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Environmental Conservation with Grassroot Governance

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The article is based on [A Bottom-Up Approach to Conservation](#) that was published in The Hindu on 26 August. It talks about the interweaving relation of grassroots democracy and environmental conservation.

Context

- [Flood and landslides \(Kerala\) of 2018](#) caused huge financial losses and the same repeated in **2019**.
- Considering the above scenario, powers and responsibilities conferred on citizens under provisions such as the **73rd and 74th Amendments to the Constitution**, and the **Biological Diversity Act, 2002** are being sidelined.

Background

- The Western Ghats are regarded as **one of the eight 'hottest' biodiversity hotspots in the world**.
- Kerala accounts for nearly **18%** of the biodiversity-rich and fragile ecosystem of Western Ghats.
- **Western Ghats Ecology Expert Panel (WGEEP) chaired by Madhav Gadgil (2011)** had suggested interweaving of the existing laws relating to environmental protection and devolution of powers, right down to the gram sabha to be followed.
- But, almost all policy recommendations by the Gadgil committee were **not accepted**.
- In August 2012, the government constituted another panel called the **Kasturirangan committee**, which recommended:
 - To **balance** the two concerns of **development and environment** protection.
 - To bring just **37% of the Western Ghats under the Ecologically Sensitive Area (ESA) zones — down from the 64%** suggested by the Gadgil report.

Gadgil Committee Recommendations

Though the maximum of its recommendations were not accepted, but it could be used to safeguard global biodiversity hotspot and water tower of peninsular India. Few of the recommendations were:

- Replacement of the prevailing '**Develop Recklessly, Conserve Thoughtlessly**' pattern with one of '**Develop Sustainably, Conserve Thoughtfully**'.
- The fine-tuning of development practices to the local context would have required the full involvement of local communities.
- Recommendations regarding **ecological sensitivity** are the starting point for a bottom-up democratic process:
 - To demarcate areas within the Western Ghats Region which need to be notified as ecologically sensitive and further as ecologically sensitive zones under the **Environment (Protection) Act, 1986**.
 - The zone of highest ecological sensitivity would be '**ESZ1**'.
 - The indicators of sensitivity would be:
 - Elevation
 - Slope
 - Natural Vegetation
 - The interrelation among the above indicators would be:
 - **Rainfall increases** rapidly with **elevation**, and high rainfall and steep slopes render localities vulnerable to landslides.
 - Landslides are under check, in the areas with intact natural vegetation because the roots bind the soil.
 - Any disturbance to such vegetation would render any locality that has steep slopes and experiences high rainfall, susceptible to landslides.
 - Such disturbances may include:
 1. Quarrying or mining
 2. Replacement of natural vegetation by new plantations
 3. Levelling of the land using heavy machinery
 4. Construction of houses and roads.

Hence, **areas prone to landslides would come under ESZ1**.

Kerala and Participatory Governance

Kerala has been a leading state in participatory governance across the country and so in **democratic devolution**.

- It also pioneered **Panchayat Level Resource Mapping**. This is essentially a participatory programme which involves the mapping of assets, land use and water resources of individual survey plots by trained volunteers.
- Its **People's Planning campaign** was also success which attempted to involve every

panchayat in the preparation of a Panchayat Development Report.

- **Plachimada Panchayat Case:**

- The Kerala High Court cancelled Coca-Cola's licence because the company polluted and depleted groundwater reserves, drying up wells and adversely impacting agriculture and livelihoods.
- While doing so, the panchayat invoked its **constitutional rights**, arguing that it had the duty to protect the well-being of its citizens and had the right to cancel — or refuse permission for — anything that affected its citizens adversely.
- The company's **counter-argument** was that the **panchayat was subordinate to the State government, which had granted it the licence.**
- The Kerala High Court rejected this contention, **affirming that grass-roots institutions have the authority to decide on the course of development in their own locality.**
- Furthermore, the Kerala legislature unanimously passed a law asking Coca-Cola to pay Plachimada Panchayat due compensation for losses inflicted on them.

Grassroot Governance and Environment Conservation

- Local bodies having the authority to decide on the course of development in their own localities should be made genuinely operational across the country.
- Full advantage of powers and responsibilities conferred on citizens under provisions such as the **73rd and 74th Amendments to the Constitution**, and the **Biological Diversity Act, 2002** must be taken.
- Conservation prescriptions should not be merely regulatory but include **positive incentives such as conservation service charges.**
- Economic activities like quarrying should be given to agencies like the Kudumbashree groups that are accountable to local communities.

Way Forward

The **sovereign people of the country**, are the **real rulers of India** and must engage themselves more actively in the governance of the country and lead it on to a path of **people-friendly and nature-friendly development.**

Drishti Input:

“The strengthened grassroot democracy would pave the way for enhanced environmental conservation.Comment.”
