



SAHYADRI VARTA

GIVING VOICE TO THE WESTERN GHATS

‘Practitioners’ Conclave’- Mahabaleshwar 2012

Every individual effort towards change, counts. It counts in its own unique manner to influence minds, to think beyond the obvious, to question the norms, debunk established rules and strive towards establishing a more egalitarian, just and better order. The struggle for just environmental decisions, the quest for conserving and protecting our ecological wealth, the urgency of promoting sustainable development practices is a journey many have chosen to embark on. Day by day, they attempt in their own way to make amends, reverse the order and make the wider populace aware about the perils that unmitigated development brings with it. But at times it is necessary to stop, look back at the changes that have happened, draw inspiration from it and proceed. At times, it is imperative for us to show our collective strength by uniting on the basis of common goals, visions and aspirations. It was with this motive of facilitating long term, fruitful coalitions for the cause of conserving the Western Ghats, that the ‘Save the Western Ghats Meet-2012’ was envisioned. The Save the Western Ghats Movement which gained credence through the march in 1987/88 and was again revived in the year 2009 at Goa, aims at bringing together all like-minded people to work towards the shared goal of protecting the Western Ghats.

This annual conference was held at Mahabaleshwar from 30th November to 2nd December and saw a total of 350 delegates from various parts of India take part in it. The Conclave was supported by Critical Ecosystems Partnership Fund, Central Bank of India and Indigenous Partnerships for Agro-biodiversity and local Food Sovereignty. The Conclave was inaugurated by eminent Gandhian and Water Conservationist, Shri Anupam Mishra. In his inaugural address, Shri Mishra expressed in simple and lucid terms, the lacunae in understanding what development entails. He spoke



about how the paradigm of development is increasingly becoming anti-people and anti-nature, which is defeating the purpose of human emancipation. He talked of the urgent need to go back to nature for answers to issues of sustainable development and use the traditional knowledge of various Indigenous communities to understand and protect nature. In an effective and soul stirring address, he appealed to all the gathered delegates to act, before any more damage could be done to the pristine ecology of the Western Ghats.

The Conclave was marked by commemorating the marchers of 1987/88 who had assembled at the venue. They shared their experiences and memories from the march and talked about the way the movement has progressed since then. Marchers from Maharashtra, Karnataka, Kerala and Tamilnadu came together to express their solidarity for the movement. They were felicitated by Mr. Abhilash Khandekar, State Editor, Dainik Divya Marathi.

The first day of the Conclave saw some wonderful

*For a detailed list of delegates, discussions
and presentations, visit
www.savethewesternghats.org*

sessions on various aspects of conserving the Western Ghats. It started with Dr. V.B Mathur, Dean, Wildlife Institute of India speaking about the process through which the Western Ghats were inducted in the World Heritage site list. He also shed light on how this status could aid the efforts of conservation in the area. Post lunch, we started the session on Western Ghats and the Urban with Mr. Somnath Sen, member of the Save the Western Ghats group, moderating the session. The session which brought into focus the urban scape nestled in the Western Ghats had some pointed factual arguments and issues raised by the panel. The panel comprised of Kavita Wankhede and Sasikala Gowda of Indian Institute of Human Settlements, Bengaluru and Mr. Rajiv Raman, an independent researcher working on urban waste management. This was followed by the E-Dialogues session which saw many delegates speaking about their work in the Western Ghats. Parineeta Dandekar from South Asia Network of Dams, Rivers and People gave a riveting presentation of the Rivers of Western Ghats and their transitions vis-à-vis 'development'. Prof. M. K Prasad, pioneer of the Silent Valley Movement and Mr. R. Ajayan, Convener, Plachimeda Solidarity Committee spoke of the respective Environmental Movements headed by them and what learnings we could draw from their experiences.

The second day of the Conclave was celebrated as the 'Indigenous Communities Day' and was inaugurated by Mr. Phrang Roy, Co-coordinator, Indigenous Partnerships for Agro-biodiversity and local Food Sovereignty. He spoke about the urgency to reclaim food cultures as they are an intrinsic tie to the local biodiversity of the region. Preserving local food traditions is crucial to preserving the agro-biodiversity of the area, having control over ones land and ultimately retaining ones political and social autonomy. More about the Food Festival is highlighted in the next article. The second day was marked by parallel sessions in the afternoon. Mr. Abhilash Khandekar, Editor of the Divya Marathi group spoke about the responsibility of the media in questioning development and bringing Environmental issues to the fore-front. In the other parallel session, 'E-Dialogues', many members

spoke about their work in the Western Ghats. There were some presentations on Water Management and Eco-Tourism initiatives in Mahabaleshwar. This was followed by Shaiontoni Bose, an author talking about using the medium of literature to spread awareness about environmental issues. The day ended with a session on PILs and Legal activism on Environmental issues. This session was chaired by Dr. Jay Samant and Mr. S. Hiremath from Samaj Parivartan Samudaya, Dharwad, Hema Ramani from Bombay Environmental Action group, Mumbai and Guruprasad Balsaheb Malkar from Environmental forum, Kolhapur shared their experiences with the delegates.

