

Laws violated in Ratnagiri, says ecology panel report

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PUNE: The Western Ghats Ecology Expert Panel (WGEEP) headed by ecologist Madhav Gadgil has decided to walk the untrodden path. In the summary report which raises environmental concerns in the Sindhudurg and Ratnagiri regions of Maharashtra and emphatically supports the rights of its people, while strongly criticising the government's role, the WGEEP gave voice to the years of protests witnessed by the regions.

The report seeks to answer various questions related to the ecologically sensitive area under consideration, and the role of the 'development projects' there. It observes that environmental laws have not been followed in many cases, along with a serious threat to civil liberties. The 'development' had not been equitable or sustainable, the report observes. "It is relevant to enquire not only whether the overall cost, in environmental, social, economic terms, exceed the benefits, but also as to who is benefiting, and who is paying the costs," it states. The final report will be submitted to the Environment and Forests Ministry in March, 2011.

Alleging that even mango and cashew orchards promoted through the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme did not exist anymore, the report raises serious questions

around the protection of these schemes. "These mango and cashew orchards may, in the long-run, suffer seriously from the worsening air pollution; and the ongoing highly inadequate investigations by the Agricultural University certainly cannot provide any assurance to the contrary," the report points out.

The pollution will also affect the export value of the mangoes and cashews, it states, adding, "There are of course many imponderables in the ongoing human interventions in the region. For instance, we have little understanding of the impact of gases like SO₂ and NO_x on the mango and cashew plantations and forests of the slopes of the Western Ghats."

On the question of whether people's rights were being respected in the region, the report says, "Not only are people not being active partners in the process of development and of nurturing the rich natural resource heritage of Ratnagiri-Sindhudurg districts, but their civil right of expression is being systematically suppressed."

Mr. Gadgil, in the report, says that he could not talk to the people freely during his visit to the region. "I was shocked on being informed on the morning of October 8 that my plans for a field visit and open consultations with people had to be drastically modified because the collector had promulgated the Bombay Police Act 1951 Sec-

tion 37 (1)(3), prohibiting the gathering of more than five people in public," the report states.

The report also alleges that the Environmental Impact Assessments (EIA) conducted by the government are flawed, "almost without exception."

The EIA is an important tool for deciding the acceptability of the environmental cost of various human interventions. Further, pointing out the failure of the local government, the report states that the Study Group at Lote near Chiplun district has met only twice, the last meeting being in 2008. "Contrary to the information provided by the authorities in Mumbai, the Study Group is completely inactive," the report says.

The report also underlines the important issue of toxic dumping. "It was revealed that the Common Effluent Treatment Plant at Chiplun cannot handle the quantity of effluent it is receiving, and its functioning is highly defective. People also reported that solid toxic sludge from industries was mixed with soil and dumped in the ghat area.

"It is understood that many industries at Lote are pumping toxic waste into groundwater through bore wells. Apparently, three such cases were brought to light, but there has been no action," the report observes, adding that decision-makers at the centres of power were not aware of the ground realities.