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### Save Silent Valley Movement: An Ecofeminist Perspective

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#### Abstract

India has had a history of non-violent resistance against the state actions. Her journey of environmental protection and resistances has always remained non-violent, beginning from the Bishnoi Movement in the eighteenth century in the colonial India, for protection of their Khejari trees to the post-colonial movements like Chipko and Narmada Bachao. Save Silent Valley movement also shares a similar trajectory wherein through peaceful methods, the locals protested against the big dam and the hydro-electricity project. This paper seeks to analyse the role of women in these protests and to see the movement with an ecofeminist lens.

**Keywords:** Save silent Valley, Ecofeminism, SEEK, hydro-electricity project

Located in the Nilgiri hills, Silent Valley is a small piece of land in Palakkad district of the Indian state of Kerala. Being a tropical rain forest situated in the southern part of western ghats and rich in biodiversity, the Silent Valley is home to a large variety of flora and fauna. The place is famous for some very rare species of birds and animals. The River Kunthi runs through the valley for roughly 25 kilometers, descending from the Niligiri hills, at an altitude of 2000 meters. The river, locally addressed as Kunthipuzha (puzha means river in Malayalam)<sup>1</sup>, this perennial, crystal clear and wild river is a tributary of Bharatapuzha. The area was named silent valley by the Britishers for the perceived absence of noisy Cicadas<sup>2</sup>. The site also gains importance from mythology which claims that the Pandavas spent a good time here during their exile, also, the river derives its name from Kunti, the mother of five pandavas<sup>3</sup>.

Robert Wight, a Scottish surgeon and botanist, working for the British East India Company, first intruded the valley looking for medicinal plants in 1847. Thereafter, the Britishers took a keen interest in the diversity found in the region. In 1914, the forest area in

<sup>1</sup> *Geography and Climate*. (n.d.). Retrieved September 13, 2021, from Silent Valley National Park <http://www.silentvalley.gov.in/AboutThePark/Geology>

<sup>2</sup> The cicadas are insects which typically live on trees and make a particular loud noise for attracting mates.

<sup>3</sup> Sivadas, S. (2010, June 21). *And Silent Remained My Valley*. Retrieved from The Hindu: <https://www.thehindu.com/sci-tech/energy-and-environment/And-silent-remained-my-valley/article16261788.ece>

the Silent Valley was designated as a protected forest<sup>4</sup>. The British Government started forestry operations in the valley from 1927. And since then, the operations continued in the region by the forest department until 1976. The Kerala Forest Research Institute (KFRI) conducted an ecological impact assessment in the Silent Valley area in 1977 and recommended that it be designated as a biosphere reserve<sup>5</sup>. In 1980, Mrs. Indira Gandhi, India's then Prime Minister, ordered that the Kerala government halt all project construction until all concerns were properly considered. And later the Silent Valley region, excluding the hydropower project area, was designated a National Park by the Kerala government in December 1980. Later, a committee, chaired by Prof. M.G.K. Menon, was formed to determine if the hydropower project could be implemented without causing substantial environmental harm which submitted its report in early 1983 and recommended to abandon the power project. Consequently, Rajiv Gandhi, the Prime Minister of India, officially inaugurated the Silent Valley national park on September 7, 1985<sup>6</sup>, abandoning the idea of power plant. The Silent Valley National Park was incorporated in the core area of the Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve on September 1, 1986 and the National Park received a 148-square-kilometer buffer zone on June 11, 2007, which was dedicated to the nation on September 2007<sup>7</sup> by the then chief Minister of Kerala, Mr. V S Achuthanathan.

