



Mining and timber lobbies behind opposition to heritage tag?

By Praveen Bhargav

The Karnataka government's stand opposing the proposal to include scientifically identified areas in the Western Ghats on the Unesco World Heritage List is shockingly short sighted. Several ministers and elected representatives have presented bizarre arguments as to why they oppose the proposal. While one BJP MLA from Kodagu claimed that the Unesco proposal would hamper the availability of stone for road construction, another minister is on record that his plan to have a base at Kudremukh for the state commando force would be affected.

While such explanations ring hollow and expose the lack of scientific temper and vision, it is important for the people to know the real truth and the underlying reasons leading up to this unfortunate decision.

The World Heritage Convention (WHC) is an international treaty to which India is a signatory. It recognises the fundamental need to preserve the balance between people and nature. The decision to scientifically identify Natural Heritage

Sites was initiated by the ministry of environment in 2002. The results of the transparent identification process were publicly discussed during 2004. The Government at the Centre during that period was headed by Atal Bihari Vajpayee, who showed great statesmanship in initiating the process. So why is the state government vehemently opposing their own iconic leader's visionary decision?

In December 2008 some local people led by elected representatives and supported by senior district officers, bulldozed portions of the Pushpagiri sanctuary in the Western Ghats in gross violation of the Supreme Court's orders. The SC directed the central empowered committee to investigate the serious charges and proceedings are presently at a crucial stage. The Karnataka high court, in 2009, blocked a determined attempt to cut several thousand trees in pristine forest enclosures in the Western Ghats including one allegedly owned by a powerful minister in the present cabinet.

These legal interventions have huge implications for political leaders. They greatly fear that the Unesco proposal will be an



other weapon in the hands of conservationists to block such activities.

A virulent misinformation campaign was launched against the Unesco proposal in which a few corrupt forest officials and local outfits which are essentially fronts for the timber lobby were involved.

Mineral exploitation

It is common knowledge that huge mineral resources are lying under the Western Ghats. Ill-planned mineral exploitation in Kudremukh, Kemmanagundi and Hogarekangiri were stopped by the courts to

protect the ecologically fragile Western Ghats. Even though the prospect of mining is fast receding, KIOCL continues to pursue its efforts to restart mining and it would be hardly surprising if they are not frantically lobbying against the Unesco proposal. Several mini-hydel project promoters too would only be eager to see the rejection of the proposal.

A thorough scientific evaluation has been conducted by the Wildlife Institute of India and only some specific sites of great biological significance have been proposed for inclusion. These include the Talacauvery cluster of 707 sq km comprising the existing Pushpagiri, Bramhagiri and Talacauvery sanctuaries, Padinalknad and Kerti reserved forests in Kodagu. The second cluster of 881 sq km is in the Kudremukh region and includes the Someshwara sanctuary, Kudremukh national park and Agumbe, Balahalli and Someshwara reserved forests. Thus, what is proposed is only 1,588 sq km of already notified protected areas and reserved forests which is less than 1 per cent of the State's land area.

These facts demonstrate how the de-

velopment argument is bereft of logic and tellingly highlight how vested interests are at play to scuttle the proposal by cleverly projecting impediments to development. Is it not in larger public interest to protect these biodiversity rich areas from development where several key rivers of the State including the Cauvery, Bhadra, Tungga and Netravati originate?

Can a government that has vowed to protect farmers' interests, abdicate its responsibility to protect the origin and catchments of these major rivers by ignoring these basic facts and succumbing to the pressures exerted by a few of their leaders who are enmeshed in legal battles before courts?

Allegations have also been made that 'pseudo environmentalists' will get huge foreign funding from Unesco.

This is completely untrue. The Unesco World Heritage Convention provides international assistance only to the Government of India to protect heritage sites. No NGO or individual is eligible for any funding.

An orchestrated attempt has also been made to spread falsehood that the Unesco

proposal will lead to displacement of people. There is no plan to forcibly snatch the existing legal rights of any person. The wrong perception that Unesco will even enact laws that will affect bona fide activities of local people is far from truth and again maliciously spread to block the proposal.

All these are irrefutable facts that are in public domain. It is therefore amply clear that certain forces are attempting to mislead the government and the state on this important issue. Even Gujarat under Narendra Modi's much acclaimed development model has proposed to nominate a 4,954 sq km area in the Little Rann of Kutch. It is fervently hoped that chief minister B S Yeddyurappa rises above petty political considerations of placating some leaders and takes a responsible and visionary decision to protect the identified areas in the Western Ghats. For, the Unesco heritage tag can only be seen as an honour to the State and not a curse as is being projected.

(The writer is a trustee of Wildlife First and has served on the National Board for Wildlife)