

Silent Valley: A controversy that focused global attention on a rainforest 40 years ago

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- The Kunthi river in Kerala flowed even during the drought-hit summer of 2017, since it emerges from evergreen forests and there is no dam to impede its water.
- Forty years ago a dam was to be constructed at Silent Valley from where the river originates.
- The people's movement to prevent the Silent Valley project was the first significant milestone in Indian environmental history that brought national and international attention to the forests and intervention from a prime minister.
- Conservation leaders recall those early days of Indian environmentalism.

Citizens of Kerala, the state that welcomes the southwest monsoon into the Indian peninsula, are not as confident in the recent years of the water flow in their rivers. Their memories of unreliable rainfall are fresh from 2016, when both the southwest and northeast monsoon failed, resulting in a severely dry 2017 summer. It was then that Bharatapuzha – the river that drains the Palghat Gap in the Western Ghats – was bone dry.

Flowing close by to Bharatapuzha is Thootha river, also known as Kunthi river, which never dried completely even in this worst period. Closer to the delta, Kunthi joins Bharatapuzha, giving the river some flow in its final stretch.

There are two reasons why the Kunthi river flows all through the year, even during the worst summers. One, it emerges from one of the richest and most biologically diverse tropical rain forests of the Silent Valley. Two, it has no dam obstructing its pathway.

The Kunthi river as it flows through the valley. Photo by S. Gopikrishna Warriar

There was to have been a dam that would have submerged and fragmented the rainforests of the Silent Valley. Forty years ago, in 1978, Prime Minister Morarji Desai, had given conditional clearance for the construction of a dam. Strong people's movement, supported with science, could succeed in getting the subsequent national government to conserve the forest. Silent Valley was declared as a national park in 1984 by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, and inaugurated in 1985 by Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi.

Unique location

Rising above 1,000 metres the Western Ghats stretches like a curtain parallel to India's western coast. Like the pleats of a curtain, the mountains have folds. They also rise steeply in places, literally forming an impenetrable wall blocking the southwest monsoon clouds pregnant with rain. When the clouds find it difficult to surmount the wall, they drop their payload – the rains. It is thus that Kerala, which occupies the thin strip of land west of the mountains, gets an average annual rainfall close to 3,000 mm, making it the envy of the other parts of the country.

The Silent Valley and its location within the Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve. Credit: Google Maps.

The Kunthi river, which originates from the south-western edge of the Nilgiri massif cuts a deep valley that starts from the northeast and flows towards southwest. The valley itself is located on the Athirapally plateau that rises to a floor height of 800 m, bridging the gap between the edge of the Nilgiri massif and the Palghat hills, both rising over 2,000 m.

The Silent Valley is like a geographical *cul-de-sac* into which when the clouds move in they cannot but dump their rain. Thus watered over millennia, and protected by the steep mountain walls, the rainforests in the valley flourished, supporting a biologically diverse plant and animal life.

Small in scale, large in impact

In terms of scale the Silent Valley is small. The area that was [originally declared as a national park](#), and continues to be the core zone of the present demarcation, is 89.52 sq.km. The hydroelectric project that was envisaged in the valley was to have had an installed capacity of 120 megawatts. However, the controversy that the Silent Valley project generated in the 1970s and early 1980s made waves nationally and internationally. It was among the earliest significant milestones in the modern Indian environmental history.

"The people's movement against the Silent Valley project was significant in the sense that it was not a rhetorical protest, but one in which the scientific argument supported the views of the anti-dam group," Madhav Gadgil, the well-known ecologist who later went on to chair the Western Ghats Ecology Expert Panel (WGEEP), told Mongabay-India. Gadgil was a member of the multi-disciplinary committee constituted by the Government of India under the chairmanship of M.G.K. Menon, which finally proposed the cancellation of the Silent Valley project.

Gadgil commended the involvement of the Kerala Shastra Sahitya Parishad (KSSP), a people's science movement that was very popular in Kerala during the 1970s and 1980s, for this. "Theirs was a scientifically well-informed argument, and they could communicate it well with the public since they had the ability to reach out to the people in large numbers," he recalled.

The forests of Silent Valley. Photo by S. Gopikrishna Warriar

According to environment journalist Darryl D'Monte in his book *Temples or Tombs* published by the Centre for Science and Environment in 1985, KSSP took a four-pronged approach in its communication. It emphasised that the Silent Valley was among the last such tropical evergreen forest patches remaining in the Western Ghats. Further, the organisation stated the hydro-electric project was unjustified since 40% of Kerala's power generation was being exported to neighbouring Karnataka and Tamil Nadu; the project would contribute to only 7 percent of the power produced in the state; and the 10,000 hectares proposed to be irrigated could be serviced through alternate ground and surface water at lower cost.

