

A Review on Gadgil Report (2011), Kasturirangan Report (2013) & Oommen V Oommen Report (2013) on Western Ghats - Environmental Management Planning in India

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Abstract

India was the first nation in the world to establish a ministry of renewable energies, and it is a member of progressive intergovernmental collaborative ventures, such as the Kyoto Protocol, the Convention on Biological Diversity, the Montreal Protocol, the Ramsar Convention etc.

The Western Ghats is a widespread section spanning six (6) States and host India's richest wilderness in 13 national parks and several sanctuaries. The Western Ghats hills are also sourcing to numerous rivers, including Godavari, Krishna and Cauvery. This Hill and Ghats region desires high attention in the sustainability aspect of India and especially South part of India. Ministry of Environment and Forests, Govt. of India, constituted Western Ghats Ecology Expert Panel in 2010, Prof. Madhav Gadgil as the chairman and other 13 distinguished ecologists. This eminent panel submitted its report on January 31st, 2011.

The mandate of Western Ghats Ecology Expert Panel was to demarcate ecologically sensitive zones and recommend measures to conserve, protect and rejuvenate the ecology of region. Taking into account the comments and suggestions made by different stakeholders including State Governments and Central Ministries on Western Ghats Ecology Expert Panel Report, the MoEF constituted a High-Level Working Group, under the chairmanship of Dr. K. Kasturirangan, to advocate and recommend an all-round and holistic approach for sustainable and equitable development, keeping in focus the preservation and conservation of ecological systems in Western Ghats region. This working group submitted report on April 15th, 2013.

The three-member committee led by Dr. Oommen V Oommen, Kerala State Biodiversity Board was instituted in October 2013 in the wake of agitations, mainly in the high-range districts of Idukki, Wayanad and Kozhikode, against the draft notification issued by the Ministry of Environment and Forests (MoEF), accepting the suggestions and draft of the Kasturirangan Committee on Western Ghats conservation.

With this background, the researcher reviews the recommendations, criticisms and comparisons of reports submitted by Prof. Gadgil, Dr. Kasturirangan & Dr. Oommen V Oommen. And the study also focuses on environmental management planning in India.

Key Words: Ecologically Sensitive Zones, Environment, Equitable Development, Preservation & Conservation, Sustainability, Tourism, Western Ghats

India was the first nation in the world to establish a ministry of renewable energies, and it is a member of progressive intergovernmental collaborative ventures, such as the Kyoto Protocol, the Convention on Biological Diversity, the Montreal Protocol, the Ramsar Convention etc.

India is remarkable for the deep and abiding concern demonstrated by its people and its successive Central, State and local Governments towards halting the rapid pace of degradation of the environment.

Introduction to Western Ghats:

The Western Ghats is a widespread section spanning six (6) States and host India's richest wilderness in 13 national parks and several sanctuaries. The Western Ghats hills are also sourcing to numerous rivers, including Godavari, Krishna and Cauvery. The Western Ghats acts as a huge water tank supplying water to states of Gujarat, Maharashtra, Goa, Karnataka, Kerala and Tamil Nadu. The Western Ghats, also known as the Sahyadri Hills stretch for 1,600 kilometres along the west coast of India, interrupted only by the 30 kilometres long Palghat Gap (in the state Kerala).

Recognised by United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) is one of the world's eight most important biodiversity hotspots. The importance of the Western Ghats in terms of its biodiversity can be seen from the known inventory of its plant and animal groups. Nearly 4000 species of flowering plants or about 27% of the country's total species are known from the Ghats. Of 645 species of evergreen trees

(>10 cm dbh), about 56% is endemic to the Ghats.

