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A COMPARITIVE STUDY OF Prof. MADHAV GADGIL AND Dr. KASTURIRANGAN REPORT on THE WESTERN GHATS

by

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Introduction

The Western Ghats (WG) or the Sahyadri is the majestic mountain range on the fringes of the west coast of India. It is one among the seven great mountain ranges in the country and is next only to the Himalayas in its vastness and wilderness. The geological, biological and ecological landscape is unique. The mountain range extends over a distance of 1500-1600 km from Tapti river in the north to Kanyakumari in the south with an average elevation of more than 600 m and traverses through Six States viz. Gujarat, Maharashtra, Goa, Karnataka, Kerala and Tamil Nadu.

Western Ghats Region spreads over an area of 1,64,280 km² between 8°0'– 22°26' N and 72°55'– 78°11' E, with an altitude ranging (ellipsoid) from 0 to 2674 m above mean sea level and a width ranging from 10 km (at narrowest point) to 200 km (at widest point).

Its geology and geomorphology coupled with high rainfall makes the Western Ghats as one of the most ecologically diversified landscapes. It is this ecological diversity of WG that supports: (i) a wide range of forest types ranging from tropical wet evergreen forests to grasslands, (ii) some 4000 species of flowering plants and (iii) rich fauna with high degree of endemism. Consequently, Western Ghats constitutes not only one of the hotspots of biodiversity in the world, but also one among world's eight hottest hotspots.

Western Ghats is the world's second most vital forest for threatened species and one of the 137 globally irreplaceable protected areas with exceptional levels of plant and animal diversity and endemism.

The Western Ghats is the home for about 50 million people belonging to the Six States of the Country. It is the source of water for the entire Peninsular India, and also influences the monsoons. The life supporting and biodiversity rich ecosystems of Western Ghats are threatened today due to habitat pressures.

Background and Constitution of both WGEEP and HLWG

The Ministry of Environment & Forests (MoEF), Government of India, has been concerned with degradation of Western Ghats in the past due to increasing population pressure. Keeping in view of the ecological sensitivity and significance of the region, complex interstate nature of its geography and also possible impacts of climate change, the MoEF constituted, by an order dated 4 March 2010, a 14-member **Western Ghats Ecology Expert Panel (WGEEP)**, with Professor Madhav Gadgil as its Chairman.

The Panel submitted its report on 30th August 2011. Considering the complex interstate character of the Western Ghats and the recommendations of WGEEP which involved demarcation of **Ecologically Sensitive Zones (ESZ)** and zonal regulations of important sectors of activities, the Ministry sought comments/suggestions of all stakeholders. When the WGEEP Report was made public

and put on the website of the Ministry over a thousand and seven hundred responses were received by the Ministry.

It is in this background that the MoEF constituted the **High Level Working Group (HLWG)** by an order dated 17th August 2012 with Dr. Kasturirangan as its chairman, inter alia the following terms of reference:

- (i) examine the WGEEP Report in a holistic and multidisciplinary fashion in the light of responses received from the concerned Governments of States, Central Ministries and Stakeholders, keeping in view the following matters: (a) sustainability of equitable economic and social growth in the region while preserving the precious biodiversity, wildlife, flora and fauna and preventing their further losses; (b) ensuring the rights, needs and developmental aspirations of local and indigenous people, tribals, forest dwellers and most disadvantaged sections of the local communities while balancing equitable economic and social growth with sustainable development and environmental integrity; (c) the effects and impacts of climate change on the ecology of Western Ghats region, (d) the implication of recognizing some sites in Western Ghats as world heritage sites in the conservation and sustainable development in Western Ghats and (e) the constitutional implications of Centre –State relations with respect to conservation and sustainable development in Western Ghats;
- (ii) to interact with the representatives of the Six States of Western Ghats region and other stakeholders, particularly environmentalists and conservation specialists;
- (iii) to suggest to the Government for further course of action on WGEEP Report;
- (iv) any other relevant matter that may be referred to it by the Central Government; and
- (v) submission of Action Plan to implement WGEEP Report in the most effective and holistic manner.

