

Final Proceedings: A National Consultation on

SAVE WESTERN GHATS

Converging Responses for Meeting Common Challenges

February 8-10, 2009

Peaceful Society, Madkai, Goa

Organized by

Prakruti/ Appiko Movement, Sirsi, Karnataka

Keystone Foundation, Nilgiris, Ooty, Tamil Nadu

Peaceful Society, Kundai, Goa.

Preamble

The Save Western Ghats movement of 1988 has long been history. Twenty one years and 5 days later, on Feb 8, 2009, over 200 passionate, concerned and searching souls got together to relive the past in order to rebuild a future to protect the grand old mountains of peninsular India. The sprawling campus of the Kundai-based Peaceful Society played generous host to the national consultation drawing participants from 7 states and 3 countries. At 30 degrees plus, the weather was unexpectedly warm but the enthusiasm was overwhelming, the number of participants continued to swell by the day.

Quipped Carmen Miranda, a native Goan who had flown in from London to be part of the congregation: 'The location is most suited with its diverse flora, as it reflects the bygone image of the Goa we had known.' Indeed, the team that had set up the event had given serious thought to the venue, the ambience and the flavor of the consultation. The idea was to *Celebrate Western Ghats*, for its colours, diversity, ethnicity, culture, music and food. Consequently, the event had done away with formal format of presentations – chairpersons, speakers and PowerPoint presentations – in favor of evolving program, extempore presentations and spontaneous responses. The idea was to make the consultation evolving but intense, and amusing but engaging.

Advocate *Ritwick Dutta* could not hold himself from commenting: 'This meeting is testing our power to make a powerful point without a power point'. Indeed, the Save Western Ghats consultation made many powerful points mainly because people were asked to respond spontaneously. Everyone was taken by surprise at the unpredictable nature of the program that was executed in an unpredictable fashion too. The *Toda shawl ceremony* through the three days, honoring the beacons of the Save Western Ghats Movement was the most unpredictable event that was touted as non-commercial break through the sessions, did take many by surprise.

DAY 1

Opening Session

The event opened with an all bamboo orchestra, led by its creator *Unnikrishna Pakkanar*, capturing the rhythms and echoing the concerns through the varied tones emerging from dozen instruments made from indigenous bamboo found across the region. The 12-member troupe re-created the cascading waterfalls, the jungle breeze, the chirping of birds and the howl of the wild through the amazing combination of bamboo instruments – the first of its kind, original and creative. Developed

along the banks of the most dammed river in Kerala, the Chalakudy River, the music captured the pain and agony of the river as well.

Symbolic merger

Resonating the rhythms of the *Ghats*, the bamboo music led to the symbolic merger of waters brought by participants from rivers in the region viz., Mandovi in Goa, Aghanashini, Kali, Bedti, Tunga, Bhadra and Saravati from Karnataka, Kabini, Chalakudy, Bhavani and Siruvani from Kerala into the decorated water pitcher kept centre stage – reflecting the need to view the region as an ecological continuum. The pitcher stayed on the stage through the event. On the last day Sunderlal Bahuguna of the Chipko fame, merged the Ganges water into the pitcher, symbolising merging of Himalayas and Sahyadri.

Reminiscences of the past

‘Conservation has no alternative’ – B.J.Krishnan

Noted counsel *B J Krishnan*, who was an active member of the Save Western Ghats march and contributes immensely to the Save Nilgiris Campaign, recounted the past to provide lessons for the present. In no uncertain terms, he said: *‘Western Ghats is our Walden.’* Expressing disappointment for the failure of the then movement to provide leadership, he hoped that changing times will ensure new vigor enthused into the process. Much has changed in past two decades, Krishnan recounted, tossing up fresh challenges to preserve whatever has been left of nature in the *Ghats*. Climate change and economic recession have forced a shift towards Green Economy, necessitating the need to preserve these mountains for our survival.

Kumar Kalanand Mani, a contemporary of Krishnan, recollected the consultation of environmental and social activists that had taken place at the same venue in October 1986 which had laid the foundation for the historic Save Western Ghats march. Not only was the march voluntary efforts by hundreds of activists, its problems too were contributed voluntarily. All said, the long march to save nature continues. The need for collective struggles within and outside has to be recognized, Mani added on an optimistic note.

Claude Alvares, well known writer and an important figure in country’s environmental history, was taken aback when his name was announced for the honor in recognition of his services to the cause.

In his brief speech, Claude reflected upon the unfinished work and called upon the youth to join hands in rebuilding the movement of the past.

