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The Indian Coastline ♦ 'Jungle Folk'

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of the people and culture



The Indian Coastline • 'Jungle Folk'

Cover: Spinifex and cassarina shoot
at dawn, Gahirmatha Beach, Orissa
Photograph: Joanna Van Gruisen

Next month ...

PORTRAIT OF A PAINTER
ORCHIDS
HEADDRESS

ENVIRONMENT

6

Fringe Benefits: The Indian Coastline

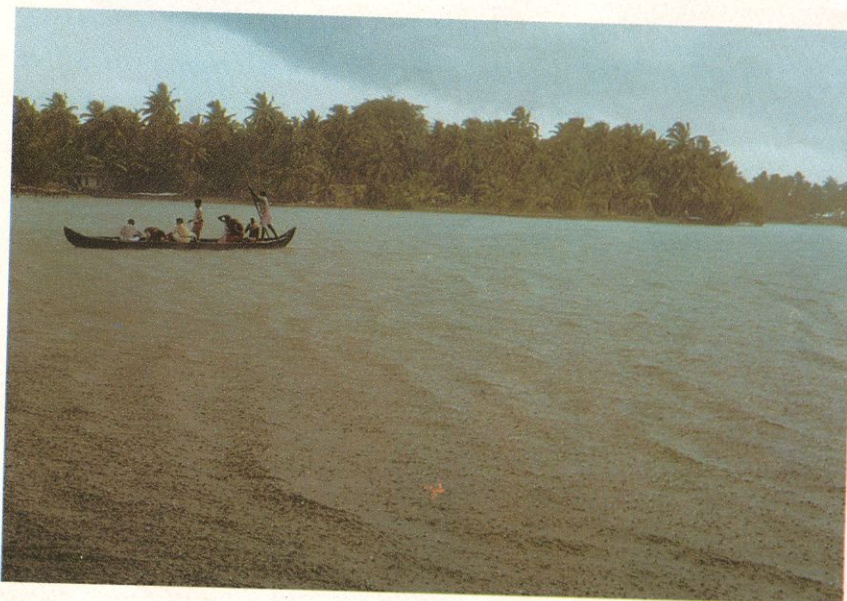


Coasts, with their special geographic and cultural features, have always been important to man. **Vivek Menon** travels along the Indian coastline, from the mouth of the River Indus, along the Arabian Sea, up the Coromandel Coast to finally end his journey at the mouth of the Ganges