The observations and discussions presented in different chapters of both these Reports clearly indicate unambiguously that the eco-system of Western-Ghats is in need of urgent attention and action. It is against this backdrop of a fast dwindling unique ecosystem, that they made some recommendations. They recognised the need in the implementation of the tasks arising out of the recommendations, even though, both the panels fully recognized the sincere commitment that each of the Six States has displayed in the context of protecting the rich Bio-diversity of this mountain range. In making some of the general and sectoral recommendations, fully aware that, many of these are already inbuilt into the present strategies of the respective States. In repeating such recommendations, they only underscored the imperatives of implementing such recommendations in letter and spirit.

Comments: After going through both the Gadgil and Kasturirangan reports very carefully, I have made a comparative study in this presentation. I have considered only a few major issues that are imperative for the environmentalists and the Nature lovers.

1 Delineation and demarcation of ecologically sensitive area in Western Ghats region

Gadgil Panel: Based on careful and extensive compilation of information, and wide-ranging field visits, consultations and analysis, the Western Ghats Ecology Expert Panel (WGEEP) has designated the entire Western Ghats as an Ecologically Sensitive Area (ESA) and, assigned three levels of Ecological Sensitivity to different regions of it. These are termed as Ecologically Sensitive Zone 1 (ESZ1), Ecologically Sensitive Zone 2 (ESZ2) and Ecologically Sensitive Zone 3 (ESZ3).

The database employs square grids of ~ 9 km x 9 km that do not correspond either to natural features such as watersheds, or administrative units such as village or taluka boundaries. This would be a task that will have to be initiated by **the Western Ghats Ecology Authority** through a broad-based participatory process when it is put in place. However, as a first step, the panel suggested the Ministry of Environment and Forests provisionally notify the initial limits of ESZ1, ESZ2 and ESZ3 based on WGEEP analysis. This may be most appropriately done at Taluka/Block level. With this in view, the panel went ahead and assigned ESZ1, ESZ2 and ESZ3 levels to all the 142 talukas within the Western Ghats boundary.

WGEEP advocated a graded or layered approach and attempted to arrive at such a set of broad guide-lines for the various sectors on the basis of extensive consultations with officials, experts, civil society groups and citizens at large.

Kasturirangan Panel: Out of the estimated 1,64,280 km² of the Western-Ghats area, the natural landscape constitutes only 41 per cent. The area identified as ecologically sensitive is about 37 per cent i.e., about 90 % of the natural landscape.

1. The delimited area of 188 talukas in 6 States of Western Ghats has been designated as Western Ghats Region.

2. About 60,000 km² of **natural landscape** (approximately 37% of the total geographical area of Western Ghats Region) has been identified as Ecologically Sensitive Area (ESA) by HLWG, which represents more or less a contiguous band of vegetation of Western Ghats region and includes Protected Areas and World Heritage Sites. The demarcation unit of ESA is the village. IRS LISS III derived spatial layers on vegetation type and landscape level indices (with a fine spatial resolution of 24 m) were used as the basis for identification of ecologically sensitive areas (ESAs).

To facilitate sustainable development in the WG region, which is inhabited by about 50 million people, the non ESA comprising mostly **cultural landscape** is also demarcated.

3. MoEF should put the ESA map in the public domain, which will enable scrutiny and transparency in decisions.

Comments: If we look at these views, First of all, Kasturirangan Panel was asked among other things to: a) recommend further course of action to the Government with respect to the Gadgil Report and, b) submit an action Plan to implement the Gadgil Report in the most effective and holistic manner within a period of two months.

It is very clear from this that the Kasturirangan Panel was not asked to create a new report for the WG. It appears that Kasturirangan Report has given scant respect to the mandates given to it and created a totally new report with recommendations and Action Plans of its own without any relevance to Gadgil report.

Now, if we observe above ESZ demarcation, the Gadgil report considers the entire Western Ghats as an Ecologically Sensitive Area, considering its significance and proposes a layered approach. Areas with highest significance as ESA 1, moderately significant as ESA 2 and less significant as ESA 3. (Significance is in terms of biodiversity, cultural, geological, historical, climatic conditions especially quantum of rainfall and the number of rainy days, risk of landslide, and stakeholders' views). Nowhere does it go against the farmers, tribal people and other down trodden.

But Kasturirangan report suggests separation of the Western Ghats into two, namely (1) Natural landscape consisting of only 37% of the Western Ghats, includes the National Parks, Sanctuaries, Reserve Forests, World Heritage Sites and other protected areas declared as Ecologically Sensitive Area and be protected. and, (2) cultural landscape consisting of human habitations including agricultural lands and plantations. However, any types of development activities are possible outside the 37% area.