Among the invertebrate groups, about 350 (20% endemic) species of ants, 330 (11% endemic) species of butterflies, 174 (40% endemic) species of odonates (dragonflies and damselflies), and 269 (76% endemic) species of mollusks (land snails) have been described from this region. The known fish fauna of the Ghats is 288 species with 41% of these being endemic to the region. Similarly, the Ghats are unique in its caecilian diversity harbouring 16 of the country's 20 known species, with all 16 species being endemic. Of the 225 described species of reptiles, 62% are endemic; special mention must be made of the primitively burrowing snakes of the family Uropeltidae that are mostly restricted to the southern hills of the Western Ghats. Over 500 species of birds and 120 species of mammals are also known from this region. The Western Ghats region harbours the largest global populations of the Asian elephant, and possibly of other mammals such as tiger, dhole, and gaur. The Western Ghats also harbour a number of wild relatives of cultivated plants, including pepper, cardamom, mango, jackfruit and plantain. This biological wealth has paid rich dividends over the years. In fact, the tract was famous for its wild produce of pepper, cardamom, sandal and ivory.

The climate of the region supports a number of agricultural activities of the region such as rubber plantations, coffee, tea, cultivation of spices such as pepper, cardamom, nutmeg and fruit trees/species such as jackfruit, pineapple and other fruit and vegetable species supporting the economy of majority of the population. According to second NATCOM Report

2012, if special efforts are not taken to conserve and protect the Western Ghats, the region could suffer from increase in temperature regimes, and extreme events due to climate change. There is also high probability of significant decrease in duration of precipitation (rainfall), all of which could have grave impacts on the economic growth of the region which are directly or indirectly dependent on the Western Ghats, such as agriculture and eco-tourism.

In addition to rich biodiversity, the Western Ghats is home to diverse religious, social, and linguistic groups. There is high cultural diversity of customs, rituals, and lifestyles in the region including a significant population of forest dwellers and adivasis. The ecosystem provides significant services for human well-being, such as clean water and air, flood and climate control, and soil regeneration, as well as medicines, food, and raw materials – and the dependency on it for livelihoods, cultural and spiritual sustenance is high. The approximately 50 million population in this hotspot on its approximately 1,60,000 sq km of land area results in a high population density of 260 people/km² and exerting huge pressure on land and forests for agriculture, plantations and perennial crops as well as forms of development, industrialization, mining and tourism.

Madhav Gadgil Committee Report on the Western Ghats:

Gadgil Commission, an environmental research commission is named after its chairman Madhav Gadgil. The commission is formally known as Western Ghats Ecology Expert Panel (WGEEP). The commission submitted the report to

the Government of India on 31 August 2011.

Gadgil Committee Recommendations:

Gadgil committee had eminent ecologists and their report too reflected that. The report was labelled favourable to environment and environmentalists and not development (or illegal mining). There is a never-ending debate between environment and development; it's tough to balance both without compromising the other. Gadgil Report highlights are

- The Western Ghats Ecology Expert Panel (WGEEP) designated the entire hill range as an Ecologically Sensitive Area (ESA).
- The panel, in its report, has classified the 142 taluks in the Western Ghats boundary into Ecologically Sensitive Zones (ESZ) 1, 2 and 3.
- ESZ-1 being of high priority, almost all developmental activities (mining, thermal power plants etc) were restricted in it.
- Gadgil report recommended that “no new dams based on large-scale storage be permitted in Ecologically Sensitive Zone 1. Since both the Athirappilly of Kerala and Gundia of Karnataka hydel project sites fall in Ecologically Sensitive Zone 1, these projects should not be accorded environmental clearance,” it said.
- Gadgil Committee report specifies that the present system of governance of the environment should be changed. It asked for a bottom to top approach (right from Gram sabhas) rather than a top to bottom approach. It also asked for decentralization and more powers to local authorities.

- The commission recommended constitution of a Western Ghats Ecology Authority (WGEA), as a statutory authority under the Ministry of Environment and Forests, with the powers under Section 3 of the Environment (Protection) Act, 1986.

Criticisms of Madhav Gadgil Report:

The major criticism faced by Gadgil Committee report was that it was more environment-friendly and not in tune with the ground realities.

