled human presence.

Migration as an Opportunity

Varghese A.M. recalls why he migrated to Adimali around 1971:

I came from Kothamangalam, where I was born and brought up. Before migrating here, I was working in the catering department of the Southern Railways at Madras. However, the position was not permanent, and I found it difficult to get new opportunities. I was married, and a suitable job that provided a decent living was necessary. That was when I heard of the opportunities in the high ranges from my brother.

Leelama has an entirely different story of the migration to Cheruthoni in Idukki taluk:

My parents were living in a joint family, and it was difficult to live in such a small house with five–six children. By that time, agricultural productivity declined. So, my father went to the high ranges in search of a job and land for farming.

Challenges and New Experiences

Migration is not possible without facing challenges and new experiences; it consists of a journey, a new life, and new work that one needs to find and adjust to. George from Idukki recalls his memories of what he had heard from his parents about the time they migrated:

Around 1900, life was much more challenging due to the lack of modern infrastructure we take for granted today. Cars and proper roads were not available, which made travelling a time-consuming and arduous task. People had to rely on small, self-made roads, and it was not uncommon for them to walk for hours or even days to reach their desired destination.

Even Mariakutty has a similar experience to share:

My mother used to tell us about the difficult journey they had to take when they first came here. There was only one bus, and they had to walk for almost three–four hours carrying us, the children, and other household items. There was no proper road; only small mud paths to walk on, created by the men in the group. My parents suffered a lot after migrating here. It was a completely new place with new people, and it was difficult to find jobs and start farming from scratch. My mother had to join my father in farming, so we could have meals daily. We struggled to adjust to the conditions here, but as time moved on, it became normal to us, and now this is our land.

On having the same conversation with Thomas, his experience was way more different than the others:

In 1964, I arrived in Adimali, a small town in Idukki district of Kerala, India. At that time, I purchased land in this area because of the scarcity of water

in the place where I was born and brought up, which was Kothamangalam. At first, I bought land in Mudiya, which was a few kilometres from Adimali. However, there was no access to the road there, and after a few years, I sold that land and came to Adimali and bought land around 1970. When we came here in 1964, we had to travel by bus, and I still remember the private bus named 'Lilly' that we used to take. The fare was only 1.50 paise from Kothamangalam to Adimali, which is in stark contrast to the current fare of around 70 rupees. We had to walk for about an hour to get to the bus that was going to Adimali/Munnar.

Almost 90% of the population who migrated to the high range region engaged in farming, either cultivating in the plot that they brought or buying plots for *pattayam* (a type of land deed issued by the government to an individual or organisation). After having a conversation with almost six farmers, I came to know that from the early 1920s to 1960s, lemon grass was one of the high-yielding products in the high-range region. It was easy to cultivate and the distillation process was time-consuming, but profitable.

“The primary cultivation back then was *kandam krishi* (cultivation of various crops at a time on a small plot of land), lemongrass, ginger, paddy cultivation, *viripu krishi* (kharif), tapioca, and other food for daily supplies,” says Mariyakutty.

Paily Kuriakose, 105-years-old, with a smile on his face, reminisced about his early 20s when he migrated to Idukki:

Around 1940, when I first arrived in this area, it was a completely different place. The lush forests were abundant with *illi* (*Bambusa bambos*), *eatta* (*Ochlandra travancorica* or reed bamboo), and other flora, and the region was home to many wild elephants.



Figure 2: Illi and *Eata* Forest (Bamboo forest).
Image: 1956 *Central Travancore*, 2019

Farming was the primary occupation at that time. We used to cultivate wheat, and to make space for it, we cleared the forests using fire. The soil here was incredibly fertile, fresh, and ideal for cultivation, even though the climate was harsh with heavy rainfall and mist. After a while, tapioca and rubber cultivation became prominent here, which led to the decline of paddy and ginger cultivation. The crops were sold in nearby markets, which were later taken to towns such as Ernakulam, Kottayam, and Tamilnadu. The road to Adimali was built during Sir CP's time, maybe around the 1930s, and the only means of transportation back then was the Pankajam bus from Aluva to Munnar or the Swaraj bus from Kottayam to Munnar.

