

RGICS



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RGICS ISSUE BRIEF **KASTHURIRANGAN REPORT** **ON WESTERN GHATS** 4TH December, 2013

Kasthurirangan Report on Western Ghats

INTRODUCTION

The Kasthurirangan Committee was formulated with the intention to conserve and use the resources of the Western Ghats in a sustainable manner. The message of this report is serious, alarming and urgent. It is imperative that we protect, manage and regenerate the lands now remaining in the Western Ghats as biologically rich, diverse, natural landscapes. We have reached a threshold from which we cannot slip further. This has to be the objective of future planning and regulation in this recognized center of biodiversity in our country.

Since the release of the Kasthurirangan report, several parties and organizations in Kerala have expressed disagreement with the recommendations of the Committee. The CPI(M) and the church outfits have turned it into a political opportunity to instill fear of displacement among the farmers and residents of this region. Even the Kerala High Court wondered whether those presiding over the *hartaal*, which was organized in protest of the report, had read through the Kasthurirangan panel report even once.

Though the Kasturirangan report is a toned-down version of the Madhav Gadgil committee report, **it does not mention anywhere that farmers and other settlers would be evicted from the fringe areas of the forests. Rather, it recommends severe restrictions on senseless quarrying, deforestation and mining to save the ecologically sensitive biodiversity hotspots. And these areas cannot have buildings and constructions exceeding 20,000 square feet in area or industries and big townships.** But all of this has failed to convince agitating residents, who see it as a ploy to evict them. Political parties and church outfits have fuelled the fire.

Firstly, this brief tries to explain the content of the Report and secondly it attempts to refute the arguments against the report by highlighting its important aspects.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE COMMITTEE

The major recommendations of the Kasthurirangan Committee are as follows:

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

The delimited area of 188 *talukas* in 6 States of Western Ghats has been designated as Western Ghats Region which spreads over an area of 1,64,280 km² between 8°0'– 22°26' N and 72°55'– 78°11' E and extends over a distance of 1500km from Tapti River in the north to Kanyakumari in the south, with altitudinal range (ellipsoid) from 0 to 2674 m above sea level and width ranging from 10km (at narrowest point) to 200km (at widest point). **High Level Working Group (HLWG) recommends the adoption of the boundaries as demarcated in the Report.**

About 60,000 km² of natural landscape (approximately 37% of the total geographical area of the Western Ghats Region) has been identified as Ecologically Sensitive Area (ESA) by HLWG, which represents more or less a contiguous band of vegetation extending over a distance of 1500 km across 6 States of Western Ghats region and includes Protected Areas and World Heritage Sites.

To facilitate sustainable development in the Western Ghats region, which is inhabited by about 50 million people, the non-ESA comprising mostly cultural landscape is also demarcated. **HLWG recommends that the Central government should immediately notify the ESA areas, demarcated by HLWG in public interest.**

2) Development Restriction in proposed Ecologically sensitive areas

HLWG is recommending a prohibitory and regulatory regime in ESA for those activities with maximum interventionist and destructive impact on the ecosystem. **All other infrastructure development activities, necessary for the region, will be carefully scrutinized and assessed for cumulative impact and development needs, before clearance.**

There should be a 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. No thermal power projects should be allowed in ESA. Hydropower projects may be allowed but subject to certain conditions.

HLWG recommends that wind energy should be included in EIA notification and brought under purview of assessment and clearance. All 'Red' category industries should be strictly banned. As the list of industries categorized as 'orange' includes many activities like food and fruit processing, there will not be a complete prohibition on this category.

Building and construction projects of 20,000 m² and above should not be allowed. Townships and area development projects should be prohibited.

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All other infrastructure and development projects/schemes should be subject to environment clearance.

HLWG recommends a framework for governance and regulation of ESA, which draws on current regulatory institutions for decision-making, but simultaneously, **strengthens the data monitoring systems and the participation and involvement of local communities in decision-making.**

The villages falling under ESA will be involved in decision making on the future projects. All projects will require prior informed consent and no objection from the *gram sabha* of the concerned village. The provision for prior informed consent under the Forest Rights Act will also be strictly enforced.

The State Governments should also ensure consultation with local communities while planning for protection of wildlife corridors.

3) Financial arrangements and Incentivising Green Growth in Western Ghats region

HLWG has recommended **policies to incentivize environmentally sound growth across the Western Ghats.**

HLWG recommends **that the Western Ghats States should come together to negotiate for a grant-in aid from the Centre.**

HLWG recommends that there should be **arrangements for Payments for Ecosystem Services accruing from ESA and non-ESA regions within the Western Ghats.**

The Planning Commission should create a special **Western Ghats Sustainable Development Fund.**

The Planning Commission is currently working on a ranking of states based on Environmental Performance Index (EPI) developed by it. The EPI could be used to devolve funds to the States. ESA should get 'plus payments' which should be paid directly to the village community.

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.

