

A BOTTOM-UP APPROACH TO CONSERVATION

Relevant for: Environment | Topic: Disaster and disaster management

"A repeat of last year's extreme weather events in the Western Ghats region has made the people rethink their approach to conservation." Landslides in Kerala's Wayanad district caused havoc earlier this month. | Photo Credit: [STRINGER](#)

In 2018, many people thought that the floods and landslides in Kerala that caused huge financial losses and manifold human tragedies marked a once-in-a-century calamity, and that normalcy will return soon and we can merrily return to business as usual. Further, the probability of two such back-to-back events was only 1 in 10,000. Hence, in 2019, a repeat of the shocking train of intense floods, landslides, financial losses and manifold human tragedies has not just left the same set of people stunned but also made them realise that it is unwise to continue business as usual, and that we must think afresh of the options before us.

What are these alternatives? One set of possibilities is provided by the recommendations of the Western Ghats Ecology Expert Panel (WGEEP) which I had the privilege of chairing. Would those measures have averted the disasters of 2018 and 2019? Certainly, they wouldn't have pre-empted the intense rainfall, but they would have definitely reduced the scale of devastation caused by the downpours.

All our recommendations were grounded in a careful examination of facts. Furthermore, the policy prescriptions fell firmly within the framework of our constitutional duties and laws. We did not ask for any new law. All we suggested was that the existing laws relating to environmental protection and devolution of powers, right down to the gram sabha and ward sabha level, be followed.

Kerala leads the country in democratic devolution. The Kerala High Court had ruled in favour of Plachimada Panchayat that cancelled Coca-Cola's licence because the company polluted and depleted groundwater reserves, drying up wells and adversely impacting agriculture and livelihoods. While doing so, the panchayat invoked its constitutional rights, arguing that it had the duty to protect the well-being of its citizens and had the right to cancel — or refuse permission for — anything that affected its citizens adversely. The company's counterargument was that the panchayat was subordinate to the State government, which had granted it the licence. The Kerala High Court rejected this contention, affirming that grass-roots institutions have the authority to decide on the course of development in their own locality. Furthermore, the Kerala legislature unanimously passed a law asking Coca-Cola to pay Plachimada Panchayat due compensation for losses inflicted on them.

Kerala had also been at the forefront of the country's Literacy Mission of the late 1980s; it pioneered Panchayat Level Resource Mapping involving neo-literates and followed it up with the People's Planning campaign that attempted to involve every panchayat in the preparation of a Panchayat Development Report.

The WGEEP called for a model of conservation and development compatible with each other; we sought a replacement of the prevailing 'Develop Recklessly, Conserve Thoughtlessly' pattern with one of 'Develop Sustainably, Conserve Thoughtfully.' This fine-tuning of development practices to the local context would have required the full involvement of local communities. It would have therefore been entirely inappropriate to depend exclusively on government agencies for deciding on and managing Ecologically Sensitive Zones, and our panel certainly had no intention of imposing any development or conservation priorities on the people.

So, why were our recommendations not implemented? For one, they were dubbed “impractical”. What then is “practical”? Is violation of constitutional provisions that pertain to environmental protection and sabotaging of democratic processes practical? May be so, but it is certainly not desirable. Acting on the WGEEP report would have implied using our recommendations regarding ecological sensitivity as the starting point for a bottom-up democratic process for deciding on how we should safeguard this global biodiversity hotspot and water tower of peninsular India.

The WGEEP’s mandate asked it “to demarcate areas within the Western Ghats Region which need to be notified as ecologically sensitive and to recommend for notification of such areas as ecologically sensitive zones under the Environment (Protection) Act, 1986.” In line with the National Forest Policy, we decided to assign 60% of the total area of Western Ghats in Kerala, including the region housing wildlife sanctuaries and national parks, as a zone of highest ecological sensitivity, ‘ESZ1’.

We proposed ‘elevation’ and ‘slope’ as two indicators of sensitivity. In Kerala, rainfall increases rapidly with elevation, and high rainfall and steep slopes render localities vulnerable to landslides. Hence, areas prone to landslides would come under ESZ1.

The extent and quality of natural vegetation was the third indicator for classifying an area as ESZ1. Landslides are under check in areas with intact natural vegetation because the roots bind the soil. Any disturbance to such vegetation would render any locality that has steep slopes and experiences high rainfall susceptible to landslides. Such disturbances may include quarrying or mining, replacement of natural vegetation by new plantations, levelling of the land using heavy machinery, and construction of houses and roads. Therefore, we recommended that such activities be avoided in ESZ1 areas. Had our recommendations been accepted, the extent and intensity of landslides being encountered today would have been much lower. Implementation of our overall recommendations would have also had a plethora of other desirable results, both for nature and for people.

So, it would surely be wise to apply the panel’s recommendations now. This would imply building on India’s greatest strength, its deep-rooted democracy. Democracy is not merely voting once in five years; it is the active involvement of us citizens in governing the country at all levels, most importantly at the local level. We must insist that the Kerala High Court ruling that local bodies have the authority to decide on the course of development in their own localities be made genuinely operational across the country.

We must take full advantage of powers and responsibilities conferred on citizens under provisions such as the 73rd and 74th Amendments to the Constitution, and the Biological Diversity Act, 2002. We should assert that conservation prescriptions should not be merely regulatory, but include positive incentives such as conservation service charges. We must hand over economic activities like quarrying to agencies like the Kudumbashree groups that are accountable to local communities. We, the sovereign people, are the real rulers of India and must engage ourselves more actively in the governance of the country and lead it on to a path of people-friendly and nature-friendly development.

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