

## 'Plantations will turn Western Ghats into Uttarakhand'

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Uttarakhand will repeat in Karnataka, unless preventive measures are taken: this is the warning sounded by a team of scientists from the Indian Institute of Science.

The team, along with the Forest Department, studied the ground realities in the Sharavathi valley, a major part of the river basin in the Western Ghats, and recorded factors contributing to such disasters for a decade from 2003. Their final report has been submitted to the state government.

Scientist T V Ramachandra of the Centre for Ecological Sciences (CES) at IISc who led the study told Express: "We conducted the study in Varada and Sharavathi river valleys. Removing of trees atop hills and creation of mono-culture plantations is the reason for landslides in the Sharavathi valley, just like in Uttarakhand. Nothing has happened where there is thick forest and grasslands."

Ramachandra said that incidents of landslides in the entire Western Ghats range has been increasing. "We found landslides reported in 32 places in the interior part of the Western Ghats, including Honnavar and Karwar. In 2009, 19 people lost their lives in landslides that occurred in 21 places in Karwar," he outlined.

The Uttarkhand disaster, he said, was caused because the district administration replaced the oaks with mono-species trees, causing the soil to loosen.

Also, more than 74 hydro-power projects were implemented in the ecologically sensitive areas. "Normally, an area around 100 metres from the river is declared as sensitive area, which should not be disturbed as it is rich in bio-diversity. But in Uttarkhand, this sensitive area was largely damaged," he said.

Ramachandra said the Sharavathi valley might face a similar catastrophe if preventive measures are not taken immediately.

"We had alerted the then administration about the possibility of landslides in Uttarakannada district in 2009," he said.

He pointed out that Mysore Paper Mills had been allowed to grow plantations in the region. This caused water scarcity and harmed bio-diversity, he said.

"While constructing the Linganamakki Dam, its life was calculated as 100 years. But in its present state, the life is reduced to 75 years due to storage of silt in the dam caused due to widespread deforestation in the catchments area. When we studied the average rainfall in the last 65 years, we found that the quantity of rain in Sharavathi valley and Agumbe is declining by five to 10 per cent," he said.

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