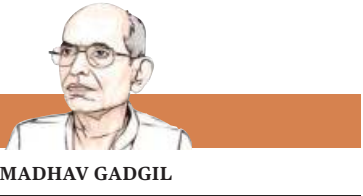


A bottom-up approach to conservation

The Western Ghats panel's suggestions stressed the need to strengthen grass-roots governance



MADHAV GADGIL

In 2018, many people thought that the floods and landslides in Kerala that caused huge financial losses and manifold human tragedies marked a once-in-a-century calamity, and that normalcy will return soon and we can merrily return to business as usual. Further, the probability of two such back-to-back events was only 1 in 10,000. Hence, in 2019, a repeat of the shocking train of intense floods, landslides, financial losses and manifold human tragedies has not just left the same set of people stunned but also made them realise that it is unwise to continue business as usual, and that we must think afresh of the options before us.

What are these alternatives? One set of possibilities is provided by the recommendations of the Western Ghats Ecology Expert Panel (WGEEP) which I had the privilege of chairing. Would those measures have averted the disasters of 2018 and 2019? Certainly, they wouldn't have pre-empted the intense rainfall, but they would have definitely reduced the scale of devastation caused by the downpours.

All our recommendations were grounded in a careful examination of facts. Furthermore, the policy prescriptions fell firmly within the framework of our constitutional duties and laws. We did not ask for any new law. All we suggested was that the existing laws relating to environmental protection and devolution of powers, right down to the gram sabha and ward sabha level, be followed.

A leader in devotion

Kerala leads the country in democratic devotion. The Kerala High Court had ruled in favour of Plachimada Panchayat that cancelled Coca-Cola's licence because the company polluted and depleted groundwater reserves, drying up wells and adversely impacting agriculture and livelihoods. While doing so, the panchayat invoked its constitutional rights, arguing that it had the duty to protect the well-being of its citizens and had the right to cancel – or re-



"A repeat of last year's extreme weather events in the Western Ghats region has made the people rethink their approach to conservation." Landslides in Kerala's Wayanad district caused havoc earlier this month. ■ REUTERS

fuse permission for – anything that affected its citizens adversely. The company's counterargument was that the panchayat was subordinate to the State government, which had granted it the licence. The Kerala High Court rejected this contention, affirming that grass-roots institutions have the authority to decide on the course of development in their own locality. Furthermore, the Kerala legislature unanimously passed a law asking Coca-Cola to pay Plachimada Panchayat due compensation for losses inflicted on them.

Kerala had also been at the forefront of the country's Literacy Mission of the late 1980s; it pioneered Panchayat Level Resource Mapping involving neo-literates and followed it up with the People's Planning campaign that attempted to involve every panchayat in the preparation of a Panchayat Development Report.

The WGEEP called for a model of conservation and development compatible with each other; we sought a replacement of the prevailing 'Develop Recklessly, Conserve Thoughtlessly' pattern with one of 'Develop Sustainably, Conserve Thoughtfully.' This fine-tuning of development practices to the local context would have required the full involvement of local communities. It would have therefore been entirely inappropriate to depend exclusively on government agencies for deciding on and managing Ecologically Sensitive Zones, and our panel certainly had no intention of imposing any development or conservation priorities

on the people.

So, why were our recommendations not implemented? For one, they were dubbed "impractical". What then is "practical"? Is violation of constitutional provisions that pertain to environmental protection and sabotaging of democratic processes practical? May be so, but it is certainly not desirable. Acting on the WGEEP report would have implied using our recommendations regarding ecological sensitivity as the starting point for a bottom-up democratic process for deciding on how we should safeguard this global biodiversity hotspot and water tower of peninsular India.

Preserving the 'sensitive zones'

The WGEEP's mandate asked it "to demarcate areas within the Western Ghats Region which need to be notified as ecologically sensitive and to recommend for notification of such areas as ecologically sensitive zones under the Environment (Protection) Act, 1986." In line with the National Forest Policy, we decided to assign 60% of the total area of Western Ghats in Kerala, including the region housing wildlife sanctuaries and national parks, as a zone of highest ecological sensitivity, 'ESZ1'.

