

# KASTURIRANGAN REPORT: IT'S FRICTION BETWEEN ECO-BALANCE, LIVELIHOOD

Opposition to report echoes in Malnad areas, uniting political leaders and voters, while green activists say people are being misled and made to boycott Gram Panchayat polls

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WITH Gram Panchayat elections round the corner, the Kasturirangan report on the Western Ghats is back in focus

again. While environmentalists favour implementing the report, bringing vulnerable and ecologically sensitive areas of Sahyadri under protection, several villagers in the Malnad belt are threatening to boycott the elections in protest against the report, which they feel not just prevents them from getting adequate infrastructure, but also threatens their livelihood.

The K Kasturirangan-led high-level working group (HLWG) report — known as Kasturirangan Report — which was submitted to the Centre in April 2013 has been facing resistance in the ghat states. In Karnataka, the stiffest opposition is from people in the Malnad region, especially in Hassan and Chikkamagaluru districts.

The report says around 37 per cent of the total area defined as the boundary of the Western Ghats is ecologically sensitive. Over this area of some 60,000 sqkm, spread across Gujarat, Maharashtra, Goa, Karnataka, Kerala and Tamil Nadu, HLWG recommends ban on activities with maximum interventionist and destructive impact on the environment. However, this clashes with the demands of the people living in these areas.

Nineteen gram panchayats, which are in eco-sensitive zones, have resolved to boycott the Gram Panchayat elections in Chikkamagaluru district.

Several associations in Balamuri and Maldare villages of Kodagu district too have threatened to boycott elections. People of Balamuri in Madikeri taluk are demanding houses under the government scheme for the



Villagers carry out road-laying work near Terali village in Uttara Kannada | DHEMANTH

labour class, while youth associations of Maldare village in Somwarpet taluk want improved playground facilities.

Around 680 voters of Koothi village in Somwarpet taluk have not just threatened to boycott the polls, but also submitted a detailed memorandum to the tahsildar. "We had threatened to boycott polls last time too, and our demands included setting up of a proper mobile network, better road connectivity, ration shop and power connection. We were given assurances, but none of them were fulfilled. This time, we have decided to boycott elections completely," said Lakshmikanth of the village.

Villagers in Sakleshpur taluk of Hassan district too have threatened to follow suit. At Hettur, Heggadde and Hongadahalla Gram Panchayats, no one has filed nominations, while 28 candidates from Maragunda, Neeranahalli, Hiremandi and Kogaravalli gram panchayats have withdrawn their nominations.

The Karnataka Growers' Federation and Anti-Kasturirangan Report Protest Committee from Chikkamagaluru district allege that the report, if implemented, will snatch away the lives of people. The unanimous decision to protest was taken by the two organisations, elected representatives, farmer association and others at a meeting held recently.

Mallesh, a senior coffee grower from Hassan, says, "The villagers decided to boycott the elections long ago, but the district authorities failed to address their grievances despite being aware of it. The issue could have been solved had the officials taken villagers into confidence."

Kiran Anaskar, a farmer from Joida taluk in Uttara Kannada district, points out how many basic needs, like roads and water, are out of reach because of present laws. "We are not aware of the Kasturirangan

Report, but local leaders fear that this could stop any development activity in the region. We had to fight for so many years to get good roads. The current forest laws seem enough for protection and villagers are apprehensive of any new law or report," he said.

Ecologists in Hassan allege that district authorities failed to reveal the pros and cons of the Report and local residents fear adverse impact.

DV Girish of Bhadra Wildlife Conservation Trust in Chikkamagaluru points to a lack of awareness among people on the contents of the report. "People are being misguided. The government should have engaged in a consultative process and listed out the clauses that are acceptable and those that are not. Politicians want people to run to them for help

as it benefits them. People want a good environment in the district, but oppose the report. They should not think that they would be displaced and they have to stop agricultural activities," he says.

Dinesh Holla of Sahyadri Sanchaya in Mangaluru criticises the delay in implementing the report. "Already, there has been a widespread destruction of areas in the Ghats that are listed to be protected under the report. We are seeing large-scale natural disasters almost every season. Large estate owners and those who own benami land are misguiding the locals. Those opposing the report have not read it, nor do they know what is in the report. The state government should have ensured that the last man understood the report and printed it in Kannada. Let people decide what is good for them. In the interest of the Ghats and ecological security of the region, the report must be implemented," he says.

Environmentalist from Uttara Kannada district, Balachandra Hegde, says the misinformation campaign against the report must be stopped. "There are many points in the report which are beneficial to the locals. The report also safeguards forests of the Western Ghats which serve as a lifeline. There are already strict laws to stop further damage to the Ghats and we must think about it. Though it seems the report is opposed in Kerala as well, the Forest Department in that state has submitted the list of reserve forests to be included in the project. There have been no such efforts in Karnataka. Many ecologists too are varied about the report as it gives permission for mini-hydel projects which have proved disastrous for the Ghats," he says.

**With inputs from: Marx Tejaswi (Chikkamagaluru); Prajna GR (Kodagu); Prakash Samaga (Udupi); and B R Uday Kumar (Hassan)**

