

Newsletter

January-December 2011 Volume V Numbers 1 and 2



ASLE India

For THE KIND ATTENTION OF NEW MEMBERS

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ASLE INDIA

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From the Editor's Desk

A deeper awareness of our environment and the pressing need to conserve and preserve nature has come into the everyday awareness of people around us. This new awakening has become apparent in several ways. Educational curricula at all levels have come to include aspects of environment and nature conservation. Even from preprimary school levels our children are made to become a little more self-conscious of the need to interact with care and affection toward all things natural, and almost at all levels this insistence on environmental care has been introduced. We see innumerable posters and hoardings all about us each day singing the praise of nature and of our responsibilities toward her. The media is replete with such messages. Ecology and environment have become catch words for our fast-developing communities. However, the fact remains that these things are applied from above, from the officiating establishment. The need of the hour is that such an integrating awareness has to surface from below from the conscience of the masses. The funny side of this story is that smaller communities in our part of the world had always cherished a profound environmental awareness and conscience, but the juggernaut of modernization and industrialization had wiped out these as superstition and ignorance. Hence what is required perhaps is an integration of such *pre-modern superstitions* into a larger vision of environmental wisdom without blocking off the present. After all, the globalising present is a given condition, and all communities are susceptible to change.

“There is, for me, a mixture of longings for an earlier age; this is inevitable, perhaps, in any life, but there is an extra twist of almost painful nostalgia brought about by having lived a life particularly intense in moods. This makes it even harder to leave the past behind, and life, on occasion, becomes a kind of elegy for lost moods. I miss the lost intensities, and I find myself unconsciously reaching out for them, as I still now and again reach back with my hand for the fall and heaviness of my now-gone, long, thick hair; like the trace of moods, only a phantom weight remains. These current longings are, for the most part, only longings, and I do not feel compelled to recreate the intensities: the consequences are too awful, too final, and too damaging.”

Jamison, Kay Redfield. *An Unquiet Mind*. New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1996. P 212

A Wild Thorn

*I have passed nights with ascetics in the monastery,
I have slept with infidels before the idols of the pagoda.
I am the pangs of the jealous, I am the pain of the sick.
I am both cloud and rain: I have rained on the meadows.*

[Jalaluddin Rumi, 'Soul of the World,' *Mathnawi*, Trans. R A Nicholson]

There is a certain quiet that falls in the mind when one enters any forest. Of course, even the most troubled and the tortured souls have found silence and calm in the solitude of the deep jungle. The *Silent Valley* reserve forests of Kerala, in south India, are no different. The last of the remaining tropical wet-evergreen rain forests, this 200 odd square miles of almost virgin forest had created such a profound social unrest in the lives of many people living in the far southern coast of India in the mid-seventies and early eighties almost to the level of being raised to the iconic level of signifying the struggles of environmental protection and preservation. The forests are so named because of the huge silence that descends amidst the rocky cliffs and giant trees and the near-total absence of the otherwise persistent cicada. Through the valley snakes the river Kunthi (recalling the epical presence of the Pandava lineage) and the jungle goes by the name of Sairandhri (Panchali renamed herself as Sairandhri, the queen Sudeshna's aid, while the Pandavas were in exile)

I first heard about Silent Valley in the summer of 1976, while I was registered as a Graduate student in Trivandrum. My college was a premier institution in the state and the country considering its stupendous history and the large number of scholars and intellectuals who had sauntered across its portals in the years of yore. The University College had celebrated its centenary and more by then. As they used to say in the small laid back city this was the college to grow up in! Those years were also years of tremendous change and political upheaval. Every second student I met there had an ideological point to debate and prove. The teachers who came to the classes were also equally intelligent and committed (or perhaps gave such an impression, or even appeared thus to my youthful imagination.) It did not appear strange to me that our professor turned out to be an accomplished ornithologist and I recall the many hours we chatted about pelicans and pigeons and edible-nest swiftlets, while he did have some spare time away from the classes and other work. The red brick-walls of the old British style building were built to last any amount of student unrests and rebellions apparently because I had witnessed quite a number of those during the years I spent there. The bird-watcher professor was always quite nonchalant and unmoved by those million mutinies and kept on lighting up his non-filtered cigarettes one after another. He was a confirmed skeptic and was quite derisive about student agitations. The song of a bulbul or the call of the White-breasted Kingfisher was no doubt more capable of creating ripples in his sardonically



