

Role Of Government And Civil Society: A Critical Assessment Of Efforts Towards Saving Environmental Degradation In The Coastal Region Of India

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Abstract

The paper will review environmental degradation in India's coastal regions, alongside the role played by the government in the execution of the projects that led to the degradation. The impactful case studies in India, along with those from UNEP, provide us with the learning that severe environmental crises can be effectively addressed through civil society intervention and local administration participation. The idea of Sustainable Development has become a challenge in itself. There is a need for intervention by political representatives to value the natural resources, take examples, and make policy decisions.

Keywords: Environment, UNEP, development, biodiversity, desertification

INTRODUCTION

Environmental concerns must be addressed by everyone in some ways. The idea of environmental issues has been misunderstood as merely protecting and planting trees. It is a dichotomy that the intellectual being Human, of the 21st century, with advanced technology, has failed to demonstrate their intelligence in preserving the environment. Humans have created atomic bombs, but have not been able to develop technology that can reverse the damage caused by them. The intervention needed has to be in the form of robust awareness, and by invoking moral responsibility. Since the action-based system, in the form of punishment or fines, or compensation, takes a longer time and is high in expense.

The word 'Development' should be understood as a gateway to destruction. The word 'Sustainable' marks the beginning of resource depletion. We have misunderstood it, and despite numerous laws, deliberations at local, national, and international levels, and public involvement, we have not achieved the desired results. The restoration work begins only after damaging and destroying, rather than understanding, and following the assessment report of the scientists. The worldwide expenditure on national and international conferences should have given some results in the form of awareness, plantation drives, and preserving the existing natural resources. The world has been driven by economic growth and not sustainable growth.

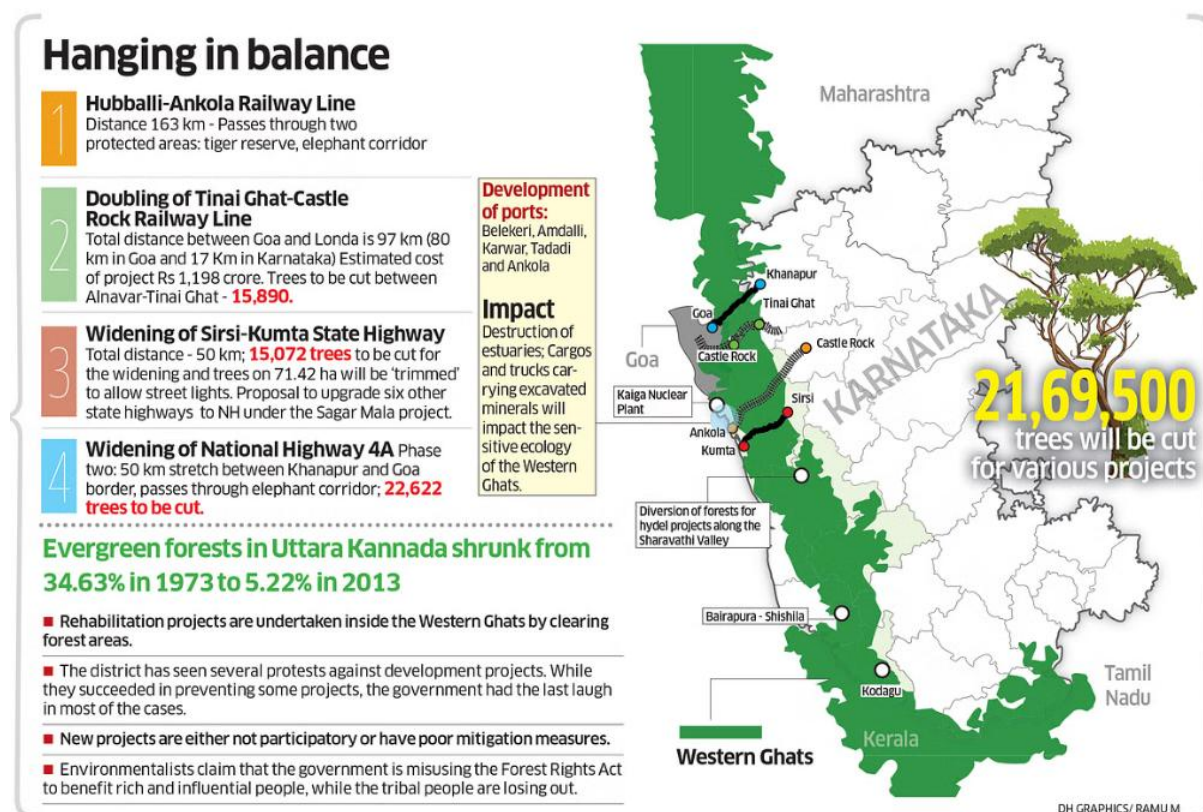
The role of elected governments is supposed to contribute to the betterment of society. They play a primary role in social, economic, cultural, environmental, educational, and responsible growth. The role of civil society should have been to supplement the efforts made by the government. The emergence of their role of preserving and conserving begins by resisting the government's inaction. In the same way, judicial activism has worked by passing judgment to save the environment. Again, the buck stops at the steps of the government, waiting for implementation.