Reflections on the present

After the stalwarts it was the time for the youth to reflect upon their struggles in the changing context. *Sival*, the young Irula tribal woman who has questioned injustice to nature and to the people in Attappady narrated the challenges they have been facing as a tribe since organized deforestation started in the region under the pretext of tribal development in the early 1960s. From then onwards, through the Integrated Tribal Development Project, the *Attappady* Valley Irrigation Project planned since 1970s, the Bhavani Diversion scheme planned at *Mukkali*, near development projects and welfare schemes have been imposed on them. She pointed out the huge disconnect that still prevails between what the tribals want and what gets imposed on them.

Sebastian Rodrigues from Goa had altogether another story to narrate on how indiscriminate mining in Goa has displaced people, ruined livelihoods, denuding forests and created water scarcity that was fuelling conflicts over water. Sanghya taluka has the maximum forests and an estimated 20,000 ha under mining leases, he reported! Dams being built in the catchment of mining areas are one of the biggest blunders and devastation beyond recovery can happen to Goa. Puraan kheti the unique river based agriculture is being threatened by dams. He however pointed out that inconsistencies in the movements are adding to the problems faced in the present era.

Sudhirendar Sharma who was the main person responsible for skillfully and tactfully moderating all the major sessions and keeping the tempo live throughout the three days wanted participants to ponder over their individual perceptions on why Western Ghats were important to them? Common perception was that these *Ghats* were sustaining all forms of life like a mother. However, a journalist from Bangalore, *Keya Acharya*, wondered if the power of money was not changing that notion of mother-child relationship!

Cross Currents

In the following session discussions got focused on political-economy, socio-psychological and environ-legal perspectives related to changing times. *Norma Alvares* passionately exposed the failure of the judiciary in understanding the environment. It is only the hope of the people which keeps one going after all these years of judicial experiences.

Mining cases are often wrought with failure rather than success mainly because restoration of flora and fauna is impossible in mined areas. Mining is emerging as a severe problem in the Western Ghats

with mined areas in some places even 150 ft below sea level and water draining into the mined areas from surrounding wells. While admitting that FCA (1986) has been one of the best laws in the country, the EIA process is ridden with problems. Environmental Clearance for projects shall not be given unless forest clearance is accorded. She lamented that environment clearance is sought to start the project while project proponents rarely wait for all-important forest clearance.

While *Ramesh* elaborated on the political-economy of development and the challenge that it has thrown, *Pandurang Hegde* approached the current crises from a socio-psychological position. The development juggernaut has created a sense of illusion amidst masses such that a large section, enamored by growth equations, has become apathetic towards environment conservation. Economics has created an imagined community that not only influences political decisions but presses hard for erasing the so-called 'development deficit.'

Following the honor being conferred on him, *Vijay Paranjpaye* invited the participants to get ready to face the problems under the changed circumstances. Besides current inroads into the Western Ghats, from mining, plantation development, infrastructure and urban development, the recent Indo-US 1, 2, 3 Agreement on nuclear development represents a fierce new challenge as it will unleash the building of new nuclear reactors and an associated scramble for plutonium, uranium and thorium, notably to be found along the coast of Kerala and Karnataka.

Having created a broad framework on the issues confronting the Western Ghats, the participants grouped at 'Converging Circles' to brainstorm on selected six issues viz., Mining, Dams and related issues, Roads and Infrastructure projects including eco tourism, wild life and biodiversity, thermal and nuclear projects and forest dependent communities.

DAY 2

Legal Challenges

Is taking more cases to the court the only solution to ensuring compliance?

The second day started off on a somber note with the above question on top of every mind. *Ritwick Dutta*, with his vast experience in judicial activism set the tone by pointing that judicial activism has to do with identifying problems. He also cautioned that 'legal' means engagement with law in different ways. Courts always look at precedence. Hence, judiciary can be a simultaneous process with on the ground movement.

The Govindarajan Committee on Industrial reforms became the starter for the new EIA notification and the new NEP which drastically altered the clearance and compliance mechanism in India. The forest diversion has been reduced to a mere numbers game and compensatory afforestation to Net Present Value! Between two meetings of the Forest Advisory Committee (FAC), *some 104 sq. km of forest areas is being cleared for projects, reported Ritwick* to a shocked audience. This, he remarked, doesn't include forest areas below 40 ha that are being diverted at the State government's level.