It may be noted that the extent of area fixed as natural area is in violation of the National Forest Policy according to which the minimum forest cover required to be maintained in hilly areas is 66%. Kasturirangan Committee proposes only about half of it. While Gadgil Committee proposes 75% considering the special features of the Western Ghats.

2 Development Restrictions in proposed Ecologically sensitive areas

There is already a prohibitory and regulatory regime for these activities with maximum interventionist and destructive impact on the ecosystem. All other infrastructure development activities, necessary for the region, need a mandatory scrutinization and assessment for cumulative impact and development needs, before clearance.

WGEEP recommends that no new dams based on large scale storage be permitted in Ecologically Sensitive Zone 1 and suggests that no check dams should be constructed in the first and second order rivers while permitting hydroelectric project for 10 MW in ESZ 1, 10-25 MW in ESZ 2 and larger dams in ESZ 3.

Decommissioning of dams: Gadgil Panel has also suggests for decommissioning of those dams which have crossed their viable life span, outlived their utility, silted up beyond acceptable standards, Structural safety due to age, weakness, structural problems, construction defects; Reservoir siltation reaching a stage where it is unable to store water as envisaged; Reduction in benefits due to poor design, inefficient turbines; Economic costs for maintaining the dam and the benefit that the dam offers to the society – a balancing of the two; Ecological damage caused to biodiversity and other economic loss.

Kasturirangan Committee allows larger dams in the ESA but with a set of conditions, that it should be 3 km from the nearest dam, ensure 30% minimum flow in the lean season and, 50% of the river should be free from development activities.

Comments: What is the scientific backing for this recommendation and how did Kasturirangan Committee reach at these figures are not mentioned. Many people who have responded to Gadgil Committee Report have objected to it without assessing the merits and demerits of the suggestion. Dam “decommissioning” is not dam “demolition”. It takes time.

3 Mining, quarrying and sand mining

Gadgil Committee has banned the mining activities in the ESZs and the existing mining should be closed within five years or till the lease period is over whichever is earlier. Illegal mining and quarrying should be stopped immediately all over the Western Ghats. An indefinite moratorium on new environmental clearances for mining in Ecologically Sensitive Zones 1 and 2, a phasing out of mining in Ecologically Sensitive Zone 1 by 2016 and continuation of existing mining in Ecologically Sensitive Zone 2 under strict regulation with an effective system of social audit. The moratorium on new clearances in ESZ2 can be revisited as and when the situation improves and when a comprehensive study on the impact of mining on the ecology, environment, human health, and biodiversity by a competent multidisciplinary team, working along with people’s institutions, has been concluded.

Kasturirangan panel also puts complete ban on mining, quarrying and sand mining in ESA. All current mining areas should be phased out within the next 5 years, or at the time of expiry of mining lease, whichever is earlier.

Comments: Whereas, the Kasturirangan Committee the restriction come only for 37% of the area and allows mining and quarrying in 63% of the Western Ghats. That means the existing illegal activities would continue without any control. An estimate shows that there are around 3000 illegal quarries in the Kerala part of the Western Ghats. All these areas are outside the ESZ1.

It is to be noted that 53% out of the 81% of people who opposed Gadgil Committee report comprises people involved in mining! Unfortunately, the report goes in their interest.

4 Industries

Gadgil Committee bans new polluting (red and orange category) industries in Zone 1 & 2; and, suggests that existing polluting industries switch over to zero pollution by 2016 and be subject to strict regulation and social audit. It also suggests new industries may be set up in Zone 3 under strict regulation and social audit.

Kasturirangan Committee recommends ban on Red category industries in ESA, the list of industries categorized as ‘orange’ includes many activities like food, and fruit processing, and there will not be a complete prohibition on this category. However, all efforts should be made to promote industries with low environmental impacts. However, it allows yellow category industries in the whole of WG.

Comments: Again, whatever Kasturirangan proposes holds good for the 37% of WG areas only. Outside it no restrictions whatsoever applies.

5 Building and construction projects

Gadgil Committee: bans any construction activity in the Zone1. It asks for a building Code and recommends that all houses should be environment friendly, (meaning using less cement, steel and stones and with water harvesting systems and facilities for waste management).

