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Posted at: Aug 14, 2018, 12:59 AM; last updated: Aug 14, 2018, 12:59 AM (IST)

Turning blessing into curse

Kerala saw its worst floods in nearly a century, with 26 people dying on a single day. Besides the heavy rainfall, the main culprit for the disaster is the organised interference with the scheme of nature.

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Conserve them: Kerala is endowed with forests and rivers.

BRB Bhaskar

Senior Journalist

Nature presented Kerala with many blessings: evergreen tropical rain forests, more than 40 rivers running from the mountains to the sea along its length of a little over 500 km, a network of backwaters and two seasons of monsoon rain. Gross interference with nature, often actuated by avarice more than need, is turning some of the blessings into curses. The current wave of floods that has caused widespread damage in about half of the state's 14 districts is an example. Not that floods are a new experience. The oldest living generation grew up hearing tales of the Deluge of 99 (the figure denoting year 1099 of the Malayalam era, corresponding to 1924 CE) which not only caused extensive damage but also left many marooned in their villages or houses for weeks. That was exceptional. There were riverside villages which experienced annual visitations. But most of the time, the rainwater flowed into the sea or drained into the water

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bodies or into the paddy fields which got enriched in the process.

The multiple canopies of the tropical forests broke the fall of rainwater and in reaching the ground the land absorbed it easily and augmented the groundwater which sustained the rivers through the year. As a result of denudation of forests, rainwater now flows into the sea in a matter of hours. Rain-bearing clouds collapsing in barren hillside pose threats to life and property. Organised interference with the scheme of nature began with the arrival of families from the plains, first in singles and then in swarms, looking for land to make a living out of it or raise fortunes by developing estates. They either took over lands in the possession of Adivasis who were entitled to live and earn their living there or cleared forests. They enjoyed the patronage of religious or caste organisations, most importantly powerful churches, and the protection of political parties that were eager to cultivate vote banks. Corrupt officials helped regularise illegal land grabs. A Central commission which studied the problems of the Scheduled Tribes found



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large-scale alienation of Adivasi lands in different states and recommended that they be seized and returned to the owners. Accordingly, the Kerala Assembly unanimously enacted a law in 1975 to return the alienated Adivasi lands. It was not implemented.

After the courts ordered its implementation and Adivasis mounted pressure through a series of agitations, all parties joined hands once again, this time to scrap the earlier law and enact a new one offering them alternative land instead. That, too, has largely remained on paper due to the insincere approach of successive governments to the Adivasis, who constitute a little over one per cent of the state's population.

For years, as encroachers converted forests into estates and built resorts, the state government valiantly sought to hide the truth by retaining the same figure for the area under forests in the annual reports until the Centre, yielding to its pressure, allowed grant of title deeds to the encroachers.

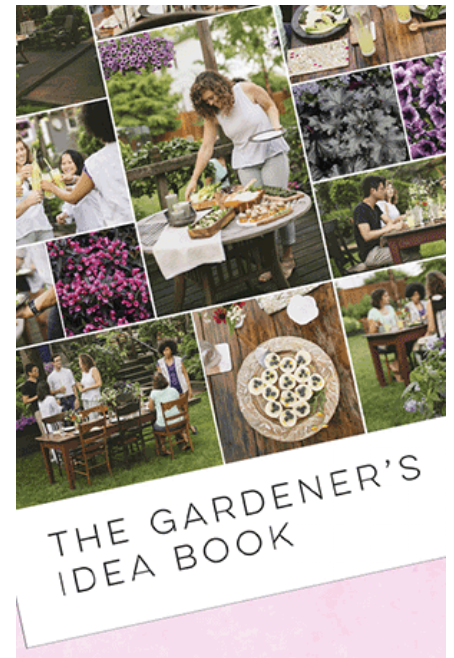
When the state government drew up a plan to set up a hydroelectric project in the Silent Valley, environmental activists, mostly poets, campaigned against it. Prime Minister Indira Gandhi withheld consent for the project after a committee of scientists headed by MGK Menon reported that it would destroy the rich flora and fauna of the rain forests.

According to official data, the state has 11,309.5 sq km under forests. This is 29.1 per cent of the total land area. A total of 1,837.8 sq km of forest is classified as "vested forests and ecologically fragile lands". Since the government is slow in taking note of loss of forests, these figures may not reflect the current position.

The Indian Institute of Sciences, Bengaluru, reported last year on the basis of a study using remote sensing data that Kerala had lost 906,440 hectares of forest land between 1973 and 2016. This was more than 50 per cent of the present forest area. "The drastic reduction of forest cover, along with high concretisation, does not bode well for the state," said the report's authors Ramakrishnan Ramabhadran and TV Ramachandra.

At the time of the release of the report, the state was going through a spell of drought, which was widely attributed to the destruction of environment. And now, it is the turn of the floods. Idukki and Waynad districts, home to most of the state's Adivasi population, are among the worst hit. When CPI(M) veteran VS Achuthanandan was Chief Minister, he sent a team to Munnar in Idikku district, which has seen the most degradation, to evict the encroachers. His party's district unit defeated the move with the tacit support of its state leadership.

A high-level Western Ghats Ecology Expert Panel, headed by Madhav Gadgil, after taking note of the extensive damage caused to the Western Ghats, recommended measures to stop further degradation and save what was left of the fragile forests from unsustainable exploitation in the interests of the present and future generations. Following a rash of protests by the powerful



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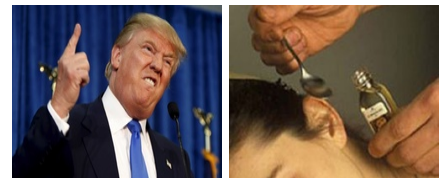


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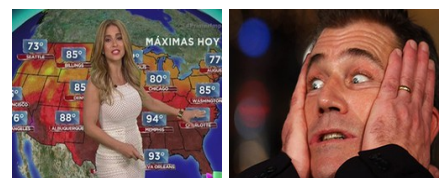


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encroachers' lobby, comprising political parties and religious leaders, the Government of Kerala pressured the Centre not to go ahead with its implementation. Thereupon, the Centre set up another panel under the chairmanship of K Kasturirangan to review the matter. It obligingly watered down the Gadgil Committee proposals.

The Modi government is yet to take a call on the reports of the two committees.

Alternating phases of drought and flood which Kerala is now experiencing is something other areas which have witnessed large-scale ecological disturbance are also gaping through.

Kerala's civil society, though weak, has been able to stop several environmentally damaging activities like the Silent Valley and Athirapally projects, over-exploitation of groundwater by Cola factories, pollution of air and water by a Birla rayon plant. But they still need to gather strength to prevail upon the authorities to adopt environment-friendly policies overcoming the opposition of various kinds of vested interests.



On the prowl in Chandigarh, he has struck four times in 48 hours

27 Aug 2018 | 2:17 AM

CHANDIGARH: A white Activa-borne snatcher is on the prowl in the city and

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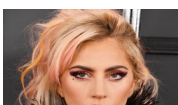
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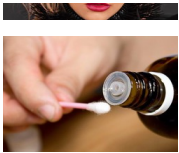
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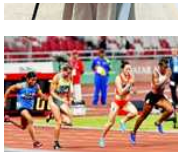
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