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Forests vs. people conflict emerges at Western Ghats review meeting



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A view of the Western Ghats at Kakayam area in Kozhikode district. (File Photo)

Of the six States falling under the W. Ghats only Kerala and Goa have submitted their reports with recommendations for demarcating eco-sensitive zones.

Do you save the forests or do you save the economic interests of the people living in and around forests? This dilemma was at the fore of the review meeting of six States falling under the Western Ghats, in which 22 members of parliament representing these States participated, led by Union Environment and Forests Minister Prakash Javadekar. Addressing presspersons outside Parliament, Mr. Javadekar said, “The overall tone of their suggestions was that we must protect the nature and wildlife habitat, but also simultaneously protect the people. To do that, we can ban mining and highly polluting industries, but other activities should be allowed.”

That economic activities such as rubber and tea plantations and agriculture should be excluded from the eco-sensitive zones (ESZ) to be demarcated in the Western Ghats, as per the Kasturirangan Committee recommendations, was one of the major suggestions coming from the MPs representing these six States. “But everyone talked about sustainable development as well. And to that end, we will have yet another meeting next week,” Mr. Javadekar said.

Of the six States, only Kerala and Goa have submitted their reports containing recommendations for the demarcation of ESZ. Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Maharashtra and Gujarat are ready with the report, but they are yet to submit it to the Environment ministry, Mr. Javadekar said. He added that only after factoring in all the suggestions given by the MPs, a final call will be taken about ESZ demarcation.

Concerns of States

Some Kerala MPs present in the meeting had raised objections to even rubber plantations being captured as forests by satellite imagery. This has resulted in the peculiar situation where even key development projects of benefit to locals like construction of hospitals or electrical poles have been treated as ‘red projects’ in the area.

Prathap Simha, MP representing Mysore and Coorg from Karnataka told The Hindu that unlike Kerala, Karnataka had not conducted a physical survey of forest areas, which was why they failed to meet the July 31 deadline for submitting reports to the Centre. “In my constituency most farmers fear that agricultural activities would be affected that they will not be allowed to use fertilizers and chemicals if their village comes under ESZ. Also if mining and quarrying is totally banned, in tourist areas like Coorg construction of houses would become difficult due to sand supply shortage. I have requested Mr. Javadekar to allow quarrying of sand for local consumption,” the MP, whose constituency comprises 55 ESZ villages said.

‘Bureaucracy perverting conservation efforts’

Renowned ecologist Madhav Gadgil told *The Hindu* that the conflict between protecting forests and protecting people's economic interests was due to the perversion of environmental conservation efforts by the bureaucracy, which turned forest protection into a license raj of sorts to collect bribes from local people to allow simple activities like digging a well. "Our report had emphasized the need to consult gram sabhas and not impose conservation efforts from above. But these are not being talked about. With the result that today ESZ demarcation is seen by the local people as tyranny of the forest department," he said.

It would be misleading to say that environment protection is in conflict with people's livelihood rights. In Kerala, illegal stone quarrying has deprived the local population of access to natural resources needed for economic well-being, but political parties have managed to fill their pockets by encouraging such activities," he said.

One of the MPs also questioned both the Madhav Gadgil report and the Kasturirangan report on the Western Ghats due to contradictions between the percentage of forests determined in the report. "The Kasturirangan report ignored the fact that a substantial amount of natural forest occurs outside of government reserve forest area," Mr. Gadgil said.

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