Building a community was one of the biggest challenges while migrating—from building schools to hospitals to starting a new life. As Paily said:

There were no churches or schools when I first arrived at Adimali. We had to build everything from scratch, including a small church made with eatta and other natural materials. We were responsible for building other amenities, such as a hospital and school. I came to Adimali in search of a job, but there were no opportunities. I heard that if we went up the high range, like Munnar, we could own land and make money. So, I, along with a few friends, travelled to Munnar in

search of land, jobs, and money. But due to natural calamities and wild animal interactions, we finally settled in Adimali. Travelling was tough back then, and when I had enough money, I would travel by bus. Otherwise, I walked for hours or days.

Apart from building schools and hospitals, setting up a house was also an important part of building a community. Mariakutty, youngest of her family, recalls how from a small hut she and her family built a house together:

When we first came here, my parents built a small hut with hay, and after a few years, we shifted to a small hut that was used for the distillation of lemongrass, which was the main cultivation that yielded high profits back then. After many years of hard work and struggle, my parents, brothers, along with some workers, built a small mud house.

But Varghese and Sisily Varghese had a different experience of building their house:

So, in search of jobs and a better living, I, along with my wife, came to Adimali and tried agriculture, which was common at the time. But it didn't work as planned, so I had to look for other jobs. With the help of my brother, I set up a small steel plates-business here in the middle of Adimali town. It was not successful at the start; so, after 1.5 years, I brought my wife Sisily also here. After coming here, she cultivated paddy, ginger, and so on. While I managed the shop, she managed the farming. For almost 10 years, the struggle was real. We stayed in a rental house for about four-five years. After that, we built a house and life came back to normal.

Human-Wildlife Interaction

In the words of Thomas:

Back then, there was not much interaction like today between animals and people because there was so much land for them to roam freely. Even the wild elephants were not as aggressive back then. Sometimes wild animals come out of the forest land, which makes farming difficult; but in the old days people knew how to tackle the situation and protect the land from them.

George, who was born and raised in Idukki, has a different take on the migration as someone who has heard the experience from his parents and classmates:

At one point, there was a significant boost in Kerala's economic situation due to migration. People who farmed their lands migrated to a new area where the soil was uncultivated. The first group of migrants cultivated the new land, lived off the yield for a year, and then returned to sell their produce in the town below Idukki, making the region a trade centre. Every migration was a gruelling experience, as people had to leave their land and families behind and move to a new area. They had to find land and adopt new methods to produce crops without knowing the outcome. In the beginning, it was typically the men of the family who went first. They built huts above the trees, as the region had many wild animals at the time. They stayed there for a while until they got used to the local environment.



Figure 2: Tree hut in Idukki. Image: 1956 Central Travancore, 2019

Idukki is famous for the presence of the double curvature Arch Dam, the second tallest one in the country, which is part of the Idukki Hydro Electric Project valleys.

George (60-years-old), Cheruthoni, Idukki taluk remembered:

After the 1930s, migration happened every year due to different reasons such as projects, floods, droughts, and so on, until the construction of the Idukki Dam. As a result, the migration kept on increasing, and people kept adapting to new challenges.

Memories Contextualise Migration Theory

Migration is viewed as an important livelihood strategy for people across the world hoping to acquire or accumulate household wealth that brings a positive change in their life situation. The concept and process of migration consist of demographic, socio-cultural, political, and economic factors in the area of both departure and destination and a set of intervening opportunities and obstacles. In that sense, the theorisation of migration provides a complete spectrum of explanations and imbibe nuances of migration. A large-scale Malayali colonisation of the Kerala highlands, particularly by Syrian Christians of central Travancore, began during the 1940s. This migration is described here as an economic migration, where people see the destination as a place where they will have better prospects and lives for their families.

Migration memories to Idukki offer insights into how individuals or communities negotiate their identities in new environments. Unfolding stories of settlement include adapting language, traditions, customs, and social practices. Understanding how migrants maintain, adapt, or evolve their cultural identity in a new setting enriches existing theories on cultural adaptation and identity formation.

“There were no churches or schools when I first arrived at Adimali. We had to build everything from scratch, including a small church, a hospital and a school.”

-Paily Kuriakose (105-years-old)
Cheruthoni, Idukki taluk

Examining these dynamics can contribute to existing theories on migration as an economic phenomenon and elucidate the role of social networks and support systems in facilitating or hindering the migration process.

It can shed light on the socio-economic factors driving migration patterns, including push and pull factors such as unemployment, poverty, or the lure of better jobs and living standards.

“The first group of migrants cultivated the new land, lived off the yield for a year, and then returned to sell their produce in the town below Idukki, making the region a trade centre

-George (60-years-old), Cheruthoni,
Idukki Taluk.

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