

**The Silent Valley and its Discontents:  
Literary Environmentalism and the Ecological  
Discourse in Kerala (1975-1984)**

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**By**

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## DECLARATION

I hereby declare that the dissertation entitled “*The Silent Valley and its Discontents: Literary Environmentalism and the Ecological Discourse in Kerala (1975-1984)*” is the result of research carried out by me in the Centre for Comparative Literature, School of Humanities, University of Hyderabad, Hyderabad, India under the supervision of Professor K. Narayana Chandran.

**Rohith P.**



## CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the research embodied in this thesis entitled “*The Silent Valley and its Discontents: Literary Environmentalism and the Ecological Discourse in Kerala (1975-1984)*” has been carried out by **Rohith P** under my supervision and the same has not been submitted elsewhere for any degree.

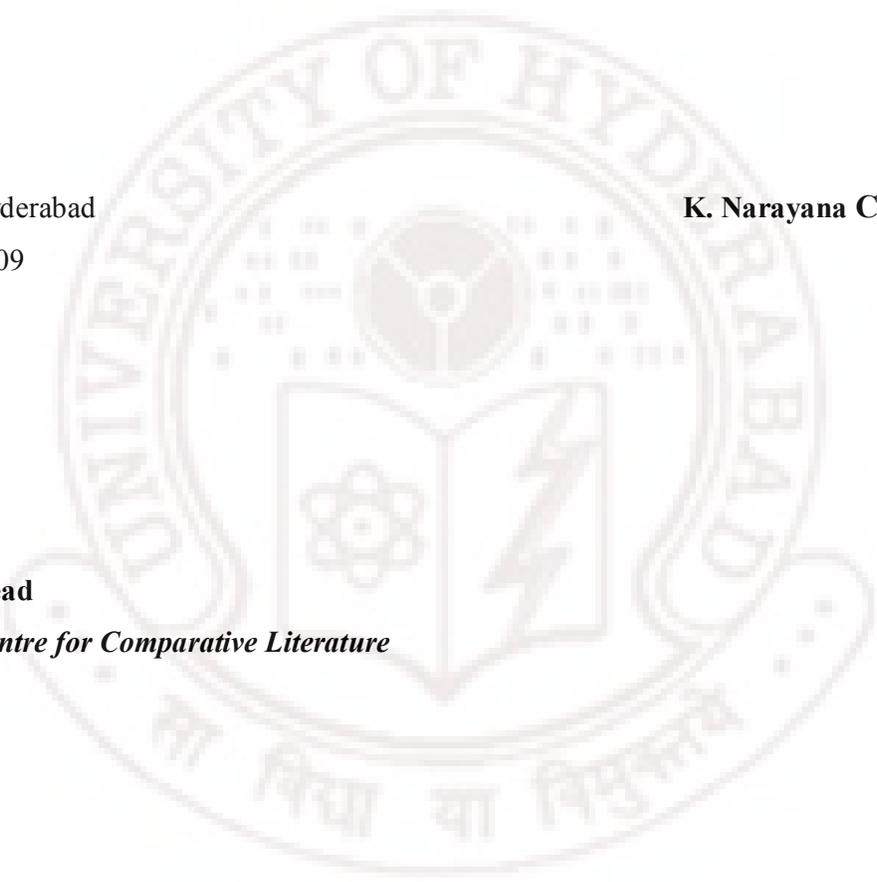
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## Chapter I

### The Silent Valley Controversy: An Introductory Overview

*The rural is not trees and fields anymore. It is on the way to data.*

–Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *A Critique of Post Colonial Reason: Towards a History of the Vanishing Present*, 164.

Few artistic traditions in India have failed to recognize a symbiotic relationship between human and natural lives. The genres and practices of our *marga* and *desi* traditions have always been fed and sustained by nature's lives and forms. While the concept of "critical habitat" has a pretty long tradition in South Asia, two important and related forms of recognition have emerged after Indian independence. The first is the recognition that the imperial powers in India (the Portuguese, the Dutch, the French and more determinedly and lastingly, the British) carved out "productive zones" and marked out commercial territories and trade routes to further their exploitative and despoliation designs. This belated awareness of the commercial mapping of South Asia is however coupled with another, more alarming, recognition that the democratically elected governments in the third world are no less culpable today in continuing colonial economic policies in the name of modernization, industrialization and liberalized development. The ongoing debate about Special Economic Zones (SEZs) is again informed by this awareness that divisions and demarcations are incommensurable with our ideals of equitable and sustainable development. Literatures of environmental movements in India cannot be read without this background. As a popular socio-political movement, environmentalism<sup>1</sup> is a product of the sixties of the last century. The popularity and public appeal of the

environmental movement distinguish it from other manifestations of protest that have lost popularity and vigour,<sup>2</sup> for the environmental movement, as Ramachandra Guha remarks, even today retains the “vigour and intensity [...] of an ever-youthful social movement”<sup>3</sup> (*Environmentalism* 1). However, it was only in the 1970s that in India environmentalism emerged as a powerful resistant ideology. The popular involvement in and the ensuing success of the *Chipko*<sup>4</sup> agitation during the 1970s in preventing large-scale deforestation diffused the ideologies of environmentalism throughout the socio-political and cultural spheres of the country. Spurred by the triumph of the *Chipko* movement, activists in different parts of the country resisted various developmental and industrial projects that had the potential to severely damage the environment and affect people’s livelihood. Most of them, in spite of their popularity, did not succeed in creating a similar impact on the concerned authorities as in the case of the former.<sup>5</sup> However, the successful campaign to protect a tiny, though ecologically significant, forest in the Silent Valley in the Malabar region of Kerala stands out from these, not quite successful, attempts at conservation.

Some four decades have passed since the Silent Valley entered the public consciousness of Kerala, but its place in the Malayali popular imagination is not merely emotive or intellectual but eco-cultural as well. As recently as January 2009, the viewers of Asianet, a Malayalam television channel, voted the Silent Valley as one of the seven wonders of the state. The year 2009 is also the twenty-fifth anniversary of the declaration of the Silent Valley as a national park. In 2004, the Valley became the subject of a documentary, *Oru Mazhumaatramakale* (Just An Axe Away). In 1999, the Kerala Forest Research Institute and the Kerala Forest Department jointly published *The Silent Valley: Whispers of Reason* during the decennial celebration of the Silent Valley as a national park. Besides, the value of the

Valley as a potential source of hydroelectric power is still pursued by the Kerala State Electricity Board (KSEB) in its continuing efforts to dam the Kunthipuzha, a few metres from the core of the Silent Valley national park at Patrakadavu.

The Silent Valley is a remote and secluded forest tucked away in the Western Ghats in Palakkadu district of northern Kerala. The name *Silent Valley* was probably given by the colonial British officers.<sup>6</sup> Situated 45 kilometres Northwest of Mannarkkadu, the Silent Valley covers about 89.52 square kilometres and is rich in both flora and fauna. Ecologists describe the Silent Valley as the sole surviving bit of evergreen forest in the Sahya ranges. In the words of the renowned ornithologist, Salim Ali, “it is a very fine example of one of the richest, most threatened and least studied habitats on earth” (qtd. in Sugathakumari, “Silent Valley: A Case Study” 11). The fact that this area is devoid of any human habitation makes it a rare ecosystem. The area has an “uninterrupted evolutionary history of almost fifty million years” (Swaminathan 2; Sugathakumari 11; KSSP, *The Silent Valley* 1-2). The Silent Valley is often described as “a botanist's bouquet, an entomologist's enigma and a biologist's delight” (Jayaram 54). There is not even a tribal village in the valley and it has always been difficult to reach. It has therefore remained as a well-preserved forest with few incursions. “Dark, cool and vibrating with life, the Silent Valley, the richest expression of life on earth,” as Sugathakumari remarks, “presents a textbook version of the tropical evergreen forest” (11).

The Silent Valley has profound and multilayered cultural significance for those who inhabit the area surrounding it. Locally known as Sairandhrivanam (the lush woods of Sairandhri), the Silent Valley is associated with the mythological character of Draupadi who was also known as Sairandhri. The river Kunthi, likewise, is named after Kunthi Devi, the mother of the Pandavas. Popular legends maintain

that the Pandavas together with their consort spent a considerable part of their *vanavasa* or life in the forest here (Nair, Thampi and Babu 81). It is also argued that with the passage of time, especially during the British rule, the name *Sairandhrivanam* might have been corrupted to the present form, Silent Valley (Nair, Thampi and Babu 81; Joint Committee 49). Another theory has it that the relative absence of the chirping cicada, a tropical forest insect, accounts for the name, *Silent Valley* (Swaminathan 2; Joint Committee 49; Nair, Thampi and Babu 81).

The Silent Valley is a plateau, more or less rectangular, stretching over an area of 8952 hectares in the southwestern tip of the Nilgiris. Geographically, the Silent Valley is situated at a latitude of 11°5'N and a longitude of 76°26'E (KSSP, *The Silent Valley* 56). The Silent Valley is naturally fortified with high ridges along its north, northeast and east, and with steep escarpments along its western and southern borders. This natural fortification protects the Valley from extreme climates and makes anthropogenic intervention almost impossible. The forests of the Silent Valley consist mainly of tropical evergreen, grasslands and *shola* vegetation with tremendous complexity, as well as floral and faunal diversity. *Shola* is the thick vegetation found at the base of the valleys in the Western Ghats of South India. Several species of amphibians, fish, insects, lichens, mosses, ferns and flowering plants have been discovered from the valley. Researchers have yet to explore more of the valley's life and potential.<sup>7</sup>

The pristine Kunthipuzha, one of the tributaries of the Bharatapuzha, streams almost twenty kilometres through the valley surrounded by high ridges before merging with the main river. The valley forms the catchment area of river Kunthi, which flows through it bifurcating it into eastern and western halves. The average annual rainfall in this area is 4600 millimetres resulting in an annual runoff of 293

million cubic metres. Originating at an elevation of about 2400 metres in the outer rim of the Nilgiris, the river descends rapidly to 1150 metres on the northern edge of the plateau. Thereafter, the river flows gently southwards for about fifteen kilometres before it descends to the Mannarkkadu plains through a narrow gorge at an elevation of about 1000 metres. This offers a straight head of more than 850 metres, the highest in Kerala, for the generation of hydroelectric power (KSSP, *The Silent Valley* 56).

In the seventies of the last century, this remote region in Kerala triggered off one of the most intense environmental disputes ever in the history of India. It all began with a proposal submitted by the KSEB to build a dam across the Kunthipuzha to create a reservoir in the Silent Valley and use the water for the production of electricity. The proposed dam was about 131 metres in height and about 430 metres in length. The reservoir was designed to impound 317 million cubic metres of water in a surface area of about 830 hectares. The apostles of development held the project a panacea for the power shortage of Kerala in general and the Malabar region of the state in particular. Almost all the major political parties, the press and the Government of Kerala were in favour of the project. In their view, it would in no way affect the lives of people directly as there were no human settlements around the Valley. The local inhabitants of the area too supported the project as they believed that the construction of the dam would provide them with jobs for quite a long time and that the electricity produced would relieve them of the acute power shortage. Another promise they saw in this project was development of the region through the many industries it might generate.

The saga of the Silent Valley Hydroelectric Project (SVHP) dates back to the second and third decades of the twentieth century. The colonial administration, in the twenties of the last century, explored the possibility of constructing a hydroelectric

project on the river Kunthi. The preliminary survey conducted by the British concluded that the region where Kunthipuzha emerges out of the forest, flowing down between a pair of narrowly separated steep granite-faced hills, with a head potential of over 850 meters, is most ideally suited for putting up a dam (B. K. Nair 4). In 1931, E. S. Dawson, the Forest Engineer, reinforced the idea of a dam in the Silent Valley (Manoharan, Harikumar and Geetha 24). In spite of these initial surveys and approval, the project remained on papers.

In 1951, the SVHP was revived. The Government conducted a fresh survey to ascertain the feasibility of a hydroelectric project in the area. The social and economic backwardness of Malabar inspired the first Government of Kerala (1957-59) to undertake the construction of a major hydroelectric project on the river Kunthi. A project report was accordingly prepared in 1968 after adequate investigations and surveys. Subsequently, in 1973, the Planning Commission formally approved the SVHP. Following the sanction, the KSEB started preliminary works, such as surveying the land for the SVHP, demarcating the area for the reservoir and constructing an approach road to the work site in the same year.

Despite its enthusiasm for the SVHP, the KSEB had to slacken the work on the project on account of inadequate financial support. The high priority accorded to the construction of the Idukki hydroelectric project was cited as reason for the paucity of funding for the SVHP. After the construction of the Idukki project in 1976, the KSEB took steps to resume the construction of the SVHP. The soaring labour charges and the increase in the cost of raw materials pushed the initial estimate of Rs. 249 million up to a staggering Rs. 580 million.

The imminent threat to the Silent Valley was first brought to the notice of Indian environmentalists by a group of foreign scientists. Steven Green, a specialist

on the Lion-tailed macaque, from the New York Zoological Society, visited the Silent Valley during 1971-72, when the survey for the SVHP was underway. Green expressed serious concerns over the nearly extinct species of the macaque. The American-born expert on snakes, Romulus Whitaker, the founder of the Madras Snake Park and the Madras Crocodile Bank, was probably the first individual to alert us to the potential ecological destructibility of the SVHP. Following his tour of the area for snake studies, he wrote on the need for conserving the Silent Valley in the *Journal of Bombay Natural History Society*. The note written to BNHS by a group of European naturalists trekking from Nilgiris to the Silent Valley also went a long way in convincing Indian naturalists about the ecological significance and the vulnerability of the Silent Valley forest.

The climax of the Silent Valley controversy began with the report of the taskforce of the National Council for Environmental Planning and Conservation (NCEPC). In the April of 1976, the NCEPC appointed a taskforce under the chairmanship of the eminent environmentalist Zafar Futehally to study the ecological and environmental problems of the Western Ghats. Based on its report, which categorically stated, “The taskforce feels very strongly that the project should be abandoned and the area declared a Biosphere Reserve,” the NCEPC asked the Government of Kerala to stop construction of the SVHP in the October of the same year. In case the State Government thought it absolutely necessary to go ahead with the SVHP, the NCEPC prescribed the implementation of certain precautionary measures for the protection of the area. The intervention of the NCEPC failed to evoke a positive response from the State Government. This was because the Planning Commission Working Group on Energy Policy (1977) had recommended the optimum utilization of the hydropower potential in the country. 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 Chief Minister of Kerala, he 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 intervention of the NCEPC and the subsequent legislative debates and executive actions brought the SVHP into the public sphere. Though the state legislative was unanimous in going ahead with the project, signs of discordance were already visible, especially among the scientific community. 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 war. 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 controversy over the SVHP and the scientific debate generated by it forced the Kerala Forest Research Institute (KFRI) to send an expert team to the Silent Valley to carry out studies on the flora and fauna of the region. In 1977, V. S. Vijayan and M. Balakrishnan visited and conducted studies on the Silent Valley and submitted a report strongly urging the Government of Kerala to abandon the project. Satishchandran Nair, from the Kerala Natural History Society (KNHS), also toured the Silent Valley and highlighted its ecological value.

The year 1978 also witnessed a number of organised activities to resist the SVHP. In February, the members of the KNHS submitted a memorandum to the Chief Minister of the state requesting him to abandon the SVHP and to take up the construction of a thermal power station instead. At their General Assembly held in September, the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN) adopted a resolution specifically urging the Government of India to conserve the Western Ghats more effectively, including the undisturbed forests of the Silent Valley. Scientists assembled at the plenary session of the seminar on “Floristic in Peninsular India” held in connection with the 125th anniversary celebration of the Madras Herbarium organised by the Botanical Survey of India in December adopted a unanimous resolution urging the Government of Kerala to abandon the SVHP so that the endangered flora and fauna could be saved.

The IUCN in its letter dated February 12, 1979, urged the Chief Minister of Kerala to abandon the SVHP. The Health and Environment Brigade of KSSP, an interdisciplinary team consisting of M. K. Prasad, M. P. Parameswaran, V. K. Damodaran, K. N. Syamasundaran Nair and K. P. Kannan, in the July of that year, published “The Silent Valley Hydroelectric Project: A Techno-Economic and Socio-Political Assessment.” The High Court of Kerala stayed the construction of the SVHP

in the month of August. On October 21, 1979, WWF, KSSP and KNHS jointly convened a public meeting in Thiruvananthapuram to deliberate on the measures taken by the Government of Kerala to protect the Silent Valley. Salim Ali was to inaugurate the gathering. The KSEB, with a view to silencing the critics of the SVHP, obtained an injunction against the meeting. This injunction required conservationists and friends of nature to desist from organizing public gatherings to discuss the SVHP for a period of four days. The attempt by the KSEB to stifle the freedom of expression provoked widespread condemnation. Newspapers like *The Hindu* came out with strong editorials against such antidemocratic measures. However, the delegates who reached the VJT hall covered their mouths with black cloth, marched and met at the Thambanoor Park. On November 25, KSSP and KNHS organised a seminar on the SVHP at Thiruvananthapuram. The seminar facilitated a detailed discussion on the SVHP and related issues with ecologists, academicians and trade union leaders.

November 1979 witnessed a volte-face in the Central Government's attitude towards the SVHP. The new Government under Prime Minister Charan Singh requested the Chief Minister of Kerala for a review of the decision of the previous Government with regard to the SVHP because of a number of representations against it. The Centre decided to send M. S. Swaminathan to the Silent Valley on a mission to assess the ecological viability of the SVHP. The following year began with the High Court vacating the stay on the construction of SVHP that it had issued in the previous August. But this triumph was short-lived. On January 12, 1980, a small group under S. Sarma met the Governor, Jyothi Venkatachellam and requested her to put on hold the construction of the project, at least till a popular ministry assumed office in Kerala. Following this, the next day the Governor issued a stay order and the

construction was temporarily halted. This was the second victory to the conservationists following the High Court order of August 1979.

With the return of Indira Gandhi as Prime Minister in January 1980, the controversy over the SVHP entered a new phase. Indira Gandhi requested the Government of Kerala to abandon the construction of the SVHP and to study all aspects of the project thoroughly before resuming its construction. Meanwhile, KSSP observed March 15, 1980 as the Silent Valley day. The Government of Kerala, on April 26, 1980, conducted a seminar in Thiruvananthapuram to discuss various aspects of the Silent Valley project. In July 1980, Mrs. Gandhi requested the Chief Minister of Kerala to consider possibilities of alternative projects for meeting the power needs of the state. In the August of 1980 she met the Chief Minister of the state and decided to appoint yet another committee headed, this time, by M. G. K. Menon, the then Secretary of the Department of Science and Technology. It was to consist of four members nominated by the Government of Kerala and an equal number nominated by the Centre.

In October 1980, the Government of India made it mandatory that all developmental projects with considerable ecological imbalance and risk should seek clearance from the Ministry of Environment and Forests (MoEF) in advance. In December 1980, the Government of Kerala made a desperate bid to forestall criticism on environmental grounds by declaring the entire Silent Valley Reserve Forests a National Park, which meant that felling operations would no longer be permitted. After a couple of months, in January 1980, however, the Government of Kerala attempted to undo its earlier decision by modifying that order to exclude the 830 hectares affected by the SVHP. The environmentalists lost no time in reacting against this governmental strategy.<sup>8</sup>

In January 1981, Mrs. Gandhi declared in the Science Congress at Varanasi that the Silent Valley would be protected. In July 1982, the *Prakrithi Samrakshana Samithi* (Association for the Protection of Nature), an eco-social organisation led by the writers of Kerala, submitted a united appeal from scientists, writers and social activists in a last ditch attempt to save the Silent Valley. The Menon Committee submitted its report in the December of 1982 after thoroughly examining various aspects of the SVHP. This report too emphasized the ecological significance of the Silent Valley, and accordingly, the SVHP was shelved in 1983. Thus, at least in the Indian context, the SVHP became the only case in which a hydroelectric project once sanctioned was abandoned for purely ecological reasons. On September 7, 1985, the area was notified as a National Park.

While trying to understand the fight for the preservation of the Silent Valley, it is important to compare and contrast its achievements with other ecological struggles that took place in India. India, a country with pre-industrial, industrial and post-industrial economies existing side by side and with a population of over a billion and limited resources, has witnessed many ecological struggles due to conflicting interests and the dominant group's exploitative enterprises. The *Chipko* Movement in Utter Pradesh resisted massive deforestation and its bad effects on the rural community that had forest at the centre of its economy and culture. At Balliapal in Orissa, locals agitated against a proposed missile base that would have destroyed fertile cultivable land and got the project abandoned. In Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat and Maharashtra, tribespeople opposed the construction of the Sardar Sarovar Dam on the river Narmada as thousands of them would go homeless once the dams are constructed, as the locality they are living in would be under water. At Mavoor in Kerala, people resisted the pollution of air and the waters of the river Chaliyar by the

wastes from a rayon mill. This movement unlike others, gained popularity after thirty years of its inception when people experienced the ill effects the factory had on their health. Such agitations have been of importance in terms of the gravity of the struggles and their repercussion on the socio-political situation of the state/country. These were mass movements, wherein illiterate and poor tribespeople or village communities were fighting for their habitats, livelihood, health and social justice, to which intellectual support was extended by social activists later. The sole catchword used by those who wanted to implement these projects was “employment for thousands” and a life that would evolve structuring itself around the project and the benefits the locals can have from it. The rhetoric almost always employed development and ecology as binaries. But due to the harm the proposed projects did to the respective communities, they stood up against it and fought it. But the Silent Valley was fought on the argument that the disturbance the proposed hydroelectric project would cause to the plateau, which has been untouched for more than 50 million years, will be disastrous in the future. Lion-tailed macaque, a species found only in this valley became the symbol of the cause and thronged the public sphere for a while.

The statewide campaign to resist the construction of the hydroelectric project in the Silent Valley differs immensely from similar environmental protests regarding the choice of protest sites. Different from movements like the *Narmada Bachavo Andolan* (NBA) and the *Chipko* Movement, the protests against the SVHP were organised not in and around the project site. The protest was largely reinforced and popularised by activities in the literary and cultural fields. Such a modus operandi is quite unusual for an Indian environmental movement in the light of various environmental histories (Guha, *Environmentalism* 114; Arnold and Guha 18; Guha,

*Social Ecology* 6). As one of the activists of the Silent Valley movement, R. K. Ramesh, remarked, those who organised against the SVHP were a small group of professionals shocked by the decision of the State Government to build a dam in the Silent Valley. After deciding the formation of The Society for the Protection of the Silent Valley, they wrote letters and submitted representations to the authorities concerned and interested and similar minded groups inside and outside the country. Their efforts achieved their intended goal when organisations like IUCN, WWF, and BNHS came forward to help them. Despite their success in raising global alarm, this mode of operation distanced them from the people who live in and around the Silent Valley (personal interview).

Apart from the political, administrative, legal and scientific actions to save the Silent Valley, the ecological mission and the awareness campaign undertaken by various organisations and individuals too ultimately resulted in the success of the campaign. Consequently, a substantial part of the political leadership of the state began to conceive development as a means of attaining and sustaining prosperity for the living population and for the posterity with minimal environmental impact. The presence of a large number of teachers and youth organisations in the Save the Silent Valley Campaign (SSVC) turned the students and the youth sensitive to environmental issues. The vigorous campaign introduced the youth of the state to similar activities in the rest of the country and in other parts of the world. The participation of the youth was ensured by organising a series of seminars and debates on the SVHP in various educational institutes. There were many such events: on November 25, 1979, K. K. Neelakantan, M. P. Parameswaran and Sathishchandran Nair presented papers on the Silent Valley at the Kerala University Student Centre; on November 23, 1979, a discussion was held at the Indian School of Social Sciences, in

which K. Vijayachandran and M. P. Parameswaran argued for and against the SVHP respectively; and on December 13, 1979 Satishchandran Nair talked on the significance of saving the Silent Valley at the Institute of English, Kerala University.

The strategies of various groups ranged from the most common mode of distributing pamphlets and holding public meetings to organising performances and exhibitions of indigenous art forms. The most significant contribution to educating the common folk came from people like S. Prabhakaran Nair and John C. Jacob. Nair toured the countryside of north Malabar and pleaded for forest conservation. The people of north Malabar also benefited from the activities of Jacob as he had trained scores of young ecologists and nature lovers, who later became the champions of environmental conservation. He succeeded in mobilizing the youth of Malabar through the formation of nature clubs, the activities of which introduced them to the ecological crisis in general and to the threat to the Silent Valley in particular.

Experts from various fields and disciplines urged the Government of India, as well as the Government of Kerala to desist from proceeding with the SVHP. Internationally reputed ecologists like Salim Ali and Madhav Gadgil, renowned social scientists like M. N. Srinivas and K. N. Raj, eminent scientists like M. S. Swaminathan and C. V. Radhakrishnan and prominent personalities such as K. P. S. Menon made representations to both the Central and the State Governments to abandon the SVHP as they considered it a sin against posterity. Salim Ali wrote:

Having visited most of the major forests of India over the past six decades, I am convinced that the Silent Valley is undoubtedly one of India's ecologically most valuable areas and must be preserved. Short-sighted projects with limited objectives should not be pushed through at enormous costs to the community at large. (qtd. in Sugathakumari, "Silent Valley: A Case Study 14)

Disregarding the organizational support of their political parties to the SVHP and despite their political divide, some of the members of the State Legislative Assembly like K. V. Surendranath of CPI, C. Narayana Pillai from INC, Varkala Radhakrishnan and P. Govinda Pillai of CPI(M) strongly opposed the project. Along with the politicians from the state, national figures like Piloo Modi, Krishna Kant, Subramoniam Swamy, Yogendra Makwana, Sitaram Kesari, Margaret Alva, to name a few, too supported the efforts of the environmentalists by urging the Central Government not to proceed with the project. S. Sarma, who later became the Minister for Power in Kerala, has been a persistent presence in the fight to protect the Silent Valley. Virtually all other ministers of the state who handled the power portfolio except Mr. Sarma tried to revive the SVHP.

Some of the others who actively challenged the SVHP include Joseph John, P. K. Uthaman, V. N. Chandran, R. K. Ramesh and A. Achyuthan along with many people who remained unknown. The public sphere of Kerala was vibrant with activities like open meetings, seminars, poster exhibitions, slideshows, recital of poems and protest marches. Intellectuals, scientists, artists and lawyers joined the protest. “Save Silent Valley” committees were formed in different parts of the country—Bombay, Madras and Bangalore. This vigorous campaign led to the production and dissemination of a large volume of literature on nature conservation in both Malayalam and English.

Besides scientists, ecologists and politicians, artists also joined the resistance group. Artists used their popularity to propagate the message of environmental conservation. Mrinalini Sarabhai, as a part of the campaign against the SVHP, visited Kerala and put up a series of dance performances in association with the Citizens'

Committee for Saving the Silent Valley. One of the special attractions of her performance was *The Fight for the Silent Valley*, an item emphasising the need for conserving forests. She travelled all over the country performing this item in her attempt to enlist popular support to the resistance campaign. Recalling her involvement with the Silent Valley movement, she writes:

I am happy that we did not remain silent when the Silent Valley was facing threats of destruction. The silent, solid friendship among those who stood up for the Silent Valley cause can never be broken. [...] We feel happy when we are able to do something, in our limited capacity, to save a small part of our planet, for, it is we ourselves who benefit when we try to do something for the world. (67)

M. B. Srinivasan, the vocalist and composer, visited Kerala with his choral troupe during December 1979 and presented a music concert at Thiruvananthapuram. The songs presented were mainly on the themes of conservation, pollution and protection of the Silent Valley with a view to enlisting public support for the campaign. Artists from different parts of the state produced drawings and paintings on the Silent Valley and exhibited them in public places. Anti-SVHP groups organised street plays throughout the state to educate the public on environmental issues. Most of the academicians and public intellectuals were with the SSVC. But this campaign was spearheaded by different groups in various parts of Kerala. In the northern part of Kerala, especially Kozhikode, it was headed by The Society for the Protection of the Silent Valley. This group included people like M. K. Prasad, A. Achyuthan, K. T. Thomas, V. M. N. Namboothiripad, L. Namasivayem, V. Vijayakumar, Jose Philip, M. V. Geetha and others. It was this group that initiated the protest and internationalized the issue through their correspondence with international and

national organizations. Later the activists of the Society were joined by the KSSP, which had by then gained massive grassroots support. The KSSP could mobilize considerable support against the project through its vast organizational network. Further North, John C. Jacob guided the campaign to resist the SVHP. In the South, the Prakrithi Samrakshana Samithi, a literary organization, led the movement against the SVHP. Intellectuals cutting across disciplinary boundaries came out against the SVHP. The chief among them were Laurie Baker, the British-born Indian architect; K. P. Kannan, the economist; Sukumar Azhikode, the Malayalam professor, public speaker and critic; S. Satishchandran Nair and Velaayudhan Nair, biologists; Salim Ali and K. K. Neelakantan, ornithologists; V. K. Damodaran, electrical engineer and M. P. Parameswaran, science writer and nuclear physicist.

One of the channels through which the resistance gathered momentum was letters in the columns of Malayalam and English newspapers. Though editorially most newspapers espoused the SVHP, they opened their *Letters to the Editor* columns to different views on the Silent Valley. Malayalam newspapers started publishing reports on the SVHP from 1977 onwards. Irrespective of their political biases, the editorials of all popular newspapers stood firmly for development. The exceptions were the Thrissur-based Malayalam daily, *Express* and the English daily, *The Hindu*. In June, July and August 1979, the *Express* published editorials opposing the SVHP. *The Hindu* too published more than a dozen editorials on the issue supporting the environmental cause. The *Letter to the Editor* columns of these newspapers carried the names of many public figures. This include persons like Romulus Whitaker, the American-born specialist on snakes; M. K. Prasad, the botanist who spearheaded the Silent Valley campaign; K. N. Raj, the economist; Madhav Gadgil, the renowned environmentalist; K. J. Yesudas, the playback singer; Laurie Baker, the distinguished

architect and environmental planner; M. Krishnan, the naturalist and T. Shivaji Rao, the Visakhapatanam-based environmentalist.

The literature of Malayalam played a significant role in the campaign to resist the SVHP. The threat to the Silent Valley shocked a major portion of the writers and galvanized them. Never before in the socio-political history of Kerala had writers displayed such unity and resolve in opposing the policies of the government. Towards the close of the 1970s, the pioneers of the environmental movement in Kerala were joined by a team of writers who understood the value of preserving the physical environment. These writers were initiated into environmentalism by those in the natural and physical sciences, through their writings in the print media. By the time literary figures entered the arena, the fight against the SVHP had reached a critical stage. The contribution of the writers to the Silent Valley movement were not confined to creative writings but the writers, regardless of their ideological and political differences, formed an eco-social organisation, *Prakrithi Samrakshana Samithi* (Association for the Protection of Nature). Besides poets, who were evidently the mainstay of literary environmentalism in the state during this period, writers like Vaikom Muhammad Basheer, S. K. Pottakkat, O. V. Vijayan, K. Bhaskaran Nair and Sukumar Azhikode too inspired and contributed to the campaign. The enthusiasm displayed by the writers in opposing the destruction of nature is obvious from the publication, by the *Samithi*, of *Vanaparvam*, an anthology of thirty-four poems on environmental themes written during this period. The *Samithi* also circulated a pamphlet stressing the importance of conserving nature:

Nature is our mother. Approach her with reverence and love. If our ways are destructive, she will also be equally furious in her response. Conservation of nature is a concern the world over. This is because the

sustenance of life depends on the conservation of nature.<sup>9</sup> (Jayachandran Nair 10)

The involvement of writers transcended the usual literary mode and even entered the highly esoteric legal terrain too. It was Sujatha Devi, a poet, who drafted the first petition for the Silent Valley case in the High Court of Kerala. The petition is drafted in the style of a literary piece:

The Silent Valley is a magnificent poetry of the earth. It has a unique geographical situation and ecological condition. The salient features of the valley have been the subject matter of international recognition and appreciation. (2)

The triumph of the campaign cannot be attributed just to the activities in the fields of science and environment. The activities of KSSP helped in bringing scientific issues close to common people by reducing the hiatus between art and science, and art in the dexterous hands of its volunteers proved an excellent medium for communicating scientific issues. Almost for a decade, some of the major writers of Kerala were aware of the denaturalisation happening around them. Issues like the depletion of water bodies, pollution, deforestation, and cruelty towards wild animals were taken up by some of them. Since writers like M. T. Vasudevan Nair, C. Radhakrishnan, O. V. Vijayan and T. Padmanabhan enjoyed a wide reading public, such concerns reached the public easily. I do not suggest that these writers existed as a homogenous group that focused on human interference with nature. They were, however, talking about the dangers that would befall humanity and the planet if humans continue their relentless pursuit of material progress. Furthermore, these writers were conscious of the deep bond that existed between Malayalam literature and the environment, for as O. N. V. Kurup puts it:

The landscape of Kerala, with a network of rivers and backwaters with upper, middle and lower berths of the Ghats, the midland and the coastal delta, is very much present as if in a thousand miniature paintings in innumerable folk-songs as well as in the modern works of fiction and poetry. (“A Requiem” 84)

This campaign against the SVHP is significant, as it disproved the widely accepted notion that environmentalism directed solely towards conservation is a phenomenon peculiar to the rich nations of the North. This notion of environmentalism rests on Ronald Inglehart’s analysis that discontented with the materialistic values of their societies, a considerable section of the people of affluent nations willingly forego such values in favour of alternative life styles (qtd. in Sarkar 272). However, this belief presupposes that such a move towards post-materialistic values is possible only in societies where a certain level of affluence is already achieved. In other words, this theory holds that nations or societies can generate environmental movements only after attaining material prosperity. The campaign against the SVHP, I think, is important in that despite the radical developmental strategies followed by most developing countries of the time, it told us that environmentalism could be a legitimate concern of developing societies.<sup>10</sup>

*Chipko* in India and the movement of rubber tappers in Brazil headed by Chico Mendes during the 1970s heralded the rise of environmentalism as a powerful socio-political movement in the postcolonial countries of Asia, Africa and South America. In spite of the success and popularity of these movements, the postcolonial governments of these countries continued the developmental policies imbibed from their colonial past and the contemporary West. It is during the second half of the 1970s that this conception of economic and industrial development was challenged. In

India it is the campaign against the SVHP that challenged this deeply rooted and commonly accepted mode of progress. The prevailing beliefs of progress in these societies, as Faber observes, regarded large-scale industrialisation and power generation as well as mechanised, chemically fertilised and irrigated agriculture as the only possible means of development (6). Notwithstanding its international appeal during the life of the struggle in the seventies and eighties of the last century, the campaign against the SVHP did not elicit any further attention from academics, social scientists and conservationists. The exclusion of the campaign against the SVHP from the theoretical discussions on Indian environmental movements, in my view, is largely due to the widely held belief that in societies like India concern for the environment follows and most often is a corollary of the struggle for social justice. In his recent review of social movements in India, Shah (250) states that in most instances people's struggle for livelihood and access to forest and other natural resources are described as environmental movements. The campaign against the SVHP, on the other hand, was for purely ecological reasons, and thus holds a unique position in the history of environmental struggles in the erstwhile colonies.

Apart from passing references by a few writers,<sup>11</sup> there has not been any serious academic attempt at exploring and analysing the campaign to oppose the SVHP per se. This obvious neglect towards the movement is all the more intriguing in my view as all other social and political aspects of Kerala has been widely followed—debated, contested and detailed—by sociologists, economists, anthropologists and historians. The popular and specialised literature written in Malayalam after the 1980s on subjects ranging from literary criticism to energy security and Kerala's development to ecology reveal a very clear fact. They all, more or less, agree on the idea that the Silent Valley agitation determined and directed some of the future

discourses in the state. For instance, some of the articles in *Haritha Niroopanam Malayalathil* (Ecocriticism in Malayalam), a collection of 52 articles on ecocritical and ecoliterary concerns in Malayalam edited by G. Madhusoodanan in 2002, suggest that the Silent Valley along with several national and international socio-political factors in the 70s turned Malayali writers' attention to ecological crisis.

Madhusoodanan's volume is divided into four parts. While the first section is on eco-aesthetics and ecocriticism in general, the second brings together various ecocritical studies of individual poets and their poems. The eco-concerns in Malayalam fiction is the core of the third section, whereas the last section deals with the expression of nature in the fine arts. The volume opens with a prefatory essay by Athmaraman on the early days of ecological awareness in Kerala. This preface, "Harithavabodham: Adyankurungal" (The Nascence of Eco-consciousness), suggests that the Silent Valley controversy was instrumental in galvanising Malayali writers against ecological destruction. Apart from this introductory piece, no other essay in *Haritha Niroopanam Malayalathil* deals with the Valley or its effect on Malayalam literature, although some of the studies deal with writers who have been active in the agitation. This is quite understandable as there are no serious critical studies on Malayali writers' responses to the call of the Valley. Hence, Madhusoodanan had to request Athmaraman to write an introductory piece elaborating the SVHP controversy from a literary perspective.

Two years before the publication of this collection, in 2000, Madhusoodanan published *Kathayum Paristhithiyum* (Fiction and the Environment), an ecocritical study of Malayalam fiction. Similar to his edited volume, this study too does not engage with the Valley. The absence of the Valley and its "influence" is significant as much of the studies are devoted to short fiction in Malayalam published during the

last quarter of the twentieth century. Similarly, the special issue of *Sahityalokam*, a journal of Kerala Sahitya Akademi, on environment in 1995 too had nothing much to say on the literary significance of the Silent Valley. T. P. Sukumaran's *Paristhithi Soundaryasastrattinoru Mukhavura* (A Preface to Eco-Aesthetics), one of the first attempts to theorise eco-aesthetics in Malayalam, like the ones that followed it, is silent on the part played by the Valley in inspiring Malayali creative imagination. The Malayali intelligentsia has always shown interest in debates on issues of ecology and development. Significantly, though there have been books published in Malayalam on issues like the Balliapal agitation in Orissa and the Bhopal chemical disaster, not even a single book has been published so far in Malayalam on the Silent Valley movement. Does this academic antipathy towards the unique environmental struggle that took place in south India suggest the prevalence of a deep-rooted suspicion among them towards the environmental movement? Or does the society of Kerala in general and the academia in particular reflect the dismissive attitude of the various state governments towards the environmental problems that would have occurred due to the SVHP?

Whatever the case may be, the campaign to preserve the Silent Valley could be seen as akin to the elitist attempt to aesthetically appropriate nature, which is epitomized in the creation of several national parks and sanctuaries the world over. Again, the artistic enthusiasm to conserve wilderness is simply seen as a means of registering artists' dissatisfaction with rampant urbanisation. This line of reasoning stems from the general belief that environmental activism, and by extension, green politics in general, is essentially against the minutest human interferences in the social as well as natural world.<sup>12</sup>

The general perception is that the desire for the presence of a concrete unsullied natural order and the urge to harmonise with it is an effort to distract the focus from burning social issues.<sup>13</sup> Quite different from this, those who campaigned against the SVHP argued that the forest is for the entire society, not just for the industry and the market. To those who are directly dependent on it, the forest is the source of their living and thus sustains such communities. The recognition of this does not necessarily mean the deification of nature. Neither does it refer to the persistence of a utopian state of human-nature coexistence suggested by spiritual/radical ecology.

In the international political scene, 1980s was a decade that witnessed the rise and consolidation of forces that supported free-market ideologies. Following the short-lived triumph of the Green Movement in popularising their concerns and in lobbying, governments in Western Europe and the United States during the 1960s and 1970s, 1980s witnessed the steady rise of the conservative Republicans under Reagan in the US and the Conservatives with Thatcher in Britain. The free-market ideology promoted by these governments has virtually dominated the global political field ever since and Conservatives have always been hostile to the cause of conservation.<sup>14</sup>

However, it would be instructive to draw a distinction between modern environmentalism on the one hand and traditional eco-friendly cultures on the other. A product of industrial culture, “environmentalism,” as Kay Milton observes, “rises out of the specific need of conserving nature which has been suffering at the hands of its human inhabitants” (27). Similarly, the concerns of ecocritics and the authors of environmental literature too are informed by the political audacity as well as the philosophical realisation that criticised the instrumental approach towards nature (Slaymaker 130). The traces of ecological wisdom that pervade traditional cultures, notwithstanding their remarkable tolerance towards the natural environment, were not

environmental in spirit. While the perspective that dominated the traditional nature writings was mainly regional and national, the perspective that characterises the ecoliterature is chiefly global (Slaymaker 131). Different from this, environmentalism is a politically activated “concern to protect the environment through human effort and responsibility [...]” (Milton 33). Environmentalism as a political concern opposes the harmful impacts of the modern market economy. The allusion to pre-modern ecological wisdom, nevertheless points to the existence of alternative cultures available within local traditions thereby rendering an indigenous aura to the fight to conserve the environment. According to Milton, such strategies on the part of the environmentalists attempt to localise the environmental movement by means of emphasising a cultural status quo in which the previous generations have always understood their place in the world (33). This affinity to traditional cultures is indeed a way of rejecting the general accusation that environmentalists merely emulate the concerns of the advanced societies or that they are the agents of foreign agencies interested in disrupting the advancement of third world countries.

The modern Western attitude towards nature exhibits a complete rupture from the traditional perception of life and environment. However, as Glacken observes, virtually, every thinker in the West, from the fifth century B. C. to the present, has dealt with the question of the relationship of human beings with their environment (McIntosh 289). He holds that the interest in humans’ relation to their environment permeates mythology, history, literature and art (Glacken, “Traces” 246). “Man and nature” as Ekirch observes, “is the basic fundamental fact of history”. Despite this, the prominent Western conception of nature regarded it as “that part of the physical world other than humanity and its constructions, and natural commonly implies phenomena taking place without human involvement” (qtd. in McIntosh 289). According to this

idea, nature or wilderness is considered a threatening, evil area that has to be tamed and manipulated for human benefits.<sup>15</sup> Along with this antagonistic view, the West also cherishes a romantic view of nature. This attitude of nature as a realm of comfort and a place to escape, in the words of Salleh, is the result of an excessively aggressive and violent culture.

One of the major theoretical challenges that one has to encounter in an enquiry as the present one is the ambiguousness discernable among writers towards the so-called eco-friendly traits of their traditional culture and the so-called progressive elements of their modern society. This ambiguity that characterised the conservationists in general and the literary environmentalists in particular is of special interest to both literary critics and social scientists in the wake of the participation of Marxist organisations like the KSSP in the SSVC. But this aspect of the conservationist movement in Kerala still remains largely unexplored. This is not surprising as no serious effort has been made in the three decades after the Silent Valley controversy to document the struggles undertaken by the literary and scientific communities of Kerala to protect the Silent Valley. Apart from a few journalistic reports on, and highly technical studies of, the proposed hydroelectric project and the significance of the Valley from techno-economic perspective, the literary-ecological facet of this movement has nearly been ignored.

The question of tradition versus modernity has been quite elaborately discussed in the last decades of the twentieth century by Partha Chatterjee (6) in the context of colonial society and Meenakshi Mukherjee (3) in the context of colonial literatures). A common thread that can be discerned in these studies is the ambivalence displayed by their respective subjects towards the two contesting antagonistic sources available to them namely Indian and Western. These studies

reveal that though the colonial intelligentsia and writers tried to model their society and literature along the Western principles, their efforts remained Indian in essence. A similar strain is visible in the fight to save the Silent Valley. Until then, environmental struggles in developing countries were more-or-less based on livelihood and human rights issues, whereas most of the Western environmental movements fought for the preservation of the wilderness even at the cost of alienating marginalised indigenous communities.

Though the Silent Valley entailed no direct human costs and the thrust of the conservationist argument was the preservation of the pristine forests of the area for their ecological as well as aesthetic significance, the writers resorted to the seemingly conservationist traits of their traditional cultures. There are two angles at work here: those who stood for development alleged conservationists to be aping the Western models of natural preservation, blocking the development of developing countries. Conservationists always insisted that they were fighting for the preservation of indigenous lifestyles, whose virtues seem to be fast vanishing in the rush of Western models of development. Curiously, both the sides were presenting the local against the alien.

This became essential as a vast majority of the politicians, bureaucrats and technocrats in Kerala during the 1970s and the 80s saw conservationist efforts and arrangements as necessarily reactionary. Along with this, they perceived the enthusiasm for conservation as an emulation of the West. A significant question that rises out of this ambivalence of the society towards literary environmentalists is whether their rejection of the literary activities oriented towards conservation as reactionary and utopian, a mere ploy to distract the public from the environmental discourse. The fact that such organised propaganda collapsed before the literary

activities to save the Silent Valley testifies to the power the writers wielded over the common people. In spite of the differences in their attitude towards nature, the literary community sustained itself as a quite formidable pressure group. The strength of the literary collectivity rested on the fact that the collectivity as a whole promoted and presented an eclectic attitude towards environment and development. This is evident from the literary texts written with an eye to create environmental awareness that linked the ecological crisis with other burning issues that prevailed in the society of Kerala, like the oppression of women, tribespeople and devaluation of morals and ethics. Such diverse concerns require varied approaches, and therefore, the literary strategies to highlight these problems differ significantly from one another. Hence, instead of viewing them as independent texts, I would like to read the entire corpus of creative work published during the period with the proclaimed aim of saving the Silent Valley as a comprehensive, organic and complementary unit. To see the writers as assuming conflicting positions in their concerns towards environment destroys the integrity of their efforts. Despite the differences in their strategies to regenerate the environment, none of the writer-activists<sup>16</sup> of the Silent Valley movement was critical of each other. Of course, there were criticisms from within the literary community. Writers like Balamaniyyamma and Chemmanam Chacko, who criticised other writers who opposed the SVHP, argued in favour of economic progress and industrial development even at the cost of environment. But the writers who fought for the conservation of the Silent Valley regarded the efforts of their fellow-writers as complementary.

The penchant for traditional cultural artefacts like sacred groves and similar cultural institutions gave a conservative/reactionary air to their activities. The literary community realised the significance of preserving the eco-friendly traits of traditional

culture and their continuance. This, they thought, would lead to the effective conservation of the environment and undo the damage done to the natural environment. The writers realised that a certain conservatism can be beneficial to conservationism. Their “conservative” leaning thus is not a reactionary trait. Thus, these literary and environmental endeavours call for a return to what Coupe termed “the grassroots of culture.” This, as he observes, involves tracing the relation such cultures bore to nature and the efforts of those former generations who tried to speak for nature (5-6).

As F. R. Leavis and Deny Thompson observe, “there can be no mere going back.” The efforts to re-establish the old order by abandoning the present will in no way contribute to the furthering of the environmental cause. The going back, in the words of Leavis and Thompson, should make us aware of what has been lost. This awareness would ultimately inspire us to strive for a new worldview. Without this awareness, one is uncertain of what to “strive towards”. There will be no striving in such a situation, but, as they observe, “an absolute surrender to the progress of the machine” (76). This going back, then, does not suggest an indifference to the present nor does it negate the future. Instead, this retrospection on the part of writers anticipates the evolving of an eco-sensitive future. As Evans remarks, “Conservation is often presented as if it represented a clinging to the past: not so— what we are engaged in preserving is opportunities for the future” (37).

