

# The Western Ghats: A Political Economy, Institutions and Environmental Ethics Perspective

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**Abstract:** *This article analyzes the political economy, institutions and environmental ethics perspective on the Western Ghats issue to understand the problems in a greater depth and a different view. It tries to throw in a different light, the issues plaguing our precious Western Ghats and looks for solutions to resolve them.*

**Keywords:** development, environment, policy, sustainable, Western Ghats

## 1. Introduction

The Western Ghats extend from the Satpura Range in the north, go south past Goa, through Karnataka and into Kerala and Tamil Nadu end at Kanyakumari embracing Indian Ocean. According to an international study, the Western Ghats are some of the most irreplaceable protected areas in the world for endangered species. The Western Ghats which were once covered in dense forests now has a large portion been logged or converted to agricultural land for tea, coffee, rubber and oil palm or cleared for livestock grazing, reservoirs and roads. There are a lot of factors which have influenced the state of Western Ghats as of today. Construction of large dams, mining, quarrying, thermal power plants, red-category industries and large scale cattle grazing are among the other issues which have cropped up in the Western Ghats. There are almost 300 illegal mining units in the fringe area of the Ghats, along the Kerala-Karnataka border.

## 2. Political Economy Perspective:

**Political economy** is a branch of social science that studies the relationships between individuals and society and between markets and the state, using a diverse set of tools and methods drawn largely from economics, political science, and sociology. A political economy perspective on environment and society enables us to scan country and sector environments for opportunities to use the existing positive drivers of change as well as to make realistic estimations of the risks and challenges involved. Thus, rather than thinking about reforms predominantly from a public welfare perspective, the incentives of individuals and of groups can be taken more seriously. This perspective argues that it is the structure of the economy and the set of power-laden relationships that produce both the environment in which we live and our perceptions of it (Fritz, 2012).

The Western Ghats, which cover almost 30% of the flora and fauna species of South Asia, have unique ecological characteristics. But despite the apparently “untamed wildness” of these hills, a closer look reveals these are not the „pristine” spaces that conservationists and conservation scientists have long revered and sought to protect. Rather, they are essentially anthropogenic environments, produced by farmers growing mostly shade-grown coffee, areca palm nuts, and hand-tapped rubber, acting in response to global

market (capitalist) forces. They are, in short, landscapes of production and thus of labor.

In a lecture at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, Paul Robbins, Director of the Nelson Institute for Environmental Studies, mentioned that this is a signature landscape of “Anthropocene”, that new geological era marked by „human” (more accurately, capitalism’s) influence on the environment in which arguably, nature does not exist. Thus, the debate about whether we should still strive to protect „wild” or „pristine” spaces is irrelevant and the question is more about what exactly influences farmer’s decision to conserve more biodiversity. According to the findings of Robbins and his team, based on the species count of amphibians and birds in about 200 plots in the region, confirm that despite the heavy human intervention, the region holds enormous biodiversity including rare bird species and endangered amphibians, but some areas have more than others. The various economic factors that influence product intensification, that is opening or closing the forest canopy to produce more and cheaper coffee or increasing the use of chemical inputs are access to credit, membership in cooperatives and crop prices. Understanding producer’s decisions should be done through a multi level analysis, beginning with the relation of producers to each other and to local and regional markets and other institutions, all the way to the national government, the global market and the international institutions. The producer’s decision on how and what to grow in the Western Ghats agro-forested landscapes are driven by the variability of crop prices, as one of the main factors.

The role of the labor is also big. Producers have consistently complained about the increasing bargaining power and costs of farm labor, which they compensate by reducing production costs in ways that impact the biodiversity. A few examples of doing so include changing to a less labor intensive crop, increasing pesticide use or opening the canopy. This is a result of an unexpected absolute labor scarcity in the region (and arguably in other regions of India) resulting from migration to the cities, coupled with a low fertility rate. According to Robbins, the most viable option to address this problem, assuming we want biodiversity and recognize farmer’s desires to stay in the land would be to increase support from the smallest, self employed farmers, which are not caught in this labor-nature trap. Another option would be to increase other sources of income associated to biodiversity. The role of women and of

community norms and rules regarding biodiversity also influence production decisions.

