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The Saving of the Silent Valley: a Case Study of Environmental Education in Action

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In 1929, when an enterprising British engineer sat down and identified the Silent Valley as one of the best potential sites in Kerala for a hydroelectric project, he could not have imagined that 50 years later this tranquil valley would be the centre of a raging controversy.

Protected over millennia by its virtual inaccessibility, this 8950 ha valley of tropical wet evergreen forests forms part of a magnificent block of almost 40,000 ha of contiguous forest. The Silent Valley itself is one of the few areas in India to have been almost free of human habitation and intervention (not more than three or four trees per acre were felled for railway sleepers; a coffee plantation in the 19th century was started, and almost immediately abandoned).

Here wildlife, which has been almost eliminated from other parts of the country, still survives – the tiger, the nilgiri langur, the giant squirrel and, most valuable, one of the only two viable populations of the lion-tailed macaque – one of the world's most endangered primates. More exciting is the fact that in the dense vegetation are found wild relatives of pepper, cardamom, tobacco, black gram and other commercially valuable species – a genetic resource essential for the survival and development of their cultivated counterparts – and many medicinal plants which could provide the basis for modern life-saving drugs.

Unfortunately, as so often happens, environmentalists woke up to the existence of this area, and to the devastating effects of the proposed hydroelectric project, at a stage when the project had already been cleared by the Planning Commission of India for implementation. In fact, preliminary work had already started in 1973. The first I heard of it was in

1974 when, as the then chief executive of WWF-India, an article arrived from Romulus Whittaker for the WWF-I Newsletter. In 1976-77 a Government-sponsored Task Force for the Protection of the Western Ghats recommended that the project be dropped, but, anticipating that the odds against this happening were too great, added a series of safeguards if the project were to be implemented.

HUMANS VERSUS MONKEYS: THE ELECTRICITY BOARD'S CASE

Ironically, it was the over-anxious Kerala State Electricity Board which contributed to saving this valley by rushing to the press with its condemnation of the report, and thus drawing the attention of environmentalists to an area which might otherwise, like so many others, have been quietly destroyed. The subsequent ding-dong battle, which lasted over 6 years, saw the deployment of all types of arguments on both sides.

The protagonists for the project triumphantly paraded the following facts:

1. That the project, situated in one of Kerala's poorest regions, was an economic necessity for Kerala, generating 500 million units of energy, irrigating 10,000 ha of land and providing employment for 3000 people during its construction phase.
2. That the Silent Valley dam site provided an ideal – almost a textbook – location for a hydroelectric project, in a state which would have a power deficit by 1985 without it.
3. That every single political party in Kerala had joined forces to demand from the then Prime Minister, Shri Morarji Desai, the implementation of the project. (The only other occasion when such unanimity was achieved was when the Kerala legislators voted an enhancement of their own emoluments!) In fact, no political party in Kerala which valued its votes, dared ask for the abandonment of a project so avidly sought by the people of the economically backward Palghat district of Kerala, where it was to be located. The project was cleared by the Prime Minister, on the State Government undertaking to enact legislation ensuring the "safeguards" listed in the Task Force Report.
4. That the Kerala High Court had cleared the project for implementation.

With the promotions of 22 engineers at stake, as well as many lucrative contracts for timber felling and construction, the Kerala State Electricity Board (KSEB), and its unions, mounted an "environmental education" campaign of its own.

Unknown college professors were projected overnight as "eminent scientists" and directly or indirectly funded to produce no less than six books denigrating the importance of the Silent Valley, and scores of such

articles for the local press. The objective was to project to the public, and to key decision-makers, that "scientific opinion was divided" on the value of this forest.

Words like "unique" and "virgin", which had been loosely applied by environmentalists to this valley in early stages of the campaign, were pounced upon and torn to shreds. Busloads of legislators and journalists were taken to the dam site, already denuded of trees, to show them how ecologically poor the Silent Valley was, and that the campaign was motivated by smugglers and antisocial elements who did not welcome the healthy intrusion of the Electricity Board personnel.

