

# A PEOPLE'S CAMPAIGN TO REBUILD KERALA

Relevant for: Environment & Disaster Management | Topic: Disaster and disaster management

The material loss due to the [Kerala floods has been estimated at 26,000 crore](#), but beyond this there has been an immense loss of natural, human, and social capital for which no estimates are available. There is no doubt that the short-sighted attempts in building man-made capital (buildings in hilly forests, encroachments on wetlands and rivers, and stone quarries) while ignoring the attendant degradation of natural, human and social capital have played a significant role in exacerbating the problem. The immediate task in the State is relief and rehabilitation, but it is crucial to simultaneously identify the root causes of the havoc.

These root causes prevail throughout the Western Ghats and, indeed, the rest of the country. The first is the flouting of laws that have been established to safeguard natural capital. The Shah Commission inquiring into illegal mining in Goa observes that mining beyond permissible limits has caused serious damage to water resources, agriculture and biodiversity. Second, we have been ignoring serious degradation of human capital in terms of health and employment. In the case of the Plachimada panchayat in Palakkad district, overuse and pollution of water resources by the Coca Cola factory has resulted in losses to the tune of 160 crore. Third, scientific knowledge and advice has been continually disregarded. In the case of the proposed Athirappilly hydroelectric project, an analysis by the River Research Centre showed that the project document had seriously overestimated the availability of water. The data examined showed that the likely power production in no way justified the costs of construction and running of the project. And fourth, there has been serious erosion of social capital. For instance, Anoop Velloppil, a staunch anti-quarry activist engaging in a peaceful demonstration, was killed when he was pelted with stones by those allegedly employed by quarry owners at Kaiveli in Vadakara Taluk of Kozhikkode district on December 16, 2014.

Kerala floods: Kudumbashree women play big role in clean-up

Therefore, it is imperative that we abandon business as usual. We cannot just focus on man-made capital; we must enhance the sum total of man-made, natural, human and social capital. The new regime that we must usher in while keeping this in mind must acknowledge that it is local communities that have a genuine stake in the health of their ecosystems and an understanding of the working of the same. The current system of protecting natural resources through negative incentives in the hands of a coercive and corrupt bureaucracy must give way to positive incentives that can be monitored in a transparent fashion by all concerned citizens. Our Western Ghats panel proposes several such incentives — for example, payment of conservation service charges for protecting important elements of biodiversity such as sacred groves (called Sarpa Kavus in Kerala), and payment towards soil carbon enrichment by switching to organic farming.

Turning over a new leaf then, the Kerala government must reassure its people that it will no longer continue the policies of development and conservation by exclusion, and that it will respect the right of local communities to decide what kind of development they want and what kind of conservation measures they would like to see put in place.

To accomplish this, the government must implement the 73rd and 74th constitutional amendments in letter and spirit. It must empower local bodies at the ward, gram panchayat, and town and city levels to prepare reports on the status of the environment and to decide on how a substantial portion of the budget should be spent on the basis of these reports. It must set up

Biodiversity Management Committees of citizens and empower them to document the status of the local ecosystems and biodiversity resources, and regulate their use. They must be given powers to levy collection charges for access to biodiversity as well as to intellectual property relating to community knowledge. In particular, it must accord the Biodiversity Management Committees a central place in the preparation of environmental impact assessments and ensure that these assessments begin to reflect the true state of affairs instead of being the uniformly fraudulent documents that are being submitted today. It must fully implement the Forest Rights Act and empower not only tribals, but all traditional forest dwellers to control, manage and market non-timber forest produce. It must stop distortion and suppression of all environment and development-related information and begin uploading information suo moto on websites, as the Right to Information Act demands. It must initiate building a public and transparent database on environmental parameters drawing on the environment status reports, People's Biodiversity Registers, community forest management working schemes, and environmental education projects undertaken by students.

The flood-hit start returning home

Equipped with this information and all pertinent documents such as from the Western Ghats Ecology Expert Panel, the Kasturirangan Committee, and the Oommen V. Oommen Committee, the State government should ask local bodies about the levels of ecological sensitivity in different parts of the landscape on the basis of topography, hydrology, land use and vegetation, regardless of ownership of the land. The local bodies should provide suggestions on appropriate management regimes for regions of different levels of sensitivity. The government should begin to proactively use modern technologies, including smartphones, in a user-friendly manner so that all the inputs from the various local bodies are transparently available to all citizens. Citizens can then assist in the task of integrating all this information and come up with appropriate conservation and development plans that are properly fine-tuned to locality- and time-specific ecological and social conditions.

This will be a broad-based inclusive approach to conservation and development, and will be in the spirit of the People's Plan Campaign of the 1990s in Kerala, which was spearheaded by the State Finance Minister, Thomas Isaac. I urge Mr. Isaac to renew the spirit of the People's Plan Campaign rather than seek to bury it. Only then can the people of Kerala rebuild nature and society and assure for themselves a sustainable and safe future. I fervently hope that the Kerala government embraces such a progressive approach, so that we will be much better equipped in the years to come to moderate, if not fully prevent, the kind of havoc that visited Kerala recently.

*Madhav Gadgil is Chairman of the Western Ghats Ecology Expert Panel*

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**END**

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