The writings on the Silent Valley seem not to account for the eco-sensitiveness of the pre-Silent Valley phase of Malayalam literature. Such efforts usually trace the emergence of eco-literature in the language back to the Save Silent Valley Movement (Athmaraman, “Harithavabodham” XXIV; Leelavathi 109; Sukumaran, *Nallavanaaya* 61). The eco-literature produced in Malayalam during the early eighties was, no

doubt, written with the specific purpose of opposing the SVHP. The coeval nature of their appearance had the effect of ascribing causality between the two events. My proposition might appear problematic considering the reinforcing effect of the literary participation on the Silent Valley movement and in turn, the influence of the Silent Valley on the writers. The rise of modern eco-literature in Malayalam and the Silent Valley movement were hardly a happy coincidence, though in asserting it one comes back to the question of causality. But the link between the two, instead of a cause-effect relation that is neither inevitable nor useful, is a mutually reinforcing one. This study will explore the means by which this mutuality is achieved and its significance in literary as well as social and political fields by discussing the ways in which the two events could be critically viewed.

The revival of a potent eco-aesthetics in Malayalam during the late seventies and early eighties of the last century, however, has failed to rouse much critical acclaim. Those who stood for ecology and conservation of nature were scornfully dismissed by the critical circle as *Marakkavikal* or tree poets (Sugathakumari, “Enviyum” 28; Sukumaran, *Nallavanaaya* 61). The label, in a sense, identifies this group of writers as animistic, romantic and devotees of nature. The present study will investigate the ways in which the Silent Valley movement caused the furthering of eco-aesthetics among writers in Kerala and their readership, and in turn, how nature writings of the period shaped and furthered the environmental movement. One can positively assert that a self-conscious eco-movement began in Kerala in the 1970s and 80s with the Silent Valley movement. Alongside the claims for region specific and issue based literary involvement in the Silent Valley movement, this study will try also to trace disjunctures in the literary productions of the period that betray their concerns with larger issues of human-nature interactions.

This phase of eco-awareness and activism is not a total rupture from the previous eco-benign culture of the region. The spearheads of modern environmentalism in Kerala most often trace their legacy back to the cultural and religious institutions of the past. This belief in the existence of an ideal, eco-friendly society is reiterated in *Kavutheendalle* (Do not Desecrate Sacred Groves), a collection of essays on environmental themes written by Sugathakumari, one of the most ardent environmentalists and a major poet in Malayalam (38-40). Besides Sugathakumari, efforts to trace a traditional, benign ecological wisdom could also be discerned in the writings of O. N. V. Kurup, Vishnu Narayanan Namboothiri, N. V. Krishnavarier, D. Vinayachandran, K. G. Sankara Pillai, and K. Sachidanandan. Unlike the early writings that either described nature or grieved the loss of its charms, the writings of the early eighties were issue-based and seditious. The specificity of their subject matter is evident from the issues they addressed like the clearing of forests for developmental projects and plantations, the effects of destructive wars, the massive decline in arable land, the diminishing interest in agriculture and the depletion of water bodies.

The question of the influence of the Silent Valley movement on the writers of Malayalam is a complex one. It would indeed be naive to argue that it was the Silent Valley that kindled ecological awareness among the writers of Malayalam, for that would in effect neglect a long tradition of early eco-sensitive Malayalam literature. The writings of P. Kunhiraman Nair and Idasseri had already introduced their readers to the problem of the despoliation of environment. Writers from the very early decades of Malayalam literature, from Ezhuthacchan and Cherusseri to Asan, Vallathol and Changampuzha were also deeply rooted in the geography of Kerala.

So instead of perceiving the literary interest in issues concerning environment during the seventies and eighties merely as an offshoot of the Silent Valley movement, it would be fair to look at it as a continuation of the inspiration drawn from the earlier writers and the geographical and ecological particularities of their land. It could be, however, rightly said that the Silent Valley controversy ignited the long tradition of awareness of nature in Malayalam literature into a fully focused political and ideological concern. The Silent Valley controversy furnished the writers of Kerala with an opportunity to foreground the underlying eco-consciousness that had hitherto characterised the earlier literature. They regarded the period opportune also for the fact that the issue of environmental crisis was then being debated globally. In 1972, the first United Nations Conference on the Human Environment was held in Stockholm. In India, the *Chipko* movement attracted the interest of politicians, environmentalists and journalists initiating discussions on the link between the large scale plundering of natural resources for industrial use and the loss of livelihood.

Perhaps behind my present effort to revisit the campaign to save the Silent Valley now—after almost three decades— at a critical juncture in human history when debates and concerns in the global political and scientific scenes are overwhelmingly concentrated on ecological issues like the melting of icecaps, rising sea levels, diminishing rainforests and variations in climatic patterns, is also an alarming sense of ecological angst. The issue is much more than the universal misgivings that persistently haunt us in the garb of these portent signs of environmental apocalypse. This overwhelming concern over the future of our existence, however, demands immediate academic consideration. The attempts of the KSEB to start another hydroelectric project in the area of the Silent Valley, namely Pathrakkadavu project, make it quite important that one learns the lessons of the

Silent Valley movement in order not to make similar mistakes one more time and such a concern is also my personal interest in the project.

The literary environmentalism in the context of Kerala, to adopt the terminology of Coupe, was “much more than a revival of mimesis” (the mere description of nature or its loss): it was “a new kind of pragmatics” (the critical assessment of modern human’s interaction with nature and its various eco-social consequences) (4). The literature of the period did not address nature as a background for human actions, neither did nature surface as an object to project human emotions. By addressing nature, the writers of the period challenged the rationale behind the concept of “progress” by means of industrialization and modern technologies. Though the goal of the literary environmentalism is to engage matters of life, living and literature in a systematic relationship, it also has a humanistic aspect. This aspect lies in the effort of the literary community to discover and communicate the irreversible and undesirable social effects of developmental projects instead of regretting them later. Though it is not the province of writers to rid developmental projects of their social and ecological effects, they can lead to such desirable changes by educating the public on such issues. Any developmental project, regardless of its magnitude, is liable to bring changes to the community involved. The literary community in Kerala, instead of resisting any such progressive social change, sought to preserve the status quo of the ecological community.

In doing so, writers of Kerala on both sides of the political as well as ideological divide yearned for alternative socio-economic and political outlooks while the existing political ideologies ranging from the Right to the Left firmly believed that the productivity of the economy must be enhanced at any cost. In relating themselves to the non-human world, the writers challenged what Coupe termed “complacent

culturalism” (4) that considers non-human species subordinate to the human. Their effort, like that of Aldo Leopold, was to widen the notion of community to include “soils, waters, plants, and animals” (355). In other words, as Thoreau remarked, they regarded man as inhabiting nature, rather than being just a member of society (1). The writer-activists of the Silent Valley movement realised the importance of cherishing such an ecocentric worldview. Along with this, they realised that earthly life is in a critical condition. This enthusiasm that surfaced among the writers would have been relegated (though efforts have been made to that effect) to a mere issue-based, propagandistic literature had the subsequent literary productions in Malayalam not offered resistance to the denaturalization of the planet.

A significant feature of this literary and artistic zeal to oppose the SVHP, and to sustain the evergreen forests of the Silent Valley is the recognition among the activists that the modern practice of demarcating the earth’s surface into commercial, industrial, residential, protected, and recreational zones is entirely alien to the inherited, native perceptions of nature. This reductionist view of nature is a legacy of the Enlightenment tradition. The danger with such a notion is that earth is no longer regarded as an organic entity. Instead, it is conceived in terms of several specialized, segregated units with specific economic, conservationist, or cultural applications. Thus, if viewed from such an angle, the struggle to save the “uninhabited” Valley from a potentially large hydroelectric project underscores the ecological premise that no part of the earth can be exploited for the “benefit” of the rest. It is this awareness that the entire nature is a contiguous stretch of land and other resources shared by the whole of humanity with equal rights and responsibilities that I term “critical habitat.”

This is the spirit that underlies the passage from Spivak I have cited as the epigraph to the chapter. While tradition (and the poets also nurture and are nurtured

by the tradition) considers the *rural* as *trees* and *fields*, the forces working against this tradition view the *rural* as data for mere statistical use. The writers of Kerala were alerting us to this grievous perspective and urging us to develop a sense of the “critical habitat” when they wrote their poems and essays against mapping Nature for plans, projects and productive energies.

The idea of the “critical habitat” thus owes its concerns and focus to Kenneth Frampton. In an essay called “Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance” Frampton defines “critical regionalism as that which declares open war against the megalopolis, particularly against the big city’s architectural forms.” Frampton believes that architectural forms of resistance include the local and regional that can sustain a “dialectical relation with nature” (21). It is important to realize that megaprojects that favours capital-intensive productions and consumption need not necessarily exploit or undo the natural balance that ecology provides, especially in regions, like the Silent Valley, with a known and recorded history of sustained and sustainable life of endangered species. The best writing I have examined in Malayalam of the Silent Valley decade amply testifies to this “critical habitat” consciousness and commitment.

I have borrowed the term, “critical habitat”, from the Endangered Species Act (ESA) passed by the United States Congress in 1973. According to the Act, critical habitats include “all areas essential to the conservation” of the species in question. Government agencies are prohibited from authorizing, funding or carrying out actions that "destroy or adversely modify" critical habitats. The notion of critical habitat is significant as most provisions of the Act aim at preventing extinction and direct the Government to ensure recovery of listed or endangered species.

However, I have adapted the concept of the critical habitat to refer to a specific eco-social attitude particularly among the writers and activists of the SSVC. Malayali writers and artists, as we will see in chapters II, III, and IV, reinforced the idea of the “critical habitat” through their literary and polemical texts. Their aim was not merely to preserve a specific valley, an ecosystem, or a species, rather they aimed at conserving entire natural habitats and larger ecosystems so as to make maximum socio-economic good with least ecological imbalance. Here the emphasis is on developing an ethics that extends much beyond the customary concerns of sustaining human comfort and leaving the means for continuing, if not improving, the resources of life for posterity; an ethics that ensures the preservation of biological diversity in terms of both species and ecosystems; and an ethics that reminds us that we are only one among several millions of species and are responsible to other species. Despite human beings’ considerable adaptive capabilities and scientific and technical advancements, societies will not survive without “breathable air, potable water, or food” (Paehlke, “Sustainability” 35)

The activists of the SSVC considered habitat-loss to be the primary threat to most imperiled species in the Valley. However, the environmentalists’ goal was not to preserve merely a few trees or animals endemic to the Valley. Rather, their effort was to reconceptualise sustainability in order to evolve a healthy and sustainable mode of living. The concept of sustainability is variously conceived by different groups. In the essay, “Sustainability,” Paehlke writes:

Conservation advocates often are most concerned with the sustainability of nature. For others, the meaning of sustainability is bound up with preserving human health and well-being, or—most broadly—‘quality of life.’ For still others, sustainability is primarily about sustaining resources to fuel industrial society as we know it. (35)

It is clear from this that sustainability has three components: environmental, social and economic. In this sense, sustainability refers to human endeavours to attain optimum well-being through the best utilization of locally available natural resources. This desire for well-being is coupled with an ecological awareness that inspires us to minimize ecological damage and resource depletion.

The literary fraternity that formed around the fight for the preservation of the Silent Valley stood the right of nature to exist on its terms. The Silent Valley, then, was only an immediate fact and symbol of human highhandedness. Literary responses to this potential ecological disaster, in time, also assumed a distinct political aura. The political nature of the literary activities is apparent from the formation of *Prakrithi Samrakshana Samithi*, an eco-social organisation founded and led by writers. The *Samithi* was one of the major resistance groups that opposed the construction of the SVHP. The large-scale dissemination of polemical writings by the writers came only after the formation of the *Samithi*. Despite being led by major writers, the concerns of the members of the *Samithi* were political as well as aesthetic. This destruction, as they realized, was not just ecological, but social too. “The struggle to save the Silent Valley” claims Sugathakumari, “did not stem from the merely emotional thought. Historical, ecological and economic considerations also weighed heavily” (“Silent Valley: A Case Study” 11). The presence of a perceivable political rationale that inspired their production contributed to the popularity of modern ecoliterature in the language. The political side of the ecological discourse catapulted by the SVHP caused a sea-change in the way the literary community approached nature. This political concern formed the underlying tenet of the literary works that came out during the Silent Valley controversy.

The activities of literary environmentalism did succeed in positioning environment as an aspect to reckon with in the rhetoric and process of development in the public sphere of Kerala. This unusual event exerted an immense influence over the consciousness of the “socio-ethical, aesthetic and conservational profile of Kerala” (Menon, “Foreword” XIII). But to see the abandoning of the project purely as the result of literary and environmental activities will be a digression from the truth. It was the pressure exerted by international conservation movements and other similar bodies that forced the Indian Government to shelve the project. It is also alleged that the shelving of the project was an attempt by the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi to boost her international image which had drastically suffered on account of the Emergency (Athmaraman, “Harithavabodham” XXXI). This speculation holds for the fact that the governments, both central and state, have never after displayed such stubbornness and interest in dealing with environmental issues, be it Narmada or Bhageerathi. Nevertheless, the success of the literary endeavours was phenomenal as more than any other single factor in the resistance campaign, they triumphed in raising the public consciousness on environmental issues.

The chapters that follow this will attempt to understand the effect of the literary community on the Silent Valley movement and the manner in which this effect is realised. Chapter II will analyse the rhetoric of the movement by reading popular science writings on ecology and conservation in general and on the Silent Valley in particular. The chapter will also enquire into the ideological aspects of writers’ attitude towards science. In the following chapter (III), I will read the ways in which writers were trying to get to the masses at large through both literary as well as other modes of expression such as brochures and articles. It will also discuss whether they were trying to negotiate with the public to convince them that they were not anti-

development and whether they had a viable alternative for the space that technology and science at large should occupy. In Chapter IV, I will investigate the roots of the power that cultural figures wield in a society like Kerala's to have been so successful in obtaining a need fulfilled even when they were such a micro-minority. In their fervour to oppose the SVHP, the writers of the period in Kerala published a large quantity of literature with nature as their theme. The Silent Valley has so powerfully invaded the literary as well as the public mind of Kerala that one of the contemporary writers of Malayalam, Shihabudheen Poithumkatavu, could write "A lion-tailed smile burst out from his Silent Valley moustache" in his 2001 short story "Bodheswaran". I have confined my reading in this study to the reading of texts, literary and otherwise, directly connected to the Silent Valley because the writers have not shied themselves away from voicing their concerns regarding the SVHP. This will also help us in understanding the mutual reinforcing influence of an eco-social movement—Save the Silent Valley Campaign—and Malayalam literature. Such an attempt will have to be essentially ecocritical in nature. However, this would have become essential if the writers of the period had concealed their resentment by means of the usual literary, metaphorical expressions. This, however, need not be taken for an absolute denial of the presence of an all pervasive, subtle strain of eco-wisdom in the writings of the period. As Paniker observes, it is possible that the less strident works and not so explicit attempts by the writers might be the right place to enquire the pervasiveness of literary ecology in Malayalam. But as Madhusoodanan remarks, there can be two major approaches to the study of nature in literature. The first one is to view literature from an ecological angle and the second is to study specifically the literature written with an ecological theme. In the first approach, any work can be analysed ecocritically irrespective of its thematic concerns. In the second approach, since the

writer directly addresses the ecological question the link is evident (Madhusoodanan, *Kathayum Paristhithiyum* 23).

This study encompasses texts from various genres in spite of being different in their formal and structural aspects. This is due to the commonality of their broader thematic concerns, namely, their concern with conservationist efforts in general and the fate of the Silent Valley forest in particular. Such a framework becomes essential in a study such as this just for the fact that a comprehensive reading of creative writings on conservation has to be informed and supplemented by non-literary compositions and concerns. It is in this context that I intend to include polemical writings that include popular science writings on the Silent Valley, booklets and pamphlets published by various NGOs, documentaries and journalistic pieces together with the literary texts concerned directly or tangentially with the Silent Valley. Also because the environmental debate originated as a scientific and political discourse before being taken over by writers, the reading of such non-literary texts becomes inevitable. The inclusion of polemical texts also adds to a better understanding of the ideologies at work in the discourse concerning the preservation/conservation of nature.

After studying the popular science writings and literary writings, this dissertation will seek to analyse different socio-cultural and ecological aspects of the rhetoric and listing out the conclusions, limitations and recommendations in the last part. Thus, I endeavour to provide a critical documentation of the Silent Valley positioning it against global ecological as well as local literary traditions. .

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**Notes:**

<sup>1</sup> Though I am aware of the distinction proposed by scholars like Dobson between environmentalism and ecologism, I will nevertheless stick to the former throughout my dissertation. My choice of the term is largely due to its socio-cultural and politico-economic rootedness as against the purely ideologic, scientific and esoteric tint of ecologism. For a detailed distinction between the two, see “Introduction” and “Chapter 1” of *Green Political Thought* by Dobson, especially pages 1-4 and 14-16.

<sup>2</sup> Guha is specifically alluding to movements like pacifism, the counter-culture and the civil rights struggle, which were coeval in the West with environmentalism.

<sup>3</sup> Together with a number of UN sponsored international conferences on environment and development from 1972 onwards, the last decade has experienced a phenomenal surge in rows over carbon and CFC emission, concerns over climate change, and the proliferation of environmental struggles throughout developing countries.

<sup>4</sup> *Chipko* literally means “to hug” and in the popular psyche the term refers to a highly successful environmental movement started in 1973 in the mountainous northern segment of Uttar Pradesh to protect the trees of the Himalaya from influential loggers. The activists of the movement hugged the trees and placed their bodies between the trees and the loggers.

<sup>5</sup> Popular but unsuccessful campaigns against projects like Sardar Sarovar and Tehri could be recalled here.

<sup>6</sup> It is exciting to know that the Silent Valley in the Western Ghats is the name sake of a Mountain Park in Northern Ireland situated in the high Mourne that also features a reservoir in the U-shaped valley of the Kilkeel river. As well as being one of Northern Ireland's prime water sources its natural beauty and leisure facilities make it a leading tourist attraction.

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<sup>7</sup> The significance of the Silent Valley as a scientifically unexplored area is foregrounded by M. G. K. Menon in his “Foreword” to *Silent Valley: Whispers of Reason*:

[...] scientific understanding of such complex ecological systems, as existed in the Silent Valley, had not reached a stage when the causes and consequences of perturbations in the ecosystem could be quantified and explained in determinate relationships without ambiguity; even now such understanding is limited. Moreover, the floristic and faunistic compositions of the Silent Valley area had not been explored on any significant basis. No comparative and critical evaluation of the adjoining ecosystems had been carried out earlier; and no scientific data were available on the species of plants and animals endemic to this region, and the extent to which they and their habitats were unique.  
(XIV)

<sup>8</sup> A similar brawl is presently rocking the state with the Ministry of Forest declaring the creation of a 148 square kilometre buffer zone around the Silent Valley National Park and the Ministry of Electricity going ahead with the Pathrakadavu hydroelectric project, a thinly disguised, renamed revamp of the SVHP.

<sup>9</sup> Unless otherwise stated, all translations from Malayalam in this dissertation are mine.

<sup>10</sup> This position can be stretched further to argue that the rest of the world cannot adequately respond to the environmental cause unless it experiences affluence as the societies of Western Europe, North America and Far East. The insistence on human societies’ linear progression from a state of impoverishment through a phase of affluence to an environmentally conscious state is, in effect, a refusal to learn from the mistakes of others. Hence, the notion that environmentalism is a luxury that the poor cannot have is, in my view, fictitious. Alongside such calls for the deferral of environmentalism from within poor societies, are the recent attempts by industrial

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societies to impede the material progress of the former in the name of environmental crisis. The failure of the industrial block to rectify the Kyoto Protocol on global warming (1997) and its failure in the recently concluded (December, 2009) Climate Conference at Copenhagen to comprehensively address the issue of climate change reinforce the prevalence of such attitudes.

<sup>11</sup> Gadgil and Guha in *Ecology and Equity* have included the campaign to protect the Silent Valley in their discussion on environmental struggles in India (73). Interestingly, though Guha provides a list of major environmental movements carried out by the people of the developing countries in the last three decades of the twentieth century in his *Environmentalism: A Global History* (98-124), he does not mention the SSVC in it at all.

<sup>12</sup> Various ideologies within environmentalism—deep ecology, spiritual ecology and the strand of ecofeminism proposed by Vandana Shiva—have been used to establish stands like these.

<sup>13</sup> This belief remained in the socio-political sphere of Kerala, especially within the established Left. For a detailed account of this debate in Kerala, see “Paristhithi Rashtreyathinte Prathyayasasthram” by K. Satchidanandan.

<sup>14</sup> Robert Paehlke describes in detail the anti-environmental stands of Reagan administration in “Cycles of Closure in Environmental Politics and Policy.”

<sup>15</sup> This position is heavily criticised by Marxists, for, in their view, human alienation from nature results from capitalism’s alienation from labour (Foster 73-74).

<sup>16</sup> Though writers like Arundhati Roy has expressed their resentment with the term “writer-activist” for the apparent dichotomy that it proposes between writer and activist, I nevertheless use it to separate writers who were a part of the campaign to

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save the Silent Valley from its other activists and also from other Malayali writers who stayed away from it. My use of the term is merely descriptive.



## Chapter II

### The Silent Valley and Popular Science Literature

The Silent Valley controversy is significant in the cultural sphere of Kerala as it triggered a profusion of prose genres on issues of scientific interest during the decade from 1975 to 1985. An unprecedented outpour of prose literature on unconventional subjects, like the energy situation in Kerala, the state of its forests, changing climatic patterns, extinction of species, depletion of rivers, industrial pollution, socio-political approach towards the environment, socio-economic and technical assessments of developmental projects, and a host of other similar concerns distinguishes this decade from the ones that preceded it. This period in the history of Kerala was marked also by an extraordinary convergence of print media, social organisations, academic institutions, activist groups, political parties, trade unions, expert committees and other civil groups or citizens' initiatives on similar issues. Concerns of these varied groups on such diverse issues reached the Malayalee public sphere in the form of prose artefacts, such as journalistic essays, articles, debates, seminar papers, conference proceedings, pamphlets, editorials, popular writings on science and ecology, highly technical articles on the SVHP, dissertations, expert studies organised by various institutes and universities, techno-economic and political assessment by various organisations, and letters and reports of different government committees. The historical conjuncture that prompted these active reflections in Kerala is significant as the period in question corresponds to the Emergency and the period immediately following it marked by political uncertainty and regroupings. While the Emergency stifled freedom of speech and freedom of expression, the euphoria that followed it provided the Malayalee public with political freedom. The anti-establishment feeling

nourished by the environmental debate triggered by the SVHP was instrumental in ushering this recently restored political freedom into the Malayalee public sphere. As a student of comparative literature, I am interested to know whether this plethora of publications that appeared in Malayalam and English in such a short period and across such a wide spectrum of genres had any lasting influence on prose literature and, in an extended sense, on the socio-cultural and environmental movements in Kerala. Another related issue is the development of a new genre of prose literature in Malayalam that has mass appeal and could be generally referred to as popular literature on science topics.

In 1990, the KSSP published a collection of 14 such articles on the energy situation in Kerala originally published between 1975 and 1987 entitled *Oorjavivaadam* (The Energy Controversy). Half of the articles collected in *Oorjavivaadam* were on the Silent Valley. These articles converge on the point that an energy crisis was looming over Kerala. The popular and bureaucratic answer to Kerala's imminent power crisis was hydroelectricity. Various articles in this book regard the hydroelectric solution as inadequate, unsustainable, expensive and detrimental to Kerala's ecology. Another potential option to ward off Kerala's energy crisis was the nuclear alternative. *Oorjavivaadam* rejects this option too as contributors considered nuclear reactors to be extremely dangerous for both present and future generations. Moreover, articles in *Oorjavivaadam* deem nuclear power unsuitable for Kerala. Considering these aspects, the book advocates the construction of a thermal power plant in the Malabar region of Kerala. Though thermal power plants are slightly costlier than hydropower plants, they could be commissioned in a short period and so the grievances of the people of Malabar could be redressed without delay. Diversification of power generation by utilising natural gas, coal and

biogas could reduce Kerala's dependence on the monsoon. The use of latest technologies could minimise pollution and increase fuel efficiency. Instead of a few huge hydropower projects, Kerala should rely more on small, easily operable hydroelectric projects that are economical and environment-friendly. Another practical suggestion was the strengthening of Kerala's electricity distribution system. In Kerala, avoidable transmission and distribution losses add up to more power than is generated by projects like Sabarigiri. The primary focus, thus, should be on minimising and avoiding this huge loss.

In 1999, the Kerala Forest Department (KFD) and KFRI jointly published *Silent Valley: Whispers of Reason* during the decennial celebration of the Silent Valley as a national park. Besides scientific papers on areas ranging from classical taxonomy to advanced concepts in conservation biology, the volume recounts the story of how the Silent Valley became a national park. A significant aspect of such endeavours is the subtle ways in which these pieces on ecology manipulate Malayalees' conceptions of the environment. However, the ways in which such popular efforts have shaped the contemporary understanding of their surroundings have remained more-or-less unexplored. This is all the more so in the context of conflicting signals from the scientific community regarding various questions on the impact of human activities on nature. Following the burgeoning scholarship on the socio-cultural and ideological sides of science, this chapter examines various modes in which nature was perceived, constructed and comprehended by different groups with diverse interests during the course of the Silent Valley movement. Popular science literature on ecology, conservation and biodiversity that will be examined in this chapter are those authored chiefly by conservation biologists, environmental activists, media personnel and defenders of development with strong scientific biases.

Such an exercise, I presume, is important, as unlike all other environmental campaigns in India and other Asian, African and Latin American countries, which were primarily socio-economic in essence gradually reinforced by ecological, statistical and scientific data,<sup>1</sup> the Silent Valley movement was launched entirely for scientific and ecological reasons.

I regard this reading as significant, for, as most of the available literature on the campaign against the SVHP reveals, scientific intervention was instrumental in initiating the debate on the Silent Valley. Nevertheless, as we will see in the following chapters, despite signs of protest from the scientific community, it was, in fact, the presence of writers and artists that reinforced the campaign and popularised the message of conservation. However, the popular print media in Malayalam and the political authority considered such educative articles on scientific and ecological issues to be romantic, far-fetched and imaginary. This widespread sceptical attitude towards such scientific efforts rests on two opposing arguments: first, it arises from the belief that the scientific method is incapable of addressing ecological problems for, “ecology, like human history, is concerned with unique events”<sup>2</sup> (MacFadyen, 351). The second contention is succinctly voiced when a reputed botanist described ecologists who raised their voice against the SVHP as mere “birdwatchers” and “fortune-tellers” (SSVS 2).

In other words, this chapter will examine how nature and conservation are variously represented by different social groups—conservation biologists, environmental activists, technologists, electric engineers and media personnel—and how a lasting ecological discourse is shaped subsequently in the public sphere of Kerala. Further, I shall also analyse the role of cultural and political processes in shaping such discourses in the immediate event of ecologically disastrous

developmental projects like the SVHP. This will be accomplished by looking at the modes by which both proponents and opponents of the SVHP communicated with the public. What is significant regarding these interactions with the public is the manner in which such communicative acts were enmeshed in the broader cultural and political context determined by the diverse reporting of developmental, as well as environmental stories by the vernacular and national press, an issue which will be discussed in detail in Chapter 4.

Before going into popular writings on nature and conservation published during the Silent Valley movement, let us briefly survey the evolution of science writing in Malayalam. The reading public in Kerala, right from the inception of the popular reading culture during the second half of nineteenth century, had developed an inclusive reading habit through a host of periodical publications. Significantly, these periodical publications did not concentrate on facilitating any specialized discussion. The publications that succeeded these early ones too followed them in terms of their composition. The standard distinction between popular magazines and scholarly journals was hence absent in Malayalam. Popular Malayalam magazines like *Mathrubhoomi*, *Malayala Manorama*, *Kalakaumudi*, *Kumkumam*, *Kerala Sabdam*, *Deshabhimani* and *Bhashaposhini* published, and still publish, articles on a variety of topics. Some of these include critical writings on art, literature, film and music; creative writings like poems, serialized novels and short stories; popular science writings; features on politics, sports and contemporary events; and sections for children and students. This peculiar mixture, however, paved the way for the convergence of perspectives, topics and expertise from various disciplines.

It was with the establishment of *Sastra Sahithya Samiti* (SSS),<sup>3</sup> an association led by a handful of science teachers in the year 1957, that the genre of popular science

literature started gaining the attention of the public. In the following year, the SSS brought out a science magazine, *Modern Science*, which according to their plan, was to be issued every month. But the SSS itself had a short life. It was with the establishment of the KSSP<sup>4</sup> in 1962, again by a group of science teachers, that popular science literature in Malayalam received a shot in the arm. Unlike the former SSS, the KSSP focused on and emphasized the need for concentrating their activities in Malayalam. Like its predecessor, the KSSP too started magazines with the proclaimed aim of spreading the ideas of science and developing a scientific temperament among Malayalees. It is in this context that magazines, such as *Sasthragathi*, *Eureka* and *Sasthra Keralam* are to be historically viewed.

These publications, no doubt, have helped in acquainting the local public with the modern scientific concepts and their everyday applications. Right from its inception, the KSSP has been a major disseminator of scientific ideas among other magazines, especially the weeklies. The abundance of popular articles on scientific issues in these publications and their popularity inspired other popular periodicals, especially *Kumkumam*, *Mathrubhoomi* and *Malayala Manorama* to devote pages to scientific issues. As early as 1963, the *Mathrubhoomi* weekly published an article by V. M. N. Namboothiripad on wild life protection (Namboothiripad 3). Not until the controversy over the SVHP broke out, did the various publications, mainly scientific, converge on a common issue of interest. Until then, science literature in the language was scattered in nature with no common element of interest threading the variegated writings. But the period between 1977 and 1981 witnessed a host of popular literary publications centred on ecology and conservation of nature. The immediate cause for this profusion of literature with a central focus on environment was the storm over the proposed SVHP.

Major periodicals that devoted their pages earnestly to this issue were *Sasthragathi*, *Kalakaumudi* and *Mathrubhoomi*. A survey of these publications during the period mentioned reveals a large quantum of popular writings based directly and indirectly on the energy crisis of the state and the ways to overcome it, the extinction of flora and fauna, and conservation of nature. During this short period *Sasthragathi* alone published around twenty-five pieces on these topics and *Kalakaumudi* and *Mathrubhoomi* weeklies both published more than ten each. While most periodicals, though in varying degree, seemed to take a stand against the SVHP, all major newspapers in the language with the sole exception of *Kerala Kaumudi* enthusiastically supported the project.

Educative and informative articles that appeared in these magazines shaped and directed debates on Kerala's ecological state during the 1970s and 1980s. Experts from the fields of science, technology and politics with conflicting ideas and positions actively participated in such debates. Major contributors to this discourse on ecology belonged principally to the KSSP and KSEB. This discourse provided a platform for interested individuals and groups, including political parties and environmentalists, to deliberate on issues like the role of forest in sustaining water supply, sources and necessity of clean and cheap energy, development and its positive, as well as negative, effects on society, the role of government and mass movements in protecting the environment, the extinction of plant and animal life, and finally the question of the compromise between development and progress on the one hand and the environment on the other. The Silent Valley, as M. K. Prasad rightly observes, is not an isolated issue ("Gunadosha" 15). Debates like these brought the otherwise ignored, though grave, question of dwindling forest area into the realm of science, politics, economics and even aesthetics.

Most of the non-literary figures who wrote against the SVHP were scientists, political activists with strong scientific biases or teachers of science. These polemical writings interest us for the kind of rhetoric employed and also for the way in which it contributed to the development of the ecological discourse in Kerala. As expressed in the documentary *An Axe Away*, it was the scientific community that controlled and directed the discourse, though it was popularised and reinforced by the literary/artistic community. The discussion of such non-literary, quasi-scientific prose assumes enormous significance in the light of the recent scepticism among scientists about the future of life on the planet.<sup>5</sup> It is in this broad context that I propose to read and locate the scientific literature on the Silent Valley controversy. Among writers who were themselves scientists or activists in science education, who wrote on the controversy related to the SVHP were M. K. Prasad, S. Satishchandran Nair, V. S. Vijayan, M. P. Parameswaran, N. V. Krishnavarier, B. K. Nair and K. Vijayachandran.

Journalistic essays, popular articles and seminar papers with a scientific flavour on the Silent Valley and development that espoused the SVHP cause were mainly of two kinds—one anthropocentric, which relied on a rhetoric of human progress and socio-economic advancement by means of modern science and technology,<sup>6</sup> and the other that emphasized the need for developing a cautious approach towards nature by employing the techniques of modern science that would in no way affect the ecosystem negatively.<sup>7</sup> While articulating their belief in nature's cornucopia, the former refused to recognise the reservations of ecologists by universalizing the effect of anthropogenic activities on the natural environment. Maintaining that all human, as well as non-human, activities have their impact on the ecosystem, which it has the potential to rectify, they justified, legitimized and naturalized human exploitation of nature. In this conception, as White (148) remarks,

nature has no other purpose but to serve man, and the Judeo-Christian tradition, particularly as it evolved during the Middle Ages, is often cited as the root of such beliefs. Nature, thus, is regarded simply as a larder of resources available for human exploitation. This notion of human-nature relation, rooted in exploitation, enjoyed mass popular and political support during the post-independence era, when the nation was striving for socio-economic and industrial development.<sup>8</sup> Evidently, it was sacrilegious to question this long-established and seemingly successful notion of development. Conservation efforts were, consequently, ridiculed as spreading a “fear-psychosis about developmental activities,” “intellectual terrorism” and “conservationist extremism” (Vijayachandran 2). Such rhetorical stands were, surprisingly, extended to scientists, conservationists and ecologists too.<sup>9</sup>

That the scientific as well as political row over the SVHP was an offshoot of the intervention of the NCEPC is obvious from the acrimonious debate over the report of its taskforce. Consequently, those who regarded the SVHP as a symbol of Kerala’s industrial and economic advancement considered this report to be unscientific, deliberately misleading, overwhelmingly imaginative, romantic and highly rhetorical. *Parisara Asoothrana Samrakshana Samithi* (PASS [Environmental Planning & Conservation Society]), a Thiruvananthapuram based association of pro-SVHP scientists and political activists, published a book-length analysis of the report entitled *Silent Valley, Myth and Reality: An Exposure of the National Committee on Environmental Planning and Coordination and the Campaign against the Silent Valley Project*, according to which, “it was the taskforce [...] that raised the first ‘alarm’ against the Silent Valley Project. Even before going into an actual study of the Western Ghats, the NCEPC asked the Kerala Government [...] to suspend all activities in the Silent Valley” (2).

Though the PASS charged the taskforce with deviating from the objective scientific approach, the language and style of its analysis too were not free from such accusations. The utter disdain the PASS had for the report of the taskforce is evident. “This report and the recommendations it contains,” observed PASS “have nothing to do with the environmental and ecological planning of the Western Ghats. [...], it deserves the reputation of being branded as a national scandal” (3). Similar instances of propaganda surface throughout its analysis of the report. What seems interesting to me in this spiteful repartee is how accusers inadvertently fall prey to their own accusations. Even while indicting conservationists for being prejudicial, unscientific and susceptible to external pressures, they fail to comprehend that “modern science” in itself is the product of various networks of socio-political and economic interests (Latour 257).

Yet another point on which such diverse observations were prevalent was the status of the Silent Valley as a pristine and intact tract of forest. The popular idea of the Silent Valley as an intact tract of virgin forest was fiercely contested by the engineers of the KSEB and the scientists who were on the official side. This argument was founded primarily on the official statistics of the colonial government, which suggests that from 1847 onwards the trees in this forest have been exploited quite ruthlessly in order to make sleepers for the construction of railway tracks. Citing official documents, B. K. Nair, in a pamphlet titled *Silent Valley: An Ecological Hyperbole*, argues that the area had been the centre of anthropogenic activities for centuries:

Originally the Silent Valley and nearby areas of forests were the private property of one Chenat Nair family of Mannarkkadu. The Government purchased the area from this family. In 1883 [...] the Government [...] constructed a bridle path cutting across the forest connecting Coimbatore with Nilgiri Hill Stations. The

purpose of this path was the systematic exploitation of the forest area. In 1847, the Government of Madras allotted an area of nearly 400 hectares in the Silent Valley for establishing a Coffee plantation. [...] But it was later abandoned, the land having been taken over by the Government in 1889. [...] It should also be recalled that five individuals resorted to legal action against the Government of Madras in 1883 when the Government declared that the Silent Valley-Attapadi forest tract is Government's property. These individuals produced records in the court that parts of these forests, including some regions of [...] the Silent Valley Range belonged to them and they were regularly exploiting it (felling trees, clearing portions for cultivation, trapping elephants, hunting, etc.) for generations. (30)

Nair's effort was, thus, to reinforce the idea that the area had been under human occupation for more than a century. As is clear from the passage, Nair reiterates the KSEB's claim that the Silent Valley, like any other part of Kerala, is imbued with all kinds of human activities—domestic, industrial, commercial, agricultural and recreational. Nair's was not an isolated endeavour. It was a part of a complex argument that denied any exceptionality to the Valley in terms of its remoteness from human civilization. O. V. Vijayan relates the tale of one such denial in his account of his visit to the Valley, "Nisabda Tazhvara: Oru Yatravude Ormakal" (The Valley of Silence: Memories of a Journey). He recalls the ingenious engineer's attempts to convince him that the Silent Valley and its surrounding areas are, in fact, already influenced anthropogenically. Vijayan realised that the engineer's detailed story of the road into the forest and the naked hills, and their subsequent visit to a nearby estate were well planned attempts to impress upon him the notion that the area was already overrun by commercial interests:

This path was paved with stones by the forest department many years ago. The engineer informed me that big trees have been felled from the Valley of Silence and its surrounding forests all these years. It

was later that I realised that this knowledge imparted to me was a part of a comprehensive argument.

A short way into our journey, the engineer told us that we would stop at a coffee farm. Taking another route we reached this site [...].

The visit to the estate, like the story of the paved path, was, I think, a part of my education. I could also make out a few other things. There are various means of disguising forest as plantation. The areas inside forests where cardamom grow naturally and wildly are manipulated as agricultural estates in order to establish human presence. (34-35)

Viewed from the heights of the powerhouse, far below deep in the distance is the Kunthi. Beyond that the forests of the Valley of Silence. Right above the Kunthi are a few bald hills. A bridle path across the hills. 'Look, Vijayetta,' said the engineer, 'Aren't you seeing those bald hills?' I saw the bald hills. The stony path that I saw in the beginning of the journey, the plantation in the middle of the forest and now the bald hills of the Valley of Silence, my education is complete. The engineer asked, 'Where are the evergreen forests?' (22)

Vijayan's passage is an interesting instance of how public opinion was being shaped and influenced in favour of the SVHP by exposing the seemingly tangible and impartial facts. The contention was that the Silent Valley and the forests surrounding it were already opened to commercial agriculture, illegal logging and other human activities. As Vijayan remarks towards the end of his recollection, all these instances of human presence in the Silent Valley were carefully selected ploys to reinforce the idea that the Valley is not pristine and different. This is done with the full conviction that to establish this is also to disarm and defang the resistance campaign.

The unfolding of the environmental resistance campaign during the Silent Valley controversy in Kerala, thus in retrospect, marks it as a carefully scripted and designed theatrical performance. In this skit, the contesting forces are represented by environmentalists and defenders of development. The plot is knit around the emotionally charged passionate discourse of regional/national development and

modern science. The crisis starts when the nascent trends in societies cast doubt on the efficacy of development, especially in its modern avatar. The rest of the narrative of this resistance campaign is marked by efforts of various parties to lure and convince the public and prominent personalities. It is here that the Iago-like insinuations, as was experienced by Vijayan, and symbolic actions like the constitution of Environmental Monitoring Committees or mere passing of environmental laws come to play.

Interestingly, Satishchandran Nair, a research fellow in the Department of Zoology, University of Kerala, and the then secretary of the KNHS who campaigned against the SVHP, too disproved the description of the Silent Valley as a virgin forest on the grounds that the forest in this region has been a poachers' paradise. In one of his letters to M. K. Prasad, dated January 15, 1979, he cites the recent increase in the level of anthropogenic activities:

The amount of destruction already done is staggering. There is a good deal of timber extraction going on even deeper than the dam site. A large crew is camping in the interior. A fire probably started by them has been burning for the last four days. There is evidence of elephant poaching and I saw parts of a skull. Occasionally gunshots can be heard. (30)

Interestingly, both B. K. Nair together with the KSEB engineer and Satishchandran Nair draw their readers' attention to the existing and increasing anthropogenic activities in the Silent Valley forest. While the former, by means of emphasising human impact over the well fortified Valley, suggests that no forest remains in its pristine state and thereby dispels all claims for sustaining the Valley's status quo, the latter, by exposing the deleterious effects of human interferences on the fragile ecosystem, calls for extreme measures to save the Valley. Resorting to

such rhetorical devices, scientists and technologists from the opposing camps naively reinforce the social embedded nature of science. What is implied in this discourse is certain scientists' rejection of the idea of nature as a separate entity that is to be salvaged and the consequent reluctance on their part to recognise the forest environment as special. A related, but contradictory idea that environmentalists normally assert is the notion of an untouched nature in sharp contrast to human inhabited areas. However, Satishchandran Nair disapproves of this long-standing notion and reveals that the so-called pristine nature too is being gradually invaded by industrial and commercial interests. In other words, Nair is quite close to Dobson's remark: "There is not a self-contained 'humanity' counterpoised to and ever battling with a self-contained 'non-human world'" (175).

Comparable to the conflict over the pristine condition of the Silent Valley was the row over its status as a tropical rainforest. The contention in this case was grounded on the idea that tropical rain forests were located only in such places as Central America, Amazon Basin, Brazilian Coast, West African Coast, Congo Basin, Malaya, East Indies, Philippines, New Guinea, N. E. Australia and Pacific Islands (Balanandan 7-8). Stripping the Valley of its rainforest status also affects ecologists' concerns over the fragility of its ecosystem. In the register of those who stood for the SVHP, fragility of the Silent Valley's ecosystem is a myth as the temperature and rainfall in the Valley vary considerably during the year. Such an ecosystem with varying temperatures, rainfall and humidity, they maintained, cannot be fragile for the simple reason that these inherent variations within the ecosystem render it resistant towards change and prove its characteristic adaptability (Balanandan 6).

Destruction of tropical rainforests has always invited condemnation from conservation agencies and environmental groups. Regarded as one of the most ancient

ecosystems of the earth, tropical rainforests present remarkable floral and faunal complexities and are extremely fragile. Though rainforests account for only 7 percent of the land surface, they contain over 50 percent of earth's species. An ecosystem that rarely regenerates, it accounts for almost a quarter of oxygen supply in earth's atmosphere. Besides, rainforests are rich gene pools, the loss of which would compromise our ability to produce the crops we need to heal and feed ourselves (Kelly 32-33). Due to the alarming rate at which rainforests are cleared for various industrial, commercial and livelihood activities, environmentalists regard them as particularly endangered. That the Silent Valley is a tropical rain forest would in itself prove the concerns of environmentalists regarding the ecological significance of the area. Furthermore, in this position, it invites comparison with tropical rainforests in other parts of the world and essentially raises the visibility and value of the Silent Valley among the global environmental community. Once more we have an instance where contending groups of ecologists, scientists and technologists fashion and refashion nature, in this case a tiny tract of forest, corresponding to their respective positions in relation to it.

The environmentalists' emphasis on the rainforest went to such an extent that the destruction of other ecosystems like grasslands was completely ignored. Since the environmental campaign anticipated intervention from international conservation agencies like IUCN and WWF, the focus was mainly on the issue of rainforest destruction. Most deliberations on ecology published during the period contain passages that suggest the importance of rainforests. The emphasis on the uniqueness and specificity of the tropical rain forest implies the need for protecting the Valley from submergence. Though grasslands constituted more than a third of the area that would be submerged, this was neither debated nor even mentioned during the entire

controversy. The importance of the Silent Valley forests as the last specimen of tropical evergreen forest in the entire Sahya range of the Western Ghats was contested in a similar fashion. While the scientists, as well as the engineers of the KSEB, regarded this fact as insignificant as the loss of all other forests in the Sahya range had caused no harm, the conservationists stressed the importance of preserving this rare and unique forest for research, ecological and scientific reasons.

The manner in which technologists of the KSEB countered the prospective damages of the SVHP is worth mentioning here. Equating submergence with inundation, their effort was to reduce human induced permanent changes in the ecosystem to seasonal (and sometimes seasonable) natural occurrences: “If a dam submerges forests, wild floods also submerge them [...]. If a dam wipes out some agricultural land, it irrigates much vaster areas. If a dam destroys a few villages, it gives prosperity to much larger communities” (Vijayachandran 44). The uniqueness of the Silent Valley was reduced to a non-issue by employing the rhetoric of universalizing and simplifying. The process of universalizing uniqueness, the way of perceiving everything as unique in a manner as to say, “you are different from me” or “Thiruvananthapuram is different from Delhi”, (Balanandan 5-6) deprives the Silent Valley of its ecological, as well as biological significance.

The element of biodiversity, which was largely unexplored, furnished another ground of divergence for both sides in the controversy. Even though it acknowledged the richness of the area in terms of its flora and fauna, the official side regarded it as a universal phenomenon. The argument was that humans have succeeded in recording just over fifteen percent of flora and the rest is yet to be identified. During the course of human history many plant and animal species have disappeared from all parts of the earth leaving no traces of their existence with hardly any adverse effect for the

human kind. This being the case, they maintained, the submergence of the forest and the subsequent destruction of some of the “rare” life forms would hardly have any negative impact on the ecological balance of the Western Ghats (Balanandan 33). The trivializing, universalizing perception continued even with regard to the negative effect of the dam on the ecosystem of the region. They argued that there can be hardly any human activity with no adverse ecological impact, and the SVHP too is not free of some such impact. The entire debate was conceived by the official side as a confrontation between nature and development (Balanandan 32). The arguments of the resistance campaigners were trivialized on the grounds of the axiom: “the best way of eliminating pollution and conserving nature is to eliminate man himself” (Balanandan 58).