The more the labor is exploited, the less will be their tendency to work and hence, the production will fall down shortly leading to crisis. This continuous exploitation and the ongoing destruction of the forests of Western Ghats has led to people organizing themselves and taking part in these environmental movements, struggling for the rights of the victims of ecological degradation. One of the most popular movements which started in the villages of Uttar Kannada district of Karnataka was the *Apiko* Movement. This movement was inspired by the *Chipko* Movement in Uttarakhand. In September 1983, led by Panduranga Hegde, men, women and children of Salkani village, "hugged the trees" in Kalase forest (Baginski and Blaikie, 2007). The government had taken up a large part of the forest area and initiated the process of "development" by setting up major industries like pulp and paper mill, a plywood factory and a chain of hydroelectric dams, which overexploited the forest resources and displaced the local population, especially the poorest groups. The natural mixed forests were commercialized, converting them into teak and eucalyptus plantations which dried up the water resources, directly affecting the forest dwellers. Basically, the taking up of large parts by the state showed an enormous expansion of powers of the state, the diminishing rights of the local villagers leading to a radical alternation in the traditional use of resources and the increasing commercialization of forest itself. This agitation led to state recognition that local people should be involved in biodiversity protection and therefore forest management. The people's movement had a major effect in generating pressure for a natural resources policy more sensitive to people's needs and the natural environment.

People have come to think of environment as a commodity rather than an intrinsic part of their daily life. The best form of conservation is the one in which the one in which conservation and development are compatible with each other, working in the „Develop sustainably- conserve thoughtfully“ lines (Gadgil, Krishnan, Ganeshaish, Vijayan, Borges, Sukumar, Noronha, Nayak, Subramaniam, 2011). It is inappropriate to depend exclusively on government agencies for constitution and management of our environment. The local communities and the local bodies should play a major role in final setting up of policies and rules for nature conservation.

### 3. Institutions Perspective

The Western Ghats are a source of number of ecological products and services without any well defined property rights and ownership. In such cases, there always exists an incentive to take a "free ride" and let others invest their time and money. The game theoretical situation which arises out of this is the prisoner's dilemma in which individuals act in their own personal best interests leading to outcomes that are not ideal for anyone.

Let us take the case of coffee plantations in the Western Ghats. The stakeholders in this landscape are the coffee planters, the forest department, farmers located downstream

who benefit from the hydrological services and final consumers and appropriators located locally and downstream. While the climate and hydrological functions of surrounding forests are acknowledged, pollination services are under recognized, whereas disservices in the form of frequent crop raids by wild animals are of prime concern. The ambiguity in the property rights and the mistrust towards state forest department contribute to the apathy towards conservation of private and state managed resources. Though many planters are keen on planting native shade trees in their plantations, the limited rights in harvest and transport prevent them from doing so. In the Kodagu region, there are several high income consumers among the domestic and global appropriators of the ecosystem services. Therefore, the stakeholders as well as the ecosystem services of the landscape point towards the scope for an incentivizing mechanism. However, the coffee-forest system is a mosaic of tenurial regimes where state-managed forests of the Western Ghats coalesce with privately owned coffee plantations with different use and ownership rights (Uthappa 2004). In particular, under certain tenurial services in this landscape, planters have limited rights over native trees. The ambiguity in property rights in this regard and the lack of ownership result in a prisoner's dilemma in the conservation of these regions, particularly the native shade trees within plantations.

This also justifies Hardin's theory that the best way to tackle the Tragedy of Commons is by privatization, either by individual owners or by a strong state management body. Since most of the resources provided by the Western Ghats come under the category of commons, some sort of environment super-police state or private property rights over all environment systems or objects is necessary.

However, there are numerous examples of complex systems for management of difficult to enclose resources that do not rely on any form of authority or ownership. Sacred groves, which are an important component of the landscape in three districts of the Western Ghats are example of traditional conservation practices that are locally managed by the people without any enforcement authority. Some of the best preserved remnants of indigenous vegetation of Western Ghats are in the form of Sacred Groves. The groves are mostly owned by villagers who are still able to survive on their lands without having to develop their sacred groves. Management of the sacred groves including religious functions and protection is supervised and monitored by a group of village elders. The cultural significance is high, and most of the community festivals are celebrated in the temple situated in the groves. These groves function as resource forest also, offering both sustenance and ecological security. The people of the village may gather fallen deadwood, non-wood produce such as pepper, mango, jackfruit, etc and tap toddy from a palm.