Coastal Region Restoration Politics

The Western Ghats region begins at the river Tapti in the north and stretches towards Kanyakumari, India's southern-most tip. It is a hot spot of biodiversity. It is the responsibility of every individual to contribute to the restoration process. The Western Ghats have been termed a UNESCO World Heritage Site since 2012. The mountain chain of the Western Ghats is of immense value due to its geomorphic features, with biophysical and ecological processes.

The Ministry of Environment and Forests, Government of India, was established in 2010 and submitted its report in 2011. It was under the ecologist Prof. Madhav Gadgil, as part of the Western Ghats Ecology Expert Panel (WGEEP). In 2021, he warned about the deteriorating situation and believed that the role of civil society at the grassroots level can only address the issue. He insisted that the people need to pursue it through the elected representatives. The landslides in Wayanad, Kerala, in 2018 were one of the worst

monsoon disasters since 1924, and flash floods and landslides in the Konkan region in 2021 have raised questions about the conservation measures adopted by the government.



Source: Western Ghats, Deccan Herald, 18 July 2019.

The warning was issued for the states of Kerala, Maharashtra, Goa, Gujarat, Tamil Nadu, and Karnataka. The rampant development that was planned to lay out several projects led to the cutting of 4,57,000 trees in Kodagu; 12,06,000 trees in Shivamogga; 2,94,327 trees in Uttara Kannada, and 74,000 in Chikkamagaluru. They were planned to be cut for the widening of the National Highway, Railway Line, Power Line, expansion of the Kaiga power generation unit in the Sharavathy sanctuary, and such other heavy projects. The destruction is occurring at an alarming rate that cannot be controlled without enlightened governmental intervention. The Uttara Kannada green cover has been reduced from 34.63 % in 1973 to 5.22 % in 2013.

The Gadgil Committee made recommendations aimed at protecting the Ecologically Sensitive Zones (ESZ) 1 and 2 as follows:

- The suggestion was to provide new environmental clearances for mining in these areas.
- The recommendation was to phase out mining from ESZ1.
- All chemical pesticides to be phased out in ESZ1 and ESZ2 in five to eight years.
- The plastic bags had to be phased out in three years.
- The mining in ESZ2 should continue under strict regulation. He highlighted the effective social audit mechanism and demanded maximum control over these activities.
- The new red and orange category industries, which include coal-based power plants, were prohibited in ESZ1 and ESZ2.
- The ban on genetically modified crops in the entire region.
- The ESZ1 and ESZ2 should not permit new special economic zones, hill stations, dams, railway lines, or major roads.
- The conversion of public lands to private lands and diversion of forest land for non-forest purposes are strictly banned in ESZ1 and ESZ2, underscoring the top priority of preserving these lands.
- Tourism will be regulated in these areas to minimize environmental impact.

In 2024, the National Environment Care Federation (NECF) again recommended implementing Gadgil's report in the Western Ghats.

The government established another High-Level Working Group (HLWG) to review Madhav Gadgil's report on the Western Ghats. The chairman was K. Kasturirangan, an eminent space scientist and former Chairman of the Indian Space Research Organisation, who headed the committee in 2012. It submitted its report in 2013. It retained the ESZ by reducing the area to 37 percent of the Western Ghats. The remaining 63 percent was suggested for 'Sustainable Development'. The word Sustainable needs to be defined in terms of the percentage of development, the type of development, and the areas to be brought under development. In a way, we are still following a path of unplanned development. In a time of advanced technology and scientific analysis, where proof of deterioration could be assessed, yet the negligence of warnings cannot be understood.