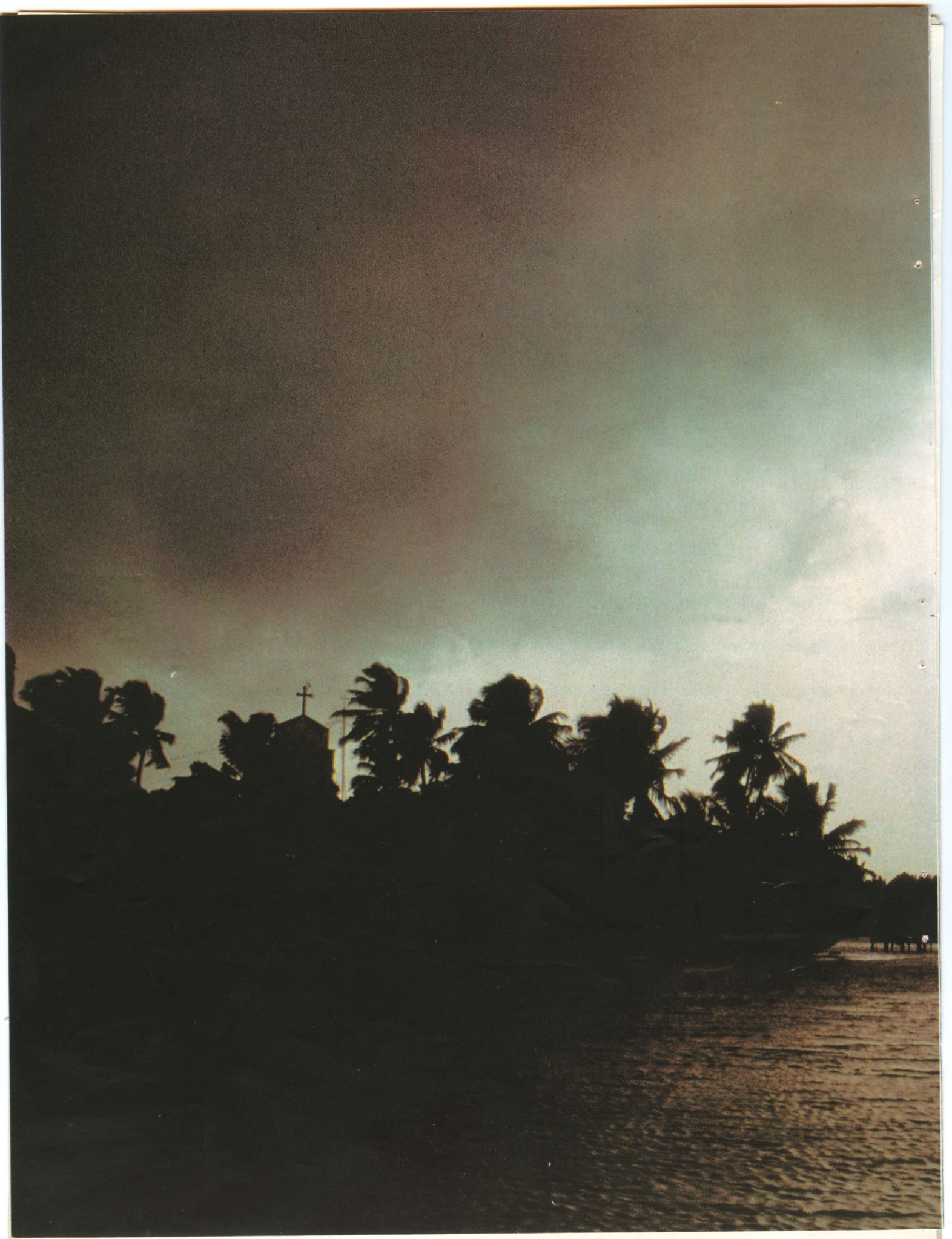
TRAVEL

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Soaked in the Rain



To fully experience the majestic beauty of the rain, one must travel to Kerala where the southwest monsoon first makes its appearance. **Nihal S Mathur** relates his adventures in the Land of the Monsoon



TRAVEL

Soaked in the Rain

The southwest monsoon, so crucial to us in India, makes its dramatic entry in Kerala. The rains are the harbingers of prosperity and good fortune, sometimes of disaster and grief. From a balcony in a seaside hotel in Cannanore, Nihal S Mathur quietly witnesses the spectacular arrival of the southwest monsoon and experiences its power and fury in his subsequent travels across Kerala



The sea, the sky and the rain became one dark and ominous entity. There was roar of the elements that was truly frightening. Momentarily, I panicked! It's the deluge! The waters are taking over! But luckily, no such thing happened.

We, in India, look to Kerala to receive its first shower to declare the onset of the monsoon throughout the country. This coastal state is the first to receive the bounty of the southwest monsoon and also the last to be touched by it as it leaves the subcontinent. Drawn over a period of six months, from June to November, I thought the rains surely must be special for the Malayali. But I was to be surprised. Most people in Kerala were indifferent. What *mazha* or rain was I talking about anyway? Did I know that Kerala was the Land of the Monsoon? If it were not the rains of the southwest monsoon, then they were the northeast ones! And just as there were the pre-monsoon ones in the hot season, there were the post-monsoon ones in the dry season. So what can one say about the rains in Kerala? Sometimes good, sometimes bad. Rain, like a spouse, was a constant companion, without which one could not do!

But I could certainly do without it, my friends in Delhi declared. Besides, it is an old story. There is a Penguin travelogue, a coffee table picture book, a National Geographic cover story, a BBC documentary film and hordes of other articles in newspapers and magazines. 'But my story concerns only Kerala! I protested. It was only my good Malayali friends who urged me on saying 'Just go' and one day, my editor added, 'And get drenched!'

