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Concern over impact of land conversion in Kodagu

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3-4 minutes

The recent dilution of the Karnataka Land Reforms Act 1961 through an amendment to Section 109 enabling direct purchase of agricultural land from farmers, has larger environmental ramifications for the State.

This is more so in the hilly terrains and ecologically-sensitive regions such as Kodagu where there are concerns over the dilution of the Act, and is set to bring the government and local stakeholders on a collision course.

Ravaged by floods in 2018 and 2019 abetted by unbridled urbanisation and infrastructure development to promote tourism, there are apprehensions in Kodagu that sale of agricultural land for non-agricultural purpose will devastate the catchment area of the Cauvery.

Kodagu-based NGO, Coorg Wildlife Society, has said that the amendment will have devastating consequences as reckless urbanisation has already caused negative impact on the environment as evident in recent floods and landslips.

“It’s not just about land in Kodagu but this will also have a bearing

on water and its implications will be felt in the downstream region of State, impacting food security and agriculture,” said C.P. Muthanna of Coorg Wildlife Society, which plans to take legal recourse to fight the amendment.

“The amendment makes it easy for any industrialist to directly approach farmers and purchase land. We will write to the government and approach the court to fight it,” he said.

Though there are individuals and political outfits who support the government move, the correlation of environmental damage and depletion in waterflow cannot be denied, said Mr. Muthanna.

Stakeholders now plan to revive environmental groups including the Save Kodagu Save Cauvery campaign, an umbrella organisation fighting to conserve Kodagu. These groups were at the forefront in opposing the proposed linear projects through Kodagu that included two railway lines – one connecting Madikeri with Mysuru via Kushalnagar, and another connecting Thalassery in Kerala with Mysuru via Kodagu.

While there are no dearth of studies underlying the ecological damage that has taken place in Kodagu over the years, a group of scientists have come out with new findings on the urbanisation and change in land use pattern in the district, which does not augur well for its future.

The study is by T.V. Ramachandra, S. Vinay and S. Bharat of Energy and Wetlands Research Group, Centre for Ecological Sciences, Indian Institute of Science, Bengaluru. The paper titled ‘Urban Dynamics in Coorg District, Karnataka’ has been published in the ENVIS Technical Report, April 2020.

As per the paper, the native vegetation cover including forest, scrub

jungles, and sacred groves, have declined from 45.44% to 44.46% with loss of edge forests, which are slowly being converted to open spaces.

The study also states that land use changes assessment indicate that agriculture areas are vulnerable to anthropogenic pressures with burgeoning societal demands around major towns where agriculture area are converted to construct resorts. The imbalance in the forest cover can lead to abrupt change in hydrological status, increased temperatures, higher instances of landslips, higher soil erosion, and lesser crop productivity, it says.

Mr. Muthanna said scientific findings will strengthen their fight against the amendment.