

Deciphering the Devastation of the Western Ghats: A study on
Regional Documentaries

Sujitha S. K.

Research Scholar (Full-Time), Reg. No.:22113064012002,
Department of English, Lekshmipuram College of Arts and Science,
Neyyoor – 629802.

Dr. A. Xavier Chandra Bose,
Research Guide and Supervisor, Associate Professor,
Department of English, Lekshmipuram College of Arts and Science,
Neyyoor – 629802.

ABSTRACT

Western Ghats are renowned for its rich biodiversity and serve as a habitat for many species. UNESCO has recognised it as a global biodiversity hotspot due to the presence of endemic species in it and it plays a vital role in maintaining sustained ecology. However, due to industrialisation and urbanisation, it is gradually losing its vegetation and heritage. This paper aims to decode the dark side behind the devastation of the Western Ghats region stretching over Kerala and Tamil Nadu, highlighting the impacts of exploitation. This paper carries out through the lens of documentaries, illegal mining and the invasion of tourism in the sites of the Western Ghats and explores how it disrupts the biodiversity and its reflection in climate change and other disasters.

Keywords: Western Ghats, Mining, Tourism, Devastation, Climate change.

The Western Ghats are ecologically rich mountain ranges that stretch across six states, starting from Tapti of Gujarat and ending in Kanyakumari of Tamil Nadu. Due to the presence of its exceptional biodiversity, UNESCO designated it as 'World Heritage' in the year 2012. The Western Ghats is also known as the Great Escarpment of India because of its steep slopes and high elevation in the southern parts. It serves as a habitat for many endangered species of flora and fauna and is considered one of the hotspots of biodiversity in the world. It acts as a natural barrier between the Arabian Sea and the Deccan Plateau. Thus, it plays a vital role in regulating monsoon and provides sustainable water resources. In recent years, the Western Ghats has lost its diversity due to encroachment and exploitation of human beings. Illegal quarrying, mining, power plant projects, industrialisation, tourism and settlements lead to the extinction of the Western Ghats. This article analyses the tapestry behind the Western Ghats' devastation, the reflection of its impacts and makes a clarion call to conserve it and suggests ways to resist the depletion.

Geographically, the Western Ghats covers an area of 160000 km² across the western region of six states such as Gujarat, Maharashtra, Goa, Karnataka, Kerala and Tamil Nadu, with a diverse range of species and natural resources in it. However, the abundance of natural mineral sources becomes the driving force for its gradual exploitation. Deforestation, illegal logging, hunting and poaching, industrial mining, illegal quarrying, power plant projects, tourism, human settlement and developments are bringing the Western Ghats under the verge of extinction. Rather than societal development, economic greed of human beings plays a great part in plundering and over exploitation of natural resources leads to the destruction of the environment and human beings themselves.

This paper focuses on the rampant increase in mining, quarrying and tourism in the Western Ghats, particularly in the states of Kerala and Tamil Nadu. It analyses how those illegal activities contribute to the Western Ghats' devastation, by highlighting the recommendations and resistance led by the common people to conserve it from the clutches of corrupted power structures. In recent years, landslides, forest

fires, excessive rainfall, flood and extreme heat are the headlines in the media, and everyone thinks of it as the outcome of drastic climate changes. But they never try to think of the reason behind the sudden climate fluctuation.

Mineral extraction and illegal quarrying have become a fragile threat to the Western Ghats and its inhabitants. It has become a great source of economic development for the corporates. Behind this development, there is an endless loss of lives and devastation. In recent years, these effects are being witnessed in the Western Ghats, especially in its southern part. Illegal quarrying defines the extraction of minerals and other materials from the earth surface, especially in the mountain ranges without any concern for environmental protection. Quarries are mostly unauthorised. While looking in the context of Kanyakumari in Tamil Nadu and Wayanad in Kerala, these illegal mining activities are unregulated and become the major cause for the devastation of the Western Ghats. This leads to collapsed landscapes, biodiversity loss and contaminated water resources. Looting a part of mountain from Western Ghats and feeding it to port construction and other exporting business makes businesspeople to earn in crores. These southern parts of the Western Ghats regions are rich in natural resources like granites and other materials that are extracted continuously for construction works and for export, under great influences. It gradually erodes natural vegetation, farming land and the lives of the people who reside in both regions. The transformation of destruction is penned as,

Years ago, a small road under the shadow of giant banyans, twisted its way from Aralvaimozhi in Tamil Nadu's Kanyakumari district to Kerala's Thiruvananthapuram. It wound its way through the Western Ghats, the route dotted with ponds filled with water lilies, bright green paddy fields, and swaying coconut trees. With this time, . . . this road is part of NH 44, NH 66 and NH7 and the banyans are entirely gone, . . . and the hillocks you see from the highway bear ugly scars: huge

chunks of rocks have been sliced away and all you see is the naked face of a disfigured mountain.