The site at Sairandhrivana<sup>8</sup> on the river Kunthipuzha was recognized as an excellent location for power generation in 1928-29 by the government. Later, after independence the Kerala State Electricity Board suggested a 120 MW hydel power plant costing INR 17 million after the inventory and investigations were completed in 1958.<sup>9</sup> The proposal for this hydel project was reviewed by the National Committee on Environmental Planning and Coordination (NCEPC)<sup>10</sup>, which proposed 17 safeguards for protection of environment, but didn't recommend abandoning the project altogether. Then, the Kerala Forest Research

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<sup>4</sup> *History of Silent Valley*. (n.d.). Retrieved September 13, 2021, from Silent Valley National Park <http://www.silentvalley.gov.in/AboutThePark/History>

<sup>5</sup> Prasad, M. K. (1984). Silent Valley Case: An Ecological Assessment. *Cochin University Law Review*. 128-138. Retrieved from <http://dSPACE.cusat.ac.in/jspui/bitstream/123456789/10999/1/Silent%20Valley%20Case%20An%20Ecological%20Assessment.PDF>

<sup>6</sup> Dattari, S. (2015, September 25). *Silent Valley – A People's Movement that Saved a Forest*. Retrieved from Conservation India: Enabling Conservation Action: <https://www.conservationindia.org/case-studies/silent-valley-a-peoples-movement-that-saved-a-forest>

<sup>7</sup> *History of Silent Valley*. (n.d.). Retrieved September 14, 2021, from Silent Valley National Park <http://www.silentvalley.gov.in/AboutThePark/History>

<sup>8</sup> Sairandhri is another name for Darupadi, the wife of Panadavs. The naming of the forest here, signifies the relationship between women and nature, how the forests are being identified with feminine.

<sup>9</sup> *History of Silent Valley*. (n.d.). Retrieved September 14, 2021, from Silent Valley National Park <http://www.silentvalley.gov.in/AboutThePark/History>

<sup>10</sup> Established in February 1972, the committee constituted by the Government of India, to plan environmental policies and coordinate various ministries on environmental concerns in the planning of Economic Development. The NCEPC was established as a response to Stockholm Conference, which later developed in the form of Ministry of Environment & Forests in the year 1985, now called Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change. The NITI Aayog recommends reestablishment of a similar body.

Institute conducted an ecological impact assessment in the Silent Valley area in 1977 and recommended that it should be acknowledged as a biosphere reserve. However, the project was approved by India's Prime Minister in 1978, on the condition that the state government would enact legislations to ensure the required environmental safeguards. Also, the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) in Ashkhabad, USSR (1978) approved a resolution proposing that the lion-tailed macaque<sup>11</sup> be protected in the Silent Valley region and Palakkad. As per the directives of Central government the Kerala government enacted the Silent Valley Protection Area (Protection of Ecological Balance) act, 1979 but excluded the proposed Hydel Power Project from the protected area. This step of the state government led to subsequent series of protests and movement by the local people, which this research aims to study.

### **Background of the Movement:**

The Kerala State Electricity Board (KSEB), on the directions of the government, started construction of the Hydroelectricity Power Project, which consequently led to the rise of voices against the power project. The scientific community as well as the local people were concerned about the negative impacts that it would cause on environment and the lives of the inhabitants. Many tribal communities live around this area. Kurumba, Muduga, Irola and Kattu Naiken are the major tribes inhabiting this area<sup>12</sup>. These tribes mainly rely on agriculture and allied activities for their survival. And they collect the Non-Timber Forest Produce (NTFP) like tubers, wax, honey, gooseberry etc. from the forest. The locals hold this belief that the valley takes care of all their needs and all the possible threats that may affect them are reversed by the ecology near them. The construction of dam and the power generating project would lead to felling of a large number of trees, which the forest people considered holy, led to sporadic protests throughout the valley. The construction of the dam would drown almost 845 hectares of land<sup>13</sup> was the claim made by these protesters.

The protesters included not only the native people or the academicians and scientific community, but the opposition to this felling of trees came from all sides, writers, artists and experts from different disciplines actively participated in the Save Silent Valley Movement. Kerala Sasthra Sahithya Parishad (KSSP), a non-governmental organisation, spoke out against the hydroelectric project most ardently<sup>14</sup>. Another organisation that voiced against the project was Prakrithi Samrakshana Samithi (PSS)<sup>15</sup> led by Sugatha Kumari, a poet and environmentalist. Sugatha<sup>16</sup> was the most prominent figure in this movement. Songs written by her carried the soul of this movement, the protesters throughout their struggle, sung her songs and contributed in the protection of the wildlife. Other key figure of the movement

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<sup>11</sup> The region is home to the largest population of this threatened species of primates.