And so I did! On the very first day of my arrival, in Alleppy. Though not entirely by accident, I got caught in a shower between the beach and the club house, one evening in late June. I was dripping wet by the time I got to the shelter of the club bar and a shot of rum in hot water. But more than the drink, I realised that what I really needed in Kerala was an umbrella!

So, on the second day, I found myself outside the St George Umbrella Mart in downtown Alleppy. There, beside the entrance, sat a young man writing names on the inside of umbrellas, using a paint brush and indelible silver ink, under the scrutiny of the purchasers. As I stood there, I could well imagine that in a society where umbrellas were an indispensable part of one's apparel and where one umbrella looked like another, it was necessary to have ownership clearly spelt out to avoid disputes or swaps! I promptly bought mine and for a fee of rupees two, got my name written along with graphics of a coconut tree and two sea birds!

The store, however, was crowded and the proprietor was a busy man, what with the 'season' in full swing. I met his son Davis Thayil, who told me that they sold umbrellas in the wholesale business right through the year but retail sales boomed only when the southwest monsoon arrived. During the peak months of June and July, they sold nearly 1.5 lakh rupees worth of umbrellas per day! In August, sales drop dramatically as the rains slacken, picking up marginally during October-November, when the rains intensified once again.

This was big business the rains brought to just one product and one company. The overall umbrella industry is estimated around thirty crores, employing nearly five thousand people. But this is a figure for the organised sector only. It would be impossible to assess the number of people who find part-time employment as the umbrella repairers one sees sitting along pavements in busy intersections in every small town and city in Kerala. And what about the young man sitting outside painting names? Mugandhan, as I came to know, wrote names on approximately four hundred umbrellas per day during the peak season earning twenty four thousand rupees in a month! Well, that's good business for the man on the street! Thank you, Rains!

There is indeed a lot for which Kerala should thank the bountiful rains it receives. For truly, the story of the rains in Kerala begins in the hot and dry months of March, April and May. In this period of rising temperatures, Kerala experiences drought like conditions when water levels in the reservoirs upstream fall sharply, leading to power cuts in the cities and the industry. Kerala's rivers and streams become a trickle, grossly insufficient for agriculture which awaits the rains. Besides, village tanks, ponds and wells begin to dry up, leading to rationing of water supply in some cities. Barring the evergreen patches in the highlands, the dry deciduous forests of the hills, turn leafless and brown. In the midlands, the paddy fields lie fallow and even the coconut palm looks a fallow shade of green! In the low lying backwaters, navigation in the waterways becomes problematic as water levels recede. Now is the time when Kerala experiences a real taste of tropical heat and humidity and people begin to wish for the rains.

Starting as early as March and continuing into April, thunder-showers, often accompanied by violent winds, begin to strike coastal Kerala occasionally in the late evenings and nights. In the month of May, the frequency of such visitations increases. These are the pre-monsoon showers that release a subtle fragrance as it makes contact with dry earth. There is a popular Malayali belief that even snakes emerge from the underground to savour the specially scented air!



Left:
*Demonstrating in the rain on
MG Road, Ernakulam*

Right:
Krishnattam class, Guruvayoor

Towards the end of May, these thundershowers imperceptibly merge with the southwest monsoon, which one day is officially declared to have 'Arrived!' by the meteorological office in Delhi. This is indeed a national event, front paged and celebrated across the country as likely dates are calculated as to when the rains would arrive in Bombay, Bhopal, Baroda or Bhatinda. But the declaration is not news for the Malayali for whom the show has already begun!

From now onwards, the rain is a continuous affair, sometimes falling unabated for three to four days, often a week, or even ten days at a stretch at some places. For a Malayali, this is the Kalavarsham or timely seasonal rain. According to the Kerala calendar, it is also known as Edavampathy, since it begins in the middle of the Malayali month of Edavam. However you choose to call it, it rains morning, noon and night, either in a fine drizzle or a thick downpour!

