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# Sustaining Sustainability: Re-reading the “Tree Poets” in Malayalam Literature

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### Abstract

The concept of sustainability that is ubiquitous now has, as Jeremy S. Caradonna well documented in his book *Sustainability: A History*, has been here for at least some centuries. This paper studies the involvement of Malayalam writers in what is known as the “Silent Valley Movement” or “Silent Valley Protest” in the 70s and the early 80s of the twentieth century. It reads select poems written by poets like Sugatha Kumari, Kadammanitta, ONV, etc., who, at the time of the struggle, because of their active literary and physical involvement in it, came to be disparagingly tagged as “Tree poets” by the supporters of the proposed irrigation project in Silent Valley, an evergreen, ecologically sensitive tropical forest in the foothills of Western Ghats in the Palakkad district of Kerala. The paper looks into the poems from the perspective of sustainability to see how the media of poetry can, with its literary forms, figures, and, symbols, sensitize the public about an issue of utmost importance to the future of humankind. It seeks to discover how proposed “developmental activities” which can damage the ecological balance of the planet are countered through literary means. The paper further looks into the ideals projected in the poems to see how far they correspond to the accepted sustainability goals of today.

*Keywords:* Sustainability, Tree Poets in Malayalam, Silent Valley Protest, Sujatha Kumari, Kadammanitta

### Introduction

The concept of sustainability demands in itself a multi-dimensional and multi-disciplinarian approach for its praxis. The concerned and dedicated efforts of people from all walks of life are pivotal in the proper implementation of, and, achievement of sustainability goals.

For some time now we have listened to doomsday narratives about upcoming climate catastrophes. Yet, we also know that sustained and concerted efforts to bring out a better world have been

taking place in many parts of the planet. Jeremy S. Caradonna in his *Sustainability: A History* argues that “the fundamental idea of creating a sustainable society has a long genealogy that stretches back at least to 1700” (231). Chris Turner in *How to be a Climate Optimist* (2022) invokes his readers to “set doom aside” and “. . . focus on living. Living better” (11). He says that “in the face of the existential challenge of climate change” he believes that “the world will develop and implement better systems and technologies to meet our daily needs and reduce our global greenhouse gas emissions . . .” (10). Turner has even coined a phrase, “climate solution” to denote a “. . . tool (a technology, policy, concept, idea, gadget or notion) that is part of a general effort to reduce the amount of catastrophic climate change humanity is likely to cause (15-16).

This paper looks into one such “climate solution.” It looks into a first-of-its-kind struggle made by a group of litterateurs in Kerala towards preserving a tropical evergreen rainforest through literary activism in the late 70s and 80s of the twentieth century. The literary techniques used and the genres employed have served and can serve as blueprints for later literary engagements in similar contexts. The paper further analyzes the merits and limitations of such approaches from the vantage point of being able to look back at the whole struggle after half a century.

One of the proclaimed SDGs of the United Nations is action against climate change. Long before the UN formulated the SDGs, long before climate change was generally perceived as a consequence of human actions, some established creative writers in Kerala joined with an emerging movement of protest against, what was then generally seen as a scientific project bringing in development to an underdeveloped geo-political location. The project was the proposed “Silent Valley Hydro-electricity Project” and the writers who joined in the protests against it were pejoratively termed “Tree Poets” by those who supported the project.

### **Silent Valley Project**

The Silent Valley is a tropical evergreen rain forest on the banks of river Kunthi in Palakkad district in the state of Kerala. The forest is considered untouched by human activity with an unbroken ecological history for crores of years. It is found to be a “treasure-

trove of biological diversity” (Ministry 9) and is home to more than 211 species of birds, 225 species of insects, 25 species of reptiles, and 128 species of butterflies apart from being a habitat for rare plants and animals thus making it a veritable mine of bio-diversity. Because of the dense forestry that covered it, the area remained resistant to deforestation attempts for centuries.

According to Global Footprint Network, “Humans use as much ecological resources as if we lived on 1.75 Earths.” And, sustainable development is being advocated as the only option for human survival. *Our Common Future* defines “sustainable development” as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (8). And, not compromising upon the needs of future generations requires an understanding of critical natural capital (CNC), the capital in nature that cannot be substituted by human action. In a Report prepared for the UK Conservation Agency English Nature CNC is defined as “consisting of assets, stock levels or quality levels that are highly valued, and either essential to human health or to the efficient functioning of life-support systems, or irreplaceable or not-substitutable for all practical purposes” (English Nature Research Report 14). And, the thick rain forests of Silent Valley can be counted as CNC based on all these aspects.