Man versus monkey

Despite KSSP's reasoned arguments against the dam and the hydro-electric project, the environment movement needed a mascot. It turned out to be a monkey. "One of the unknown figures in the Silent Valley saga is an American primatologist named Steven Green," wrote D'Monte in his book. "With his companion, Karen Minkowski, he studied the habits of the lion-tailed macaque ([Macaca silenus](#)) – the second-most threatened primate in the world – in the thickly-forested Kalakkad hills, which are at the southernmost tip of the Western Ghats in Tamil Nadu. Since these monkeys are found in Silent Valley, and the threat to their continued existence became a [cause celebre](#), he was indirectly able to focus international attention on the controversy."

A pair of lion-tailed macaques preening. These monkeys became the focus of controversy at the Silent Valley. Photo by Revi Unni

The lion-tailed macaque became the bone of contention during the Silent Valley controversy. While the conservationists wanted its population and habitat protected, the pro-dam groups ridiculed the environmentalists for giving priority to monkeys over human needs.

Focussing attention on the threat to the Endangered lion-tailed macaque, the [International Union for Conservation of Nature](#) (IUCN) passed a resolution to preserve the Silent Valley at its 14th General Assembly held at Ashkabad in the USSR in September 1978. "The IUCN resolution brought considerable pressure to bear on the Indian Government to proceed cautiously in Silent Valley," wrote D'Monte.

Prime minister takes a stand

The decision to deny permission to the project is credited to Indira Gandhi. "Her role was indeed crucial as I have documented extensively in my book," said Jairam Ramesh, former environment minister and author of an ecological biography of Indira Gandhi published in 2017. "From 1979 onwards – influenced hugely by [ornithologist] Salim Ali and former diplomat K.P.S. Menon – she was against the project even though her own political colleagues in Delhi and Kerala were in support of the project." Ramesh's book gives instances of the prime minister corresponding with the chief minister of Kerala on protecting the forests.

According to Ramesh, the then agriculture secretary, M. S. Swaminathan also played an important role in convincing her about the need to abandon the project on ecological grounds. Gandhi encouraged debate and discussion on it for almost three years and set up a multi-disciplinary committee to assess the project.

"The Silent Valley represents one of the most coveted parts of our biodiversity heritage. Conserving this heritage was vital for ensuring the future of human wellbeing and happiness," Swaminathan said when asked about his recommendation to the government. He shared with Mongabay-India excerpts from a report he had written to the government after his tour of the valley in October 1978.

"The evolutionary age of the Silent Valley evergreen rainforest is believed to be more than 50 million years," Swaminathan wrote in his report. "The flora and fauna of this area are quite unique and 23 mammalian species including three endangered species – the tiger, lion-tailed macaque and the Nilgiri langur – have been recorded." He brought to the notice of the government a report by the [Kerala Forest Research Institute](#) that the forest tract was unique and relatively undisturbed.

A muntjac or barking deer waits a while before disappearing into the foliage. Photo by Varun Warriar.

"I was well aware during my years in the latter half of 1970s that our country's forests were being decimated by the construction of dams. Among these, the Silent Valley in Kerala, containing the richest tropical rainforest in the southern Western Ghats, was a conspicuous target of dam-builders against which there was already in Kerala a considerable public resentment, unmatched, however, by official response," said N.D. Jayal, then joint secretary for forests and wildlife in the Union Agriculture Ministry (the Ministry of Environment and Forests had not yet been formed), recalling how the events unfolded within the government.

All through her tenure as prime minister, Indira Gandhi had one nodal official who coordinated matters related to environment and forests. Jayal executed this role in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

"I found one day a file on my table seeking forest clearance for the Silent Valley project," Jayal said. "Feeling appalled, I took the file to consult the inspector general of forests who agreed that this was too precious a forest to be sacrificed. He said he felt helpless in these matters before the might of government, but agreed I could make a personal visit if there was a way to help save the forest."

In the Silent Valley, Jayal was "astounded by the sheer richness of the forest and its flora and fauna, worth saving at all cost." At Thiruvananthapuram, a remarkable young couple with PhDs in ecology – Sathis Chandran Nair and Santhi Nair – asked if they could show him a video presentation of the Silent Valley, of which they seemed to know every bit.

