

Communication Design Project 2

THISPLACE

A narrative on the forced displacement
of an indigenous community



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Acknowledgement

My biggest thanks goes out to the indigenous people of India, the Adivasis, for their resilience and wisdom which has finally begun to make its way into contemporary design discourse. I am beyond grateful to be part, however small, of this moment of contemplation in design and in the words of Prof. Wanda Dalla Costa, the “global reawakening of indigenous design thinking”.

In one of our early discussions, Prof. Raja Mohanty mentioned that what was essential was to continuously learn and grow as an individual through our pursuit. And at the end of this project I have learned and grown so much, yet my biggest take-away is how unending this process of learning and growth is. I thank him for his guidance and introducing me to several new ways to look at the world.

I am humbled by the generosity of Mooppan Chellappan (Tribal Leader Chellappan) of the Oorali Tribe. Thankful to Bobby, without whom a key interview would not have been possible, Jijo Varghese and my mother Sinimol George, who helped with translation, and my dearest friend Joe Koshy for the clever title and patient listening.

Lastly, I would like to thank my father T S Issac and the many times he has reminisced about his childhood, which was the main inspiration behind my deep interest in the cultures of my ancestors,

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People travelling on the Grand Trunk Road by foot 1910, Source: Chota Nagpore, a little-known province of the empire Published in 1910, Author: F.B. Bradley-Birt, I.C.S, F.R.G.S. Licence: Public Domain of India

1. Introduction

1.1 Forced Displacement of Adivasis

1.2 Motivation

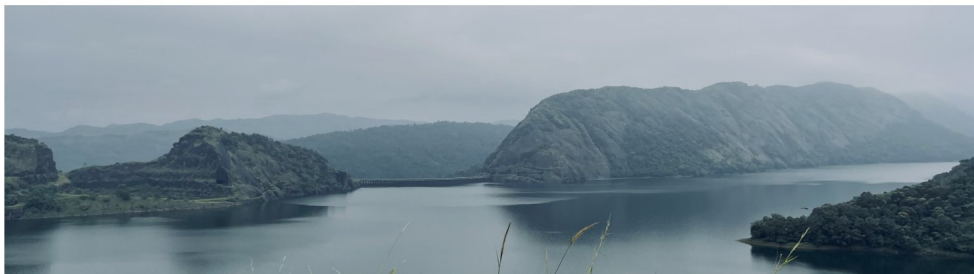
1.3 Objectives

1.1 Forced Displacement of Adivasis

Forced Displacement or Forced Migration is an **involuntary or coerced** movement of a person or people away from their home or home region.¹ But the UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) puts it more accurately as (people or communities) displaced as **a result of persecution, conflict, generalized violence or human rights violations.**²

Forced displacement is not a concept that is alien to the Adivasis, the indigenous communities of India. In fact, having to deal with land alienation, being outcasted - treated as literal aliens in rehabilitated land, loss of access to and control over forests, is still very prevalent in our country to this day.

One of the major causes of enforced migration are development and resource extraction projects. These vulnerable adivasi populations who have lived in the forests are traditionally dependent on forest resources for their subsistence³ and displacement impacts their life and health and most importantly **uproots their identities**, much like the trees of their forests are in the case of many these development projects.



Idukki Dam reservoir, Kulamavu, 2022, Reshma Issac

1.2 Motivation

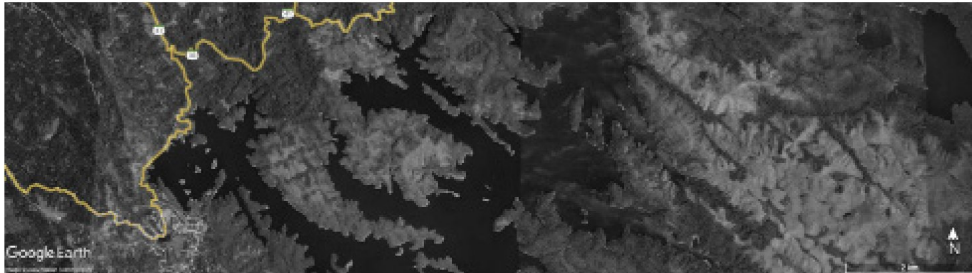
Displacing people and destroying their identity has physiological and psychological effects that continue to affect them generations later. Even at the global level, indigenous communities have been exploited and continue to be exploited and the rich knowledge of the land, the climate, the ecosystem that they possess is dismissed and destroyed.