While the EIAs are totally inadequate and projects are often publicly opposed, official documents only refer to 'public consultation has taken place', without mentioning opposition expressed in such public hearings. MoEF acts in violation of Constitution by not acknowledging the powers of Panchyat Raj (local self government bodies at village level). There is as yet NO project which has been rejected by the MoEF as a consequence of public opposition while we realize that wild life corridors are non-negotiable even with NPV! Displacement debate due to dams and other development projects like in the case of mega projects like Narmada do not apply to the Western Ghats due to the high value of forests and highly dispersed nature of the habitats. *Hence even a small number of displacements should matter.* In this globalised world where we do not have any rules *we need to develop citizens EIAs to counter and set the rules.*

Research Priorities

With even research priorities and inferences getting diluted and manipulated apart from the judiciary and the executive, the next session on what should be the research priorities for the Western Ghats was indeed significant. The session saw heated debates between researchers and activists on what should be the stance taken by researchers in the case of development projects affecting forests and critical wild life corridors. *Lalitha Vijayan* from SACON made an interesting observation that the ecosystem services of wetlands is more than the total budget of Kerala state. Even very common species of birds were becoming rare pointing to the need for their systematic documentation through educational institutions.

While species are being given prominence in research studies we have little information on habitat – species - ecosystem interactions. And new research priorities need to focus on these. The lacuna of research on lower forms of organisms like fungi and invertebrates was also pointed out. The need for integration of social- natural researches is the need of the hour was the stance taken by *Nitin Rai* from ATREE. Presently institutions were looking very narrowly at forest interactions. Speaking from the experience of working for ten years in the species focused regeneration work in the BR Hills Sanctuary; one understands that while local history of the land and the people are very important one

has to deal with the larger economic drivers changing the landscapes as well. And the number of variables to be dealt with in Western Ghats conservation is increasing.

After all these years of working and talking passionately for conservation, we need to remember that 400 sq.km area in the Nilgiris is under exotic species. What are we lacking? This disturbing question was posed by *Mohan Raj* from WWF who was of the opinion that after 21 years we have weakened and are losing ground in research. We keep looking for new knowledge not using the already available knowledge. Action based on already available research is the need of the hour.

A fitting conclusion to this session was given by one of the oldest participants when she reminded the audience that the very ancient 2,000 year old *Khazan* system of tidal ecosystem based agriculture that was prevalent in Goa was fast disappearing – *inspite of so much knowledge being generated* (words not spoken but heard by all) – so are not we truly losing ground? A young researcher tried to pacify all by suggesting that this is the time for ecosystem approach and community based research in the Western Ghats.

Power Corridor

‘There is no need to crucify all the forest and environment officials’, opined the three valiant government officials who spoke in the session on power corridors. Administrative hassles and political pressure were the biggest obstacles. However, there were officers utilizing the available space to take decisions in favour of conservation. The young Wild Life Warden *Manoj Kumar* from Dandeli Wildlife Sanctuary even found time to carry out his own research on the hornbill – habitat interactions out of self interest without official compulsion. K S Reddy, from the Ministry of Environment & Forests, was bit apologetic for not doing as much and yet contended that their heart was in the right place. ‘Count us in your activities,’ he reiterated.

The system doesn’t allow as much liberty to exercise one’s conscience and yet there exists scope to ‘follow the rules to make an impact’. The officials were appreciative of the civil society concerns and committed themselves to do their best in supporting conservation actions in the Western Ghats. The fact that some officials did come to hear voices from the ground and contribute their opinion on the matter was appreciated by the participants.

Counting Faith

In the afternoon, no one was prepared for the session on what had faith to do with Western Ghats! However, *Rakesh Bhatt* with his deep philosophical outlook on life started off the moderation with a remarkable statement on the meaning of the Urdu word *Khaleefa*; *the one who relates to other*

species other than himself. The two speakers *D.K.Mishra* and *Vinay Aditya* quoting from the ancient scriptures took back the audience into an era when hills, forests and rivers were looked upon with reverence and considered as the symbols of prosperity and fame to the rulers who protected them. Even the Himalayas and the Western Ghats are connected culturally. Ganga *snaan* (bathing in Ganga) is not complete without Tunga *snaan*. The name of the river Mandovi in Goa is also the name of King Bharat, the younger brother of Lord Rama *Presently the skills of our engineers and the resources of the government are the most fatal to our natural resources.* However, *Madhu Ramanath* countered that *too much emphasis on the ancient Hindu tradition of faith and reminding the audience about the tribal world view which must have been much more ancient and closer to nature.*

Media Watch

After exploring the untainted power of faith for building empathy it was time to talk about the role of media in promoting conservation in the Western Ghats. Seasoned freelance journalist *Bharat Dogra* gave the classical example of *Shankar Guha Niyogi* –union leader of Mine workers who held a press conference in the problem area and helped to break the silence of the media and involved them in the issue. The movements always have to be alert to the changes in the media and seek how the issues can get a better space in media. The media in turn has to maintain constant contact with the researchers and activists. In spite of their limitations, the challenge lies in how the media can be used for press coverage without alienating the press. The speaker recommended the systematic up-scaling of the press coverage from local to the state to the national level.