- Recommendations were cited as impractical to implement.
- Gadgil report has asked for a complete eco-sensitive cover for the Western Ghats which hamper different states on energy and development fronts.
- There was a criticism against the constitution of a new body called WGEA. States insist that protection can be given under existing laws.
- Gadgil report doesn't give a solution for revenue losses due to the implementation of its recommendations.
- Gadgil report is against dams in the Western Ghats, which is a crucial blow on the ailing power sector. Considering the growing energy needs of India, critics argue that this recommendation cannot be taken.

And the most important: The Gadgil Committee report adversely affects the various mafia. When the Gadgil Committee report was first made public, there were a lot of protests against it from the sand mining and quarrying lobbies in Goa. Many mafias created fear among farmers in Kerala that the Gadgil report is against them, and that they will lose

livelihood if its recommendations are implemented.

Kasturirangan committee on the Western Ghats

The Kasturirangan committee was constituted to examine the WGEEP report. The committee is often called HLWG – it denotes the 10-member high-level working group (HLWG), headed by Kasturirangan.

Kasturirangan committee Report Recommendations

- Instead of the total area of Western Ghats, only 37% (i.e. 60,000 sq. km.) of the total area be brought under ESA under Kasturirangan report.
- A complete ban on mining, quarrying and sand mining in ESA.
- Distinguished between cultural (58% occupied in the Western Ghats by it like human settlements, agricultural fields and plantations) and natural landscape (90% of it should come under ESA according to the committee).
- Current mining areas in the ESA should be phased out within the next five years, or at the time of expiry of mining lease, whichever is earlier.
- No thermal power be allowed and hydropower projects are allowed only after detailed study.
- Red industries i.e. which are highly polluting be strictly banned in these areas.
- Kasturirangan report on the Western Ghats has made several pro-farmer recommendations, including the exclusion of inhabited regions and plantations from the purview of ecologically sensitive areas (ESAs).
- The Kasturirangan report had said 123 villages fall under the ESA purview.

Criticisms of Kasturirangan committee Report

- The Kasturirangan panel used remote sensing and aerial survey methods for zonal demarcation of land in the Western Ghats. The usage of such techniques, without examining the ground reality, has caused many errors in the report.
- The power is vested with the bureaucrats and forest officials and not with gram sabhas.
- Many fears that the farmers would get evicted if the Kasturirangan Committee report is implemented. Under this report, the mining and quarrying lobbies are expected to flourish. When these lobbies and tourism flourish, it will be disastrous for the environment. There will be a water shortage, there will be pollution. Finally, farmers will have to quit the area. They will not be able to do farming there.
- The use of “erroneous method” had caused inclusion of many villages under Ecologically Sensitive Areas (ESA) though there were only rubber plantations and no forest land!
- Kasturirangan report included ecologically non-sensitive areas under ESA, and left out many ecologically sensitive areas!

Comparison of Gadgil Report and Kasturirangan Report:

Whenever we study environment, the evergreen topic of debate is between environment and development. It is tough to achieve a perfect balance. The same happened with both these reports.

If Gadgil report laid too much importance to the environment, Kasturirangan report

was biased towards development. Kasturirangan report was criticized by many as that it provided loopholes for mining, which if allowed would turn detrimental to the environment, in long-term will affect development too. Kasturirangan report got the tag as anti-environmental soon after its release. But this report was tagged anti-development too by many who fear that their livelihood and interests will be affected.

Gadgil’s Western Ghats (Western Ghats landscape across 1,29,037 sq km.) is smaller than that of Kasturirangan’s (Western Ghats landscape, according to Kasturirangan is 1,64,280 sq km). Gadgil report marked out 60 percent of the Western Ghats as the highest-priority Ecologically Sensitive Zone (ESZ -1).

