

**ENVIRONMENTAL STUDIES**

# Roots of Environmentalism in Kerala: Examining the Silent Valley Movement 1973-1985

**Abdul Gafoor P.**

Assistant Professor, PG Department of History  
Govt. College, Malappuram  
Email: abdulgafoorpg850@gmail.com

## Abstract

The Silent Valley Movement in Kerala, South Western coastal state of India, was a conservation movement that aspired to preserve the Valley by protesting the proposed hydro-electric project in the Silent Valley area of Palakkad district of Kerala state. The protest against the proposed hydro-electric project came to be known as 'Save Silent Valley Movement'. It marked a new chapter in the environmental movement of the State. Numerous big and medium-sized mammal species, including two endangered endemic species and numerous more protected and endangered species, can be found in the Silent Valley and its surrounding woodlands. The development of the Hydel project was feared by the time's environmentalists and nature enthusiasts to have a negative effect on the area's big mammal populations and abundant vegetation. So a large scale movement started in the 1970s against the project. It was led by environmental activists, academicians, scientists and local communities of the state. The paper delves into the key role played by Kerala Sastra Sahitya Parishad (KSSP), a left-leaning organization, to provide a sound critique on the proposed project. The Movement efficaciously mobilized support from the entire nation that led to scraping of the Project and declaration of the Valley first as a protected area and finally a National Park. The paper highlights the significance of the Silent Valley Movement as a successful example of grassroots environmental activism in India.

**Key Words :** Environmentalism, Silent Valley, Silent Valley Hydro-electric Project (SVHEP), Save Silent Valley Movement, KSSP, Dr.M.K.Prasad.



## Introduction

The terms environmental history, environmentalism and wilderness had been widely discussing since the publication of Roderick Frazier Nash's magnum opus *Wilderness and American Mind* in 1967. Environmentalism has been considered as an organized social activity consciously directed towards promoting sustainable use of natural resources, halting environmental degradation or bringing about environmental restoration (Gadgil & Guha 1995, 98). Some Western scholars like Lester C. Thurow postulated environmental activities were involved only by the upper middle class of rich countries; he remarked thus: 'If you look at the countries that are interested in environmentalism, or at the individuals who support environmentalism within each country, one is struck by the extent to which environmentalism is an interest of the upper middle class. Poor countries and poor individuals simply aren't interested' (Thurow 2001,104). But the aforesaid statement of Thurow is not correspondence with the Indian scenario since India had witnessed umpteen numbers of environmental protests under the auspices of poor and hapless villagers who forced to tolerate the burden of development. Such a remarkable struggle for the protection of a sheen and lovely rainforest in the remote area of palakkad district of Kerala State, India, deserves special concern.

Kerala is a 38,855sq Km land strip situated between 8° 18' N and 12° 48'N latitudes and 74° 55'E and 77° 24' E longitudes on the south-western coast of peninsular India. It is a landscape distinct for the sandy, loamy plains with undulating tracts of red soil sandwiched by the forested Western Ghats on the east and over 780-km-long coast of the Arabian Sea on the west (Gurukkal & Varier 2018, 1). 'Kerala has been through the ages an integral part of the Indian subcontinent. Its history is part of the general history of India and its culture is one of the major streams that have enriched the composite culture of the country. At the same time kerala has the distinction of being an independent geographical and political entity from very early days. Its unique geographical position and peculiar physical features have invested kerala with a distinct individuality' (Menon 2019, 13). Blessed with forty four rivers, backwaters, evergreen forests, and a moderate climate, Kerala stands one of the best places to live in the subcontinent. At the same time the land has many ecological sensitive zones. The Silent Valley movement marked a significant turning point in kerala's environmental history. In the early 1970s, a small beautiful valley in Kerlala's Palakkad district, became the focal point of a ground breaking environmental movement that changed the course of the state's environmental history. This movement conspicuously marked the beginning of environmentalism



in Kerala. The movement also shaped the environmental policies of the state. The silent valley movement, named after the quaint silent valley region, was a grassroots campaign that brought together scientists, activists, and local communities. The aim was to protest the proposed construction of a hydro-electric dam in the valley. Academicians of the state played a pivotal role in highlighting the ecological impact of the proposed project.

