

SPECIAL ARTICLE

The Western Ghats Imbroglia in Kerala

A Political Economy Perspective

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The bitter opposition in Kerala to the Gadgil and Kasturirangan reports on the conservation of the Western Ghats was a result of information asymmetries, engendered by ignorance of the reports' contents, attendant disinformation campaigns and rumour-mongering abetted by and favouring the Church, ruling and opposition political parties, and other interest groups to mislead settler-farmers and create a panic situation. The exclusive focus on "ecologically sensitive areas" and efforts to exclude certain areas from it failed to address the larger debate on sustainable development.

This article discusses the political economy dimensions of the contestation between different stakeholders in Kerala over the implications of two state-commissioned reports—the Western Ghats Ecology Expert Panel (WGEEP) or the Gadgil Panel, and the High Level Working Group (HLWG) or the Kasturirangan panel—relating to the conservation of the Western Ghats. The authors contend that "asymmetric information" arising out of the lack of awareness of the reports' contents and the attendant disinformation campaigns and rumour-mongering provided a fertile ground for the Church, ruling and opposition political parties, and other interest groups to mislead farmers and create a panic situation, leading to the bitter opposition to the reports' recommendations. Information asymmetries were engendered through tardiness in making the reports public, delayed translation of the reports into Malayalam, non-discussion of their contents, nature of disinformation campaign run by some groups, and insinuations of a conspiracy by "international forces" and "environmental extremists" to push for the notification of ecologically sensitive areas (ESAs) in the region.

The Ghats in Kerala

The Western Ghats are internationally known for its biological diversity with high geological, cultural, natural and aesthetic importance. It comprises a series of largely mountainous areas parallel to India's western coast spread over a 1,600 km stretch of land and spanning the states of Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Goa, Maharashtra, and Gujarat, with approximately 30–50 km inland push excepting the Palghat region. The ghats play a key role in controlling the weather of the Indian peninsula. They are particularly important for their endemism¹ and have been listed as one of the eight hotspots of biological diversity globally. Not less than 325 globally threatened plant and animal species are found in the region (UNESCO 2012). A total of 39 properties, including wildlife sanctuaries, national parks, and reserve forests are designated as world heritage sites, of which 20 are in Kerala alone.

Most of the settlers in the ghats in northern Kerala hail from the central Travancore region and bear affiliation to the Syrian Catholic community known for its enterprise and skills vis-à-vis agriculture and plantations. Most development in the ghats is attributed to the surplus wealth generated by these sections from agriculture, mainly through the cultivation of cash crops, and more recently, through income derived from lucrative jobs outside Kerala by the educated and technically-skilled children

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of first and second generation settler-farmers. Unlike most other churches, the clergy in the Syrian Catholic Church have considerable sway over the faithful. The clergy had played a key role in creating the Indian Farmers' Movement (INFAM) in 2000 to lobby for the interests of farmers with better prices for farm produce and other concessions from the government. The INFAM was one of the frontal agencies involved in the agitation against the Gadgil Committee report.² The Church has set up several institutions in the ghats to address the spiritual, educational, cultural, and health needs of its settler-members as well as the larger public. The Syrian Catholics in the ghats have traditionally been supporters of the Congress party, except in Kottayam and Idukki districts where the support is

favourable decisions through the lure of money/votes and/or pressure tactics, including the capability to paralyse the administration by engaging in demonstrations and routine violence targeting the state. These contestations, however, lead to conflict, polarisation, negotiation, bargaining and even, consensus formation in some cases. Further, environmental regulations are formulated by central and state governments within the ambit of constitutionally defined powers vested in them and cannot be imposed unilaterally, in defiance of the federal structure or disregard for the diversity of land relations and use in the country.⁴ The implementation of such regulations is subject to revision or adaptation by the states which in turn is subject to pressures from the people, either directly or indi-