Experiencing such showers for the first time, I was paralysed by the non-stop rain in Cochin. Born and brought up in the desert, I instinctively holed up in my hotel room to await clear weather before going out to chase my stories. But the rain did not let up for the third consecutive day and I felt ill, cold and damp. My soggy laundry, festooned around my room, refused to dry, adding to my discomfort. But from my fourth floor window, I saw the world moving along, the dense traffic on M G Road below uninterrupted by the rain. For the Malayali, it was I guess, business as usual. Clearly, I needed a change in attitude. But all I could do was read, write a bit and wander on the wet streets in search of restaurants announcing 'Meals Ready'. I was depressed. Bob Dylan and Jesudas on the Sony did

not help. I was in bed most of the time, watching and listening to the pouring rain.

Unable to sleep one night I suddenly became conscious of the rhythmic drumming of the rain. And then, I noticed the subtle changes in beat and tempo as the rain waxed and waned on the corrugated shed outside my door. Much later, speaking to Kamala Das about it, I got an incredulous response 'Music of the rain?' she asked and then exclaimed 'It is nothing short of an orchestra!' She then went on to describe how different the rain sounds as it approaches Cochin Bay from the open sea, and the changes in its tones as it strikes the canopies of the coconut trees or crashes on masonry walls, wooden structures and metal surfaces. Henceforth, I tried fine tuning my ear to catch the tonal differences whenever it rained!

Although the sky was threateningly overcast with dense nimbus clouds, it was not raining the day I went to the historic meteorological observatory in Trivandrum, established in 1837. I met VK Gangadharan, the officiating director, who told me that this centre had records of the arrival of the southwest monsoon since 1885! From more than hundred years of data, he pointed out that the monsoon had arrived as early as 18 May in 1918 and 1955 and as late as 11 June in 1972. The records also show 1 June as the day of arrival eight times, making it the most favoured day for the onset of the monsoon.

The first of June also happens to be the day when the schools all over Kerala reopen after a summer recess. Isn't that ill-timed? I would have thought the rains would have been a deterrent for parents to send their



children to school. But as I saw for myself, the rain was no dampener as far as school attendance was concerned. Throughout my stay in Kerala during the rainy season, I saw enthusiastic bands of young boys and girls neatly turned out in their uniforms, with school bags aslung, going to and fro, from home to school, whether in the countryside or in the city suburbs. Often barefoot! Well, here was one reason for Kerala's proud claim to hundred percent literacy!

In Tellicherry, KV Bala, a father of two school going kids told me that for the last five years he had been noticing that Indra, the Vedic God of Rain, made it a point to pour only when he saw children in their uniforms going to schools! This particular season, schools for some reason reopened a week late, on 7 June, and coincidentally, even the meteorological office declared the monsoon delayed by a week! Bala added, 'Actually, Indra loves kids and kids love the rain!'

If there was any season especially designed for children in Kerala — it was undoubtedly the rains! With water everywhere, there was the sheer joy of getting wet, besides splashing, swimming or simply wading through knee deep waters just for the heck of it! In the flooded Kuttanad or the backwaters near Kottayam, I saw a child fishing from the window of his room! No wonder, contemporary writers and poets of Kerala find rain a metaphor to recollect the magic of a lost childhood.

I became a bit of a child when one twilight in Vypeen, I tried, though quite unsuccessfully, to catch fireflies that swarmed a prawn breeding pond. Of course I had seen fireflies before, but never so many switching on and off. It was absolutely bewitching, if that's the word! Dr Easa, a biologist, told me that the most incredible sight he had ever seen was a huge cloud-like swarm of fireflies in the Parambikulam National Park. Fellow scientist and entomologist, Dr RV Varma at Peechi, said that the onset of the southwest monsoon truly triggers an explosion in the insect world. First to take wing are the termites, presaging the onslaught of the other insects. After that, such strange winged creatures begin to make forced landings into your life that you thank God for keeping them swatatable in size. Otherwise reality could turn into science fiction! But after the first month of rains, Varma explains, the larger insect life substantially drops because of the fungal and microbe life that now begin to take over. There is a boom in bird life and the wild elephants come out of the deep forests because water is available in plentiful everywhere.

