

**SILENT VALLEY MOVEMENT IN KERALA: A STUDY  
ON THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF KERALA SASTRA  
SAHITYA PARISHAD**

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**Abstract**

The Silent Valley Movement is the tale of a battle against the state to protect a pristine evergreen rainforest in Kerala, South India. The battle for the now famous Silent Valley raged for over ten years and involved thousands of people. When Kerala State Electricity Board announced plans to begin the construction of a 240 MW Hydro Electric Project over the Kunthipuzha river flowing through the Palakkad and Malappuram Districts in 1976, it triggered a wave of protests across the state. Soon, it became India's first major environmental movement resulting in far reaching changes. The Protesters were spear-headed by the Kerala Sastra Sahitya Parishad, a voluntary organization to promote scientific temperament, produced hard facts. The movement was undertaken by the environmentalists, poets, artists, academics, thousands of students and the media against the proposed hydroelectric dam across Kunthipuzha in the Western Ghats. The agitation led to the establishment of the 89 sq.km tropical rainforest National Park in 1984 after abandoning the Hydel Project. The present paper is an attempt to trace out the role of different mediums which contributed to the success of the Silent Valley Movement with special reference to the contributions of the Kerala Sastra Sahitya Parishad.

Key Words: Environmental Movement, Non Violent Movement, Kerala Sasthra Sahithya Parishad, Silent Valley Movement.

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## Introduction

Silent Valley is situated in Palghat district and contains India's substantial sketch of tropical evergreen forest. It is the only vestige of near virgin forest in the entire Western Ghats mountain range. Known as Sairandhry Forests based on characters of the Mahabharata, the scientific and environmental importance of the region was first recognized by British Botanists who named it Silent Valley in their records. The park is known for its rich forest ecosystems with a large number of specially adapted plants and animals. It has at least 108 varieties of orchids and has a rich repository of medicinal plants; 80 percent of those have listed in the standard pharmacopoeias and 66 percent of the aromatic plants used worldwide grow there. At least 21 flowering plants discovered in the valley are new to science<sup>1</sup>. Although the Silent Valley National Park is famous for its lion tailed macaques, it has all the large mammals found in this part of the Western Ghats including tiger, leopard, wild dog, sloth bear and lesser predators like smaller cats, otters and mongooses. Herbivorous animals including elephant, gaur, sambar, barking deer, Nilgiri Tahr, Chevrotain and wild boar are also found. Four species of primates, many chiropterans, rodents and squirrels including the giant squirrel and two species of flying squirrels are common in park.

The name Silent Valley came to the public attention when the Save Silent Valley Movement, stirred by the zeal of NGOs, environmentalists, poets, artists, academics, thousands of students and media against the proposed hydro electric project across the pristine stream called "Kunthipuzha" in the Western Ghats. It enjoyed medial limelight for several years. That was the beginning of an intense debate on whether to opt for the conservation of nature or to promote development and it ultimately resulted in the first major milestone to evolve a national policy towards environmental issues.

## Background of the Movement

In 1929, an enterprising British Engineer identified the Silent Valley as one of the best potential sites in Kerala for the Hydro electric Project. In 1951, the Kerala Government undertook the first survey for the Hydroelectric Project, and in 1973, the Indian Planning Commission approved the Dam Project. Ironically, it was the over anxious KSEB which contributed to the saving of this valley by rushing to the press with its condemnation of the

report, and thus drawing the attention of environmentalists to an area which might otherwise, like many others, have been quietly destroyed<sup>ii</sup>. The protagonists for the Silent Valley Hydroelectric Project (SVHP) argued for its implementation for several reasons that the project situated in one of Kerala's poorest regions, was an economic necessity for Kerala, generating 500 million units of energy, irrigating 10,000 ha of land and providing employment for 3000 people during its construction phase and also proclaimed that the silent valley dam area was an ideal location for the hydroelectric project.

Almost all the political parties of Kerala demanded the implementation of the project. On October 1976, a National Committee on Environment Planning and Co ordination (NCEPC) set up a task force, chaired by Zafar Futehally, to study the ecological problems that could be precipitated by the project. Work on the project is suspended pending the task force's impact analysis. Task Force recommend that the project be scrapped. However, it provided a loophole that stipulates that, if abandoning the project not possible, a series of safeguards should be implemented.

