

Destruction In The Name Of Development? : Understanding Ecological Destruction Of Western Ghats

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Abstract

Western Ghats region has been at the heart of conservation efforts since last many decades. Given the rich biodiversity and the endemic species of flora and fauna it hosts, it is featured as one of the eight most important Biodiversity Hotspots across the world by UNESCO. However last many decades has seen large scale exploitation of the region and its resources in the name of development which has resulted in the ecological degradation of it. In the light of this, government has setup important Committees to look into the protection of this region. This paper shall explore this issue and try to address the question that is the Western Ghats region facing degradation in the name of development.

Key words: Western Ghats, Gadgil Committee, Kasturirangan Committee, ecological degradation

➤ Introduction

Environmental conservation has become a burning topic ever since the issues of climate change and impending doom have gripped the world. In the last few decades environmental damage, exploitation and pollution of our environment has caught the attention of the people which has led to increasing awareness about the mounting environmental degradation. In the light of this, historians have tried to trace the origins of the contemporary environmental problems into the past as problems of the present can be better understood if we try to examine its genesis.

The increasing ecological damage and its tangible consequences in the last few decades have recently led to the emergence of a branch of history, called environmental history which has steadily gained prominence. Environmental history primarily focuses on the interaction of culture and nature. It seeks to understand how nature has affected humans and how humans have affected nature in the past. Over the past four decades or so, environmental history has developed into a full-fledged discipline which has adopted an interdisciplinary approach in order to study in-depth region specific ecological issues along with people's experience.

This paper focuses on the region of Western Ghats which has been increasingly subjected to exploitation ever since the colonial period. Spanning over six states, from Gujarat to the southern tip of India, this biodiversity hotspot known for hosting rare flora and fauna is famous for its rich biodiversity. With numerous National parks and wildlife sanctuaries within it, the importance of this ecological hotspot can be understood in the light of Government of India setting up two important Committees, namely the Gadgil and Kasturirangan Committees to look into the conservation of these Ghats.

➤ Historical overview

To understand the level of ecological destruction today, it's important to delve into the past to trace the history of exploitation which began centuries ago. Scholars like N D Jayal explain how in the later part of the 19th century and in the early 20th century the extensive stretches of moist forests were replaced by plantation crops like tea, coffee, rubber, cardamom, pepper, etc which led to the modification and destruction of the former. Later during the war years of 1939-1945, the demand of wood and food led to further destruction of the forests. Thereafter, during the post-war years the growth of vast monocultural plantations and the wide scale development of irrigation and hydel projects in the river valleys here has changed the forest density of the region. According to Jayal, the reason for the environmental degradation of the region is the result of developmental projects undertaken in an uncoordinated manner without proper study or investigation into its impacts or returns.

On the other hand, Marcus Moench has tried to focus on the region of Cardamom hills situated in the Idukki district of Kerala to understand the reason and cause of deforestation there. According to him, the relationship between the ethnic and religious communities has greatly affected migration, clashes over land control, forest encroachment, etc in this region.

Moench divides the history of Cardamom hills into three distinct periods and tries to explain the ownership rights and encroachments during these time frames. He describes how until 1860, the tribal population exclusively inhabited the hills and these forests were viewed primarily as a source of timber and other forest products by the government. From 1880 till the period

of Second World War, plantation agriculture rapidly expanded while timber harvesting continued. The natural forests were replaced by plantation crops like tea, coffee, cardamom, etc. Furthermore infrastructures like roads were constructed for political reasons, as well as for dam construction, easier access to plantations, forest harvesting, etc. However, post-Second World War, India's independence, the process of state formation since 1950's and the domestic politics since then has transformed the area into a centre of wealthy land grabbers and landless migrants. In the contemporary day and age, the High ranges have become a collage of plantations being surrounded by patchwork of migrant holdings.

➤ Development or Destruction?

In today's day and age, 'development' entails exploitation carried out on a massive scale using technical expertise, which takes into account the material gain to only few involved in the process. However, those who bear the cost of development are not the ones who benefit from it. This results in irreparable damage to the environment leading to irreversible changes.

N D Jayal explains how natural resources that are exploited are assessed generally in terms of their economic or monetary value while the biological value of the products still remains to be ascertained. He points out some significant aspects. He suggests that the indirect benefits of forests such as water conservation, soil protection, etc have not yet been quantified. Moreover, the cost-benefit analysis and the delay between the cause and the end result is another drawback according to him as it makes the estimation of the consequences difficult. The problem is that the total cost to of development to be borne may not be apparent at first, but becomes evident only in the long run.

Ecologically, mountainous regions are very fragile while also being immensely valuable in terms of resources that they hold. However, these are highly vulnerable topographical zones as they are easily affected by drainage, erosion, climate, other physical factors, etc. While difficulty of terrain makes them less populated, which helped them retain their biotic wealth, the recent development activities in these regions are usually to exploit the natural resources such as minerals, timber, etc, for arable land, for exploiting the water potential for hydel projects, for tourism and other such activities. While some development is required for the larger good and productivity of the society, excessive exploitation has to be rejected outright.

➤ Government Intervention

Given the ecological importance of the Western Ghats region and the threat that human developmental activity poses on it, the Government of India found it necessary to setup two important Committees namely the Western Ghats Ecology Expert Panel, also called the Gadgil Committee and the Kasturirangan Committee to look into the conservation of this ecologically sensitive region.

While the Gadgil Committee was labeled as being favorable to environment and its conservation, the Kasturirangan was seen to be more pro-development. The Gadgil Committee designated the entire hill ranges of Western Ghats as ecologically sensitive area and within this overall category, demarcated the region into three types of Ecologically Sensitive Zones (ESZs), namely ESZ 1, ESZ 2 and ESZ 3. In all three of these zones, SEZs, new hill stations, inter-basin linking of rivers, commissioning of dams that have outlived their utility has been banned. ESZ 1 is the highest sensitive zone and therefore the rules are the most stringent, while ESZ 3 has comparatively less rigid rules in place.

The Kasturirangan Committee however, sought to bring only 37% of the total area of the Western Ghats under the Ecologically Sensitive Area wherein there is complete ban on mining, quarrying and sand mining. This was in clear contrast to the Gadgil report which was accused of being anti-development while this report was seen as biased towards development.

Both these reports have been criticized on various grounds. While Gadgil report was critiqued for being more-environment friendly and not in tune with ground realities, Kasturirangan report was slammed for diluting the earlier report to serve vested interests. Furthermore, Gadgil report was seen as idealistic, which is impractical to implement. It doesn't take into account or give solution for the revenue losses that will be incurred by the state if its recommendations are implemented. On the other hand, Kasturirangan report is seen to provide space for mining and quarrying lobbies to flourish.

➤ Conclusion

To conclude, one can say that the momentum of present developmental process can corner the whole system and push it to an edge. Ecological rejuvenation of the Western Ghats region is a necessity and it is necessary to protect and preserve an ecosystem which is home to 1500 endemic species of flora and around 500 endemic species of fauna. The current status of reports by Gadgil and Kasturirangan is that government has chosen to take no action on it. This is a sad state of affairs as the lack of proactive action by government will only lead to further degradation of the Western Ghats from which there will be no return. Thus, government needs to balance both development and ecological conservation; as development is unavoidable, but lack of proper environmental safeguards will lead to destructive ripples across the spectrum.

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