4) Decision support and monitoring centre for Western Ghats

HLWG recommends for setting up the "Decision Support and Monitoring Centre for Western Ghats" by Ministry of Environment and Forests (MoEF) and it will be hosted by one state and will have joint management of all six states of the Western Ghats region for conservation of the ecology and sustainable and equitable development in Western Ghats Region.

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KEY ISSUES

A balanced approach to environment protection and human sustenance

The motto of the HLWG is incentivization not displacement. It accepts that management of the Western Ghats through prohibition and official order is often detrimental to interests of the very people and environment the policy is aiming to protect. Therefore, **we need a balanced and nuanced approach to say no to the most damaging and high impact activities and at the same time working of systems to incentivize environmentally sound development that benefits local livelihoods and economies.**ⁱ

The Gadgil committee, on the other hand, had taken an activist position. Just because a windmill project in the Bhimashankar Wildlife Sanctuary threatened Maharashtra's state animal, the Giant Malabar Squirrel, the Gadgil committee had applied a blanket ban on windmills across the Western Ghats. The Gadgil committee report threatened the future of the legendary Kodagu coffee when it recommended that existing plantations in Ecologically Sensitive Zone (ESZ) be replaced with endemic plant species.

The Kasturirangan panel admonished the Madhav Gadgil Committee for being blind to the human cultural component in Western Ghats. It divided the Western Ghats area into cultural and natural landscapes and placed the cultural landscape, which forms the largest chunk of the Ghats, out of the ambit of the ecological sensitive area (ESA) even while fully aware that these landscapes are biologically rich. The cultural landscape, as different from natural landscape, is the land of settlements, agriculture and plantations (other than forest plantations). It is the natural landscape that has been branded ESA.ⁱⁱ

The Specific case of Kerala:

The Kasthurirangan Report has tempered down the severity of the Madhav Gadgil report. **If the Gadgil Committee had included 633 villages in Kerala under ecologically sensitive zones, the Kasturirangan panel has brought it down to 123.**

The HLWG also acknowledges and allows for the presence of humans even in areas marked as natural landscape. The report says, "It is not possible to plan for Western Ghats, only as a fenced-in zone, with no human influence. People living within the rich biodiversity have nurtured nature. They must benefit from conservation." It says facilities should be created for the value addition of non-timber forest products. It also calls for both infrastructure and financial support for the collection and transport of such produce.

The Kasturirangan Panel had conditionally backed the Athirappilly Project which has the support of both the UDF and the LDF.

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There are a lot of rumours floating around regarding the recommendations of the report. While the report is a tremendous attempt to protect the Western Ghats, one of the “hottest hotspots of biodiversity” in the world, people in the Western Ghat districts have been told that it would ruin their lives. What they seemingly don’t know is that the Western Ghats are spread across six states and **the recommendations of the panel are only to protect and rejuvenate the ecologically sensitive areas for sustainable development. The report has almost nothing against the common people who live in these areas.**ⁱⁱⁱ

The ban on mining, sand mining and quarrying and thermo or hydro projects is not anti-people but anti-cartel. The truth is that none of the recommendations will affect most of the people living in the Western Ghats in Kerala. However, it will indeed affect cartels engaged in sand mining and quarries; and those engaged in encroachment of forest land, construction of resorts and development of townships in ecologically sensitive areas.^{iv} The report is therefore an opportunity for the local people to prevent the ecological destruction due to quarrying and indiscriminate construction.

In the case of hydro-electric projects, it is clear that as much as the country needs renewable and clean hydroelectric power, it also needs to balance this requirement with the loss of biodiversity in forests and the need for ecological flow in rivers. Both are essential components and policy must determine that these elements are safeguarded.

Moreover the report does not consist of any anti-farmer recommendation as it understands that agriculture and plantation are critical livelihood and economic mainstays of the region. It recommends ways for sustainable agriculture and also promotes productivity of forests for economic benefits for local communities. It says, “The region needs to plant, to harvest and then to build economic value-addition from forests, including minor forest produce.”

The Report **also decentralizes the process of decision-making as the *gram sabhas* now have the authority to decide on the future of a project that may have an impact on the village’s biodiversity and ecology.** The tribals have a greater role in discussing and deciding on the economic future of the region.

As for Kerala, the Chief Minister and the Minister for Environment have ensured that nothing in the report would adversely affect the people of the state and have proposed a democratic process of arriving at a decision on the report. Kerala has also appointed an expert committee to look into the recommendations and it has proposed public hearings to gather the opinions and suggestions from the farmers and residents of the ESA.

The Kasthurirangan Report is a step ahead of the Gadgil report and an attempted to frame an environment policy with an equal attention to human sustenance. Kerala has the opportunity to debate the recommendations in a democratic manner and decide on the sustainable development of the Western Ghats.

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ⁱ Kasthuri rangan report, 2013

ⁱⁱ <http://www.deccanchronicle.com/131116/news-current-affairs/article/special-kasturirangan-report-close>

ⁱⁱⁱ http://www.firstpost.com/politics/keralas-opportunistic-cpm-smells-blood-in-kasturi-rangan-report-1236025.html?utm_source=ref_article

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