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 catagorisations. 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.\(^1\) 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.²

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 Krishnavarier 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enign, “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 issue 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 Kadamanitta 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.
Notes:

1 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)

2 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.