Visually speaking, it was the kingdom of plants that blossomed delightfully with the southwest monsoon in Kerala. Whether it was a fern, a grass or a creeper, a plant or a tree — everything turned over a new leaf with renewed vigour and growth, in shades of glistening green. Though I must confess, I personally liked the tone and texture of the moss that grew on damp and shaded boundary walls of most homes. It is

indeed the largesse of the rains that gives this coastal state the befitting epithet of Green Kerala!

And nothing in Kerala can be greener than paddy! With the onset of the southwest monsoon, the farmer begins work on the *punja* crop. Travelling right across the state, from Kasargod to Trivandrum, I saw row upon row of men and women, wearing 'Chinese' straw hats, working in the paddy fields, in the company of white egrets. Besides paddy, this is also the time for banana and coconut plantations, the two fruits intrinsic to the economy and culture of Kerala.

And what happens to the spice trade during the rains? After all, it was the discovery of the southwest monsoon winds by Hippalus in 45 AD that brought foreign ships, braving violent seas and rain, to the shores of Kerala in pursuit of the spices. Mr Neelkanthan Thampy of the Spice Board, told me in his Ernakulam office, that as far as the production of the spices was concerned, the rain was an absolutely critical factor. In olden times, he explained, the spices grew wild in this tropical paradise and were collected by tribals who exchanged them with traders on the coast. But today, there is systematic farming of these spices and although there was artificial irrigation, the rains were necessary for a good crop. In the mid 1980s, there were at least three consecutive seasons of inadequate rainfall resulting in a sharp fall in spice production. However, as far as the export was concerned, Mr Neelkanthan said, rain had no bearing

in these days of modern shipping and integrated world markets.

On the domestic front, the local fish markets were virtually closed as much by rains as by the controversy between the traditional and mechanised fishing operations. At the heart of the problem was the issue of fishing during the southwest monsoon which is the breeding season. The rough seas made it impossible for traditional fishermen with their country boats to go out to the sea, enforcing a holiday. To tide over this period of scarcity, Nature provided some relief through a unique phenomena, colloquially called *chagara*, which occurs only during the rainy season right along the coast of Kerala. Scientifically understood as mud banks, these *chagaras* are calm and turbid patches of sea that form unexpectedly, for uncertain periods of time, in small semi-circular shapes, measuring several kilometres along the shore. When big breakers crash on either side, the fish rush into the still waters, providing a bonanza for the traditional fishermen.

But those were the good old days when the rains brought respite from a hard life at sea. The advent of the trawler changed the old order, as these mechanised boats can go anytime, barring a few exceptionally bad days. It was natural that the traditional fishermen blamed the mechanised boat owners for destroying fish breeding grounds resulting in poor catches when the season opened for them in



Right:

Traditional boatmen protesting in Cochin harbour

Below left:

Ramayana masa, Trivandrum



September. The mechanised sector on the other hand, quoted scientific studies to show that this was not true. The issue they said, was hopelessly politicised and compounded by a propaganda of misinformation. I was, however, informed that this is going to be fiercely debated when the case comes up for hearing in the Supreme Court.

'But by and large, the southwest monsoon provides a period of enforced rest for the industry in general, whether it is traditional or technological', said Mr Menon of Malabar Building Products. 'While industrial activity may slow down, the rains play a major role in rejuvenating the economy as such. In essence, Mr Menon was reiterating Kerala's hoary tradition that declared the rainy months of June and July as one of rest and recuperation. Now was the time to concentrate on the body and build physical health. While the rich got their oil massages, the poor looked after their diet. A middle class housewife in Calicut told me that during this period her maid drank a small cup of clarified butter whipped with a raw egg every night before she went to sleep!