(Rose, *The Hindu*)

Plundering natural resources in the name of progression is the labelled voice of everyone to continue these cruelties. The consequences of widespread illegal quarries have been reflected in the past few decades. The torrential rainfall, landslides and floods in Kerala in the year 2018, 2019 and 2024 are regarded as the impact of ecological degradation and the intractable mining in the Western Ghats. Fluctuation in weather changes like heavy rainfall, extreme heat, frequent forest fire and contamination of pollutants are the great impacts followed by the mineral extraction in Kanyakumari and other parts of Kerala. Commonly people fabricate it as the outcome of climate change, and they never try to understand the reason behind those climate fluctuations. Environmentalist and Scientists like Gadgil called that terrible Wayanad disaster as 'man-made tragedy' (*The News Minute*). Rampant mining and quarrying leads to accumulation of large amounts of dust in the atmosphere and the aerosols enhance the precipitation. This aggravates and brings about extreme rainfall. Most of the quarrying in these Western Ghats is being run without proper license. In a documentary, "Wounded Hills: A documentary on the environmental issues of the Western Ghats" the environmentalist and members of the Gadgil Committee openly state that half the number of rock quarries in the Western Ghats are illegal and even after taking so many steps to halt such quarries still they are continuously working under influence (*The Hindu*).

The next emerging defect of the Western Ghats is tourism and settlements in the name of development and conservation. Tourism in a sustainable way is less harmful to the environment but in contrast, tourism springs up like mushroom in the Western Ghats for the sole purpose of economic development. Clearing up trees, construction of buildings and roadways become a threat to biodiversity. Scientist Madhav Gadgil, in a documentary, views that the intervention of buildings and tourist resorts in and near the region of Wayanad increases the burden of the geological structure of the Western Ghats

and later makes way for landslides. Changing the natural land sites into artificial lakes and other entertainment activities also disturbs the landscape of the hilly and sloppy region. Because cutting off trees in vast areas reduces the solidity of the soil, resulting in soil erosion. It leads to unexpected massive landslides in Wayanad and other sudden landslides in Nilgiris. Overcrowding of the wildlife sanctuaries highly disturbs the wild-life ecosystem and their habitat. Deeraj, a former researcher points out that, "Today we have lost the grassland, tomorrow we may lose the habitat of king cobras and other endangered species that are thriving here" (qtd. in, *Deccan Herald*). Unregulated tourism ends in exploitation of the environment and its resources. In addition to this, monoculture crop cultivation in the hilly terrains highly impacts the sustainability of the soil and makes it vulnerable to disasters.

However, the contributions and resistance action from the environmentalist and climate scientist are still enforcing the conservation of Western Ghats. In the year 2010, under the leadership of Dr. Madhav Gadgil a committee named, 'Gadgil Committee' was formed to protect the Western Ghats and its ecological diversity. The purpose of this committee is to protect the Western Ghats and its living species from the exploitation of humankind, because it is considered a sensitive area that plays a significant part in balancing the ecosystem. Under this committee, 70% area of Western Ghats is categorised as Ecologically Sensitive Zone (ESZ) in three zones such as ESZ I, ESZ II and ESZ III. The first zone is of the most sensitive areas and highly protective, where human activity should be prohibited. No developments or settlements should take place in this zone. In the second zone, there should be regulations to prevent human activities. It is less sensitive and constructive progress like mining should be regulated by strict rules. In the third zone, human activities and development are allowed but it is advised not to do harmful things to the ecosystem. Mining should be permitted only in the third zone, and without any negative impacts. However, this committee gained much opposition from the state government and other local stakeholders to impose these things (*The News Minute*).

Following this, in 2013 another committee 'Kasthurirangan Committee' was appointed by the Indian government under the name of a former Indian space scientist to restructure and make some recommendations in the Gadgil committee. This was made to do some relaxation in the previous committee, and to engage the people to conserve the Western Ghats. Kasthurirangan committee classified the region as Ecologically Sensitive Areas (ESA) and reduced 37% area of WG as sensitive. They banned only the red category of developments like mining, illegal quarrying, and not other agricultural activities which are done in the name of development of the local communities. It emphasised the people to involve in more sustainable practices of agriculture and development projects. They created 'Buffer Zone' under this development. Certain rules and regulations were promoted. Eventually this committee also faced many oppositions from the local community people and farmers from the area, because they thought it would affect their livelihoods. But later in 2017 the Kasthurirangan committee made an amendment in the restriction of mining process. They permitted to use explosives within fifty meters of residents and forest (*The News Minute*). It was criticised by many environmentalists like Sunitha Narain and questioned how these things would further help in conserving the Western Ghats. She reports her views as, "Sadly, this is how the report got interpreted, largely, I believe, because of the politically powerful interests that are behind rapacious "development" activities in the region" (Narain, *Down To Earth*). The environmentalists and other eco activists insist the indulgence of government and other state local authorities to take role in environmental conservation and management.

This study finds that resistance is the only big solution to control human beings from indulging in cruel attitude towards nature. It also insists on increasing the participation of everyone in the conservation of environment. In the documentary, "An Activist's' Battle to stop illegal mining in India's Aravalli Mountains" a single activist from the local community takes lots of efforts to halt the illegal mining that makes the place an unhealthy locality. He traverses through many risks and gets all the evidence for documenting illegal

quarrying and lets everyone know the impacts of such devastation (*Al Jazeera English*). Likewise, the government plays a major role in resisting all those illegal activities and in the efforts of making everyone participate in the conservation schemes. It is advisable to give compensation or funds to the local community people. who indulge in sustainable agricultural practices and make them know that they are saving a major part of the earth from devastation. More than that, resisting through writing creates great impact in society and brings some positive changes towards the conservation of the Western Ghats.

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