The list marked with the Red Category was termed as a 'protected area' where industries were prohibited. The Karnataka government rejected the recommendations made by the Kasturirangan panel. The government wanted permission for stone quarrying and sand mining, though it accepted the ban on mining.

The situation faced in the Eastern Ghats should be an example before planning anything under the name of 'Sustainable Development'. The degradation due to illegal logging and the exploitation of forest wealth, which was the storage of natural resources with rich forests, perennial and semi-perennial streams.

There are numerous laws in place to protect the environment across India. The Tamil Nadu Forest Act, 1882, and the Wildlife Protection Act, 1955, have been in force, but ineffective implementation has become a challenge. The issues in Koli Hills and Panchamali had been of monocropping; in the areas of Chitheri, Javadhis, Yerchaud, Koli Hills, Panchamalai, and Bodhamalai, they particularly suffered from illegal, indiscriminate cutting of sandalwood trees. It had caused a significant impact due to the uncontrolled removal of rare medicinal plants.

The Biodiversity and Conservation of Natural Resources Department at Central University, Koraput, states that increased pressure on the ecosystem results from human activities. Specifically, in the Koraput region, forest clearance is driven by development needs and mineral extraction. On August 4, 2025, the Supreme Court delivered a landmark judgment empowering the Pollution Control Boards, both central and state, to impose fixed restitution or compensatory damages on large establishments exceeding 20,000 square meters under the Water and Air Acts. The study of the Eastern Ghats Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan indicates that industrialization has created a 'precarious' situation for biodiversity and recommends 'drastic steps by the government'. Mining has also been identified as one of the primary reasons for the loss of biodiversity.

The success stories of the designated UNESCO World Heritage Sites are examples to be emulated by the government. The Belizean government, in a joint effort with UNESCO, civil society organizations, and others, halted oil exploration and drilling in offshore waters in 2015, thereby saving the reefs.

Another example set by the Royal Chitwan National Park in Nepal has discontinued the project for the benefit of future generations. This decision was made following the post-environmental impact assessment of the proposed Rapti River Diversion Project, which the World Heritage Committee questioned in the 1990s.

On a personal level, many individuals in India made efforts to protect and restore the environment. One notable example is Jadav Payeng, who has developed 1360 acres of land in Jorhat district, Assam, since 1979. It has become a habitat for wild animals, birds, and various species of bamboo. The point here is that if one person can create a forest, what has immobilized the government from doing the same? This question needs an answer to do justice to conservation and to highlight the urgency of climate change.

UNEP and an Experiment with Local Bodies in India

The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and India signed a Host Country Agreement on 10 November 2021 in Glasgow, Scotland. It was based on the dialogues at the UN Climate Change Conference (COP26).

Ecosystem-based disaster risk reduction (Eco-DRR) has been developed as an approach that would work for the reduction of the most common natural hazards and provide support to vulnerable communities

for their better living. The UNEP, in affiliation with the Kerala Institute for Local Administration (KILA), labored from 2019 to 2023 to address the disaster.

The Eco-DRR addresses the triple planetary crisis of Disaster Risk-Reduction, Climate Smart Livelihoods, and Ecosystem Restoration. The local body adopted the Eco-DRR and worked in collaboration with the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (Mahatma Gandhi NREGS) and the Ayyankali Urban Employment Guarantee Scheme. The funds from MGNERGS were utilised to carry out the work. It is one of the world's largest cash-for-work programmes.

The effort benefits over 300 local representatives who received training, along with more than 800 officials, including engineers and work supervisors, 300 agriculturalists, and many others. Success stories include Pozhuthana Gram Panchayat in Wayanad, Purathur in Malappuram, and Nedumudi in Alleppey, Kerala. A case study of Kerala's Coir Geotextiles has demonstrated success in preventing soil erosion within just a year and a half. The mesh was made from coir, a natural coconut fiber, which is biodegradable and eco-friendly. It has been used to protect community pond banks and to plant indigenous grasses in the mesh that secures the soil. Effective measures such as contour bunds, stone bunds, bamboo afforestation, and vetiver planting have been implemented, helping in landslide-prone areas. The Eco-DRR project has scaled up community resilience in the Tampara Wetlands of Odisha, the Kabartal Wetlands of Bihar, and the Northern Dryland Region of Gujarat. The project focuses on restoring and conserving wetlands of various sizes. It has strengthened Community-based Organisations (CBOs), with thirty-two such groups involved, aiming at capacity building and awareness that have benefited 29,216 people. Women comprise 36% of those involved, and the project has restored and protected 3,312 hectares of land. The Eco-DRR action plans aim to be integrated into local government development plans or gram panchayat development plans. This was only possible through collaboration with Partners for Resilience (PFR) – the Netherlands Red Cross, the Red Cross/Red Crescent Climate Center, Cordaid, Wetlands International, and CARE, alongside local civil society and CBOs.