As is evident from the foregoing discussion, the richness, density and intact nature of the Silent Valley were fiercely contested by those who campaigned for the construction of the SVHP. They attributed the mystery that prevailed around this area to its mysterious appellation, *Silent Valley* (S Nair, 79; K Nair, 83). Many of them argued that the area is not a valley of silence, but similar to any other landscape. The romantic aura that the name evoked had influenced the public and others, including the scientists in shaping their attitudes towards the Silent Valley as an unexplored, impenetrable and dark territory. The restoration of the original native name *Sairandhrivanam* (the lush woods of Sairandhri) will, they maintained, clear the misapprehension and help people to approach the issue in an objective manner. The name *Silent Valley* gave the impression of an “impenetrably dark”, “mysterious”, “unknown” and “frighteningly silent” region with gothic resonance and charm. The name had also contributed in a significant manner to deeply confirm the notions one acquired in childhood about forests and their ecosystems. Hence, the fight to prevent

the destruction of this small tract of forest can also be read as an unconsciously nostalgic yearning to bring forth the child inside. The main issue during the entire campaign was the plight of a species of monkeys 'lion-tailed macaque', something which again brings forth such affiliations and appeals to the childish impulse in the adult.

Scientific arguments that explicitly advocated the SVHP belong to two major groups. The first group negated the claims of ecologists about the destructibility of hydroelectric projects in general and the SVHP in particular. In their account, fears on this ground are not valid for several reasons. Foremost among them is the relatively tiny size of the forest tract that would be submerged. Since the volume of forest submerged would be negligible, the projected loss of biodiversity, they argued, also would be insignificant. The contention was that the loss of biomass production due to deforestation would be amply compensated by the biomass production from the additional land that would be brought under cultivation with the help of the reservoir (B. K. Nair 43).

The second group, though it acknowledged the effect of SVHP on the local ecosystem, firmly argued that, if properly pursued, the government and other concerned authorities would be able to limit the deleterious effect of the SVHP. Believing in the benignity of scientists, engineers and technologists, they sought to rectify the environmental damage that has been already done by employing modern science and technology with proper managerial guidance from the government and other concerned groups with no substantial changes in the existing pattern of life. We have noticed the dubious manner in which the Government of Kerala declared the Silent Valley as a national park excluding the area to be submerged by the SVHP in the previous chapter. Similarly, those who hold this view often overlook the fact that

the promised actions of the government are always purely symbolic as they are simply gestures aimed at placating concerned citizens. However, such actions play an important role in convincing the public about government's readiness to address all concerns during the formative phase of developmental schemes.

As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, defenders of the SVHP regarded those who opposed it as utopians and romantic naturalists. The KSSP that led the SSVC and its associates were accused of being a group of ivory tower scientists who were attracted towards the natural beauty of the area, with no practical experience (KSSP, "Silent Valley Vivaadam" 51). The thrust of the argument of those who resisted the SVHP was the lack of creative and constructive imagination among the political establishment. Despite being sceptical of the policies of the Western governments, the ruling elite in India copied (and often continued) their developmental policies. Prevailing conceptions of development and ways to achieve it, thus, were in essence and in embodiment alien. Those who opposed the SVHP were, in fact, challenging the prevailing notions of development. They sought to thoroughly alter the existing developmental paradigm so that a more democratic and a more sustainable alternative would evolve. However, the society at large was uncertain about this alternative: the uncertainty could be pithily framed in the question whether it was justifiable to withhold the developmental process in advancing societies when more affluent societies have already proved the efficacy of such process in improving living conditions of common folk. Those who expressed this quandary wondered whether emerging societies like Kerala could rightfully afford luxuries like environmentalism.

It was with these considerations that the activists of the SSVC countered the claims of the KSEB, the Government of Kerala and political parties. Rather than

conceiving the SSVC as a question of saving a few trees or a small tract of forest, they viewed it as a much more important issue of public and local participation in the planning and implementation of all developmental activities (KSSP, “Silent Valley Vivaadam” 51-52). The Silent Valley issue was debated at legislative, administrative and activist levels from 1976 onwards. However, it was in the June of 1979, with the publication of the article “Silent Valliye Samrakshikkuka” (Protect the Silent Valley), that the issue reached the public sphere. One of the major concerns of the article by M. K. Prasad was the lack of public interest and participation in debates over the SVHP. Apart from a few academic and policy discussions, formidable public opinion was yet to be formed (6). A much more significant issue that the article deals with is the role of scientific professionals in our society. Scientists, according to the author, should transcend narrow partisan interests and must be selfless, objective and daring:

Some of the senior scientific experts think it unwise to question political decisions. The fear that their interference in political decisions would be against their interests keeps these scientific and technological advisors silent. The future generation will not forgive these scientific and technological experts who treat such an important issue in a very trivial way. (6)

Referring to his visit to the Valley, O. V. Vijayan writes that he would have approved of their intention, if the scientists who supported the SVHP had done so with the full conviction that it would reduce the comparative backwardness of Malabar. It is from this angle that he approaches the issue.

I think that our friend, the engineer and his colleagues are honest and idealists. They sincerely believe that the dam on the Kunthi is absolutely inevitable for Palakkadu. They also see the hydroelectric project in the Valley of Silence as a symbol of progress. I will not

attempt to insult their beliefs. I am trying to examine this debate by regarding their belief as a pure emotion. The curriculum of our engineering colleges is partial. Indian Institutes of Technology have tried to remedy this by combining courses in science and technology with aesthetics and philosophy. Science has come a long way from its mechanistic origins. In its present maturity, it has become a self-critical religion. I often remember the remark of my friend Krishna Chaithanya, who wrote *The Physics and Chemistry of Freedom*, that science went astray from Galileo onwards. This straying that befell science is common to all human endeavours. This is not the fault of science, neither is it the fault of man. It is only a deeper dialectics of growth and liberation. (50)

The opponents of the SVHP considered the project to be a failure in economic as well as in environmental terms. There had been no proper scientific, technical, ecological and economic assessment of the SVHP. The only one, as I have indicated in the first chapter, was conducted by a multidisciplinary team of the KSSP (KSSP, *The Silent Valley*). Such an exercise assumes significance as the controversy over the proposed hydroelectric project began after incurring an initial expenditure of Rs. 25 million. The design of large-scale impact projects like the SVHP must never be left to engineers alone. Electrical engineers can never assess the ecological and social impact of such projects accurately. Ecologists, geologists, hydrologists, economists and personalities from other relevant fields must be consulted at every stage right from the planning phase to avoid later skirmishes as in the case of the SVHP. The construction of the project and the problems it raises are not just limited to engineering and ecology, but include social, cultural and aesthetic aspects too. Furthermore, the construction of reservoirs undertaken without such assessments has the potential to deplete our forest in the long run. Owing to the dependence of adjacent valleys and plains on nearby forests to regulate their climate, such ecological destruction, in turn, could reduce the availability of water by means of both siltation and by its effect on

the water cycle. The river Kunthi that divides the Silent Valley into two, for instance, never floods during the monsoon season, unlike other rivers in the state; neither does it wane in the summer season. Kunthi is the only tributary of the Bharathapuzha that sustains a perennial flow. It is the Silent Valley forest that regulates the water supply by absorbing and releasing water according to climatic variations. The activists of the Silent Valley movement usually refer to the acute shortage of water experienced in the wells in the areas adjacent to the Idukki reservoir and warn the people of Mannarkkadu that the construction of the Silent Valley dam too could result in similar problems (Uttaman 23-25). Krishnavarier too points to the same problem by citing the case of Malampuzha reservoir, the depth of which has been continuously decreasing due to siltation. Despite such failures in the past, governments continue to invest heavily on similar projects like the SVHP. What infuriates Krishnavarier is the utter disregard of the state administration and the political establishment towards forests of the Western Ghats. The SVHP is just one of the numerous schemes that had the potential to devastate the entire Western Ghats. Krishnavarier, for instance, cites the proposed 893 kilometre-long hill highway project that would link the north with the south of the state through the Eastern Mountains.<sup>10</sup> Botanists and zoologists were unanimous on the significance of the Silent Valley in furthering the body of scientific knowledge. Studies in the Valley conducted during this period have discovered that the area is an invaluable gene pool and also have reported occurrences of speciation. Since the Valley hosts some of the most endangered species on the subcontinent, the entire nation has the responsibility to ensure its conservation. Again, the presence of one of the last specimens of living arboreal species—the lion-tailed macaque—in the Valley adds to its scientific/ecologic significance:

The complex and prosperous flora of the Silent Valley has not been explored so-far. This forest exists as a cradle of biological evolution. The Silent Valley, untouched by man, is one of the few forests where the evolution process that occurred millions of years ago in nature can be explored. The evolution of man took place in the forests. Humans evolved from the apes that abandoned the tree-tops and started to live and walk erect on the land. Scientists agree that the social life of these apes has played an important part in the evolution process. But, the knowledge about the social life of apes during the arboreal phase is scant due to the extreme dearth of such arboreal species. In fact, the lion-tailed macaque is the only surviving arboreal macaque. The study of their social life will provide the scientists with an important chain in the evolution of human beings. Almost half of the worlds known population of the lion-tailed macaque lives in the Silent Valley forests. (Prasad, "Silent Valliye Samrakshikkuka" 7)

Several scientific enquiries were carried out in the Silent Valley forest by different agencies to ascertain its ecological significance. The studies conducted by the Botanical Survey of India revealed the existence of four hitherto unknown plant species in this region. The scientists of the Zoological Survey of India had discovered four new species of amphibians, three fish species and a species of spider in the region. The National Bureau of Plant Genetic Resources has found healthy pepper vines in the area, while other wild plants of great utility include cardamom, turmeric, ginger, cinnamon and diascoren. Such wild species are of inestimable value in breeding new varieties of food and medicinal plants. Besides these studies, the studies conducted by V. S. Vijayan of Kerala Forest Research Institute (KFRI) and M. Balakrishnan from the University of Kerala too revealed the richness of the area. One of the major issues that surfaced during the entire Silent Valley debate was the plight of an endangered animal species called lion-tailed macaque. The Silent Valley holds one of the two viable breeding populations of lion-tailed macaques. It is the only genuine existing arboreal species of monkeys in the world. The construction of the

project means the destruction of this species as most of these animals live in the trees on the banks of Kunthi, which would be submerged.

Along with scientific, technological and economic reasons, many conservationists perceived the Silent Valley as a natural heritage. The perception of the Silent Valley as a heritage passed down by previous generations extends the devastation caused by the SVHP to future generations. Thus, the affect of the SVHP transcends regional or national sentiments and assumes planetary significance. The destruction of the Silent Valley, hence, will deprive the entire human race of a rich and priceless heritage (Prasad, "Silent Valliye Samrakshikkuka" 6). The notion of the Silent Valley as a heritage reiterates the traditional/native stewardship attitude towards nature and thereby offers an efficacious counter to modern industrial conceptions of nature as mere raw material. This notion precisely reflects the Onondaga sentiments towards nature cited by Mies and Shiva, "Take care how you place your moccasins upon the earth, step with care, for the faces of the future generations are looking up from the earth waiting for their turn for life" (88).

Citing the Idukki hydroelectric project, the activists of the Silent Valley movement exposed the manner in which increased human presence during the construction of dams and after would affect the Valley and the rest of the Western Ghats. In the instance of the Idukki, increase in anthropogenic activities in the form of construction work, in reality, had detrimentally affected the vegetation and the wild life of the region. The mysterious reindeer pest disease that killed scores of deer in Thekkady, again, is believed to have been spread from the cattle kept by the construction workers (Prasad, "Silent Valliye Samrakshikkuka" 26).

Kerala, particularly the region of Malabar, was facing an acute shortage of power and its Government and the KSEB regarded the proposed SVHP as the only

possible answer to the energy crisis. The political and economic argument in favour of the SVHP rested solely on this claim (Paul 12). However, environmental activists were of the opinion that even if the entire hydropower capacity of the state were to be tapped, the state would still face a massive energy crisis by the year 2020 (Prasad, “Gunadosha” 17). Consequently, in place of large hydropower projects, they advocated alternative and innovative ways of power generation. Meanwhile, the energy crisis in Malabar could be forestalled through an efficient power distribution system (Prasad, “Gunadosha” 19).

To the environmental activists, besides its ecological significance, the Silent Valley raises several major socio-political issues. In the anniversary issue of *Chintha*, C. P. Narayanan raises the issue of Kerala’s energy policy and its effect on its people. Environmentalists’ and social activists’ questioning of government’s energy policy leads us to a related and much more socially significant question of the appropriateness of such challenges. The issue stems from the notion that only authorised specialists and experts can authentically speak on such specific matters that can potentially affect the entire society. This reductionistic outlook that is the basis of modern societies and knowledge systems reinforces the esoteric nature of scientific knowledge and denies any space for social activism. The eco-social activism during the 1970s and 1980s in Kerala facilitated a reexamination of peoples’ approach towards science, techno-science and scientific knowledge. The Silent Valley controversy and Malayalee intelligentsia’s engagement with it raised, for the first time, such issues as the role of modern science in human societies and its role in sustaining and breaking existing social systems. Popular literature on science and technology played no small role in initiating discussions and promoting public awareness of such issues.

A usual way of assessing the cost-benefit effect of the proposed SVHP was to link it with the already functioning and similar projects in the country and even in other parts of the globe. The major projects to which such comparisons have sometimes been made are Idukki and Kuttiyaadi within Kerala, and the Aswan in Egypt and so on. The fact that dams in Kerala are devoid of water is stated in a well-documented book based on official statistics published by the Kerala Bhasha Institute (Krishnayyar 422). Almost everyone who opposed the SVHP was unanimous in their concern about the scarcity of water in dams and reservoirs throughout the country and state.

The allegation that the opposition is lying comes about when the value system is shared between both the parties in the argument. The Silent Valley movement is one such where both those who were for and against kept reiterating they were concerned about the issues in question, be that the conservation of the pristine forest or that of local development. Surely, there were differences in the way in which they talked about it: while those who argued for the project, played down the uniqueness of the space, the latter emphasised it. But the question was never dismissed. Similarly, the question of regional development, which the supporters of SVHP championed was never dismissed *prima facie* but was only contested bringing in issues of sustainability and long term implications. Here, the shared values of the public sphere engineers the rhetoric along certain lines. The need to be appealing to the value system is crucial to both parties, as the fundamental requirement is to convince the public sphere of its cause.

Different from the rhetoric of development, wilderness, conservation and biodiversity that have been discussed over and again, P. K. Misra, an anthropologist, offers a radically different perspective on the Silent Valley controversy. In his letter

dated 17th May 1980 addressed to Mrs. Variava of the BNHS on the need for protecting the Silent Valley, he claims that a tribal population known as *Cholanaicker*, the cavemen of Kerala, inhabits the forest area in the vicinity of the Silent Valley. A group of classic food gatherers, *Cholanaickens* are extremely unique in their entirely different way of life and values, thereby demonstrating that there are alternative ways of living. Their history would take us back to thirty thousand years. The low rate and growth of population among this group makes the *Cholanaickens* an extremely endangered and vulnerable group. The downward trend in their population can be attributed to several environmental hazards. Being food collectors, the *Cholanaickens* require a very large resource area for harnessing their daily quota of nourishment. In fact the *Cholanaickens* reach as far as the Nilgiris in the north and to the Amarampalam forest block adjacent to the Silent Valley in the south. They have been inhabiting areas well guarded inside the forest. The SVHP is only 8 miles away from the core habitat of the *Cholanaickens*. The completion of the SVHP would mean not just the destruction of their subsistence, but the possible incursion of civilized urban modernity into their very natural lifestyle.

This perspective in the campaign to save the Silent Valley foregrounds the significance of cultural diversity in environmental struggles. Misra's concern, unlike that of others', is the affect of the proposed SVHP on a highly vulnerable indigenous community. This aspect of environmental struggles has been dealt with by writers even before the anthropological effects of the SVHP were known. Indigenous communities and tribes, portrayed in the literary texts of Kadamanitta that will be discussed in the next chapter, for instance, lend a human rights angle to environmental struggles. The issues that Kadamanitta raises like the destruction of natural lifestyles in "Kirathavrutham" and in "Kattaalan," impoverishment of tribes in "Kattaalan" and

alienation of indigenous communities in “Kirathavrutham” and “Kunhe, Mulappal Kudikkaruthu” are same as Misra’s concerns about the affect of the SVHP on the *Cholanaickens*.

It is indeed commendable that in spite of the vehement antagonism showed by the state government and a significant number of people from the field of science, the scientific community could successfully resist the construction of the SVHP and create, to a certain extent, an all round awareness of ecological issues among Malayalees. As Karunakaran Nair and Sreeranjini remark in their article, “Paaristitikaprashnangalum Muthalalithavum” (Environmental Problems and Capitalism), the scientific community has to play a crucial part in educating the masses to impress upon them the need for following a sustainable model of development (330). During the Silent Valley agitation, the scientific community fulfilled its task at hand. In this, they were amply supported by the literary community and a section of the print media, though the most popular newspapers like *Mathrubhoomi* and *Malayala Manorama* remained indifferent towards the environmental cause throughout the campaign. The activities of this group of scientists acquire enormous significance in the light of the support extended by the scientists on the official side in favour of the hydroelectric project and in refuting the ecological importance, uniqueness and antiquity of the Silent Valley. Countering the campaign to oppose the SVHP, the scientists in the official camp formed associations like *Parisara Asoothrana Samrakshana Samithi* (PASS), which remained a major disseminator of such ideas.

Educative and informative articles on the Silent Valley were intended for enlightening the public of the state on environmental matters and hence they were presented in simple language and lucid style without any jargon. Most of such

educational writings in prose were given in the style of school textbooks with examples and explanations:

Technically, forest is a biome. Rainforests, deciduous forests and meadows are all biomes. Biome is an ecological concept. It is a community of organisms based in a particular place. This community is formed as a result of the interactions with the climate of a particular locality through hundreds and thousands of years. Such forests have a vast range of life forms from micro organisms to huge trees and to giant animals like the elephant. The organisms in a biome are divided into producers, consumers and decomposers. Each of them cooperates and competes among themselves and kills and gets killed. The equilibrium is preserved thus. Each of these organisms has its address and function. Each of them is a chain in the complex web of life. In order to damage the equilibrium of a forest, the whole forest need not be destroyed. Interference in the form of felling of trees, large scale human settlements, and cultivation and hydroelectric projects can detrimentally affect the natural equilibrium. (Prasad, “Gunadosha” 18)

As evident from the style of this passage, one of the major groups of target readership of these writings was evidently school and university students. It must be noted here that students formed one of the major groups of resistance throughout the campaign to protect the Silent Valley. The participation of the student community came in the form of mass petitions to political authorities—the Chief Minister, the Prime Minister, the President and the Governor; protests such as marches and picketing and so on. One of the poems published in *Sasthragathi* pleading for the protection of the Silent Valley was written by P. Balamuralidhar, a Pre-Degree student. The poem, “Silent Valley,” draws upon the episode of Draupathi’s disrobing in the *Mahabharata* as a metaphor for the destruction of the Silent Valley. The native name of the Silent Valley, *Sairandhrivanam* is recalled in the poem and this lends a

mythical aura to the subject. The involvement of students is not surprising when one remembers that most of the leading members of the campaign to save the Valley—M. K. Prasad, John C. Jacob, A. Achyuthan, K. Ayyappa Paniker, and Vishnu Narayanan Namboothiri— were, at that time, school/university teachers. It should also be noticed that the first convention of the *Prakrithi Samrakshana Samithi* held in 1980 had a separate section for student delegates. They were invited to special slide-shows by eminent environmentalists emphasizing the importance of the Silent Valley. The convention adopted a declaration by the student community which reads thus:

We recognize the fact that along with his growth, man interferes with and alters nature. In their insatiable hunger for wealth, people indiscriminately exploit both humans and beasts leaving them nearly lifeless. We recognize this as well.

This insatiability, we realize, for material gains will in the near future render the planet unsuitable for life. This must not be permitted.

Almost all the rivers, the ports, the lakes, the beeches, the atmosphere, and the fields in this region have been contaminated by industrial waste. People, in their efforts to enlarge their profit, destroy forest, and in doing so, increase the prospect of risk two fold by causing drought and flood. We recognize that the ruling class which has the power to control them has vested interests, which they will not give away easily.

We are aware that in order to make the planet habitable where the future generations can live with dignity, all kinds of exploitation must be stopped.

This struggle is not just for us, nor is it an isolated one. But we, the students and youth of Kerala, declare that we will be in the forefront of this struggle (“Jeevanthe Nilanilppinuvendi” 13)

This enthusiasm for the environmental cause surfaced during the period caused educational agencies like the State Council for Educational Research and Training (SCERT) to incorporate ecological contents in the school curriculum. Besides the emphasis on the ecology in science textbooks, the language courses too

contained material related to different kinds of pollutions and over population. The school curricula also contained materials clearly aimed towards fostering the values of peaceful coexistence. The language textbooks contained such contents as “Boomiyude Avakasikal” (the Heirs of the Earth), “Bhavikkoru Bheeshani” (Threat for the Future), and other similar passages by eminent writers intended at creating an interest among the students towards the nature and the non-human beings inhabiting it.

The Silent Valley campaign also played a major role in changing the Malayalee’s conception about wild life. Till then pictures of wildlife in text books as well as other publications and ideas of wildlife contained in them had nothing to do with endemic flora and fauna. Except a few major species of flora and fauna, most endemic species were absent from the curriculum and public sphere. The campaign reinforced and convinced us that forest and wilderness is not something confined to biology textbooks, classroom discussions and creative, adventurous and romantic imaginations. Consequently, forest and related issues became concerns of policy makers, journalists, legislators, and the public at large.

The Silent Valley had been in the public domain right from the publication of the report of the taskforce appointed by the NCEPC in the October of 1976. Almost all the important political as well as scientific decisions concerning the hydropower project had been out by 1980, major exceptions being the report of the Joint Committee and the political decision to abandon the project based on this report. During this period the campaign failed to reach down to the grassroots. The only active mass participation, which was from the part of the local public of the Mannarkkadu region, supported the SVHP. This is not surprising for the project authorities employed the rhetoric of power shortage, unemployment, irrigation,

industrialization, and the backwardness of the region to rally the support of the local population.

A discernable pattern in struggles commonly regarded as environmental is the polarization of people into conservationists and defenders of development. While environmental activists, ecologists, intellectuals and artists question “development” that destroys communities, forests, rivers and ecosystems, governments, political parties, bureaucrats and technologists deem such activities progressive. Political parties usually link mega projects to regional development and any resistance to such activities is to them intrinsically anti-development. Though all political parties in Kerala shared this view, the two Communist Parties were the most vocal. Politicians belonging to these parties described environmentalism as utopianism, romanticism or primitivism and destruction/exploitation of nature as development or nation building. This political critique of concerns over ecology was systematically countered by Marxist organisations like the KSSP. The members of the KSSP resorted to the often overlooked environmental streak in the political and theoretical writings of Marx and Engels in order to underline the ecological rootedness of Marxist/Communist thought. In “Virakum, Kalkkariyum, Vaidhyuthiyum” (Firewood, Coal and Electricity), M. P. Parameswaran argues by quoting Engels (180) that his being a Marxist does not prevent him from opposing the SVHP. The overpowering influence that the rhetoric of Marxism has had over the Malayalees again justifies this invocation of Engels for the cause of the Silent Valley.

The campaign against the SVHP, in the light of this schism, can be read as a rupture between the regional desire for development and the scientific/ecological awareness. The SVHP had been a long cherished dream of the people of Malabar in general and Palakkadu and Malappuram districts in particular. In 1958, the state

Government of Kerala, which claimed to be motivated by the desperate need for the economic development of the Malabar region, reviewed the possibilities of constructing a hydroelectric project on the Kunthipuzha, on the fringes of the Silent Valley reserve forest. The government and other organizations that advocated it made use of the rhetoric of regional development in their bid to highlight the inevitability of the SVHP. The question of region surfaced repeatedly throughout the campaign in a variety of forms. The region, Malabar, was pitted against the rest of the State, Cochin and Travancore. This historical division (geographical as well as administrative) was gradually, but steadily replaced in the post-independence era by socio-economic, industrial and educational disparities among these areas.

The aspect of the “regional” was vigorously employed in the campaign to gather societal espousal for the realization of the SVHP. The argument centred on the underdeveloped nature of the Malabar region. It was argued that the 522 million units of energy produced by the SVHP would be of immense help in overcoming the economic and industrial backwardness of the region. Besides the energy factor, the region would also benefit from the flurry of economic activities related to the construction, which by itself could provide continuous employment for more than three thousand workers for a period not less than five years. The infrastructure of the region too would benefit from the increased accessibility of the region due to the construction process. The project would also enhance the prospect of farmers as the reservoir could irrigate 10000 additional hectares of paddy fields.

These aspects of possible economic and industrial benefits of the region were countered and annulled in a systematic and measured manner by various environmental groups. The ecologists tried to establish that the claims of the KSEB and other pro-SVHP groups were erroneous and exaggerated. They expressed the

view that the power produced by the SVHP would not help to remedy the energy crisis in the region since it would take at least 10-12 years to complete it. Moreover, much of the energy produced was meant for sale. The installed capacity of the SVHP could be realised by means of improving the existing distribution mechanism and bringing down the transmission loss to international standard. They rather argued that the availability of continuous employment to the local population a myth, as once the construction was complete, only a few technically qualified employees would be needed to maintain the project. They also highlighted the detrimental climatologic affect that the SVHP would have on Malappuram and Palakkadu districts.

Those who joined the SSVC regarded the environmental cause more essential than the regional development promised by the SVHP. The protection of the tropical evergreen forests in the region would be, in their opinion, of immense benefit in furthering the general understanding of various scientific disciplines like genetics, medical science, and agriculture and land use management. The destruction of such an ecologically and biologically priceless forest area could create hiatus in the ecosystem as well as an irretrievable loss to the body of scientific knowledge.

This, however, does not mean an absolute rejection by the resistance campaign of the developmental aspirations of the local population. On the contrary, together with their opposition to the SVHP, the major groups in the Movement suggested alternative methods of power production and regional empowerment. So instead of a hydroelectric project, which is heavily dependent on the monsoon, the environmentalists demanded that the Central Government sanction and fund a thermal power plant in the Malabar region. The KSSP suggested the possibility of smaller, run-of-the-river power and irrigation schemes. Such locally administered, small projects would rather help ameliorate the living standards of the poor than any

irrigation scheme controlled by a distant authority. The relation between the SVHP and the regional development was countered by citing the continuing backwardness of the Idukki, though the district hosts the Idukki power project that accounts for 75% of Kerala's power production.

The region versus science/ecology aspect in the campaign to resist the SVHP is obvious as all activities directed towards the conservation of the Silent Valley were launched from far-off places like Thiruvananthapuram and Kozhikode. It would be interesting to note that not a single group that opposed the SVHP was from Palakkadu or Malappuram. For instance, KSSP and Society for the Protection of Silent Valley worked from Kozhikode, Friends of Trees and Citizens' Committee for Saving the Silent Valley from Kottayam, *Prakrithi Samrakshana Samithi* and Kerala Natural History Society from Thiruvananthapuram and Bombay Natural History Society from Bombay. Those who supported the SVHP took this as the failure of the environmentalists to understand the regional craving for development. The environmental cause was not very convincing as far as the local population and administration were concerned, though the significance of protecting the Silent Valley forest was emphasized by academicians and scientists across the state.

The region's desire for development coupled with the absence of human settlement in the area that would be submerged made the Silent Valley forest a safe site for the proposed project in the eyes of the state administration. Since the project involved no destruction of human settlement and displacement, the resistance campaign lacked popular encouragement. This gave the campaign the hue of a conflict between the developmental needs of a comparatively small and backward region and the rest of the state, the country or even in some instances, the rest of the

world. This dimension of the Silent Valley debate is reflected in the following excerpt from an editorial of *The Hindu* dated 11 January 1980:

The Silent Valley is far too valuable a national and continental asset for its treatment to be decided by those who have a narrow temporary interest in the matter. It is a national issue on which all of India should have a say. The price of saving the Silent Valley by sacrificing the flow of benefits is borne by the people of Kerala in general and those of South Malabar in particular. The benefits of preserving Silent Valley accrue not only to the people of Kerala, but also to the whole nation and the world as well. (qtd. in Rangamony and Parthasarathy 2)

Those who fought for the realization of the SVHP within the state could thus easily inflame the local rage against the Central Government and their high-handed attitude. The fact that some Central Government agencies and international conservation groups supported the campaign to resist the SVHP was misleadingly projected as evidence of such claims. Those who emphasized the regional point of view portrayed the environmentalists as insensitive to the developmental needs of the Malabar region.

One of the booklets published by the PASS supports this view. The booklet entitled *Silent Valley, Myth and Reality* criticizes the scientists of the NCEPC for stirring regional feeling and sectarian tendencies in the country. According to it, the report of the taskforce is highly biased against Kerala. The same committee that denied permission for the SVHP went on to sanction the Kundremukh Iron Ore Project in Karnataka, though the committee considered the area comparable to the Silent Valley forest (1). And so, the KSEB and PASS indict the NCEPC for stirring and sustaining regional feeling and sectarian tendencies in the country. The report of

the taskforce now becomes a well thought out, disguised attempt, induced by the imperial powers to create regional imbalances in India:

The people of Kerala have a long-standing grievance about the continuing neglect of the State's developmental needs by the Central Government and its planners. Such perceptions are widespread and not confined to the people of Kerala alone. The question of Centre-State relations is today very much a live issue and is likely to be a focal point for serious political developments in the near future. [...] Such developments are quite natural, [...]. We have seen the functioning of the National Committee on Environmental Planning and coordination [...]. Does it not contain enough inflammable material to put the Keralites against the Tamils, Kannadigas or even Maharashtrians? (55)

The problem of separatism was very much a part of the national politics during this period. The analysis, though indirectly, also points to the inadequate representation of Kerala in the taskforce of the NCEPC. On its Committee of nineteen members, only one was from a Kerala-based institution (7). The scrutiny finds that the taskforce was overwhelmingly “poetic” and aesthetic in its report on the SVHP, whereas the portion that deals with the Kundremukh Iron Ore project was “matter of fact” and straightforward (9-10). The grant of \$10000 received by the NCEPC from conservation agencies, IUCN and WWF was cited as instances of the Committee’s servitude towards imperial powers. Political parties and their spokesmen too propagated the idea of regional imbalances and the imperial plans to unsettle the developmental activities undertaken by the nation.

The perception of region by those who opposed the SVHP was drastically different from that of their opponents. Unlike the latter who considered the whole of Malabar as region, the ecologists took a much smaller geographical area as critical as

far as the environmental discourse was concerned. It was not the anthropocentricity, but rather its absence that made the tiny region symbolize the forests/wilderness of the entire world. Those who resisted the SVHP too considered the region distinct and unique. The factors that determined the distinctness of the region were ecological and geographic, unlike the Malabar region which was distinct socially and economically. The ecological discourse considered the region rich with regard to its biodiversity. The impact of the proposed hydropower plant, the ecologists maintained, would devastate not just the region, but also the entire Western Ghats. The economic gains that the SVHP might bring fades, according to them, in front of the ecological devastation it could trigger.

The rhetoric of the regional development was championed by the KSEB, print media as well as the political parties, which dismissed the ecological campaign as romantic. This accusation was strengthened by the presence of the literary/artistic community in the ranks of the Silent Valley Movement. The focus of this group was not just regional, though their fight was to save a tiny wilderness region from destruction. Their endeavour was symbolic in that it transcended all geographical boundaries and attracted global interest. This tiny ecosystem lost its regionality in the process of it being viewed as an example of human intervention in the natural order and the subsequent fall-out. If this region was deprived of its symbolic aura, it would remain an isolated green island in a vast anthropogenic desert. The dichotomy of regional development and ecological conservation thus works out to weaken the dominant narrative of nationalism and patriotism or even functions as a counter narrative for federalism, as all these abstract entities get concretely questioned by the notion of region. This is an interesting case of the immediate and the concrete questioning the abstract and the far off.

The ecologists and environmental groups, especially those who opposed the SVHP, were portrayed as anti-modern, unscientific and regressive by the popular media and political parties. In the course of the development versus the environment discourse, the primitive unconsciously gets eulogized as eco-friendly as against the “modern” which is environmentally hostile and destructive. The exaggeration of the nature-friendliness of the pre-modern is celebrated ignoring the limited population and needs, and the palliation of the destructiveness of the modern is artfully effected, by means of employing the rhetoric of human development and welfare. But the SSVC was triumphant in undoing this dichotomization by advocating prudent ways of energy/resource consumption and distribution. Since one of the parties that campaigned strongly for the abandonment of the project was KSSP, a Science-for-the-People organisation with its putative claim of spreading and cultivating scientific/modern temperament in the state, the focus was on the judicious and careful use of resources rather than a retreat into the past. The affinity of this group with the technologies, achievements and ideals of the modern age proclaims in no dubious terms the closeness and reverence the group had for scientific modernity. It seemed to argue that the application of modern scientific and technological principles, instead of remaining elitist, should reach the common people. Besides, the scientific as well as the political community should be clear in identifying and abandoning technologies which are destructive in the long run, even though these might be profitable for a short term.

I have tried to mark various ways in which *nature* was comprehended during the Silent Valley controversy by means of examining the scientific and institutional discourses of the KSSP AND the KSEB. What is significant for me regarding these discourses is the role of science and scientists in their respective social constructions

of nature. Equally significant is the role of the scientific community in debates over the value and worth of nature and in cultural-political struggles over conserving nature in modern Malayali society. One discerns in the seemingly scientific discourse over the SVHP the crumbling of the concept of science and nature as universal and objective. The controversy offers an instance where various groups assign social, scientific and cultural meanings to nature. The conflicting views that were engaged in the debate on the SV brought to the fore the perceptions and ideologies that underpin them—such as rural-urban; tribal-industrial; poetic-prosaic; mythic/transcendental-everyday; development-sustainability. That the SV had galvanized not merely social action but stirred intellectual debate is a significant achievement in Kerala's modernity, and the literature of popular science played an unignorable part in this debate.

Of course, the ideas of nature cherished by the proponents and opponents of the Silent Valley are different. Their respective conceptions of nature are shaped by various traditions. The plethora of popular scientific literature that appeared in Malayalam had a major role in this. While the defenders of development conceived and propagated the idea that nature is to be tamed and exploited, environmentalists emphasised on non-exploitative coexistence with nature and other non-human beings. While the proponents of the project were largely influenced by the modernist idea of human progress and development, the opponents were to certain extent guided by the traditions of native cultures. I do not reject the part played by the burgeoning ecological discourse on them; rather my argument is that the so called cultural elements which were considered eco-benign had a profound impact on them.

Along with the popular science literature that reveals different aspects of the SVHP from technological, scientific and ecological angles, there appeared a large

number of popular articles in magazines that, despite being anchored in scientific and technical information, were not strictly scientific. Artists who spearheaded such efforts expatiated on the proper place of modern science and technology and how they should advance human societies. These popular artistic efforts are significant as they, unlike educative articles by those in the field of science that are full of statistics to establish and disprove certain arguments, suggest that objects and concepts of science could be freed from their esoteric confines. Another significant difference between these two categories of writings is the way in which they view nature. While the former rests on the premise that humans are outside the natural world and can harness it for their benefits, the latter reminds us that humanity is just one of the numerous expendable constituents of nature. While the former considers nature as an object to be explored and studied in order to acquire and add to the existing knowledge or to exploit it to further human comfort, the artists approach it as an organic entity. To them, nature is not an object, passive as the former would like to describe it, but a sentient and conscious being capable of benevolence and retribution. Such interventions by artists, chiefly through popular magazines in Malayalam, suggest that comprehension of the natural world and our harmonious existence in it are not possible with just facts and information, but with the exploration of the meaning of life itself. Their effort is to enable us to lead a life worth our species and appropriate to our place on the planet. Let us examine some social observations on the role of science in the socio-cultural givens in relation to the Silent Valley, some of which were written by literary personalities such as Krishnavarier and O. V. Vijayan, and by a scientific professional, Satishchandran Nair. These engagements treat the Silent Valley as the microcosm of a larger whole and extend it metaphorically far beyond the concrete and immediate situation. The clubbing of a poet, a prose writer and a

scientific personal together is characterised by the shared angle in the treatment of the topic.

Recollecting his short visit to the Silent Valley, Vijayan dwells on the efficacy of modern science and technology. He is disheartened by the particular stream of modern science that dominates emerging societies like India. Since the industrial revolution, reductionist and mechanical paradigms of science have shaped societies' attitudes towards nature. Nevertheless, to him, this paradigm of modern science has been challenged in the West since the sixties of the last century. However, Vijayan maintains that in societies like India, the scientific and technological optimism of the early decades of the industrial revolution still persists. Hence, in his view, if our scientists hate those who challenge their optimism with "existential dilemmas" and with "dull truth," it is only a child's innocent response. Vijayan observes that our science is still in its formative stages and consequently immature. He admits that he is not heartless to oppose it. However, its immaturity makes him impatient and it grieves him (22). Vijayan realises that the flourishing of empires during the 19th and 20th century was the consequence of ruthless exploitation of nature. Maintaining that it is impossible for humans to live opposing nature, he continues that the industrial revolution that pitted humans against nature has now recognised this. Modern science acknowledges that all organisms are links in the complex web of nature and the untimely loss of one will affect the entire biological cycle. While scientists in the West recognise this ecological precept, Western Multi-National Corporations continue to exploit nature. However, Vijayan notes with dismay that our scientists, technologists and politicians consider it our moral right to repeat those very follies of the past (23).

Krishnavarier too has made several such interventions through articles he published during this period in weeklies like *Mathrubhoomi* and *Kumkumam*. Such articles of Krishnavarier on environment/ecology that have had contemporary relevance collected in such volumes as *Anweshanangal Kandethalukal* (Inquiries and Findings), *Velluvilikal Prathikaranangal* (Challenges and Responses) and *Mananangal Nigamanangal* (Reflections and Deductions) sometimes express scepticism over the so called benign application of modern technology. Quoting a Centre for Development Studies (CDS) report on the possibilities of decentralised development in Kerala, Krishnavarier in “Viduyuchakthi Nayam” (Policy on Power) writes that no part of Kerala, especially its North, gets enough electricity to light fluorescent lamps or to operate motors. Forty per cent of all the electricity generated here is sold to the neighbouring states—Tamil Nadu and Karnataka. Two-third of electricity distributed within Kerala is high voltage power given to large industrial units at subsidised rates. Small scale industries get only about 4 per cent of the total electricity consumed. Not even half of this is available for agriculture. This statistics clearly suggests that electricity in Kerala has not made any significant contribution in bettering the living conditions of the poor (5-6). The trouble, Krishnavarier maintains, is with our attitude that views electricity as an isolated product or commodity. Electricity is one of the major components of the overall economic development of the people. Therefore, augmenting power generation must be viewed from the broad perspective of economic development (5).

In other words, what Krishnavarier seems to question is not the tenets of modern science and technology but the specific applications of them in contemporary societies. Using his knowledge of science, he offers (and tries to provoke) resistance to the objectionable modes of its application. However, such scepticism towards some

aspects of science and its application is not necessarily reactionary always. For instance, in his article on the shoreline of India, “Anathamaakunna Kadaloram” (Languishing Seashore), Krishnavarier disapproves of the ecologists and conservationists for confining their interests solely to the protection of forests. He urges them to be more inclusive and to extend their activities to other aspects of conservation such as the saving of the shoreline of the country (18). The technological/engineering solution to this is the construction of seawalls, which, he argues, is ineffective and expensive. Instead, an organic barrier with mangroves and other vegetations, he writes, would be more effective, permanent and more productive. He urges the environmental groups campaigning against the deforestation and submergence of the Silent Valley to be more inclusive in their approach towards the cause of conservation (19).

Again, in “Bhoomiye Baadhicca Ancu Rogangal” (Five Diseases that have Affected the Earth), he draws the attention of his readers to the irresponsible and imprudent manner in which administrators and technologists approach significant environmental issues. The subtlety with which these writings link the Silent Valley issue to other significant, though not popular, environmental issues is interesting. He recalls the way in which politicians and engineers of the KSEB insisted on going ahead with the SVHP. Krishnavarier wonders whether it is possible, as the administrators and technologists claim, to have the SVHP without destroying the forests of the Western Ghats! He reminds us of the devastation that had happened around the Idukki reservoir. Destruction of environment that has happened to date, he believes, is due to our ignorance. However, this is no longer true. We are aware of the importance of re-establishing the equilibrium of nature, and any reluctance in this regard would be unforgivable (33). In *Mananangal Nigamanangal*, Krishnavarier

remarks that the only manner in which humans can lead a satisfactory life is to be in harmony with nature. Instead of regarding nature as a force that is to be encountered and conquered, we must strive to gain the affection and friendship of it (79). In other words, like Betty and Roszac, he recognises that “a culture divorced from the biological foundations of life is simply not sustainable” (223).

In an overwhelmingly poetic essay, Satishchandran Nair regards the controversy over the Silent Valley as a revolution. The Silent Valley movement was not a mere opposition to a dam, nor was this campaign a clamour for a bit of forest, but, to Nair, “it was the birth pang of questions such as which way we were headed for” (“Reflections” 71). The Silent Valley is not an isolated issue, for as he writes, it was “one tiny ripple in the unfolding of our consciousness. Simultaneously such things were happening everywhere” (71). The significance of the Silent Valley controversy, in his view, lies in its potential to make us realise that the tranquillity of many similar valleys has also been irreparably violated and a number of other areas are under similar threat (70). To him, the Silent Valley campaign was a revolution in the social history of the state that questioned our conception of progress and the means to realize it. The campaign, thus, was “not a struggle to save the Kunthi, but a fight to save all rivers and streams; not a struggle to save a small forest, but a fight to protect all our forests. For a few, the macaques are important, but then there is not much difference between humans and them” (71).

Krishnavarier too realises the symbolic significance of the Silent Valley, for, in “Silent Valley National Park,” he writes:

The Silent Valley is an extremely tiny portion of forest land in Kerala. The scientists, environmentalists and thinkers do not want the Silent Valley to be protected as a show piece. They want the entire stretch of remaining

forests in the Sahya Mountains to be conserved and utilized scientifically. The Government of Kerala, though with reluctance, has recognized the validity of their argument. Hence, it is the responsibility of the environmentalists, scientists and nature lovers to evolve a movement to protect our forests. (5)

So, if the Silent Valley and other ecologically endangered areas in the Western Ghats are to be protected and preserved, enlightened, positive and active public interventions should continue. The primary and the most important phase of struggles such as these is the creation of scientific awareness among the public on environment. In other words, what Krishnavarier suggests is the task of individuals and organisations sensitive towards the environmental issues does not end with the temporary or permanent preservation of the Silent Valley. There are tens of ecologically hazardous projects that could potentially turn Kerala into an ecologically barren land in a few decades. For example, in the same piece, Krishnavarier invites his readers' attention to the state Government's intention to build a hill-highway across the Sahya Mountains. The realisation of this project means the complete destruction of Kerala's forests. Similarly, in articles like "Chaliyarinoranujathi" (A Sister to the Chaliyar) and "Chaliyar Vellathil Visham" (Poison in the Chaliyar) Krishnavarier explicates how industries—textile, chemical and newsprint—contribute to deforestation, pollute air and contaminate streams and rivers. In "Vanavidhwamsanam" (Deforestation), he exposes the complicity of Kerala's political leadership in destroying forests.

In such articles, as these, we see how the *social* meets the *cultural* and *educational* lives of Kerala. In fact, much of Krishnavarier's essays and studies of environment and ecology has a correlated thrust. In writing such editorial pieces for the *Kumkumam* weekly, for example, Krishnavarier may be seen to range freely from

ecology and ekistics to the decimation of tribal lives, rain-harvesting and folk cultures, Sanskritic as well as Dravidian traditions of art and their sustenance, the perils of mindless urbanism and industrialism, etc. The subjects he covers in each essay are as disparate and wide-ranging as the cultural references that alert readers to ways of existing dangerously as opposed to living safely. Pan-Indian references, local traditions, European and North American examples spot his fascinating short essays. The “literary” and the “cultural” are nearly indistinguishable from everyday life and its “sciences”—loosely seen and understood as extremely crucial for the healthy life of our community.

The artistic resistance against the proposed hydroelectric project in the Silent Valley thus alludes to alternate and more sensitive ways of inhabiting the earth. Very often, the emphasis is on evolving an inclusive habitat that is critical to the "healthy" sustenance of human societies. None of those who opposed The SVHP regard it as an isolated issue specific to the region. The educative and journalistic pieces by Krishnavarier, M. K. Prasad, O. V. Vijayan and Satishchandran Nair discussed earlier in this chapter point to this. Though the Valley and the climatological as well as the hydrological impact of the Valley's submergence are always discussed and highlighted in relation to the region, the artistic/literary environmental campaigners underscore it as a mere symptom of a looming planetary threat.

However, these “scientific” essays by writers who are not specialized in sciences point to the aura of unmistakability that science seemed to have possessed in those days. The rhetoric of scientific inferences and data could not be contested. Until then, there had been no theoretical departure from the enlightenment notions of science, rationality or progress. Even O.V. Vijayan who briefly mentions the critique of instrumental rationality by alluding to the mistake of Galileo foregrounds romantic

aspects of the issue and of the land. The fact that science is just another way of grappling with the world is never even coming through. It is particularly interesting as such questions had already started getting asked in the west in the last years of sixties itself.

Other than such initiatives that dealt with the issue from the perspective of social sciences, there is a great deal of works that dealt with it from the literary and artistic perspective, where the medium and treatment of the subject matter are proper to literary materials. It began with the effort of Sugathakumari, one of the leading poets of Kerala. It was an article appeared in the *Mathrubhoomi* weekly written by M. K. Prasad that told her about the uniqueness and value of the Silent Valley forest. Inspired and intrigued, she attended a conference on the issue, and decided to support the cause. Soon after this, on fifth, January 1980, Sugathakumari published an article in the daily, *Kerala Kaumudi*, pleading for the protection of the area. The next chapter will examine the manner in which this move grew into a concern of the whole of literary community of Kerala and its implications.

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**Notes:**

<sup>1</sup> I am referring to resistance movements against Itaipu dam in Brazil, the Three Gorges in China and the Sardar Sarovar in India.

<sup>2</sup> It should be noted here that this argument against those who opposed the SVHP boomerangs, and the same scientists, engineers and technologists who faulted the ecologists were criticised on the same grounds by the activists of the SSSC as is shown in the latter part of this chapter. However, the insistence on the incompatibility of the scientific community by those who opposed and backed the SVHP points to the significance of cultural and socio-political aspects of environmental problems. Nevertheless, this does not suggest issues like livelihood, displacement, and rehabilitation but hints at the different modes of perceiving and relating to the environment undoubtedly aided, sharpened and strengthened by the precepts of modern ecology.

<sup>3</sup> In 1957, O. P. Namboothiri, M. C. Namboothiripad, Kurumappilli Kesavan Namboothiri and P. T. Bhaskara Paniker formed *Sasthra Sahithya Samithi* (Association for Science Literature) and held its first session at Ottapalam, Palakkadu. The Samithi's magazine, *Modern Science*, was modelled on the *Penguin Science News*.

<sup>4</sup> On September 10, 1962, KSSP held its inaugural conference at Devagiri College, Kozhikode. The conference also facilitated a seminar and a science exhibition. Some of the founding members of the SSS like P. T. Bhaskara Paniker were also active in the formation of the KSSP. Though the KSSP was formed in the early sixties, it restricted its activities to educational programmes. It was in the mid-seventies that it started engaging with the socio-cultural problems of Kerala.

