



A POLITICAL ECONOMY PERSPECTIVE ON THE ROW OVER PROTECTION OF WESTERN GHATS IN KERALA

Nisha Velappan Nair and John S Moolakkattu

Abstract: This paper seeks to analyse the political economy dimensions of the row over the identification of ecologically sensitive areas in Western Ghats based on the Kasturirangan report. After discussing the theoretical framework focused on political economy with special reference to the notion of asymmetric information, the paper looks at the content of the reports, their differences, the disinformation campaign, the interests involved and the role played by the state as an advocate of the interests of the farmers. The paper argues that environmental decision-making is subject to interests of various kinds and policy makers have to navigate among the varied and often competing interests even as they try to ensure their political survival

Introduction

A political economy perspective on an issue or policy area looks at the actors involved, the interests they represent, the coalitions (temporary or stable) they form and the resources employed by different actors to attain their goals. This is particularly visible in matters dealing with sustainable development, which many groups see in zero-sum terms. In a democracy, politicians are not like managers guided purely by efficiency considerations, but engage in normative interpretations of fairness in policy outcomes having regard to concerns of their electoral constituencies. Thus, policy analysis will have to reckon with a range of normative criteria of good governance, including the protection of human dignity, individual freedom, the rule of law, and fairness in distribution, efficiency and sustainability. Unlike economics that deals with value – free analysis of outcomes, political economy, or the theory of economic policy, is concerned with what we should do, if we want things to happen, in an ‘inversion of logic’ (Wolfson, 2015, p.8). Political economy also deals with how rational and self-interested groups form coalitions to influence the state’s decision-making processes.

In this paper we attempt to analyse the political economy dimensions of the row over Gadgil and Kasturirangan reports relating to the protection of the Western Ghats. After a brief description of the theoretical framework, the paper looks at the content of the reports, their differences, the disinformation campaign launched by vested interests, and the role of the state as an advocate of the interests of the farmers.