

THE SILENT VALLEY PROJECT



In the late 1970s, the Silent Valley project stirred up a hornet's nest in India's first major 'environment versus development' controversy. The proposed project, now abandoned, was to dam the Kuntipuzha River in Kerala's Palghat district. As it flows through the valley, the Kuntipuzha drops 857 meters, making the valley an attractive site for generating electricity. Those promoting the project claimed that it would produce 240 MW of power, irrigate 10,000 hectares of land and provide over 2000 jobs. Environmentalists, on the other hand, asserted that as home to one of the few remaining rain forests in the Western Ghats, the valley ought to remain pristine. They further contended that with over 900 species of flowering plants and ferns and several endangered species of animals and birds, Silent Valley was one of the world's richest biological and genetic heritages.

In the campaign to save Silent Valley, legal strategies played a peripheral role. The environmentalists' success was due to a combination of several other factors, including the grass-roots campaign led by the Kerala Sastra Sahitya Parishad (KSSP); intense lobbying by several non-governmental organizations

and influential environmentalists within and outside government; and international pressure exerted on Prime Minister Indira Gandhi.



The adverse effects from the conversion of the Silent Valley into a hydroelectric project were listed thus: first, the deforestation was bound to affect the climatic conditions in the state and even outside, by depriving the state of its legitimate share of rain during the Monsoon; Second the preservation of the forests was needed for conducting research in medicine, pest control, breeding of economic plants and a variety of purposes, and third that deforestation was bound to interfere with the balance of nature, as between the forest land on the one side and arable and others types of lands on the other.

The argument stressed that a project like the HEP, if sanctioned and setup would have its impact on environment, and this has to be carefully considered. Copious citations were made from various treatises, reports, and publications, to show the importance of the environmental factor in industrial planning.