Combating Desertification

The UN established the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) in 1994. It became the only legally binding worldwide settlement that links the surroundings and development to sustainable land management. It emphasizes Sustainable Development Goal 15 and Land Degradation Neutrality (LDN). The

India is a party to the UN Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD), and the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEF) is the National Coordinating Agency for the implementation in the country. India has devoted to restoring 26 million hectares of degraded land by the end of 2030. Under this plan, there is a need to increase forest cover through tree plantation, which will, in turn, help us to create a storage for carbon dioxide.

The plan was to strengthen South-South Cooperation by sharing experiences on Sustainable Land Management (SLM) strategies. In a written reply by the Minister of State for Environment, Forest, and Climate Change on 29th July 2024, a suggestion was made to create a model framework under remedial and preventive categories for combating land degradation and desertification, along with details of new initiatives to tackle land degradation issues. While the research results were already presented to the government.

The National Action Plan to Combat Desertification (2023) emphasizes the importance of implementing initiatives for land restoration.

India has developed a 20-year comprehensive National Action Programme (NAP) to combat desertification. The objectives included: a community-based development approach, activities to enhance quality of life in local communities, awareness campaigns, drought management preparedness and mitigation, R&D initiatives and interventions—particularly with local focus—strengthening self-governance to empower local communities.

The discussion on the rising cases of land desertification was also addressed under the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD). In 2017, the Conference of the Parties (COP) adopted the 2018-2030 Strategic Framework. It encouraged countries to include it in their national policies, programmes, plans, and processes related to desertification, land degradation, and drought.

The data reveal that 86 percent of the UNCCD countries, that is, 169 of the 196 countries and the European Union (197), are affected by DLDD. In India, 30.51 million hectares, that is 9.45 % of the land, were degraded. The world has lost 100 million hectares of productive land. The cases of drought have increased, as per the 'Drought in Numbers, 2022' report that was released at the 15th Conference of the Parties (CoP15) to the UNCCD.

Expenditure for Environmental Conservation

Table 1: Key Allocations to the Ministry (in Rs crore)

Category	2023-24 Actuals	2024 25 RE	2025-26 BE%	change (24-25 RE to 25-26 BE)
Establishment Expenditure of the Centre	780	881	946	7%
Pollution Control	845	858	854	0%
Environment, Forestry, and Wildlife	530	590	720	22%
Autonomous Bodies	562	437	455	4%
Statutory and Regulatory Bodies	158	187	232	24%
Environmental Knowledge and Capacity Building	74	100	103	3%
National Coastal Mission	32	8	2	-75%
Others	132	65	102	57%
Total	3,114	3,126	3,413	9%

Note: RE is Revised Estimate, BE is Budget Estimate. Others include Environment Education, Awareness, Research and Skill Development, centrally sponsored schemes, Economic Services, and Grant-in-Aids. Sources: Demand for Grants, 2025-26, Ministry of Environment, Forests and Climate Change; PRS.

Need of an Hour

The Minister for Forests, Ecology, and Environment in Karnataka, Eshwar B. Khandre, took action following a disaster in Wayanad, Kerala. He directed the removal of illegal establishments and settlements for commercial purposes.

There is also a need to generate awareness for people not to make Antarctica their tourist destination, as the deterioration has been observed to be faster than 40 years ago.

The Ministry of Earth Sciences, Government of India, along with the National Programme on Climate Change and Human Health, the National Center for Disease Control, and the WHO India office, has been working closely to understand and deal with health issues due to climate change and get prepared for the unforeseen circumstances. The expenditure on all the studies and infrastructure preparedness needs to be supplemented by addressing local issues of water contamination, water shortage, and wastage. The reviving of water bodies, collecting data from the Panchayats, and frequent inspection with

geotagging of the work done, monitoring through satellite. The technologically equipped governance would become a new way for ethical governance.

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