The forest-covered BRT hills to the east of the Nilgiris are the traditional homeland of Soliga tribals, who earlier practiced hunting-gathering and shifting cultivation. They have, to this day, protected a large sacred grove with a magnificent *Michelia champaca* tree. When this area was declared a wildlife sanctuary, the Soligas could no longer hunt or practise shifting cultivation. So gathering honey,

medicinal plants became the mainstay of their subsistence. A voluntary organisation, the Vivekananda Girijana Kalyana Kendra, has organised them effectively and helped set up a system of regulated collection, processing, and marketing of forest produce. A scientific institution, ATREE, has been studying Soliga forest produce collection practices and their impact on resource stocks, and has found the practices to be wholly sustainable. The earnings of the Soligas also improved with their own processing industry. Most regrettably, the forest department, under the guise of conservation, has banned the collection of forest produce for marketing, forcing the Soligas into destitution (Godbole, Sarnaik, Punde, 2010).

A model of conservation and development should be compatible with each other. It is quite inappropriate to depend exclusively on government agencies for constitution and management of ecologically sensitive zones. The conservation practices should be based on extensive inputs from local communities and local bodies. Despite the 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> Amendments to the Constitution that have devolved the powers of making decisions relating to development to Panchayats Raj institutions and Nagarपालikas, all development decisions are being thrust on the people. In Ratnagiri district, several Gram Panchayats and Panchayat Samitis, including the Ratnagiri Taluka Panchayat Samiti, have specifically passed resolutions relating to environmental issues that are being completely ignored by the State Government. Adaptive Co-management, a process in which there is full participation of local communities is now a widely accepted development plan. Such a system would marry conservation to development and not treat them as separate, incompatible objectives.

#### 4. Environmental Ethics

**Ethics** is the branch of philosophy dealing with morality or questions of right and wrong human action in the world. When these questions of right and wrong are applied in the perspective of environment and the human action on it, they are called as environmental ethics. The Western Ghats, being the biodiversity hotspot of the world and home to a number of endangered species of flora and fauna have a lot of environment ethical issues attached to them. Many of the environmental movements, regulations and ideas on the Western Ghats that have been established are founded on such ethical concerns of human action on the Ghats.

One of the major issues that comes up is that of environment justice, which stresses the need for equitable distribution of environmental goods and bads among people without any discrimination based on race, ethnicity, caste or gender. The kind of development scheme followed in the Western Ghats, or India as a whole has exposed most of the environment risks to the poor or the minority populations while the rich is benefited and continues to exploit the poor. Setting up of huge power projects in the Ghats is one example of the kind of “development” which has had deleterious effects on the economic, social and environment aspects of our society without the “compensatory” benefits to the Western Ghats. These huge power projects come with a lot of environment, ethical, social, legal and cultural issues. Dams are a very controversial alternative to coal and oil and there have been

many hydel power projects in the Ghats like the Koyna Hydroelectric Project in Maharashtra, the Parambikulam Dam in Kerala, and the Linganmakki Dam in Karnataka (Dandekar, 2013). Destructive projects like the Kalu Dam were stalled by people’s movements and local agitations.

If we look at the issue of dams from an anthropocentric viewpoint, people are likely to support dams because they make the areas habitable for humans, prevent flooding, help to generate electricity which is important for development. When we look as to how dams benefit the humans it is clearly seen that dams are actually are good thing. From an anthropocentric view that tries to benefit humans and the environment they live in, dams are good even if they do cause a few problems in the area they are build. However, if we look at this problem from a non anthropocentric view, the idea of dams seems bad. Dams attempt to change the environment in a way that benefits only humans and that too the rich class. As said by Leopold in his views in the “Land Ethic”, humans rather being a part of the environment, attempt to be masters of it which may sometimes backfire. Dams kill the wildlife in the river, it fails to realize the rights that the animals have and they have a right not to have their habitat destroyed by us. According to Leopold, all members of the ecosystem from the animals, to the plants, to the water, and even the soil have rights in his land ethic. Hence, because we end up violating the rights of the animals that live in that river, it is an immoral act. At the same time, a huge number of locals living in that region are displaced from their homes and are not provided with a proper compensation or livelihood.

Another ethical issue that comes up is due to the large coffee plantations in the Western Ghats. The untamed wilderness of the Ghats is now being largely replaced by shade-grown coffee plantations, which are essentially anthropogenic environments produced by farmers (Lopez, 2015). Whether people should strive to protect these wild and pristine spaces is a question which being raised. The rights of the local people, in conserving such spaces using their traditional methods have also been increasingly violated because of the policies of the government which focus on “development by exclusion” (Gadgil, Krishnan, Ganeshaish, Vijayan, Borges, Sukumar, Noronha, Nayak, Subramaniam, 2011). It is now being widely accepted that development plans should not be cast in a rigid framework, rather they should be made with full participation of local communities, in an adaptive “co-management” kind of system.

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