

# Water for people

Community initiatives are coming together to address the biggest water challenge in India – the absence of environmental governance.

## Context and challenge<sup>1</sup>

The Western Ghats mountain range extends for 1,600 kilometers. It crosses six states along India's western coastline and plays host to rich, centuries-old cultural diversity including many tribal communities. Most of peninsular India's rivers also originate in this global biodiversity hotspot – a complex, thickly forested catchment area that drains almost 40% of the entire country and contains dozens of UNESCO World Heritage Sites.

Mumbai, India's financial capital, is located some 100 kilometers from the Western Ghats. With 18 million people in its urban agglomeration, Mumbai is one of the fastest growing cities in the world. It is also a case that clearly demonstrates the immense value of natural ecosystems to a population's health, wealth and well being. The mountain forests act as the city's lungs and watershed, providing essential ecosystem services for more than 250 million people across the region, including many tribal settlements and the dry Deccan zone of Central India.

As the population expands, so does the demand for water. Concerned about the need to quench the region's future thirst, municipal corporations are calling for 12 new large dams to be built in the Western Ghats. Together these dams would submerge over 22,000 hectares of predominantly tribal land, including over 7,000 hectares of forest and over 750 hectares of the world renowned Tansa Wildlife Sanctuary. This would lead to the displacement of over 100,000 tribal people from their homes, land and livelihoods. Yet, despite this, due to a legislative oversight, most of these dams do not require social and environmental impact assessments or monitoring, management plans, or even public consultations. Tribal and other affected groups are actively opposed to these projects.

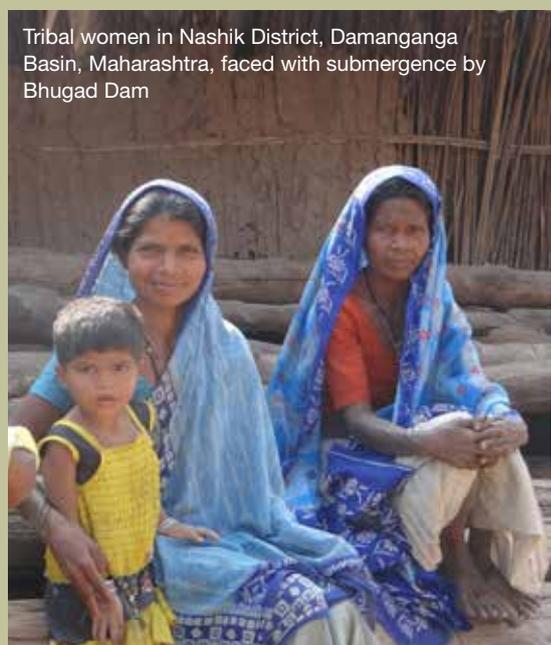
As well as the dams, the water authorities of the Western Ghats face a daunting list of challenges. These include access, water supply and sanitation, low return on investment for large surface irrigation projects,

environmental management, pollution, increasing frequency and extent of floods and droughts, and – woven through many of these issues – the absence of participatory and transparent environmental governance. At the same time, the resilience of the region's natural systems is being threatened by an array of massive power projects, deforestation, the diversion of rivers and streams, and biodiversity loss due in part to the monoculture approach to growing food.

## Taking an ecosystem approach

The ecosystem approach promotes the integrated management of land, water and living resources in a way that achieves mutually compatible conservation and sustainable use, and delivers equitable benefits for people and nature.<sup>2</sup> With support from the Ecosystem Alliance, local civil society has focused on three key areas of work to safeguard the incalculable natural value of the Western Ghats for the people who depend on them:

- Advocacy for improved environmental governance:** The revival of the Save the Western Ghats movement, which was originally founded in the 1980s, has helped create a platform for civil society organisations to promote Ecologically Sensitive Areas planning. Through this, Ecosystem Alliance partners have been actively involved in the public consultations leading up to and following the 2011 report by the Western Ghats Expert Ecology Panel<sup>3</sup>, which provides a basis on which to engage with relevant government departments and other stakeholders. This report, and a response report commissioned by the Ministry of Environment and Forests, is now in the public domain.<sup>4</sup>
- Building leadership and knowledge:** A sustained focus on training youth leadership is empowering an active support network for the public hearings of the Expert Ecology Panel. It is further helping to bring regional civil society groups together to create a more concerted campaign for responsible environmental governance.
- Building models for sustainable natural resource management:** With support from Ecosystem Alliance partner the Keystone Foundation and Barclays Bank, tribal farmers and non-timber forest product gatherers have set up a company focused on adding value to agricultural and forest produce. The Aadhimalai Pazhankudiyinar Producer Company was registered in April 2013 with nine Directors from the tribal community and a CEO. Since then, over 60 programs have trained more than 800 tribal youth and women in life skills, financial management, and trades ranging from carpentry to crochet, vermicomposting to ecotourism. The initiative is also reinforcing civil society networks through knowledge- and coalition-building on the challenges of mining, deforestation and specific mini hydro projects.



PARINEETA DANDEKAR

Many local partners are becoming involved. The Keystone Foundation in particular has played a co-ordinating and synergising role. The Ecosystem Alliance framework is being used to discuss new partnerships, such as with Climate Action Network South Asia. The heightened media focus on the Western Ghats has successfully raised awareness among the public and governments at all levels and throughout the region's mosaic of civil society organisations.



