

Quadrant II – Transcript and Related Materials

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Unit: 3

Module Name: Silent Valley Movement

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NOTES

Introduction

Long before the Internet era, a remarkable people's movement saved a pristine moist evergreen forest in Kerala's Palakkad District from being destroyed by a hydroelectric project. The battle for the now famous Silent Valley raged for over ten years and involved thousands of people who did not even live in the vicinity of the area that was to be destroyed. Although the campaign did not have any centralized planning, it was highly effective.

The sustained pressure exerted on the government by citizens using every possible means available at the time such as letters to the editors of newspapers, seminars, widespread awareness programmes, and finally petitions and appeals in court and other high offices proved ultimately successful. In 1986 Silent Valley was declared a National Park, a striking testimony to the power of peoples' action. The lessons from this inspiring and hard-fought campaign are still relevant today.

The Kerala State Electricity Board (KSEB) proposes a hydroelectric dam in 1970 across the Kunthipuzha River that runs through Silent Valley, that will submerge the untouched moist evergreen forest.

Arguments made in favour of the Silent Valley Hydroelectric Project (SVPH) are as follows:

- 1) The Kerala State Electricity Board states that the state's electricity requirements will not be met without this additional power.
- 2) Increase in Irrigation capacity by an additional 100sq km in the Mallapuram and Palghat districts.
- 3) Provide employment to several thousand people during the construction phase and boost the economy of the state.

The environment movement needed a mascot, It turned out be a monkey. One of the unknown figures in the Silent Valley saga is an American primatologist named Steven Green a scientist from the New York Zoological Society, conducts studies on primates, especially the lion-tailed macaque in Silent Valley. Green expresses concerns about the possible threats to the rare macaque from the project.

Around the same time, herpetologist Rom Whitaker explored Silent Valley to study the snakes of the region and this is when he acquainted himself with the Hydroelectric plant proposed by KSEB in the silent valley he took up the initiative to spread awareness of the same among the people both at local and national level and hence wrote a letter to the Bombay Natural History Society about the need to conserve the Valley. It was this Report that created an uproar and alerted other naturalists.

The Battle

Irrespective of the constant vigorous protests against the hydroelectric plant in the silent valley the Planning Commission approved the project at the cost of Rs.25 crores however due to lack of sufficient funds the project was delayed.

In 1976 the silent valley movement saw a ray of hope in the form of the National Committee on Environment Planning and Coordination (NCEPC) that set up a task force, chaired by Zafar Futehally the aim of which was to study the

ecological problems that could be caused by the project and until the report was submitted the project was suspended. The report of the Task Force recommended that the project be scrapped, however it provides a loophole that stipulates that, if abandoning the project is not possible a series of safeguards should be implemented while executing the Hydroelectric project and Unsurprisingly, the Kerala government opts to proceed with the project by promising to implement all safeguards, it argues that only 10 percent of the ecosystem will be damaged, while ecological safeguards will protect the rest. However, several NGOs strongly oppose the project and urge the government to abandon the project completely. The Conservationists had no faith in the empty promises made by the Kerala State government and argued that:

- 1) The Project will lead to the submerging of the entire lower valley by the dam which will completely destroy the biodiversity there within.
- 2) The 10 percent loss projected by the government will actually be far worse as the government presented figures were inaccurate.
- 3) The workforce brought in for the construction of the project would reside in the area for several years and the destruction they cause through illegal wood felling, extensive cattle grazing, poaching, encroaching in tribal land would destroy the Valley along with the tribal culture.

In 1977 a missionary zeal started a movement to create awareness in academic circles through talks and slide shows, the Kerala Forest Research Institute did a study on the impact of hydroelectric projects on the environment, and wrote to the authorities not to begin the project till one of the academicians V.S Vijayan submits his report on the said topic however he was admonished and his report was suppressed by government authorities.

The message of the conservationists was taken to villages and cities all over Kerala, tours to the villages of north Malabar were made by professors to spread awareness also young nature lovers were trained to participate in the Movement, Soon Nature Clubs sprung up all over the state which resulted in the outcry against the Silent Valley Hydroelectric Project to gain local as well as international attention through various

forums. However irrespective of the hue and cry created for the protection of silent valley the state government remained un-deterred and moved forward with the Proposed project.

Institutions like the Bombay Natural History Society and Geological Survey of India recommended that the area to be declared as a Natural Bioreserve.

However, Prime Minister Morarji Desai rejected all the appeals and recommended the immediate commencement of the proposal without further delay.

In 1979 Kerala state authority began the project, members of Prakriti Samrakshana Samiti filed a petition and got a stay order from the High Court of Kerala, stopping work on the project.

Meanwhile, at the Centre, Morarji Desai was replaced by Charan Singh as PM. He institutes a Central Committee to re-investigate the issue, headed by M.S. Swaminathan, much to the displeasure of the Chief Minister of Kerala.

In January 1980 the High Court rejects the writ plea, saying that it is not for the courts to go into the merits of scientific arguments and that it is “satisfied that the matters have received attention before the State decided to launch the project”. Work on the project was re-initiated.

In the media too, the fight for Silent Valley marks a distinct curve. In the beginning the leading Malayalam newspapers first carry positive columns on the hydroelectric project, However there were few media houses that freed themselves from the clutches of the government and published editorials that constitute a deliberate and strong tilt towards saving Silent Valley.

Meanwhile, in Delhi, Charan Singh's term as Prime Minister is over in a short six months. He is replaced by Indira Gandhi. Luckily for the conservation movement, she takes an active personal interest in the Silent Valley project, as national and international pressure mounts.

Bowing to unrelenting public pressure, Indira Gandhi declares that Silent Valley will be protected.

However when the fine print is read it is learned that the area under the hydroelectric project is not covered under the protected area! When the people become aware of this 'little detail', hundreds of protest telegrams are sent to the Central Government. More pressure was heaped on the government by NGOs, reputed scientists and intellectuals, and ordinary citizens.

The Centre re-examines the issue through a commission chaired by Prof. M.G.K. Menon. And in **November 1983** the Silent Valley Hydroelectric Project was called off.

Achievements of the Silent Valley Movement.

In 1980 Indira Gandhi requested the chief Minister of and the kerala government to abandon hydroelectric project in silent valley and advised them to consider possibilities of alternate projects for meeting the power needs of the state.

In 1983 the Silent Valley Hydroelectric Project was completely shelved, making it the only case in which a Hydroelectric project once sanctioned was abandoned purely on ecological reasons.

In 1985 the area was notified as "Silent Valley National Park" and efforts have been made to conserve the silent valley Ecosystem which is one of the greatest treasures in Kerala.

In 2001 a new Hydroelectric project was proposed which was to serve as an alternative to the one in Silent valley, however it had a similar fate and was abandoned.