By the 19th century, along with increased human interferences over the geological plane, the need for energy multiplied. Hydroelectric energy was seen to be one of the most efficient means to meet the growing energy demand. Dams were being built all over the world and they were increasingly seen as symbols of development bringing in progress to hitherto “backward” areas. During the time of the British rule itself, the river Kunthi had been found as an ideal spot for building a dam and plans were made to the effect. There were government approvals and attempts to build the dam from the early 20th century onwards, but it was in the mid-70s of the 20th century that a dedicated move to build a dam across the river got approved by the government and the work got started in earnestness.

The project, popularly known as the “Silent Valley Project” was proposed and executed by KSEB, Kerala State Electricity Board which

was constituted by the Government of Kerala in 1957 for carrying out the business of Generation, Transmission and Distribution of electricity in the state of Kerala.

At the same time, many environmental activists and scientists opposed the Project since it was bound to flood a large tract of heavy forest which was ecologically unique. According to them, the project was seen to cause unalterable damage to the ecosystem and climate. Among those who opposed the project were many well-known scientists, writers, artists and social workers. M. S. Swaminathan, Dr. Salim Ali, Dr. Madhav Gadgil Mrinalini Sarabhai, etc. were among the many luminaries whose involvement -gave strength to the protest movement. Prof. M. K. Prasad, an academic and environmental activist, wrote many articles which opposed the project using objective and scientific arguments. He was a member of Kerala Sastra Sahitya Parishad KSSP (transl. Kerala Science Literature Council) whose magazine, *Sastragathi* published many articles concerning the subject advocating the protection of Silent Valley. Many other periodicals at that time too published articles to and for the project. One such article, by Prof. M. K. Prasad, titled “Protect Silent Valley,” (1979) was published in *Mathrubhumi Weekly*, a popular and critically acclaimed literary weekly in Malayalam, put forth strong arguments for the preservation of the rain forest and countered the claims made by KSEB regarding development of the Malabar region which the project was supposed to sustain. Moreover, he put forth creative and practical solutions to solve the backwardness of the Malabar region and to bring about the needed power to the area. Thus, while the article objectively and poignantly argued for the preservation of the Valley as a unique legacy handed over to mankind, it stood apart since it made learned alternative suggestions to generate energy and sustainably preserve nature.

Among the readers who were motivated by the article was the noted Malayalam poet Sugathakumari. Inspired by the essay, Sugathakumari came to attend a meeting held to protect Silent Valley in a hotel in Thiruvananthapuram. (James 55, Radhakrishnan R., & Joji Koottummel 49). This brought a new dimension to the whole struggle and paved the way for the entry of many well-known poets and writers into the movement. Many writers including the legendary storyteller Vaikom Muhammad Basheer, poets like

Ayyappa Panikkar, ONV, Kadammanitta, D. Vinayachandran, G. Kumarappillai, and the acclaimed essayist and critic, Sukumar Azhikode joined in the protest.

### **The Poems**

Consequent to this an organization for the protection of nature (Prakriti Samrakshana Samiti) was formed in 1980 under the auspices of N. V. Krishnawarriar, a well-known poet and critic. In 1983 Samiti published *Vana Parvam*, a collection of 31 eco-poems. These poems, in the words of K. L. Mohanavama, who was the Secretary of Kerala Sahitya Akademi who republished it in 1996 are a “creative revolution” against the human destruction inflicted on nature.

The poets themselves considered it a sacred mission to write in support of the preservation of gifts of nature. Vishnu Narayana Nambhoothirippad, who wrote the preface, equated their work to a yagna, a sacrifice. He even lists out the challenges they faced during the struggle, namely, The derisive tag “Tree Poets,” the prohibitions, the oppressive economic limitations, the lethargy of just souls, the inefficiency and uselessness of the administrative agencies to implement justice even at times when justice was established [by law-making bodies and courts], accusations that [they were] agents of every known political and apolitical conspiracies”. Yet they refused to stop the yagna convinced that “a writer’s identity and essence constitute in not learning to destroy and in being designated to create” (11).

The thirty-one poems (and a One Act Play by Vylloppilly Sreedharamenon) dealt with emotionally charged interactions with nature. The poems, like many other creative literary works where ecology and environment occupy a pivotal space, can be categorized based on the basic themes and emotions upon which they are focused. It is interesting to trace some of the UN SDGs being addressed in the poems, especially, SDGs 11, 13 and 15. This can point to the relevance of the SDGs as such along with shedding light upon the prophetic vision of the poets who evoked the SDGs even before they were conceptualized in systematic patterns.

One set of poems emanates a sense of nostalgia leading to sadness, lamentation, rightful indignation and a call for action. The

UN SDG 13 of “climate change” can find an early resonance in these poems where we can see the poets lamenting over the destruction of sustainable geographies leading to global catastrophes. Another set of poems invokes the oneness of man with nature by talking about delicate bonds between humans and animals, and by singing eulogies to the beauty of nature and its components. Some rare poems also offer inspiring examples of the preservation and reclaiming of natural elements. Preservation and respect of “life on land”, the 15th SDG is seen as the desirable end in these poems. Altogether, the poems in *Vana Parvam* bring in a compendium of arguments for a societal mobilization for sustainability.

