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*Case Study*

# Voices of the Ghats: The Battle for Environmental Protection vs. Community Survival

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**Abstract:** In India's Western Ghats, a deep conflict takes shape, a battle between nature conservation and the survival of communities. Declared a UNESCO World Heritage the Western Ghats not only stand for a wonder of nature but a lifeline for countless native communities whose lives become inescapably intertwined with its habitats. Yet, relentless accelerating development, and infrastructure development encroach onto traditional lands and habitats, plantations, and mining encroach into untouched lands, with catastrophic repercussions for the environment implications. In the face of growing environmental degradation, the government initiated Western Ghats The Expert Committee (WGEEP) in 2010, chaired by Dr. Madhav Gadgil, to formulate a sustainable conservation Strategy. The cautious work of the committee uncovered Ecologically Sensitive Areas (ESZs) in which specific restrictions in land use were deemed important for balance. Despite that, the report kindled widespread concern among farmers like Rajan, who faced the loss of traditional lands and livelihoods under stricter new restrictions tiered model of ESZs posed a dualism: save the environment or save their existence. The Ghats protests reached a fevered height, with villagers rallying together to make a stand, holding boards with slogans resonating with them. Locals' political fortunes changed, with leaders mobilizing in the farmers' cause, with an eye towards a balanced one taking into consideration both the integrity and dignity of humans. Media criticism grew, depicting the controversy in a microcosmic of a national dialogue regarding development and conservation. The focal point of all of this tumult is a sad query: Can harmony between them ever be reached? Do communities have to sacrifice heritage at the expense of ecologic conservation? Voices of Ghats resonate in a cry for recognition, such a verdant haven's future hangs in the balance—caught between the aspirations of its people and the imperatives of nature.

**Keywords:** Western Ghats, Conservation of Environment, Sustainable Development, Kerala, Gadgil Committee

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## 1. Introduction: The Western Ghats' Need for Protection

Located in India's western coast, at its heart, stands one of India's most breathtaking and biologically rich regions—the Western Ghats. This magnificent range, extending for over 1,600 kilometres in six states, and for a long period, not only for its beauty but the storehouse of flora and fauna that inhabit it. Known to be a UNESCO World Heritage Site,

Western Ghats are not hills with a cloak of rich forests; they are one last refugia of biodiversity, with a thousand endemic species of animals and flora and insects that can nowhere else in the world.

The Living Legacy: To an ecologist, Ghats form a living textbook, a virtual laboratory where one can witness the unobstructed and unending flow of ecosystems, such as thick forests and evergreen trees to deep valley-cutting rivers, with each one hosting a specific range of species. Here, animals and plants coexist in a fragile equilibrium that takes a period of millions of years to settle down. For centuries, numerous native communities have lived in harmony with the land and its wealth, with its customs filled with surrounding Nature's beat.

But in modern times, such everlasting outlooks have been challenged with ever-growing and unrelenting than ever in its history. As India's urban areas expand and demand for wood, and minerals intensifies, Western Ghats have become under attack. Once lush forests they stand etched forever with highways and rails, cleared for farms, or stripped for minerals. Sources of water that have long been under cover of thick canopies face attack today through pollution, not only for wildlife but for communities' livelihoods down river. Whereas its mining and industrious deforestation could perhaps be less, Kerala faces its unique environmental challenges. The Western Ghats are increasingly subject to pressures from human settlements, expansion of plantations, and localized tourism—all of them put strains in its delicate environments.

The dependence of Kerala on these hills for water, agricultural lands, and refuge in case of natural calamities means that any degradation, however subtle, has a far-reaching impact. Floods, landslides, and shifts in neighboring climates, long infrequent, have become an ever-present danger these days. Environmentalists in Kerala noticed these symptoms and suspected that Kerala's Ghats could soon be a critical issue, specifically with a heightened level of flooding and landslides in recent years.

