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'Address Karnataka's concerns, move ahead on ESA'



Bosky Khanna, DH News Service, Bengaluru, SEP 02 2018, 00:51AM IST | UPDATED: SEP 02 2018, 01:38AM IST



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Sandeep Dave

Karnataka has come to be seen as the main stumbling block to declaring a third of the Western Ghats

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Why has Karnataka rejected the (Kasturirangan) report?

Karnataka has not rejected the report. There are some recommendations made in the Kasturirangan report on which the state has raised concerns since 2014, when the first notification (of ESA) was issued. Those concerns still stand, they have not yet been answered.

The Kasturirangan report made 36 recommendations, four of which we did not agree to. These include: (i) Any area, any village with 20% eco-sensitive zone (ESZ) will be a part of eco-sensitive area (ESA). To this, Karnataka government said there are many villages, in Malnad region, for example, where villages are widely dispersed, so make it 50%. Since Kasturirangan report was based on satellite imagery, the Centre said that they needed to verify it by a committee.

(ii) The report recommended complete ban on mining, sand mining and quarrying. While Karnataka agreed on banning mining in Western Ghats, we sought reconsideration on sand mining and quarrying as sand and stones are essential for construction. The government was willing to impose some restrictions.

(iii) The report had put a ban on buildings and construction projects of 20,000 sq km area and above. To this, Karnataka said that when the Environment Impact (Protection) Assessment Rules are already in place, why not go by them.

(iv) The report had also proposed a strict ban on tourism, but we said that is not possible. Restrictions have already been put in place.

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There is no delay from Karnataka's side. During each notification, recommendations are made but the concerns raised by us are not addressed. When the notification was issued again in September 2015, the cabinet sub- committee visited all the districts and had discussions with grama panchayats. They noted the objections raised by people. Government of Karnataka told the Centre to address our concerns. That was not done.

In 2015, red category industries and hazardous waste rules were brought into the picture. In 2017, the same thing came up again with minor changes. During this time, Karnataka government pointed that many villages have been repeated in the list. Also, the recommendations made by the state earlier were not taken on board.

Now, yet again, the Centre's notification lapsed on August 26.

In 2015, the Forest Survey of India report was released which showed that 30,000 sq km area was under green cover, of which 8,500 sq km is under protected areas. To this, Karnataka added that already 19,000 sq km is ESZ and is around protected areas.

The Centre says Karnataka is to constitute another committee to address the state's concerns. Is that true?

Why will Karnataka make a committee to address its needs. It's for the Centre to respond to our concerns.

At the meeting held on April 11, 2018 in New Delhi, organised by Ministry of Environment and Forests and Climate Change, Karnataka had said that since there are many agreements and disagreements,

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While this was rightly noted in the minutes of the meeting, the covering letter dated July 13, sent to Chief Secretary Vijay Bhaskar, stated that to expedite the finalisation of the Kasturirangan notification, which expires on August 26, the state government is requested to constitute a committee.

What is Karnataka's next step now? What is the stand?

The stand of Karnataka government is very clear: address our concerns and then proceed. The next step is for the Government of India to take, not us. The notification has lapsed. After this, if the Centre has taken any decision now, we are yet to be told. We are not against conservation, but what about the compensation?

Kasturirangan report has other recommendations like paying compensation, livelihood, monitoring, special programmes, etc. What happened to all those recommendations?

In 2013, the Centre had proposed to set up a Western Ghats Development Fund, it did not happen. Karnataka wanted it as a large chunk of Western Ghats is in Karnataka.

The Kasturirangan report had also spoken about payment for eco-services, where incentives would be given to those who are conserving the forests using limited resources and do not have many facilities like those urban areas enjoy. This has not yet been addressed. In fact, no subsequent notification since 2013 has addressed this topic.

Does the state intend to go by Kasturirangan report or is there a need for another report?

It is not a question of wanting or not wanting. It is the reasons we gave. You (Centre) address our

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There is already a ban on mining in Western Ghats. There are already restrictions on quarrying.

The Kasturirangan report speaks of 20,688 sq km with 1,576 villages being declared as ESA. But under different provisions, acts, rules and regulations, Karnataka has already regulated over 22,680 sq km in Western Ghats.

There is already the Forest Act, Environment Protection Act, Conservation Act, there are also many forest rules. Identification Declaration of ESZ is on-going and is already an addition. This report will be another layer.

In fact, the recent Forest Survey of India report showed that the forest cover has increased to 1,11,000 sq km in Karnataka (an increase of about 11,000 sq km).

Wouldn't having the UNESCO World Heritage tag be beneficial for the Western Ghats?

This will be just another tag. There are already many stringent laws for protection and conservation. In fact, not many know that Karnataka was the first to come up with green felling policy in 1980. We were also the first to ban mining in Western Ghats. We were also the first to announce and implement that instead of the forest minister, permission for forest land conversion for non- forestry purposes will need clearance from both the Houses. This was passed in 1978. It was later in 1980 adopted by the central government and they came out with an Act stating that MoEF permission will be needed for forest land conversion.

Karnataka

Western Ghats

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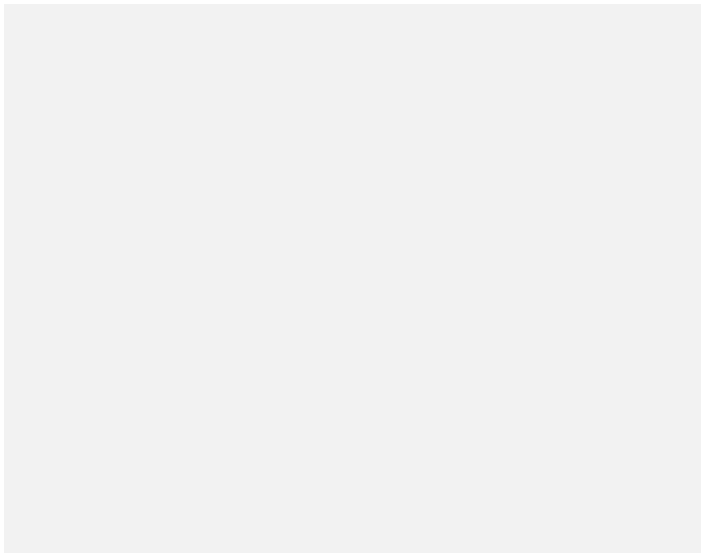
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