As a designer, a storyteller, and most importantly as an Adivasi wom-

an, I realise the great responsibility I am endowed with in holding this fragile narrative of my people. As American historian Howard Zinn rightfully puts it, conventional history is often written by the pen of the victor who seized the right of narration with might⁴. In telling the stories that could not be told before, I am hoping to capture the essence of thousands of other stories that cannot be told yet.

1.3 Objectives

- To use storytelling as a tool to enable people to reflect on their position on aspects such as privilege, development, industrialization, access to resources, and marginalization.
- To weave a story through time while ensuring authenticity runs through every detail by working closely with those whose stories are to be told

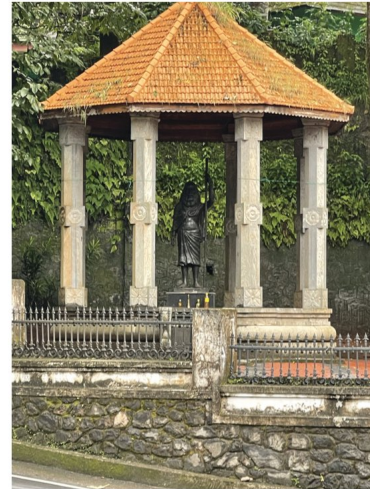


Idukki Dam reservoir, Google Earth

2. Understanding Context

2.1 Idukki Dam

2.2 The Mala Arayan and Urali Tribes



A memorial of Chemban Kolumban, Idukki, 2022, Reshma Issac

2.1 Idukki Dam

- Idukki is one of the 14 districts in the Indian state of Kerala. Idukki district lies amid the Cardamom Hills of Western Ghats in Kerala. The Periyar river, the longest river and the river with the most discharge potential in Kerala cuts across the landscapes of Idukki.
- The Idukki Dam is a double curvature Arch dam constructed across the river in a narrow gorge between two granite hills locally known as **Kuravan** and **Kurathi**.
- The dam was constructed and is operated by the Kerala State Electricity Board (KSEB).
- The construction of the dam commenced in **30 April 1969**.
- Commercial operation of the power station was commissioned on **12 February 1976** by the then Prime Minister Smt. Indira Gandhi.

2

Legend has it that an **Adivasi tribal leader, Chemban Kolumban**, in 1922 had joined the team of the Malankara Estate superintendent W.J. John and his friend on a hunting trip in Idukki and lead them to the Kuruvan and Kurathi hills.

In 1932, W.J. John submitted a report to the Government of Travancore on the possibility of constructing a dam at Idukki between these hills for power generation.

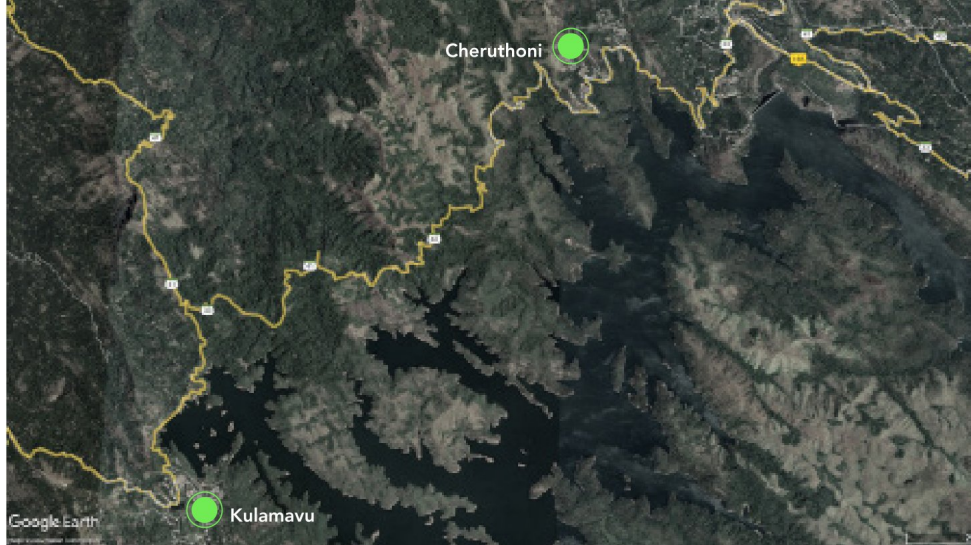


Mooppan Chellappan,
Nadukaani, 2022, Reshma Issac

2.2 The Mala Arayan and Urali Tribes

- The Mala Arayans are an indigenous group that once occupied (and still continue to occupy to some extent) the hills of the Idukki district.
- They were an agriculturist community and were one of the Adivasi groups that were forced to migrate and were rehabilitated across the state of Kerala before construction began on the Cheruthoni-Idukki dams.
- About 55% of them converted to Hinduism and 45% to Christianity (by Christian missionary Henry Baker). This enabled a majority of them to have access to contemporary education and have now more or less assimilated into mainstream society.