Environmentalists, researchers, and residents increasingly sounded the alarm. Each year, reports of landslides, floods, and vanishing species painted a grim picture of an ecosystem pushed to its limits. But for years, these warnings went largely unheeded, their voices lost in the clamor of industrial progress and the push for economic growth. The balance, once self-sustaining, was tipping toward disaster. The Ghats, they warned, were not just nature's gift to humanity—they were its lifeline, providing water, fresh air, and sustenance to millions.

Amid mounting pressures, an urgent need emerged to protect the Ghats before it was too late. For many, this was no longer just about preserving beauty or rare species but about securing India's environmental future. The call went out to the government: act now, or face irreversible consequences. Protect the Western Ghats, they pleaded, for the survival of the region and the generations to come. In response, the government took a historic step to safeguard this natural heritage.

In 2010, it formed a panel of experts tasked with developing a comprehensive, scientific plan to protect the Ghats. Leading this group was Dr. Madhav Gadgil, a respected ecologist and outspoken advocate for sustainable development. Under his leadership, the Western Ghats Ecology Expert Panel (WGEEP) began its work to chart a path toward preserving one of India's most treasured ecosystems. But as the story would soon show, not everyone agreed on what protection should look like—or who would pay the price for it.

## 2. Recommendations and Study of the Gadgil Committee

The Gadgil Committee conducted a thorough and systemic analysis to assess the vulnerability of the Western Ghats, specifically in Kerala, with its traditional life and new urban needs converging in a complex form. Dr. Madhav Gadgil's group officially known as the Western Ghats Ecology Expert Panel (WGEEP), embarked on a fervent search, to map the current state of such hills and propose sustainable future directions that will benefit both humans and nature.

The board conducted an inquiry into the Western Ghats with a general orientation that would register both scientific data and public awareness. Dr. Gadgil and his team organized widespread site tours across the Ghats, in consultation with communities at a deep level, agricultural employees, ecologist professionals, and state representatives. In Kerala, they focused watching closely at how humans engaged with their environment, knowing that in this state, Ghats became a part of routine life.

The data collection was expansive and multi-dimensional and involved satellite observations, water and tastings, tracking wildlife, and mapping biodiversity. All these activities were augmented with interviews with farmers, entrepreneurs, and conservationists. The group specifically sensibility to the needs of citizens residing in and about the Ghats, towards balancing ecologic well-being about welfare locally. Locals' talks regularly showed both concern and pride, with a desire to have their environment saved but worried about the restrictions placed on land and residence.

The group learned that most Kerala citizens took a lot of pride in Kerala's natural heritage, they were also increasingly reliant on industries that put pressure on the land. Dr. Gadgil approached with a willingness to try and bridge such conflicting outlooks and mandates, even when his group was ready to make recommendations that could redefine the future of the region.

### a. Identifying Ecologically Sensitive Zones (ESZs)

The Gadgil Committee's findings presented both a stark warning and a path toward sustainable stewardship. Through data and observation, they identified regions of the Western Ghats that they classified as Ecologically Sensitive Zones (ESZs). Each ESZ was determined based on factors such as biodiversity richness, water resources, forest cover, and soil erosion rates, indicating areas where human intervention had already stretched ecological limits. Kerala, with its unique patchwork of protected forests, agricultural lands, and dense populations, presented a particular challenge.

Here, the Gadgil Committee emphasized that unchecked development, even in seemingly small amounts, could trigger cascading effects. Areas prone to landslides and floods were classified as ESZs, as they posed risks not only to the environment but also to the people living nearby. In these zones, the report noted, certain activities posed higher risks to the ecosystem, such as mining, the construction of large buildings, and land alterations for industrial agriculture. The team argued that, to preserve the stability and health of these ecosystems, new safeguards were necessary.