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<sup>5</sup> It was during the 60s and 70s of the last century that concerns over the health of our environment began gaining scientific, as well as political attention. Publications like *Silent Spring* by Carson, *The Limits to Growth* by the Club of Rome and writings by Capra, Schumacher and Illich opened our eyes to the crisis we are in and suggested possible (though sometimes utopian) solutions to it.

<sup>6</sup> The advocates of this notion of human progress, as Garrard observes, hold that most of the projected eco-disasters are illusory and exaggerated (*Ecocriticism* 16-17). They think that capitalist economies with their vigour and adaptability have the potential to resolve and remedy the contemporary environmental problems with advanced and sophisticated technologies. According to them, the scarcity of natural resources is an impossibility, as the discovery of new and alternative resources and more efficient resource utilisation will take humankind out of the present predicament.

<sup>7</sup> Despite being aware of the environmental predicament, those who hold this view, as Dobson remarks, “argue for a managerial approach to environmental problems, secure in the belief that they can be solved without fundamental changes in present values or patterns of production and consumption [...]” (1).

<sup>8</sup> This notion of development, even though it went unchallenged in the first few decades after independence, has been under attack in the recent years. Writers like Arundathi Roy and Mahasweta Devi, ecofeminists like Vandana Shiva, organisations like KSSP, eco-social movements like the *Chipko* and NBA have questioned the appropriateness of such developmental strategies.

<sup>9</sup> This, however, is not an isolated indictment. It still permeates the developmental vocabulary.

<sup>10</sup> Besides the Silent Valley, other environmental issues like the pollution of the river Chaliyar by a rayon mill too spurred public debates and discussions in Kerala during

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the 1970s. For details on the pollution of Chaliyar during this period refer to George (254-256) and *Velluvilikal Prathikaranangal* by Krishnavarier. Environmentalists also discussed industrial pollution in such places within Kerala as Punaloor and Velloor. These issues interest us for, unlike the activists of the SSVC, those who raised these issues were concerned primarily with public health, right to life and equitable distribution of natural resources.



## Chapter III

### Writers for the “Protection of Nature”

We have seen the role of popular science literature that appeared in Kerala during the Silent Valley controversy in creating ecological awareness and promoting the cause of the environment. Such efforts largely popularised scientific, ecological and technical material for the ordinary Malayali audience. Besides, such activities, it would seem, served as a discursive corridor from pure science towards politics and literature. If the Silent Valley occupied the centre stage in public consciousness through popular journals, newspapers and other periodicals, Malayalees often debated the Silent Valley in larger and more intellectual and literary forms. Popular science and public action indeed set the stage for the movement. Scientific prose and journalistic debates seemed to lead inevitably to literary politics of a kind. Along with reducing the distance between science, bioethics and aesthetics in popular imagination, such endeavours together with popular science exhibitions and art processions, prepared Kerala’s public sphere and intellectuals to resist the mindless destruction of the state’s natural reserves. This link between science, aesthetics and political action in Kerala is crucial, as the burgeoning environmental awareness among Malayalees during the 1970s generated social activism and prompted public intellectual debates. Interest in matters of environmental import was clearly visible in the literature of this period. This espousal of the environmental cause and the furious controversy it generated encouraged Malayalees to keenly follow the Silent Valley controversy. Besides the scientific gestures, which introduced and initiated the Silent Valley debate, the literary involvement, as I will argue in this chapter, immensely helped in sustaining the environmental cause among Malayalees.

M. N. Paaloor, one of the writers who actively resisted the SVHP, underlined the temporal appropriateness of the literary environmentalism in “Anaavrishtti” (The Drought) in 1980. Paaloor invokes the Muse to inspire the writers to protest against the environmental devastation as the condition of our natural environment is deplorable. Indiscriminate human interference in nature has nearly destroyed its drying ponds, wells, rivers and fields. Even the human throat is parched. The poem considers this era in Kerala’s history, a time when the environmental discourse dominated the public sphere, suitable for creating eco-awareness among the people: “This is the right time / For the Muse to shower” (27-28). Surely, the Muse heeded this invocation and showered in torrents as attested by the literary efforts to resist the SVHP.

However, it would be uncritical to assume that the pervasiveness of ecological concerns among the writers of Malayalam was unanimously approved. The growing discontent against such literary interventions is more than evident from the article, “Nammude Ezhuthukkar, Ethra Nalla Vruksha Snehikal!” (Our Writers, Such Good Lovers of Trees!) that questioned the intention of writers as no such unified, firm purposeful solidarity was displayed by them earlier (Nair 50). In this article, Jayachandran Nair recalls the rejection of his 1974 report that charged the political establishment of Kerala with facilitating large scale destruction of forest wealth as baseless, prejudicial and biased. Nair is obviously disheartened by the indifference of writers to his earlier report, which, in his view, is nothing but a silent approval of the plundering of Kerala’s forests. However, he notes with astonishment that a few well-known, prominent writers of Kerala have come forward to educate the public on issues like the Silent Valley. This drastic change that happened in a span of six years in writers’ perception of nature is beyond Nair’s comprehension. He regards writers’

nascent interest in issues like the Silent Valley merely as a ploy to gain public attention. Considered thus, he thinks writers who joined the campaign against the SVHP to be opportunistic, for they had already acquiesced to the destruction of Kerala's forests.

Nevertheless, the enthusiasm that he displays in accusing just the writers does not sustain, for, as Narayana Pillai writes in his response to Nair in the following issue of *Kalakaumudi*, it was not just the writers who were silent to Nair's 1974 report. Even environmental and social activists and scientists did not acknowledge Nair's report or follow it up (11). However, Nair's rage is not against writers' participation in the campaign to resist the SVHP but their failure in acknowledging the significance of his effort in exposing the threats to the forest wealth of Kerala. His despair stems from his realisation that the defence of his efforts by those in the cultural field would have convinced the public and together would pressurise the political establishment to oppose the destruction of Kerala's natural resources. Debates such as these that appeared in popular magazines are important as they point to the participation of writers in the campaign and the impact such a presence could produce.

But before proceeding to the contributions of the major writers, let us for a moment, examine the works of imagination, though purely propagandist, published well ahead of organised literary efforts to oppose the SVHP. Such attempts, especially by people hardly known in the literary and public sphere before,<sup>1</sup> are significant for me, as they illustrate the manner in which the environmental/ecological can inspire artistic imagination and likewise its potential to resist environmentally disastrous projects. What is important for me about these writings is their pervasiveness which is obvious from the nature of their distribution. All popular periodicals—*Mathrubhoomi*, *Kalakaumudi* and *Sastragathi*—published such poems during 1979 and 1980. While

*Sastragathi* published two, *Mathrubhoomi* and *Kalakaumudi* published one each. I am also intrigued by the titles of these poems which are all eponymic—“Silent Valley”—which perhaps, was a deliberate attempt by their authors and publishers to invite the attention of their readers.

In “Silent Valley,” published in *Sastragathi* (1980), Priyathamam ridicules the arrogance and ignorance of modern man. The poet’s perception of man as self-indulgent and ecologically destructive is, I think, significant as many works by the major writers which will be discussed later in this chapter too corroborate it. The poem comprehensively relates the role of evergreen forests in regulating the climate, the interdependence of organisms and the alarming rate of population growth, and registers with dismay that the struggle for survival has transformed into a fierce competition to dominate others—humans as well as non-humans. The closing lines of “Silent Valley” offer us one of the most severe remarks on man’s arrogance and the self-destructive, though overwhelming, confidence in his capabilities:

May be not far in time,  
This land will turn into a desert.  
Let it become; I shall  
Stand it as a camel. (54-57)

V. Balamuralidhar compares the felling of trees in the Silent Valley with the disrobing of Draupadi in the Mahabharata. In “Silent Valley”, which he published in *Sastragathi*, he identifies the Silent Valley with Draupadi as the area is eponymous with her in Malayalam—Sairandhri. This mythicising gesture is significant as it suggests the possibilities of religious and cultural myths in arousing the popular interest. The myth of Draupadi/Sairandhri is, in my view, appropriate as many—as suggested in chapter 2—thought the restoration of the name, *Sairandhrivanam*, to the

area would remove all doubts about the Silent Valley. “Silent Valley” describes various players in the controversy as counterparts of the mythical characters. Thus, in the poem, KSEB assumes the role of Dushasana; scientists and officials who supported the KSEB and the government come across as Bheeshma and Drona; the government of Kerala passes for Dhritirashtra; and environmentalists appear as Pandavas (3-9). Again, “Silent Valley” mythicises modern man’s relation with nature. Modern man, like the mythical Krishna who drank Poothana’s blood along with her breast milk, drains the blood of nature (19-20). Though this reversal of roles carries the potential to shock a traditional reader, this episode from the childhood of Krishna provides the author with an apt simile to present an unnatural relationship. Balamuralidhar ends “Silent Valley” by calling on the people of Kerala to rise up and prevent the destruction of the Valley (29-30).

Yet another poem with the same title by Cheruthitta, unlike the other two, describes nature as severe and unrelenting. The benevolent, passive and helpless image of nature that we saw in the last two poems transforms into a vengeful, at times malevolent being. The poem narrates the fate of five woodchoppers who try to violate the tranquillity of the Silent Valley. The images of disrobing and rape pervade the narrative.

The savages surreptitiously advance.  
They will not return  
Without ravishing you. These porcine fellows  
Will go only after devouring your hymen.  
Not contented with drinks, plunders, debaucheries, and ecocide,  
The neo-Keechakas march to your abode.  
There are five of them  
And they are mad with lust.  
Though they have different names,  
They have a single aim.  
Sneering, the first one, a corpulent man  
Disrobes you. While two of them hold you in place,

A third one charges at you and chokes you.  
The other man sticks his tongue out and leers at you.  
(58-71)

The epithet neo-Keechakas evokes the native name of the Valley, Sairandhri, which is another name of Draupadi. The metaphor recalls the episode in *Mahabharata* in which Keechaka tries to seduce Sairandhri. It also points to the writer's optimism that, like the rescue of Sairandhri by Bhima, the Valley too will be saved from destruction. The violent attack on the Valley infuriates nature, and the tranquil valley is instantly transformed into a raging spirit with deafening thunders and blinding flashes of lightning.

Roaring like an elephant,  
The black cloud rushed  
And struck them with  
Its sword of lightning.  
(72-75)

Efforts like these heralded the literary involvement in the anti-SVHP campaign, the significance of which will be examined below.

As mentioned in chapter 2, the literary effort to oppose the SVHP began in January 1980 with the publication of an article by Sugathakumari in the Malayalam daily, *Kerala Kaumudi*. Unlike the informative reports and features that were published, Sugathakumari presented her fears in an extremely passionate tone. "Time is running out; the axes are already falling; the forest fires have been ignited," she writes, "the forest stretches out its arms in supplication" (trans. Parthasarathy and Rangamony 33). In a recent article she recalls, "From the moment I read the article on the Silent Valley [...] some deep emotion swelled within me and I felt that it was my life's mission to fight for this unknown bit of forest. I feel proud I could be a soldier

in this battle and could call out to my fellow writers of Kerala also to join” (“Silent Valley: A Case Study” 19). “It was my firm conviction” she emphasises in the same article, “that creative writers could communicate better with the public [...] than the scientists.” With this conviction, some of the writers, she continues, “met at the residence of N. V. Krishnavarier [...] and formed *Prakrithi Samrakshana Samithi* with a view to creating a new awareness regarding nature conservation” (Silent Valley 14-15).

*Prakritiyude Samrakshanathinuvendi, Jeevante Nilanilppinuvendi* (or “The Protection of Nature, for the Sustenance of Life”) was the motto of the *Samithi*. The motto suggests, in no dubious terms, that the endeavours of the *Samithi* would be to ensure not just the preservation of humanity, but the sustenance of the nature/ecosystem. The logo of the *Samithi* was a pair of hands protecting the globe with the words *Namah Prathyu* marked on top. This Sanskrit phrase evokes the picture of earth as a Goddess who has to be propitiated. On June 6, 1980, the *Samithi* organised its first convention in the VJT Hall, Thiruvananthapuram. The convention facilitated a conference of poets whose theme was the inevitability of preserving nature. Besides Krishnavarier, Sugathakumari, O. N. V. Kurup, K. Ayyappa Paniker and Vishnu Narayanan Namboothiri, the conference brought together K. V. Ramakrishnan, Kadamanitta Ramakrishnan, N. K. Desam, and D. Vinayachandran who recited their poems. Their poems exerted immense influence on the youth of the period and they thronged to hear the poets. Figures who dominated the cultural field of Kerala like M. P. Manmathan, Sukumar Azhikode and A. P. Udayabhanu addressed a public gathering in which scientific papers were also presented.

Till then the anti-SVHP campaign more-or-less had been a purely elitist discourse that enlisted little support or sympathy from common people. The

appearance of the writers, mostly poets of high acclaim and mass appeal on the scene, changed the whole scenario with people now gathering in large numbers to attend the conference of poets in which nature poems were recited or sung. The conference of poets and ecological mission made possible by the *Samithi* in different parts of the state drew large crowds. Such activities initiated by the *Samithi* were enthusiastically received and the themes of poems recited communicated easily with the people and convinced them of the grave situation the earth would be in if man's highhanded activities in nature are not curtailed. Most recitals foregrounded images and symbols suggesting barrenness, deprivation and exploitation.

It is, in my view, indeed amazing that in 1983, within a couple of years of its inception, the *Samithi* could bring out an anthology of thirty-four poems on deepening environmental crisis in Kerala. This anthology, *Vanaparvam*, brought together poems that were recited at the conferences of poets organised by the *Samithi*. Though some of the poems contained in this collection have appeared in magazines and other anthologies, I have selected these poems from the 1996 Kerala Sahitya Akademi reprint of *Vanaparvam*. Besides relating human exploitation of nature, poems collected in *Vanaparvam* concentrated on the scientific aspects of human and non-human relation, nostalgic and romantic yearning for a supposedly eco-benign, feudal and rural past, the struggle for an eco social future, significance of historical and political events with ecological impact and mythicising the contemporary ecological concerns in both religious and cultural terms. These are not the only traits that we can discern in the poems published during the anti-SVHP campaign. Anthropomorphism is a trope that pervades many poems written during this period of protest. Along with anthropomorphism, most poems personify and apostrophise nature and non-human

beings. Closely related to this is the animistic nature of some of these poems. Many of these poems are also apocalyptic in their outlook.

The poems on the Silent Valley can be categorised into seven types, on the basis of themes/approaches to nature, viz. scientific, romantic, social, historical, mythical, apocalyptic and constructionist.

### **Scientific**

It is a general belief that science and literature are indeed antithetical. While science is considered “value free,” “universal” and “objective,”<sup>2</sup> literature is imaginative and culture specific.<sup>3</sup> However, during the anti-SVHP campaign, Malayali writers blend these two together. To them, poetry, politics and bioethics and general science were not separate but means of combining imagination with verifiable facts. In the poem, “Marattinu Stuti” (Hymn to the Tree), Sugathakumari<sup>4</sup> describes the tree as Lord Shiva who consumed poison to save the life on earth: “I pray to him / Who offers breathing air / By consuming the poison / Like Lord Neelakanda” (5-8). The allusion reveals itself rather lucidly to the readers as photosynthesis, the process by which trees synthesize carbohydrates from carbon dioxide, water and light releasing oxygen. The invocational tone of “Marattinu Stuti”, however, does not prevent Sugathakumari from highlighting ecological/scientific knowledge. The poem presents a tree’s ecological significance and its benevolence to man. It alludes to the tree’s role in preventing soil erosion and in regulating and sustaining the distribution of rain and water supply:

You save our  
Mother from floods

And rejuvenate  
The soil. You  
Store the ambrosia  
Streaming down the heavens  
In her  
Simmering heart. (33-40)

The image of the earth as mother is vehemently contested in “Kunhe, Mulappal Kudikkarutu” (Child, Do not Drink Breast Milk [henceforth “Kunhe”]), for Kadamanitta<sup>5</sup> writes, “Is earth a playing ball or a playful doll? / Her patience too has limits” (43-44). The reference here to “Her patience”, by means of representing the Nature as a self-regulatory planetary-size ecosystem which, unlike the notion of the benevolent mother, links the poem to the burgeoning ecological discourse.

Similarly, Kurup’s<sup>6</sup> “Bhoomikkoru Charamageetham” (A Requiem to Earth [henceforth “A Requiem”]), one of the most artistically and critically appreciated poems among the so-called tree poems, vividly presents the effects of human interference on the climatic stability of ecosystems. “A Requiem”, I feel, is predominantly apocalyptic in tone. This mode of articulation, no doubt, seemed eminently suited for the writings that concern themselves with the dire environmental conditions. The climatic instability and its consequence on the nature is verbally painted in “A Requiem”:

Aroused is the wrath  
That emits fire from the burning Sun;  
And the clouds of monsoon desperately seek a drop of water to drink;  
Autumnal eves long for a pleasant chill;  
And the King of Seasons searches in vain  
For a tiny flower;  
Stilled are the rivers longing for a ripple;  
The wheels of life get stuck in their tracks! (trans. Kurup 30-37)

Such insights in “A Requiem” correspond to the apocalyptic forecast of future in Rachel Carson’s influential 1962 book on the environmental crisis, *Silent Spring*. Here, she projects a bleak, monotonous future for the earth where the springs would no longer reverberate with the songs of birds, if human exploitation of nature goes unabated. The evolution of the imagination of Kurup from that of the lover of beauty, in “Bhoomi” (The Earth) where the unfading, youthful beauty of the mother is extolled, to that of a seer who anticipates the imminent catastrophe in “A Requiem” also parallels the progression of the environmental thought in Malayalam literature. To confine the significance of writings such as “A Requiem” just to their immediate purpose of opposing the SVHP would be to miss their essence. For instance, consider the prophetic tone of the lines quoted above: the verbal picture of our planet stricken by human induced climate change drawn during the heydays of the anti-SVHP campaign is staring us in the face. The global relevance of the concerns voiced by these lines is evident from the reports of Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) and it being awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for 2006.

As ecologists have generally agreed, ecology defines and explores the interdependence of organisms and the relationship between organisms and their environment. One can find this mutuality among various species and their environment as inspiring the imagination of writers. For instance, D. Vinayachandran observes that environmentalism is not to be mistaken for a blind worship of nature. Nor does he see it as a thesis on gardening. Vinayachandran notes that the popular notion reduces nature to trees, rivers, birds and forests. However, he holds that this notion unconsciously separates human life from nature and distances people from it. Vinayachandran suggests that literary environmentalism should challenge such perceptions so as to create and promote a sense of interdependence between nature

and all aspects of human life (103-104). In “Udayaasthamanam” (The Sunrise and the Sunset), Paniker deals with the interdependence of different organisms. The poem unfolds this interconnectedness through the Sun’s Westward journey:

The arrows of fire hurled from the horizon  
Keep awake the earth;  
Its rooted old trees;  
The buds, flowers and the fresh leaves  
On the tree branch;  
The worms that crawl forward  
To eat the fresh leaves;  
The flock of singing birds  
For swallowing those worms;  
The hunter who kills the birds for his food;  
The wild animal that follows  
The hunter to feed on him;  
The fire that devours the beast and the forests;  
Then the horizon regains it. (22-35)

This verbal diagram of the food chain is, in my view, potent enough to induce in readers a sense of coexistence with the non-human world. Paniker’s description of the interdependence among various living and non-living organisms is significant also as it points to the organic relation that exist among them. Similarly, Krishnavarier<sup>7</sup> in the first stanza of “Marangalum Vallikalum” (Trees and Creepers) describes the interrelatedness of different organisms. Krishnavarier’s poems foreground the need for fostering a conception of life based on mutuality and friendliness. He projects through his writings the right to life as a universal one, something which is not exclusive to human beings. “Only when you consider grass and Birds as yourself, Will you gain knowledge and bliss” (“Oru Pazhankatha” [An Old Tale]). His writings on other forms of life are evidence of this belief. He was deeply attracted towards the diversity of life-forms on the planet. His concern for the diversity of living things is clear from his willingness to study flies, tortoises, reptiles, butterflies, stray dogs,

elephants, trees and mangroves. He was extremely conscious of developing a sensibility that protects the biosphere that includes humans. In spite of the romantic/nostalgic vein in some of his poems, Krishnavarier's concern towards nature is not an infatuation; on the contrary, I believe, it is the result of deep and intense thinking. His acquaintance with different branches of scientific knowledge inspired him to cherish and value all forms of life.

Though these poems are cautionary, they are exquisite and charming and inspire emotions of warmth and reverence in our attitude towards nature. For instance, "Marattinu Stuti" accomplishes in seventy-two lines what those scientifically and statistically loaded elaborate articles on preserving forests and trees do in so many pages. The poem excites me, for it precisely presents the entire discourse on deforestation that was flooding the pages of contemporary periodicals. The disturbing image of the majestic tree wearing on its "broad chest, the stains caused by our axe" (15-16) was able to elicit massive emotional identification with the ideals of the anti-SVHP movement. Likewise, "A Requiem" powerfully presents the variations in the climatic stability in Kerala. The picture of cloudless monsoons, flowerless spring, stagnant rivers and the leafless trees (31-37) has more potential to invite readers' interest in such matters than the factual, statistical descriptions of the same. Similarly, Paniker's suggestions of the food chain, unlike the popular science literature, communicate with our emotions rather than to our intellect, and thereby personalise the universal. While pure science universalises and objectifies the various aspects of environmental crisis, literary efforts individualise and thus evoke in their readers a sense of shock as they emotionally identify with writers. The poets use their scientific knowledge of different aspects of nature all through such poems. As cited by Adams in his discussion on Joseph Beuys' contribution to conservation, the scientific is

contained within these writers' artistic world view (28).<sup>8</sup> Like that of Beuys, these writers' understanding of ecological responsibility moves from scientific interest to public protest. But unlike Beuys, their efforts do not overtly aim at creating an alternative political organization though they were conscious of the need to restructure their society. However, science in their treatment, instead of dull becomes loaded with emotion. Trees, for the authors are not just natural elements, but most often spirits and life-preservers.<sup>9</sup> What is interesting for me in these writings is the way in which the authors adopt explanatory models from ecology without compromising aesthetics and use them in their writings on environmental problems.

### **Romantic**

As a literary or aesthetic movement, romanticism has been frequently discussed in the recent past. Jonathan Bate observes that many critics perceive the romantic endeavour to return to nature as an attempt "that covers up the real conditions of oppression and exploitation in feudal and neo-feudal agrarian economies" (170). It is also regarded as the failure on the part of the romantic artists to rise up and face the reality. As against this, Garrard emphasises, "a preoccupation with non-human nature is not per se an evasion of any kind." In his view, this notion is based on the belief that "'polities' is finally only about social relations between humans" ("Radical Pastoral" 183). In Bate's terminology, romantics found poetry not only in language but also in nature. To them poetry is not just a medium for "verbal expression," but a means of "emotional communication between man and the natural world" (169).

Many Malayalam poems of the late seventies and early eighties, during the campaign against the SVHP, exhibit some interest in the romantic view of nature.

This interest is variedly reflected in these works as a disillusionment in the ecologically destructive present, the deteriorating human and non-human relations, revisiting a supposedly benign past and glorification of agrarian, feudal rural as against the industrial urban.

“A Requiem” by O. N. V. Kurup presents some of these traits—disillusionment in an ecologically destructive present and revisiting a supposedly golden past. “A Requiem” is a moving verbal picture of human exploitation of the planet. The poem effectively blends the romantic note with an apocalyptic vision without marring its elegance. “A Requiem” presents a rather disturbing, gloomy picture of the earth, powerfully enough to agitate readers. No other poem in Malayalam has, I think, so triumphantly merged the aesthetic with the environmental crisis. “A Requiem” is an elegiac composition for “the Earth who is not yet dead”:

O, Earth, who is not yet dead,  
On your imminent death, peace for your soul.  
For your obsequies (and mine too)  
This song is inscribed in the heart today.  
As Death blooms dark and venomous,  
And you, beneath its shadow turn numb by tomorrow,  
None will be left here not even me to mourn  
In final oblation of tears on your frozen face;  
So shall I inscribe this. (trans. Kurup 1-9)

The poem then goes on to describe the activities of man which have made death imminent for the earth. Man has virtually devastated the planet, mother of all creatures. The profit-seeking children (men) strip the Mother Earth of her bridal-cloth (the thick vegetation) gifted to her by the Sun. The earth is deprived of all her possessions and is left devastated:

Tearing apart the lustrous garment

In which the Sun had dressed up his favourite bride,  
They pierced nails in your body naked  
Drank the blood that flowed from your wounds. (trans. Kurup 23-26)

The activities of the humans go beyond disrobing the earth and assume catastrophic proportions in their violent wars that directly affect both nature and human beings. “A Requiem” is perhaps the first work in Malayalam to link the impending environmental crisis with the inhumanity of destructive wars. The elegance of its treatment makes it one of the best artistically crafted pieces on the destructiveness of wars. The anti-war, anti-nuclear campaign, inseparably linked with the environmental movement, had a close ally in the poet:

You did deliver in pain children countless,  
But one eating up the other before your eyes,  
And you stood hiding your tears unseen by others,  
Then, as they devoured you bit by bit  
And rejoiced, (trans. Kurup 12-16)

Kurup thinks that this requiem in advance is necessary, for there will not be anyone including him at the time of her death, for the death of the earth means the death of the human race. In this respect, the requiem becomes one for the humankind too. The markers of this imminent catastrophe can be discerned in various forms (29-37). However, contrasted with the scenes of the direful present is Kurup’s delightful youth in the company of nature. The aesthetic quality of the Nature has been a constant attraction to the poet in his youth. Everything in nature despite its size inspires a sense of marvel in him:

Even in the dew-drop on the forehead of a *darbha*  
Grass sprouting from you,

There is a tiny sun,  
 And seeing it, amazement dawned in my heart.  
 I have known you  
 Startle at the hoot of an owl  
 Only to soothe as the melody of the koel.  
 You weave designs in my heart with colours varied;  
 You turn dusk golden and vanish in the forest with  
 dusk in your arms.  
 And reappear with Dawn on your shoulder;  
 To awaken me, to feed me with nectar,<sup>10</sup> (trans. Kurup,  
 43-54)

“Kurinhipookal” (The Kurinhi Flowers), yet another poem written in the context of the anti-SVHP campaign with a nostalgic note by Sugathakumari, discusses the human interference in nature. The poet does this on the occasion of the blossoming of blue kurinhi flowers that occur once in twelve years. The blooming Kurinhi flowers transform the mountain valley into a sea of neela kurinhi or blue kurinhi:

In the Eastern mountain ranges  
 Where I cannot climb up to,  
 They say there is a place  
 Where Kurinhi blossoms like sea.  
 The wind is flowery there  
 And it has the glow of Kannan’s<sup>11</sup> body.  
 There the sky is green,  
 Nature stands there smiling.  
 They say that this place is  
 As fresh as the God’s mind. (1-10)

In spite of her intense longing, the poet is unable to visit the blue hills on account of her infirmity. The fascination displayed by the poet to visit the blue hills is a muted protest against reservoirs and the artificial plantations and gardens that attract large number of tourists. Let us recall that these plots like the proposed SVHP, have claimed vast areas of forest in the Western Ghats. The poem is a desperate attempt by the poet to inspire in Malayalees a sense of awe in the dwindling exquisiteness of

their landscape. The kurinhi offers a sweet murmur and a rare bluish spirit to the city suffocated by stress, sorrows and smoke. The poet is apprehensive of the hills turning blue with kurinhi in another twelve years:

With axe, fire and bloody eyes  
Will not man go there tomorrow?  
Will the lines of rubber stretch there?  
Will projects come there roaring?  
Will the Kurinhi blossom again in the  
Eastern hills after twelve years? (30-35)

The poem is reminiscent of the early *Cankam* poetry that is firmly rooted in the landscape of its region, South India. In this tradition, different kinds of poems are variously named after particular landscapes to which the chief emotion of the poem corresponds. The five types of poems accordingly are *kurinci*, the hills; *neytal*, the seashore; *palai*, the wasteland; *mullai*, the forest and *marutam*, the lowland. The opening lines of “Kurinhipookal” exhibit striking resemblance with *kurinci* poems. The poet’s anxiousness to visit the eastern hills where kurinhi blossoms like the sea recalls the lovesick characters of *kurinci* poems. Sugathakumari’s nostalgia thus is both for the vanishing nature and a losing literary tradition.

This grief over the loss of a rich cultural tradition and the disappearance of natural landscapes marks the writings of O. V. Vijayan as well. In his recollections of his visit to the Silent Valley, Vijayan regards the area and everything related to it as serene, pure and unaffected. He is even fascinated by the small rustic teashop in the foothills of the Valley that reminds him of the serenity of his childhood:

Almost after a couple of furlongs the jeep stopped in front of a teashop. It was a very small teashop, with small benches and tables which were also like benches. The shopkeeper smiled helplessly as though he had

been guilty of some crime. It seemed that the place is full of regrets. I bent my head with shame when the food was served. Pure and unadulterated vellapam and potato curry reminded me of my childhood.

I realised that we were in that morning feasting in one of the last islands of unadulterated culture. Why did the shopkeeper, the chieftain of this island, express regret to me, a clumsy creature without a face and a name from the city that had forgotten purity? For serving me with pure grains or for serving pure milk! (34)

Vijayan conceives his visit to the Valley as a pilgrimage, the shrine being situated away from civilization. Each lap of the journey is, to the author, an experience to be cherished:

We [...] started climbing. The number of houses on either side of the road began dwindling. Then, the face of nature that encompassed those houses began to change: forestal old vegetation and primitive stone faces. Soon we started ascending the Attappadi hills. There are almost 12 hairpin turns on the Attappadi road - sudden, sharp curves that startle. [...] Once we ascended a turn and reached the path above, we could see the trailing path right below. Still below, layers of the same path; in the distance even in the glittering snow and sunshine the civilization that is beginning to fade; ahead, above, the untouched mountains and the serene sky. (34)

It was an eccentric turn in the stony path. Almost in the shape of a triangle the stony path hung down to the valley. Above the head was the precipice. In the multiplicity of its sanctum sanctorum the mind becomes numb without knowing what to know. What is it? Primitiveness, heritage, mother and father, man and nature, Kirathan and Pasupathan, agitation, liberation and salvation! (35)

In his awe-inspired ecstasy in the presence of the serene, mountainous Valley, Vijayan experiences extreme bliss: "I could feel the presence of the mountains all around. Maybe the presence of the mountains is not the right phrase; I am at a loss

for want of a right expression. The crowded mountains and the endless biological wealth around envelop us and this knowledge overwhelms us as in an orgasm” (35). He continues, “I stood gazing at a tree with reddish yellow leaves for a long time. Slowly, then slowly, I spread my mind out of that tree. [...]I could have stayed there forgetting everything. Like that tree with reddish yellow leaves, I could have stayed there” (34).

In his attempt to juxtapose the present with this serene past, he realises that everything has changed: the breeze, the atmosphere, the chilling hills and local ambiance. “All I know is that today's winds are not the winds of my childhood. What happened to Sahya's atmosphere? The Kottekkadan Mountains that had always cooled our village burns now. Heat waves from their naked ribs envelop both humans and animals beneath” (50).

The visit is brought to an abrupt end, as Vijayan gets scared by the trumpet of an elephant. Though frightened by the presence of an elephant, he regards his emotion as pure, for he recalls the adulterated—urban and more civilized—version of the same, when a few years ago, he was robbed by two thugs armed with knives in Delhi (31). Thus, for Vijayan, everything associated with the Silent Valley is pristine and pure and those associated with the urban are shallow. Interestingly enough, the account of his visit abounds with such words as pure, primitive, wild, salvation, nostalgia, serene, heritage and experiences of travelling in a bullock cart. Vijayan’s distrust of modern humans’ advancements turns up poignantly in his earlier works too. For instance, the following passage from *The Legend of Khasak* (1969) expresses his qualms regarding human intervention in nature:

[...], ‘They’re talking of a dam, but can a dam make the skies rain or turn back the flood?’

‘Dams do help...’  
‘One doesn’t know,’ muttered the old man, ‘one doesn’t!’ He was deeply disturbed by the big machines with arms and mandibles which moved loads of earth and chewed serene rocks into jelly. ‘Could man pit his skills against God’s will?’ (Vijayan, *Selected Fiction* 9)

The growing lack of human intimacy with nature that we saw in Sugathakumari and Vijayan is vividly described by Krishnavarier in the poem “Kadalkakkaye Arariyunnu?” (Who Knows the Seagull?). This poem registers the writer’s pain in the contamination of human mind due to the excess of consumerism. The poem is set in the coastal city of Kozhikode. In spite of their proximity to the sea, not many inhabitants of the city, the poet notes with regret, are interested in the seagull, which is common in the area. The curved wings of the bird and the music its fluttering creates mostly go unnoticed (1-4). Here the poet echoes the words of the Red Indian Chief who talks about the alienation of modern urban civilization from nature, which he himself translated for a Malayalam magazine in the August of 1983. The poet notes with regret the massive shift in human perception of nature through the instance of the sea. The poem refers to the calm intimacy that existed between humans and nature. But this intimacy is replaced by an instrumental, utilitarian attitude in the contemporary age. Thus the sea stands for the edible fishes, the Gulf and the material comforts that it offers (17-24). Furthermore, the sea now signifies slums, stench, smuggling and riots (25-28). What is significant here is not the changing perception per se, but the reasons behind such radical shifts. The disgust that the sea evokes is not an isolated phenomenon. This shift in physical as well as moral perception is the consequence of anthropogenic devaluation of nature accumulated through time.

The perfect harmony that existed between the human and non-human beings in the past is poignantly suggested in “Marangalum Vallikalum” (The Trees and Creepers). The poet nostalgically recalls the picture of the *Kavu* or sacred grove that adorns the surrounding of his family house (1-22). This is his memory of childhood days. The sacred grove presents a perfect example of harmony between humans and nature. The poem alludes to the rich biological diversity of the *Kavu* and how it serves and benefits the people of the area. The trees provide food, fuel and medicine and it also provides women and children sources of entertainment. The *Kavu* represents an ecosystem characterized by the coexistence of different forms of life that are mutually beneficial. Artistic efforts as these taught Malayalees that human beings are not alone in this world and they by themselves are not the sole determiners of their future/destiny. The thrust of these literary endeavours, to use Donald Hughes’ phrase, is to place “humankind in connection with the whole natural world” (2). The second part of the poem dwells on the present where there are no groves. The poet notes with distress that all have vanished. The grove is replaced by a *Lakshamveedu colony* or Dalit colony (88-89). The fighting animals have been replaced by the quarrelsome drunkards. The stench of the *kavala flower* is replaced by the stench of poverty and diseases. The women instead of swinging on the creepers are forced to swing in the yarns of societal morals (95-100). As Raymond Williams observes, “it is not only the loss of what can be called [...] a piece of ‘unspoiled’ country. It is also [...] the loss of a specifically human and historical landscape, in which the source of feeling is not really that it is ‘natural’, but that it is ‘native’” (138).

The poet thus juxtaposes two kinds of society, the past and the present. The poem along with nostalgic yearning for and glorification of what Williams termed as the “myth of a happier past” (40), extols the modern man to adopt and to nurture some

of the ecologically benign values of the past. However, I think, it is necessary to consider Krishnavarier's idea of conservation. His worries about the lack of human interest in nature (here nature signifies just the immediate surroundings and not the planet) and the resulting indifference are not reactionary in spirit for his objection is against certain aspects of modern life, especially consumerism. He deplores the market economy that measures everything in monetary terms. The use of the sacred grove as a symbol of eco-friendliness, mutuality of different organisms and biodiversity is problematic in my view, as the glorification of sacred grove as a benign cultural institution implicitly approves of the social injustices of feudalism that nourished it. This is especially so when the poet remarks with regret that the sacred grove of his ancestral house has been replaced by a Dalit colony. Such remarks, instead of problematising socio-economic development, point their fingers at measures taken to bridge socio-economic inequalities. Usually, such idealisation of the past is considered reactionary, though such lifestyles and value systems are, if approached with due caution, pointers to the existence of indigenous, self-sufficient ways of life.

Despite the enthusiasm he displays for the cause of environment, Krishnavarier has never been described as a nature poet or a worshipper of nature. His works do not cherish a mere nostalgic view of nature. The response towards the ecocide is registered not just by singing adoringly and romantically about nature, but also by representing the dismal results of human interference in nature. He believes that "the extinction of man's tender feelings" will eventually lead to the desertification of human mind and the planet.

Ayyappa Paniker's poem, "Kaadevide Makkale" (Where are the Forests), resembles, in theme and approach, the romantic lament for the lost charms of the rural

landscape. This is especially true in the first part of the poem, where by means of a number of rhetorical questions the poet brings the sense of despoiled nature home to the reader. This part vividly expresses the disappointment of the poet in the loss of all that have enchanted for ages the artists of the region—forests, meadows, wild rivulets, groves of mango and jack fruit trees, paddy fields and lagoons (1-20). Along with his concern for the natural environment, Paniker is nostalgic about the cultural environment. He is sorrowed by the gradual, though steady fading of cultural artefacts such as *chaakara* (21-24), *oppanas* (37-40) and temple festivities (45-48) that signify socio-religious unity.

The moral degradation of the country is, in the words of Vishnu Narayanan Namboothiri, linked to the physical destruction of forest. In “Kadinte Vili” (Call of the Forest), he observes that people fight among themselves for worldly wealth, religious, linguistic and national pride. However, he notes with astonishment that these people tend to be soft and united in their pilgrimages to holly places/shrines. Here Namboothiri conforms to the transcendentalists’ conception of wilderness as an “environment where spiritual truths are least blunted” (Nash 86). During their arduous forest journey pilgrims who feel oneness, eat and sleep together, turn strangers once they reach their countries, grab other's property, commit every possible deceit to attain their goals, organise protest and strikes and display extreme indifference to the sufferings of others. However, he concludes, “For the country to sustain itself, / Oh, my fellows, do grow forests” (101-102). Notice the astonishing correspondence between Namboothiri’s idea of wilderness in “Kadinte Vili” to that of both Emerson and Thoreau. In the opening chapter of “Nature”, Emerson writes: “In the woods we return to reason and faith. ... In the wilderness, I find something more dear and

connate than in the streets or villages.” (4). And Thoreau writes in “Walking”: “[...] in wildness is the preservation of the world” (18).

Apart from the traditional shrines located in mountains and forests, social and religious reform movements too, Namboothiri remarks had their origins in the forests. The reference is to Narayana Guru’s crusade against the injustices in the Kerala society that originated at the fringes of a forest. Like the light of the rising sun, the teachings of the Guru spread the world over purifying the path of human progress (“Kadinte Vili” 33-50). Wilderness, unlike the popular perception has it, is to Namboothiri, not a moral vacuum where humans return to their innate sinful nature, but an ambiance that intensifies and deepens moral awareness, self realisation and spiritual awakening. In other words, Namboothiri tells his readers that “nature is the proper source of religion.”

In “Sooryagayatri”, N. N. Kakkaad contrasts his arid locality to its scenic past. The earth is burning and is devoid of beasts and trees. It is parched. This extremely unromantic picture of the present is contrasted with a feudal rural landscape which is considered to be wholesome. This part of the poem resembles “A Requiem” in which Kurup describes his childhood memories of nature. In contrast to Kurup who laments the environmental plight of the planet, Kakkaad laments the destruction of scenic rural environment. More than anything, it is the loss of aesthetic beauty that worries the poet. Despite the use of synonymic words like “*Ila*” and “*Bhoomi*” both meaning earth, his concerns never seem to transcend the loss of beauty of his locality. The poem begins with the poet regretting his return to the place where he spent his childhood. It is this particular place in the valley of Western Ghats that is changed beyond recognition. Unlike the poems of Kurup, his poem never addresses the earth as a whole. The earth is reduced to an aesthetic object and in this process some of the

criticisms against the environmentalists in general and against the writer-activists in particular are validated. This poem is clearly a yearning for the feudal past.

This apprehension about a losing social order rooted in agriculture and the cultural artefacts related to it is quite discernable in “Ellin Poovukal” (The Sesame Flowers) by P. Narayanakurup. This poem addresses one of the crucial issues specific to the eco-social, economic and the cultural situation of Kerala, namely the general indifference displayed against the cultivation of grains. Consequently, the fields are filled for industrial and commercial purposes. The fields of paddy and sesame, once lush with green, Narayanakurup notes with regret, yields to the march of palatial houses, air-conditioned hotels and cinemas. The vanishing of the lush, wholesome fields from the agricultural landscape of Kerala parallels the disappearance of traditional cultural artefacts like the temple arts from the cultural landscape. Along with this, the rural innocence and delights are ruthlessly ravished by commercial expediencies and urban sophistication. The profundity that characterized the rural/agricultural human-nature relation is pithily phrased in the description, “the sesame plant is their big sister” (*Vanaparvam* 59). The loss of the sesame fields signifies the loss of this organic relationship. The poet remarks with regret that the flourishing sesame fields now exist only in the poetic imagination.

There is another strain of personification that works with the logic of empathy, which is quite romantic. Sugathakumari’s “Marattinu Stuti”, addresses the tree as if it were a human. The tree is apostrophised in the poem:

As rain, as coldness,  
As fruits that satisfy hunger,  
As the cure and as the  
Force behind our labour,  
As the smiling toys in the  
Little hands and as the staff

That supports the sorrows  
Of the old age,  
As the little cradle,  
As the bet and as the cindery  
Sheet for our  
Last quiet sleep,  
You are our  
Close bosom friend  
Who showers  
Kindness on us (13-28)

By personifying trees thus, the Malayali writers suggest that non-human objects too can feel and sense like humans. It suggests that the destruction of trees, rivers and animals is as hideous a crime as the murder of human beings. However, Tim Dean rejects this humanizing of non-human nature and suggests a new mode of communion with it. “It is not by humanizing nature or personalizing our relationships with it” he argues, “that we treat nonhuman nature ethically, but, on the contrary, by impersonalizing our relationships with it and thus effectively dehumanizing ourselves” (492). Personification, nevertheless, lends an active voice to nature. It is no longer a mere symbol or a metaphor. Viewed thus, nature has a substance and a meaning independent of humanity.

The elements of romanticism, thus, is quite dominant in the writings on the Silent Valley, as a yearning for the lost rural purity and charm or as an empathetic plea.

## **Social**

Unlike the eco-romantics,<sup>12</sup> deep ecologists<sup>13</sup> and spiritual eco-feminists,<sup>14</sup> who try to remedy the ecological crisis through spiritual, biocentric and romantic means, the social ecologist and eco-Marxists try to root the current ecological crisis in

the capitalistic system. Social ecologists conceive over-consumption, productivism and consumerism as symptoms, the causes of which lie deep in the existing social structure characterized by hierarchy, exploitation and domination. Social ecology can be described as a comprehensive way of understanding scientific ecology and social/political systems. It is in this platform provided by the social ecologists that most of the Green parties operate. To the advocates of social/Marxist ecology, it is not the magnitude of population, but the way in which they relate to one another that has caused the present economic as well as ecological crisis.

Murray Bookchin, one of the major figures among the social ecologists, explains current ecological crisis as rooted in the relation of domination between people, which assumes catastrophic proportions under capitalism. In his words:

The notion that man must dominate nature emerges directly from the domination of man by man [...]. But it was not until organic community relations [...] dissolved into market relationships that the planet itself was reduced to a resource for exploitation. This centuries-long tendency finds its most exacerbating development in modern capitalism. Owing to its inherently competitive nature, bourgeois society not only pits humans against each other, it also pits the mass of humanity against the natural world. Just as men are converted into commodities, so every aspect of nature is converted into a commodity, a resource to be manufactured and merchandised wantonly. (63)

Bookchin traces the human domination of nature back to the disintegration of primitive tribal communities, which were characterized by equal distribution of power and resources. The social evolution that occurred in these communities forced them to move towards a patriarchal system with men assuming complete domination over women. This domination was gradually consolidated by extending the influence of power to the weaker sections of the community. The domination of nature is a natural

consequence of this social structure. And so the social ecologists often reject hierarchy, domination and capitalism instead of an outright rejection of the entire civilization. In the environmental discourse, nature is sometimes regarded as a separate entity outside history and human society. However, this notion of nature that is pristine and that is outside history and human context does not have the potential to address the contemporary ecological crisis.<sup>15</sup> O'Connor rejects this notion of nature when he remarks that human history and natural history are "dialectically interconnected" (Darier, 936). Nature, thus is not something to be cherished for its own sake, but acquires value for us only in relation to humanity. Instead of emphasising the principles of anthropocentrism, this foregrounds the absurdity of such radical positions that treat humans as outsiders who have disrupted the harmony of nature. Rather than concentrating on this human-nature dichotomy, social ecology comprehends all social as well as environmental problems as rooted in the "material fact of inequality" (Veak 403). A critique of prevailing socio-political and anti-ecological attitudes, social ecology presents a reconstructive, ecological, communitarian, and ethical approach to society.

Another stream of thought that is closely akin to social ecology is ecological Marxism or ecological socialism. The major contributor to this stream of thought is James O'Connor. Different from the social ecologists, eco-Marxists believe that social causes alone are insufficient in explaining economic as well as ecological crisis. From an eco-Marxist perspective almost all problems the humanity and nature face are essentially linked to the political economy. According to O'Connor, "to understand the current environmental crisis it is vital to understand the broader economic and political conditions which created that crisis in the first place" (Darier 935). It is only

through a just distribution of productive resources and capital that this problem can be settled.