No wonder, this time of the year is also called the Aushudhi Maasa or the month of taking medicines. Even the famous temple elephants of Kerala take a break during the rains. In the Punnathur Kota, a home for forty elephants of the Guruvayoor temple, I saw the elephants being given special diets of boiled rice mixed with traditional ayurvedic and modern medicines. Dr Pannicker in Trichur, told me this was the *suka chikitsa* or restorative treatment, that is given to the elephants after a busy season of festivals in the summers.

The southwest monsoon also puts a full stop to the *poorams* or the temple festivals for which Kerala is famous. With the *poorams* are associated the performing arts, most of which are essentially linked to the temple. I looked through the calendar of Kerala's cultural events prepared by the School of Drama in Calicut. There were no performing art events listed under June, and in July there were just a few. Clearly, there was no 'Dancing In The Rain!' 'This is the time for practice and tuning up the body' said PC Elayath, the superintendent of the school for Krishnattam, a classical dance form linked to the temple of Guruvayoor. On his recommendation, I got up early next morning at 4 am and walked the two kilometres in pouring rain to see the dancers exercise, in nothing more than a loin cloth, their bodies glistening with oil. While young students were practicing their steps under the watchful eyes of their seniors, other members of the troupe were lying prostrate on the floor. The instructors, standing next to them, massaged their muscles with their feet. MP Parameswara, the chief instructor, told me that this regimen would continue till the festival of Onam, after which they would start regular performances in September.

But it was still 16 July and I read a news item saying this day marked the beginning of the Malayali month of Karkidakam. Traditionally this is considered an inauspicious month, as the continuous rains made it impossible to have marriages, engagement ceremonies or house-warming parties. People were forced by the rains to stay indoors. Consequently, Karkidakam was also termed as the Ramayana Masaa or the month to read the holy scriptures. However, in my travels

through Kerala during this month, I only came across one family where the evening lamp was lit and the Ramayana actually being read by a senior member of the family, while the others sat and listened! Obviously, this was a tradition of the past; a lot had changed.

Along with the culture of Kerala, the times have also affected the pattern of the rains! Tagazhi, author of Kerala's contemporary classic novel *Chimeen*, laments the fact that the rains are no longer the same — a sentiment shared by many. A common complaint was that nowadays there was not enough of rain, as compared to the good old days. The question was not merely of volume and intensity but also, the element of uncertainty. For instance, they pointed out, the southwest monsoon behaved erratically, either coming late or going early, or peaking at the wrong time, as it did in 1989 during the Onam festivities. Rampant deforestation and the construction of dams in the forested highlands were some of the reasons ascribed. Whether they were regional or global ecological factors, what was definite was that the rains were playing truant. And yes! This was still the 'inauspiciously rainy' month of Karkidakam and I already had four straight days full of sunshine. So where had the rain suddenly disappeared?

Meteorologically speaking, this was termed as the break monsoon condition. Just as June and July were the phase of onset and establishment, the following two months of August and September were the prevalence of the southwest monsoon when it considerably slowed down in activity. Hence, this is a period of little rain when many boat racing events, synonymous with Kerala, take place. But once upon a time, this lull in the rains provided an opportunity for the spice ships to set sail for their distant ports, laden with their cargoes, leaving behind a fortune in gold and silver coins with the local traders. Besides, during this time the farmer harvested the paddy and banana crops. With the wealth from the spice trade and agricultural surplus in hand, it was natural for people to celebrate the bounty of the rains. Therefore, it is not surprising at all to find that Kerala's biggest and most important festival Onam is in the middle of this six month wet season.

But there was not even a hint of rain that bright sunny morning I went drifting in the backwaters. It was mid September and while crossing the Vembanad, I climbed up on the tin roof of the boat to take in the wide open vistas of this lake that sometimes looks like the sea. In the late afternoon, a spectacular cumulus appeared, the top touching the heavens in an explosive mushroom. A little later, just when one least expected it, a drizzle began, almost from nowhere, to



*Elephants at Punmathur Kota,
Guruvayoor*

surprise an open boat load of people midstream.

