

Meet Maari, the human encyclopaedia of Silent Valley, who won Kerala CM forest medal

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Maari, a celebrated conservationist, recently earned the Kerala Chief Minister's Forest Medal for his work in protecting the valley's exceptional biodiversity.



In the late 1970s, a number of environmental scientists and conservationists from across the country came to the forest area of the Silent Valley in Palakkad to study its immense biodiversity. In those days, the Muduga tribal Letchiappan was the only one who could guide them to different parts of the forest to learn about its unique peculiarities. Though he had little formal education, Letchiappan was a self-made expert on flora and fauna in the moist evergreen forests. He provided scientists and experts with precise information, aside from introducing them to rare plant species of the forests.

Then a daily wage worker with the Forest Department, Letchiappan had an encyclopaedic knowledge on rainforests of the valley. Letchiappan's son Maari was also an integral part of all those journeys, even as a child. Like his father, Maari too turned into an authority on the forests of the Silent Valley over the years. That exposure helped Maari inherit his father's legacy after the death of Letchiappan. Over the years, he has become the sole authority on the Silent Valley and its rich diversity. Biologists and botanists often seek his help to conduct in-depth studies of the region, which was originally named 'Silent Valley' because of the lack of cicadas, a noisy insect, in the area.

Now a celebrated conservationist, Maari was recently declared as a recipient of the prestigious Kerala Chief Minister's Forest Medal in recognition of his dedication to protecting the valley and its exceptional biodiversity.

"I feel excited about this award. For me, the Silent Valley is an integral part of my very existence. Whatever the knowledge I gathered from the forests and shared with others are not meant for any award or recognition. Like my father, I lived in perfect harmony with the forests. Only you people from outside are telling me the importance of awards and recognition," said Maari.

Though Maari's efforts in conservation are unparalleled, the movement to save the Silent Valley began years before. In 1976, when Kerala's electricity board announced its plan to build a 240 MW hydroelectric project over river Kunthi at Sairanthri, deep inside the Silent Valley forests in Palakkad district, the project sparked protests of an unprecedented magnitude across the state. With leading biodiversity experts and the country's top environmentalists joining forces with local green activists, it became India's first major environmental movement, one that strongly pushed for conservation above all infrastructural needs.

The Kerala Shashtra Sahitya Parishad (KSSP) had coordinated the massive protests. The group earned nationwide attention for its passionate demands to protect the evergreen forests, which constitute the largest habitat for the endangered lion-tailed macaques. The protestors had pointed out that the power project would destroy over 530 hectares of pristine evergreen forests and its rich biodiversity in the Western Ghats. They had also demanded authentic studies on the flora and fauna of Silent Valley, one of the world's key ecological hotspots.

It was in 1980, the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi acted in favour of the Silent Valley protest and directed the state government to abandon the project forever. The Prime Minister had also declared the area as a national park, with special focus on the lion-tailed macaques.

This agitation led to the enactment of a series of laws, which required stringent clearances, including a mandatory environmental impact assessment report, before approving any major project with ecological implications. The movement had later inspired several green initiatives at the national level, including Narmada Bachao Andolan and the Anti-Tehri Dam movement.

Maari has won other environmental awards in the past, including a conservation award instituted in memory of former Chief Conservator of Forests N Madhavan Pillai and later the prestigious P V Thampi environmental award. But he stands out because of his humble family background and limited exposure to formal education. Maari left school during his lower primary classes and began his conservation activities at the age of 15 as a daily wage worker with the department. He worked his way up to and became a permanent employee in the department only in 2017. He joined the service as a tribal watcher after passing a Public Service Commission examination with first rank.

And when it comes to research conducted in the Silent Valley during the last quarter of a century, Maari's contributions have been unparalleled. During the floods in 2018, Maari was forced to spend multiple days deep within the forest as the roads were inundated by surging

waters from River Kunthi. On many occasions, he faced attacks from wildlife in the region, including elephants, bears and tigers.

“The Chief Minister’s medal is a great recognition for his selfless efforts. We owe quite a lot to Letchiappan and Maari for their immense contributions in saving the unique ecosystem of the Silent Valley. Maari knows more about the Silent Valley than any of the forest researchers and officers. He knows each and every corner,” said Silent Valley Wildlife Warden Samuel Vanlalngheta Pachuau.

Top forest research institutions such as the Tropical Botanic Garden and Research Centre, the Institute of Forest Genetics and Tree Breeding, and the Kerala Forest Research Centre have all acknowledged Maari’s contribution to conservation. For a long time, he was also a member of the Kerala State Wildlife Board headed by the Chief Minister. What’s more, a group of environmentalists have recently started working on a documentary about the 49-year-old man. To his utter surprise, the celebrated Malayalam film director Lal Jose will do the background narration for the documentary.

“Currently, I am deputed to carry out conservation activities at Poochipara region of the Silent Valley. On a daily basis, I get the opportunity to interact with eco-tourists on the need for conservation and safekeeping of our forests. There are scholars and academics among those who meet me. But they value me and my advice without bothering much about my formal schooling and academics,” said Maari.

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