cynical mind than any number of political happenings. He was the President of our *Kerala Natural History Society* organized in the lines of the Bombay version of the same. We used to get together during the last Saturday of every month in the Museum campus under the trees or when it rained during the persistent monsoon days in the damp up-stairs rooms of the silent citadels of a colonial era. Nature was our concern and ecology and conservation our subject. It was then that I came across the silent valley debate and the time and age were so volatile that soon I was sucked into the maelstrom of the first ever people's movement for environment in India. Silent Valley was a passion, it became the icon and symbol of what we humans were about to lose forever on account of the wayward march of uncaring science and technology. The whole project of development was something I came to detest and deride. The very idea of the city and its ambience was what I came to identify with the inhuman policies and projects of the imperial west!

When one is young one's thoughts are pretty fast and the youthful brain adapts easily to the ideas of resistance to authority and power. One arrays oneself always with the underdogs and identifies everything else as potential threats. For my enthusiastic mind urbanization appeared as some kind of Americanisation, and technology that ushered in the terrible change figured as the juggernaut of maldevelopment and calamity. The very name Silent Valley was enough to evoke the idea of greenness and solitude, tranquility and serenity. Over and above it when I came to know more about the policy of the State Government to build a dam across the placid water of the deep jungle stream—the Kunthi river—I was determined to throw in my might to save all that I stood for at any cost. I trekked the hills and mountains of the Western Ghats sometimes with friends and fellow naturalists but mostly alone. Many of those few close friends I had in the literary artistic circles thought I was a freak and started keeping safe distances from me. And yet there were a handful who sympathized with my view and I soon found myself drawn into a larger circle of committed young people like me. Then came the wild-life week celebrations. The State Department of forests also came to our aid and sometimes provided some sort of help. During one of the ubiquitous poster exhibitions of those days I was awarded a bird-book by our President in the presence of a few committed naturalists and wild-life enthusiasts—and as he proclaimed it, it was in return for the single-handed service I had rendered for the social awareness raising campaign. Life was in the fast lane those days and much was happening beside the valley issue. The political emergency clamped on the country by the then prime minister Mrs. Indira Gandhi was crucial and critical in the way of our growing up. No one was allowed to protest and there was little one could do by way of resistance. Mrs. Gandhi herself was a sensitive soul when it came to issues of conservation and



preservation, as I came to realize, but the political climate of those days inspired innumerable young people to take to the streets and be tortured and martyred—apparently for no significant purpose. This might appear no big deal to the youth of today so very used to terrorism and needless political massacres. But then protest and resistance were the order of our youthful days! And Kerala was a hotbed of socio-political and cultural action. However, there were many so called pretentious intellectuals who hid themselves away from the prying eyes of the Gestapo-like police force of the ruling powers that be. Strangely enough many of them made it big in some way or other in

later days, conveniently forgetting those times of struggle in the darkness. I can recall a couple of instances when as a student I had occasions to witness the dastardly and cowardly actions of some so-called intellectuals who later paraded themselves as big shots and culture-vultures! Julien Benda had rightly dubbed such situations as *the betrayal of the intellectuals*. And then there were other mean minds that played havoc with several innocent *younghearts* who were absolutely unaware of the profound political intrigues of the times and their deeper significance. They would organize some action rally or other forms of activities like street plays etc and parade the unknowing innocent victims in the forefront while hiding behind their shadows lurking and ducking the vigilant police and political spies. How many times did I fall prey to these dirty games that these political big-wigs played! How many dark nights and sleepless dawns did I tread the erroneous bye lanes running reckless errands for these uncaring scoundrels! The worst thing was that I had carried out all these under the pretense that I was doing something heroic! And growing up in those dragon-ridden days and nights I had played out my active part in the drama of the silent valley too. We got ourselves organized as a society calling it the *Save Silent Valley Society*. There was an equally involved student of Engineering with whom I struck up a good working friendship. The two of us were the conveners of this society. We sent out a call for a public seminar and proclaimed our intentions to create an open forum to bring the great intrigues into the clear light of day. There was also a specially mounted exhibition that displayed posters and photographs depicting the facts and figures of the silent valley issue. On the date of the rally and intended procession, the court issued an injunction order and it was announced that anyone found defying the court order would be punished—the rally was called off. But a few enthusiastic friends had decide to take out a march to the