- The Urali tribe is yet another adivasi group that were majorly affected and faced enforced displacement due to the hydro-electric power project at Idukki.
- The Uralis still continue to dominate the Idukki landscape as many of them reoccupied areas near the dam.
- They continue to practice their ancestral religious practices and customs to this day



3. Primary Research

Primary research involved me visiting the towns in and around the Idukki dam such as Kulamavu, Cheruthoni, and Nadukaani which still has a significant population of Mala Arayans and Uralis. The people interviewed involved the tribal chief of the Urali tribe who experienced displacement and its effects first hand, adivasi who grew up in resettled areas, and those who migrated into these areas during dam construction as they found business opportunities at the time.

The participants interviewed were asked to narrate their early recollections of the events that went down before, during, and after the construction of the dam and the mass displacement. They were also asked about their views on development and if they viewed the project as having brought development.

What emerged as a result of these interviews were **three broad perspectives or personas** based on who was asked.



The Outsider

- Is an immigrant, a businessman
- Describes changes to adivasi society as development, calls the adivasi "A New Man"
- Talks about history in terms of trade and exchange
- Believes the incentives provided by the government as compensation satisfies the adivasis
- Recommends developmental projects as it generates employment

The Child

- Belongs to a generation that grew up after being displaced
- Had access to education growing up due to religious conversion
- Employed in various public and private sector jobs
- Looks at displacement as having greatly improved / developed people's lifestyles
- Shame in associating self as adivasi or as coming from a 'primitive community'

The Displaced

- Experienced forced displacement firsthand
- Talks about how his community got fragmented post displacement
- Didn't have access to resources that would have helped with handling the compensation offered
- Increasing debts, went from being resource owners to facing resource deprivation
- Lives on the fringes of the forest as they have become dependent on the outside

4. What is development?



KSEB Idukki Power Station, Moolamattam, 2022, Reshma Issac

“**Development is invariably a form of change**, but not all forms of change can be termed as development. **There are forms of change that may disadvantage communities and thus, lead not to development, but to deprivation**”

“In the language of social exclusion, this is a process of adverse inclusion that has largely negative results when compared to the state of exclusion”

Dev Nathan, Virginius Xaxa
(Social Exclusion & Adverse Inclusion: The development and Deprivation of Adivasis in India)

We look at indigenous lifestyles as primitive

The Western Model of **development through industrialization** as realised by nationalist leaders post independence imposes ‘market value’ over all other values

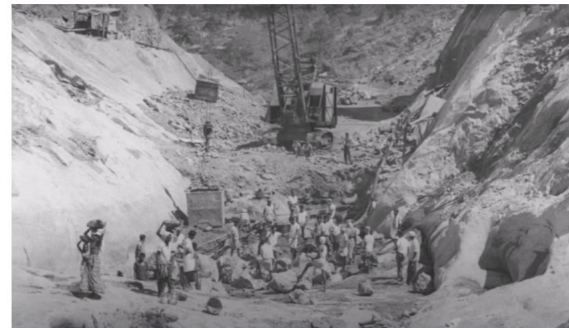
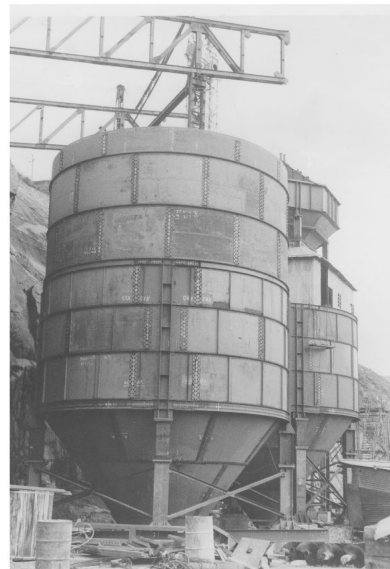
Does large scale industrialization really lead to people’s well-being as a whole?

