

# THE

# IDIKKI

# EPIC

as a Rs 626-million project is now expected to cost more than Rs. 850 million. The estimate had already risen to Rs. 682 million by 1967 when Canada advanced a \$ 19.5-million loan for powerhouse and switchyard installations (a \$5.25 million grant in 1964 took care of engineering services and construction equipment). But it was the saga of strikes that overtook Idikki in '68 and '69 that turned a five-year project into a nine-year one.

So look at the bright side:

Allowing for strike interruptions, the Idikki dam has been built as fast as it would have been in Canada. The credit goes to Hindustan Construction Company which handled both the Idikki and Cheruthoni dams, and to the Indian labourer. The Canadians' key contribution has been in the application of computers to the shaping of the arch dam and in sharing this know-how with their hosts. They have been working themselves out of a job at Idikki.

In terms of technology, at least. But that's only one of the Canadian roles. Another is to take responsibility. In the nature of government, a KSEB engineer cannot deviate from tender specifications without getting the green light from his audit department in Trivandrum. That takes time. So when a KSEB engineer and his Canadian consultant agree there must be changes, the Canadian sends him a note to that affect by way of support. As the party responsible for the design of the project the consultant has the authority to depart from it.

**P**RESTIGE is at stake. "You must have the guts to change the wording of your own tender specification," Rock Poulin, my escort, told me, "in order to allow them to do

something different. But we're not expected to say just what they want us to say. And if I can't convince you, there's something wrong with my argument".

The other function the Canadians fulfil is to act as a ginger-group. They chivvy their KSEB colleagues with complaints: poor coordination of activities around the intake, late start on erection of steel liners in penstock number 1, failure to award contracts in time, late completion of designs, and so on. They make recommendations for remedial action.

Which shows why the delays that have dogged the Idikki project cannot be blamed on one party alone. Government, contractors and unions all have a stake in the project and all have set their seal on it in different ways. It is not only the workers, haunted by insecurity, nor the fragmented unions, nor the KSEB engineers bound by government procedures, nor the backsliding contractors, but all of them together that have transformed Idikki from a slick paper project to a battleground for social forces.

Any society that aspires to raise itself above the peasantry faces the same challenge. To command resources of the order involved at Idikki is to launch on an economic revolution. The longterm effects of that gesture—the industrialization made possible by Idikki's 780 megawatt output and the irrigation of 150,000 acres downstream—belong to the later stages of the campaign. The front line now is at the dam sites, in the cavern where India's biggest underground powerhouse is shaping up, in the power shafts and the other farflung elements in this staggering conception.