

# RESTLESS MOUNTAINS, SHATTERED LIVES

Relevant for: Environment | Topic: Disaster and disaster management

In his preface to the Western Ghats Ecology Expert Panel (WGEEP) report submitted in 2011, ecologist and panel chairman Madhav Gadgil points to the degradation suffered by Kalidasa's "charming maiden" thus: "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".

Nearly a decade later, the reverberations of Mr. Gadgil's warnings resonated in the minds of many following the tragic loss of over 40 lives in flash floods and landslides in the aftermath of heavy rains in the hilly regions of the Western Ghats in central Kerala districts of Kottayam, Idukki and Pathanamthitta between October 12 and 20. In recent years, Kerala, known for its peaks and rich water bodies, most of which originate from the Ghats, has seen back-to-back calamities, including the disastrous 2018 floods, which raised serious questions on the conservation of the mountain chain.

Recognised as one of the world's biodiversity hotspots, the Western Ghats region runs to a length of 1,600 km starting from the mouth of the river Tapti near the border of Gujarat and Maharashtra to Kanniyakumari, the southernmost tip of India in Tamil Nadu. It stretches over the six States of Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Kerala, Goa, Maharashtra and Gujarat. The Ghats are second only to the Eastern Himalaya as a treasure trove of biological diversity in the country.

The 39 serial sites of the Western Ghats were inscribed into UNESCO's World Heritage Site list in 2012 for its "outstanding universal value and for representing significant ongoing ecological and biological processes in the evolution and development of terrestrial, fresh water, coastal and marine ecosystems, and communities of plants and animals". They were also recognised as areas containing "the most important and significant natural habitats for in-situ conservation of biological diversity, including those containing threatened species of outstanding universal value from the point of view of science or conservation".

## **Sensitive area**

It's home to hundreds of globally threatened flora, fauna, bird, amphibian, reptile and fish species. An assessment by the International Union for Conservation of Nature in 2020 had found that the Western Ghats is "under increasing population and developmental pressure that requires intensive and targeted management efforts to ensure that not only are existing values conserved, but that some past damage may be remediated".

The WGEEP report, popular as Gadgil report, had designated the entire hill range as an Ecologically Sensitive Area (ESA). It had classified the 142 taluks in the Western Ghats boundary into three Ecologically Sensitive Zones (ESZs). The panel, which was appointed in 2010 by the then UPA government, recommended that "no new dams based on large-scale storage be permitted in the Ecologically Sensitive Zone 1". It suggested that development activity needs to be decided through a participatory process involving the gram sabhas in these zones. The report had never seen the light until the Delhi High Court issued an order in May, 2012 to make it public. The Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change had opposed disclosure of the report stating that it could affect the economic and scientific interests of the six States. The successive State governments opposed it stating that most of its suggestions were impractical.

The Centre appointed a high-level working group on Western Ghats led by K. Kasturirangan, a noted space scientist, in August, 2012 to examine the Gadgil report. Its mandate was to give special attention to “the preservation of the precious biodiversity” and “the rights, needs and development aspirations of the local and indigenous people”. However, the committee’s report in April 2013 identified only 37% or 59,940 sq. km of the Western Ghats in the six States as ESAs. Around 4,156 villages along the region were identified as ESAs on the basis of the criterion that “they had 20% or more of ecologically sensitive area within their boundary”.

Nearly 123 such villages were identified as ESAs in Kerala, provoking political and religious protests. It snowballed into a political conflict between the then ruling United Democratic Front and the Left front and even influenced the 2014 Idukki Lok Sabha election outcome, with the victory of the Left front’s independent candidate backed by the High Range Samrakshana Samithi (Protection Council), a collective of various groups under the Catholic Church. The Bharatiya Janata Party and the Sangh Parivar organisations, which had initially supported the Gadgil report, later turned silent.

The then Congress-led government decided that an area of 9,993.7 sq. km be considered ESAs in Kerala as against the 13,108 sq. km area proposed by the Kasturirangan Committee. It was based on a recommendation by the State-level expert committee led by Oommen V. Oommen, the then chairman of the Kerala Biodiversity Board, which recommended that the inhabited areas, plantations and agricultural lands in the Western Ghats region be excluded from the scope of ESA.

The Union Environment Ministry issued a draft notification in March 2014 by notifying a total of 56,825 sq. km in the Western Ghats as ESA instead of the original 59,940 sq. km recommended by the Kasturirangan Committee. The final notification remains pending despite a directive by the Principal Bench of the National Green Tribunal in September last that there is no justification for continued delay merely because the States have sought exclusion of area from eco sensitive zone. Farmers had approached the Supreme Court to declare the Centre’s draft notification as “unconstitutional” while saying that the recommendations based on Kasturirangan report (and earlier Gadgil report) on land use, farming practices, animal husbandry, forestry, industries, infrastructure development, power generation, transport, tourism, etc. would convert the semi-urban villages in the region into forests with no facilities and roads.

## **Natural disasters**

About 40% of Western Ghat ranges lie in Kerala, which makes the State particularly vulnerable to the ecological changes in the mountain chain. Environmentalists argue that the flash floods and landslips point to the fragile ecosystem of the Ghats and call for urgent action. Take the case of the October landslips in Kerala. Kootickal village in Kottayam, which was among the four local bodies in the State that were removed by the State government in 2015 from the list of 123 ESAs witnessed back-to-back landslides. The increasing extreme climate events have resulted in large-scale disasters and destabilised the already vulnerable districts along the Western Ghats.

The World Meteorological Organisation had included the August deluge that rocked Kerala in 2018 as among the five major extreme flooding events in the world between 2015 and 2019. Official estimates showed that there were a total of 2,062 landslides in the State in 2018-19. Idukki was the most vulnerable with the district facing around 1,048 landslides in this period. As Mr. Gadgil reiterated, the human interference and unscientific land use had worsened the already damaged ecosystem of the Western Ghats.

The studies by the Geological Survey of India in the landslide vulnerable areas in the hilly

districts of Kerala had found faulty cultivation patterns and defective maintenance of drainage systems. Geoscientists have advocated the need for exempting areas of very high susceptibility in the Western Ghats from any types of constructions while urging the government and the local communities to increase the vegetative cover as a first defence against the landslide vulnerability.

### ***In Focus***

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