### **Silent Valley**

The Mannarkkad Taluk in Kerala's Palakkad district is home to Silent Valley. The silent valley evergreen rain forest is thought to have existed for over 50 million years. The relative lack of *cicadas*, which often provide a characteristic sound in a forest setting, is thought to be the source of the name Silent Valley. The Silent Valley Reserve Forest covers 8,952 hectares in total. Three additional designated forest areas encircle the silent valley forest: 1) 8,000 hectares of New Amarambalam Reserve Forest; 2) 10,000 hectares of Kundaa Forest; and 3) 12,000 hectares of Attappadi Reserve Forest. Accordingly, this region has roughly 39,000 hectares of available reserve forest land (Swaminathan, 1979, 2). Since Silent Valley is said to be the sole remaining stronghold of evergreen vegetation in the Sahya Mountains, both nature enthusiasts and ardent academics are eager to learn more about this enchanted green haven. It is the focal point of the Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve and is protected to the north by the Nilgiri plateau and to the south by the Mannarkkad lowlands. In 2012, UNESCO designated Silent Valley a World Heritage Site. The Silent Valley boasts an incredible variety of plants and animals. Tigers, leopards, elephants, snakes, lion-tailed macaques, Malabar giant squirrels, and hundreds of insect species, including uncommon butterflies and moths, can all be found in this region. There have also been reports of the legendary Nilgiri Tahr (Keralatourism, 2024). All of the aforementioned plants and animals in the area should become extinct, according to the campaigners and nature enthusiasts who fiercely opposed the Silent Valley hydroelectric project.

### **Silent Valley Hydro-electric Project (SVHEP)**

The primary goal of the Silent Valley hydroelectric project was to expand Kerala State's electrical power supply. As early as 1921, the initial concept for a hydel project in this region was proposed. However, subsequent decisions and actions proceeded at low ebb. On February 15, 1973, the project was finally approved by the Planning Commission at an estimated cost of Rs. 24.88 crores. However, some technical concerns arose over the project's continued execution, including



the authority's emphasized ecological effect question. The National Committee on Environmental Planning and Coordination (NCEPC) requested in October 1976 that this project's progress be put on hold until a Task Force was established to conduct an ecological impact analysis. Against all odds, the Task Force strongly advocated for the project's abandonment; if this was not feasible, the Force also suggested that certain precautions and procedures be put in place for the project's execution. The Kerala government was prepared to adopt the recommendation to implement safeguards and moved forward with the required legislation.

The main socioeconomic advantages of SVHEP, as emphasized by the project's protagonists, are as follows: a) Generation of electricity by the installation of four 60MW units; the Kerala State Electricity Board estimates that without this additional power, the state of Kerala will not be able to meet its energy needs by 1982. b) 10,000 hectares in the districts of Malappuram and Palakkad will be irrigated with water from this project to grow an additional crop. c) The project would help create jobs and stimulate the economy in one of Kerala's less developed regions, as it may ultimately require an investment of 60 to 70 crores of rupees over six to seven years. Additionally, more than 3,000 people might be hired as part of the workforce during the construction phase; highlighted the glory of great job opportunity for the poor of the locality (Swaminathan 1979, 4).

The above mentioned justifications from the authorities gave much impetus to the votaries of the project. On the basis of these justifications for the project, a Silent Valley Scheme Protection Committee was established by local political figures. But at the same time there emerged a loud and persistent public clamour, especially from the academicians and social activists of the state, came in to being.

### **Beginning of a Historic Protest ('Save Silent Valley')**

The Silent Valley movement had been considered as the beginning of environmentalism in Kerala (Issac 1987, 271). The activists and nature lovers of the time had inspired from the global environmental movements and Chipko Andolan, a movement of Himalayan peasants against the clear-cutting of forests by timber contractors in the 1970s. The desire to save endangered animal species and their natural habitats was the driving force for global environmental initiatives; but the need for human survival gave rise to environmentalism in India, which aimed to promote sustainability and social justice. Current resource usage habits, according to movements like Chipko and Silent Valley, have harmed local communities and the environment. As Ramachandra Guha aptly remarks: 'the peasants saw their



forests being diverted by the state for commercial exploitation; pastoralists saw their grazing grounds taken over by factories and engineering colleges; tribals lost their lands and homes to hydro-electric projects; artisanal fisher folk were squeezed out by large trawlers' (Guha 2014, xii).