Unsurprisingly, the Kerala government opted to proceed with the project by promising to implement all safeguards. State argued that the area submerged by the dam is only 1022 hectares, of which 150 ha is grass lands. It also argued that only 10 percent of the ecosystem will be damaged, while ecological safeguards will protect the rest. An all party delegation met the Prime Minister Morarji Desai at New Delhi on April 7, 1978, to press for an early clearance of the SVHP. In his letter dated May 14, 1978, to P. K. Vasudevan Nair, the then Chief Minister of Kerala, gave conditional approval to continue the construction of a hydroelectric project in the Valley. To satisfy the Central Government, the State Government enacted "The Silent Valley Protected Area (Protection of Ecological Balance) Ordinance, 1978" (31 of 1978). This ordinance was repealed by the Kerala Legislature in March 1979 with the enactment of the Silent Valley Environmental Protection Act, "the Silent Valley Protected Area (Protection of Ecological Balance) Act, 1979". In the light of this legislation, the Prime Minister approved the SVHP in the May of the same year. The Government of Kerala also constituted the Silent Valley Environmental Monitoring Committee to coordinate and monitor the implementation of the provisions of the Act. The result is that the outcry against the Silent Valley Hydroelectric

Project- which started as a localized movement through individual and small group protests- transformed into a national and international movement.

### **Role of KSSP in Silent Valley Movement**

Kerala Sasthra Sahithya Parishad (KSSP) literally means The Kerala Forum for Science Literature. In fact it was founded in 1962 as a forum of science writers with the limited objective of publishing science literature in Malayalam, the local language, and popularizing science. However it was soon realized that mere publication of literature or taking science classes was not enough, if the blessings of science were to reach the common people. KSSP became convinced that at present a privileged minority was monopolizing the benefits of science and technology, and it results in their enrichment, at the expense of the majority. KSSP chose as its mission, the challenge of arming the people with the tools of science and technology so that they can reverse this process. Thus in 1972, KSSP decided to become a People's Science Movement and adopted "Science for Social Revolution" as its motto. Over these years, it has also expanded its fields of interests and activities to almost all fields of human endeavor. The KSSP is involved, broadly in three types of activities: educative, agitate and constructive, in areas like environment, health, education, energy, literacy, micro planning and development in general. In 1977, the issue was raised within the Kerala Sastra Sahitya Parishad (KSSP), a science for the people organisation in the state. During this period, the KSSP was actively campaigning against misconceived development projects of the government, environmental pollution by factories, occupational and labour health hazards, drug abuse, militarization of science and the danger of nuclear wars. KSSP took almost a year, at the organizational level, to arrive at a consensus to oppose the SVHP. In its annual convention of 1978, the KSSP adopted a resolution opposing the implementation of the SVHP (KSSP, The Silent Valley 1).

The Executive Committee of the KSSP was inspired, primarily through the persuasions of one of its members, Prof.M.K.Prasad, to undertake a "techno-economic-socio-political" assessment of the implications of the Silent Valley Project. The report produced by its multidisciplinary Task Force, consisting of a biologist, an electrical engineer, an economist and an agricultural scientist-cum-economist, provided a turning point in the Silent Valley Campaign. It exposed the undesirability of the project, not only on ecological grounds, but on technical,

economic and social grounds. More important, it convinced the 60-member Executive Committee of the KSSP to take up the fight to save the Silent Valley.

KSSP organized several civil resistance campaigns and campaigns were also organized by teacher student organizations. Eminent creative writers also joined the fight. Through poems and dramas, Stories and articles, speeches and poetry competitions they brought the message to Kerala's public, the most literate in India. The incessant struggle fought by KSSP and various groups taught the first lesson of environmentalism, ie, without protecting the nature we cannot protect ourselves. KSSP published and distributed several pamphlets and study reports on the issue. One of the most important pamphlets, "The Silent Valley Project: Parishad's Stand and Explanation"<sup>iii</sup> argues that "the Silent valley issue raised serious concerns such as people's attitude towards development, the conflict between various interest groups, the development of the Palghat-Malappuram districts, the provision of adequate energy to the Malabar region, and the electricity generating policies of the Kerala government".

KSSP faced many challenges from the Marxist Party itself; one of its foremost leaders E.Balanandan wrote in favour of the project, but denied the idea of Silent Valley as an "ecological paradise". Those who supported the hydroelectric project claimed that the project wouldn't do any harm to the rain forest; the area covered by the dam was "only" 830 hectares out of a total of 8952 hectares. Against this argument KSSP argued that "this attitude is like saying the size of the human heart is insignificant compared to the size of the whole body, and therefore the ruin of the heart will not affect the body"<sup>iv</sup>. The debates on the project, kept the movement active throughout the protest period and forced people to think in favour of the environment.

The KSSP's 7000-member- consisting of teachers, doctors, engineers, lawyers, scientists, agriculturists, trade union workers and others, all of whom were committed to taking sciences to the people as a tool for social uplift-were an invaluable weapon in the battle to save the Silent Valley. These members, and especially some of the leading intellectuals of the KSSP's Executive Committee, encouraged and participated in public debates in different parts of Kerala. The Youth, especially the college-going youth, were convinced. Through its unique annual Jatha- a 37-day marathon march from one end of Kerala to the other- KSSP members focussed on the effects of deforestation through traditional cultural media like dance, drama, poetry, music

etc. The Jatha covered 300 to 400 villages along its 6000 km route. A special 12-day Jatha was organized during April/May 1983, covering all districts of Kerala which still had forests. Signatures were collected from 2,00,000 people asking the Government of Kerala to declare a moratorium on all development projects in forested areas and to stop clear felling, especially on steep slopes. The press played a crucial role where literacy is high. Where a science –for-the-people movement as effective as the KSSP does not exist, environmentalists must take the trouble to convince other organizations working in the field of rural uplift to take up their cause.