Kadamanitta's poems written during the course of the SVHP campaign are to a great extent influenced and shaped by Marxist and Naxalite ideologies. It is not the sheer depletion of the nature, but its effect on the lives of the common folk that worries the poet. Poems such as "Kiratavruham" (The Hunter's Tale), "Kattaalan" (The Savage) "Kunhe" and "Kurathi" depict the intrusion of the modern, capitalist, market system into the natural habitats of the marginalized. Alongside this recognition, the poems of Kadamanitta depict the loss of the natural, rural simplicity and purity to the industrial, urban, market rapaciousness and ruthlessness. His poems encompass the different aspects of the despoliation of the environment. "Kiratavruham" vividly portrays this aspect of the contemporary social structure. The protagonist, Kattaalan "with a burning torch in his chest" (8), is furious at the marginalising forces that corrupt and destroy his indigenous lifestyle by imposing urban, market values into his knowledge system. The underprivileged are deprived of their natural surroundings:

Where is the lightning, thundering sky  
In which I sowed my dreams?  
Where are my *tulsi* forests and  
Twilights combing their moist lock?  
Where are the green meadows  
In which grasshoppers hop? (36-41)

The Kattaalan's burning torch in his chest alludes not merely to the burning torch pictorially marked on the youth-wing left's flag but to the raging public sphere. Similarly, the images of the "eyes that reflect a breeding tigress" (1-2) and "half-curved eyebrows that sprout on the tail of a black cobra" (3-4) represent the rage of the

public including that of the literary figures. Kadamanitta brings it home to his audiences that the endeavour they are collectively embarking upon is nothing less than a war. The abundance of images in “Kiratavrutham” of “bow” and “arrow”, “trumpet” and “the stone axe” vividly suggest a battlefield. The same ire informs his other poems as well. In “Kurathi”, one of his best read works, the Kurathi is portrayed as “valiance of the burned soil”, “violent river”, “forest fire” and “chiselled wild-stone”. The protagonist of “Kiratavrutham” proclaims:

The hands of huntsman,  
I'll chop them with my axe.  
They who ruin the mountains  
Must flow headless in the river.  
They who hew the trees,  
They who destroyed my clan,  
I'll garland the earth  
With their entrails.  
85)

(78-

The realization that the poor have been in chains for ages, marks the poems of Kadamanitta out from other nature poems written during the period. The comprehension of how the oppressed have been “utilised,” “sacrificed,” “dominated” and “denaturalized” for the benefits of the ruling affluent minority makes the socio-political side of the ecological crisis evident. Concerns regarding human casualties were admittedly absent from the Silent Valley controversy, though such concerns have been raised against all major “developmental” projects before and after. The poet presents an environmental Naxalite view of the ecological crisis. The following lines from “Kunhe” suggest that the current ecological problem lies in the relation of domination between people:

They smashed the gratification of

Your life, sprouted in the hill,  
They dishonoured our clan  
By blasting the atom bomb of knowledge,  
They sowed calamities  
By burning the paddy fields.  
They sacrificed us  
To fix the bridge tearing the river.  
Now they call us  
To weaken the earth.  
Now they approach us  
To keep us in chains.  
(31-42)

What is foregrounded here is the realisation that the so called progressive process, in actuality, is detrimental to communities in the fringes. Such processes often drain practical knowledge and native wisdom from indigenous cultures by means of alienating them from their traditional habitats. The significance of this process in relation to small tribes is the subsequent loss of various specific skills and the consequent loss of skilled practitioners to use them. This loss of specific skills would, eventually, drive such communities to urban labour markets for their livelihood. Instances like these reveal the Malayali writers' awareness that modern science and technologies cannot adequately substitute the loss of indigenous experiential knowledge.

The revolutionary spirit of Marxism and the Naxalite movement is subtly directed towards the injustices against nature. The declaration, "the onus of today is to chop the hands that strangle Her" takes the revolutionary zeal in Malayalam poetry forward from Idasseri's "we must reap power first, let the ponnaryan<sup>16</sup> be after" ("Puthan Kalavum Arivaalum") to new aesthetic-revolutionary heights. Here one can glimpse the Marxist in Kadamannitta, for, as the Left who rely on distributive value, his characters too rebel for political and economic systems where domination and oppression no longer exist. Even then they are aware of the need for establishing

ecological justice, for they realise that only the principle of distributive justice has the potential to sustain the environment and far more importantly save the so called communities in the fringes. In other words, as Burgmann, Kadamanitta reminds us “[...] that socialism cannot be built on rubbish heaps, that ecological problems cannot wait until the revolution” (qtd. in Jagtenberg and McKie 116).

Quite contrary to my assessment of Kadamanitta here, C. R. Parameswaran describes the questioning, seditious tone in the early poems of Kadamanitta like “Kiratavrutham” and “Kattaalan” as reactionary. In the opinion of Parameswaran, critics have often wrongly regarded these poems as revolutionary utterances. He observes that such “revolutionary” efforts of Kadamanitta are “stone-hurls which are not intended to hit” (174). Parameswaran argues that Kadamanitta’s attempt to comprehend the moral and social degradation of humans at the level of culture by separating them from their economic base leads him inevitably to nostalgia; to perceive primitive or initial stages of human civilization as blessed, despite their seemingly agreeable tone, is essentially illogical and unreal.

Hence, Parameswaran strongly believes that the practice of reading Kadamanitta’s poems as revolutionary calls to the oppressed is an adventure. He firmly holds that Kadamanitta’s poems are inadequate to express the complexities of contemporary life. In his words, the only similarity of the “Kattaalan”, if there is any, is to the Tantric cult (174). Parameswaran is also skeptical of Kadamanitta and others who use folk cultural forms in order to have greater popular reach. According to him, those who regard folk elements as inevitable are essentially urban snobs who search in vain for a primitive innocence (179).

However, instances of resentment in Kadamanitta’s poems like “Kiratavrutham”, “Kunhe”, and “Kattaalan” attracted the public, and they thronged to

the conference of poets that served as one of the major mediatory factors between the environmentalists and the public. Kadamanitta seized this occasion and utilized it to present his concerns which also come up in such compositions as “Kozhi” (The Hen), “Karuttamakal” (The Black Children), “Uzhavuchalukal Keerunnavan” (The Ploughman), “Adimakal” (The Slaves), “Kochumanushyanmar” (The Poor Folk), “Harijanangal” (The Harijans), “Daridra Daivangal” (Poor Gods) and “Shantha”. The rage of the Kattaalan against the corrupting, modern, capitalist, market forces is not a prayer for reviving tradition; on the other hand, it represents his yearning for a just society.

In spite of the relatively just and self-sufficient traditional nature of the tribal societies, such communities are highly vulnerable in relation to the developed, civilized and non-tribal world ingrained in market economy. The only possible way out in such a situation is, as Kadamanitta understands, the politicization and democratization of such communities. The seemingly significant aspects of science and aesthetics that depoliticize the environmental discourse is heavily politicized (and in this process challenged) by linking the environmental crisis with socio-political and cultural aspects. Landscape thus acquires significance as a source of livelihood and economic activities as distinct from the mere status as an object of aesthetic appreciation and contemplation. It is in such insights where the focus is not directed to the lost charms, but to the unjust and unequal socio-political and economic organization that the eco-Marxist quality in Kadamanitta’s poetry surfaces. Even the sense of desolation that the unprivileged shows for the loss of nature and culture transcends the normal nostalgic/romantic yearning and reaches the radical realization that the downtrodden are never recognized and comprehended. The words of the protagonist of “Kattaalan” reflect the recognition by the marginalized that how the

mainstream society and cultures have systematically removed the Adivasis from the fruits of nature. Similarly, the desperation and wrath of the marginalized in the regional disparities and exploitation too are subtly expressed:

When the flower bloomed  
I got only the withering leaves.  
When the fruit was ripe  
I got just the skin and husk. (29-32)

A significant aspect of Kadamanitta's poetry is his characters' attitude towards conservation ethics. What is observable here is the special manner in which Kadamanitta's characters relate themselves to their surroundings and to the environmental crisis. Whereas modern conservation ethics is usually projected as being guided by the conflation of ecological sciences and cultural constructs (Trudgill 677), the disbelief, anguish, disappointment and the subsequent wrath of Kadamanitta's people over the loss of their habitat and livelihood, though definitely personal and emotional, is not a bit less genuine. Their particular understanding of their environment is/could be of immense help for conservation activists in ensuring the success of their endeavours. The point here is that activists and ecologists should acknowledge and recognise the specific modes of people's relation to and their sense of and emotions towards nature, especially their immediate environment. What is of importance here is the sentimental and emotional motivation behind people's urge to conserve and sustain their surrounding. Though there is nothing new for us in this notion of conservation ethics, it was not so with 1970s and 1980s, an era in the environmental history of India when creation of wildlife sanctuaries and national parks, even at the cost of alienating people was considered the most effective way to protect endangered flora and fauna.

The protagonists of “Kiratavrutham”, “Kattaalan” and “Kurathi” come out of the traditional apolitical structure and question and challenge the outside authority and bare the precariousness of the existence of their communities. It is this aspect of Kattaalan that inspired T. P. Sukumaran, one of the first critics in the language to theorise on eco-aesthetics in *Paristhithi Soundaryasastrattinoru Mukhavura* (A Preface to Eco-Aesthetics [1992]), to see in him a saviour the Kerala society was looking for. Kadamanitta’s Kattaalan, according to Sukumaran, is not only an isolated figure for the numerous college dramas staged during the 70s but also told the tale of Kattaalan, the Savage (*Nallavanaaya* 55). Sukumaran believes that the Kattaalan symbolizes the urge for protecting nature, *Sairandhri*, from the intrusion of the civilization, *Keechaka* (*Nallavanaaya* 64). This apparent identification of the Kattaalan, Hunter/Savage to the saviour, though appears primitivistic to us, is far from exalting the ‘Noble Savage’, a concept that cherishes the memories of a pristine, savage and pre-modern existence.

The characters of these poems are essentially revolutionaries in spirit and aspiration. The words of Kattaalan in “Kiratavrutham”, “The hands of huntsman, / I’ll chop them with my axe” and the Kurathi’s warning: “We’ll rise like the fort raised on bones / We’ll wake and face you like a castle of stone”, forcefully suggest this revolutionary aspect. These utterances of defiance are significant to me as such instances suggest the presence of a universal consciousness of exploitation and the strength to resist it. But, as Sukumaran observes, it is not the responsibility of the writers to execute the revolution, which is essentially political in nature. The most that the literary community can do is to foster and support the revolutionary attempts (*Nallavanaaya* 61).

Instead of glorifying a benign premodern existence , these poems yearn for an ecologically and socially just future. Most often this anticipated future is to be attained by means of an abrupt violent struggle. This apparent indifference to the ideals of non-violence is, in the words of Sukumaran, not surprising given the intellectual and material influences that characterized the period (*Nallavanaaya* 56). Kadamanitta realized that the injustices prevalent in the society then could not be made good with the ideals of non-violence advocated by Buddha and Gandhi. Instead he perceived the saviour in the raging Kattaalan.

It would be instructive to juxtapose the defiant and seditious tone of Kadamanitta with the works of Sugathakumari that are evidently educative. Her poem, “Adivasi Saksharatha” (Adivasi Literacy), exposes the ways in which the so called developmental and civilising projects affect the lives of tribal societies and environment. The poem unequivocally states the link between the destruction of the natural environment with the social injustice. The realisation by the Adivasis of the deception of the “benefactors” who destroyed and violated the integrity of their lives and natural environment, unlike the poems of Kadamanitta, does not lead to an encounter, but clearly marks their helplessness. Alongside its reproachful tone, the poem points to the alienation of tribes, animals and other organisms from their natural habitat. The same tone pervades the poem, “Vidhi” (Fate). “Vidhi” presents the Earth as a petitioner who accuses the affluent, powerful elite of the planetary destruction and of the miseries of the wretched and non-human organisms.

These poems of Kadamanitta introduced a new aesthetic into Malayalam that shattered notions of propriety by rejecting the thematic centrality of the “mainstream” subject matters in favour of Subaltern concerns. Most of these writings suggest this shift right from their titles. Kadamanitta was following the tradition started by poets

like Idasseri. He took the tradition of such writers forward and developed it into a full-fledged aesthetic as well as political concern probing the misery and wretchedness of the deprived. By means of his own identification with the Adivasis in these poems, Kadamanitta lends specificity and contemporaneity to the eco-consciousness in Malayalam literature. Besides his apparent identification in these poems with the marginalized, Kadamanitta recognizes that each incursion into the personal as well as the social life of these groups from the “outside” is detrimental to the environment. The incursions into the natural environment do not go unchallenged, for the protagonists of these poems are politically defiant and least submissive. The poet realises that only an active confrontation could counter this transgression. The linking of the natural surroundings to the immediate livelihood of those in the margins, and the realisation that the despoilment of the environment is, as in all instances, detrimental to those who are directly supported by it renders an eco-social colouring to the writings of Kadamanitta. Mostly, groups like lower caste as well as the working class women and Adivasis are in direct contact with nature for their livelihood, and by highlighting the concerns of these sections the poems of Kadamanitta proclaim the presence of a powerful subaltern, environmental and feminist aesthetic consciousness in the literature of Malayalam. Kadamanitta would have agreed to Coupe’s observation that “it is impossible to separate defence of people from defence of the planet, human rights from ecological survival” and “justice from sustainability” (Coupe 5).

Kadamanitta thus quite forcefully reminds us of the relevance of developing a human rights perspective towards such endeavours, a perspective that eventually became causal to the formation and sustenance of conservation movements like the *Chipko* that preceded the anti-SVHP campaign and also later campaigns like the

NBA. Evidently, this was necessitated by the obvious, though not deliberate, wilderness overtones of the anti-SVHP campaign. What I suggest here is along with the apparent wilderness thrust that the resistance campaign against the SVHP had, unlike most other wilderness movements, it was not indifferent to, and as is evident from our discussion, was even conscious of and acknowledged human rights issues related to environmental movements. The seeming indifference to human aspects, as could be inferred was entirely due to the mere absence of any human settlements in the project area, unlike oppositions to the creation of national parks and sanctuaries that required massive displacement of population or seriously affected their livelihood.<sup>17</sup> Viewed from this perspective, Kadamanitta's nature is not a void, culturally insignificant space where the modern, urban, industrial and capitalistic societies could enact their economic/industrial games. What is suggested here is that nature, even in its so called pristine state, is not free from human interests. Throughout the Silent Valley movement, forest was often cited as an abstract category without any geographical specificities or regional moorings. Forests, in particular, were extolled for their wildness, biological richness and diversity and for their other ecological functions. These perceptions of nature—as an ecologically significant biome or as an economically valuable resource—could be extremely detrimental; as such views hold the potential to turn the public away from the forests. What is usually ignored when such perceptions are evoked is the fact that forests, besides being resource or biome, are culturally significant.

Paniker describes the effects of despoliation of natural environment on the socio-cultural life of Kerala in “Kaadevide Makkale.” The destruction of the natural charms of the region in a way symbolizes the evils of the contemporary social life. Nature to the poet is not wilderness or a repository of commodities but as Savyasaachi

observes “full of history, memory and meaning” (59). This process of linking nature and culture annuls the traditional nature-culture dichotomy. The poem does not call for the revival of a golden nature-friendly past nor does it eulogize the past. While the poem does not lament a despoiled landscape, critiques the contemporary society and yearns for a

[society]  
That does not burn down  
The huts and the clans to ashes  
That does not dishonour  
The flowers of the huts  
[...]  
That does not chop  
And sell the head of the weak  
That does not tear  
The entrails of the poor.

(87-96)

In his 1983 short story, “Kaattutee” (Forest fire), Anand links the fate of the exploited and unprivileged with that of the trees felled. By doing so, Anand effects a union between the red and green ideologies. He effects this blending of ecological crisis with the revolutionary social ideas by associating the fate of the exploited to trees. Agitated greatly by the sight of a distant forest fire, one of the characters, Seetha, considers trees to be the most helpless creatures on the face of the earth. Trees, in her view, besides their fate of being stuck to a place for the entire span of their life, cannot but fall to the axe or fire. This fate of trees, according to the revolutionary Hari, loses its poignancy in the light of the defencelessness of the oppressed. He considers their fate worse, as they are deprived of basic resources despite their proximity to them and are powerless before their oppressors in spite of their active limbs. While emotions offer warmth to the lives of the well-to-do, the lives of the poor are burned down by the flames of emotions.

Through such literary reflections, the Malayali writers mount a major offensive against existing socio-economic and political patterns. The plight of their surroundings is not separate from their characters' own predicaments. This understanding of the environmental crisis inspires them to challenge "development", which is often understood as economic growth and technological improvement or specifically as the indiscriminate replacement of forests with roads, houses, business establishments and factories. The knowledge that this transformation of physical geography is closely followed by even more alarming transformations in the lifestyles of those who inhabit such geographies informs and enriches their literary texts. A major discernable transformation is the decline of ecologically viable and sustainable agrarian practices and the ascendance of market-based economies. Hence, these writers urge the existing social as well as political systems to seriously rethink and redefine human progress and development in a way that combines reverence of nature with respect for human needs.

### **Historical**

It is a common phenomenon among writers and activists of all socio-cultural movements to trace their legacy to some previous events or institutions. In some instances, relevant contemporary occurrences are also related and extolled to gather popular support. Similar trends are discernable in certain literary efforts to resist the SVHP. Involvement in the SSVC made creative writers in Malayalam aware of larger, even global, environmental issues and they tried to relate the resistance campaign to issues such as the purification of the Thames, the pollution of Ganga, the pollution of rivers like Pamba, Chaliyar and Bharathapuzha, the attempts by Bishnoi to protect trees, the Red Indian Chief's letter to the U. S. President and so on.

“Thames Nadiyodu” (To the Thames River), a poem inspired by the news of the purification of the Thames, is one such attempt by Sugathakumari. In a short preface to the poem, the poet writes that her poem is a response to the report in some newspapers about the purification of the Thames as a result of the drastic and concerted action (*Vanaparvam* 108). Though the poem is an expression of joy in the redemption of the Thames, it laments the deplorable condition of the Ganges, the Nila and the virgin forests of the Western Ghats. The poem suggests the relevance of initiating and the impact such moves can have on the rest of the population and on the cause itself, which in the context of this poem is the purification of Thames. The two hands that began the purification of the river grow amazingly into inconceivable thousands. Sugathakumari is certain of the fact that once the cause has been adequately explained to the public, support would obtain automatically. In order to persuade the public, she hopes for literary participation in the campaign. In her letter requesting Malayali writers to support the anti-SVHP campaign she writes: “Every battle has two sides, the winning and the losing. Maybe we are on the losing side. But the losing side also needs soldiers. Will you join this losing battle?” (“Silent Valley: A Case Study” 19).

“Thames Nadiyodu” presents the twin expressions of delight and disappointment: delight in the redemption of the Thames and disappointment in the waning of sacred Ganges and Nila. The poet is thrilled with excitement by the actions of the “lover of the Thames” that transformed the moribund, toxic and lifeless Thames into a clear, living stream:

Today you flow smiling again  
The swans descending on your heart  
Your sweet budlike salmons  
Leaping up the river

The frolicsome children swimming on your  
Broad breast, singing and smiling  
The varieties of fish flashing and disappearing  
Lovers in boats singing and rowing  
Oh, Thames, what a delight for us  
Hearing of your good fortune from a distance. (33-42)

However, the deplorable condition of the Ganges transforms Sugathakumari's delight, caused by the redemption of the Thames, into agony. The Ganges, purity personified, and the Yamuna are dark with pollution, both, reminiscent of the mythical Kalindi. Along with them, the sacred Nila and the virgins of Sahya too are on the verge of destruction. The disappearing forest in her backyard is suffocated with smoke. The birds disappear in pain, the trees are felled, the streams dry and even the soil weep. Regardless of these, we march ahead "selling our children, gods and our mothers" (67-68). The image of the "panting deer trapped before the hunter's gun" (69-72) forcefully suggests the vulnerability of non-human beings and the excruciating cruelty in human nature. The redemption of the Thames is significant, for it illustrates the need for concerted actions to save nature and brings fresh hope and renews creative spirit.

The cleaning of the Thames also acquires significance, for the Silent Valley movement vehemently opposed the damming of the Kunthipuzha, which in the long run will destroy it. But the radical attitude towards the SVHP succeeded in retaining the pristine nature of the river as is clear from the words of Sugathakumari twenty years after, "it was worth fighting a war for her, [Kunthipuzha]". In a later poem "Silent Valley," published in her 1988 collection of poems, *Kurinhipookal*, the poet recalls the days of protest against the destruction of the Silent Valley. She recollects with delight the experience of being a part of the anti-SVHP campaign. She describes the ambivalent feeling the writers felt towards the nature in general and the Silent

Valley in particular. Nature was to them both mother and daughter simultaneously: Mother because nature nourishes and ensures the continuance of life and daughter for it required protection from the excess of development. It is this twin emotions of daughterly care and maternal affection that characterised writers' feeling to the Silent Valley. She describes her visit to the Silent Valley as a pilgrimage and considers the forests of the Silent Valley a temple. In this regard, Sugathakumari reminds us of Vijayan. She exhorts her companion not to forget those days of resistance and the efforts of those who through years have guarded the forest. She exalts those who became the tongue of the forest.

In their efforts to resist the SVHP, writers like Krishnavarier have also used historical and contemporary events that have environmental significance. In some cases, they have even tried to historicise environmental concerns. Krishnavarier's translation in 1983 of Chief Seattle's letter of 1855 to Franklin Pierce, President of the United States, for instance, is an attempt to foreground efforts in the past to resist the commodification of nature and the alienation of humans from nature. What makes this document relevant for the activists of the anti-SVHP campaign is, in my view, the cultural and historical identification of the people with the water, land, trees and animals. Since the environmental aspect of the campaign to resist the SVHP focused on the utter disregard displayed by the authorities towards the endangered animal species and to the fate of the river Kunthipuzha, this translation, the first in Malayalam, of the following passage, looks timely:

This shining water that moves in the streams and rivers is not just water but the blood of our ancestors. [ ... ] You must teach your children that it is sacred and that each ghastly reflection in the clear water of the lake tells of events and memories. [ ... ] The rivers are our brothers, they quench our thirst. The rivers carry our

canoes, and feed our children. [ ... ] What is man without the beasts? If all the beasts were gone, man would die from a great loneliness of spirit. For whatever happens to the beasts, soon happens to man. All things are connected. ... Whatever befalls the earth befalls the sons of the earth. Man did not weave the web of life; he is merely a strand in it. Whatever he does to the web, he does to himself. (*Anweshanangal* 339)

Again, in his discussion on the *Chipko* movement, Krishnavarier historicises the efforts to protect trees in India. According to him, *Chipko* adopted its non-violent mode of resisting the felling of trees from the Bishnois of Rajasthan. The Bishnois have been actively resisting the felling of trees at least since 1604. In 1829, 363 Bishnois laid their lives when they tried to prevent the soldiers of the local king from cutting down the trees for a lime-kiln for the palace.

Besides discussing historical events, Krishnavarier has been prolific as a writer on contemporary environmental problems like the pollution of the Ganges and the Chaaliyar, the nuclear accidents at Three Mile Island and Chernobyl, and the industrial accident in Bhopal. In his article on the dying Ganga, he champions the role of rivers in the socio-political and cultural life of a country. In his words, “if the Ganga dies India will also die” (*Anweshanangal* 189). Kunthipuzha is one of the most important tributaries of the Bharatapuzha which occupies the place of Ganga in the cultural, religious and political life of Malayalees. The entire Silent Valley debate was centred on the question of damming the Kunthi which would simultaneously destroy both the river and the evergreen forests on its banks. It would be interesting, in my view, to read Krishnavarier’s poem “Puzhakal” (Rivers) along with his articles on the Ganges (18-19). The poem describes his relationship with three rivers, Karivanoorpuzha, Periyar and Bharatapuzha. The poet recalls with delight his childhood on the sandy banks of the Karivanoorpuzha. But he grieves the miserable

plight of the river for it is a filthy pool now. He was acquainted with the Periyar in his youth and adored it for he could witness in its gentleness and in its monsoon fury, the image of a powerful deity. But even this mighty river has been polluted. The Bharatapuzha, which opened before the poet a world of beauties, has been waned. The fate of this trio is repeated in the Ganges, the Krishna, the Kaaveri and other major river systems of the world. He recalls with anguish his recent visit to the Ganges, the deplorable condition of which deeply saddened him.

### **Mythical**

As is evident from the poems of Balamuralidhar discussed earlier here, mythicising of the environmental crisis is a common element among writings on environmentalism. This affinity to myths serves to culturally appropriate the environmental movements. Writers use both religious and cultural myths to this purpose. As cited earlier, Sugathakumari equates the tree to Lord Shiva.

Kunhunni, one of the popular poets of Malayalam, known for his terse and aphoristic style, has composed a few epigrammatic verses on the significance of trees in the socio-political life of Kerala. “Maramantrangaal” (The Tree Mantras), as he calls them, starts with a witty and cautionary couplet on the felling of trees:

This land raised by an axe  
Is being ruined by an axe. (1-2)

The first line alludes to the legend of *Keralolpathi* or the origin of Kerala, according to which the land of Kerala was restored from the sea by Parasuraman, who gifted it to the Brahmins, as a penance for his regicidal sins. The land was recovered by throwing his axe. The sea receded from the stretch of land from Parasala, the point

from which the axe was flung, to Gokarnam, the place where it landed. The land thus retrieved using the mythical axe is being destroyed by the real “indulgent axes.” The axe, symbol of creation and a source of livelihood, is transformed to an agent of destruction. The legendary transformation of the regicidal agent into a penitent, life-giving instrument has been reversed in the modern age. The regicidal axe has now become a weapon for ecocide.

Kurup recalls the myth of Oedipus, the Greek tragic hero, to relate modern man’s attitude towards nature. The poet is certain that while the Greek hero was ignorant about his sin, the modern man is deliberate and purposeful in his incestuous acts:

How obsolete is the tale of the Greek youth  
Marrying his own mother in ignorance!  
Now, new tales are written by the children of earth  
Disrobing their mother. (34-37)

Kurup also evokes the myth of *Parayipeta Panthirukulam* or the twelve clans delivered by Parayi. He addresses earth as “Mother of the Parayi, who delivered the twelve clans” (13). The legend of the twelve clans begotten by the Parayi holds that the major castes in Kerala emerged out of the twelve children of the Parayi (an untouchable girl reared by a Brahmin) and her Brahmin husband, Vararuchi. The reference to the Parayi and her children implies human unity and brotherhood.

In “Kunhe”, Kadamanitta uses the myth of Krishna’s childhood to describe the environmental problems (6-18). The modern world is as dangerous for us to live in as it was for Krishna during his childhood days. The modern world with all its pollutions is compared to the demon Poothana, who in the guise of a beautiful young woman tried to kill Krishna by nursing him on her poisoned breasts. The motor vehicles that

crowd and pollute our cities seem to the poet as Sakataasuran, the demon who disguised as a vehicle tried to run over Krishna to kill him. Rivers and their surroundings are as filthy as the mythical Kalindi. Here, it is not the mythical serpent Kaliya that pollutes them; instead modern industries and garbage take its place. However, the effects of such pollutions are same—human and animal deaths and the destruction of the flora.

### **Apocalyptic**

Apocalyptic literature, as reflected in the literature written during the anti-SVHP campaign in Malayalam, is an attempt by writers to envisage the ruin of the planet. The apocalyptic mode of expression, as Garrard notes, is inextricably bound with the imagination, as it narrates what is yet to come (*Ecocriticism* 86). The apocalyptic note in Malayalam is discernable in such writings as “A Requiem”, “Varunna Nootandiloru Dinam” (A Day in the Coming Century), “Udayasthamaanam”, and “Marattinu Stuti”. These poems point to an ecologically disastrous future. In “A Requiem” Kurup anticipates the dismal condition of earth:

With shaven head, as a forsaken maid,  
When you take up your lone journey in cosmic void,  
Bearing the cross of dishonour and the burden of  
Your children's sin,  
With agony ablaze in your emptying mind,  
Is it not cruel Death itself  
Creeping up through the nerves ? (trans. Kurup,  
31-37)

This depressing picture of our planet “as a forsaken maid” in her “lone journey in the cosmic void” reiterates the idea that the Earth is a living being that ought to be “the object of our wondrous contemplation rather than the source of satisfaction for

our rapacious material greed" (Dobson 45). Obviously, this to his intended readers implied nothing less than the complete rejection of our reckless approach towards nature and expected them to desist from backing all our harmful projects.

"A Requiem" has a sequel in the poem "A Day". If "A Requiem" narrates the plight of the dieing earth, "A Day" speculates on the poet's after-death visit to the earth. He doubts whether the charms of his earthly life like the songs of the birds, the aromatic breeze, the sprouting buds, the showering clouds, the songs of the reaping girls and so on would be there to delight him. The uncertainty regarding the future of the planet induces the poet to ponder whether all these would be an old tale (48). The picture of the gloomy, dark face of the planet reinforces the poet's apprehension over the "not yet died earth". The picture of the planet anticipated by Kurup in "A Requiem" is repeated in "Udayasthmanam" too. Paniker describes the earth as a famished cow. The picture of the wandering cow corresponds to the mother with her tonsured head orbiting the solar system:

Will our earth wander like a mad cow that groans and rushes in the tender lines of horizon? With an open mouth, with twisted neck, eyes bulged, tongue sticking out, like a weeping, staggering mother cow, will our earth wander? (106-109)

The apocalyptic anxiety reflected in such works, along with violent and grotesque images provide their authors with an opportunity to project the dire consequences of human interference in nature. In other words, they feel that time is running out and are annoyed by the indifference of humanity to this apocalypse. This ecological disaster, as Richard Kerridge writes, is a "warning: the shock we needed, the lesson administered by providence to open our eyes just in time" (244).<sup>18</sup>

## Constructionist

Some of the poems written and recited during 1970s and 1980s overtly tried to reinforce the Silent Valley campaign and extolled trees and plants for their ecological functions. Malayali writers' emphasis on growing and saving trees is significant as the proposed reservoir portended doom for the intact evergreen forests of the Valley. Poets, eschewing mere forestal description, extolled the act of planting trees. Kurup, for instance, elaborates the advantages of planting trees in "Oru Thai Nadumbol" (When a Seedling is Planted). Transforming a mere mundane subject, the planting of a tree, into a poetic concern, Kurup writes:

When a seedling is planted,  
a shade is planted.  
A soothing shade to  
stretch oneself is planted.  
A bed of flower  
for a siesta is planted. (1-6)

In "Marangal" (Trees), Sugathakumari describes various trees she had planted during her life. In this ruthless world, the poet finds solace and comfort in planting and watering trees, growing shades and keeping flowers. She is certain that only those who love trees can love earth, children, rain, kindness and peace.

Again, in "Thaivekkal" (Planting), Sugathakumari relates the significance of planting a tree. This symbolic challenging of the urban, industrial tendency to clear forests for commercial, industrial, housing, recreational and developmental activities is dismissed as defiant and idiotic by modern industrial worldview. However, in the face of such societal attitudes, Sugathakumari stresses the significance of individual conviction and action. "Thaivekkal" shows a mother and her son engaged in planting a sapling on the banks of a waning river. The mother inspires her son to plant the tree

and wishes that the tree provides him with shade, flowers, fruits, wind, rain and green. This enthusiasm for growing trees, however, is not, as in the West, simply a response to the looming ecological crisis of the present. Various Indian religious and cultural traditions also encourage planting of trees. Vasudha Narayanan refers to an event from the Matsya Puranam. Parvati, the consort of Lord Shiva and the goddess of wealth, planted an Asoka tree and watered it. Amazed by her tenderness towards the tree, the celestial beings and the maharishis asked her to explain her deeds when most people feel contentment in bringing their sons up. Parvati explained herself in these famous words: “One who digs a well where there is little water lives in heaven for as many years as there are drops of water in it. One large reservoir of water is worth ten wells. One son is like ten reservoirs and one tree is equal to ten sons” (qtd. In Narayanan 187). According to the Varaha Purana, one who plants five mango trees does not go to hell, and according to the Vishnu Dharmottara one who plants a tree will never fall into hell. (187)

Just as the planting of trees was recommended and celebrated, cutting them was considered a sin. Poems like “Oru Maram Vettunnam” (When a Tree is Cut) by Paniker and “Kanmazhu” (The Stone Axe) by K. V. Ramakrishnan relate the tale of human indifference to nature and seek to remedy it. Such poems link the felling of trees to desertification, aridity, loss of habitation, decreasing rain and rising temperature, climatic instability and the extinction of species<sup>19</sup>.

However, it is in such aesthetic reflections rather than in specialized literature on ecology that, in Malayalam, nature assumes the status of an active agent. The scientific and quasi scientific literature that we discussed in the last chapter mostly view nature as passive, requiring human agency to sustain it. In other words, such purportedly scientific endeavours imply that nature is at the mercy of humans. While

granting agency to nature, the literary imagination was not oblivious to its victimization. Malayali creative artists, as we have noticed, were insightful to realize and consequently relate the victimization of nature to that of victimization of the poor and the marginalized.

All these writings take the forests as setting and people them with communities which depend solely on forest resources with the full conviction that they are the right folk to resist and challenge the large-scale destruction of forest. As Savyasaachi observes, the culture and traditions of these groups are closely related to forest (59). Since the whole rhetoric of the movement to resist the construction of the SVHP was focused on the extensive deforestation and submergence, it was natural that the writers of the period too adopted themes and techniques to suit this agenda. The titles of some of the literary works produced during the period like “Kiratavruttham”, “Kattaalan” and “Kurathi” are suggestive. Kiratan and Kattaalan are forest dwellers and in “Kurathi” the protagonist is described as “a chiselled wild stone”, “a violent river flowing down the mountain” and “forest fire”, all associating her with the forest. The poems “Kaadevide Makkale” by Paniker, “Kadinte Vili” by Namboothiri and “Kadu” (Forest) by Vinayachandran proclaim their association with the values of the anti-SVHP movement. Similarly, fictional writings such as “Kaattutee” (Forest Fire) by Anand, and a host of other non-fictional writings also declare their affinity to the Silent Valley movement.

What is interesting, however, in the literary resistance against the SVHP is the manner in which Malayali writers transcended their “region” in terms of both conservation and progress. Significantly, it was not just the fate of the endangered Valley that inspired The writers to ecoconsciousness, though the looming threat to it acted as a catalyst. The poetry and prose writings of Krishnavarier, Sugathakumari,

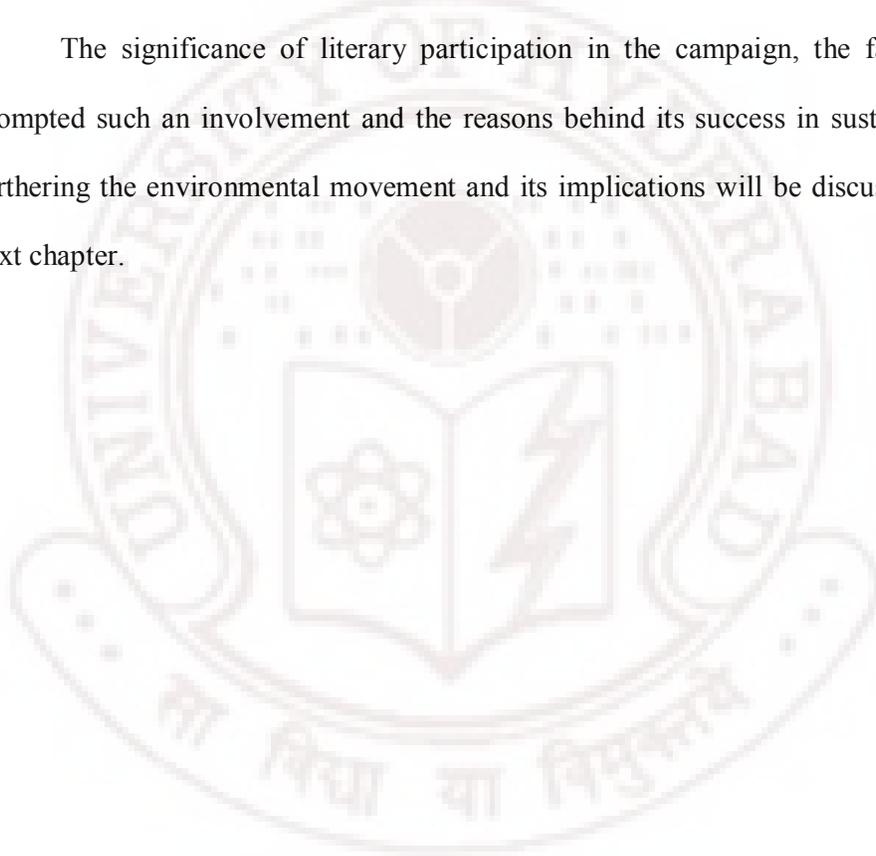
Kurup, Namboothiri, Anand and others discussed in the foregoing pages reveal that their interest in conserving nature is not solely confined to the preservation of the Silent Valley and its threatened ecosystem. Despite their polemical and educative interventions in the popular print media on the ecological consequences of submerging the Valley, none of them defined their ecoliterature in terms of it. In other words, their concerns went beyond the narrow constraints of their immediate region. To them, the “local” was just a symbolic microcosm of the entire human race. Their efforts aim at evolving, reinventing and reconstructing an ecologically viable habitat that is vital for the continuance of the humankind. The writers’ emphasis is not on creating and sustaining exotic landscapes, instead they long for a new sense of living that values the ecological principles of coexistence and cooperation.

We saw that most of the major Malayali writers of the period openly resisted the SVHP. However, a few among them stood for the cause of development. Chief among them was the poet Balamaniyyamma (1909-2004). She observed that only through establishing power plants in Malabar can the region come out of its socio-economic and industrial backwardness. And so, she considered the SVHP to be inevitable for the overall progress of her region (Athmaraman, “Harithavabodham” XXX). Viewed from this angle, it is possible to see her as a regionalist. Balamaniyyamma’s attitude towards the SVHP and her desire to see Malabar develop do not make her an ardent pro-development crusader. However, in his obituary for her published in *Bhashaposhini*, Athmaraman argues that Balamaniyyamma is more a poet of “city and electricity” than of nature (“Nagaram” 11–15).

Balamaniyyamma was not alone in supporting the SVHP. Poets like Olappamanna Subramanian Namboothiri and Chemmanam Chacko too supported the construction of a hydroelectric project in the Silent Valley. Namboothiri hails from

Olappamanna, a village in Palakkad district to which the Silent Valley geographically belongs. He regards himself as a resident of Mannarkkadu which is just about 45 kilometres from the Valley. In his words, there are no forests in the Silent Valley. The forests of the Valley have already been cleared. And, in his view, the Kuntipuzha is also dead (Athmaraman, “Harithavabodham” XXX). Chemmanam Chacko considers himself to be a pragmatist, and hence, he did not support the arguments of conservationists (Athmaraman, “Harithavabodham” XXX).

The significance of literary participation in the campaign, the factors that prompted such an involvement and the reasons behind its success in sustaining and furthering the environmental movement and its implications will be discussed in the next chapter.



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**Notes:**

<sup>1</sup> Most of the publishers furnish detailed information about the writers of these verses. For example, V. Balamuralidhar, one of the poets is described as an intermediate student from Thiruvalla (Balamuralidhar 176) and Priyathamam, yet another writer is introduced as a KSSP member from Mancheri (Priyathamam 11). Such personal introductions become essential as these writers are not familiar to their readers. Interestingly, most of the authors of scientific literature are also introduced thus, probably to authenticate their arguments.

<sup>2</sup> Vandana Shiva and Maria Mies assert that their involvement in the environmental movements opened their eyes to the fact that science is not gender neutral (3). In their view, modern science, which is glorified as the liberator of humanity, has succeeded only in procuring increasing ecological devastation (6). They perceive modern science as patriarchal, anti-nature and colonial (16).

Ashis Nandy remarks that in the present, all states with the aid of science can demand enormous sacrifice from the ordinary citizen. Usually, the intimidation of science is attributed to those who apply and use it. In other words, science as such is not to be blamed. However, Nandy wonders:

Can one go beyond shedding tears copiously over the misuse of modern science by wicked politicians, militarists and multinational corporations and scrutinize the popular culture and philosophy of modern science? May the sources of violence not lie partly in the nature of science itself? Is there something in the modern science itself which makes it a human enterprise particularly open to co-optations by the powerful and the wealthy? (2)

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<sup>3</sup> Hippolyte Adolphe Taine in his *History of English Literature* (1863) remarks that the explication of a work of art depends on three factors—author’s race, socio-geographical milieu and the historical moment (Abrams 289).

<sup>4</sup> Sugathakumari (1934- ), one of the major literary voices of Malayalam, was the most vocal and active among the literary/environmental activists who opposed the SVHP. Besides being a foremost poet in Malayalam, she has registered a formidable presence in the social and political landscape of Kerala during the last thirty years. Besides the enthusiasm she displayed in the organisation of *Prakrithi Samrakshana Samithi*, many of her writings, both in verse and in prose, explicitly deals with the destruction of the planet and its resources. As the founding secretary of the *Samithi*, she played a significant role in mobilising the rest of the literary community. One of the major attractions of the conference of poets organized by the *Samithi* was the recital of her “Marattinu Stuti”. She has been a prominent voice among the most ardent critics of human domination and despoliation of the environment in Kerala. She has also held the post of Chairperson, State Women’s Commission. In recognition of her role in rousing the public interest in favour of protecting the Silent Valley and other ecological problems in Kerala, Sugathakumari was awarded the first *Vriksha Mitra* award constituted by the central government in 1986.

<sup>5</sup> Ramakrishna Paniker (1935-2008), popularly known as Kadamanitta Ramakrishnan, was the most revolutionary among the vibrant group of poets who gathered together for protecting the Silent Valley. In addition to his literary career, he was active in politics too. He was a Member of the Legislative Assembly during 1996-2001. Hence, he is sometimes referred to as the Poet-MLA. He was also the president of the Progressive Artists Association. He had also served the state as the president of the State Library Council. He was enormously attracted by the ideologies of the Naxalite

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movement that shook Kerala during the sixties and seventies of the last century. Marxist ideologies too made a great impression on him. Modern poetry in Malayalam had one of its most important and popular practitioners in Kadamanitta. His poems are lively with the rhythms of folk art forms of Kerala like *Padayani*. “Kurathi”, “Shantha” and “Makanodu” (To the Son) are some of his major compositions.

<sup>6</sup> O. N. V. Kurup (1931- ), one of the most popular poets of modern Kerala has contributed immensely to the popularization of the environmental cause. As with Kadamanitta, the Marxist ideology had an enormous influence on Kurup. Like Kadamanitta, Kurup too has contested for the Kerala legislative assembly on a Communist party (CPI) ticket. Unlike Kadamanitta whose works shed a revolutionary zeal, the poems of Kurup are romantic to a fault. His poems are marked by their musicality and harmony.

<sup>7</sup> N. V. Krishnavarier (1916-89) is one of the most significant voices in Malayalam poetry. During the anti-SVHP campaign, he was the editor of *Mathrubhoomi* weekly. Besides *Mathrubhoomi*, his writings on topics of popular and contemporary interests have appeared in magazines like *Kumkumam* and *Kumari*. These writings of Krishnavarier have been collected and published in eight volumes. He was a prolific communicator of science in Malayalam. Probably, it is this interest in the scientific issues that made him react against the destruction of nature.

<sup>8</sup> In the words of David Adams, Beuys (1921-1986), German artist and co-founder of the German Green Party, remains today the most radical of all Western artists concerned with new ecological paradigms. Beuys explained the Western exploitative attitudes toward nature as rooted in “individual modes of thinking” and an economy oriented toward unlimited material growth. He considered the “complicity between

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the power of money and the power of the state” as the basic cause of external societal problems.

<sup>9</sup> The animistic tone of these writings makes us aware of the traditional cultures and believes that regarded all natural objects as endowed with spirit. The belief is that one who harms the natural world is potentially harming a human.

<sup>10</sup> Kurup’s attitude towards nature reminds me of Williams observation:

A way of seeing has been connected with a lost phase of living, and the association of happiness with childhood has been developed into a whole convention, in which not only innocence and security but peace and plenty have been imprinted, indelibly, on a particular landscape, and then, in a powerful extension, on a particular Period of the rural past, which is now connected with a lost identity, lost relations and lost certainties, in the memory of what is called, against a present consciousness, Nature. (“Green Language” 54)

<sup>11</sup> *Kannan* is an endearing regional version of Lord Krishna, especially used to refer to him as baby.

<sup>12</sup> The term refers to the stream of environmental thought that believes in the existence of an environmentally benign, golden past from which the humanity has fallen and blames the modern, industrial cultures for the contemporary ecological crisis. According to this thought, humanity can redeem nature only by going back to the past.

<sup>13</sup> Deep ecology is a strand of radical ecological thought proposed by the Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess that emphasises the intrinsic value of nature as against its instrumental value.

<sup>14</sup> For a critical appraisal of these environmental ideas see *Radical Ecology: The Search for a Livable World* by Carolyn Merchant.

<sup>15</sup> For a detailed exposition and critique of this position, refer to William Cronon 7-28.

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<sup>16</sup> An indigenous variety of rice.

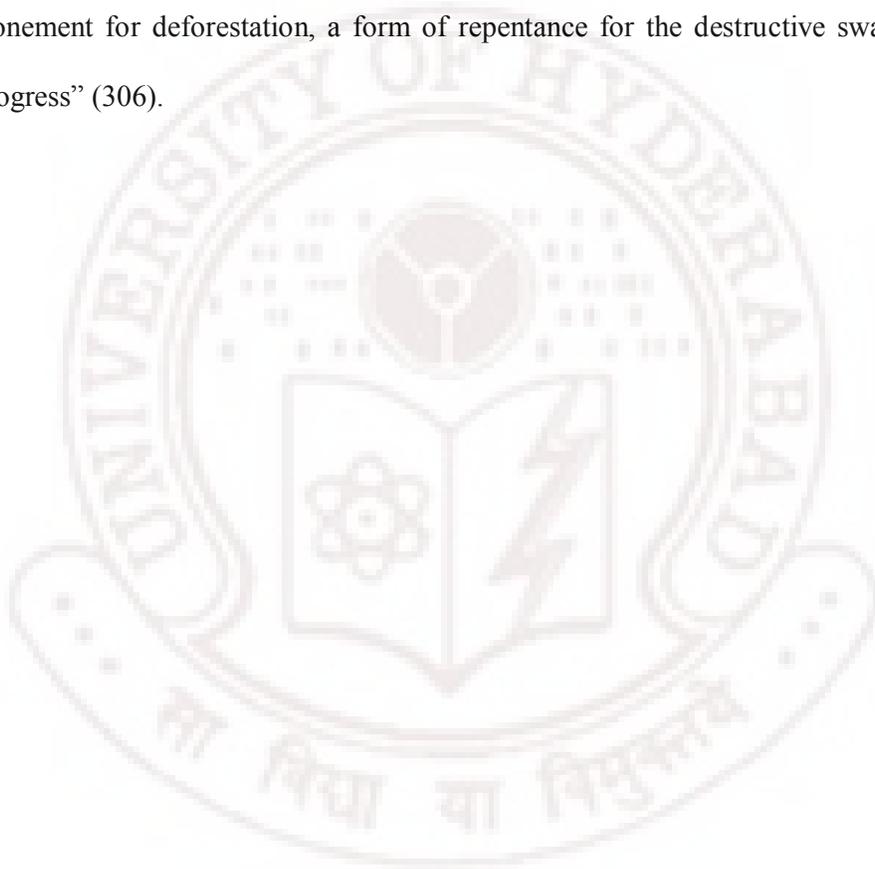
<sup>17</sup> National parks and sanctuaries along with industries have displaced over a million tribes people in India (Ghatak XXVI). Gadgil and Guha describe the way in which creation of sanctuaries interfere with and disrupts the life of local communities (232-239). It could also be recalled here that one of the most publicised and criticised event in the recent Kerala was the forceful occupation of the Muthanga wildlife sanctuary by a group of tribes and the police action to evict them from the sanctuary which resulted in a bloody confrontation.