### b. The three-tiered ESZ model

The Gadgil Report proposed a three-tiered model to categorise areas in the Western Ghats based on their vulnerability and ecological significance. Each level would involve specific restrictions and protections;

1. ESZ 1: Most sensitive, in which no activity, construction, or significant agricultural development will not be allowed in such areas should not be disturbed in its natural form and restricted to such activity alone integral to conservation
2. ESZ 2: Slightly sensitive regions, in which development will only be allowed. There was permission for minor construction and tillage but under stringent environmental legislation to have no significant impact on wildlife and the environment
3. ESZ 3: Slightly less sensitive areas, in which specific agricultural and industrial operations could continue, but even then, careful observation must be preserved in order to avert overexploitation and environmental degradation.

The multi-tiered scheme was planned in such a manner that communities could peacefully coexist with Ghats while offering proper safeguard for more sensitive areas. In Kerala, such a model will require specific agricultural methods and infrastructure constructions to be altered and limited, most noticeably in upper ESZ levels.

### **3. The Severe Impact on Local Farmers and Residents**

When its report came out, alarm moved at wildfire speed through the village settlements in Kerala's Western Ghats. The report had placed sections of the Ghats in Ecologically Sensitive Zones (ESZs) with high restrictions that no one in the village ever imagined. Most of them had lived off growing black pepper and cardamom for generations, but even the future of their farms at present seemed doubtful.

The villagers, having flocked together for consultation, heard in a whisper of impending bans and unsettling conversation. What happens when the government reaches a conclusion no cultivation where they could go? What if, in reality, they have to go, go out of their homesteads, farms, and questions about communities? For Rajan and his neighbours, such questions were not theoretical ones—looming perils that struck at the core of their existence

#### **a. Anxiety regarding Loss of Livelihood and Legacy**

The family of Rajan, and numerous others, had invested several generations' worth of sweat and blood in their property. Pepper and cardamom production had earned them enough security to build structures, educate children, and set aside a little for future weddings and emergencies. With these fruits and vegetables, these fruits and set marriages, arranged for studies for kids, and saved for future years.

Losing such a property for having nothing go for everything is indeed a worst-case scenario. The farmers inquired about what would then become if property value in case it is subjected to stricter regulations, under stricter environmental laws and have no land any longer capable for livelihoods or give them any form of security. If prices plummeted, how would they ever afford their children's weddings or have enough to leave for them? The mere fact kept them feeling helpless and deeply betrayed.

#### **b. Displacement and an uncertain future**

The rumours about moving began, and with it, apprehensions began growing. Where will they move, then? When do they leave? Unlike urbanites, such family members did not have contacts, no work skills but agriculture. Rajan could not fathom resettling in a new location and beginning again, asked himself about how his son, Raju, would survive in a life with no field, no pepper creeper, and no societal connections.

Displacement would mean cutting off ties with a country that for centuries had been in family hands. Rajan saw his kids in a city, deprived of heritage and anchorage of family heritage. He fretted about a future when the intelligence won through by his forefathers—how to farm cardamom in tree canopies' shadow, and tips for growing pepper vines to thrive—would the centuries-old skill, gained and then passed down to his descendants, would be gone in a single generation.

The villagers' concern reached a loss, not a life in an individual but a life in general. They shared not only a plot of land but a community, customs, and celebrations with rhythms of farm life. Generations have enjoyed harvesting together, and kids have played in hillsides, and elders imparted their knowledge in the shadow of pepper vines. There was scattering community experienced a loss of part of its identity, culture and tradition.

In the end, the farmers felt trapped, facing a choice between their own survival and the protection of the environment. There hung in the air, agonisingly, a question: could one have balance, or would they have to sacrifice their lives, livelihoods, and legacies for the sake of environmental conservation. For Rajan and for most, it was a choice that not only determined their future but that of their children and future generations. Hills in Western Ghats can perhaps be preserved in a green state, but at what cost to its citizens, who lived in it for centuries?

