

## In sync with Silent Valley

K.A. SHAJI November 19, 2015



Muduga tribal Letchiappan was a veritable storehouse of information on the flora and fauna of the moist evergreen forests of Silent Valley. In the 1970s and 80s, when the Save Silent Valley Movement was at its peak against the construction of a hydroelectric project across the Kunthi river, conservationists from and outside the State reached the forest area to get authentic information on its rich biodiversity.

It was Letchiappan who took the experts, researchers, and conservationists into the deep forests to introduce them to the rare species. A daily wage worker with the Forest Department, school dropout Letchiappan had an encyclopaedic knowledge on rain forests of the valley. Letchiappan's son Maari, a child then, was an integral part of all those journeys. After Letchiappan's death, Maari continues to live up to his legacy.

Now a well-known conservationist, Maari has been chosen for the 18th P.V. Thampi Environmental Award, instituted by the Kochi-based Environmental Monitoring Forum. The award, carrying a cash prize of Rs.25,000 and citation, will be presented to Maari on Friday in Kochi. Maari, who has completed only his lower primary education, began his conservation

activities at the age of 15 as a daily wage worker. He became a permanent employee of the department only last year, joining the service as a tribal watcher after passing a Public Service Commission examination with first rank. "The studies the environmentalists did to buttress their argument to save the unique ecosystem of Silent Valley owed quite a lot to Letchiappan and Maari," says N. Baburaj, a colleague. "He knows more about Silent Valley than any of the forest officers. Every nook and cranny of the forests is under his close vigil," he adds.

Experts from the Tropical Botanic Garden and Research Centre, the Institute of Forest Genetics and Tree Breeding, and the Kerala Forest Research Centre have acknowledged Maari's contribution to conservation. Winner of several awards, Maari is at present a member of the Kerala State Wildlife Board headed by Chief Minister Oommen Chandy.

***Tribal watcher, a school dropout, gets eco award for keeping a close vigil on every nook and cranny of the national park.***

Source:

<http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/kerala/in-sync-with-silent-valley/article7894454.ece>