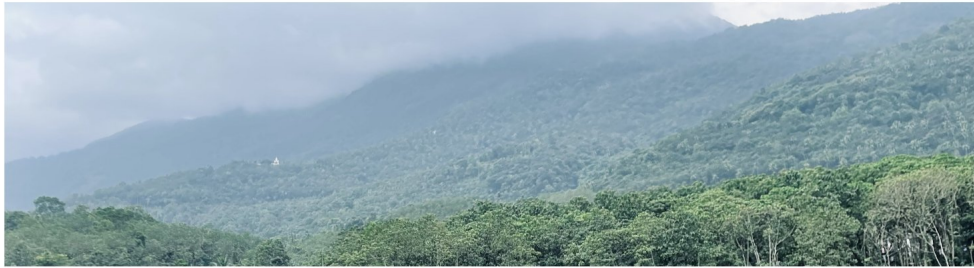
‘Mass production’ over ‘production by the masses’

“... industrialization - which has little to do with the ‘industries’ necessary for fulfilling people’s needs and ensuring self-sufficiency of communities that Gandhi’s vision incorporates - enslaves a country to foreign-based companies and governments, on the one hand, and replicates this slavery within the country, on the other.”

Fleix Padel, Samarendra Das
(Out of this Earth: East India Adivasis and the Aluminium Cartel)

5. Archival Photographs of the Dam Construction, Source: KSEB





The Western Ghats, Thodupuzha District, 2022, Reshma Issac

6. Insights



There are broadly two distinct worldviews - the mainstream, euro-centric worldview and the indigenous worldview. And when applied to development practices in the Indian context, there is the Nehruvian and the Gandhian. The Gandhian perspective on development looks at 'industrialisation' as the production by the masses over mass production. This view aligns with the indigenous worldview which prioritises the collective over the individual.

As designers, and as human beings first, we have to realise that human beings aren't separate from the world that we occupy and are deeply interconnected to the ecological systems that we find ourselves in, and that we are capable of reawakening such design thinking rooted in the indigenous worldview, often discredited by contemporary knowledge systems as inferior and primitive.

We can and have to take steps to relinquish the current western settler model of looking at the world and the ways in which it affects design practice and process, especially in a country such as ours that still continues to adopt the language and the methods of the coloniser, decades post independence.

The knowledge systems that we already possess, enriched by thousands of years of wisdom, and the ones waiting to be revealed to us through the unavoidable interaction with contemporary knowledge systems can be leveraged in service of new problems.

7. Why a Graphic Novel?

Challenges

One of the main objectives of the project was to capture a story with events that happened across time because often, stories of marginalisation go back and forth in time. It almost always has a deep past and most certainly future implications for the marginalised, all of which has to be thought of in the present.

Solutioning

One way to capture this was in a graphic novel. To keep it engaging for the reader it was decided to introduce elements of fiction and whimsicality. This would allow for events such as time travel and entities ungoverned by mortality to engage with mortal beings such as ourselves.

A big part of adivasi culture involves belief systems that consider objects and geological features often dismissed as inanimate and lifeless, such as hills or rocks, as being full of life and a part of our living system that requires continuous care and fostering. A god, or a guardian, resides in everything and is deserving of respect, in these indigenous cultures. The graphic novel attempts to make this a key element that drives the storyline forward.

A brief summary of the story

The story is set in the past, in a territory in southern India, where a dam construction project is well on its way. The protagonist is a teenage girl who is the daughter of one of the engineers overseeing the project (and it is implied that she is someone who has privilege and thus access to resources). She sometimes accompanies her father to the construction site, and on one such visit she follows a firefly that catches her eye into the surrounding forest. In the forest she happens upon a guardian spirit who befriends her and reveals to her the richness and the fragility of the forest and its inhabitants. She revisits this forest spirit several times in the story, and each time the spirit takes on a different form - he is a child when the protagonist first interacts with him but as the story moves along he turns into an elder and takes her into the future to give her a glimpse of the fate of the forest because of the dam construction.

A note on the protagonist

The protagonist is not a saviour. She exists as a mere observer of events. But what sets her apart is that she is someone who is able to tap into the innate human quality of 'empathy' which each of us is endowed with.

