

**Silent Valley** was a social movement aimed at the protection of Silent Valley, an evergreen tropical forest in the Palakkad district of Kerala, India. It was started in 1973 by an NGO led by school teachers and the Kerala Sastra Sahithya Parishad(KSSP) to save the Silent Valley from being flooded by a **hydroelectric** project. The valley was declared as **Silent Valley National Park** in 1985. The Kuntipuzha is a major river that flows 15 km southwest from Silent Valley. It takes its origin in the lush green forests of Silent Valley. In 1928 the location at **Sairandhri** on the **Kunthipuzha River** was identified as an ideal site for **electricity generation**. In 1970 Kerala State Electricity Board(KSEB) proposed a hydroelectric dam across the Kunthipuzha River that runs through Silent Valley, that will submerge 8.3 sq km of untouched moist evergreen forest. In February 1973, the Planning Commission approves the project at a cost of about Rs 25 crores.

After the announcement of imminent dam construction the valley became the focal point of Save Silent Valley Movement, India's fiercest **environmental** debate of the decade. Because of concern about the endangered **lion-tailed macaque**, the issue was brought to public attention. **Romulus Whitaker**, founder of the Madras Snake Park and the **Madras Crocodile Bank**, was probably the first person to draw public attention to the small and remote area.<sup>[1]</sup> In 1977 the **Kerala Forest Research Institute** carried out an **ecological impact study** of the Silent Valley area and proposed that the area be declared a **biosphere reserve**. In 1978 **Indira Gandhi**, Prime Minister of India, approved the project, with the condition that the state government enact legislation ensuring the necessary safeguards. Also that year the **IUCN** (International Union of conservation of nature) passed a **resolution** recommending protection of **lion-tailed macaques** in Silent Valley and **Kalakkad** and the controversy heated up. In 1979 the Government of Kerala passed **legislation** regarding the Silent Valley Protection Area (Protection of Ecological balance Act of 1979) and issued a notification declaring the exclusion of the hydroelectric project area from the proposed national park.

**Kerala Sasthra Sahithya Parishad** (KSSP) effectively aroused public opinion on the requirement to save Silent Valley. They also published a techno-economic and socio-political assessment report on the Silent Valley hydroelectric project. The **poet activist Sugathakumari** played an important role in the Silent Valley protest and her poem "Marathinu Stuthi" ("Ode to a Tree:) became a symbol for the protest from the intellectual community and was the opening song/prayer of most of the "save the Silent Valley" campaign meetings.<sup>[2]</sup> Dr. **Salim Ali**, eminent ornithologist of the **Bombay Natural History Society**, visited the valley and appealed for cancellation of the hydroelectric project.<sup>[3]</sup> A petition of **writ** was filed before the High Court of Kerala, against the clear cutting of forests in the hydroelectric project area and the court ordered a stop to the clear cutting.

Dr. **M.S. Swaminathan**, the renowned agricultural scientist, and then secretary to the Department of Agriculture, called at the Silent Valley region and his suggestion was 389.52 km<sup>2</sup> including the Silent Valley (89.52 km<sup>2</sup>), New **Amarambalam** (80 km<sup>2</sup>), **Attappadi** (120 km<sup>2</sup>) in Kerala and Kunda in Tamil Nadu (100 km<sup>2</sup>) **reserve forests**, should be made into a national rainforest **biosphere reserve**, with the aim of "preventing erosion of valuable **genes** from the area".<sup>[4]</sup>*Listen:(8:46)* to Dr. M. S. Swaminathan speaking on Sustainable Development, p.83, August 27, 2002

In January 1980 the High Court of Kerala lifted the ban on clear cutting, but then the Prime Minister of India requested the Government of Kerala to stop further works in the project area until all aspects were fully discussed. In December, the Government of Kerala declared the Silent Valley area, excluding the hydroelectric project area, as a **national park**.

In 1982, a multidisciplinary committee with Prof. **M. G. K. Menon** as chairman and **Madhav Gadgil**, **Dilip K. Biswas** and others as members, was created to decide if the hydroelectric project was feasible without any significant ecological damage.<sup>[5]</sup> Early in 1983, Prof. Menon's Committee submitted its report. After a careful study of the Menon report, the Prime Minister of India decided to abandon the Project. On 31 October 1984 Indira Gandhi was **assassinated** and on 15 November the Silent Valley forests were declared as a national park, though the boundaries of the Silent Valley Park were limited and no buffer zone was created, despite recommendations by expert committees and scientists.

Ten years later, on 7 September 1985 the Silent Valley National Park was formally inaugurated and a memorial at Sairandhri to Indira Gandhi was unveiled by **Rajiv Gandhi**, the new Prime Minister of India. On 1 September 1986 Silent Valley National Park was designated as the core area of the **Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve**.

Since then, a long-term conservation effort has been undertaken to preserve the Silent Valley **ecosystem**.<sup>[7]</sup>

In 2001 a new hydro project was proposed and the "man vs. monkey debate" was revived. The proposed site of the dam (64.5 m high and 275 m long) is just 3.5 km downstream of the old dam site at Sairandhri, 500 m outside the national park boundary.<sup>[8]</sup> The 84 km<sup>2</sup> catchment of the project area included 79 km<sup>2</sup> of the Silent Valley National Park

The Kerala Minister for Electricity called The Pathrakkadavu dam (PHEP) an "eco-friendly alternative" to the old Silent Valley project. The PHEP was designed as a run-off-the-river project with an installed capacity of 70 MW in the first phase (105 MW eventually) and an energy generation of 214 million units (Mu) with a minimal gross storage of 0.872 million cubic metres. The claim was that the submergence area of the PHEP would be a negligible .041 km<sup>2</sup> compared to 8.30 km<sup>2</sup> submergence of the 1970s (SVHEP).<sup>[9]</sup> However, The spectacular waterfall between the Neelikkal and Pathrakkadavu hills bordering the Silent Valley will disappear if the proposed Pathrakkadavu hydro-electric project is implemented.<sup>[10]</sup> - Image

During January to May 2003 a rapid Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) was carried out during by the Thiruvananthapuram-based Environmental Resources Research Centre and its report was released in December, stating that forest lost due to the project would be just .2216 km<sup>2</sup>, not including the 7.4 km approach road and land to be acquired for the powerhouse in Karapadam.