<sup>12</sup> *Tribal Community*. (n.d.). Retrieved September 13, 2021, from Silent Valley National Park <http://www.silentvalley.gov.in/AboutThePark/Tribal>

<sup>13</sup> Subrahmanyam, K. V. (1980). Environment of 'Silent Valley'. *Economic & Political Weekly*, 1651-1652. Retrieved from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4369141>

<sup>14</sup> *Home*. (n.d.). Kerala Sasthra Sahithya Parishad: <https://kssp.in/>

<sup>15</sup> Prakrithi Samrakshana Samithi can be translated as the Committee for Protection of Nature

<sup>16</sup> Sugatha Kumari was awarded the Padma Shri by Government of India for her poetry in the year 2006

was Joseph John, a member of Friends of Trees organization who tirelessly fought the entire legal battle against the state of Kerala, for seeking annulment of the project.<sup>17</sup>

The protests against the felling of trees started in 1973, with all round support from all the classes. The government of Kerala along with the Central government headed by Morarji Desai, were adamant to get the power plant constructed in the valley. KSEB was in charge of putting the plan into action, getting underlying support from a non-profit organisation, Parisara Asoothrana Samrakshana Samithy (PASS)<sup>18</sup> based in Kerala, dedicated to environmental planning and conservation.<sup>19</sup>

The scientists and academicians involved with PASS were arguing that the construction of the project would flood only ten percent of the Silent Valley Forest Area and in turn would have multi-fold benefits. As per their cost benefit analysis, the project would cause more benefit than harm. They divided the advantages of the power project into two categories: firstly, the inclusion of 522 million kilowatt-hours of electricity would facilitate more avenues of economic activities in the region and secondly, the project would make available the irrigation water for the needs of agriculturists. Also, during the construction phase, the project would create numerous jobs for the local people as well as others<sup>20</sup>. Also, the KSEB, put forward similar arguments, alluding the shortage of electricity in the Malabar and the nearby regions.

As a response to childishness of these claims, the activists, presented the examples of previous such constructions where more dire and dangerous consequences of power projects were experienced, which were earlier not taken into account. Previous experiences in Koyna River, where the construction of power plant and the consequent increase in the weight of water led to disastrous earthquake in 1969 also the river basin witnessed many other negative after-effects. The Nile Delta in Egypt also met a terrible fate in the year 1970, post the construction of Aswan High Dam, where numerous archaeological sites of great importance submerged along with habitats of lakhs of local people<sup>21</sup>. Also, the projects have resulted in loss of fertility and an increase in the toxicity of soil, the still water causes diseases and for correction of these problems more investment is needed<sup>22</sup>. They also established the fact that the project was not going to contribute to the power needs of the state as the other bigger Hydro-electricity projects were doing, at a lower environmental cost.

Many national and international societies, environmentalists and scientists expressed their concerns and grave worries about the Silent Valley Hydro-Electric Project (SVHEP) and warned the government against the disastrous impacts it will have on the natural

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<sup>17</sup> Syed, N. (2020, June 27). *Athirappally Project: Lessons for Kerala from The Silent Valley Movement*. Retrieved from The Wire: <https://thewire.in/environment/kerala-ecology-athirappally-project>

<sup>18</sup> In Malayalam "Parisara Asoothrana Samrakshana Samithy" means Environmental Planning & Conservation Society.

<sup>19</sup> D'Monte, D. (1982, December). Storm Over Silent Valley. *India International Centre Quarterly*, 9(3/4), 288-297. Retrieved from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23001562>

<sup>20</sup> Parameswaran, M. P. (1979, July 7). Significance of Silent Valley. *Economic & Political Weekly*, 14(27), 1117-1119. Retrieved from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4367757>

<sup>21</sup> Aswan Dam Case Study. (n.d.). Retrieved from Peter Guo-hua Fu School of Architecture: <http://www.arch.mcgill.ca/prof/sijkpes/arch374/winter2001/dbiggs/aswan.html>

<sup>22</sup> Parameswaran, M. P. (1979, July 7). Significance of Silent Valley. *Economic & Political Weekly*, 14(27), 1117-1119. Retrieved from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4367757>

environment in a long run. Another important environmental NGO named Society for Environmental Education in Kerala (SEEK), established in 1979, was also working in Kerala for creating environmental awareness and it got the credit of beginning the agitations against the project.