The refrain “where, where” could be heard to echo in poems which nostalgically look at geographical spaces transformed by modernity’s interference with the natural world. “Every person, in every country in every continent, will be impacted in some shape or form by climate change. There is a climate cataclysm looming, and we are underprepared for what this could mean” (*United Nations “Sustainable Development Goals”*). The 13th UN SDG for climate action warns that “If left unchecked, climate change will undo a lot of the development progress made over the past years. It will also provoke mass migrations that will lead to instability and wars.” Many poems in *Vana Parvam* warn about the catastrophic consequences of unsustainable development and call for immediate action.

Dr Ayyappa Panikkar’s poignant poem asks the present generation a question from the past for the sake of future generations, “where are the woods, my children, where are the woods? (25-26).” P. Narayana Kurup laments the loss of sesame flowers in his poem (58-59). ONV goes one step further by writing a requiem for the “soon to die” planet Earth that “is not yet dead” (103-107). He says had to write it early since no human can remain alive at the time of earth’s demise emphasizing the interrelationship between man and his ecosystem.

M. N. Paloor writes about the coming days of no rainfall (71), while ONV wonders about the sights that await him when he returns to earth one day in the next century (94). Will he miss the flowers, the

birds, the fruits, and will all these turn to old stories, his queries anxiously?

The lamentations overflow to indignation and anger in Kadammanitta's poems. He invokes the baby not to drink breast milk and writes about the "Kattalan" (the aboriginal first dweller) who is coming to take vengeance against the ones who destroyed his pristine forest (90-93). Vyloppilly too brings in the same theme through his short play, "Mrthasanjeevani" (118-144).

As "Project Everyone", a United Nations Global Partner for SDG Advocacy and Outreach, puts it, the 15th SDG seeks to "protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss" ("Global Goals"). Poems of *Vana Parvam* written in the 1980s resonate with these ideals.

Many poems in the anthology invoke the understanding that we humans are part of nature. D. Vinayachandran's poem, "Forest" (60-63). What will "I name the forest," the poet asks and concludes that "I will name the forest my name." The human thus becomes identified with nature and then wields power over it as its ruler.

This oneness and identification can be seen in human-animal friendships as explicated by Vyloppilly's "Foster Daughter" where an elephant cured by a human comes back as his foster daughter (34-38). There are also eulogies praising the tree, the bird, and, the flower. When one plants a sapling, ONV avers, one is planting a shade, a carpet of flowers, and, he concludes, many saplings, and many shades (22-24). Sugathakumari praises the tree's varied benevolences in her "Praise be to the Tree" (19-22).

The images in the poems too are appropriately arranged to bring in the awareness of impending danger. P. Bhaskaran uses a heart-wrenching image of a cow (45) who stands for Mother Earth whose greedy children feed on her and kill her. Ayyappa Panikkar laments whether the planet Earth will wander about like a beaten cow (99-102). The image of the axe recurs in the poems of many poets. Some even equate it with the axe of Parashurama, the legendary figure who reclaimed the land of Kerala by throwing an axe into the sea. Yousaphali Kechery in his "Lament of the Forest" cries out to

Parashurama that his axe is now in the hands of thieves (46-49). Kunjunny in his micro poem subtly states that “a land made by an axe is disappearing because of axes” (42).

Some poems generate hope even after the atrocities man has done to nature. SDG 11 about “making cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable” visualizes a better future for all. Some poems in *Vana Parvam* too bring in such optimism.

Sugathakumari’s “To Thames” is one such poem of inspiration and hope where the poet is motivated by the story of the cleaning of the Thames River in London. She also writes about the ray of hope in the dread of darkness when she brings forth a mother and son planting a sapling amid pollution and smoke (138-39).

The tone and the rhythm too were used creatively by many poets to bring into the minds of the readers the necessity of immediate action. Kunjunny’s pithy lines and Sugathakumari’s poignant lyrical tones are appropriate to the themes. Poets like Kadammanitta have used the tone of incantation to evoke the urgency for action.

## Conclusion

Thus, the themes, the images, and the rhythm and tone of these poems have served the purpose of sensitizing an indifferent public against the danger of environmental destruction and have brought about what Turner has termed as a “climate solution” (16). The mass sensitization brought about by these poems also influenced the Government of India’s final proclamation of the Silent Valley as a national park on 7th September 1985 thus putting an end to years of struggle. At a time when sustainable goals are made into national and international priorities such literary activism in the past can provide many lessons.

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