Kasturirangan report marks only 37 percent area (but considers wider Western Ghat boundaries) as ESA. Gadgil’s report proposed to declare this entire landscape as ESA, creating three ESZs within it. He prescribed that the existing sanctuaries and ESZ-1 would together cover 60 percent of this landscape. The 25 percent lowest priority areas would be marked as ESZ-3 to allow all developmental activities with precautions. The remaining 15 percent area would become ESZ-2. For example, while no mining would be allowed within ESZ-1, existing mines could continue in ESZ-2 with a moratorium on new licences. In ESZ-3, new mines could come up.

The Kasturirangan panel, on the other hand, adopted the criteria followed by the Western Ghats Development Programme of the Planning Commission and identified 188 talukas as its Western Ghats landscape, which worked out to 1,64,280 sq km. He marked 37 percent of this

stretch as ESA where hazardous industries, thermal plants or mines would not be allowed. In effect, the restriction level of Kasturirangan's ESA corresponds to that of Gadgil's ESZ-1.

Now, according to the Gadgil report, the ESZ-1 areas add up to approximately 77,000 sq km (60 percent of 1,29,037 sq km). Kasturirangan's ESA, on the other hand, accounts for around 60,000 sq km (37 percent of 1,64,280 sq km). That is a reduction of 17,000 sq km in the top priority segment.

Oommen V Oommen Committee:

As people turned violent and started protests, Oommen Chandy, the then Chief Minister of Kerala set up an expert committee. The expert committee, appointed by the Kerala government, to study the Kasturirangan report in detail submitted its report to chief minister Oommen Chandy (CM).

Recommendations of Oommen V Oommen Committee

- The committee recommended the government to make changes in the clauses of Environmentally Fragile Land (EFL) in the Western Ghats.
- The Oommen Committee reported that serious lapses happened in determining the EFL areas. The committee adopted a satellite survey to determine EFL and even plantations and estates were included in it!
- It also recommended stopping land acquisition proceedings according to the Kasturirangan committee report.
- The panel has made several pro-farmer recommendations, including the exclusion of inhabited regions and plantations from the purview of ecologically sensitive areas (ESAs).

The Kasturirangan report had said 123 villages fall under the ESA purview.

- The state-level panel said a field survey should be held in places that the Madhav Gadgil and Kasturirangan reports have identified as ESAs to demarcate forest land and human settlements. After examining the population density of these areas, human settlements should be exempted from the category of ESAs.
- It also said farmers should not be stopped from rearing hybrid varieties of milking animals and suggested that the grace period is given to shift to organic farming be extended from five years to 10 years.
- The report said forest areas should be fenced to prevent the animals straying into it.

Though there are many who treat Kasturirangan report as a more practical report, the truth is that Gadgil report was not anti-farmer. Also, people had misconceptions about Ecologically Fragile Lands (EFL) and Ecologically Sensitive Areas (ESA). Both of them were different concepts under different laws—the first under forest department and the latter under the district administration and pollution control board.

And remember that protests often are not due to love towards the environment, but often because of fear of eviction or loss of livelihood. Centre issued an office order in November 2013 directing immediate implementation of five proposals in the Kasturirangan report. This was the immediate provocation for the agitation. Later, the central government sought the opinion of the five states in implementing the report. Dialogues were still on and the government had asked the state

governments to submit their views on the report.

Conclusion:

After analysing the reports on Western Ghats, committees' objectives and insight are unquestionable. But conservation of environment without social concern is impossible as Western Ghats is the biodiversity hot spot with high population concentration. The reports highlight urgent need of thoughtful conservation and protection of Western Ghats, will bring difficulties in life and livelihood of people. Thus, the case by case analysis of anthropogenic activities like expansion of plantation agriculture, conversion of forest

in to other plantation, mining, tourism and urbanization is needed to prepare and suggest developmental plans and programs with a perception of environmental sustainability of Western Ghats. The burden of achieving a balance between conservation and development in the Western Ghats cannot be assigned to only to experts as if technical solutions are sound enough. It depends on the ability of the political class to rise above partisan politics and some consensus on environmental issues. This requires a new type of politics that does not exploit the vulnerabilities of ordinary people fed on incorrect and misleading information.

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