### **Other Medias, Methods and Strategies**

In 1971-72, Steven Green, a scientist from New York Zoological Society, conducted study on primates, especially the lion-tailed macaque in Silent Valley. Green expressed concerns about the possible threats to the rare macaque from the project. Around the same time, herpetologist Rom Whitaker explored Silent Valley to study the snakes of the region. He wrote a letter to the Bombay Natural History Society about the need to conserve the valley. Reports like these alert other naturalists. Satish Chandran Nair with missionary zeal started movement to create awareness in academic circles through talks and slideshows. V.S.Vijayan of the Kerala Forest Research Institute studied on the impact of the Hydroelectric Project on the environment, and wrote to the authorities not to begin the project till the report is published. He is admonished and his report suppressed. Nature clubs sprang up all over Kerala under Prof. John Jacob. The General Assembly of the IUCN urged the government to conserve the undisturbed forest area. Many eminent people like Salim Ali, Madhav Gadgil, C.V. Radhakrishnan, M.S. Swaminathan, Subramaniam Swamy, Sitaram Kesari, Pilo Modi, Krishna Kant etc wrote to the Central Government requesting not to sanction the project. Institutions like BNHS and Geological Survey of India wanted the area to be declared a Natural Bioreserve. The Silent Valley Samrakshana Samithi and KSSP turned the campaign into a mass people's movement. In the media too, the fight for silent valley marked a distinct curve. Dr. M.S. Swaminathan, who was then Secretary for Agriculture, India, prepared a report highlighting the genetic wealth of the area and the desirability of postponing the project until this resource could be studied and tapped. Mr. E.M.S. Namboothirippad, Secretary of the powerful Communist Party of India (M) left the matter open for debate within the party having been convinced that it was not a blessing for the people of that area.

The co-ordination in strategy formulation and decentralization in action was the method adopted for powerful campaigning. Although Silent Valley groups sprang up spontaneously and independently in different parts of the country, a division of functions emerged. Groups of Kerala created public awareness in their respective areas, the Friends of Trees Unit in Kerala pursued the court case, the Society for Environmental Education in Kerala(SEEK) worked largely with children's groups. The Save Silent Valley Committee in Trivandrum, capital city of Kerala, provided a meeting point for important activists from different walks of life and from different political parties. The Save Silent Valley Committee in Bombay, the most active group outside Kerala, provided support to the efforts in Kerala especially through National Press.

Above all, Mrs.Indira Gandhi, who became the Prime Minister in 1980, played a critical role in asking the State Government to halt further work until the Central and State Governments could explore the implications of the proposed project and the alternatives that were available. In January 1981, bowing to the unrelenting public pressure, Indira Gandhi declared that the Silent Valley will be protected. A committee under the chairmanship of Prof.M.G.K.Menon was set up to look into the ecological implications of the project. In November, 1983, the Silent Valley was called off and in 1985, Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi formally inaugurated the Silent Valley National Park.

### Conclusion

The success of the Silent Valley Movement became an inspiration for similar movements, including Narmada Bachao Andolan and protests against the Tehri Dam. It can be rightly claimed that the Silent Valley project evoked global concern on rainforest destruction from various concerns of the world. It brought to the centre stage the issue of forest-river catchment protection and effected a quantum change in conservation concerns by replacing 'wildlife' with 'biodiversity'. The controversy and subsequent scientific studies spawned long-term monitoring of ecosystems resulting in the first biosphere reserve in India—the Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve. Coincidentally, the Ministry of Environment and Forests was born when the silent Valley controversy was raging. The issue attracted the world's attention to the Western Ghats and the exercise of identifying biodiversity hotspots for urgent conservation action got a fillip. Environment Impact Assessment became a routine procedure prior to sanctioning of mega-development Projects. The lessons from this inspiring and hard-fought campaign are still relevant today.

- <sup>i</sup> Agarwal, S.K.&P.S.Dubey, Environmental Controversies, New Delhi: APH Publishing Corporation, 2002, p.151.  
<sup>ii</sup> D.S.Variava, The Saving of the Silent Valley, p.356.  
<sup>iii</sup> Silent Valley Padhathi: Parishadinte Nilapadum Visadeekaranavum, KSSP, March 1980.  
<sup>iv</sup> Silent Valley Charcha(The Discussion on Silent Valley), a pamphlet published by KSSP in Malayalam.

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