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Dr. V. B Mathur answering a question from the audience



Prof. Madhav Gadgil addressing the audience

Of Food, Culture and Identity: Indigenous Food Festival at SWG Meet

There is an intrinsic link between the idea of Biodiversity Conservation and local food security. The Western Ghats with its ecological and demographic diversity houses many Indigenous communities who through ages have lived in close proximity to the natural wealth of the region. They have developed their own forms of adapting to climate change, facing adverse natural conditions and utilizing natural resources for their sustenance and livelihood. This knowledge that they possess stems from a deep rooted connection with their surroundings. It is imperative for us to take cognizance of this knowledge while deliberating on the future of the Western Ghats. With an idea of disseminating this knowledge and providing the members of these communities to present their perspectives on Conservation, we celebrated the second day of the Conclave as the 'Indigenous Communities Day'. The food practices of these communities reveal a lot about the biodiversity of their region and the way in which local resources are produced and consumed. These food practices are not only sustainable but also promote a much more nutritious and healthy lifestyle. With the intention of promoting the local food cultures of these communities, we organized a Food Festival, with the support of our partners, 'Indigenous Partnerships for Agro-biodiversity and Food Sovereignty'.

6 groups from the states of Maharashtra, Karnataka, Tamilnadu and Kerala took part in the Food Festival and presented their authentic cuisine. The Mahadev Koli community from Bhimashankar, Maharashtra used Cucumber, Pumpkin and Rice Flour to present Dangar Bhakar and Kakad PISOI, a local delicacy of the area. The Kunbi community from Konkan presented a spread of dishes amongst which the Solkadi was widely appreciated by the delegates. The Ruchie Farmers' Network from Wayanad, Kerala used Bamboo and Jackfruit as the major ingredient in their preparations. The Irula community from Nilgiris used the platform to present many delicacies which used locally

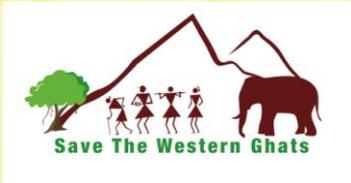


produced Millets as the prime ingredient. They also showcased pickles, juices and soaps which were prepared by members of the community. The Kaani community of Tamilnadu was represented by the Tribal Foundation, Kanyakumari. They made use of Tapioca and local chilies to come up with a variety of dishes. The final participating community was the Soligas from MM Hills, Karnataka. They used minor forest produce like tubers, roots and flowers of edible plants to present the daily diet of the members of the community. The representatives of the Irula and Mahadev Koli community also addressed the delegates where they spoke about their local agricultural and forest management practices which are rapidly undergoing change. This can be considered to be a first step towards promoting Food Festivals as a means of knowledge dissemination in this region.

Practitioners' Conclave (Contd. from Page 2)

The last day of the Conclave was primarily dedicated to the crucial session of 'Western Ghats Ecology Expert Panel Report: Policy bench'. Eminent Environmentalist and Chairman of the Western Ghats ecology expert panel, Prof. Madhav Gadgil was the key panelist of the session and was joined by Mr. Madhu Ramnath, SWG group member and Dr. Jay Samant for Devraai, Kolhapur. The session coordinator, Mr. Sanjay Upadhyay flagged off some key issues which questioned the intent behind the dissent of state governments towards the report and whether there is any way to prohibit such unmitigated development. Taking on these questions Prof. Gadgil talked about the 'development of exclusion and imposition' which is the order of the day and which the WGEEP report draws attention to. He said that the dichotomy between a democratic political system and an economic order fuelled by selfish interests has always sabotaged environmental protection in India. This system has always either put the people under the tyranny of the Forest department or has made them face the brunt of large developmental projects. He said that the government is honor bound to implement the recommendations of this report as they essentially lie under the broad framework of the values enshrined in the constitution.

In all, the Conclave was an opportunity for all Nature enthusiasts and Environmental organizations working in the Western Ghats to connect with the various cross cutting issues affecting this terrain. This meet threw up more questions that need to be addressed while sharing various solutions which could help practitioners' in the field. But, this is only the beginning of the channelization of attempts to step up the work and deliver environmental justice to the people in the Western Ghats. The cause of the Save the Western Ghats Movement has become more crystallized with this Conclave and the endeavor to continue engaging with more such issues is further strengthened. This Conclave has reaffirmed the motive for all present, to raise awareness, advocate and deliver sustainable development in the Western Ghats



Applied Environmental Research Foundation
C-10, NatyaChitra Co-op Housing Society
Bhusari Colony, Kothrud
Pune- 411038, Maharashtra, India

www.aerfindia.org

Email Id- info@aerfindia.org

EDITOR: Mr. Jayant Sarnaik

EDITORIAL TEAM: Mr. Alhad Godbole

Ms. Pratyasha Rath

You can send in your suggestions and opinions about this edition of Sahyadri Varta and also send in articles for the next editions. For any such concerns or queries, contact:

Pratyasha Rath

pratyasharath@aerfindia.org