<sup>18</sup> Kerridge also argues that apocalyptic fantasies are means of reconciling the powerlessness that one feel in the face of the disastrous present which is felt to be permanent. Such apocalyptic thinking suggests an underlying assumption that things will remain as they are with no prospect of improving the situation (244).

<sup>19</sup> However, such poetic thoughts on the relevance of planting trees have ever since been translated into practice by various religious institutions in India. The famous Venkateswara temple at Tirumala-Tirupati, for example, has a large nursery and encourages devotees to take home tree saplings as *Vriksha prasada*. Likewise, as a result of the joint action by the G. B. Pant Institute of India's Himalayan Environment and Development, the chief priest of the Badrinath temple, and the local population, thousands of trees were planted in 1993 in the Himalayas. The priest invoked the legend of the descent of the Ganga regulated by Lord Shiva “by tying it into his ash-smearred locks”. The forests were, to the priests, the locks of Shiva. The State Government of Kerala has also, in the recent years, initiated various afforestation programmes. On June 5, 2007, Departments of Education and Forests launched *Ente Maram* (My Tree) and the following June, launched the *Nammude Maram* (Our Tree) schemes for school and college students. More than five million indigenous saplings

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have been planted along the length and breadth of Kerala under this scheme. Besides, seedlings have been planted along the roads under the *Vazhiyorathanal* (Wayside Shade) and along the seashore under the *Haritha Theeram* (Green Coast) schemes. It is possible that this penchant for growing trees and forest stems from such poetic and legendary inspirations. However, as Leigh Eric Schmidt observes in the context of arbour day celebrations, “Trees and their planting could [also] become a kind of atonement for deforestation, a form of repentance for the destructive swath of [...] progress” (306).



## Chapter IV

### **The Inevitable Involvement: Literary Environmentalism and the Ecological Discourse in Kerala**

In the previous chapter, we discussed the manner in which the Silent Valley inspired literary imagination among Malayali writers. We also saw how popular science literature and creative imagination transformed an exceedingly esoteric issue into a popular socio-political and cultural concern. The mediation of those from aesthetic and cultural fields turned the threat of submergence of the Valley into a public concern. This predominantly scientifically and politically charged intellectual and academic issue aroused Malayali writers to ecological awareness and social action. This literary intervention subsequently reinforced the campaign to save the Silent Valley and extended its reach. In other words, the Silent Valley and creative imagination complemented each other. A good many of the politicians, technologists, bureaucrats and the popular print media in Malayalam regarded the artistic opposition to the construction of the reservoir in the Silent Valley as “romantic” or “utopian”. This was especially so, for the landscape of Kerala was considered to be green and lush. Despite this verdancy, the Malayali society was generally regarded as modern and progressive. Hence, when Malayali writers joined hands to reinforce the environmental movement and to resist a “developmental” project many viewed it with consternation. The general resentment was on the grounds that the writers who resisted the SVHP were mainly nourished by ideals of social justice, human progress and general material advancement.

Most of the writer-activists who played a significant role in the Silent Valley movement were obviously not ecologists. It is true that most Malayali writers were

not competent enough to scientifically judge problems in ecology. The writers were hence denounced by the KSEB, the popular media and the court scientists as utopian and unrealistic. However, like the “cynics” referred to by Southern in his 1969 presidential address to the British Ecological Society, those who opposed the submergence of the evergreen forests of the Valley believed that ecology is too important a subject to be left to ecologists alone (1). But this “cynical” statement is voiced time and again by a multitude of people. According to Passmore, the solution of ecological problems cannot safely be left to scientists "because the solution of ecological problems demands a moral or metaphysical revolution". In the words of McIntosh (313), ecological crisis is thoroughly enmeshed in “the ecological conscience,” “ecology and social institutions”, and "the metaphysics of ecology".

Thus, it is possible to argue that involvement in any such movement transcends all usual generalisations and rigid compartmentalisations. The supposedly socio-economic aspect of all environmental movements in the developing world is forcefully negated as a myth by the enduring success of the campaign to save the rainforests in the Silent Valley. Critics usually categorise uprisings into social and environmental; struggles to gain control over and protect natural resources; and movements with a wilderness, aesthetic and recreational purport. These classifications are to be re-conceptualised and reconfigured in order to have a better comprehension of such eco-social struggles. The campaign to protect the Silent Valley with its various fronts and strategies, with active involvement from diverse socio-cultural and professional groupings including the unprecedented convergence of writers refutes the vanity of such categorisations. It also points to the need for developing a more inclusive and extended framework to comprehend, and more importantly, to socio-historically situate such movements.

The seemingly paradoxical literary enthusiasm to salvage a “biologically rich” and “pristine” tract of forest apparently with “hydroelectric potential with little negative impact on humans,” however, did not make Malayali writers oblivious of the socio-political concerns . In fact, through their involvement in the environmental campaign, writers were eco-socially assessing the Malayali society. Most of them, without limiting to the purely environmental and regional question, linked ecological problems with social concerns generated by the so called developmental process. The cultural significance of Malayali writers’ involvement in the movement, in my view, is their rejection of the existing dichotomy between anxiety over nature and anxiety over society. Besides organically linking people to nature, this perspective, as Deming, Nelson and Sanders remark, suggests that no one is complete, safe and sane without a community which, in turn, requires the vigour and abundance of the earth to thrive. The Silent Valley, Sugathakumari observes, was instrumental in fostering such an ecological perspective among Malayali writers:

In 1979, during the Silent Valley controversy, most of us had an experience of one lifetime. All of a sudden there were great changes in our life, life styles and goals of life. It shook us. We who traversed the scorching heat of the era were different from our earlier selves. We started embracing the earth with our mind. We started regarding flowers, birds, butterflies and children not just with eyes of love but also with eyes of anxiety. Many faces loomed in the perimeter of that regard, the faces of tortured women, and the faces of adivasis who lost everything, the faces of helpless organisms. We are trying to be the tongues of the mute. The earth is wounded. This is the voice of those who try to say “No” and “*Ma Nishada*” recognizing that the eyes of the earth do not just have tears in them, but also the fire of curse. (*Kaavutheendalle* 10)

In this excerpt from her preface to her collection of essays on environmental themes, Sugathakumari tries to argue that the Malayali writers were not drawn to the Silent Valley merely by its ecological implications. On the contrary, she suggests that their involvement in environmental issues was inspired by the ruthless exploitation of nature in Kerala. In other words, the writers' resentment was almost exclusively directed towards the unjust social arrangements that encouraged and justified such exploitative enterprises. Nostalgia for an eco-friendly past and resentment against the ecologically and socially unbalanced present can variously be discerned in the literature of this period. Often, such traits appear as a disappointment in and rage against the loss of habitat and livelihood; the Westernisation of all aspects of Malayalees' life; the overwhelming impact of market oriented, consumerist tendencies; and commodification of both human and nature.

Nevertheless, as the campaign against the SVHP propagates, such positions are dubious. This is because questions of displacement, rehabilitation and similar concerns that usually trigger environmental struggles are conspicuously invisible in it. The picture that the Silent Valley conjures up is rightly that of a thick, dense, dimly-lit tract of forest with no visible human impact in terms of both settlement and commercial as well as industrial interests. Those who spearheaded the resistance campaign argued that the Valley is ecologically unique, biologically rich and climatologically significant. Hence, the purely non-human, ecological factors were highlighted throughout the resistance campaign. Interestingly though, the conspicuous absence of human concerns did not dissuade writers from joining the protest or contributing to its success through their writings. Besides their anxiety over the deteriorating natural surroundings, most of the writers tried to expand the scope of their creative interventions by incorporating questions of social justice and human

rights. Writers who joined the protest by means of their polemical as well as creative engagements, did achieve the spread of awareness substantially among the governments and the masses of the need to manage nature responsibly and live sensibly. In this chapter, I shall look at the significance of the literary participation in the Silent Valley movement and the factors that induced such an involvement.

Efforts to save the Valley, as we have seen earlier, especially in its early stages, were overwhelmingly esoteric and intellectual. Consequently, during this phase of the campaign, the Malayali public at large had no sympathy for the Valley or its endemic, endangered species. The indifference of the Malayali public sphere to the cause of nature, besides being disadvantageous for the protection of the Valley, could, eventually, have disrupted all future conservation efforts in the state. The public's endorsement of the environmental campaign, thus, was decisive in directing the state administration towards environmentally sound developmental activities. Writers realised the significance of popular sympathy and with unconditional commitment, unstinting devotion and unreserved enthusiasm intervened in the environmental discourse with a view to raise Malayalees' awareness on environmental issues. Writers' endeavours aimed at rallying ordinary Malayalees, however, were, indeed, arduous, as mass organisations like political parties and democratically elected governments in the centre, state and the local governing bodies were in favour of the SVHP. Apart from such mass organisations, the print media which enjoyed a large reading public too was evidently in favour of the SVHP.

Every organised resistance, whether political, social, cultural or ecological, in order to be popular and effective, must base itself on some pressing needs of those who agitate. Such exigencies must be felt and considered pressing by a majority of the population. In the case of freedom movements throughout the colonies, for instance,

there was not only a desire for self-governance among the colonised, but self-governance and political sovereignty were considered desirable by a majority of them. The same holds true for agitations against the violations of political or economic rights of a particular community or region by central or federal governments. In such cases, along with the resentment, the agitating groups exhibit certain homogeneity. This homogeneity can be in terms of their place of dwelling or the membership of a particular community. In other words, both geography and ethnicity have an important role in determining the popularity and strength of any struggle (Moore 3-6). The history of Indian environmental movements in general and that of anti-dam movements in particular reveals the geographic and ethnic particularities of various protesting groups. In most such movements, threatened tribal groups have responded spiritedly to defend their rights by organising demonstrations and work stoppages (Gadgil and Guha, *Ecology and Equity* 72). Sometimes, though rarely, wealthy, landowning classes too have protested against the construction of dams. In one such instance, the Bedthi project in Karnataka had to be abandoned as the upper caste spice garden farmers of Uttar Kannada whose lands were to be submerged lobbied against it and forced the state government to shelve it (72-73).

The activists of such agitations are, then, bound by local, communitarian and economic interests. The presence of regional and economic causes as defining factors of resistance movements against dams, however, does not preclude the possibility of external influences. Such external influences and participations were not their guiding factors though. So, one can quite positively assert that all environmental struggles are sustained and reinforced by geographical or ethnic ties. The campaign against the SVHP seems to be the only exception to this pattern of environmental movements, especially in the Indian context. Even though there were no immediate local,

community or economic interests at risk in the case of the SVHP, the project was opposed. Those who opposed it hailed from different parts of Kerala and even from other parts of the country. They were rather a heterogeneous group belonging to various geographic, cultural, professional and linguistic locations. Their knowledge that the Valley is ecologically significant and their realisation that the proposed hydroelectric project could potentially harm it organised them. The resistance against the SVHP during the seventies was not a local reaction, instead, it was a major gesture that challenged the existing paradigms of development.

The campaign against the SVHP, right from its inception, was entirely political and scientific in its rhetoric and outlook. The political nature of the campaign is reflected in environmentalists' discontent with the existing modes of development adopted by India after independence. Political parties, bureaucrats and the civil society regarded big dams, factories, power plants, cash crops and military installations as the "temples" of the emerging nation. Adhering to the principles of "development", India, like other emerging nations, has always rationalised its appropriation of nature and resources of the marginalised. This appropriation is often camouflaged with the seemingly benign rhetoric of development. The sufferings of the poor and the devastation of local environment are justified, in the words of Arundhati Roy, as "Local Pain for National Gain" (58). Environmentalists raised questions over the efficacy of centralised gargantuan projects and emphasised the relative merits of locally designed and administrated small projects.<sup>1</sup> The scientific discontent over the SVHP was based on the potential ecological destructiveness of the project.

Consequently, in its early phase, the campaign was not successful in effecting any lasting influence on the socio-cultural realms of the Malayali society. The

discernable absence of social and cultural elements from the resistance prevented people from appreciating the principles of environmentalism. Obviously, this was a certain handicap in popularising the campaign. The cultural and livelihood aspects of other environmental movements caused people to join them.<sup>2</sup>

However, to the dismay of environmentalists, the inhabitants of Palakkadu and Malappuram districts wholeheartedly supported the SVHP, as it undertook to satisfy many of their long-standing desires. The promised benefits of the SVHP were more concrete and tangible than the predicted deleterious effects of it. Consequently, the anti-SVHP movement continued to be highly esoteric. To compensate the limited support at home, the organisations and activists of the movement looked outwards for assistance. This explains why organisations like the Society for the Protection of Silent Valley, KNHS and KSSP contacted national and international conservation agencies to pressurise both central and state governments to abandon the project.

Writers of Kerala became conscious of the continued absence of public commitment towards the campaign and recognised that this could be dangerous. The mobilisation of masses seemed the only possible strategy. Writers (as we saw in the last chapter) considered themselves appropriate for the task of creating awareness among the public on issues pertaining to conservation and this induced them to join the protest group. With this in mind, Sugathakumari published an article pleading for the protection of the Silent Valley and was overwhelmed by the response her article evoked in some readers. If a single piece by a literary figure could elicit such a keen and spontaneous response, a combined effort from the literary community, she believed, will certainly be of enormous help in advancing the campaign. It is this thought that induced Sugathakumari to meet her fellow writers which ultimately resulted in the formation of the Prakrithi Samrakshana Samiti. Along with their

creative endeavours, Malayali writers, as indicated in chapters 2 and 3, began publishing popular literature on environment in general, and on the Silent Valley in particular. Individual efforts of these writers in the form of literary and non-literary publications were complemented and reinforced by their collective literary as well as political interventions through conferences of poets, conventions and similar educative activities. The individual poems that were published separately were threaded together in similar meetings. Such strategies reinforced their individual efforts rendering their voice loud and distinctive.

In a society like Kerala which is economically and industrially backward despite the gains in the social and educational fields, it is not surprising that the voice of the general public is in favour of projects that promise industrialisation and economic growth. Besides this, Kerala is relatively poor in natural resources in comparison with the rest of the country. In addition to this, the state failed to attract investors, both public and private, due to the relatively high labour costs, the highly organised trade union structure and above all the inadequacy of proper infrastructure. Alongside these general problems, Malabar experienced acute energy shortage. The SVHP promised an annual output of 522 million units of electricity. According to the project authorities, the state administration and the media, this additional power production would help the establishment of new industries in Malabar. Furthermore, in their view, the construction of the SVHP involved no destruction of human settlements and the subsequent displacement as well as destruction of agricultural land. On the other hand, the projected benefits of the SVHP were too enticing for the government and the people of Kerala to resist. The SVHP promised to boost employment opportunities considerably in the districts of Palakkadu and Malappuram. This increase in employment was planned to be realised in the first few years by

means of the construction work and sustained afterwards through the establishment of various industries and also by way of tourist activities. The SVHP, according to many, had the potential to bring prosperity to the farmers of Southern Malabar by irrigating an additional 10000 hectares of paddy fields.

In relation to these well advertised desired aspects, the concerns raised by environmental groups against the SVHP were not quite tangible and remained remote in the eyes of the public. The insistence on the rhetoric of conservation—the preservation of rainforests for their ecological significance, the protection of biodiversity, the maintenance of conducive natural habitat for various species and the protection of endangered species—even at the cost of economic and industrial development distanced a large portion of the public from the campaign. Along with this, a majority of the population considered the projected deleterious effect of the SVHP like the effect of the proposed reservoir and clearing of forests on the climatic stability as well as the seismological and hydrological effects of the SVHP insignificant. The truth was that in relation to the real needs and raised expectations, these pressing, though not concrete environmental concerns failed to capture the public interest.

The public's hesitance to approve the environmental cause had the potential to disrupt the ecological discourse. Writers were not the only ones to notice this. Environmental activists and organisations too realised this and countered it by educating students and the youth of Kerala on ecological issues. Environmental groups also organised performances by popular dancers and singers with an aim of gaining public support. Science exhibitions and *Kalajatha* or art processions organized by the KSSP and the popular science literature also narrowed the distance between science and aesthetics in the popular imagination. This new-found affinity

between the artistic and scientific interests inspired the writers to focus on the looming ecological crisis in the immediate context of the Silent Valley. A complete rejection of the movement by the legal, political and journalistic community would have meant an utter approval of the ideals of “progress” and “development.” As evident from all subsequent environmental movements in Kerala, the triumph of the Silent Valley had an immense reinforcing influence on them. The triumph of the Silent Valley meant the legitimisation of the positions taken by the environmental activists. But for this legitimisation, Malayalees would have approved no subsequent environmental struggles like the ones against the Pooyamkutty Hydroelectric Project, the struggle against the pollution of Chaliyar, the movement against the pollution of underground water by soft drink factories and the agitation against sand mining.

The general criticism was that those ecologists, scientists and politicians who opposed the SVHP were from relatively well-to-do social and professional classes with absolute disregard for the developmental aspirations of the local inhabitants. In addition to the quality education that they received, they were all comfortably placed. The propaganda based on this aspect of their social and professional profiles unleashed by the groups who supported the project gave an aura to the Silent Valley movement. Besides, their professional locations kept most of them aloof from the public when compared to the politicians and media persons who backed the project. Many of them were academicians, the activities of whom were most often esoteric. M. P. Parameswaran, the science communicator, was the only major exception to this.

As against the environmental groups, the voices for the implementation of the SVHP were more focussed for they reflected the desires of communities from specific locations. The specificity of the rhetoric of development attracted the local community. The stand of the popular political parties and politicians too influenced

them. Both the Communist parties and the Congress party used their popular appeal to mobilise and manipulate public support. Though the political parties abstained from declaring their official approach to the SVHP, all members of the state legislative, irrespective of political divisions, were unanimous in voicing their support for the SVHP. In their Techno-Economic and Socio-Political Assessment of the SVHP, Prasad et al write:

It is true that the Silent Valley is one of the richest biospheres in the whole world; but it is also true that for the people of Malabar; the question of energy, of irrigation, of employment and of development is more real, immediate and obvious than the necessity of protecting the unique biosphere of the Silent Valley. Without winning over the confidence and co-operation of the people in the locality in particular, and of Kerala in general, the Silent Valley cannot be saved. This confidence cannot be gained by empty promises. Fortunately, the techno-economic considerations are not at variance with the ecological considerations in this case; but socio-political forces are strongly pitched against them. (21)

The success of the Save the Silent Valley Campaign thus rests entirely on mobilising mass support. The literary community plunged into the movement with the objective of acquiring public support. Writers, despite being academics, were quite popular in the public sphere of Kerala. Some of them were in the media too. The course they adopted, unlike that of the scientific community, was consequently popular. The primary effort of the literary community thus was to reach out to the entire populous of the state. Along with their literary text, both revolutionary and romantic, they published popular, polemic articles on the significance of the Silent Valley and on other environmental issues. Instead of emulating the ecologists, such writings explored the meaning of life and reiterated that humans have both practical

and moral obligations to care for the nature. These writings took upon themselves the responsibility of inculcating a benign attitude towards nature characterised by stewardship, restraint and ethics.

Apart from the publication of such popular articles, the literary community published imaginative writings on environmental themes. As we saw in the last chapter, much of such writings contain or, in some cases, hint at the ecological facts. In such instances, we have already noticed, writers try to be imaginative as well as factual. The writings of Sugathakumari on trees and rivers, of Kurup on the earth and future, of Paniker on trees and the nature of Kerala, of Namboothiri on forests and of Krishnavariar on rivers and the changing landscape of Kerala testify this. Such writings, as I suggested in chapter 3, foreground the interdependence among various species and between species and their environment. Despite being repetitious of already published scientific/ecological thoughts, these creative as well as polemic endeavours emphasised those significant scientific facts. The attitude of the writers towards ecologists was one of cooperation. This was emphasised by Sukumar Azhikode when he suggested that the two groups should work together. Hence, the convention organised by the Prakrithi Samrakshana Samithi, along with poetic recitals, facilitated scientific discussions and paper presentations with slide shows by eminent ecologists.

Besides creating ecological consciousness through popularising ecological facts, many writers tried to trace an ecologically benign local cultural tradition. These writers tried to establish the existence of an ecologically sensitive pre-modern culture. This retrospective attitude in the literature of Malayalam during the seventies of the last century, I think, is symptomatic of a conflict that characterised the society of the period. The quasi-feudalism that had hitherto dominated the social life of the state

began to be challenged by the emergence of a new social order oriented towards the market. This era also witnessed the Naxalite uprising against feudalism in several parts of the state. The environmental discourse that often eulogised the pre-modern for its supposedly eco-benign attitudes offered the writers of the period an opportunity to express their discontent with the socially and ecologically troublesome present. The nascent ecological discourse justified their retrospective tendencies. The values that had hitherto dominated the society began to change and the environmental movement made it possible for writers to judge the society in terms of feudal values. Such writers focused on the moral degeneration of the newly emerging polity that had already proclaimed its break from feudalism. Their effort was to set an ordered, happier and benign past against the troubles and disorder of the present. Though the feudal past is generally regarded as a system that kept people close to nature (Pepper 72), it was strictly hierarchical and oppressive.

The high priority accorded by writers to sacred groves as a conservation oriented religious, cultural institution throughout the life of the anti-SVHP campaign betrays their feudal hangover. Along with environmentalists, writers who joined the campaign too tried to project the existence of sacred groves as a proof of Kerala's primitive ecological wisdom. Besides their emphasis on sacred groves, some of these writings extol and idealise rural existence. The allusion to the ecological benignity of traditional, pre-modern cultures in these works, it could be argued, is a deliberate and desperate attempt by their writers to counter the dissipative lifestyle that squanders natural resources. This idealization, though attempts to suggest the possibility of alternative systems of life, wittingly or unwittingly, glorifies and eulogises a socially decadent past and calls for its reinstallation. The frequent invocation of the past in

such writings does urge the reader to judge the relative merits of an “ecologically benign, “socially just” past over the ecologically and socially decadent present:

We Malayalis were leading simple lives. ... We had *Sarppakavu* [sacred groves dedicated for snakes] in our temples and *taravad* [ancestral households]. A sacred grove is a tiny evergreen forest. We regarded them as untouchable and sacred. They are the seats of snake gods. Grandmothers advised, ‘do not enter the grove, the pond will dry, the drinking water will perish.’ Today ecology tells us that these groves protected rain water and prevented the ground water level from falling and purified the atmosphere. Besides, several animals (big and small), wild plants, medicinal plants, creepers and weeds could grow there without the fear of being felled or killed. Today we call these pristine spots gene pools. Though groves were the seats of the snake goddesses, they never violated their limits, their population did not increase. Now we know the way in which this equilibrium was maintained. The snake goddesses controlled the population of rats. And at the same time mongooses, owls and eagles checked the snake population. These groves in the *taravad* premises are close to us, yet they remained mysterious, untouchable and sacred. The elderlies believed that the protection of groves will lead to prosperity. (Sugathakumari, *Kaavutheendalle* 42)

As is evident from this passage, sacred groves merge environment, history, and religion. It is primarily not a scientific or even an ecological institution. Modern science, especially ecology can only recognise it and justify its relevance. Basically it is social and religious. Sacred forests are thus as much social constructions as ecological objects. It is the gaining scientific interest in concepts such as biodiversity and ecosystem that sustains their relevance and calls for their maintenance.

Sugathakumari’s description in my view is grounded firmly on the assumption that sacred groves are vestiges of an ecologically sensitive past. This position holds that, prior to colonialism, the Malayali culture was infused with religious and social

customs devised to restrict human exploitation of earth. Such descriptions of sacred groves, Freeman argues, does not indicate the existence of such wisdom among earlier generations nor spring from any indigenous ecological wisdom. Rather, this insistence on the ecological significance of the sacred groves, he observes, should be seen as an attempt to halt or reverse the destruction of Kerala's landscape in the recent years (77). A mere restoration of this supposedly lost indigenous ecological wisdom is, hence, neither desirable nor effective in conserving nature. However, my intention in disputing such notions is not to deny the so called conservationist purport of sacred groves, but to take issues with the attempts that claim a legacy of indigenous ecological wisdom.

Again, the same appeal for the restoration of a benign past is visible in Sugathakumari's attitude towards the traditional social set up, for, she writes:

We had joint families and the matrilineal system of inheritance. As the inheritance was matrilineal, our women had more rights and privileges and better facilities than those enjoyed by the most modern women of developed nations. Woman was the light of the family, and hence we longed for girl children. She was the rightful heir to the family property. It was through her that the clan existed. Marriage was simple and divorce was even simpler. Remarriages and widow remarriages were common among us. Parda, dowry and Sati were not even heard of. (41)

While this description of a feudal *taravad* holds true in the case of a few upper caste households, it does not represent the traditional society imbued with gender discrimination and caste prejudices. Likewise, the portrayal of Malayali women as free and liberated is problematic in that only a certain community followed the matrilineal system of inheritance. Majority of Malayali women, including the Nair women referred to in the quoted passage, along with their Brahmin and lower caste

sisters were still under the yoke of patriarchy and the caste system. However, this eulogising of past is not unique to Sugathakumari. Writers like Krishnavarier and Vishnu Narayanan Namboothiri also have uncritically expressed similar admiration for the past. Krishnavarier's "Marangalum Vallikalum," discussed in the last chapter, closely resembles these select passages from Sugathakumari's *Kavutheendalle*.

Together with this emphasis on the ecological and social benignity, some of these writers see such benign practices as deriving from the religious and spiritual superiority of their past. Mostly, such writings advocate rejection of contemporary profligacy and devastation which are the only possible logical culminations of the anthropocentric worldview that permeates every aspect of contemporary life as a means of averting the impending environmental catastrophe. This anthropocentric worldview, Vishnu Narayanan Namboothiri and Azhikode assert, which is typical of the modern West, could only be sustained at the expense of nature's equilibrium. This homocentric, recklessly wasteful culture, emulated by non-Western societies, is often contrasted with the eco-benignity of the pre-modern oriental cultures. The efficacy of such writings, in my view, lies in readers' purposeful subversion of such reactionary elements by the critical appropriation of those "benign" cultures so as to foster a sense of benign stewardship towards nature.

However, the denigration of writers for their supposedly reactionary, retrospective attitudes is similar to the way in which environmentalists in the West are equated with the Nazis. This denunciation of environmental movements stems from the historical reality that the Third Reich was the first modern state that recognised animal rights and adopted policies to conserve and preserve the natural environment. The radical political implications of some of the ecological positions are usually upheld to dismiss all shades of ecological thoughts. This position implies that in order

to be ecologically minded one has to approve such radical ideologies as Nazism and Hindutwa. By way of charging the environmental writer-activists as mere reactionaries, critics of environmentalism overlook the ecological destructibility of modern socio-political systems and ideologies.

In most cases, the writers who joined hands with the environmentalists, by means of pointing towards the ecologically benign aspects of their traditions, were, in actuality, foregrounding the unprecedented and alarming rate in which nature was stripped leading to the possibility of a bleak future. This obvious political punch, visible among the writers and their creations during the resistance campaign against the SVHP, renders them distinct from the preceding literary deliberations on nature that was more-or-less descriptive and nostalgic. This seemingly reactionary tilt, I think, issues from writers' awareness that the fight for clean land, water and atmosphere and for preservation of forests and sacred groves is entangled in the intricate web of cultural, spiritual and socio-political dimensions. Also, this interest among the writers in matters concerning nature as opposed to the passionate adherents of development points to the manner in which perceptions of nature differ from one group to another. While the latter perceived rivers, waterfalls and forests as resources waiting to be utilised, harnessed and exploited, the former regarded them as wells of aesthetic and ecologic abundance. They noticed with dismay the prevailing tendency to regard things as mere resources on call for our use when required. This dichotomy refers to the difference in the way environment is perceived, constructed and appropriated by different groups to justify and prove their respective claims.

Thus, Malayali writers who formed a part of the campaign to oppose the SVHP were, in effect, rejecting Karl Kroeber's claim that those who bother themselves with the ecological crisis are at heart similar to deep ecologists who

“desire the health of nature even if that means limiting, or doing away with, human activities and human beings” (311). The efforts of such writers were to unravel the multilayered relations between humans and their non-human, non-living compatriots. In this effort, writers transcended mere reportage, and explored such complex interrelationships. Instead of remaining lyrical and subjective, these writers were quite often consciously propagandistic in their literary as well as political activities in resisting the SVHP. Their concerns were predominantly the nature that environed them. Or to take the phraseology of Bonnie Costello, the concern of these writers was “nature in our midst, not just a remote or lost nature” (573).

One of the ways in which the literary participation in the campaign to resist the SVHP could be understood is as a rift between the existing (though waning) feudalism and the nascent capitalism. The status of Silent Valley as an icon of industrialisation, urbanisation and regional development, however, accentuated this aspect of the controversy. The anticipated benefits of the SVHP in the garb of employment generation and improved accessibility threatened the very continuance of the semi-feudal social order by distancing the masses from agriculture and land.

However, this iconic status of the SVHP was quite systematically subverted by environmental activists through their efforts to pose the proposed hydroelectric project in the Silent Valley as a symbol of human exploitation of nature. This symbolic aspect of the Silent Valley is voiced by both scientists and creative writers. In the words of Satishchandran Nair, "The story of the Silent Valley is the continuity of assaulted Amazon, burning Borneo, corporated Congo, vanished bison, dodos surviving merely as an expression and the last of the Yanomami" (“Reflections” 72). "The Silent Valley," Krishnavarier observes in a similar fashion, “is a symbol; a symbol of the forests being destroyed ruthlessly and the rivers that are slowly starving

to death; a symbol of the denuded Western Ghats. Our aim should be the conservation not only of the Silent Valley, but of all nature" (qtd. in Sugathakumari, "Silent Valley: A Case Study" 19). Vishnu Narayanan Namboothiri too echoes Krishnavarier when he writes, "the Silent Valley is a symbol, an example of one of the rare evergreen forests on earth, a gene pool unspoiled, a symbol of nature not victimized by the mindless exploitation, parsimony and profligacy glorified as the industrial revolution" (Pravesakam 10).

In the words of Narayana Pillai, the danger of a symbol like the Silent Valley is that it diverts our attention from effective conservation of forests. He regards the often debated question of alternative sites for hydro-electric projects or alternative energy sources such as nuclear energy as ridiculous for these so called alternatives are also equally damaging to the environment. This is because no hydroelectric projects could be realised without the destruction of forests by felling and submergence (11). In their enthusiasm for conserving the Silent Valley, some of the environmentalists argued that the destruction of other forest areas would not be as detrimental as that of the Silent valley. Arguments such as this, he maintains, instead of contributing to the effective conservation of environment, result in the conservation of a few ecological hotspots (12).

The protection of the Silent Valley, he argues, will not ensure the conservation of our surroundings, forests and trees. This can be achieved only by means of allowing sacrifices in our lifestyles and living standards. People must be educated about and persuaded to lead simple lives abandoning affluence and "development." We must try to model ourselves on Gandhi's principles instead of the Western and Japanese models. People must sacrifice their comforts: people who earn foreign exchange by exporting frogs — the natural enemy of pests, people who work on ivory

and who sleep in air-conditioned rooms, all must sacrifice their comforts (11-12). The campaign to save the Silent Valley could not address these concerns as the issue in question was the protection of a few endangered and endemic species.

We should develop a new conception of development that reaps maximum “benefit” with minimal damage to the environment. One of the highly publicised developmental/employment generating scheme “Food for Work”, for instance, led to the indiscriminate felling of millions of trees for constructing new roads (12). This, he continues, occurs due to our general conception of development and benefit which is exceedingly anthropocentric. The need of the hour is the development of an ethics, an ethics that cares for the entire living beings instead of one that caters to the needs of human species. Animals need to be protected. They are simply not instruments of production.

Pillai reminds that there have been many organised and individual efforts to protect nature before. Notwithstanding such efforts, environmentally disastrous practices like the destruction of sacred groves and filling of fields and ponds continue in the name of economic activities. The root cause of this utilitarian attitude is the value system that regards human needs and welfare above others. This ethics fails to conceive that the welfare of non-human organisms is as crucial as that of humans. Hence, creative artists must realise that human beings and other species are integral parts of our planetary system. If the writer-activists of the SV campaign do not recognise this, the Silent Valley would be preserved and all other trees would be destroyed. The Silent Valley would be a tiny greenwood in the desert that is Kerala (12). Pillai is quick to recognise the middle-class character of the environmental movement which has the potential to derail it. The middle class, as Salleh observes by citing the British scenario, can “coexist quite comfortably with capitalist despoliation

of the world, because it can afford to eat organically grown food and buy houses in unpolluted places [...], since much of their fortune comes from investment in the environmental crimes of a multinational mining industry (5). Consequently, literary environmentalism must strive to bring about radical changes in the cultural and social life of Malayalees. It should induce both common people and administrators to change their perception of environment. The success of this enterprise relied on the effectiveness with which the activities of literary environmentalism convinced the public that the existing affluence-seeking attitude is detrimental in the long run for both humans and their environment.

To perceive the Silent Valley as a glorified symbol of human exploitation of nature without due caution is to confine human induced environmentally destructive activities to such high profile projects like the SVHP. This concern over the overvalued status of the Silent Valley stems, in my view, for the reason that the targeted audience of those who advanced such overvaluation were quite influential and prominent. It is true that the promoters of the SVHP too tried to reach out to the public through publications and other means. Though this latter readership far exceeded the former in terms of numbers, the former too was active, dynamic and influential in determining new social and literary trends. Unlike common readers of popular newspapers, those who resisted the SVHP were visible; they were more reflective and voiced their resistance through the Letters to the Editor columns of various dailies and magazines and participated in other awareness campaigns. The readers of the popular print media that strove for the realisation of the SVHP were largely coerced by the developmental rhetoric put forth by political parties. In sharp contrast to this, those who resisted the SVHP were directed by the scientific and conservationist rhetoric. However, unlike politicians, who were popular, the activists

of the resistance campaign remained distant and aloof. Despite this, the environmental crusaders managed to interest an influential section of the public and in doing so, forced the political establishment to heed them. Thus they were in a better position to shape the public opinion.

Those who received the developmental rhetoric with elation were for the most part pragmatic, as in my view, they were to a great extent fascinated by the projected tangible material benefits of the SVHP. On the other hand, the reception of the conservationist rhetoric, in the contest of the SVHP, was largely proactive and based on apprehensions over the probable deleterious effects on the ecosystem. As against the journalistic readership who conceived development from a purely anthropocentric position, the imaginative readership that resisted the SVHP was disturbed by the apocalypse of an ecological crisis. An example of this rupture between the ways in which political/pragmatic and literary/imaginative eyes perceive human progress is illustrated by the conflict that broke out between the management of the daily *Mathrubhoomi* and the weekly issue of it. *Mathrubhoomi* weekly which was under the editorship of the eminent writer Krishnavarier resisted the SVHP with as much vigour as the daily *Mathrubhoomi* bolstered it. This rift in the attitudes of these two publications, I think, arises from the difference in their targeted readership. While the daily *Mathrubhoomi* catered to the common reader, its weekly issue served the interest of more specialised, sophisticated and focussed readers.

The fissure that existed among those who opposed and favoured the SVHP is manifest, in my view, from the manner in which regional and national media approached the issue. We have already seen that almost all the major newspapers in Malayalam—*Malayala Manorama*, *Mathrubhoomi* and *Deshabhimani*—were in favour of the SVHP. Though these dailies opened their letters to the editor column to

various shades of opinions on the SVHP, editorially they remained firmly for the SVHP. Quite contrary to this, national dailies like *The Hindu* and *The Indian Express* along with editorially opposing the SVHP also gave wide coverage to the resistance campaign. While the targeted audience of the Malayalam dailies remained largely unsophisticated and uninitiated, the readership of national dailies, mainly in English, was learned. This rift also hints at the tension between the regional versus national element that characterised the Silent Valley controversy.

Once they were sure of their readership, the literary community began devising strategies to reinforce and sustain the burgeoning ecological consciousness among their readers. With this goal in mind, writers historicised environmental struggles in their bid to impart a universal character to their activities. This was achieved by means of referring to (or in some instances by linking the resistance campaign) to other environmental movements in India and the rest of the world. Their approach is both diachronic and synchronic. Writers' effort to diachronically view the environmental resistance is evident in Krishnavarier's writings on the Bishnois of Rajasthan and the American Indians. Along with their writings on historical events, writers tried to establish or more likely invent a legacy of ecological wisdom. In synchronic terms, they dealt with contemporary environmental issues in Kerala and outside. Thus, issues like the pollution of rivers such as the Thames, the Ganges, the Rhine, the Chaliyar; industrial and nuclear accidents at Bhopal, Three Mile Island and siltation in the Aswan and the Malampuzha reservoirs were discussed, probably with a view to disclose the spatial pervasiveness of anthropogenic environmental problems.

The contribution of the Malayali writers to the campaign against the SVHP assumes significance as along with individual efforts, mitigation of environmental problems requires political and policy level actions from the concerned government.

Anyone can (though with a certain degree of observation) sketch the seriousness of the present crisis or can blame the government for not doing enough. In a democracy like ours, government heavily depends on people's mandate. Hence, in the absence of real popular yearning, governments are very much likely to carry on with the misguided developmental agenda. Thus the responsibility of creating awareness among the public is crucial and the writers of the period strove to bring about the required change in the popular perception of progress. The public is much less likely to accept this unless the esoteric aspect of the resistance campaign is abandoned. To realise this, the writers of the period organised conferences of poets in several corners of the state, awareness campaigns with slide shows and scientific papers and involved themselves with other activist groups to spread the theme of conservation. This involvement comes as a result of the knowledge among such writers that as creative artists their work, along with protecting the things they loved, is to impart the significance of doing so to the not yet initiated.

The writers who opposed the SVHP were certainly disturbed by the immediate reality of the destruction of a priceless small forest in their neighbourhood. They were galvanized, however, by a deep sense of foreboding about the prospect of a global ecological catastrophe that may endanger the continuation of life on the planet. Never before in the socio-political history of Kerala have writers displayed such unity and resolve in opposing the government. The participation of the writers in the campaign as an organised social group was unprecedented in the social history of India. Such an organised involvement was different from that of the individual participation of writers in similar struggles. Contrary to the popular conception, the writers who resisted the SVHP were not inspired by the aesthetic aspect of the wilds, but rather were shocked by the amount of devastation the proposed project could unleash. The

accusation was that the writers in their bid to protect the forest failed to grasp the regional aspiration for socio-economic development of the Malabar region.

The reasons for the galvanization of men/women of letters for the apparently non-literary cause, the preservation of nature, can be discerned only in relation with the socio-political situation of Kerala. There were no channels, potent enough to direct the social energy in Kerala during the first half of the seventies. The “emergency” took the major part of the second half of the decade, and like the rest of the country the society of Kerala too was trying to come to terms with that experience. The preceding decade with the Naxalite Movement was a turbulent one in the history of Kerala. The weakening of the Naxalite Movement dispersed the social energy that was hitherto focused on the eradication of socio-economic inequalities and exploitation. The intelligentsia now was evidently in search of a proper channel for the outlet of their long suppressed resentment. The campaign against the SVHP with its anti-establishment, anti-capitalistic overtones provided, at least to some of them, a potent, fresh field of action.

An interesting facet of this environmental crusade that occurred in Kerala during the later half of the last century is the way in which it inspired and mobilised numerous literary figures with diverse political and aesthetic ideologies into a common platform. This galvanization demands greater attention, for, as mentioned, the environmental movements in India had been unprecedented in rousing mass literary interests. It was not for the first time that the society of Kerala was struck by strong agitations and controversies. The fifties and sixties too were times of massive social unrests, and agitations like *Vimochana Samaram* (The Liberation Struggle), The Naxalite Movement and the anti-Emergency protests were active throughout the state. But none of these seemed so enchanting and challenging for the literary

community except for some sporadic literary references. The campaign to oppose the SVHP, unlike these stirring social events, troubled the writers of the time and triggered their imaginations.

The manner in which Malayali writers united in the wake of the threat to the species-rich tropical rainforests of the Silent Valley makes it unprecedented both in terms of its commitment to an environmental cause and its significance as a socio-literary 'movement'. Writers and artists, besides resisting the SVHP in their capacity as mere writers and artists, joined the scientists, professionals and environmental activists to forge a public, sensitizing movement, and thereby opened up a forum for free intellectual access and debate in the interest of Kerala's beleaguered history of development. This literary and social action for evolving a sensible approach towards nature and human progress, based on the principles of ecology, ecophysiology, ekistics and bioethics, was perhaps Kerala's first meaningful step toward modern ecoconsciousness.

The zeal displayed by the writers to be a part of the larger goal of protecting the nature overlooked their ideological and political differences. They were fully aware of the immense power that literature has on the people and utilised it for the creation of an ecologically sensitive, socially just society. The importance of unity among the intellectuals resisting the aggression towards nature is amply illustrated by Sugathakumari in "Thames Nadiyodu." She recalls with joy and relief how the actions of a person could enlighten the public and gather support from even the ruling elite by citing the actions to purify the Thames. She makes her point clear by linking the environmentalist in her poem with Upaguptan, the Buddhist monk, who cleansed the soul of Vasavadatta, the prostitute, in "Karuna" (Kindness) by Kumaran Asan. The immensity of their work becomes apparent in the light of the knowledge that the

movement in its early stages was not at all popular for as mentioned the project symbolized development and progress. To worsen matters, no writer from the project area or from the adjacent places was among those who stood against the project. Most of the anti-SVHP groups worked from centres like Kozhikode and Thiruvananthapuram, places far away from the Silent Valley.

The decision of the writers to join the environmental group marks a turning point in the history of the movement. Most of the writers who supported the movement were popular poets and it is the presence of these writers that galvanised the youth of the time against the project. Since these writers enjoyed a large readership, the issue reached a wider public where it was debated and analysed. Once educated, the people, a major section being literate, got enough opportunities to decide for themselves the pros and cons of the matter. The support of a significant group of writers in the language for the movement no doubt might have influenced at least a small group of people. Together with the formation of this group in the public sphere of Kerala, the students too were organised against the project through nature clubs and for the first time in the history of the country they came out on to the streets to protest against the destruction of forests.

Along with reinforcing the environmental campaign through creative writings, most of the writers also influenced the Malayali public in their individual capacity as media persons and teachers. This is true of most of the members of the Samithi: Krishnavarier was the editor of magazines like *Kumkumam* and *Mathrubhoomi*, and others like Kurup and Ayyappa Paniker were established academicians. This was a historical necessity, which the writers of the period understood, especially in the event of the unity that politicians and political parties displayed in favour of the SVHP. It is the presence of a large number of popular and revered writers in the movement that

inspired many to the campaign. The emphasis on the interdependence between various species and organisms and their environment created a new attitude among the people towards nature. The literary texts of this new group of writers, together with their frequent interventions through the popular press raised the environmental consciousness by highlighting the inevitability of conserving the nature.

It is quite certain that the literary activities during the 1970s and 1980s had enormous influence over the campaign to resist the SVHP. At the same time, the presence of an ecological consciousness among the Malayali public that caused the success of the campaign could be attributed to Malayalees' literary and cultural traditions. In 1954, for instance, Idasseri (1906-74) had written a poem on the newly constructed Kuttippuram Paalam (Kuttippuram Bridge). He considers it as a break in our relation with nature, for the bridge separates the traveller from the flowing water underneath. His was not an isolated voice. Other writers had also expressed similar concerns. Some of them were P. Kunhiraman Nair, N. N. Kakkad, and Vyloppalli. It would, however, be a narrow perspective to assume that the early literature, a by-product of the native "environment friendly culture," remains the sole cause for the generation of the Silent Valley movement. Along with the undeniable influence of the native cultural traditions and the ecological awareness on the movement, Malayalam literature during and after the campaign has played a pivotal role in nourishing and sustaining eco-consciousness. The literary activities aroused by the Silent Valley raised the environmental question from being a mere development oriented, socio-political and economic discourse to a cultural discourse that probed into lifestyles and Malayalees' changing attitude towards similar concerns. This aspect of literary environmentalism is evident in such instances where writers link the destruction of the

physical environment to the loss of Malayali cultural artefacts and the resultant dehumanising.

The question of the mutual relationship between Malayalam literature and the eco-social campaign to oppose the SVHP has to be still further. Along with Malayali writers' contribution to the campaign, its influence on the writers and the literature must also be studied. This becomes essential as later writings in Malayalam have regarded environmental issues as one of their major concerns. The influence of the Valley on Malayalam literature is evident from Samithi's publication of *Vanaparvam*, an anthology of nature poems, within three years of its inception. Again, as we saw in the last chapter, the concern over the Valley caused a major section of Malayali writers to focus on issues of ecological importance. The literature written with a view to support the cause of the Valley formed a formidable presence in Malayalam literature. What is so exciting about this literature is not their literary or aesthetic standing. There is no denial of the fact that these were written with a specific aim and to inform and educate the public. The writers achieved this by incorporating revolutionary ideas into their works as illustrated in the works of Kadamanitta. The activist in the Kiratan, towards the end of the poem, rises to action by declaring that he must dismember the destructor of the forest and his community and culture. In this respect the literature has in effect exerted a double influence over the environmental movements in general. This aspect of mutual influence makes the literary involvement in the campaign significant and unique.

Though much of the literature during the Silent Valley controversy belong to the fold of Marxist/social and Promethean ecology, some of them adopt techniques popularized by eco-romantic genres like pastoral. This paradoxical appropriation of pastoral, romantic techniques has to be recognised as an effort to highlight the

ecological crisis as in one of the founding texts of modern environmentalism, *Silent Spring*, which relies heavily on such techniques. In spite of the romantic/wilderness urge, which was evident in the case of the Silent Valley, the writers of the movement linked the ecological crisis with the socio-economic and cultural inequality and exploitation. To the writer activists of almost all other environmental struggles in the country this was comparatively easy for as suggested by Guha and Arnold, these movements were directly related to the livelihood issues of the local inhabitants (Guha 116; Arnold and Guha 18).

The choice of eco-social themes by the writers who formed an integral part of the Silent Valley movement has to be understood as an attempt to counter the claims of regional craving for development advanced by the supporters of the SVHP. If the proposed project uses the rhetoric of regional benefits, most local leaders and organisations will be in favour of it, making the task of the environmentalists arduous as with the Silent Valley. But the question that haunted the environmentalists including the writers was the issue of the projected beneficiaries. They were quick to realise that all developmental projects entail monetary as well as personal costs. Those who opposed the SVHP persistently raised the issue of the projected beneficiaries "beyond the community as a whole" and the projected casualty "beyond the general taxpayer" (McEvoy and Dietz 246). Just as the SVHP was glorified for its socio-economic benefits, the works of the literary community emphasized the eco-social aspect of it. In their view, notwithstanding the benefits the project promised for the common people in the form of power, irrigation and employment, which, [in their view,] are purely short living, the major beneficiaries of the project were an elite minority of rich capitalists, contractors and farmers. Writings of Kadamannitta and Ayyappa Paniker expose this aspect. By juxtaposing the SVHP with other similar

power projects, both inside the country and outside, the environmentalists too had exposed the absurdity of the project authority's claims.