Caught without my umbrella, I was also intercepted by the rain one night on my way back to my hotel from a late show. So it seems that just when one was getting used to the somewhat clear weather in September, the rains began to spurt back to life in October. The Malayali calls this the Thulavarsham, or the rain coming in the month of Thulam. Lasting for the two months of October and November, this is the retreating phase of the southwest monsoon when it finally leaves the Indian subcontinent in the first week of December. But not before it has showered another 50 cms of rain. Compared to the 200 cms of Kalvarsham, the first phase, this may seem paltry but



has greater potential in creating flood havoc, said Meghanathan, the information officer at the Kerala Public Relations Office in Trivandrum.

So how many people were killed or rendered homeless by the rains in Kerala, I asked 'The Lord of Clouds', as Meghanathan literally translates! In addition to the annual flooding of certain areas, there are also landslides in the hilly regions. Besides, the monsoon seas lashed at the coastal lands each season, causing soil erosion and much damage to the poor fishing community. And the roads! What a battering they get during the monsoon. A bus ride was a nightmare not only because the potholed road kept you jumping in the seat but also because maniacs, disguised as drivers,

drove recklessly in the blinding rain. Kerala has the highest incidence of road accidents in India. Are there more accidents during the rains?

Quite expectedly, Meghanathan had no such answers to give me. Well then, could he perhaps tell me how the government prepared to meet the challenge of the rains? Meghanathan elaborated that it all began with the pre-monsoon thundershowers when the government owned radio and TV issued early warnings to the fishermen to get off the ocean, as winds upto 100 kmph began to sweep the seas. To manage natural calamities, the government over the years, had codified procedures in a manual to help district administrators to act swiftly — whether it was to



Water lilies and rain drops
on water

arrange relief camps for floods victims or distribute free rations or provide medical care. All other departments of the government also geared up to take anticipatory steps to deal with the southwest monsoon. 'But despite all the technological advances and preparations by the state to cope with the rains', Mr Jai Kumar, secretary of information with the Government of Kerala, told me that 'Nature finally catches everybody off guard and in the end, always wins'.

With the coming of the Thulavarsham, my journey in Kerala approaches its end in the first week of October. I knew I was going to miss the drama of the withdrawal of the southwest monsoon, as the rain now comes with much lightning and thunder, accompanied by squalls. Another interesting feature of Thulavarsham, I was told, is that maximum rainfall occurs during late nights and early mornings. This is the Ratri Mazha, or the night-time rain that often comes with the mad mystic energy of a demented young woman. With the dark clouds her open black hair, she weeps and howls with the whipping winds and rain or breaks into fits of meaningless laughter with its bursts of lightning and thunder. This was the poetic imagery of Sugatha Kumari, a well known poet, environmentalist and social worker, who I had gone to meet in her home in Trivandrum. While I drank cups of hot coffee, she painted other equally vivid characters of the *mazha* in Kerala, perhaps reflecting her own moods. To begin with, there was Amma Mazha, the rain that is compassionate as a mother who satisfies hunger and

thirst. Consider then her contradiction, the Durga Mazha or the furious incessant rain that leaves death and destruction in its wake. But bringing the freshness of a little girl into one's life is the Kalli Mazha or the playful rain that rushes in, shakes the trees, scatters the flowers, laughs and runs away. Then there is the Chinungi Mazha or the rain that promises to come in a big way but holds back her charms with a few scattering showers like a grumbling, sulking, adolescent girl! Whatever the epithet, rain for Sugadha was always a female form and the one I identified most was the sensuous rain that she called the Premika Mazha.

Yes, I had fallen in love. I am not too sure whether it was with the woman I met on the Malabar Express. Or was it with the land I travelled through — of coconut trees and *karimeen* curry, of elephants and waterlilies, of seascapes and boats. Or perhaps, it was with the people of Kerala, quick to smile and nod their heads in a friendly gesture. I don't know. But whatever it was, it was definitely soaked in the rain of Kerala.

NIHAL S MATHUR IS A FREELANCE WRITER, PHOTOGRAPHER AND FILMMAKER

PHOTOGRAPHS BY NIHAL S MATHUR