It recommends that even sites for construction should avoid canals, wetlands, biodiversity pockets.

Kasturirangan Panel: proposes that Building and construction projects of 20,000 m² and above should not be allowed. Townships and area development projects should be prohibited.

Comments: Now, what is a construction of this magnitude inside WG? And the panel has not suggested any building codes. That means any construction less than 464 X 464 ft. in the form of Resorts, Malls or Apartments are possible inside WG! This will ensure only the continuation of the 'business as usual' approach. Thus construction lobby could flourish.

6 Forests

Gadgil Committee bans conversion of forest lands for any non-forestry operations. The panel cautions that Western Ghats has got only just 7% of the original forest cover and gives clear recommendations for all these which serve the interest of the poor and ecological integrity of the Western Ghats.

Kasturirangan Committee allows forest diversion with additional safeguards, while Land use, agriculture, water and forestry.

Comments: Kasturirangan Committee does not say anything on these vital issues, except making passing remarks that these should be incorporated in the green growth of the State Governments with adequate incentives and included in the regional plans, all again inside the core areas of WG.

7 Agriculture

Gadgil Committee: Agricultural land should not be diverted for non-agricultural purposes, except for raising forest and for construction of houses of the families which have grown larger. Gadgil committee recommends conversion to organic agriculture within 5 years in Zone 1, 8 years in zone 2 and 10 years in Zone 3. Compensation during the period of conversion is also suggested.

Gadgil Committee emphatically states that there shall not be any conversion of Government land for private purpose.

Kasturirangan Committee: To promote sustainable agriculture, HLWG recommends a focused programme to incentivize growers in the Western Ghats to move towards organic cultivation and to build a unique 'brand' for such premium products in the world market.

It recommends policies to incentivize environmentally sound growth across the Western Ghats. It also suggests categorization of minor forest produce, including bamboo which should be promoted to build forest-based local economies.

Comments: The Kasturirangan Panel has not taken a strong position even for organic agriculture. It only gives a general recommendation that organic farming should be promoted. No time frame is given for conversion. This certainly helps the pesticide and fertilizer lobby.

According to Kasturirangan Committee, the agriculture land is open for conversion, irrespective of the purpose! The Kasturirangan Committee cites opposition from public, but does not make clear its own stand. Conveniently enough, it does not deal with this most crucial issue for the survival of Western Ghats. Reducing the area of ESA and non-banning conversion of forest land for private uses would lead to, inter-alia, more encroachments in the Ghats. At the end of the day, the beneficiary of the Kasturirangan Report will be land mafia, construction lobbies and the like.

8 Financial arrangements

Gadgil Committee suggests that the Central Government should give special grants and additional funds to all the Western Ghats States as they conserve a good part of the forest in the country. It also proposes guidelines for establishing a **Western Ghats Ecology Authority** which according to the Government of India should be 'a professional body to manage the ecology and sustainable development of the region'. The decision to set up the same was already taken by the MOEF. It recommends a democratic decision making system with the involvement of representatives of line departments, civil societies, experts and local communities in a three tier administrative system consisting of a Western Ghats Ecology Authority (WGEA), a State Western Ghats Ecology Authority (SWGEA) and a District Ecology Commission (DEC).

Kasturirangan Committee: recommends that the Western Ghats States should come together to negotiate for a grant-in aid from the Centre. The financial arrangement should be of the nature of a debt for nature swap.

The Planning Commission should create a special Western Ghats Sustainable Development Fund. This fund will be used to promote programmes specifically designed to implement an effective ESA regime and incentivize green growth in the region.

It recommends the following: (a) Continuation of the WGD program with an enhanced allocation of Rs. 1000 crores,

(b) Continuation of the special category status to the program i.e. cost sharing of 90:10 between Centre and State,

(c) Revival and reconstitution of the High Level Committee consisting of CMs of the six States, for monitoring the implementation of the recommendations /suggestions of the HLWG and existing legislations,

(d) The management of Western Ghats ecology involves conservation, protection and rejuvenation as well as sustainable development in Western Ghats through periodic assessments of environment and ecology on a long term basis across the Six States of Western Ghats region using state-of-art geospatial technologies,

(e) setting up the "Decision Support and Monitoring Centre for Western Ghats".