The themes that the writers took up for discussion in their writings were influenced and to a certain extent determined by the scientific/ecological discourse that dominated the period. The very fact that most of the writers were drawn to the agitation through their acquaintance with people and literature, both scientific and ecological, hints at this. The need for interplay between the scientific and literary discourses and its recognition by those working for the preservation is evident from the joined participation by both environmentalists and literary figures in the first convention of the Samithi, and the unity displayed by them thereafter. Together with a craving for the allegedly nature-friendly past, these writings stress the complex interdependence displayed by different living and non-living matters and challenge the anthropocentric conception of the world.

The literary involvement in the SV movement must be assessed against the backdrop of the distinction proposed by Passmore between a 'problem in ecology' and an 'ecological problem'. According to his formulation a problem in ecology signifies the failure of scientists to comprehend certain ecological phenomena, which have to be solved through tests and ecological experiments. An ecological problem, he maintains, is a special type of social problem arising out of our transactions with nature. "It is problematic not because we fail to understand how it comes about, rather because we think we would be better off without it" (43). The former is purely scientific, while the latter is socio-cultural. Unlike a problem in ecology that has to be explained scientifically, an ecological problem has to be solved politically and legally. Media and popular culture too play an important role in turning a scientific problem in ecology into an ecological problem. I have hereby attempted to draw a clear picture of

the manner in which the Malayali writers transformed the row over the ecological significance of the Silent Valley into a socio-cultural and public concern by linking the destruction of ecosystems to various socio-economic, political, human rights and developmental issues.

The linking of ecological concerns to socio-economic, political and cultural issues is extremely important as only such an approach can effectively subvert the prevailing dichotomies of nature - culture, nature - society, human - non-human, development - environment, progress - conservation and so on. The subversion of these binaries is significant as the aspects of nature that we strive to protect and preserve are not external — the exotic nature or the wilderness out there, rather these are the different facets of nature that we imperceptibly find ourselves in as we go on with our ordinary lives. However, in trying to locate the Silent Valley in the broader framework of human rights and social justice issues, the Malayali writers transcended the “regional” and the “local”. Their effort was to see the threat to the Valley, a regional issue, as a symbol of human societies’ insensitivity to the environment. In other words, the thrust of Malayali writers’ involvement in the environmental crusade during the 1970s and 1980s was to drive home the idea that the nature which is to be protected and preserved is an integral part of all societies. Moreover, the artistic intervention strove to counter the notion that nature is extraneous to humanity. Their effort was to alert us to the possibility of inhabiting a sterile and barren earth if we fail to alter our ways.

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**Notes:**

<sup>1</sup> This fascination for small, locally administrated developmental projects is not unique to the anti-SVHP struggle. The ideology of glorifying the small has opened the possibility of an alternate discourse in the field of social theory at least since the publication in 1973 of Schumacher's *Small is Beautiful: Economics as if People Really Mattered*. Again, the strong distrust towards the big projects is poignantly voiced by Arundhati Roy:

We have to support our small heroes. [...]. Who knows, perhaps that's what the twenty-first century has in store for us. The dismantling of the Big. Big bombs, big dams, big ideologies, big contradictions, big countries, big wars, big heroes, big mistakes. Perhaps it will be the Century of the Small. Perhaps right now, this very minute, there's a small god up in heaven readying herself for us. (53)

<sup>2</sup> The cultural and livelihood thrust of Indian environmental movements is elaborately discussed by Ramachandra Guha in his study of *Chipko*, Sanjay Sangvai in his study of the NBA and K. C. Narayanan in his study of the campaign against the proposed missile station at Balliapal in Orissa.

## **Chapter V**

### **Conclusion**

The distinction between a problem in ecology and an ecological problem that we discussed with reference to Kerala's Silent Valley in the previous chapter is also a question of attitudes and approaches. Though we know that such distinctions overlap, from its very scientific nature, a problem in ecology is chiefly a concern of the specialists. As long as the human transformation of natural environment remains an esoteric issue, the need for self-regulation will evade most human beings. In other words, ecological awareness among the specialists alone does not constitute environmentalism or environmental activism. Only a transformation of this awareness into a popular socio-cultural concern can realise the move towards environmentalism. The need for creating public awareness through sharing esoteric information and sustaining informed debates is, therefore, crucial for transforming a potential problem in ecology into an ecological problem that demands, more than scientific measures, political, social as well as cultural solutions. The campaign to save the Silent Valley was a problem in ecology that was converted into an ecological problem, through orchestrated efforts in the socio-cultural field.

The Silent Valley movement presents the trajectory of a struggle that moves on from being a scientific, specialized and academic issue to a concern of the public sphere. Initially, the dissemination of ecological discourse was taken up by specialised botanists and zoologists through their publications in the popular media. However, irrespective of their achieving their intended goal of arousing popular resistance, these science writings, published with a view to educating and informing

the public on ecological and scientific issues, afforded science communicators in Malayalam a major break in going popular. Articles on conservation, renewable and non-renewable energy sources, extinction of the flora and fauna, climatic variations, global warming, and such concerns flooded the pages of most popular magazines such as *Mathrubhoomi*, *Sasthragathi* and *Kalakaumudi*.

These scientific endeavours—in favour of both conservation and economic progress—follow three different possible lines of ecological thought. I describe these strands of ecological thoughts as possible, as none of them espoused a utopian or purely ecocentric or bioregional ideas as the deep ecologists in the West. While the first group of writings tried to naturalise human impact on the environment and rely on the corrective capabilities of nature in the long run, the second group firmly believe that human beings with their reason are capable of managing all their activities in such a way as to mitigate all subsequent complications. In the event of any unseen future complications, new advances in science and technology would enable humans to face them. Quite contrary to these two, the third group of writings reject both these stances, the notion of corrective nature and the invincibility of modern science. However cautious we are in our developmental projects, this group argued, all such human endeavours will have a deleterious impact on our environment. They urge planners, governments and technologists to heed to the *ecological* costs, instead of just economics. While allowing for nature's corrective force, they firmly argue that this corrective force need not be of any use to us, for in its corrective process nature can even destroy humans.

One of the ways in which Malayali writers contributed to this project was by bringing the question of ethics to the realm of development, technology and ecology. Even before environmental ethics began to appear in this discourse, political ethics

had assumed great importance. The ethical question was whether the developmental aspirations of a relatively impoverished region were to be sacrificed for larger human/planetary good. A closely related question was the relative significance of biogeographic region and socio-economic region in the environmental discourse. This problematic was explained and answered by exposing other environmental disasters that, without exception, affected communities in such areas. The precept of environmental ethics—human accountability in our transactions with our fellow creatures and the environment—began to invite the interest of writers and activists after this. Ethical perspectives regarding our relationship with the environment now assumed significance in a manner it hitherto had not. Insistence on ethical perspectives by writers in struggles such as this has to be perceived as a concerted effort to reverse the political antipathy inherent in democratic systems towards non-human concerns. This was a graver problem that involved questions of lifestyle, culture and our attitudes. Here, the emphasis was on evolving (and perhaps reviving) a worldview that underlines coexistence with nature. In the absence of such a perspective the protection of the Silent Valley would not be significant as it would be an exception to human greed. The question of environmental ethics is not one of simply reviving a lost tradition, but an eclectic approach that fused aspects of the past with modern scientific awareness and human and animal rights awareness as the poetry and prose of Narayana Pillai, Krishnavarier and Kadamannitta discussed in chapter two, three and four suggest.

The entire debate on the Silent Valley also offers insights into the weakening of the nationalistic strain of developmental rhetoric through the foregrounding of the category of “region”. . This, as we have noticed in the second chapter, is especially related to the various Central Government agencies’ opposition to the SVHP and

similar positions taken by national and international conservation agencies. In this schism, region often assumes the position of counternationalism. This aspect of regional versus national/global was aggravated by the kind of terminologies employed in the discourse: 'global thinking, global perception, holistic approach, global village, planetary timing, spaceship Earth, lifeboat Earth, and One World. Obviously, the effort of those on the environmental side was to see the destruction of the Silent Valley, a local issue, as a symbol of a planetary problem.

It may not be too far-fetched to suggest that writers on the Silent Valley, or themes related to environmental hazards, were writers who simply refuse to be identified “Malayali” or “Indian” when issues of human rights and environmental privileges are debated at all. In other words, the writers who crusaded the Silent Valley movement were content to be members of the human race at large, and not mere *regional* writers who seem to protest against a *local* assault on their territorial rights. In fact, several texts I have examined in the foregoing pages are not strictly on Kerala or specific Malayali localities or regions. Occasionally the rhetoric of the Silent Valley was symbolic to a fault; it seemed to ask disturbing questions about such worrisome binaries—outside – inside; here – there; territory – boundary; home – exile; us – them; self – other; sameness – difference; country – city etc. If any lesson can be learnt from such rhetoric, it would be that the Silent Valley would urge us to consider that the “outside” and its exotic geography would soon disappear unless we develop a sense of the “critical” in the habitat we chose to make and sustain. If one makes nature look far and out of our civilized habitat, nature will send us on exile. We are free to decide whether this is an environmental or ethical choice or question. Often, choice and question are both environmental and ethical as far as writers are concerned.

Esoteric though the campaign was during its formative phase, it was transformed into an active and vibrant one with writers and artists joining ranks of the environmentalists. With the arrival of writers and artists on the scene, the focus shifted from architectural, technological, hydrological, seismological and climatological concerns to those over human interactions with nature. The obvious absence of human interests from the Silent Valley campaign, however, did not detract writers from issues which were predominantly anthropocentric. There was a deferred anthropocentrism. Despite its seemingly biocentric attitude, it reveals that the prudence suggested regarding human approaches to environment is really for a better human existence. Posterity, younger generation, better and equitable future were some of the key ideas that appeared throughout the campaign.

Of course, the chief distinction between this campaign and other environmental movements is the special manner in which Malayali writers during the period associated themselves with it. This association was not always in the form of activist direct action by individual writers. I am specifically adverting to the overtly political fashion in which writers throw their organised might behind the environmental cause. Ecological discourse was largely perceived then as an exclusively specialist activity with no public interest. Writers' organised support of the environmental struggle was, in my view, most significant, for despite the emergence of ecological discourse in the region during the period, public awareness remained almost peripheral. In other words, concerns over environment during the initial phase of the Save Silent Valley Campaign existed only for a handful of scientists who, in turn, were dismissed as romantic naturalists. However, the writers' involvement in the controversy through the public media transformed the once esoteric issue into one of statewide concern. Ecoconsciousness *per se* is not new. What was so new regarding

this burgeoning popular concern for the Silent Valley was the public interest, awareness and affirmation of such environmental approach, popularising the ecological crisis. Apart from the collective political activities, writers enlarged their sphere of protest to the legal terrain. The pervasiveness of ecological discourse in Kerala during the late seventies and early eighties of the last century was a result of the controversy over the SVHP. However, the surge in environmental consciousness among Malayali writers during this period in Kerala's history, contrary to the prevalent belief, cannot be credited solely to the Silent Valley controversy. Closely related to this were the questions whether (1) the eco-sensitivity of the literature of Malayalam galvanised writers to protest the ecological destruction in their backyard, or (2) the environmental activism of writers during the seventies and eighties of the last century spurred ecological awareness in Malayalam literature, and, by extension, the ecological discourse in Kerala. As I have indicated, despite such awareness discernable in some of the past writings, they were not overtly ecologically- or politically- motivated. Besides being instrumental in popularising the environmental discourse during late seventies and early eighties, environmentally motivated creative writings of this era inspired such writings in Malayalam in the following decades.

Besides being propagandist as well as polemical in their endeavour to resist our ruthlessness towards our environment, writers relied heavily on their creative/imaginative faculty in rousing folks to environmental awareness. Performances, recitals, exhibitions, slideshows and other activities in the public arena were organised jointly with environmentalists, scientists and activists so as to extend the reach of ecological awareness. A significant aspect of these efforts was the Malayali writers' return (and the ways in which they conducted their audience's return) to the roots, stem, and branches of Malayali folk cultural forms. Here, the

distinction between the usually conflated (and confused) popular and folk was crucial. The Silent Valley belongs to the pre-electronic industrial scene in India where corporate agencies had not yet entered, and the advertising commercial media had not been as considerable a force to reckon with as today. The pop had little influence on the Malayali mind which was still open to the beauty and sanity of the folk. This certainly was an advantage for many Malayali writers, especially poets and writers of street plays and folk theatre, whose work reflected, refracted, and reinvented many folk forms: ritual dances, folk ditties, stylised choreographic presentations of poems and skits, masks and pageants reflecting a past illumined not by electric bulbs but by torches and oil-lamps.

The thematic concerns of creative writing on the Silent Valley can be broadly categorised into romantic, social, ecological, apocalyptic, historical and constructivist. All these forms, though they share the cause, deal with it differently. My primary aim has been to see the manner in which literary environmentalists—eco-romantics and eco-socialists—try to link the past with the future. Both these groups comprehend the present as troublesome, severed from the past, preparing the necessary platform for the emergence of a benign future. In this sense, the discourse of literary environmentalism is overwhelmingly temporal, one with retrospective eyes and another with revolutionary eyes. Writers were always confined by their ideological shackles even when they seemed to be writing on environmental matters. This explains the prevalence of romantic, feudal and exotic ideologies among the writers of this group. However, their concerns were contemporaneous in their recognition of ecological as well as social problematic of their society. Despite their feudal hangover and nostalgic ruminations, their immediate concern was the ecological catastrophe that overhung their society. Feudal/nostalgic aspects, thus are pointers to alternative

systems of life displaced by modernity. In this regard, these environmental narratives involve "a dialogue between the 'Expansionist World View', the story line of which is 'Wise management', and the 'Ecological World View', the story line of which is 'Conservation'" (Harre, Brockmeier, and Muhlhausler 70) Likewise, the writings that link the ecological with the social too are extremely critical of the present. Instead of unearthing a supposedly environmentally benign past, they look ahead for a new/alterd human civilization compatible with nature.

However, the campaign to resist the Silent Valley is significant, for during this period, poetry in Malayalam was traversing an arduous terrain. The looming "crisis" in poetry during the seventies was largely due to the intense internal strife between traditionalists headed by Krishnavarier and modernists with Ayyappa Paniker and M. Govindan in their front. Recognition as a poet then was a matter of getting published in the *Mathrubhoomi weekly*. While *Mathrubhoomi* positively enlisted itself in promoting the nascent modernism in novel, short story and criticism,<sup>1</sup> it turned its back to similar trends in poetry and refused to publish the poetry of Kadamannitta, Kunhunni and K. G. Sankarapilla.<sup>2</sup> Rejection by the mainstream media persuaded modern poets to seek alternative means of reaching their audience. The establishment of little magazines, exclusively for poems of these writers,<sup>3</sup> and the emergence of new modes of poetic expression, especially *kaviyarungu* or poetic performance had to be understood in this context. The Silent Valley, arguably, became a platform for these contradictory and contrarian schools of poetry to converge. The conferences of poets organised to save the Silent Valley facilitated a shared non-literary objective to the old and new generations of Malayalam poets. This newly gained space of activism also purged poets of their traditional-modern dichotomy and, perhaps, for the first time, afforded them a public performative space as well as common publishing space.

*Vanaparvam*, the anthology of nature poems published by Samithi, was one of the first anthologies where poems of these antagonistic groups of poets saw the light together. The fight for the Silent Valley thus gave a rallying point for the writers and contributed to the emergence of a literary fraternity with a shared action plan beyond ideological and political concerns. .

Though we saw that most of the writers enthusiastically opposed the SVHP in view of its potential ecological destructiveness, a group of Malayali writers stood in favour of the project. It is also interesting that most of such writers come from Palakkadu and adjoining areas. This gesture from such writers does not mean that they were insensitive to the plight of nature. Rather, their reasons for approving the SVHP could be a longing to see an entire geographical area and its population emerging out of decades of socio-economic backwardness and political neglect. It is also worth noticing that some of the writers of the time were silent on the issue. For instance, writers like M. T. Vasudevan Nair and Kamala Das were surprisingly silent on the question of the SVHP during the resistance campaign. All of them grew up in villages on the banks of the Bharatapuzha. Breaking his silence on the issue, in a recent documentary, Vasudevan Nair remarked that he valued the river more than the developmental project.

However, as we know, despite their silence during the 1970s and early 80s, Nair and others have been active in some of the later ecological campaigns in Kerala. Their silence does not suggest indifference or apathy towards the cause of nature. Hesitance among such writers to come out against the ecologically disastrous SVHP could also be a result of the presence of a subtle strain of ecological awareness in their literature. However, here I have confined my study to the more overt and public utterances of protest. A critical examination of such subtle strains of ecological

awareness in Malayalam literature of the period would certainly supplement and reinforce the arguments of this study. Similarly, the influence of the literary involvement in the cause of the Valley on other, emerging writers can also be examined. Another area in which this study could be extended is the role of performing and visual arts such as plays, street plays, dance performances, paintings, exhibitions, slide shows, documentaries and cinema in the popularizing and sustaining of ecological discourse in Kerala.

This study engages primarily with the literary and popular science writings that was published during the Silent Valley movement. It has not gone into the details of pre-Silent Valley or post-Silent Valley rhetoric at any depth, as the focus has been on chronicling and analysing the material that was written specifically for the Valley. An in-depth survey of the emergence of eco-aesthetics in Kerala through creative works and studying its intensity and attributes with reference to the Silent Valley is a vast topic and is worth taking up in order to see how language itself undergoes interesting phases in the journey of producing such a cause. An enquiry into the ways in which the Malayali literary fraternity established itself as an institution with its own internal logic can also be put as a recommendation of this project, as this study has not ventured into the historical and the political of such associations. Reading the Silent Valley vis-a-vis the development of Kerala society using the insights from cultural materialism is yet another aspect that can be furthered to see why such a movement was possible at a given point in the history of Kerala. Taking an author and the whole of his writings, the element of propaganda can be studied to see how activism shapes the language along certain lines.

When viewed specifically from my experience as a visually challenged person, the literary/artistic approach to nature and ecological crisis assumes a whole

new meaning. It is quite certain that most often our conception of the environment and almost everything around us is shaped and determined by visual signs and images. In other words, our conception of the world around us is essentially visual-centric. Nature is more visual to us than tactile, olfactory or aural. We experience the plight of the environment in literature often by the loss of certain aspects of nature that one can sense with his eyes. The felling of a tree, for instance, is felt by us not much by the loss of shade, or by the absence of living voices such as the singing of birds and the rustling of leaves or by the loss of a specific smell as by the sheer loss of greenery. A critical engagement with the manner in which the visual defines our perceptions of nature, in the context of the Silent Valley, could potentially question a whole strain of visual-centric sensibility. Such an exercise would certainly enrich and extend existing theoretical frameworks and perhaps might yield new tools for understanding nature.

The Silent Valley movement thus gives a whole array of issues to ponder and study further, which will help in understanding the society and public sphere of Kerala, which can also give insights in to the role of an artist, language of dissent and the culture of literary activism.

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**Notes:**

<sup>1</sup> In 1968 the *Mathrubhoomi* published *Khasakinthe Ithihasam* by O. V. Vijayan marking the advent of modernism in Malayalam novel according to learned literary-historical opinion. It also published short stories by such writers as Madhavikutty, Punathil Kunhabdulla, M. Mukundan, Kaakkanaadan, T. Rajalekshmi and M. P. Narayanapilla along with critical writings by V. Rajakrishnan, Narendra Prasad, K. P. Appan, Asha Menon, M. Thomas Mathew, and others.

<sup>2</sup> Let us recall here that during this period the *Mathrubhoomi* weekly was under the editorship of N. V. Krishnavarier. For details regarding *Mathrubhoomi's* rejection of Modern poets, see M. N. Karasseri's foreword to *Kunhunni Kavithakal, Kathakal* and also see *Kalakaumudi* 226 (1981) 17.

<sup>3</sup> From 1968 onwards, this group of emerging poets established little magazines such as, *Kerala Kavitha*, *Sameeksha*, *Yugaresmi*, *Anweshanam* and *Aksharam* in order to counter the antipathy of the mainstream media.

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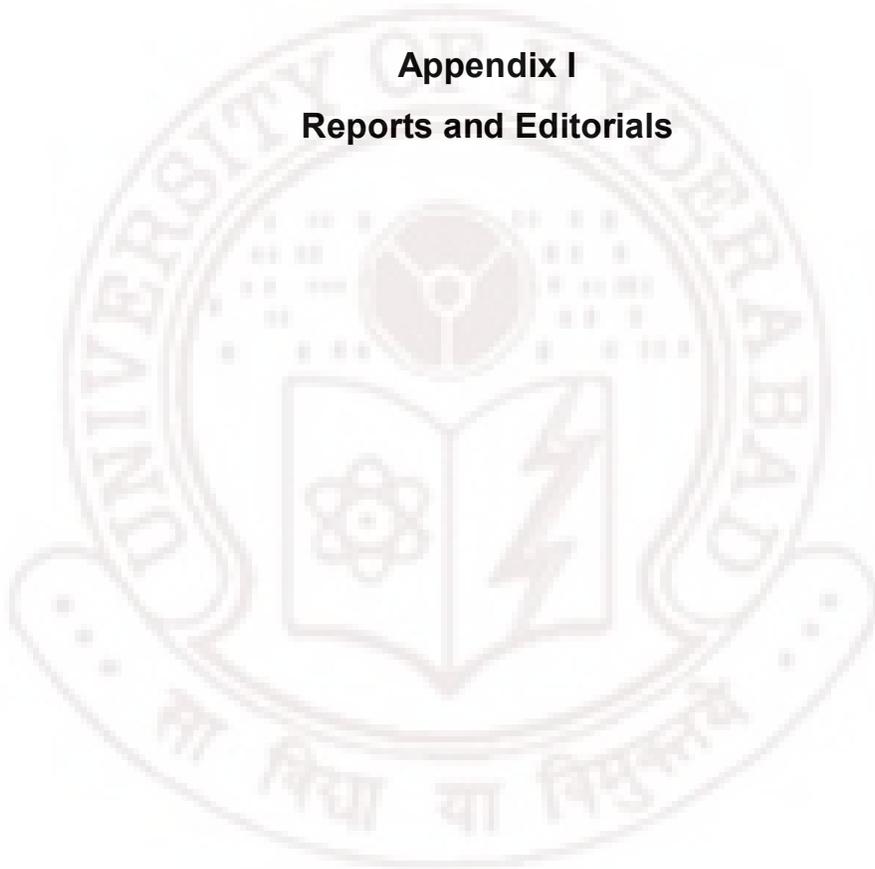


## Appendices

## Note to the Appendices

I have appended some selected texts on the Silent Valley here as samplers of the literary as well as non-literary writing by artist-activists and sympathisers of the issue. The material, some of which was written in English and others translated from Malayalam, includes reports, memoirs, appeals, and poems. This collection also shows the interest displayed by people from different fields—writers, dancers and photographers—in the conservation of the Silent Valley, people who had diverse concerns and approaches towards the cause. This would give a feel of the whole spectrum of writing that was generated as part of the Silent Valley movement. I have tried to account for the representational character in the selection of poems and for the impact and the impression they left on the readership. Appendix IV is a letter that Professor K. Ayyappa Paniker (dated 7 January 2008) sent me in kind response to my letter on environmentalism and Malayalam literature. This record of the opinion of one of the most influential writers in Malayalam has not seen light before. And that explains its inclusion here. Unless otherwise mentioned, all the translations from Malayalam are mine.

**Appendix I**  
**Reports and Editorials**



## **The Silent Valley: A Case Study**

Sugathakumari

One falls in love with a forest. It happens easily, spontaneously; that love deepens, sends its roots deep into one's being. It begins to hurt, leads to anguish and despair when one knows that the very existence of the loved is threatened. A fight unto death alone brings relief. That was what happened to many of us in Kerala who got involved in the Silent Valley controversy.

The struggle to save the Silent Valley did not stem from the merely emotional thought. Historical, ecological and economic considerations also weighed heavily.

The controversy regarding the Silent Valley was in respect to a hydroelectric project that was launched by the Kerala Government in the early 1970s at an estimated cost of rupees 70 crore. The project offered 120 Mega Watt of electricity, irrigation facilities for 10,000 hectares of land and employment for about four thousand people for six to eight years. A huge controversy arose. It began as a simple 'ecological issue', but soon grew into gigantic proportions. The Silent Valley suddenly emerged into the lime light in the wake of this controversy.

Dark, cool and vibrating with life the Silent Valley, the richest expression of life on earth, as the scientists have described it, presents a text book version of the tropical evergreen forest. This ninety square kilometre precious chunk of dense forest is perhaps India's last largest and oldest tropical rain forest remaining undisturbed, undisturbed because of its relative inaccessibility, oldest because its age is estimated at fifty million years. Dr. Salim Ali observed thus: "Silent Valley is not just an evergreen forest, it is a very fine example of one of the richest, most threatened and least studied habitats on the earth."

## How it all Started

It is interesting to note that the importance of Silent Valley came to be realised only when some foreign experts got interested in this special pocket of rain forest. Steven Green, a scientist from the New York Zoological Society, visited Silent Valley during 1971-72 to conduct studies on primates, especially the Lion tailed macaque. The survey for the hydroelectric project was going on at that time. Green wrote about the threat of extinction the macaques were facing. After him came Romulus Whitaker, the American born expert on snakes, who went to Silent Valley for snake studies and wrote in the Journal of Bombay Natural History Society about the importance of conserving Silent Valley. Two European naturalists who were trekking from Nilgiris to Silent Valley also wrote a note to Bombay Natural History Society about the Valley. These alerted Indian naturalists like Zafer Fatehally, Salim Ali and H.M. Patil and a few other scientists and nature lovers in Kerala.

Dr. Satishchandran Nair, a young scientist, visited Silent Valley in 1977 and came back with lots of information. With true missionary zeal he pioneered a movement to create awareness especially in academic circles through interational programmes like talks and slide shows. Another scientist Dr. VS. Vijayan who was with the Kerala Forest Research Institute, doing research on 'the impact of hydroelectric projects on the environment' even telegraphed the authorities not to start work on the project till his report was submitted. He was admonished for this and his work was suppressed. The general public, however, became aware of the importance of Silent Valley mainly through an informative article published in 1980 in the Mathrubhoomi Weekly (a periodical in Kerala) by Professor M. K. Prasad. Silent Valley Samrakshana Samitis (bodies to protect the Silent Valley) were formed in many cities like Thiruvananthapuram, Calicut, Madras, Bangalore and Bombay. The press was not very receptive to these ideas but the national daily The Hindu took a definite stand on Silent Valley and consistently supported the cause till the very end of the battle. But nothing would deter the State Government. They went on with their preliminary investigations on the project and spent nearly two crore rupees for this.

## **The Project and its Claims**

The protagonists of the Silent Valley hydroelectric project argued that the development of the Malabar region would be hampered if the project was dropped. Besides producing 120 Mega Watt of power and irrigating 10,000 hectares of land, it would provide employment for about 15,000 people during the project period. In addition, there would be other ancillary developmental benefits. They also argued that the area submerged by the dam would be only 1022 hectares, of which 150 hectares were grasslands. Thus, according to them, only 10 percent of the ecosystem, would be affected and the rest of the Silent Valley could be protected by ensuring 'ecological safe guards.'

## **The Environmentalist Rejoinder**

The environmentalists reacted sharply to this. A few individuals took it as their lives' mission. The names to be remembered in this context are those of Shri. S. Prabhakaran Nair who toured the villages of north Malabar preaching the message of forest conservation and Professor John C. Jacob who was already there in the field training bands of young ecologists and nature lovers. Soon many other groups of nature lovers sprung up all over the State. The conservationists argued that the entire lower valley would be submerged by the dam thus destroying invaluable wealth of biodiversity. They also pointed out that in a closely interrelated and interdependent biosystem, to speak of a mere 10 percent loss is absurd. Moreover the interference of a work force and dependants amounting to over fifteen thousand people for a period of five to ten years would unleash destructive forces like illegal wood felling, cattle grazing, illegal cultivation, poaching, encroachment of forest land etc. and would destroy the pristine nature of Silent Valley and its surrounding forests.

But as mentioned above, the Kerala Government refused to be convinced. They argued that proper ecological safeguards could preserve the Silent Valley; and in February 1979 the State got from the Central Government headed by Morarji Desai, sanction for a sum of rupees 380 lakhs towards the project. The Silent Valley Protected Area Act was passed in 1979

and an Environment Monitoring Committee was appointed. But the two non-government members of the committee, Mr. Zafar Fatehally and Dr. Madhav Gadgil, both ecologists of international repute, declined to accept membership of the committee saying that no safeguard could be effective and that the project should be abandoned.

### **The Fight**

But the Kerala Government and its electricity minister were adamant. The result was that the outcry against the hydel dam, which began as individual and small group protests within the State soon became a national one and attracted international attention. The 14th General Assembly of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN), for instance, specifically urged the Government of India to conserve 'more effectively the forest areas of the Western Ghats, including the undisturbed forests of Silent Valley of the state of Kerala.' Internationally known ecologists like Dr. Salim Ali and Dr. Madhav Gadgil, Dr. M.N. Srinivas of the Institute of Social and Economic Change and Dr. C.V. Radhakrishnan (Director, C.V. Raman Research Institute), and eminent personalities like Shri. K.P.S. Menon, Dr. M.S. Swaminathan and Dr. K.N. Raj wrote to the Central Government requesting them not to give sanction to the hydel project.

Dr. Salim Ali wrote thus: "Having visited most of the major forests of India over the past six decades, I am convinced that Silent Valley is undoubtedly one of India's ecologically most valuable areas and must be preserved. Short-sighted projects with limited objectives should not be pushed through at enormous costs to the community at large." Shri. K.P.S. Menon described the project as "a sin and a crime against posterity" and hoped that it would be "buried once for all, never to be exhumed".

Joint representations for abandoning the project were also sent to the Central Government by political leaders and scientific bodies. For instance in May 1979 in a representation Messrs. Pilloo Modi, Krishna Kant, Subramoniam Swamy, Yogendra Makwana, Sitaram Kesari, Smt. Margaret Alva and others urged the government not to proceed with the project. Institutions like Bombay Natural History Society, Kerala Natural History

Society, The Geological Survey of India and Government of India's Department of Science and Technology also requested the Central Government to declare Silent Valley a Natural Bioreserve. A group of scientists from Kerala among whom was the reputed conservationist Professor M. K. Prasad went to New Delhi and presented a memorandum requesting the Government to give up the project.

The then prime minister, Morarji Desai, not only rejected these appeals but declared the project most essential and in June 1979 it was started in right earnest.

It was in this context that organisations like the Silent Valley Samrakshana Samiti (Committee to Save Silent Valley), which later merged with Prakrti Samrakshana Samiti (Society for the Conservation of Nature), the Kerala Sastra Sahitya Parishad and a number of organisations and groups all over the State started awareness campaigns with added vigour. Protest meetings, rallies, debates etc. were organised all over the State. This culminated in a peoples' movement to save the Silent Valley.

About the Prakrti Samrakshana Samiti-it was my firm conviction that creative writers could communicate better with the public on these issues than the scientists. This led to the formation of the Prakrti Samrakshana Samiti. Some of us writers met at the residence of N.V. Krishnavarier, one of the most eminent of Kerala's scholars and writers and formed Prakrti Samrakshana Samiti with a view to creating a new awareness regarding nature conservation. O. N. V. Kurup, Vishnu Narayanan Namboothiri, Kadamanitta Ramakrishnan, Dr. Ayyappa Paniker and Dr. K Velayudhan Nair founded Prakrti Samrakshana Samiti with N. V. Krishnavarier as president and myself as secretary. Let us remember that it was not by the efforts of one group or a handful of persons that this battle was won. Not only major organisations but also dozens of small groups came up to fight for Silent Valley and hundreds of people took up this challenge. We have to remember many names in this context. Nature lovers like Professor K. K. Neelakantan, who was the guiding force behind all conservation movements in Kerala, S. Sarma, Professor Mrs. Sarma and Dr. Shanti who made this their life mission, Professor Sujatha Devi who drafted the first petition for the environmental case in the Honourable High Court of Kerala, P. K. Uthaman, V. N. Chandran and many more known

and unknown friends of forests; writers like Vaikom Muhammed Basheer, Vythilingam Sreedhara Menon, S.K. Pottakkat, O. V. Vijayan, Dr. K. Bhaskaran Nair and Dr. Sukumar Azhikode deserve special mention. Perhaps for the first time in the history of our country, eminent creative writers joined together to fight for such a cause. Through poems and dramas, stories and articles, speeches and kavi sammelan (poets' meet) they conveyed the message to Kerala's literate public. The message went straight to the heart of the people and their response was tremendous as it was spontaneous.

In August 1979, we moved the court of law and got a stay order from the Honourable High Court of Kerala against continuing work on the project. The stay petition was filed by Mr. Joseph John, a veteran environmentalist and the president of the 'Friends of Trees'. Advocate Mr. P. Gopalakrishnan Nair who was always with the conservation movements took up the case and got the stay order from the High Court. It was the first victory for the conservationists in the fight against the stubborn Government and its adamant State Electricity Minister Mr. R. Balakrishna Pillai. The work on the project was stopped for the time being.

But in January 1980, the writ plea was rejected by the High Court on the technical ground that an environmental legislation was lacking. By this time Charan Singh had assumed Prime Ministership and he instituted a Central Committee headed by Dr. M.S. Swaminathan to re-examine the whole issue. The then Chief Minister of Kerala, Mr. P. K. Vasudevan Nair fumed at the delay and proclaimed that Kerala could not afford this type of "ecological luxury". The State Government could mobilise a group of scientists (who were nicknamed 'court scientists') like Dr. A. Abraham, Dr. Raghavan Nambiar, Dr. B. K. Nayar and Professor Stephen to support the Government by writing articles, organising seminars etc. to counteract the conservationists' campaign. The arguments of these scientists were effectively countered by Dr. Satishchandran Nair, Professor M. K. Prasad, Dr. M. P. Parameswaran and others. A new petition was filed in the High Court of Kerala by Dr. Satishchandran Nair. Meanwhile both the Central and the State Governments changed. Indira Gandhi who had taken a special interest in the Silent Valley issue came back to power and in Kerala the P. K. Vasudevan Nair ministry fell and President's rule was promulgated. Work on the project was nevertheless

going on. On the 12th of January 1980, a small group under the leadership of S. Sarma met the then Kerala Governor Smt. Jyothi Venkatachellam and requested her to issue a stay order against continuing work on the project till the committee appointed by the Central Government gave its final recommendations or till a popular ministry assumed office in Kerala. The Governor issued the stay order the next day and work on the project was again discontinued. This was the second victory for the conservationists and Silent Valley was saved from denudation once again.

The fight continued unabated. Newspapers carried reports for and against the project. The political parties almost without exception were in favour of the project though there were individual politicians who opposed it. For instance, eminent MLAs like Shri. K.V. Surendranath of the Communist Party of India (CPI) and Shri. Varkala Radhakrishnan of the Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPM) and veteran leaders like Shri. C. Narayana Pillai of the Indian National Congress and Shri. P. Govinda Pillai of the CPM strongly opposed the project.

Public meetings, seminars, poster exhibitions, nature poetry recitals and protest marches continued. A lot of literature on nature conservation was published. A book on the socioeconomic impact of Silent Valley Project prepared by Professor M. K. Prasad, Dr. M. P. Parameswaran, Dr. Syama Sundaran Nair and Dr. K. P. Kannan and a booklet entitled 'Silent Valley Project-Questions and Answers' by Dr. Satishchandran Nair and Dr. M. P. Parameswaran went a long way in educating the public on the ill effects of the big dam project. The Prakrti Samrakshana Samiti published a number of articles and a book entitled 'Vanaparvam' with 34 poems written on nature themes by Kerala's leading poets.

The Kerala Sastra Sahitya Parishad observed the Silent Valley Day on March 15, 1980 in a big way. The Prakrti Samrakshana Samiti organised a mammoth public meeting in Thiruvananthapuram on the 8th of June 1980. Veteran leaders like M.P. Manmathan, Dr. Sukumar Azhikode and Shri. A. P. Udayabhanu participated. A seminar in which noted scientists participated also was organised. A resolution asking the Government to call off the project was unanimously passed at the public meeting. But Shri. E. K. Nayanar, the then Chief Minister, just said no to it.

Protests, against the project continued; besides scientists, artists also came forward to propagate the message. Smt. Mrinalini Sarabhai came to Kerala to dance for Silent Valley and M. B. Srinivasan came with his choral troupe to sing for Silent Valley. Artists drew and painted pictures on Silent Valley and exhibited them on the road sides. Street plays were conducted and thousands of people sent representations to New Delhi against the destruction of that tiny bit of rain forest.

Popular pressure and Indira Gandhi's concern for environmental protection ultimately prevailed and saved this precious heritage of ours. In January 1981, the Prime Minister declared in the Science Congress at Varanasi that Silent Valley would be protected. But there was another hitch. The decision to declare Silent Valley a National Park was published in the government gazette, but in the notification the proposed project site was excluded from the National Park boundaries. Hundreds of protest telegrams were sent to the Centre by the discerning public of the State. In July 1982 the Prakrti Samrakshana Samiti submitted to the Prime Minister a pooled appeal from reputed scientists, eminent writers and public men in a final bid to save Silent Valley. As a result of all this tremendous pressure from the people, in June 1983 the Central Government again appointed a commission under the chairmanship of Professor M. G. K. Menon to re-examine the whole issue and advise the Government as to whether the project was to be sanctioned or not. The Menon Commission examined the entire issue and submitted a report to the Prime Minister in which the pros and cons were presented in detail and the final decision was left to the Prime Minister. In the end Indira Gandhi decided against the project and in November 1983 the Silent Valley project was called off. But Indira Gandhi was not destined to inaugurate the Silent Valley National Park. It was Rajiv Gandhi who formally inaugurated the National Park on the 7th of September 1986 and dedicated it to the nation.

## **Conclusion**

The Silent Valley controversy raged for nearly seven years and was one of the fiercest environmental battles ever fought. It was a non political battle fought and won by non-political people against the political; for all the political

parties, especially the leftists, insisted on implementing the project in the name of development and employment. And the news media too supported them. Now, of course, the trend has by and large changed and the media are supporting the cause of conservation.

Another salutary effect of the Silent Valley controversy, perhaps the most important gain, is that the common man has become aware of the need for conservation and the significant part he has to play in it. Throughout the State many small groups of young activists have come up who concentrate on local issues. They are active even in the remote villages. Another development is that many who have been hitherto ridiculing the conservationists have now turned ardent supporters of the conservation movement and have begun speaking the language of conservation. This is confusing, if not harmful.

The greatest achievement of the Silent Valley fight, perhaps, is that it made people in power not only in Kerala but outside also, aware of the importance of protecting the remaining precious tropical forests. That the judiciary has suddenly become alert is seen in the large number of environmental cases submitted before the courts and the number of positive orders issued by them. The Government also have become a little more aware of the importance of protecting the natural environment. The various administrative and legislative measures (the Forest Conservation Act, for instance) they have undertaken for this and the encouragement they give to individuals and conservation organisations by way of instituting awards, incentives etc. are proof positive of this awareness. By and large, politicians as well as implementing officials also have begun to show a more positive attitude towards conservation.

All this was, to a large extent, the result of an environmental awareness created by the Silent Valley controversy. But this awareness is not enough. Destruction continues. It is high time the Government and the people launched a well planned, concerted action to restore the vanishing green cover, for the ill effects of destruction have become obvious. Dr. Rasmi Mayur, the reputed scientist, said some years ago, "I warn the people of Kerala that all your 44 rivers are dying. You will have to beg for water from outside within the next 20 years." Kerala has already started begging. It is

now approaching the Centre for drought relief and flood relief. A State which had rainfall for over six months a year and abundant water all over the year is slowly turning into a dry patch. Long queues of people waiting for drinking water to be brought in tanker lorries are now a common sight in our State. And this is what is happening in other parts of the country too.

Minor ad hoc programmes won't help here. We have to find lasting solutions to the problem and that also without delay. Denudation of forests should be prevented at all costs. What little green left is to be protected zealously. No new roads, no new projects, no new rehabilitation programmes should be allowed within the forest areas. What is required is preservation of the existing forests and organisation of new afforestation and water conservation programmes on a war footing. Enough damage has been done, but it is not too late even now to repent and redeem.

Where was I in this fight? From the moment I read the article on Silent Valley by Professor M. K. Prasad, some deep emotion swelled within me and I felt that it was my life mission to fight for this unknown bit of forest land. I feel proud I could be a soldier in this battle and could call out to my brother writers of Kerala also to join. I remember the letter I wrote to the eminent writers of Kerala and this sentence in particular, "every battle has two sides, the winning side and the losing side. Maybe we are on the losing side. But the losing side also needs soldiers. Will you join in this losing battle?" But then, it was not a completely losing battle either.

And they came one and all, their pens poised in defence of that helpless little forest. I really feel proud that I was one among them. It was with utmost humility that I received the first Vriksha Mitra Award of the Government of India from Rajiv Gandhi, the then Prime Minister, mainly for my services in the cause of Silent Valley. I recall with reverence and gratitude the leadership given by N. V. Krishnavarier and his words, "Silent Valley is a symbol, the symbol of the forests ruthlessly being destroyed and the rivers that are slowly starving to death, a symbol of the denuded Western Ghats. Our aim should be the conservation of not only the Silent Valley but the conservation of all nature". I remember with nostalgia the days of the fight when we the poets of Kerala went around from kavisammelan to kavisammelan, composing and reciting poems for Silent Valley and mother nature. I remember the hundreds

of young people who gathered around to hear us and pledged to save our forests and rivers. Silent Valley was a turning point in my life and the fight goes on. I am forever indebted to that lovely evergreen, everkind forest land.

It has taught me afresh to love and cherish everything that is of Mother Nature. It is the most precious lesson I have learnt in my life.

(From *The Silent Valley: Whispers of Reason* edited by T. M. Manoharan et al. Trivandrum: KFD, 1999. 11-20).



## Policy on Electricity

N. V. Krishnavarier

The debate over the Silent Valley Hydroelectric Project continues. It seems from the statements of our Electricity Minister that the Government of Kerala is keen on building the project at any cost. There are reports that in his words those who oppose the project should be sent to Oolampaara. Oolampaara is famous as the location of a major mental asylum in Thiruvananthapuram. I do not know whether the place is famous in any other regard.

There is no doubt that we will require more electricity than that we generate now. Therefore, we must think of all means of gradually augmenting power generation. At the same time, it is not fair to see electricity as an isolated product or as a consumer good. Electricity is only one factor in the overall economic development of the people. So, the augmentation of power production must be seen from the broader perspective of economic development.

The Centre for Development Studies (CDS) in Thiruvananthapuram, established under the directorship of the noted economist K. N. Raj, has already achieved international fame. The Centre has conducted some studies on the possibilities of decentralized development in Kerala. Findings of these studies have been submitted for discussion. Suggestions of these studies regarding the augmentation of energy generation in Kerala must interest those who are concerned about the future of the state.

We have spent enormously on five year plans. But those who benefited from these programmes are the economically well-off. Instead of reducing the miseries of those in the lower strata of the society, such schemes seems to increase their miseries day by day. A crucial issue that the above mentioned studies raise is the way in which this problem can be tackled. Careful selection of projects for public sector investments and the creation of structures that ensure that the results of such investments reach the targeted groups are the suggested solutions for this.

On the basis of the above said, the CDS has examined the power projects in Kerala. The state spent thirty per cent of its total share of five year plans on power projects, especially on hydroelectric projects. While planning these projects the Government had not reflected on questions such as the consumption of electricity, the need for constructing projects in various parts of the state, the difference in the expenditure incurred on generating electricity through various means, and the cost of transporting hydroelectricity from one place to another.

As a result, the people of Kerala do not have the ability to use a large share of the electricity produced in the state. 40 per cent of the total electricity generated here is sold to other states at reduced rates. While the poor in Kerala spend 31 paise per unit to light the lamp, the people in other states get it for 14 paise. There is not enough electricity in Kerala, particularly in the northern districts. The electricity that is available is strong enough neither to light fluorescent lamps nor to operate pumps.

66 per cent of the electricity that is consumed within Kerala is high voltage power sold to large industries at 19 paise per unit. Only four per cent of the total power produced is available to small scale industries as medium or low voltage power. Even half of this is not made available to agriculture.

Thus, it is clear that electricity has not helped much in the economic development of the poor in Kerala. Though it is claimed that electricity has reached all the villages in Kerala, only a very few villagers use it. Majority of the people still use expensive kerosene and firewood for energy.

Such facts affirm the need for a change in Kerala's electricity policy. The emphasis must shift from large scale projects to small ones. Priority must be given to the construction of power plants in which the vertical distance between the powerhouse and the reservoir is relatively less. This will facilitate the building of projects in different parts of the state. Many such sites have been identified for similar projects in Karnataka. This can be done in Kerala too.

Thermal plants that use coal for power generation should be established at suitable locations. Though their maintenance is expensive, the building cost is very low. Moreover, they become operational in a relatively short time. Also there is no inevitable delay in their commissioning as with

hydroelectric projects. In addition to electricity, other sources of energy must also be developed. Biogas is extremely significant in this regard. Providing LPG connections to every household should be immediately taken up.

Urgent and adequate investments should be made in strengthening power distribution rather than in power generation. All parts of the state must have electricity with proper voltage. This is the only way to ensure returns from investments in the energy sector. 25 per cent of electricity produced in Kerala is lost during transmission. There should be no delay in preventing this loss by strengthening the distribution system.

Another issue that has to be considered along side electricity is irrigation. So far, 12.5 per cent of investment in Kerala has been allocated for irrigation projects. The main beneficiary of this has been the paddy cultivation. It is not the paddy but several crops in small groves which is the backbone of Kerala's economy. Only underground water can properly irrigate such crops. Kerala is far behind other states in supplying electricity For pumping underground water.

Those who are in favour of and against the Silent Valley Project should consider these issues raised by the CDS. The fundamental issue is this: Kerala has no policy on electricity.

(Translated from *Mathrubhoomi* 58 3 Apr. 6-12 (1980): 5).

## The Silent Valley National Park

N. V. Krishnavarier

In a statement issued on the eighth of January, the Government of Kerala declared the Silent Valley as a national park. The State Legislative had passed a law in 1979 that authorised the Government to do so. According to this notification, "the area has a rich and unique heritage of rare and valuable flora and fauna, requiring conservation and management for the benefit of the nation as a whole and posterity in general." The Government also admitted that "besides acting as a precious reserve of life forms (gene pool), it is the only undisturbed tropical rain forest, in its true state, in Kerala, the ecosystems of which require permanent preservation." This is especially significant as most of the politicians who are in the helm of the present Government have been vehemently denying all these so-far.

It is the presence of an active public opinion within Kerala, the timely intervention of some scientists who could influence the Central Government, and Indira Gandhi's personal interest in conservation that jointly prompted the Kerala Government to save the Silent Valley now. However, we cannot assume that the Silent Valley would be saved just because it has been declared a national park. The area proposed for the hydroelectric project is not included in the national park. An expert committee headed by Dr. M. G. K. Menon is presently examining whether the project can be sanctioned. The land that would be submerged if the dam is constructed is almost at the centre of the proposed national park. Hence, it is assumed that the committee would not allow the construction to continue.