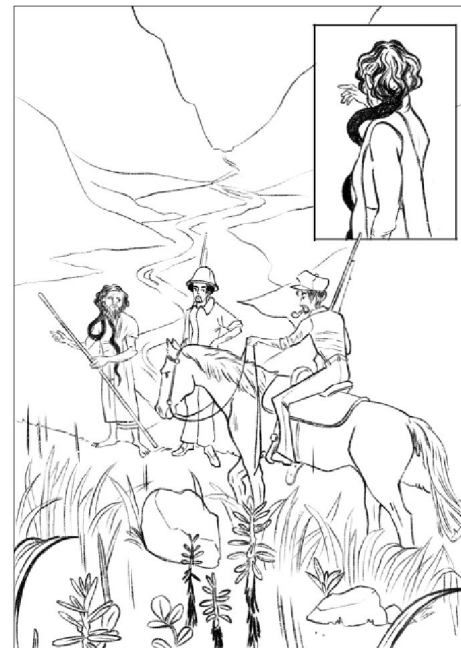
The story strives to enable thinking in the direction, that it is vital for those of us in positions of privilege and unconstrained access to resources to make room for the voices of the marginalised. It is expected that readers of the graphic novel might find themselves in the position of the protagonist and hopefully give them space to contemplate and reflect on where they stand, and what they can do about their location on the privilege ladder.

8. A Note on the Title THISPLACE

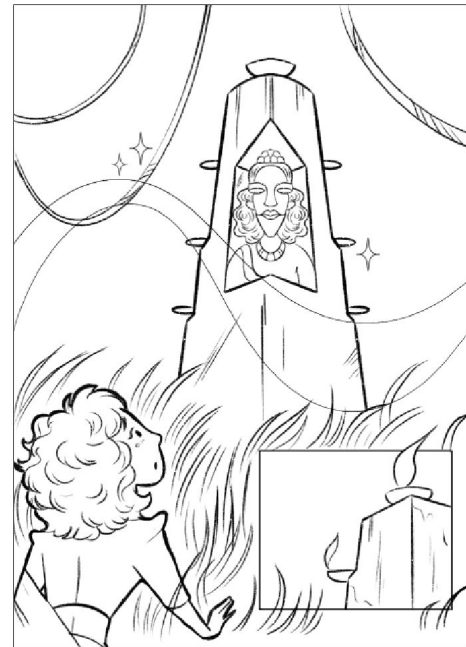
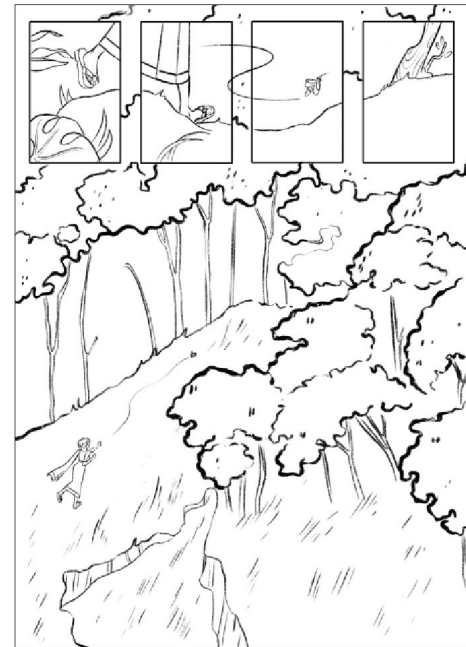
'Thisplace' is a play on the words 'displace' and 'This place'. The play on words tries to capture the distinct meanings. One, and the more obvious of the two, is that of the forced displacement faced by adivasis due to exploitative and extractive development projects. The other meaning, that of the words 'This place', is a nod to the sentiments of the people who faced displacement to whom **the place** belonged to, and of the narrative of the graphic novel revolving around a specific ethno-geography.

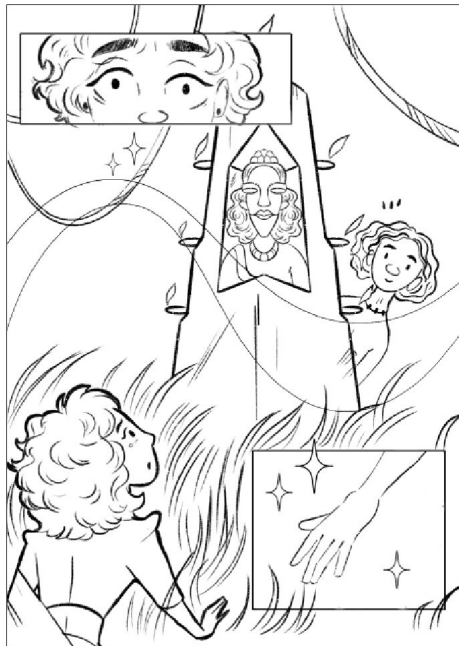
9. Illustrations

The first 10 pages, in the order that they appear in the graphic novel









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