

Human V/s Environmental Issues in the Western Ghats : A Brief Commentary on Madhav Gadgil and Kasturirangan Reports

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When ascending, and on gaining the summit of any of these passes (in the Western Ghats), the scenery which everywhere presents itself is of the grandest kind. Some idea of it may be formed by imagining mountains succeeding mountains, three or four thousand feet high, covered with trees, except in places where the huge, black, barren rocks are so solid as to prevent the hardiest shrub from finding root in their clefts. The verdure about the Ghats to the southward of Poona is perpetual, but during the rainy season, especially towards the latter part of it, when the torrents are pouring from the sides of the mountains, the effect is greatly heightened by the extreme luxuriance of vegetation". (Grant Duff (1826) *History of Marathas, Vol. 1, qtd.* in the report of the WGEEP)

The above description by Grant Duff is about one of the greatest mountain ranges of the world that is home to rarest of rare species of flora and fauna covering India's southern peninsula. Western Ghats whose other name is 'Sahyadri' is a single geographic belt ranging from Goa to Kanyakumari covering six Indian States viz., Goa, Maharashtra, Gujarat, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu and Kerala. It is a mountain range that runs parallel to the Western coasts of the Indian peninsula, located entirely in India. The range embarks on the border of Maharashtra and Gujarat, south of the Tapti river and runs approximately 1600 kms. and its width ranges from 48 kms. to 210 kms. These mountain ranges cover 1,29,037 sq.kms. and the average elevation is around 1200 m (3,900 ft.) according to Madhav Gadgil report. Important rivers viz., Godavari, Nethravati, Krishna and Kaveri originate from the Western Ghats.

The Western Ghats protects 7402 species of flowering plants, 1814 species of non-flowering plants, 139 mammal species, 508 bird species, 179 amphibian species, 6000 insects and 290 freshwater fish species. At least 325 globally threatened species of flora and fauna occur in the Western Ghats. It is also likely that many undiscovered species of plants and animals live in the Western Ghats. The WGEEP Report says:

The importance of the Western Ghats in terms of its biodiversity can be seen from the known inventory of its plant and animal groups, and the levels of endemism in these taxa (Gunawardene et al. 2007). Nearly 4000 species of flowering plants or about 27% of the country's total species are known from the Ghats. Of 645 species of evergreen trees (>10 cm dbh), about 56% is endemic to the Ghats. Among the lower plant groups, the diversity of bryophytes is impressive with 850-1000 species; of these 682 species are mosses with 28% endemics and 280 species are liverworts with 43% endemics. Among the invertebrate groups, about 350 (20% endemic) species of ants, 330 (11% endemic) species of butterflies, 174 (40% endemic) species of odonates (dragonflies and damselflies), and 269 (76% endemic) species of mollusks (land snails) have been described from this region. The known fish fauna of the Ghats is 288 species with 41% of these being endemic to the region. (Report of the WGEEP 2011 p. 10)

These hill ranges serve as important wildlife corridors and form an important part of Project Elephant and Project Tiger reserves. The second largest population of tigers is in the Western Ghats where an estimated population size of 336 to 487 individuals inhabits in an area of 21,435 sq. kms., forest in three major landscape units spread across Karnataka, Tamil Nadu and Kerala. Also the Western ghats eco-region has the largest Indian elephant population in the wild with an estimated 11,000 individuals. The endemic Nilgiri tahr which at one time was on the brink of extinction has recovered and has an estimated 3122 individuals in the wild. About 3500 lion-tailed macaques live scattered over several areas in the Western Ghats.

The amphibians of the Western Ghats are diverse and unique, with more than 80% of the 179 amphibian species being endemic to the rainforests of the mountains. The endangered purple frog was discovered in 2003. Four new species of frogs belonging to the genera *Rhacophorus*, *Polypedates*, *Philautus* and *Bufo* were discovered from the Western Ghats in 2005. As of 2004, 288 freshwater fish species are listed for the Western Ghats, including 35 known from marine water. There are also 118 endemic species, including 12 genera entirely restricted to the Western Ghats.

The foregoing details underscore the crucial position of the Western Ghats not only in India's ecology, but for its wealth of the rarest of rare species of flora and fauna, it also holds a very important position in the world's ecological system. For the same reason the Western Ghats is a focal point of world's attention. The Western Ghats is one of the eight 'hottest hotspots' of bio-diversity in the world.

In 2006 India had applied to UNESCO for declaring the Western Ghats as World Heritage Site and accordingly, in 2012 UNESCO declared thirty-nine spots along the Western Ghats as World Heritage Sites – twenty in Kerala, ten in Karnataka, five in Tamil Nadu, and four in Maharashtra—which include National Parks, Wild Life Sanctuaries, Reserved Forests, and Tiger Reserves.

Unprecedented human migration has taken place in the Western Ghats during the twentieth century. The migrant population not only include small farmers came and settled in the area looking for means of survival, but also the big estate owners and mining magnates reaping huge profits causing irreparable damage to the environment of the region. Now the Western Ghats is home to some 50 million people belonging to the six States from Goa to Kerala. And in the last one hundred years, the deforestation that took place in the Western Ghats is to the extent of 25.6%.

A big governmental and bureaucratic dilemma has been caused by the reports of two different Commissions set up by the Ministry of Environment and Forests (MoEF), Government of India in the recent past in order to find out the ways and means to protect this rare and invaluable gift of Nature. The first commission viz., The Western Ghats Ecology Expert Panel, headed by Prof. Madhav Gadgil, a renowned environmentalist, was set up in 2010 and it submitted its report in August, 2011 in which it had recommended impracticable strictures and prohibitions on the developmental projects and activities in the area including those which would have led to evacuating villages altogether under Indian Environment (Protection) Act.