Legal battle was also fought in the Kerala High Court against the power plant and its catastrophic effects, in which the honourable court, in the year 1980, finally pronounced the judgement.<sup>23</sup> The court refrained from interfering on the question of construction of the Project; however, it acknowledged the importance of environmental protection and was of the view that such environmental issues come under the domain of legislature and construction must be done in consonance with the recommendations of committees established. The proceedings certainly resulted in creating awareness about the environmental concerns in development.

### **Role of Women:**

Women of Kerala have remained active and vocal in protecting their natural environment. They have participated and successfully protected the rivers, the forests and other natural sources of livelihood. Through inspirational poems like Marathinu Stuthi<sup>24</sup>, Sugathakumari, the leader of Prakrithi Samrakshana Samithi (PSS), inspired the Save Silent Valley Movement<sup>25</sup>. The poem is in form of a thanksgiving that recognises the function of trees in the great cycle of life, in preserving environmental balance, and in guaranteeing civilization's well-being, rather than a romantic effusion on the beauty of trees<sup>26</sup>. The poem is a heartfelt statement of humanity's gratitude towards trees. It also seeks an apology for the reckless destruction of nature. In the concluding lines of the poem, "The tree is all forgiving - but will Mother Nature forgive us?", the poetess compares nature with mother and wonders how long she will forgive and be compassionate towards her children for the thoughtless decimation of natural world. Other poems of Sugatha Kumari carry the marks of her ecofeminist leanings and the inherent bond between women and nature.

The poem acquired a lot of traction in the intellectual community, and it was played as a prayer before each campaign meeting. Sugatha Kumari became so popular after her participation in this anti-dam movement that she was first to be called when there was any environmental concern in the state. Aside from the Save Silent Valley Campaign, she along with adivasis and a few women transformed a barren patch of land in Attappady district into a natural forest, and named it Krishnavanam<sup>27</sup>.

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<sup>23</sup> Society for Protection of Silent Valley vs Union of India, State of Kerala and Kerala Electricity Board, Trivandrum O.P Nos. 2949 and 3025 of 1979.

<sup>24</sup> Marathinu Stuthi is a Malayalam poem that literally means An Ode to a Tree

<sup>25</sup> Sethu, D. (2021, January 6). *The Better India*. Retrieved from This Celebrated Poet Also Saved the Silent Valley & Turned a Barren Hill Green:

<https://www.thebetterindia.com/246623/sugathakumari-activist-malayali-poet-kerala-thiruvananthapuram-tribute-silent-valley-protest-environmental-feminist-movements-covid-19-div200/>

<sup>26</sup> Malathy, A. (2018). Revisiting Malayalam Eco-poetry in the Post-flood Scenario: a Reading of Selected Poems. *Glocal Colloquies*, 19-26.

<sup>27</sup> Satish, A. (2019, June 05). The New Indian Express. Retrieved from Krishnavanam: Once Barren Mount, now Sanctuary:

The organizations like KSSP are providing trainings for employment and income-generating enterprises such as soap making, rabbit rearing, and mushroom cultivation for creating self-employment opportunities for women. Also, it is trying to build a pollution-free and healthier environment, the women's wing of the organization is promoting smokeless chulha, biogas plants, and eco-friendly items such as clay pots and hot boxes. This way, the environment as well as the women, both are being protected and empowered<sup>28</sup>. After their participation and victory in the Save Silent Valley Movement, the women have led and participated in several subsequent protests & groups like: protection of Chalakudy river from gelatin<sup>29</sup> against Nitta Gelatin India Ltd (NGIL)<sup>30</sup>, implementation of Jalanidhi project (2001) in the rural Kerala, the all women patrolling group called Vasantha Sena was formed in the Periyar Tiger Reserve Forest, protects the forests as well as keeps the wild animals safe from poachers in which they refused to include their men folks<sup>31</sup>. In the anti-Coca-Cola protests<sup>32</sup> and anti-Endosulfan movement<sup>33</sup> the women along with indigenous people participated because the destruction to natural environment had greater and direct impact on the lives of women, health and well-being of their children and the marginalised groups, than any other sections of the society. Their struggles were also against the patriarchal capitalist system, simultaneously, in the concerned areas<sup>34</sup>. Despite the offer of employment and economic development in the area, people, mostly women opposed the Power Generation Project and sometimes their men.