#### **4. Opposition and Protests: The Conundrum Unfolds**

The report of the Gadgil Committee circulated in Western Ghats, with discontent soon grew into an unrelenting tide of rebellion. There was Rajan and neighbours joined hands with many farmers and citizens in Kerala, mobilising in small town squares and in hillsides, protesting and venting out their fears and frustrations. What started village council soon developed into a series of public protests. Villagers from everywhere people, accompanied by leaders and activists, marched through the streets, chanting such slogans "Save Our Lands, Save Our Lives" and "Save Farmers, Not Trees."

##### **a. Public Outrage: Protecting Livelihoods at All Costs**

The dream of the Gadgil Committee for protecting the Ghats was ambitious, but for the proposed restrictions seemed to threaten their very existence. Farmers insisted that the stringent environmental policies will bind them in terms of financing their livelihoods, and whole poverty-stricken communities. They fear that such realignments will trap them in a loss trap, where neither could farm such as in days gone by nor sell real property, for with new restrictions, young villagers, both males and females, who hoped to work in their family farms even expand it, now saw their futures hanging in the balance.

The political leaders in the locality soon noticed, seeing that such a problem had generated a considerable solidarity with farmers, protesting over the report and demanding that the government re-evaluate its stance. The protests generated passionate statements from politicians who promised to protect the rights of the people and championed the notion that

human lives were worth no less than conservation of the environment. Committee idealism, while noble, did not involve consideration for realities of communities that hung in the balance, and for many in the village, such support filled with hope.

### **b. The Media Coverage: The Country Holds its Breath as Tensions Build**

The national and local press moved in to cover the developing soap opera at breakneck pace. They had stressed mounting tension between survival and conservation for humans, a debate that struck a chord with people across the country. The scenes of villagers gathering to protest, clutching placards, and community leaders rallying in solidarity with them painted a sharp photo that moved television and radio listeners' hearts. Media coverage increased a sense of urgency and severity of case, portraying Western Ghats not only as an ecological wealth but also, a platform for a battle for survival and basic rights.

In contrast, a statement in solidarity with the Gadgil Committee's recommendations, issuing warnings of irreparable consequences in case of inaction emerged. The Western Ghats not only represented a national but a global asset, and permission for continuous deforestation, urbanization, and industrial development will wreak havoc in ecosystems that took a span of a million years to form. That stance, however, only served to heighten for every article in its praise, a counter article stressed displacement and destitution that overshadowed communities in the region. Media reporting heightened the extreme ends, pitting citizens in a contest over what happens first: Environmental conservation or human security?

## **5. The Conflict of Consciences: Nature and Existence**

The protests grew and controversy ensued, and one question at its core became apparent: Was it ethical to put them in a position to have to make a decision between conservation and development had existed for centuries? For most, it seemed unethical to have to bear the brunt of decisions made a long distance off, especially when they lived in harmony with nature for centuries. Why must their living be taken when real culprits, in their eyes, were big builders and industries had disturbed the environment with impunity. Other people understood it in a different manner, and with no intervention, Western Ghats would worsen, taking with them the environment and assets that supported life many years and centuries the hills.

In its report, the Gadgil Committee mooted a mechanism for protecting the region for future generations, but at a tremendous expense for its native inhabitants. As protests grew, citizens in India started grappling with the underpinnings of the issue, then, is: What is most important: protecting a precious natural environment or assuring survival and dignity of citizens who depended for it? The protests over the report of the Gadgil Committee became a defining feature of conversation regarding conservation and human rights, a location at which ethics, livelihoods, and environmental conservation adopted a diametric position.

For Rajan and for his community, however, the fight was not yet finished. Threats of property loss hung over them. Larger, but with a will to have a voice heard. In search of a balancing act between life and protecting and conserving the environment remained a contradiction that would shape the future of the Western Ghats—and the lives of those who called it home.