We proposed 'elevation' and 'slope' as two indicators of sensitivity. In Kerala, rainfall increases rapidly with elevation, and high rainfall and steep slopes render localities vulnerable to landslides. Hence, areas prone to landslides would come under ESZ1.

The extent and quality of natural vegetation was the third indicator for classifying an area as ESZ1. Landslides are under check in areas with intact natural vegetation because the roots bind the soil. Any disturbance to such vegetation would render any locality that has steep slopes and experiences high rainfall susceptible to landslides. Such disturbances may include quarrying or mining, replacement of natural vegetation by new plantations, levelling of the land using heavy machinery, and construction of houses and roads. Therefore, we recommended that such activities be avoided in ESZ1 areas. Had our recommendations been accepted, the extent and intensity of landslides being encountered today would have been much lower. Implementation of our overall recommendations would have also had a plethora of other desirable results, both for nature and for people.

So, it would surely be wise to apply the panel's recommendations now. This would imply building on India's greatest strength, its deep-rooted democracy. Democracy is not merely voting once in five years; it is the active involvement of us citizens in governing the country at all levels, most importantly at the local level. We must insist that the Kerala High Court ruling that local bodies have the authority to decide on the course of development in their own localities be made genuinely operational across the country.

We must take full advantage of powers and responsibilities conferred on citizens under provisions such as the 73rd and 74th Amendments to the Constitution, and the Biological Diversity Act, 2002. We should assert that conservation prescriptions should not be merely regulatory, but include positive incentives such as conservation service charges. We must hand over economic activities like quarrying to agencies like the Kudumbashree groups that are accountable to local communities. We, the sovereign people, are the real rulers of India and must engage ourselves more actively in the governance of the country and lead it on to a path of people-friendly and nature-friendly development.

Madhav Gadgil was the Chairman of the Western Ghats Ecology Expert Panel. Email: madhav.gadgil@gmail.com

FROM THE READERS' EDITOR

Fairness in the time of polarisation

While fact-checking, the desk applies the same standard of nonpartisanship for all articles, irrespective of the contributor



A.S. PANNEERSELVAM

On August 17, Vice President M. Venkaiah Naidu wrote a lead article in this newspaper to welcome the abrogation of Kashmir's special status. His reference to B.R. Ambedkar's view on special status drew the ire of some academics and social activists. They asked whether *The Hindu* has a dual policy in handling contributions to the editorial pages: rigorous editorial processes for academic contributors and slack ones for contributors holding high constitutional positions.

The quote and the source

Before examining the critiques, let's recollect what Mr. Naidu said. He wrote: "While considering the proposal to incorporate it in the Constitution, Prime Minister Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru advised Sheikh Abdullah to convince B.R. Ambedkar, who apparently was not in favour of it. In the book, *Dr. B.R. Ambedkar Framing of Indian Constitution*, by Dr. S.N. Busi, Dr. Ambedkar was cited as saying: 'Mr. Abdullah, you want that India should defend Kashmir. You wish India should protect your borders, she should build roads in your area, she should supply you food grains, and Kashmir should get equal status as India, but you don't want India and any citizen of India to have any rights in Kashmir and Government of India should have only limited powers. To give consent to this proposal would be a treacherous thing against the interests of India, and I, as the Law Minister of India, will never do. I cannot betray the interests of my country'".