THRIVING ECONOMIES



IMPROVED LIVELIHOODS



FOOD SECURITY



WATER SECURITY



HEALTHY BIODIVERSITY



CLIMATE RESILIENCE



SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT



PARINEETA DANDEKAR

Above: a fish sanctuary where endangered fish are protected by community for millennia on River Vaitarna, Northern Western Ghats, Maharashtra.

Below: Young workers on an illegal dam in Maharashtra, Western Ghats.



PARINEETA DANDEKAR

## Impacts on communities, nature and policy

- The Ecology Expert Panel designated the Western Ghats as an Ecologically Sensitive Area and assigned three levels of Ecological Sensitivity to its different regions. Areas affected by the proposed dams around Mumbai fall in Zone I, requiring the highest levels of protection.
- In its first year of operation, the Aadhimalai Pazhankudiyinar Producer Company turnover was INR 50,000,000 (€647,000), providing incomes for 1,500 indigenous families. Volunteers from Barclays have created and rolled out a customised enterprise resource planning software to ensure that company systems are both standards compliant and user-friendly for the local people involved.<sup>5</sup> Inspired by this success, the Indian Government has started negotiating a larger sustainable infrastructure project with Aadhimalai.
- The turnover of non-timber forest and organic products grew by 30% in 2013 in the Nilgiris Biosphere Reserve as a result of the targeted training of tribal communities. A number of officials, planners, students and interns have recently visited with a view to replicating the model.
- A watershed development plan for the Parry Agro plantation in Valparai has been finalised and a similar project is under way in Kasargod, Kerala.
- The sustained media campaign has helped build dialogue with the central government in Delhi.<sup>6</sup>

## Looking to the future

A heated debate on the recommendations of the report of the Expert Panel is currently underway. Powerful interest groups – real estate, mining, tourism and infrastructure – are resisting any change to the status quo, while some politicians are labelling attempts to restrict infrastructure development as ‘anti-people’. Such language is creating tensions and many feel that the protection of essential ecosystem services, which are linked intrinsically with forest dwelling tribal communities, is being sacrificed for short term political gain. However, increased expressions of concern and calls to action are a hopeful sign that more community

groups across India are engaging with the authorities on fundamental issues of environmental management.

It is clear that the implementation of Ecologically Sensitive Areas based development and management of natural resources in the Western Ghats is going to take time. New partnerships built on an approach which connects people, governments and business offer the best chances for a sustainable future. In particular,

1. **Environmental governance:** Pro-conservation, pro-people eco-development policy must be built from the grassroots up, in close cooperation with the District Administration. The full inclusion of local communities, community-based organisations, the Ecology Experts Panel, the Ecological Authority and the Ministry of Environment and Forests in this process will be key to success.
2. **Leadership building and information:** Leadership by newly-engaged youth, supported by an Environment Response Centre, will ensure critical information and knowledge exchange. Currently the discourse around Ecologically Sensitive Areas is shrouded in misinformation and opacity. This must be challenged through initiatives to bridge the gap between policy, science and local issues, such as contributions to the India Biodiversity Portal.<sup>7</sup>
3. **Models for Sustainable Natural Resource Management:** Models must be developed to strengthen Ecologically Sensitive Areas planning and create production centres which directly address the issues faced by the marginalised, tribal communities whose livelihoods are so dependent on the ecosystem services.

A combination of these approaches, underpinned by the engagement of an empowered civil society, will ensure that the region’s ecological and livelihood security is prioritised over the short term interests of a powerful few.

**For more information, please contact:**  
**Keystone:** Pratim Roy, [pratim@keystone-foundation.org](mailto:pratim@keystone-foundation.org)  
**SANDARP:** Parineeta Dandekar, [parineeta.dandekar@gmail.com](mailto:parineeta.dandekar@gmail.com)  
**Both ENDS:** [info@bothends.org](mailto:info@bothends.org)

## Further reading

1. Dandekar, Thakkar, *Dams in Tribal belt of Western Ghats for Mumbai Metropolitan Region*, SANDRP 2014 with support from Keystone.
2. Keystone Foundation, 20th Annual Report, 2013-2014.

## REFERENCES

1. This case is based on data from [http://sandrp.in/Dams\\_in\\_tribal\\_belt\\_of\\_Western\\_Ghats\\_for\\_the\\_Mumbai\\_Metropolitan\\_Region.pdf](http://sandrp.in/Dams_in_tribal_belt_of_Western_Ghats_for_the_Mumbai_Metropolitan_Region.pdf)
2. <http://www.cbd.int/ecosystem/>
3. <http://www.moef.nic.in/downloads/public-information/wg-23052012.pdf>
4. <http://www.indiaenvironmentportal.org.in/content/374055/report-of-the-high-level-working-group-on-western-ghats-kasturirangan-western-ghats-report/>
5. <http://keystone-foundation.org/barclays-training-for-appre-producer-group/>
6. <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/home/environment/developmental-issues/Use-existing-laws-to-protect-Western-Ghats-Environmentalists/articleshow/36975586.cms>
7. [indiabiodiversity.org/](http://indiabiodiversity.org/)



MADE POSSIBLE BY THE ECOSYSTEM ALLIANCE