Nevertheless, roads that would take trucks to the heart of the Valley have already been constructed. News papers should publish pictures of trucks, loaded with timber that was already cut or that are still being cut, traversing these roads. Recent discussions in the State Legislative have exposed the interest of all political parties in Kerala on clearing forests. The inadequacy in implementation of measures intended to conserve forests has been proved beyond doubt. So, considering the events of the past, if the

Silent Valley is to be saved, enlightened and active public opinion must prevail.

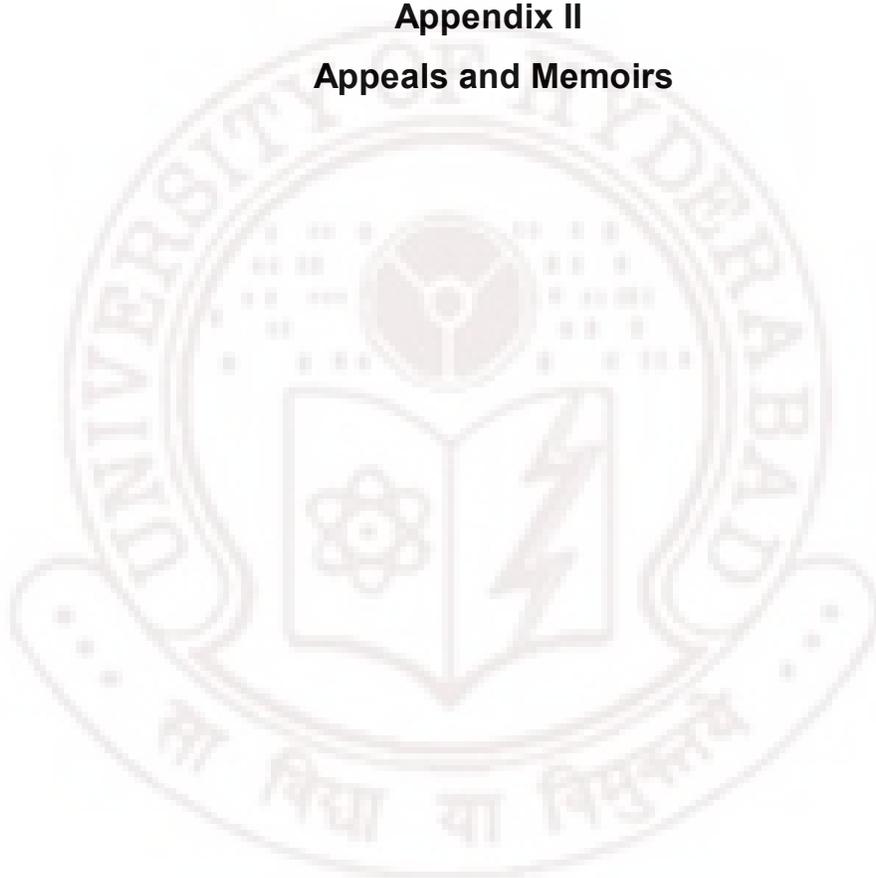
The Silent Valley is an extremely tiny portion of forest land in Kerala. The scientists, environmentalists and thinkers do not want the Silent Valley to be protected as a show piece. They want the entire stretch of remaining forests in the Sahya Mountains to be conserved and utilized scientifically. The Government of Kerala, though with reluctance, has recognized the validity of their argument. Hence, it is the responsibility of the environmentalists, scientists and nature lovers to evolve a movement to protect our forests.

Let us recall here the proposal to build a hill highway through the Eastern Mountains which is in the active consideration of the Government. If such a highway is constructed, there will not be much forest left in Kerala. In addition to this is the danger caused by the landslides. Such a highway will in no way help the progress of the hillside areas.

The concept of social forestry has begun to take roots in some parts of North India. The practice of planting easily growing trees on the roadsides, around public buildings and barren lands could be started in Kerala too. Such small group of trees, besides protecting soil, regulating climate and providing scenery, can in a small way solve the fuel deficiency also. Municipalities and Panchayats should take interest in these matters. These institutions are interested not in the growing of trees, but in cutting off the remaining ones. This state of affair must change.

(Translated from *Mathrubhoomi* 58 44 Jan. 25-31 (1981): 5).

**Appendix II**  
**Appeals and Memoirs**



## Give the Young Ones a Better World

Mrinalini Sarabhai

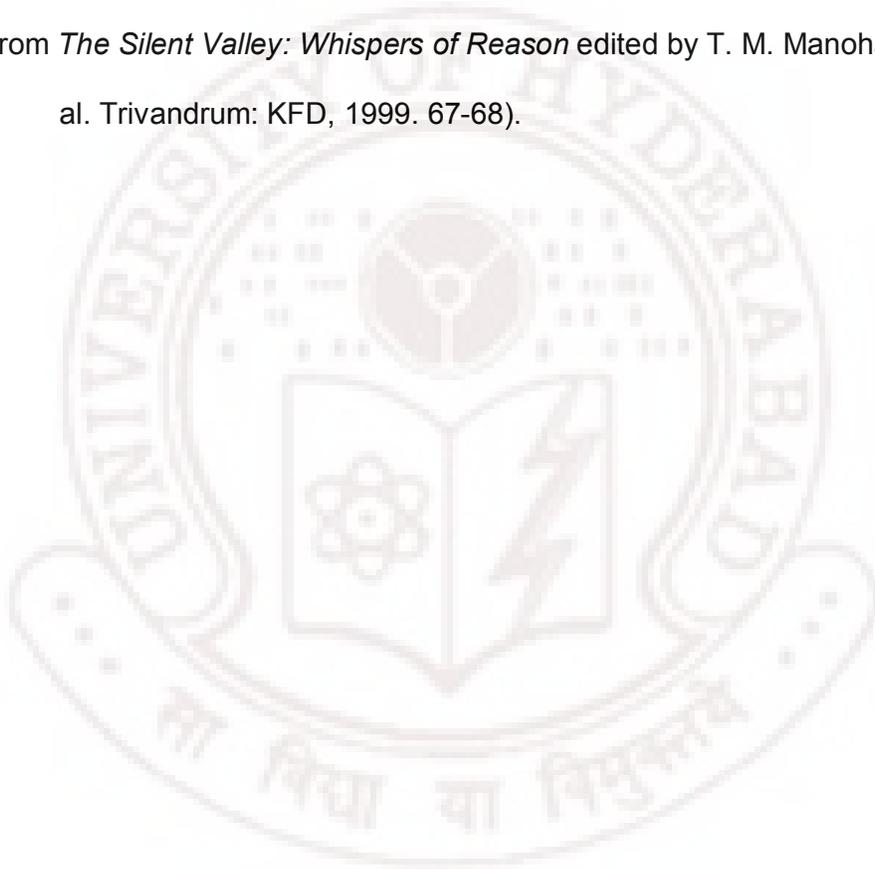
It is in silence that one shall work. But I am happy that we did not remain silent when Silent Valley was facing threats of destruction. And the silent, solid friendship among those who stood up for the Silent Valley cause can never be broken. When I was first asked to help in the protection of Silent Valley in Kerala, I did a dance piece on the subject and performed it all over the country as I was much better at dancing than at speaking or writing. We feel happy when we are able to do something, in our limited capacity, to save a small part of our planet, for, it is we ourselves who benefit when we try to do something for the world.

But, let's not forget our great forerunners who fought relentlessly for environmental causes. How many men and women had lost their lives in the CHIPCO movement long before environment was even a word among the elite! And how many silent workers have there been among the tribal people in Kerala, Gujarat and many other places who preserved our culture for us!

Preservation of environment does not mean only preserving trees, animals and nature but also preserving its values within ourselves. We think not only of nature but of those values of every religion which has nonviolence as its greatest thought. Only nonviolence can resist the growing violence in the present world. And I think it is the most important value to be preserved in India. If we truly believe in nonviolence we can't be violent even to a flower. We can be violent towards nobody and nothing. Preservation of environment really begins within ourselves. We should be environmentally aware of what is happening inside our own minds and souls. When we look into ourselves, we discover an aspect in ourselves that encourages and nourishes some destructive elements. Preservation of the environment would not be possible unless we protest against them and live that life of protest within ourselves and change our very inner souls. We have to be nonviolent in every sphere of our existence.

In Ahmedabad, we have a centre for environment. We felt that we should really begin our work among the young and started teaching children between five and fifteen. It is the children who will inherit this earth which we have devastated. But their world has to be safer. What we can give to them is important. We have many Silent Valleys to save. I hope that we will be able to protect them, and this planet and this universe that are given to us for so short a period. Let us leave our earth better than we found it.

(From *The Silent Valley: Whispers of Reason* edited by T. M. Manoharan et al. Trivandrum: KFD, 1999. 67-68).



## A Photo Naturalist in the Silent Valley

K. Jayaram

I made my first attempt to record the flora and fauna of Silent Valley in the early eighties, after it was declared a National Park. As a photonaturalist I still continue it from personal interest. Silent Valley is a botanist's bouquet, an entomologist's enigma and a biologist's delight.

During my first visit the attempt was to trek a distance of 30 kilometres. When I finished about three silent kilometres, I accidentally struck upon a grasshopper disguised as an ageing coloured leaf with all characteristics of decaying marks. It was a masterpiece of camouflage.

I went ahead a few yards more looking here and there and photographing some amazing forms of flora and fauna and soon I realised that I had already consumed my entire quota of 30 rolls of film! I turned back at once as it was meaningless to proceed any further without any stock of films.

Silent Valley has never been silent; every season has its own fragrance that fills the air, contrast of colours that is fashioned to lure prospective insect customers, all interdependent yet each one minding its own way.

Once I was invited by an avid naturalist, Shri. P.K. Uthaman, to Silent Valley to photograph the colourful orchid-*Arundina graminifolia*. It was at the fag end of the South-West Monsoon. Still thunders plundered the sky, lightning ripped the clouds and humidity hung heavy in the atmosphere. We were in an ideal tropical rain forest at an altitude of about 3,500 feet. It is this atmosphere and elevation that induced *Arundina* to fashion its purplish red colour. Braving the wet slippery slopes, I climbed over a ledge of rocks to reach the grassy precipice to photograph it. Wind shook bundles of grasses overhead and I was pleasantly drenched with a shower of pristine water. But it worsened my climb. Almost at every crevice of rock I could see the deadly Malabar pit viper lying quietly coiled. But finally I photographed the orchid.

Some towering trees in Silent Valley almost touch the clouds with their canopies. I could only stretch my little flexible neck to have an ant's eye view.

I wondered what life forms existed there! Could I be a cloud, mist or a bird to have a glimpse of that canopy? Perhaps, in my next life!

Down below, I was photographing a red coloured bug feeding on a plant and my entomologist friend told me that it was a *Bipunctata* species, referring to those two white spots on the dorsal side at the end of the body. But what bugged me was those two white spots. What message do they carry and convey to me?

The third time, in early winter, a team of four of us helped by a tribal guide trekked from an altitude of 6,700 feet in the Nilgiris down to the Silent Valley. After four days of arduous trek, we were nearing the heart of the Valley. The sun glowed with its last weak rays and the sky was in an orange hue. We were blessed with a grand sight! A pair of Great Hornbills were flying fluttering their huge wings across the horizon in silhouette. Noise of fluttering echoed in the valley. It appeared to me as if a pair of Pterodactyles were surveying the valley in the Jurassic era. It was a splendid sight in slow motion across the horizon. The last few forgotten pages of the novel the 'Lost World' of the last century flashed through my mind.

We were still watching the Hornbills. Suddenly from behind a thicket, blowing trumpet and fuming with dust all over in a halo, a medium sized tusker came charging towards us. Down the dale we ran for cover and reached safety. Probably the tusker had been watching our movements for long without our knowledge and might have been irked by our advance. That night we camped near a stream on a rocky table.

Tired by the tedious trek, chased by the tusker and fired by thoughts of the Pterodactyles I was lost in the 'Lost World.' When I came to my senses, overhead the Orion constellation was crystal clear in the moonless sky and Sirius was brilliant and bright blinking between the gentle swayings of canopies. Our camp fire, carelessly glowing in a weak flame, was dancing to the tune of scores of cicadas and bushcrickets in the pitch black background.

Suddenly with a lightning flash, like a shot in a dream, a tiger appeared beyond the fire place. In that weak glow of the fire I could see it well with fiery eyes and fiery stripes. I became senseless and felt for a second that I was dumped into a deep freezer. I struggled hard to raise my head. When I did so I saw the tribal leader carelessly munching his munchings mindless of that

striped beast! It appeared the tiger came to take stock of the snoring travellers.

During yet another rainy season I set out on a special mission, well prepared to photograph a few strange orchids that flowered during the pouring rain and to photograph, if possible, their faunal pursuers who pollinated these orchids. But it was by sheer luck that I discovered amidst dense, soggy grasses on the slippery slopes a bright yellow-flowered orchid which I came to know later as *Ipsea malabarica* recently rediscovered nearly after a century of disappearance. Excited, after exposing rolls of films on *Ipsea*, I descended greatly relieved but my friends waiting there saw me bleeding all over my body. A dozen or so leeches were still sucking blood from all over my body and those which had already tested my blood group had left me bleeding. It appeared to me as if whoever approached this endangered orchid shall return bleeding!

The tribal guide showed me a large shrub and warned me not to touch it. He emphasised that even elephants were scared of it. It was a giant stinging nettle with inch long glass like needles all over. It was the plant *Laportea crenulata*. Silent Valley harbours many such botanical wonders.

Botanists and zoologists have helped us to know much of the flora and fauna of Silent Valley. But as for insects what J.O. Westwood remarked in 1840 still remains true: 'we are still, however, far from having attained a perfect idea of the entomological treasures of India, every new arrival making us acquainted with new and beautiful species.' It is the insects that rule the forests, especially, the beetles and moths! Beetles are thought to be the first pollinators. These coleopteral creatures still dominate the forests. A thorough study from canopy to the forest floor will be highly rewarding.

Silent Valley is now a National Park, a protected area. Whoever visits this place should visit it with respect and devotion. They should imbibe the discipline of Nature and remember that 'in the age of perfect virtue, man lived in common with birds and beasts, and were on terms of equality with all creatures, as forming one family.' (Tao)



### Appendix III

#### Poems

1

## Hymn to the Tree

Sugathakumari

I pray to the  
Majestic lock of the tree  
That spreads a  
Soothing, flowery shade.  
I pray to him  
Who offers breathing air  
By consuming the poison  
Like Lord Neelakanda.  
I pray for your  
Full hands that  
Stretch kindly with  
Flowers, nectar and fruits.  
As rain, as coldness,  
As fruits that satisfy hunger,  
As the cure and as the  
Force behind our labour,  
As the smiling toys in the  
Little hands and as the staff  
That supports the sorrows  
Of the old age,  
As the little cradle,  
As the bet and as the cindery  
Sheet for our  
Last quiet sleep,  
You are our  
Close bosom friend  
Who showers  
Kindness on us  
I pray to your

Upright form wearing  
The stains caused by our axe  
On your broad chest.  
You save our  
Mother from floods,  
And rejuvenate  
The soil. You  
Store the ambrosia  
Streaming down the heavens  
In her  
Simmering heart.  
I pray through  
Tears, with hands  
Touching your feet  
That protect the mother.  
We fell him  
Who showers mercy  
For pieces of  
Blackish yellow metal.  
I pray  
To you who  
Watch and control the wind,  
The sun, the rain and the sea.  
While you provide us,  
The ungrateful lot,  
Your entire being,  
From roots to your leaves,  
What do we return  
Except axe and fire!  
Please for-  
Give us.  
But, ha, will  
The Mother Nature forgive?  
The way her

Burning eyes stares at us.

I pray to the

Majestic lock of the tree

That spreads a

Soothing, flowery shade.

I pray through

Tears, with hands

Touching your feet

That protect the mother.

(Translation of "Marattinu Stuti").



2

**A Requiem to the Earth**

O. N. V. Kurup

O, Earth, who is not yet dead,  
On your imminent death, peace for your soul.  
For your obsequies (and mine too)  
This song is inscribed in the heart today.  
As Death blooms dark and venomous,  
And you, beneath its shadow turn numb by tomorrow,  
None will be left here not even me to mourn  
In final oblation of tears on your frozen face;  
So shall I inscribe this:

'O, Earth, who is yet not dead,  
On your imminent death,  
Rest in peace your soul!

You did deliver in pain children countless,  
But one eating up the other before your eyes,  
And you stood hiding your tears unseen by others,  
Then, as they devoured you bit by bit  
And rejoiced,  
You stood uncomplaining, without defence,  
O, the All-suffering Being!

The ones you fed from your breasts  
Parting your soft emeraldine jacket,  
They felt a thirst (their terminal thirst)  
To suckle blood of your sacred heart!  
Tearing apart the lustrous garment  
In which the Sun had dressed up his favourite bride,  
They pierced nails in your body naked

Drank the blood that flowed from your wounds  
And broke into gambolling  
The rhythm of death in wanton shriek!

Aroused is the wrath  
Which emits fire from the burning Sun;  
And the clouds of monsoon desperately seek a drop of water to drink;  
Autumnal eves long for a pleasant chill;  
And the King of Seasons searches in vain  
For a tiny flower;  
Stilled are the rivers longing for a ripple;  
The wheels of life get stuck in their tracks!

Ah I that thrill when experienced for the first time  
When you dissolved on my tongue as honey and herb!  
And the last thrill when you dissolve into a drop  
of sacred water  
As the wick that I am flickers out towards the dose!  
Even in the dew-drop on the forehead of a darbha  
grass sprouting from you,  
There is a tiny sun,  
And seeing it, amazement dawned in my heart.  
I have known you  
Startle at the hoot of an owl  
Only to soothe as the melody of the koel.  
You weave designs in my heart with colours varied;  
You turn dusk golden and vanish in the forest with  
Dusk in your arms.  
And reappear with Dawn on your shoulder;  
To awaken me, to feed me with nectar,  
You hatch a bird's egg in the bosom of the plantain grove  
And it comes out as a poem!  
O! Swan with melodious wings!  
Somewhere at your feathery tip,

The sweet truth of my Being  
Glow for but a brief moment!  
Let it be blown out when you are  
Snatched away by the raven of Death.  
With shaven head, as a forsaken maid,  
When you take up your lone journey in cosmic void,  
Bearing the cross of dishonour and the burden of  
your children's sin,  
With agony ablaze in your emptying mind,  
Is it not cruel Death itself  
Creeping up through the nerves ?  
O, Earth, who is not yet dead!  
This is your requiem  
Inscribed in the heart today for your obsequies  
(and mine)  
For I will not be here to mourn  
In final oblation of tears on your frozen face,  
So, shall I inscribe this:  
Rest in peace your soul!  
Shanti! Anvitha Shanthi!!

(Translation of "Bhoomikkoru Charamageetam").

### 3

## Planting a seedling

O. N. V. Kurup

When a seedling is planted,  
a shade is planted.

A soothing shade to  
Stretch oneself is planted.

A bed of flower  
For a siesta is planted.

When a seedling is planted, a shade is planted.

It darkens the eyebrow of the earth with the hues of the sky.

A pole to raise an arbour for the spring is planted.

The tenderness of a young virgin who pours her soul into a thousand goblets  
is planted.

A carnival of colours is planted in the eyes as buds, leaves and the beauty of  
the blossoming petals.

When a seedling is planted, a shade is planted.

A swing is hung for the parrot to perch.

A can is suspended to keep the bird's honey- pot

A fete is planted for the squirrel.

Sweets are planted in the hands and laps of eager children.

When a seedling is planted, a shade is planted.

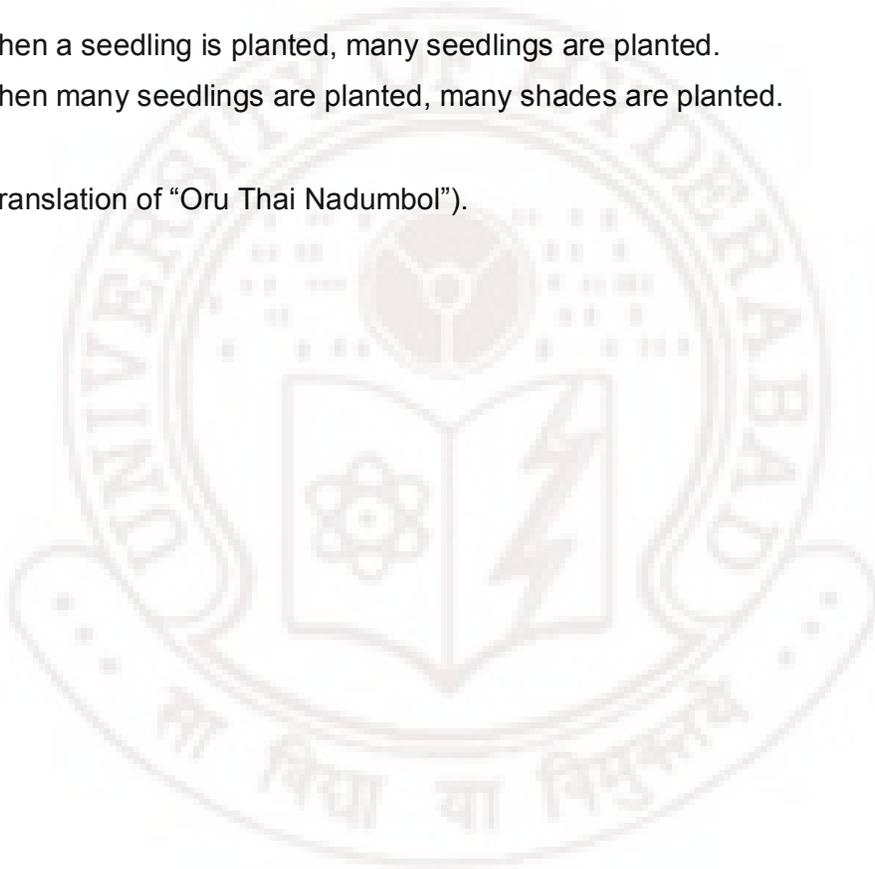
Rungs are planted to descend together for the cloud that hurries with a water pot and the furtive wind.

Thousands of hands are planted to bat the wings up in the sky for the insatiable country and city thieves when they reach the main path.

When a seedling is planted, many seedlings are planted.

When many seedlings are planted, many shades are planted.

(Translation of "Oru Thai Nadumbol").



## The Kirata's Tale

Kadamanitta Ramakrishnan

With the moist eyes, in which  
 Lies a breeding tigress, opened;  
 With brows, which sprout on a  
 Black cobra's tail, half curved,  
 Stood the Kattalan  
 In the middle of the cindery forest,  
 Stood the Kattalan  
 With a burning torch in his chest.  
 Shocked by the sight  
 Of the dead father in the sky,  
 Shaken by the  
 Burning mother by the mountain,  
 At the banks of the river,  
 She with half mutilated breasts screamed like cinder.  
 The cindery scream hit  
 The heart as a harpoon.  
 Like a raging tiger,  
 Like a sliding mountain,  
 Roared the Kattalan,  
 The whole world trembling in his roar  
 Rushed the Kattalan  
 To pull the roots of the trembling sea.  
 Like a Vezhambal  
 That sobs and yearns for a drop of water,  
 The Kattalan sat with head upward,  
 Yearning for drinking water.  
 The sky is silent.  
 Mad  
 With intense thirst for love,

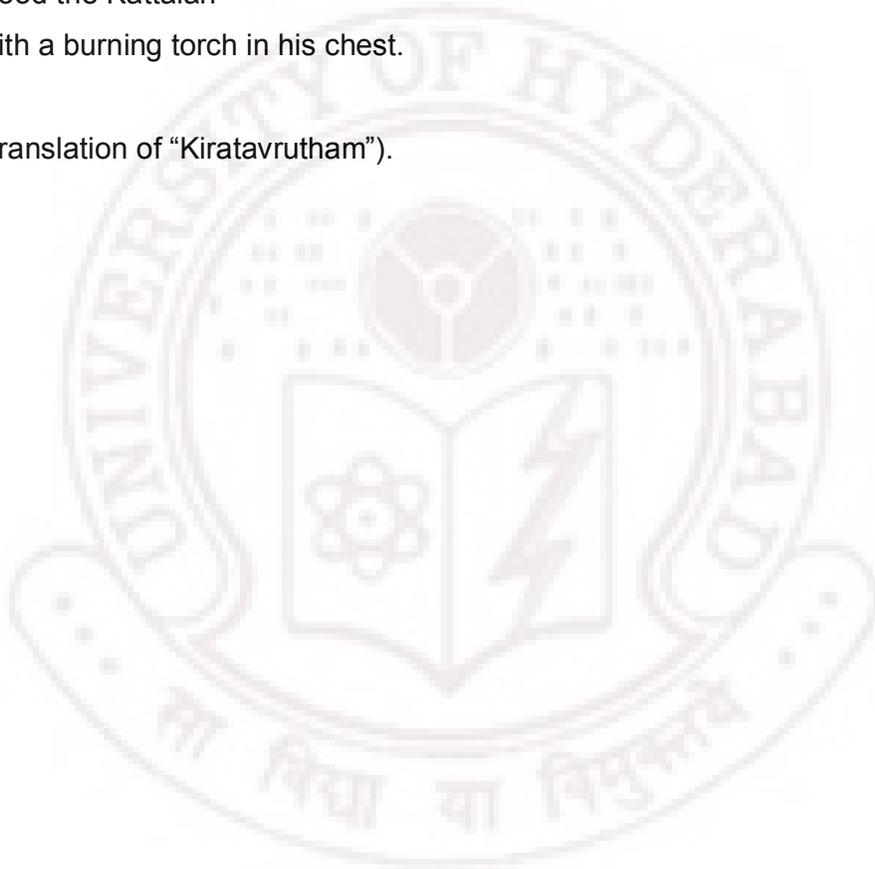
Sat the Kattalan  
In the soil that nurses the mango groves.  
Is the firmament with dark clouds,  
A sea of Hemlock?  
Am I in the fort of intense pain  
Guarded by explosion odors?  
Where is the lightning, thundering sky  
That sow my dreams?  
Where are my Tulasi forests,  
Twilights combing their Moist lock?  
Where are the Muttanga meadows  
Where grass-hoppers hop?  
The nocturnal celebrations  
With The lunar drawn mosaic on the Karuka  
With the ankle lets of the wind,  
With the jingling bangles of the wild streams,  
Danced the Kadathis in unison  
Under the chola tree.  
Snaking their black veeti bodies,  
Widening forest of eyelashes,  
With radiant cheeks,  
Spreading charms,  
Shaking bodies, and moving their hips,  
Jiggling their breasts, and scattering locks,  
Danced the Kadathis in unison  
Under the chola tree.  
Tossing down a bamboo-  
cup of cider, with head  
Tossing rhythmically, sat I  
Under the mango tree.  
Where are those days?  
Where are my children?  
The boys, my children,  
Who went for the honey bags!

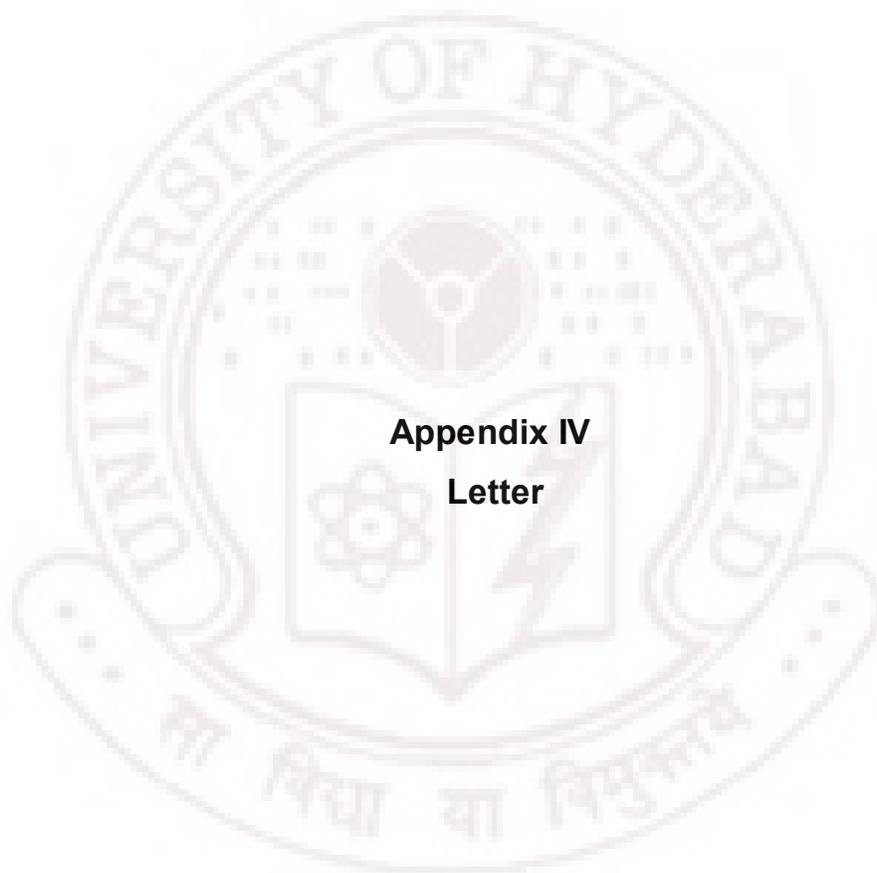
The girls, my children,  
Who went to fill the flower bags!  
Where are the ambal buds  
That adorned the tender lips?  
The smell of the tender bones burning  
Pricks the nerves.  
The hue of the melting flowers  
Fills the sides.  
With burning flaming,  
Eyes in which tiger groans,  
With an injured heart,  
The Kattaalan stood upright.

The waves of rising might  
Of digging burrows flurried ...  
The hands of huntsman,  
I'll chop them with my axe  
They who ruin the mountains  
Must flow headless in the river.  
They who hew the trees,  
Who destroyed my clan,  
I'll garland the Earth  
With their entrails.  
I'll pluck their vocal codes.  
I'll blow that trumpet again.  
I'll regain the numbed powers,  
I'll aim the arrow.  
I'll string the arch bow  
With my tight arteries.  
Breaking thunder and lightening,  
The arrow as waves of fire, shall  
Hit the clouds to torrents  
And sprinkle sprouting roots.  
The spreading buds will callout

Light ...  
The sun will rise,  
The moon will wax to a silhouette.  
The lovely woods will sway and swing.  
I'll laugh then,  
My sorrows will crumble in the *forasm*.  
Stood the Kattalan  
In the middle of the cindery forest,  
Stood the Kattalan  
With a burning torch in his chest.

(Translation of "Kiratavrutham").





## IV

### Letter from Ayyappa Paniker

7 January 2006

My Dear Shri Rohith:

I am terribly sorry that I could not reply to your kind letter of 25. 1. 2005 till now, although I did telephone Dr. Narayana Chandran and apologized for my lapse. For a whole year now, from 20 Jan. 2005, I have been preoccupied with personal matters like illness, surgery, two deaths in the family, a wedding, and then since September a kind of bad cough and breathing difficulty which still makes it difficult for me to respond to you properly. This may concern only my personal environment and not the general ecological concerns. Let that be. Forgive me for the delay.

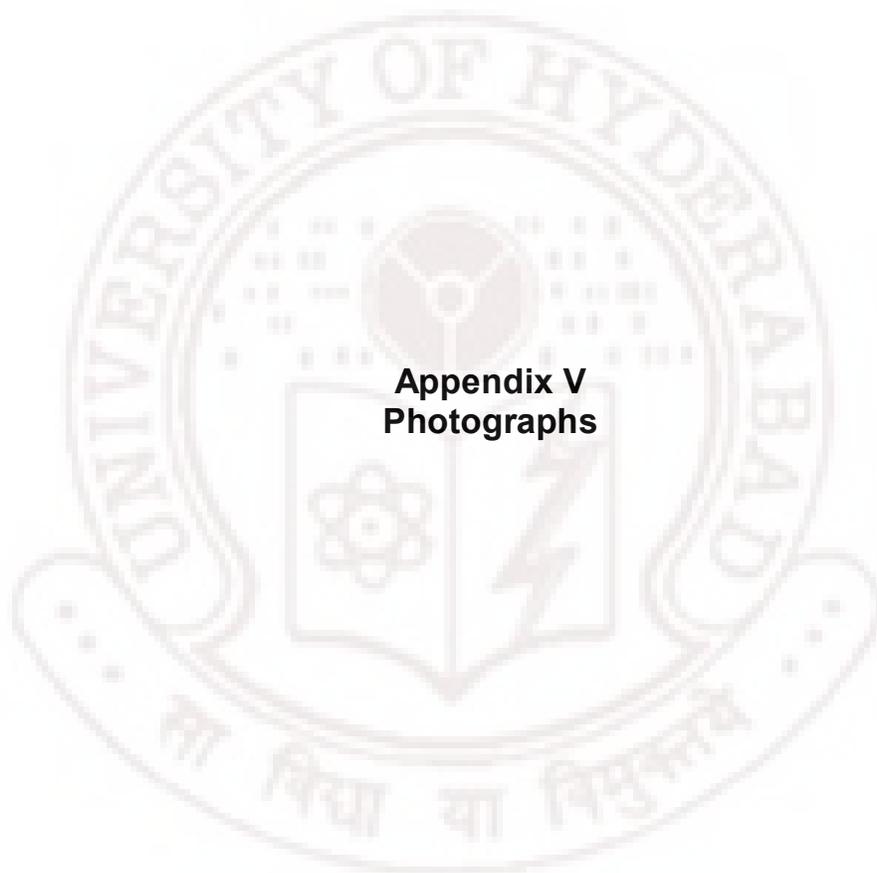
I have gone through your write-up and bibliography and feel impressed by the care you have taken in making out your case. The following information may be of some partial use to you.

Malayalam poetry has been eco-friendly from its very beginning in the 12<sup>th</sup> century. In the earliest version of Ramayana, Ramacaritam, the wind God is presented as the one who guides Hanuman to the shelter of Sita in Ravana's Lanka. And all through our literary history, long before the silent valley our poets have been close to the flora and fauna of the land in ever so many ways. One need not read too much into it, but it may be kept at the back of the mind, since every new writer from time to time invokes the continuing inspiration drawn from nature by our writers. When Cherusseri in his Krishna Gatha describes the six seasons, he takes care to give a local colour to the descriptions which find an echo in later nature poetry. Ezhuthacchan has descriptions of mountains and forests in Aranyakanda in Ramayana and Vanaparvam in Mahabharata. Local touches have crept into these classical

passages. Of course, these are not directly connected with the problems of today. But the reason our poets woke up to the call of silent valley may have something to do with this submerged springs of eco-aesthetics. In the poems of Asan, Vallathol, Changampuzha, Kunhiraman Nair, so highly sensitive to the Kerala land and landscape, reminiscent of the tinai concept of the Dravidian text of Tolhappiyam. This is natural since unlike the other states of India Kerala and Malayalam may be said to be derived from their location: Kerala is the land of Kera or coconut palms and Malayalam comes from Mala (Hill) and Alam depth i.e the sea). Our culture and history are dyed deep in the impact of environmental features.

Apart from the self-conscious reactions to the silent valley controversy, one may find exquisite etchings of nature in less obvious literary sources, and I feel these may be drawn upon for identifying the strong response to the eco problems in our times. It is probably these subconscious springs of poetic inspiration that made the poets take up the case or cause of the valley, and not the valley that made the poets sensitive to the ecology. I have three anthologies in English translation (selected poems, which contains inter alia a poem about the Bhopal tragedy called Beyond Death; Days and Nights, which includes a few pieces of environmental concerns; and I Can't Help Blossoming, The title poem echoes ecological anxieties but not in a programmed form). My only hint is that you may tap the less obvious and strident utterances too.

With all my very best wishes for your research as well as for the year 2006,  
Ayyappa Paniker.



### Photos from the Silent Valley National Park

On 28 December, 2006, I visited the Silent Valley National Park. These photos taken by N. P. Ashley, who accompanied me, give a sense of what the Silent Valley movement wanted to preserve:

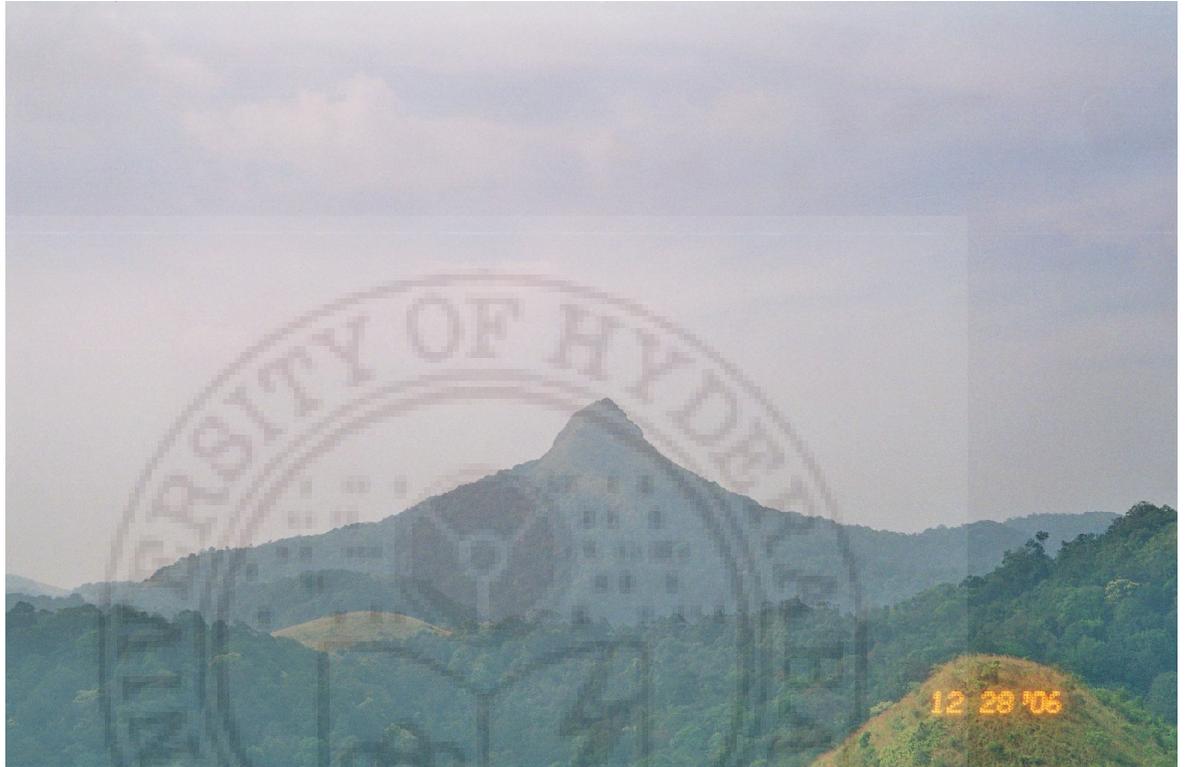


Photo 1: Sairandhrivanam



Photo 2: Kunthi River

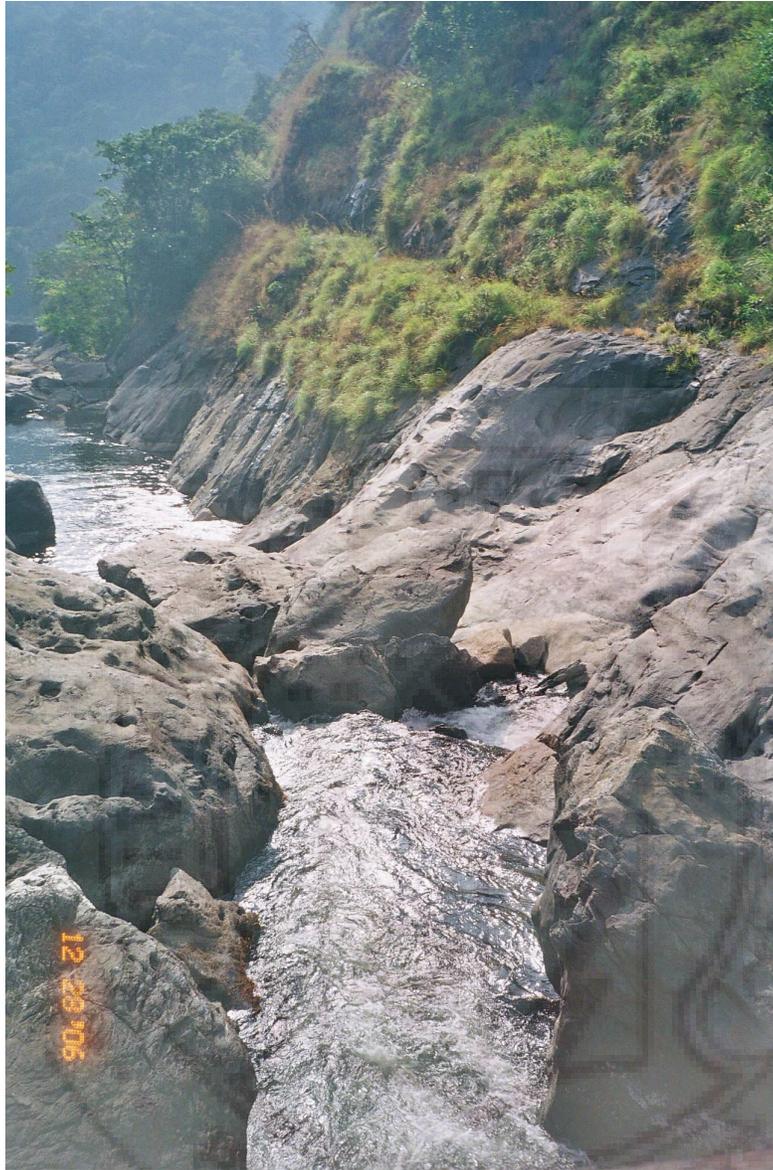


Photo 3: Kunthi River



Photo 4: Kunthi River



Photo 5: The Proposed Site for SVHP



Photo 6: From the Silent Valley National Park



Photo 7: From the Silent Valley National Park



Photo 8: The Silent Valley Tower

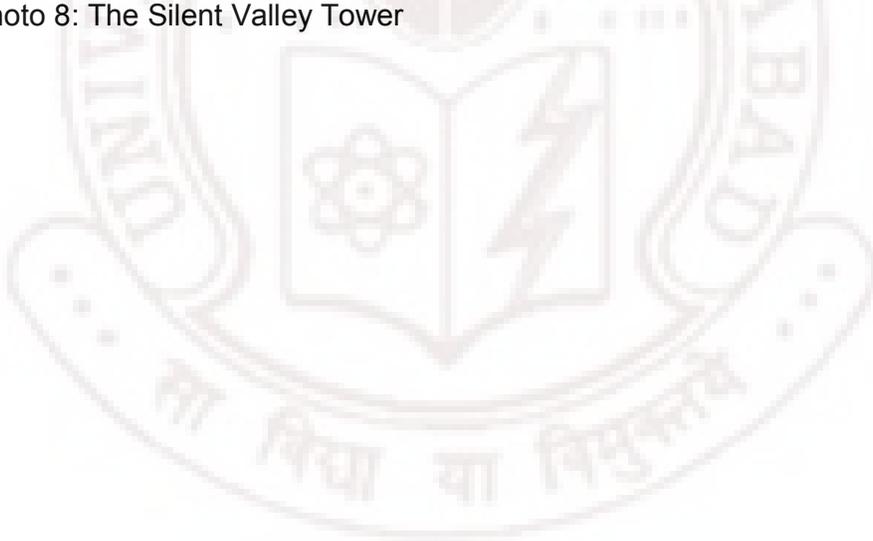




Photo 9: A board at the Silent Valley National Park



Photo 10: Photo of the Foundation Stone of the Silent Valley National Park

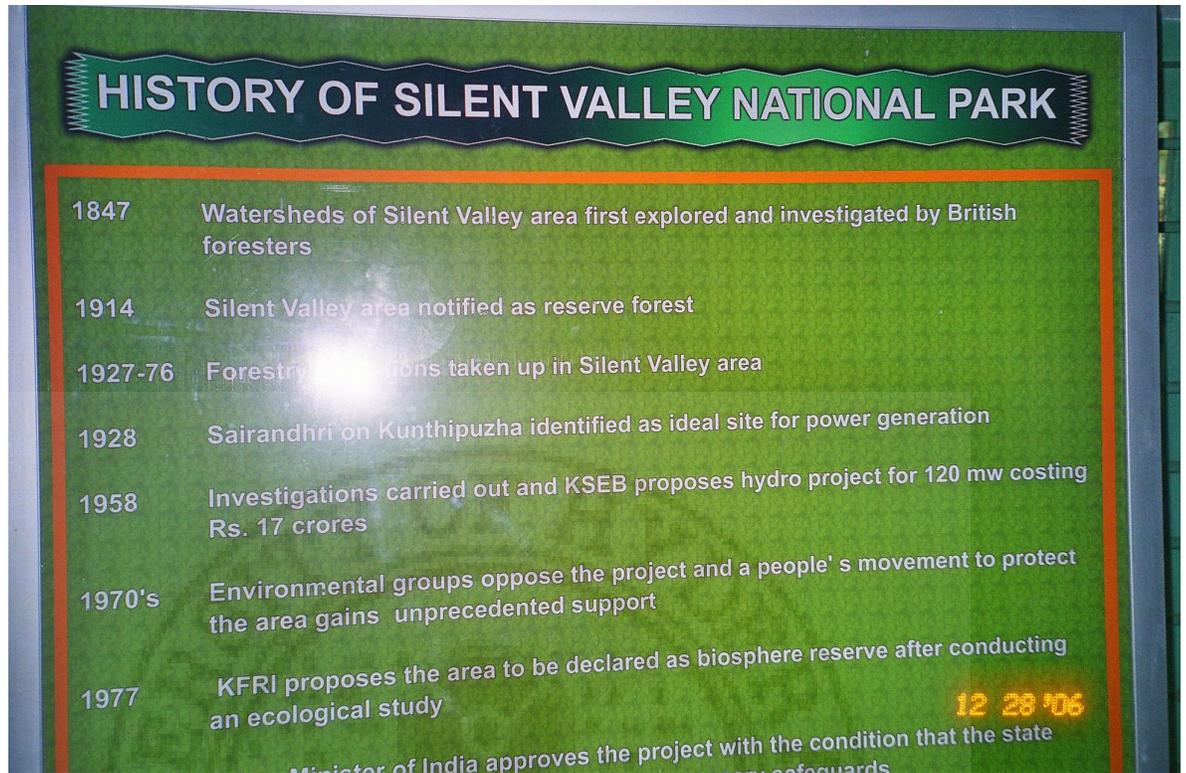


Photo 11: A poster describing the history of the Silent Valley National Park

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