As indicated, the rationale for the construction of a dam in the silent valley area was to resolve the energy crisis of the state. The Silent Valley Hydro Electric Project (SVHEP), which was based on a dam across Kunthipuzha, (River *Kunthi*) was implemented in 1973 after the Kerala State Electricity Board (KSEB) proposed a 17 crore project for this purpose. It was after the publication of the KSEB about the implementation of the project by constructing a dam in the silent valley, that the movement "Save Silent Valley" started. The ecological view point expressed by large number of scientists, news papers, and enlightened organizations like the Kerala Sastra Sahitya Parshad attracts special mention. The main objections to the proposed project made by scientists and environmentalists are as follows: They contended that the Silent Valley Reserve Forest may be the last intact tropical rain forest in Kerala State and the Indian subcontinent. This region has some very unusual flora and wildlife, with 23 animal species identified, including three endangered species: tigers, lion-tailed macaques, and Nilgiri langurs. The potential effects of the hydroelectric project on the local fauna and flora have been thoroughly examined by the Kerala Forest Research Institute. Dr. M. Balakrishnan conducted extensive study about the ecological impact of the silent valley project and strongly opposed the plan. His article titled *The Larger Mammals and Their Endangered Habitats in the Silent Valley Forests of South India* aptly remarks: 'As the proposed Silent Valley hydro-electric requires extensive alteration or destruction of a little-disturbed ecosystem with an increase in the local human population, the effect of such a project on the ecosystem in general will be catastrophic because the Silent Valley is one of the very few remaining areas of isolated and undisturbed rain forest in India' (Balakrishnan 1984, 283). The protestors also highlighted threat of proposed plan that to displace thousands of people, submerge vast areas of lush forest, and endanger valley's unique biodiversity. They frequently convinced people that the dam would cause submerging massive tracts of superb natural forest. Most studies on the ecological impact of the proposed project definitely asserted the distinctiveness of the Silent Valley's indigenous plants and animals.

But at the same we can find some counter arguments that highlighted the benefit of the project. They also tried their best to convince the people about the benefits of the proposed plan. The protagonists of the SVHEP instigated that the animal



species that are located in the Silent Valley location are even more prevalent in a few other parts of the nation. Additionally, they stated that it might not be plausible to assume that some plant species are exclusive to the valley. The members of the Silent Valley Scheme Protection Committee had given a counterargument for each ecological claim. Arguments and counter arguments went on; meanwhile the visit of Dr. M.S. Swaminathan, then Secretary to the Department of Agriculture, gave a significant turning point to the tussle.

### **Dr. M.S Swaminathan's Visit to the Valley**

Dr. M.S. Swaminathan, then Secretary, Dept. of Agriculture & Co-operation, Ministry of Agriculture and Irrigation, Government of India, visited the Silent Valley area in October, 1979. He prepared a detailed report regarding his views on the various issues connected with the implementation of the Silent Valley Hydro-electric Project. The summary of the visit bear the name *Report on the Visit to the Silent Valley Area of Kerala*. The Report gave some profound observations and suggestion advisable in order to achieve harmony between the debate over development and ecological concerns. Following are major suggestions put forth by M.S. Swaminathan to find a long lasting solution to the problem:

a) A National Rain Forest Biosphere should be created on the 39,000 hectares that comprise the following: i) Silent Valley Forest, ii) New Amarambalam Reserve Forests, iii) Kundas Forest, and iv) Attappadi Reserve Forests.

b) Steps should be done to provide irrigation using the ground and surface water resources available in as much land as possible after a thorough ground water study of the districts of Palakkad and Malappuram is soon finished.

c) By building appropriate transmission lines from the Idukki Project area, the immediate electrical needs of the Malappuram and Palakkad areas might be satisfied.

d) Actions should be taken to encourage appropriate industries in the region in order to provide more job possibilities.

e) The Rs. 200 lakhs allocated for SVHEP in the State Budget for 1980–81 could be used for appropriate industrial and agricultural projects, transmission line construction from Idukki, and ground water development (Swaminathan 1979, 8-10).

These observations of the veteran scientist clearly assert that his position was against the proposed Hydel project. His first view, i.e., the Silent Valley area should be developed in to a National Rain Forest Biosphere, gave much impetus



to the environmental enthusiast and activists who worked day and night for the conservation of the valley. As a result the environmentalism connected with silent valley received much vigour and strength.