The WGEEP Report begins with the following paragraph in order to stress on the magnitude of the subject: The protector of the Indian peninsula, the mother of the Godavari, Krishna, Netravathi, Kaveri, Kunthi, Vaigai and a myriad other rivers, Kalidasa likens the Western Ghats to a charming maiden; Agastyamalai is her head, Annamalai and Nilgiri the breasts, her hips the broad ranges of Kanara and Goa, her legs the northern Sahyadris. Once the lady was adorned by a sari of rich green hues; today her mantle lies in shreds and tatters. It has been torn asunder by the greed of the elite and gnawed at by the poor, striving to eke out a subsistence. This is a great tragedy, for this hill range is the backbone of the ecology and economy of south India. (Report of the Western Ghats Ecology Expert Panel Part I, Preface. P.v)

The WGEEP headed by Prof. Madhav Gadgil has “designated the entire Western Ghats as an Ecologically Sensitive Area (ESA), and demarcated it into three different Ecologically Sensitive Zones viz., ESZ1, ESZ2 & ESZ3, according to the degree of sensitivity. This demarcation covers about 142 talukkas with the Western Ghats boundaries spread over six States. The Panel has thus recommended not giving any environmental clearances for dam constructions in ESZ1, and also indefinite moratorium on environmental clearances for mining activities and for red and orange category polluting industries in the States of Maharashtra and Goa. The WGEEP has finally submitted its report urging:

the Ministry of Environment and Forests to take a number of critical steps to involve citizens. These would include: pro-active and sympathetic implementation of the provisions of the Community Forest Resources of the Forest Rights Act, establishment of fully empowered Biodiversity Management Committees in all local bodies, promotion of programmes on the pattern of ‘Conservation of biodiversity rich areas . . . a radical reform of Environmental Impact Analysis and Clearance processes, pro-active disclosure of all information of public interest interpreted in the broadest possible sense, a revival of the Paryavaran Vahini programme, and institution of a social audit process for all environmental issues on the model of that for the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act in Andhra Pradesh.

In fact the Panel’s recommendations, if implemented, would have more adversely affected the big estate owners and mining barons than the small scale migrant farmers. However, the recommendations of the Panel have been blown out of proportion and politics has come into play in the Western Ghats issue. Rather than party politics, certain interested groups have started threatening political parties with boycott if they do not oppose the Panel’s recommendations tooth and nail. As a result, all the ruling and opposition parties of the concerned States had raised their cudgels against the report more for the fear of losing their vote base than a real concern in the problems of the people if the recommendations are implemented.

However, considering the opposition to the report from all the quarters, the MoEF was compelled to set up another Commission in 2012, viz., High Level Working Group (HLWG) headed by Dr. Kasturirangan, the famous space scientist, which submitted its report on 15th April, 2013. The chief purpose behind constituting such a commission, particularly, when a comprehensive report on the Western Ghats submitted by the WGEEP existed, was, as mentioned in the terms of reference:

(i) examine the WGEEP Report in a holistic and multidisciplinary fashion in the light of responses received from the concerned Governments of States, Central Ministries and Stakeholders, keeping in view the following matters: (a) sustainability of equitable economic and social growth in the region while preserving the precious biodiversity, wildlife, flora and fauna and preventing their further losses; (b) ensuring the rights, needs and developmental aspirations of local and indigenous people, tribals, forest dwellers and most disadvantaged sections of the local communities while balancing equitable economic and social growth with sustainable development and environmental integrity; (c) the effects and impacts of climate change on the ecology of Western Ghats region, (d) the implication of recognizing some sites in Western Ghats as world heritage sites in the conservation and sustainable development in Western Ghats and (e) the constitutional implications of Centre –State relations with respect to conservation and sustainable development in Western Ghats; (ii) to interact with the representatives of the Six States of Western Ghats region and other stakeholders, particularly environmentalists and conservation specialists; (iii) to suggest to the Government for further course of action on WGEEP Report; (iv) any other relevant matter that may be referred to it by the Central Government; and (v) submission of Action Plan to implement WGEEP Report in the most effective and holistic manner. (Terms of Reference, The Report of HLWG, p. 3)

The HLWG had interacted with all the stakeholders including the governments of the six affected States and also from other social groups and NGOs. It had also sought responses from the Ministry of Environment and Forest. The report of the HLWG had addressed the concerns raised by the State governments and the affected groups, and recommended certain dilutions in the recommendations of the former, but for the wrong reasons, it is alleged. In fact the Report of the HLWG, headed by Dr. Kasturirangan came in for more scathing criticism from the political circles.

Thus in fact both the reports came in for scathing criticism from the States concerned and particularly from the affected groups. The major criticism, overall, was that they did not consider the human content of the area, and merely looked at the physical environmental issues in the Western Ghats which was termed as ‘mechanical environmentalism negating human interest.’

Now that there is a big public outrage against these reports, the government is unable to go ahead with implementation of any of the recommendations, being under pressure from both human and the non-human, and its further steps are closely watched by the public eye-whether it will be humane or inhuman.

The dilemma of the government is that on the one hand, it is not only in the national interest to protect the Western Ghats for its environmental importance, but also for its ecological position in the global scenario with its wild life wealth, on the other it is very difficult, if not impossible, to implement the committees' recommendations neglecting lakhs of people living in the area, both rich estate owners and poor farmers eking out mere means of subsistence. No government of the past or present, of the right or left, has shown the courage or political will to look at the issue in the right perspective. Moreover, the centre of the discussion now has shifted from the environmental issue to a social and political issue which will mean that decision making will be more complex than ever. For the same reason this issue which is of paramount importance will remain in the backburner for years to come.

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