A People’s Campaign to Rebuild Kerala

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The article appeared in The Hindu on 30th August 2018. It delves into the ecological causes behind the recent Kerala floods which have resulted from the gradual degradation of the Western Ghats and analyses the role of local communities in dealing with natural calamities like this.

The Kerala floods have opened a Pandora's box containing all possible causes behind its occurrence, including the natural, human and social causes. The unplanned and short-sighted human intervention in the ecosystem of Kerala in the name of development, particularly in the Western Ghats has brought into the frame discussions around the adoption of exploitative development policy by the state.

Understanding the Root Causes

- **Degradation of Natural capital:** Legislations for the protection of natural capital have been flouted invariably which has caused irreversible damage to various natural resources. The Shah commission’s observations on the serious damage to water resources, agriculture and biodiversity in Goa because of illegal sand mining can be seen as one of the examples of such degradation. Similar environmental degradation has been observed in the Western ghats because of concrete constructions in the hilly areas, encroachments on wetlands and rivers, and the ever increasing growth in stone quarries.
- **Degradation of Human capital:** Overuse and pollution of natural resources like water by industries, has led to the deterioration in the health and employment opportunities reducing the ability to deal with such natural calamities thereby affecting the human capital of the society.
- **Dismissal of scientific knowledge**: The empirical analysis, in terms of its environmental impacts from infrastructure projects in the state, has been neglected by the concerned authorities leading to the irrational and haphazard implementation of such projects. This has further aggravated the intensity of the damage that accompanied this calamity.

- **Degradation of social capital:** The dissenting voices raised by civil society groups in the state against some of the projects taken up by the state and corporates have been stubbed down time and again, affecting the process of social audits for these projects. This has lead to a decline in questions being raised against these projects and has facilitated their undeterred implementation.

Involvement of Local Communities

Local communities are the largest stakeholders that both affect and get affected by the changes witnessed in the health of the ecosystems like the Western Ghats. These communities and their understanding of the ecosystem can be effectively used by the policymakers to frame a sustainable development plan. Incentivising these communities for their conservation efforts can lead to a more organic and participative approach towards the protection of natural resources by the state. For example, payment of 'conservation service charges' for protecting important elements of biodiversity like sacred groves, and payment towards soil carbon enrichment via a switch to organic farming, can encourage a community's participation.

Towards Inclusive Governance and Development

- The **73rd and 74th constitutional amendments** that empower local bodies at various levels of governance should be implemented in letter and spirit.
- **Biodiversity Management Committees** should be set up which can create a database of the local biodiversity resources and can regulate their use.
    - These committees should be empowered to bring transparency in the preparation of environmental impact assessments.
    - These committees should also be empowered to charge for the access to biodiversity and the traditional knowledge associated with the local community of a particular area.
- **Forest Rights Act** should be implemented efficiently in order to empower tribals and the traditional forest dwellers.
- A **public and transparent database** on environmental parameters should be initiated.
- As suggested by the Western Ghats Ecology Expert Panel, the Kasturirangan Committee, and the Oommen V. Oommen Committee, the local bodies should be consulted for information on local ecological sensitivity developed on the basis of topography, hydrology, land use and vegetation of an area.
- **Citizen-centric information sharing and processing** should be encouraged through the increased access to technology like smartphones.

The rehabilitation and reconstruction of a disaster struck State requires a broad-based inclusive approach, as mentioned above, to connect and resolve accordingly the issues related to conservation and development.