Eminent scientists and environmentalists who called for the dropping of the project were dubbed imperialist stooges, or cranks who were more concerned about the welfare of monkeys than of people. Officials, especially Keralites, who occupied key positions in the Central Government (including the Chairman of the Central Water Commission, an authority concerned with implementation of such projects throughout the country) were assiduously lobbied and provided with distorted information about the biological wealth of the area and the ecological impact of the dam.

The sentiments of the local population were whipped up, on the grounds of economic deprivation, so that environmentalists who went there ran the risk of physical assault if they advocated dropping the project.

MAN AND MONKEY: THE ENVIRONMENTALISTS' CASE

Environmentalists, on their part, mounted an unprecedented national campaign to create public pressure for stopping the project. Starting in 1977, when a few naturalists in Kerala visited the area after reading the KSEB-sponsored barrage in the newspaper, the campaign gained national momentum by 1979 with "Save Silent Valley" groups springing up in different parts of the country. The key elements of this campaign were the following:

1. A group of intellectuals in Kerala, who became concerned with the implications of the Silent Valley hydroelectric project, began expressing this through newspaper articles and speeches. Among these were scientists, poets, economists and political activists. The seeds of public debate on the wisdom of the project were planted.
2. The Executive Committee of the Kerala Shastra Sahitya Parishad (KSSP) was inspired, primarily through the persuasions of one of its members, Prof. M. K. Prasad, to undertake a "techno-economic, socio-political" assessment of the implications of the Silent Valley project. The report produced by its multidisciplinary Task Force, consisting of a biologist, an electrical engineer, a nuclear engineer, an

economist and an agricultural scientist-cum-economist, provided a turning point in the Silent Valley campaign. It exposed the undesirability of the project, not only on ecological grounds, but on technical, economic, and social grounds. While the little grey booklet would have found few customers from the general public, its cogent analysis provided environmental activists with important data; namely: that the energy contribution of the SV project was really marginal in the context of Kerala's power requirements, that alternative sources for augmenting power existed, that ground water provided an effective and economic source for irrigation, and that far more employment could be generated in this economically backward region through medium- and small-scale industries than through this one major project. More important, it convinced the 60-member Executive Committee of the KSSP to take up the fight to save the Silent Valley.

The KSSP's 7000 members – consisting of teachers, doctors, engineers, lawyers, scientists, agriculturists, trade union workers and others, all of whom were committed to taking science to the people as a tool for social uplift – were an invaluable weapon in the battle to save the Silent Valley. These members, and especially some of the leading intellectuals of the KSSP's Executive Committee, encouraged and participated in public debates in different parts of Kerala. The youth, especially the college-going youth, were convinced.

Through its unique annual Jatha – a 37-day marathon march from one end of Kerala to the other – KSSP members focused on the effects of deforestation through traditional cultural media like dance, drama, poetry, music, etc. The Jatha covers 300 to 400 villages along its 6000 km route.

3. Eminent scientists, and nationally or internationally renowned environmentalists, were persuaded to make public statements regarding the importance of preserving an area like the Silent Valley in a country which had already lost most of the genetic wealth that such areas represent. Members of the Government-sponsored Task Force on the Western Ghats were persuaded to state that they had been mistaken in recommending the so-called "safeguards", which had been misused to negate their substantive recommendation that the project should be dropped and the area preserved. They also stated that the safeguards could not really prevent major ecological devastation of the area, but were only an attempt to save what remained on the assumption that the project could not be dropped. The national press was constantly fed with such information by the Save Silent Valley Committees in Bombay and Madras.
4. International and national organizations like the IUCN, WWF, Bombay Natural History Society and natural history societies in other parts of the country, Friends of Trees and other organizations adopted

resolutions, lobbied through members' letters and made representations to the Central and State Governments.

5. A Court case, though eventually lost, brought an invaluable stay on KSEB operations, thereby providing time for the education campaign to have full effect.
6. Key decision-makers in Government were convinced of the importance of saving Silent Valley – or, at least, of keeping the options open till a future date, when all other power-generating options in Kerala had been exhausted. They became the most valuable forces in stopping the Silent Valley project.