### Conclusion:

The studies and researches on various environmental movements suggest that women constitute the majority of the participants in environmental protests, because degradation of environment jeopardises their livelihood and existence<sup>35</sup>. This was seen in the Save Silent Valley Movement too where women showcased their will power in fighting for what was

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<https://www.newindianexpress.com/states/kerala/2019/jun/05/krishnavanam-once-barren-mount-now-sanctuary-1986056.html>

<sup>28</sup> Sharma, A. (2012). Media Coverage on Bio-diversity and Conservation Strategies, *The Clarion*, 1(2), 250-254.

<sup>29</sup> Binoy, P. (2013, August 13). *A Fight till Death, A Fight for the Commons- the Story of Kathikudam*. Retrieved from Kafila- Collective Explorations Since 2006: <https://kafila.online/2013/08/13/a-fight-till-death-a-fight-for-the-commons-the-story-of-kathikudam-kerala-parvathy-binoy/>

<sup>30</sup> The firm utilised millions of litres of river water and discharged hazardous waste water from the facility into the river. Sara Joseph, a poet and environmentalist, led the protest and organised women to oppose it.

<sup>31</sup> *All Women Forest Patrolling Team in Periyar Tiger Reserve*. (2007, December 13). Retrieved from The Economic Times:

<https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/womens-day/all-women-forest-patrolling-team-in-periyar-tiger-reserve/articleshow/2847368.cms?from=mdr>

<sup>32</sup> Berguland, H., & Helander S. (2015). The Popular Struggle against Coca-Cola in Plachimada, Kerala. *Journal of Developing Societies*. 31(2), 281-303. doi: [10.1177/0169796X15577020](https://doi.org/10.1177/0169796X15577020)

<sup>33</sup> Adithya, P. (2009). *India's Endosulfan Disaster – A Review of the Health Impacts and Status of Remediation*. Thiruvananthapuram: Thanal

<sup>34</sup> Joseph, R. (2016). *Women's Participation in Environment Protection Movement: A Study of the Kairali Village in Wayanad District of Kerala* (Unpublished master's thesis). School of Social Sciences, Sikkim University, Sikkim

<sup>35</sup> Shiva, V. (1988). *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Survival in India*. New Delhi: Kali for Women.

irreplaceable, in this case, the forests. Being the prime agent of emotional associations with the entities around them, partially as a result of their biological composition, women have this unique capability of putting emotions into constructive actions, most profoundly. Therefore, this cannot be denied that the protests against the construction of dam in the impenetrable virgin forests had ecofeminist underpinnings, where women not only understood that the forests were important for their survival and protected them, their participation in the movement also helped them in their own social-political upliftment. The voices of women and marginalised hitherto not heard, were now vociferous and the halting of the Project marked the triumph of environment over development, resulting into restrengthened basic rights of marginalised people & the biosphere. In the form of poetry, Sugatha Kumari highlighted the women-nature bond that instilled confidence and sense of empowerment in rural women, which motivated them for further improvement in their living conditions. The victory of the Save Silent Valley movement sparked similar agitations, including the Save Narmada Movement and anti-Tehri Dam protests. The lessons learnt in the Silent Valley are now guiding the Athirappally Project<sup>36</sup>.

Today, the park's pristine woods and incomparable beauty stand as mute testament to what a committed group of environmentally aware men and women can do when they come together and combine their forces.

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<sup>36</sup> A controversial dam proposed in the Athirappally area in Thrissur district in the year 1982, which still doesn't have the required environmental clearances.

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