Why Implementation of the Recommendations of Kasturirangan Committee in Western Ghats is Important

What is the issue?

Karnataka Chief Minister Basavaraj Bommai informed the Centre that the state is opposed to the Kasturirangan Committee report on Western Ghats.

Why Western Ghats is so important?

- The Western Ghats is spread across the states of Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Goa, Maharashtra and Gujarat.
- It is a UNESCO World Heritage Site and is one of the eight **"hottest hot-spots"** of biological diversity in the world.
- It hosts properties including national parks, wildlife sanctuaries ,world heritage sites, etc.
- It has over 7,402 species of flowering plants, 1,814 species of non-flowering plants, 139 mammal species, 508 bird species, 179 amphibian species, 6,000 insects species and 290 freshwater fish species.
- Thus, the demarcation of an ESA is an **effort to protect the fragile eco-system** from indiscriminate industrialisation, mining and unregulated development.
- Two committees – Gadgil and Kasturirangan – were appointed in the last eight years to identify the areas that needed to be kept out from such activities.

What are the recommendations of the Kasturirangan committee report?

> *The Western Ghats Ecology Expert Panel (WGEEP), also known as the **Gadgil Commission** has designated the **entire hill range** as an Ecologically Sensitive Area and classified the 142 taluks in the Western Ghats boundary into Ecologically Sensitive Zones (ESZ) 1, 2 and 3.*
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> *It suggested the formation of a **Western Ghats Ecology Authority (WGEA),** a statutory authority which enjoys the powers under the*

Environment (Protection) Act.

- The Kasturirangan committee report proposes **37% of the total area of Western Ghats**, which is roughly 60,000 square kilometres, to be declared as eco-sensitive area (ESA).
- Out of this, 20,668 sq km of the area falls in Karnataka covering 1,576 villages.
- The report recommended a blanket ban on mining, quarrying, setting up of red category industries and thermal power projects.
- It stated that the impact of infrastructural projects on the forest and wildlife should be studied before permission is given for these activities.
- It also stated that the boundary of the 39 UNESCO Heritage sites are in most cases, boundaries of the legally demarcated national parks, wildlife sanctuaries, tiger reserves and forest divisions which are already accorded with high level of protection.
- The state of Karnataka has the highest percentage of the ESA- 46.50 %.

Why the Karnataka government rejected the report?

- **Environment vs Development**- The state government believes that implementation of the report will halt the developmental activities in the region.
- Bommai said that declaring Western Ghats as ecologically sensitive zone would adversely affect the livelihood of people in the region.
- **Ground reality**- The Kasturirangan report has been prepared based on the satellite images, but the ground reality is different.
- People of the region have adopted agriculture and horticultural activities in an eco-friendly manner prioritising the environment protection as per the Forest Protection Act.

What is the present status of the deemed forest land in Karnataka?

- As per the Supreme Court, in *Godavarman Thirumulpad Vs Union of India & others*, the term forest as per dictionary meaning and the forests recorded in government records were to be included in the broad definition of 'forests' along with notified forests for consideration of any diversion proposal under the Forest (Conservation) Act, 1980.
- The expert committee appointed by the Government of Karnataka identified 10 lakh hectares of land in the State as deemed forest.
- The state expert committee in 1997 had identified 10 lakh hectares of

deemed forest area which over the years were shrunk by the successive governments.

- The Karnataka government has planned to further shrink the deemed forest area from 3,30,186.938 hectares to 2 lakh hectares.
- There have been massive encroachments across the state forest areas and these have been done at the behest of political leaders.
- Considering the changes in climate which would affect the people's livelihood and the nation's economy, it is essential to conserve the fragile ecosystems that costs less compared to spending money on restoration and rejuvenation.

Reference

1. https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/explained-implementation-recommendations-kasturirangan-committee-western-ghats-important-7660924/

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