Dr M. S. Swaminathan, who was then Secretary for Agriculture, India, prepared a report highlighting the genetic wealth of the area and the desirability of postponing the project until this resource could be studied and tapped. Mr E. M. S. Namboodripad, Secretary of the powerful (in Kerala) Communist Party of India (Marxist) left the matter open for debate within the Party, having been convinced that the proposed project was not an unmitigated blessing for the people of the area.

Above all, Mrs Indira Gandhi, who became Prime Minister in 1980, played a critical role in asking the State Government to halt further work until the Central and State Governments could explore the implications of the proposed project and the alternatives that were available. A Committee with representatives of the Central and State Governments was set up by her, under the Chairmanship of Prof. M. G. K. Menon (then Secretary, Department of Science and Technology) to look into the ecological implications of the project.

THE OUTCOME

In November 1983 the Silent Valley hydroelectric project was officially declared to have been shelved. Steps have been initiated to create the Silent Valley National Park. In the context of an environmental education campaign which covered all segments of society, from three successive Prime Ministers to the peasants affected by the project, what insights can be shared?

THE MESSAGE

A major requirement of such a campaign is a constant sensitivity to what is the most appropriate message, to whom it should be addressed, and by whom. Lion-tailed macaques were useful in obtaining support from international and national conservation bodies, but counterproductive at the local level. The "genetic treasure house" concept was effective both for decision-makers and the general public. The Silent Valley name was

deeply evocative, and if such an advantage does not exist in other cases, it would be useful to search for some element that could create it.

Above all, however, the environmental education effort must start with an effort to understand the needs of the local people and project how the proposed conservation movement is directly beneficial to them.

THE MEDIUM

Since dropping the project involved convincing many different levels in the decision-making process, different media had to be used.

At the Prime Ministerial level, letters from such an eminent naturalist as Dr Salim Ali, the report prepared by Dr M. S. Swaminathan and representations from reputable international conservation bodies, carried weight.

At the popular level, the use of the press created national interest in the fate of the Silent Valley. In Kerala itself it was a combination of press reports and public debate that had the maximum impact. The KSSP's annual Jatha took the issue of deforestation to the countryside. An unprecedented drought in 1983 made the effects of deforestation a living reality for the people of Kerala. A special 12-day Jatha was organized during April/May 1983, covering all districts in Kerala which still had forests. Signatures were collected from 200,000 people asking the Government of Kerala to declare a moratorium on all development projects in forested areas and to stop all clear felling, especially on steep slopes.

The decision *not* to use a particular medium is often as important as a decision to use it. At the State level, representations from international conservation bodies, with their headquarters in Western countries, would have been counterproductive because of the prevailing communist ethos in this State, and were not used. Similarly an excellent little pamphlet produced in English and in the local language, Malayalam, for the legislators of Kerala, was never used for this purpose since an over-obliging printer had done the job, free of cost, on such exquisite art paper that it would only have helped confirm the allegations of those who contended that the campaign was a capitalist plot!

A 35 mm film on which one of our Committee members had laboured for days and nights was never released for screening to millions of people through the Films Division because, by the time it was ready, the campaign had moved into a phase of behind-the-scenes diplomacy rather than public outcry.

In the final stages of the campaign, key officials in the Central Government were looking into alternatives, and trying to find a possible solution. In a 4-hour discussion with the initially hostile Chairman of the Central Water Commission, it was decided that the best strategy would be

to call a halt to the public controversy so that positions would not harden further, and the Central and State Governments could work on resolving the problem in the right atmosphere. There was accordingly an immediate de-escalation in the press campaign on the part of the environmental groups, and a corresponding de-escalation on the part of the supporters of the Electricity Board.

At all times, if the medium is treated only as a tool in achieving the larger aims of the campaign, and if the cause takes precedence over individual ego-needs, the choice of the appropriate medium becomes an easier one.

METHODS AND STRATEGIES

Some of the following strategies paid dividends and may be useful elsewhere.