### **Key figures and Organisations of the Movement**

The Silent Valley Movement has been considered to be the most significant chapter in India's conservation movement history. The announcement of KSEB authorities on the implementation of the project by constructing a dam to meet the electricity shortage of the state received mixed responses. Numerous scientists, journalistic outlets, Friends of the Trees, and progressive groups like the Kerala Sastra Sahitya Parishad all expressed an ecological point of view. These individuals and organizations became the bulwark of the movement; despite lacking unified planning, the campaign was incredibly successful. 'The sustained pressure exerted on the government by citizens using every possible means available at the time-letters to the editors of newspapers, seminars, widespread awareness programmes, and finally petitions and appeals in court and other high offices-proved ultimately successful' (Dattatri 2015). A drive to raise awareness in academic circles through talks and slide shows was initiated in 1977 by Dr. Satish Chandran, who organized meetings of scientists and academics to discuss the ecological concerns of the Silent Valley Project. Under the auspices of Professor John C. Jacob Nature Clubs were formed and the youths were given awareness about the disaster that might cause due to the unscrupulous exploitation of the nature. It is quite interesting to note that the first environmental organization in India named *suchimukhi* was the brain child of John C. Jacob. This organization launched bold campaigns against the silent valley project; picketing of the Collectorate and administrative head quarters were conducted by the organization; even children were actively participated in the picketing of Collectorate.

Special mention may be given to Kerala Sastra Sahitya Parishad (KSSP) and Prof. Dr. M.K Prasad to highlight the ecological disaster of the project among the people. The Keral Sastra Sahitya Parishad (KSSP), a popular science education group with a large following and sway in Kerala, spearheaded the resistance to the proposal. This left-leaning movement of school and college teachers and academicians of the state piled up an unexpected partnership with Wildlife conservationists. Every group opposed the project for different reasons. While KSSP emphasized the techno-economic appraisal of energy-generating alternatives, their allies invoked the need for plant and animal conservation (Gadgil & Guha 1995, 73).



Dr. Parasad was a veteran leader of the movement. ‘First hailed for his efforts to save Silent Valley, Prof. Prasad spent subsequent decades spreading his passion for sane, people-centric environment management’ (Parthasarathy 2024). His prompt action on the Silent Valley crisis prevented the charming stretch of tropical rainforest from being submerged for a hydroelectric project across the *Kunthi* River. The renowned environmentalist Romulus Whitaker, who established the Madras Crocodile Bank and the Madras Snake Park, was arguably the first to bring the silent valley to the public’s notice due to the lion-tailed macaque’s endangered status. With the following comments, Romulus gave Pro. Prasad a hearty round of applause: ‘We may have been whistle-blowers, publicizing the threat facing Silent Valley in 1973 in the WWF-India Newsletter, but it was Professor M.K. Prasad, heading the Kerala Sasthra Sahithya Parishad (KSSP), who spread the word, bringing many luminaries on board like Salim Ali, Sugathakumari, Mrinalini Sarabhai and M.S.Swaminathan. This is how he gained massive national and international support’. These remarks aptly show the role played by M.K. Prasad in bringing the silent valley issue into national and international attention. Another prime feature of the movement was poets and men of letters of Kerala actively came forward to illuminate the impending threat of silent valley hydel project, say, Sugathakumari, N.V. Krishna Warier, O.N.V. Kuruppu, Kadammanitta Ramakrishnan, K. Sachidanandan, Ayappa Panikkar, Sukumar Azhikode, Vylloppilli Sreedhara Menon. K.K. Neelakantan etc. Here special mention may be given to Sugathkumari, the role played by this poet-activist helped to inspire public opinion in favour of save silent valley movement. Her *Marathinu Sthuthi* (Ode to a tree) became the movement’s anthem (Praveen 2020). The poem became a symbol for the protest movement from the intellectual community and was the opening song of most of the ‘save silent valley’ campaign meetings during the period.

Another jolt to the save silent valley movement was a resolution passed by the International Union for Conservation of Nature ( IUCN) which held its meeting at Ashkhabad in the Soviet Union in 1978. The General Assembly of IUCN, at its 14<sup>th</sup> Session, Ashkhabad, USSR, 26 September - 5 October 1978 significantly urged the Government of India ‘to conserve more effectively the forest areas of the Western Ghats, including the undisturbed forests of the Silent Valley of the State of Kerala...’ (IUCN- Proceedings 1979, 60). This emphatic statement by an international environmental organization on the protection of silent valley region gave much impetus and hope for the nature lovers and activists of save silent valley forum; time and again the controversy and tussle over silent valley heated up.