"The Nairs gave me a copy of their rich presentation, probably unavailable anywhere. I knew it would cut no ice with the government, and decided to show it and explain it to Salim Ali," Jayal told Mongabay-India. "I believe he also wrote about it to Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, who acted promptly by setting up the M.G.K. Menon committee, whose recommendation eventually led her to reject the dam project. However, we continued the fight until we were assured that the Silent Valley was declared a protected area as a national park."

Indira Gandhi decided to deny permission for the hydro-electric project on 18 October 1983, and it was notified as a national park on 15 November 1984, a fortnight after her assassination. Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi inaugurated the park on 7 September 1985. In November 2009, while Jairam Ramesh was the environment minister, the Central and the Kerala Governments decided to add the adjoining forests of 147 sq.km as the buffer zone of the national park.

Many like Gadgil, who observed the events as they unfolded in those years, feel that Indira Gandhi's decision was motivated partially by her desire to conserve nature, and partially because of the international image that she had cultivated over the years as a head of state committed to the preservation of the environment.

Enthused the younger generation

"I was in college when the Silent Valley controversy was raging," said Revi Unni, a conservationist who retired recently from his day job of being a bank employee. Growing up in Thootha village on the banks of the Kunthi river, Unni took part in student protests and demonstrations against the dam. "In those days we did not realise that we were participating in something so big," he admitted.

It was the Silent Valley movement that enthused Unni and many youngsters of that period to pursue a lifetime involvement with conservation. "That is when we realised that there is need for activism to protect the environment."

A monitor lizard catches the noon sun. Photo by Varun Warriar

Documentary filmmaker Shekar Dattatri was a student volunteer at the Madras Snake Park when the Silent Valley controversy was in full swing. "There was a story or a letter to the editor in the newspapers almost every day, and there was no way in which I could not have been hooked by it," he said. After the people's movement was over in the 1980s, he along with herpetologist Romulus Whitaker went on to make a documentary on the Silent Valley, which won two national and several international awards.

"Many people were very passionate about the Silent Valley but did not know where it was, what ecosystem it supported and why it was special. That is what we set out to showcase," Dattatri said. Filming in the rainforest was a challenge – it was wet and dark and the animals were shy and high up on the canopy. The resultant documentary – *Silent Valley: An Indian rainforest* – helped tell the story of the Silent Valley to the world outside. The film brought Shekar Dattatri international recognition and firmly set him on his professional career.

Middle-class environmentalism?

"The Silent Valley movement reached out to the educated and the middle-class intelligentsia," said Gadgil. "Earlier in the 1970s, there were wildlife conservation issues espoused by the former royalty. The *Chipko* (hug the trees) movement, on the other hand, was from the grassroots. The Silent Valley movement tapped into a different section of the society."

While this could have been one reason for the people's movement's impact, it also triggered the growth of environmental journalism in India. "It was an iconic issue," D'Monte told Mongabay-India. "Many environmental journalists cut their teeth on it and cited it for years afterwards. I am sure that is truer of Kerala, which has a more informed citizenry, as I point out in my book and, as a corollary, a more committed media. I can only presume that it is still referred to in Kerala in particular as well as Tamil Nadu." During the years of the controversy, D'Monte was editor of the Times of India and the Indian Express.

For many environmental journalists, the Silent Valley controversy continues to remain the point that triggered their interest in environment. "I was on a pilgrimage," [wrote](#) Bittu Sahgal, the editor of Sanctuary magazine when he visited the forest in 2012.

The perennial Kunthi

Unlike in other tiger reserves in Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Karnataka, there are not many tourists in the Silent Valley National Park of today. It is difficult to reach Mukkali in Attapady, the village from which the Kerala Forest Department gives permission to a limited number of jeeps owned by the members of the eco development committee to enter the buffer area of the national park. From there reaching the edge of the core area, where the forest department has built a watchtower, takes a back-breaking jeep ride for 25 kms. The chance of sighting any wildlife is low in the dark, damp rainforest, compared to the open-canopied forests of the tiger reserves.

The entrance to the Silent Valley National Park. Photo by S. Gopikrishna Warriar

Even among those who come to Silent Valley, there are not many who are aware of the history that the forest signifies – of the confrontation between development and environment; of a people's movement that buttressed its arguments with science and got the support from people across the country; of reclusive monkeys that brought international attention; and of a forest patch for which the prime minister intervened to protect.

Down in the plains of Kerala, when the Kunthi river flows during summer, even those living adjacent to the river do not stop back to thank a committed group of individuals who protected the forests, even decades before environmentalism became popular. Had the dam been constructed 40 years ago, the Kunthi river would have been as seasonal as the adjacent Bharatapuzha.

CITATION:

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