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Road too far: For 35km, forest dept makes Kanthalloor villagers take 100km detour to Vattavada



Swathi P Ajith

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Kundala–Kanthalloor road blocked by the Forest Department. Photo: Special Arrangement

For Suresh K, a 58-year-old resident in Kanthalloor, Idukki, what was once a 35-km ride to a family wedding in neighbouring Vattavada panchayat has become a 100-km ordeal now. “Earlier, we could reach Vattavada in about 35km through Kundala Dam in 1.5 hours,” he says. “Now we have to travel nearly 100km and over 4.5 hours via Munnar,” he adds.

Also, hospital visit to Munnar means 60km journey. It used to be 40km earlier. “There is always traffic and sometimes patients don’t make it in time,” says Suresh.

At the centre of the dispute is a pre-Independence era route. This is the Kundala-Kanthalloor road, or the Sethuparvathipuram Road, built in 1938 to connect remote hill villages with Munnar’s markets. The 35-km stretch once carried farm produce, wedding parties, and emergency patients from Kanthalloor to Munnar and Vattavada. Today, the road lies behind forest-department gates and is closed for what villagers call a bureaucratic misreading of law.

The controversy dates back to 2003. A Supreme Court-appointed Central Empowered Committee had ordered a halt to “widening” or “new construction” on the road to protect forest cover. The forest department, however, treated it as a traffic ban and sealed the road. “This is an inter-state PWD road,” says P T Thankachan, president of the Kanthalloor panchayat. “The committee never said the road must be closed. Yet it was shut completely,” he says.

The disputed stretch is only about 800 metres long but cuts through the Anamudi Shola National Park and brings it under the Forest Conservation Act, 1980. Check-posts set up by the forest department now stand at Perumala and Mathappu. This forces villagers to take detours via Munnar to reach Vattavada. Earlier, they could use the Kanthalloor-Kundala Dam-Top Station route to reach Vattavada.

“If this continues, we will have no choice but to go on a hunger strike,” warns Thankachan. Also, Kanthalloor villagers have family connections with the neighbouring Vattavada panchayat, and to attend functions like weddings, they have to travel to Munnar first and then to Vattavada now, making it a 100km journey. “Trade, marriages, even social ties have been crippled by the forest department’s action,” adds Thankachan.

Years of petitions and representations have failed to reopen the road. After the villagers moved the Human Rights Commission it had sought answers to a few queries from the forest department but they still remain unanswered.

Meanwhile, a case against 13 panchayat members for alleged violations of forest law drags on in Devikulam Munsiff Court since 2023. All this while, local development projects, including a proposed rest area for travellers, have been blocked.

Over the years, the panchayat has filed petitions, written letters, and approached several authorities, but nothing has changed. “If the department claims the road is part of the Shola National Park, then it must officially inform the village and the panchayat offices. That has never been done,” adds Thankachan.

The road closure has also affected the tribal families living near the forest. “There are four or five tribal families who depend on this road,” says Suresh.

Ananthapadmanabhan, assistant wildlife warden of the Shola National Park, has declined to comment on the issue, citing that the matter is sub judice. For Kanthalloor’s residents, the closed gate symbolises more than lost convenience. “We respect the forest,” says Suresh, looking at the barricaded track. “But this road is not a luxury, it is survival,” he adds.



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