

No bridge too far (Clockwise from right) Salim Ali's picture of his wife, Tehmina, on the footboard; bringing down timber; the bridge across Karappara River; and the tramway in full view ■ SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT



■ SARASWATHY NAGARAJAN

"In this region of heavy rainfall and humid atmosphere, large quantities of teakwood, rosewood and ebony are found. Forest tramways built for lumber and passenger transport carry the produce of the forest to the marketing centres. This is the only tramway of its kind in India, a marvel of engineering.

Thus goes the commentary in a clipped British accent, describing visuals of a black-and-white short made in the mid-1940s for a newsreel, Indian News Parade, then screened in cinemas before the film.

It is perhaps the only existing film on the famous Cochin State Forest Tramway that once ran across Parambikulam Tiger Reserve in Kerala, a part of the Nelliampathy-Anamalai sub unit of the Western Ghats, surrounded by forests in Kerala and Tamil Nadu.

The tramway has come into notice again after wildlife photographer and filmmaker Suresh Elamon was given the link to the reel by railway historian Devan Varma, while he was making a film on the Reserve.

"Although the station for the loading point at Chinnar and a major part of the nearly 80-kilometre line was submerged in the 1960s when the Parambikulam Dam was completed, many crumbling bridges, culverts and parts of the track still exist," says Suresh. "The Parambikulam Tiger Reserve came into existence in 2010, but the Forest Department used to conduct Tramway Trek, a two-day guided walk till 2013. As the area became the core of the tiger reserve, forest officials wanted to ensure that the area remained undisturbed without becoming a tourist trail."

Tracking the origins of the tramway leads one to the story of logging, in this

verdant region of the Western Ghats. In the 19th Century British officers noticed the presence of abundant teak in the forests. Realising the commercial value of this treasure trove in lumber-starved Britain, they began exploiting the forests to build railways and ships.

The origin story

However, transportation of the lumber from the deep forest to nearby ports was an arduous task. In those days, the lumber was cut and slipped down into the river from Top Slip in the Anamalai range. In fact, Top Slip derived its name from this 'slipping down' of huge logs of wood. However, the river could play truant when it was not in full flow.

On the suggestion of JC Kolhoff, the first Conservator of Forests, Cochin, Rama Varma XV, ruler of the erstwhile kingdom of Cochin, hired British experts to lay the foundation of the tramway. Alwar Chetty, a Forest Officer from Madras appointed as special advisor to

Rama Varma XV, implemented the tramway under his watch.

"Work on the tramway began in 1901," says Devan Varma. "Haldwell, a British forest engineer trekked the deep forests, studied the feasibility of a tramway and drew up the alignment for the tramway. In 1901, RE Haffield, a British tramway expert, was appointed by the Cochin Maharaja. With the help of the tribal people, especially the Kadar, they cleared the forest, laid the tracks, carried the equipment and made the tramway a reality. On October 3, 1905, the tramway was inaugurated by the then Madras Governor Sir Arthur Oliver Villiers Russeli."

The tramway had 254 bridges and culverts, five sets of inclines, 70 wagons and saloons. To keep it running, there were stations, telephones, cottages for staff and dispensaries set up in this difficult terrain that began from Chinnar at 2,500 metres above sea level and came down to Chalakudy in Thrissur at about

A short film clip on the Cochin State Forest Tramway in Parambikulam Tiger Reserve revives memories of the 'engineering marvel,' once used to ferry lumber



Chugging back in TIME



56 metres altitude. Wood was burnt to fuel the engine.

The rich produce of the forests was brought to Chalakudy and from there to the port in Kochi. Varma explains that the tramway significantly increased the revenue of the Cochin kingdom and was used for the development of the Cochin harbour.

In the late 1920s, the tramway fell into disuse; it was no longer a profitable venture. It was dismantled in 1963.

The Kadar, Muthuvar, Malasar and Mala Malasar are some of the indigenous tribal people in this region of the Western Ghats. It was predominantly members of the Kadar tribe who had worked on clearing the forest and carrying the equipment for the tramway.

Ponnukutty, a member of the Kadar tribe residing at Kuriarkutty, recalls travelling in the tramway as her family were working with it.

"I dropped out from school after three years. As a girl of eight or nine, we

used to go with our elders to the forest to collect turmeric, honey, cane, cardamom and so on. The forest produce was given to a *mattakada* (barter shop) in our settlement. In turn, we were given rice, provisions, clothes etc from the same shop. From the collection centre, forest produce was taken on the tramway to the market in Chalakudy. Many in our tribe were given employment on the tramway and the forest department. Some of us still draw the pension that they were given," says the septugenarian.

Suresh says that when birder Salim Ali came to erstwhile Travancore for the first Travancore Bird Survey in 1933, he travelled to Parambikulam in the tramway with his wife, Tehmina. They stayed in a cottage at Kuriarkutty. There is a photograph of Tehmina on the footboard of the tram, taken by Salim Ali. There are also descriptive accounts of his trips aboard the tramway and the picturesque scenery it traversed.