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The third consecutive drought in Karnataka has left millions of farmers devastated, the economy in shambles with agriculture production down by 40% and the water levels in all major reservoirs in the state having hit an all-time low with people staring at an acute water scarcity...and yet, like Nero, the Siddaramaiah government is not bothered. How else would one explain the state Cabinet's decision urging the Centre to withdraw the notification on the implementation of K Kasturirangan Committee report on Western Ghats? That the ecologically sensitive Western Ghats, spread across six states, play a critical role in ensuring adequate and timely rainfall in the region, is well-documented. The rich biodiversity of the Western Ghats is recognised as one of the environmental hotspots of the world and considering that around 45% of the original vegetation has already been lost due to rampant denudation and exploitation of the forests, the Madhav Gadgil Committee had recommended that the entire Western Ghats be declared as ecologically sensitive and it be handed over to an authority to manage, preventing any further development in the region.

Perhaps, it would have been the right course to follow to prevent further damage. But, after the politicians raised a hue and cry, the Centre appointed a high level working group headed by space scientist Kasturirangan to tone down the Gadgil report. After an intensive study of the aerial maps and field visits, the Kasturirangan Committee came to the conclusion that an absolute minimum of 60,000 sq km area had to be protected. It identified 4,156 villages in six states to be declared as Ecologically Sensitive Areas (ESAs), where mining of ores, quarrying and sand mining would be banned and the existing ones phased out in five years. Among the villages identified, 2,159 villages fall in Maharashtra, followed by 1,576 in Karnataka and much less in the other four states.

Initially, Karnataka was in favour of accepting the report provided the number of affected villages was brought down to 850 and the habitats of tribals residing in the forests were protected. But powerful timber, mining and plantation lobbies seem to have influenced the government to reject the report on the pretext that "the lives and livelihood of lakhs of people would be affected." The neighbouring Kerala has also taken a similar stand, while Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu are yet to respond to the Centre's notification. It is abundantly clear that the state government is using the people as 'human shield' to ensure that the vested interests continue to exploit and denude the forests, irrespective of costs to the ecology. Karnataka's stand is completely untenable and the Centre should go ahead and implement the Kasturirangan report.