## **6. Questions**

1. Imagine you are the decision maker of this situation. After seeing all these protests, what decision you will make and why?
2. What are the ethical considerations involved in prioritizing environmental conservation over human livelihoods, and vice versa?
3. What are the potential consequences of implementing the Gadgil Committee's recommendations? How can these be mitigated?
4. How can local communities be meaningfully involved in environmental decision-making processes?
5. What are the key principles of sustainable development, and how can they be applied to the Western Ghats?
6. How can the lessons learned from the Western Ghats be applied to other regions facing similar challenges?

## Teaching Notes

The case study engages with conflicting and nuanced concerns in safeguarding of Western Ghats, a UNESCO heritage site in India. Western Ghats is a significant ecological region, but with numerous native communities residing in them and living off land for living. The Gadgil Committee, with an objective to develop a complete blueprint for safeguarding the region, including proposed robust environment legislation which jeopardized the livelihoods of farmers and citizens living in the region and a contentious debate over a harmony between conservation of the environment and human rights

### a. Key Themes

- Environmental Conservation vs. Human Rights: The case reveals contradiction between safeguarding the environment and assuring welfare for local communities
- Role of Indigenous Communities: Relevance of recognising the rights and native communities' awareness in environment-related decision-making
- Effect of Policy towards Livelihoods: There is a need for consideration of social and economic impacts of environment policies
- Government and Civil Society Role: The Role of effective governance and citizen participation in developing environmental policy.

### b. Learning Outcomes

- In order to understand the thin balancing act between conservation and human rights
- To evaluate social and economic impacts of environment policies
- To develop critical thinking and problem-solving skills
- To stimulate ethical discussion and debate

### c. Discussion Questions

1. Ethical Issue: What ethical considerations go into prioritizing human life over environment conservation, and vice versa?
2. Policy Implications: What can be the implications of putting in practice Gadgil Committee recommendations?
3. Community Engagement: How can local communities be meaningfully involved in environmental decision-making processes?
4. Sustainable Development: What are the key principles of sustainable development, and how can they be applied to the Western Ghats?
5. Global Implications: How can the lessons learned from the Western Ghats be applied to other regions facing similar challenges?

### d. Teaching Strategy



**i. Introduction (10 minutes)**

Objective: Set the context for the case study.

- Activity:
  - Briefly introduce the Western Ghats and the Gadgil Committee.
  - Discuss the significance of the region and the ecological and social challenges it faces.
  - State the objectives of the class and the key themes to be covered.

**ii. Group Analysis of the Case Study (20 minutes)**

Objective: Encourage students to explore different perspectives within the case.

Activity: Divide the class into small groups (4-5 students each).

- Assign each group a specific theme or perspective to analyse (e.g., environmental impact, indigenous rights, economic implications).

Provide guiding questions for their discussion:

- What are the main issues related to your theme?
- Who are the stakeholders involved, and what are their interests?
- What are the potential consequences of the Gadgil Committee's recommendations?

Output: Each group should prepare a 2-minute summary of their analysis to present to the class.

**iii. Group Presentations (15 minutes)**

Objective: Share insights and foster class-wide discussion.

Activity:

- Each group presents their analysis (2 minutes each).
- Encourage questions from other groups after each presentation to stimulate discussion.
- Facilitate connections between the different perspectives presented.

**iv. Ethical Dilemma Discussion (40 minutes)**

Objective: Reflect on the ethical implications of environmental conservation versus human rights.

Activity: Pose the ethical dilemma: "Should environmental conservation be prioritized over human livelihoods, or vice versa?"

- Facilitate a whole-class discussion, encouraging students to express their opinions and reasoning.
- Guide the conversation to highlight key themes and ethical considerations.

#### **v. Conclusion and Reflection (5 minutes)**

Objective: Summarize the key learning points of the class.

Activity:

- Recap the main themes discussed, emphasizing the complexity of the issues at hand.
- Ask students to write down one insight they gained and one question they still have regarding the case study.
- Encourage them to share their insights and questions with a partner or in small groups before leaving.