In these times of media overkill and fatigue, generic press releases do not get picked up. In such movements and campaigns one would need hard facts – *after the FCA Act 1988, at least 11.5 lakh ha.of forests have been diverted all over India out of which more than 1 lakh ha. are from the Western Ghats, informed Kanchi Kohli.* Media can be successfully used to bring out and expose secret policy documents of the government as well as to build relationships with the government. In a country like India inspite of its limitations there is still space to write your mind compared to other countries, opined *Keya Acharya*, a freelance journalist. However, stature of the editor in Indian media has diminished due to the market-driven agenda. The TV media in the Indian context still has scope of being used effectively. She warned that ‘with us or against us attitude won’t work in the media’.

While agreeing to the state of the present media and its limitations the general question raised by a section of the audience was, ‘How to use the media for the cause of the Western Ghats inspite of its limitations under the changing circumstances is the challenge we face. A session that evoked interesting discussion tosses up several ideas: start media dialogues at various levels; engage with

business interests; researchers must communicate with media; media fellowships for Western Ghats; stakeholder's activism to be considered; and engage children with the media.

DAY 3

Farm Crises

Though not scheduled the organisers felt that there was need to discuss the farm crises. Consequently, a session was squeezed in, and it turned out to be intense and engaging. No wonder, the country has seen over 160,000 farmers' suicides in past ten years. Causes of the decline are manifold but can be summarised in terms of trade, ecological degradation, erosion of traditional systems and climate change: Trade in palm oil import, a trade dominated by politicians, leads to demise of coconut oil – falling prices and health problems. Rice imports from Vietnam, Brazil and Myanmar leading to depressed farm gate prices in India.

Farming crisis also needs to be looked at from the climate change perspective. Due to erratic rainfall pepper has not flowered in many places in the Western Ghats, and hence not harvested. Similar problems are faced in case of coffee. Opening up of forest canopies has been leading to decline of cardamom and tea productivity. Farmers in many high range areas are shifting cardamom to coffee due to the changing climate and water scarcity. The problems of erosion and water scarcity are on the rise in the Western Ghats. Massive out migration of farmers and plantation workers in many regions has impacted farming in the region. Water scarcity in upstream catchments has started affecting water availability of farmers in the downstream plains – need to open up dialogues with farmers in the plains on the importance of Western Ghats as the most important provider of water and nutrients.

Vegetable cultivation in the Nilgiris has been severely affected by pesticide and fertilizer application. Ground water depletion is also on the rise, 3,000 year old farming practise in the Nilgiris is being affected along with the labour crisis. Traditional crops (millets) are disappearing.

Organic farming alone may not solve the crisis. Integrated approaches wherein landscape level land husbandry practises with eco-restoration as the foundation is the need of the hour. Remedies include re-focus on a more diverse agriculture alongside encouraging people to become more independent from the market for one's basic needs by growing one's own food with surplus for the local market.

Conversing Circles

Group 3 : Wild calls

The calls of the wild are growing as accountability, transparency, corruption and politics take centre-stage in so-called development. It's a pity that Kudremukh is the lone example of maximum impact. However, concerted action needed for pre-emptive planning, monitoring EIA, creating network of people with different skills, and preparing a 'State of the Western Ghats Biodiversity' report. Need to take urgent action on SESA – Sahyadris Ecologically Sensitive Area declaration, Hubli-Ankola Rail link, Nutrino project, Mhadei River diversion, Siriyur –Sthyamangalam road through Mudumali etc.

Group 4: Speed Kills

Muthanga Elephant Corridor in Wayanad is under threat from the inter-state highway linking Bangalore with Calicut passing through this corridor. The SWG calls for a ban on all activities in core and buffer zones of protected areas; environmental and social feasibility of the project should be assessed after due consultation with the local communities.