1. Having a multidisciplinary report, so that the benefits of the project itself can be questioned. Economic considerations generally take precedence over ecological ones, always putting the "burden of proof" on conservationists. If environmentalists can convince a few of their colleagues from other disciplines to help them assess the true costs and benefits from proposed "development" projects, they could shift the ball to the other court.
2. Leading the supposed beneficiaries of development projects to look at and question the benefits which the project promises to bestow. Without this it is difficult for economically deprived people to sympathize with environmental positions which require them to sacrifice even small short-term gains in the interest of sustainable development.
3. Asking for a "postponement" of the project until other alternatives have been exploited, rather than demanding a dropping of the project, can bring public support and provide a "face-saving" escape from the project.
4. Time and energy expended in convincing key decision-makers, either directly or by using the good offices of those in whom they have confidence, is invaluable. Government officials who do not have a vested interest in a project, either in terms of potential income or prestige, can be most helpful. Those who have an open mind should not be blamed if the pro-project lobby does a better job of communicating with them than environmentalists do.
5. Good rhetoric is not a substitute for hard work and good data in convincing such decision-makers. In fact, the Chairman of the Central Water Commission strongly resented the last-minute delay in the implementation of the project on vague environmental grounds, and

not until he had received satisfactory answers to the many distorted facts fed to him by the KSEB did he suggest joint de-escalation of the confrontation through the press.

6. Though the Prime Minister's personal interest was invaluable, it does not provide for a simplistic solution to such a politically sensitive problem. There is a need for public education to make the decision a politically acceptable one.
7. The press can play a crucial role where literacy is high. In other situations the people have to be approached through more direct contact. Where a science-for-the-people movement as effective as the KSSP does not exist, environmentalists must take the trouble to convince other organizations working in the field of rural uplift to take up their cause.
8. Co-ordination in strategy formulation, and decentralization in action, proved necessary for powerful campaigning. Although Silent Valley groups had sprung up spontaneously and independently in different parts of the country, a division of functions emerged. Groups in Kerala created public awareness in their respective areas, the Friends of Trees unit in Kerala pursued the court case, the Society for Environmental Education in Kerala (SEEK) worked largely with children's groups. The Save Silent Valley Committee in Trivandrum, capital city of Kerala, provided a meeting point for important activists from different walks of life and from different political parties.

The Save Silent Valley Committee in Bombay, the most active group outside Kerala, provided support to the efforts in Kerala. This consisted primarily in providing access to the national press, particularly important when the local press stopped giving exposure to the environmental point of view. It also played an important role in approaching eminent scientists and decision-makers in the Central Government and in keeping communications flowing between different groups for effective strategy formulation and implementation.

9. The ability to respond with speed and flexibility to rapidly changing situations was very important in contending with the strong, and financially powerful, vested interests involved in such a major project. A number of private contractors had a great deal to lose, as did some KSEB officials, if the project was dropped.

The established conservation bodies, with their multi-tiered organization structures, were less effective in responding to the demands of a rapidly evolving situation. An ad-hoc group, like the Save Silent Valley Committee, Bombay, strongly focused on a single environmental issue, with no hierarchical structure and no requirement to perpetuate itself once the campaign was over, could draw together interested members from various organizations and pool their valuable contacts and expertise.

CONCLUSION

It is difficult, even at this stage, to pinpoint precisely all the factors that contributed to the shelving of the Silent Valley hydroelectric project at the eleventh hour and in the face of formidable odds. Many aspects, especially in the realm of human motivation, will always remain as "grey areas" and conjectures. But if an objective criterion is required that the environmental education campaign worked, it is to be found in the fact that there was no outcry in Kerala when the project was eventually dropped. In the Palghat district of Kerala where the project was to have been located, and where those who called for the dropping of the project had to face the possibility of physical assault, the people suggested to the KSSP activists that a felicitation be held for the Prime Minister for dropping the project!

In the conservation field no battle is ever final. The Silent Valley campaign, where environmentalists intervened at a very late stage in the life of the project, and with a very inadequate data base to begin with, made the task more difficult, more bitter and more costly than it need have been. Now that a respite has been won, the search should be for ways in which such movements for ecologically sound development are based on planned and timely interactions between governmental and non-governmental agencies, with an objective assessment of costs and benefits. An approach of this type would be an appropriate expression of the holistic approach, which is part of the conservationists' own philosophy.