

A BOTTOM-UP APPROACH TO CONSERVATION

Context:

- ▶▶ The recent floods of Kerala has brought the issue of Conservation of Western Ghats and regarding committee recommendations again into limelight.

Introduction:

- ▶▶ The back to back to floods in Kerala have brought the focus back on an almost forgotten 2011 report on the Western Ghats that had made a set of recommendations for preserving the ecology and biodiversity of the fragile region along the Arabian Sea coast.
- ▶▶ Madhav Gadgil, lead author of the report has publicly argued that had the report's suggestions been implemented by the concerned state governments, the scale of the disaster in Kerala would not have been as huge as it is.

GADGIL Committee:

- ▶▶ A panel was planned to set up to make an assessment of the ecology and biodiversity of the Western Ghats and suggest measures to conserve, protect and rejuvenate the entire range that stretches to over 1500 km along the coast, with its footprints in Gujarat, Maharashtra, Goa, Karnataka, Kerala, and Tamil Nadu.
- ▶▶ To implement this Environment Ministry has set up the **Western Ghats Ecology Expert Panel (WGEEP)** under Gadgil.

What did the GADGIL Committee say?

- ▶▶ It defined the boundaries of the Western Ghats for the purposes of ecological management.
- ▶▶ It proposed that this entire area be designated as ecologically sensitive area (ESA).
- ▶▶ Within this area, smaller regions were to be identified as ecologically sensitive zones (ESZ) I, II or III based on their existing condition and nature of threat.
- ▶▶ It proposed to divide the area into about 2,200 grids, of which 75 per cent would fall under ESZ I or II or under already existing protected areas such as wildlife sanctuaries or natural parks.
- ▶▶ The committee proposed a Western Ghats Ecology Authority to regulate these activities in the area.

Other recommendations of GADGIL Committee:

- ▶▶ Ban on the cultivation of genetically modified in the entire area

- ▶▶ Plastic bags to be phased out in three years
- ▶▶ No new special economic zones or hill stations to be allowed
- ▶▶ Ban on conversion of public lands to private lands, and on diversion of forest land for non-forest purposes in ESZ I and II
- ▶▶ No new mining licenses in ESZ I and II area
- ▶▶ No new dams, thermal power plants or large-scale wind power projects in ESZ I
- ▶▶ No new polluting industries in ESZ I and ESZ II areas
- ▶▶ No new railway lines or major roads in ESZ I and II areas
- ▶▶ Strict regulation of tourism
- ▶▶ Cumulative impact assessment for all new projects like dams, mines, tourism, housing
- ▶▶ Phase-out of all chemical pesticides within five to eight years in ESZ I and ESZ II.

Ecologically Sensitive Zones:

- ▶▶ 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."

Criteria to assign ESZ:

- ▶▶ In line with the National Forest Policy, the committee recommended 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'.
- ▶▶ It also 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 the 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, the committee recommended that such activities to be avoided in ESZ1 areas.

If the recommendations been implemented, the extent and intensity of landslides being encountered today would have been much lower. Implementation of overall recommendations would have also had a plethora of other desirable results, both for nature and for people.

Kerala Model:

- ▶▶ Kerala leads the country in democratic devolution. The Kerala High Court had ruled in favor of Plachimada Panchayat that cancelled Coca-Cola's license 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 license.
- ▶▶ 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.

WGEEP'S Model of Conservation:

- ▶▶ The WGEEP has called for a model of conservation and development compatible with each other. It has 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.
- ▶▶ Failing to achieve this would be the violation of constitutional provisions that pertain to environmental protection and sabotaging of democratic processes.
- ▶▶ Acting on the WGEEP report would have implied 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.

Way Ahead:

- ▶▶ It is not high time to implement the panel's recommendations atleast 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 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 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 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.