Group 5: Forest Communities

Centralized policy on tribes has been a problem. The new FRA has inherent problems. Too much focus on cash in NTFP collection results in forgetting the sustenance uses. Value systems affected by NGO interventions among forest communities – recognize and respect it 95 % of non forest dwellers dependent on forests while the attention is focused on the 5% as either degraders of forest or most impacted both are incorrect approaches. The sense of community is nonexistent in non tribal or urban areas.

Local communities and youth have always formed back bone of the Save Western Ghats movement. It is important to fully engage and support them. Essential to involve women, and through them young children, when they are still receptive to ideas. Open up more communication channels to communities. Support for groups aiming to get

Important is to link farmers again to their land and enable them to maintain their knowledge – in view of the fact that many farmers increasingly depend on hired labour. Current Government's emphasis on 'food for work' programmes is at expense of investment in farming and biodiversity. This mismatch needs to be addressed.

Money Matters

A special session was dedicated to assess trends in (international) financial flows (e.g. climate funding) for work, notably grassroots actions, in the Western Ghats. It was observed that private foundations suffer from financial crises and have fewer funds at their disposal whereas ODA assistance is on the decline. Further, international development banks (World Bank, European Investment Bank, Asian Development Bank) are keen to regain part of their market share and are consequently laying more

emphasis on infrastructural investments. Donors have a tendency to dispose larger sums of money to fewer applicants to lower 'transactions costs'. While bureaucracy in fund applications and reporting has been overwhelming, a sizeable amount of money is parked with institutions/projects that are often distanced from the grassroots.

The house felt the need for more support for grassroots activists in Western Ghats Long term financial strategy: trust funds and small grants mechanism should be established to harness the growing potential for small actions. It was also mentioned that support for young individuals must be worked out in the form of fellowships. Private sector must be encouraged to see value in such engagements at the grassroots.

Converging Circles

Group 1: Mine but not 'mine'

Mining is environmentally and socially unacceptable activity that has resulted in loss of livelihoods and has affected local food security. Common across the Western Ghats, but with serious proportions in Goa, mining is ravaging forest and agricultural lands without suitable rehabilitation of people. There is a need to build critical mass of people against it; use RTI to dig out facts; generate researched information on its impact; sensitize *panchayats* to exert their constitutional rights and press for comprehensive EIA could be some of the actions.

Group 2: Living Rivers

The movements against dams should be focused towards ensuring 'ecological flows' based on riparian rights and ecosystem functions. Electricity boards must be held accountable for under-achiever projects and failed power projects. RTI should be used to revitalize the Western Ghats Rivers Network for negotiating Integrated River Basin Management approach. Western Ghats river valleys be placed under REDD (Reduced Emissions from Deforestation and Degradation) and Adaptation.

Over to Ooty

Padma Vibhushan *Sunderlal Bahuguna* released a pictorial book 'Sahyadri – Reminiscences and Reflections' to mark the closing stages of the event. The book captures the paradise that is Sahyadri through wildlife photographer *N. A. Naseer's* lens, and the hell that has been let loose on it through a series of writings collected over two decades and edited by *Sudhirender Sharma*. While releasing the book, Bahuguna came with a clear reminder, "The subtle, yet, significant connects between the Himalayas and the Sahyadris need to be comprehended at several ecological and socio - political layers". Bahuguna emphasized the need for more crusaders to save what remains in the Western Ghats because 'mountains are towers of water'.

Pandurang Hegde gave a closing summary of main findings and actions for follow up. It was formally announced that the next year's Save Western Ghats meeting will be held at the Keystone Foundation in Kotagiri, Ooty. Hegde informed the house that an attempt will be made to bring out a 'Citizen's Report on the Status of the Western Ghats' before the next meeting.

The modest follow up actions that have emerged are;

1. Bring out Status Report on Western Ghats
- 2 To strengthen the Campaign by involving youth, women and children
- 3 To establish a network to strengthen the grass root actions/to influence policies
- 4 To meet once in a year to share and celebrate Western Ghats as Sahyadri !

Prepared by A.Latha with inputs from Paul Wolvekemp, and Sudhirendar Sharma

We all come from the forest

Unto her we shall return

Like a drop of rain

Flowing to the ocean ...

(An American Indian song that the participants sang in chorus on the final moment)

This is a short description of the issues discussed in the Goa meeting, if anyone wants a longer printed version (about 75 pages), including the details of paper presented; please write to appiko@gmail.com or appiko@sancharnet.in. The cost of the detail report will be Rs 300 per copy + postage/courier charges.