



Kerala floods

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Highlights

Amid Kerala floods, Pune based ecologist Madhav Gadgil says his 2011 ecology suggestions may have limited scale of disaster.

The 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.

A look at some of the main recommendations of the Gadgil report, how these were substantially relaxed by a subsequent committee led by space scientist K Kasturirangan, and whether implementation of the first report would have made any difference to the Kerala crisis:

Why was the Gadgil Committee set up?

In February 2010, then Environment Minister Jairam Ramesh attended a public meeting in Kotagiri in Tamil Nadu organised mainly by those associated with Save the Western Ghats group.

Speakers pointed to threats to the ecosystem from construction, mining, industries, real estate, and hydropower.

After the meeting, Ramesh set up the Western Ghats Ecology Expert Panel under Gadgil, was asked 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.

What did the Gadgil Committee say?

- It defined the boundaries of the Western Ghats for the purposes of ecological management.
- The total area in this boundary came to 1,29,037 square km, running about 1,490 km north to south, with a maximum width of 210 km in Tamil Nadu and minimum of 48 km in Maharashtra.
- 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, each approximately 9 km × 9 km, 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.

It recommended:

- Ban on cultivation of genetically modified in 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 licences in ESZ I and II area
- No new dams in ESZ I
- No new 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

The committee proposed a Western Ghats Ecology Authority to regulate these activities in the area.

What was the need for the subsequent Kasturirangan Committee?

- None of the six concerned states agreed with the recommendations of the Gadgil Committee, which submitted its report in August 2011 (its official public release was cancelled).
- In August 2012, then Environment Minister Jayanthi Natarajan constituted a High-Level Working Group on Western Ghats under Kasturirangan to “examine” the Gadgil Committee report in a “holistic and multidisciplinary fashion in the light of responses received” from states, central ministries and others. This committee submitted its report in April 2013.
- Its report revealed that of the nearly 1,750 responses it had examined, 81% were not in favour of the Gadgil recommendations.

In particular, Kerala had objected to the proposed ban on sand mining and quarrying, restrictions on transport infrastructure and wind energy projects, embargos on hydroelectric projects, and inter-basin transfer of river waters, and also the complete ban on new polluting industries.

So, what did the Kasturirangan Committee say?

- It broadened the definition of Western Ghats and included a total of 1,64,280 square km in it.
- It then classified it as comprising cultural landscape and natural landscape.
- It said nearly 60% of the Western Ghats was cultural landscape, where human settlements, agriculture and plantations existed.
- The remaining was natural landscape, of which the “biologically rich” area was only 37% or about 60,000 sq km.
- It was only this part that the committee said needed to be classified as ecologically sensitive area (ESA)

Its main recommendations for ESA

- Ban on mining, quarrying and sand mining
- No new thermal power projects, but hydro power projects allowed with restrictions
- Ban on new polluting industries
- Building and construction projects up to 20,000 sq m was to be allowed but townships were to be banned
- Forest diversion could be allowed with extra safeguards

What was finally decided?

- Last year, the Environment Ministry notified an area of 56,285 sq km in the Western Ghats as ESA which was slightly less than the 59,940 sq km recommended by the Kasturirangan committee.
- In Kerala, specifically, the Kasturirangan committee had proposed an area of 13,108 square km as part of ESA, brought down to 9,993.7 sq km at the insistence of Kerala government.

Would implementation of the Gadgil report have lessened the impact of the Kerala floods?

- The Kerala disaster essentially has been caused by extreme rainfall.
- Since the 2013 Uttarakhand flooding, such extreme rainfall events have led to one disaster-like situation in India every year.
- Even if the state governments had begun implementing the recommendations in all seriousness immediately thereafter, it is not clear what activities would have stopped.
- What Gadgil seems to be arguing for is the need to learn lessons from past tragedies, and increase the resilience of disaster-struck areas through sustainable and long-term development that would involve minimal intervention in natural processes.
- Even in the Uttarakhand disaster, uncontrolled construction, large hydropower plants and deforestation were assessed to have aided the scale of destruction.

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