government secretariat silently holding forth placards and their mouths covered with handkerchiefs symbolizing the imposed silence. Many were arrested and the march disbanded cruelly. Some of my friends forcibly locked me up in the exhibition hall to keep me safe from being arrested. I don't actually know what happened except through the newspapers that carried detailed reports daily. There were of course no television or cell phone in those days—and anyway we were too poor to afford to buy even a book or a journal: the ubiquitous newspapers came and went. And days moved onto nights and darkness made way for the next dawns. The people's movement had caught on and there were many hands to carry the placards and prepare the posters and many mouths to spread the message. The *Kerala Sastra Sahitya Parishad*, the people's science movement in the state had taken up the issue and another organization acme to be founded: the *Prakriti Samrakshana Samithi* (the people's association for the protection of nature)



Leading poets, intellectuals and cultural activists came to take up the flag from our tired hands and the burden of saving the valley came to be the problem of a larger community of sensitive people. There were even occasions when after putting up hand painted posters some over enthusiastic self-styled leader would turn to thank me for my efforts. The valley was silent no more. It was a burning issue and vociferous political problem debated and discussed by thousands and millions not only in Kerala but all the way from Gujarat to the far eastern states and from Kanyakumari to Kashmir. The desecration of the valley symbolized the perilous avarice of the human beings and its deprivation signaled the disappearance of an all-time green soul from the human body. The silent valley was a passion in my youthful mind and its memories are even now ever-green, and will be like that forever, even after I pass. Three decades after that when I visited the place, I lugged with me the dead weight of a long lost past. I walked down the much trodden path into the green jungle and trampled carelessly over brown and yellow leaves and rounded boulders. The rush of the forest stream had not lost its power and passion. The wild breeze taunted me with the touch of evergreen green deeps. Occasional bits of blue sky showed through the rich verdance of the west coast tropical wet evergreen rain forests. I had forgotten even to wet my feet in the swirling waters of the Kunthi river. Did I hear the whistling thrush mock me for attempting to stop the building of a dam across these waters? Who can resist the juggernaut of change? When I left the forest I fumbled in my pockets for the change I had brought along. I pulled out a clutch of currency notes but no change! I realized I had lost the coins in the jungle. The deep-chested whoop of the Nilgiri Langur floated down wind and a Sambhar stag bellowed. An old friend who had spent long years in Russia had told me that whenever the Russians leave a place where they want to return later they fling a coin behind their backs. The magic of the lost coins would take me again and again to Silent Valley! Who knows! At least, there is still a valley one could think of going back to. For me, the Silent Valley, is a wild thorn—a painful memory of a lifetime. I have kept it buried deep within my secret memories with the sacredness and rectitude of a serene religious experience, nursing and preserving the bitter-sweetness of an unhealing wound, not relishing or caressing it even in my dreams for fear of losing it forever!

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The major tenets of Deep Ecology

A rejection of anthropocentrism. All life on earth has an intrinsic value irrespective of the human angle.

Richness and biodiversity are valuable in themselves and humans have no right to reduce this diversity.

An identification with all life

Caring for the other life forms is part of individual self-realization.

A critique of instrumental rationality (emphasis should be not on quantity and efficiency but quality)

Personal development of a total world view. Individual thinking and action are of utmost significance and later the collective and the social.

