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 Kadamanitta 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. Theirs 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/altered 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,¹ it turned its back to similar trends in poetry and refused to publish the poetry of Kadamanitta, Kunhunni and K. G. Sankarapilla.² 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,³ 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 yeald 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.
Notes:

1 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.

2 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.

3 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.