The 14th Finance Commission should be persuaded to provide sufficient allocation of funds to the States in the Western Ghats for forest and environment conservation. Further, as recommended above, the Planning Commission should strengthen the implementation of Western Ghats Development Programme.

Comments: Dr. Kasturirangan has dealt at large in this particular field because he is a member of Planning Commission. About special financial assistance to the WG states, Kasturirangan gives an impracticable, but superficially attractive suggestion in the nature of debt swap. The loan taken by the State Government need not be given back, but could be utilized for the benefit of the people living around the forests and for the conservation of WG. Good idea. But the fact is that no State government has earmarked funds for this. In short, nothing will come out of it.

9 Citizen's Participation

The report suggested that the Grama Sabhas should decide on the Ecological Sensitivity of the respective areas. People should decide in which ecologically sensitive zone their area should come under. The prerogative for deciding whether their area was to be considered even as a sensitive area was left to the people. The recommendation of the panel regarding the ecologically sensitive zones was just an indicator to start the debate.

Environment history of the world would tell one that for ecological conservation came from people's initiative. The thrust of the panel report was that people should be allowed to exercise appropriate powers for conservation. People at grassroots levels really care for environment health as it is directly linked to their lives. People at the grassroots should be empowered to make appropriate decisions.

Gadgil Committees recommendations are to be discussed at grass root level and decision taken by the Grama Sabha and LSG. The Panel is impressed both by levels of environmental awareness and commitment of citizens towards the cause of the environment, and their helplessness in the face of their marginalization in the current system of governance. The Panel urges the Ministry of Environment and Forests to take a number of critical steps to involve citizens.

Kasturirangan Committee: Centre may undertake these studies. In any case, the likely increase in temperature regime, rainfall and extreme events, besides decrease in the duration of precipitation which alone has serious concern for Western Ghats ecosystem - increased water stress to the forests, in fire incidences, evapo-transpiration and surface runoff. As a adaptive measure to these changes, a number of adaptive strategies such as (i) species-mix plantations, (ii) planting of hardy species that are resilient to increased temperature and drought risk, and (iii) launching of a few adaptive projects such as anticipatory plantation along altitudinal and latitudinal gradient and linking of PAs and forests fragments and implementing advance fire warning strategy, should be taken into account while formulating policies across Western Ghats region.

Comments: The Kasturirangan report's recommended alternative for the WGEA that the existing High Level Working Group strengthened by including the 6 Chief Ministers will never work, chiefly because the Chief ministers will not have time to spare. It will remain in the paper.

Final Word

Kasturirangan report on Western Ghats replaced the pro-people and pro-nature attitude of the Western Ghats Ecology Expert Panel report with an autocratic approach in terms of development and ecological conservation. The report had kept vast stretches of Western Ghats in the category cultural landscapes, which include human settlements, out of the purview of ecologically sensitive areas. The sacred groves of Kerala, which are rich in biodiversity, would come under the category.

Kasturirangan Committee recommends 37% for conservation as natural landscape and 63% for all kinds of development, just contradictory to National Forest Policy. In doing so, Kasturirangan Committee tramples upon the aspirations of the poor, and disregards the bare minimum requirements for ensuring the ecological security of the Western Ghats. Ensuring water for the people is sacrificed for the 'development' of a few. It is to be noted that 66% of people who opposed Gadgil Committee report comprises people involved in mining! Unfortunately, the report goes in their interest.

Illegal quarrying, mining, sand mining etc. would continue. It does not mention waste treatment, hazardous waste treatment processing units, incentives to the farmers, animal husbandry, fish and fisheries, water conservation and distribution, and introduction of Genetically Modified (GM) crops.

The other recommendation that the existing systems with the various Government departments, State Pollution Control Boards could manage the affairs, is only a wishful thinking. All these departments have been there all the time. Could they raise a finger against all the illegal activities in the WG?

To conclude, I feel that the Kasturirangan panel report has failed to live up to the aspirations of the Naturalists, and Ecological scientists, nature lovers of the world and the citizens of the land. Lobbyists have already started their showing their muscle power in Kerala. Nothing is acceptable to them except free trade!

With this state of affairs, it is very difficult to prevent human atrocities on nature and save the virtuous Western Ghats. God save us!