All most all political parties of Kerala during the time supported silent valley project; Kerala Legislature unanimously passed a Resolution for the implementation of the project. Moreover in 1978, an all party delegates from Kerala called on Prime Minister Morarji Desai to get a favourable nod from him; he gave a firm assurance to the delegates for the implementation of the project. On the basis of this positive nod, in June 1979 work on the silent valley project continued again. The Honourable High Court of Kerala issued a stay order in August 1979 when N.V. Krishna Warriar of the Prakriti Samrakshana Samiti, Prof. Joseph John, and barrister P. Gopalakrishnan Nair filed a Writ Petition against the clear-cut forest in the region of the proposed hydroelectric project. However, the High Court removed the prohibition on clear-cutting forest in January 1980, and construction in the Valley resumed in full force.

Meanwhile more political twists and tussles occurred in the centre and Charan Singh became the Prime Minister. New Prime Minister Charan Singh formed a central committee under the leadership of M.S Swaminathan to re-examine the boons and banes of the Silent Valley Project and submit a report. Still preliminary work on the Project in the Valley continued by the authority on the basis of Kerala High Court's 1980 verdict connected with the removal of ban on clear cutting of forest in the Valley. Nevertheless, a group of environmentalists, nature lovers and activists of the state met the governor Jothi Venkatachalam and requested her to pass a stay order. The delegates' demand was that work in the Valley should not be continued, until the Committee established by the Central Government headed by M.S. Swaminathan submits its report. Shortly, Governor gave a green signal to the demand of the delegates and the work in the Valley abruptly stopped again.

After Charan Singh's short duration, nearly six months, of Prime Minister ship Indira Gandhi became the Prime Minister of the country in 1981. Madhav Gadgil and Ramachandra Guha clearly mentions about the silent valley issue thus: 'It is true that in 1982-'83, when Mrs. Indira Gandhi was Prime Minister, she took the side of environmentalists and against the wishes of Kerala state legislature halted the construction of the Silent Valley hydroelectric Project, which would have destroyed some of the finest rain forest of the Western Ghats (Gadgil & Guha 1995, 43).

Fortunately for the environmentalists, Indira Gandhi took an active personal interest in the silent valley issue. As a result Indira Gandhi declared that 'Silent Valley will be protected'. Yet the written document expressed some ambiguity; it demonstrated that the site of hydro electric project did not come under the purview of 'protected' area. The news spread rapidly and protest sprouted again. Hundreds



of telegrams were sent to the Central Government by NGOs, nature lovers and the public screaming for the protection of the entire silent valley and the abolition of the project. As a result of this huge protest from every nook and corner of the state the Indira Gandhi government decided to re-examine the issue. She formed a Committee under the headship of Prof. M.G.K. Menon – as per the recommendations of Menon Committee, the Central Government in November 1983 scrapped the Silent Valley Hydro-electric Project once and for all.

Silent Valley, which had only been recognized as a Reserve Forest since 1914, was formally established as a National Park on November 15, 1984, and Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi gave it its official opening on September 7, 1985. This event signals the end of an ardent struggle, which lasted more than a decade, in a triumphant manner. The victory of the movement was fully obligated to the steady and persistent endeavour of the people of Kerala.

### **Conclusion**

In Conclusion, the glorious triumph of Silent Valley Movement stands as a powerful testament to the impact of grassroots environmentalism in protecting natural ecosystems. The Movement illuminated an environmental friendly agenda for development. Through the dedication and efforts of local communities and selfless nature lovers, the movement successfully protected the silent valley region from a potential destruction. The movement showed the world the power of collective action and public awareness in shaping policy decisions. The movement's success in cancelling the proposed Hydro-electric project and protecting the Valley's unique biodiversity marked a conspicuous turning point in India's environmental history. Above all the movement's effect extended beyond the valley itself; inspired a new wave of environmentalism and conservation endeavours across the nation. The success of the Movement inspired other environmental campaigns nationwide and globally. It was an amazing illustration of how people can band together to preserve and safeguard the environment.

It will be worthwhile to quote Dr. M. Balakrishnan regarding the controversy over the SVHEP 'The controversy concerning the Silent Valley-whether it should remain silent for the benefit of future generations as a virgin forest with its immensely rich fauna and flora, or whether its silence should be ended for more immediate and short-term benefit-has been receiving considerable attention'. Finally the controversy settled in favour of the conscience of the people of Kerala.



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