The complaint we received cited two web pages to contest the views attributed to Dr. Ambedkar: <http://velivada.com/2019/08/05/what-ambedkar-had-really-said-about-kashmir-issue/> and <https://www.youthkiawaaz.com/2019/05/article-370-and-dr-ambedkar-a-factcheck/>. The basic thrust of the criticism was that Dr. Ambedkar's writings and speeches on Pakistan, the Partition of India, and debates in the Constituent Assembly contained no authenticated writing on Article 370. These researchers asserted that the earliest "refusal to draft" statement was found in an editorial in *Tarun Bharat*, a

mouthpiece of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, dated 1991, citing the verbal account of former Jana Sangh president Balraj Madhok. Pratik Tembhurne, in his *Youth Ki Awaaz* essay, contended that the wrongly attributed quote of Ambedkar's has been used by Subramanian Swamy, Sushil Pandit, and by different writers in various columns in publications such as "*India Today*, *Daily Pioneer*, *The Hindu*, *Employment News*, *Indian Defence Review*, *Law Corner*, and *DailyO*".

In this context, let us examine how the desk handled the Vice President's article. It noticed that the quote was mentioned in page 472 of Volume 4 of Dr. Busi's six-volume work. Dr. Busi's work was an attempt to look at how each Article of the Constitution was drafted, debated and voted in the Constituent Assembly. Mr. Naidu neither claimed first hand-knowledge nor did he resort to some anonymous source to put forth an idea. His citation came from a multi-volume book dedicated to the framing of the Indian Constitution and not from an ideological publication such as *Tarun Bharat* or *Organiser*.

Principles followed

The desk at *The Hindu* follows some of the key principles enunciated by the International Fact-Checking Network at Poynter: "A commitment to nonpartisanship and fairness, transparency of sources, and to open and honest corrections." For the first principle, the desk uses the same standard to check every bit of information. It does not discriminate between academics and high constitutional authorities. The newspaper articulates its viewpoint in its editorials and refrains from taking positions on the articles it processes. The second principle sometimes gets lost in today's polarised political environment. The newspaper empowers its readers by consciously providing all the sources so that readers can verify the facts if they wish to do so. Of course, care is taken not to compromise personal security. The core editorial value of the newspaper states that the publications from The Hindu Group must endeavour to provide "a fair and balanced coverage of competing interests, and to offer the readers diverse, reasonable viewpoints, subject to its editorial judgment."

A newspaper committed to plurality cannot reject an argument that is based on a quote from an exhaustive work on how the Indian Constitution was framed.

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The importance of good data

In a democracy, it is important for government agencies to disseminate data in a timely manner

VARUN B. KRISHNAN

After a delayed start, the Southwest Monsoon recently wreaked havoc in Kerala, Maharashtra, Karnataka and other parts of India. In such a situation, a data journalist would have ideally looked for weekly comparisons of rainfall data across the affected States to determine when the rains began to intensify; historical data to determine how the rainfall compared to the five- or 10-year average; and whether there was a 'tipping point' in the amount of rainfall.

However, getting such data is difficult in India as the India Meteorological Department (IMD) has only two options on its website: the current week's rainfall numbers and the cumulative rainfall numbers of the season. To be fair, IMD also provides district-wise and State-wise data, but for the same two options. And while five-year district-wise data are available, each district has to be selected separately to access the data, a cumbersome and time-consuming process.

Outdated data

It is not just the lack of data which is a problem but also the fact that a lot of it is outdated. The Central government's initiative to have an open data portal is appreciable, but the datasets are rarely updated. Monthly data on rainfall are available for each subdivision, starting from 1902, but they stop with 2017. Similarly, the Census 2011 data on Indian migration, released last month, was well organised and provided insights into why people migrate, which States they come from and go to, etc. However, nine years have passed since the data was collected. Cities have undergone massive changes since then causing changes in patterns of migration too.

Furthermore, there are several datasets which are redundant. For instance, while there are data available from 1902 to 2017 for rainfall, the datasets for 1902-2015 and 1902-2016 are unnecessary.

Of course, collating the details of 1.21 billion people based on different parameters is a monumental task. Extremely granular data may not be required to give a snapshot of how things stand. But what is required is timely dissemination of good-quality

data, whether on employment (delayed this year) or on crimes (the National Crime Research Bureau is yet to release data from 2017).

Problem of 'dashboardisation'

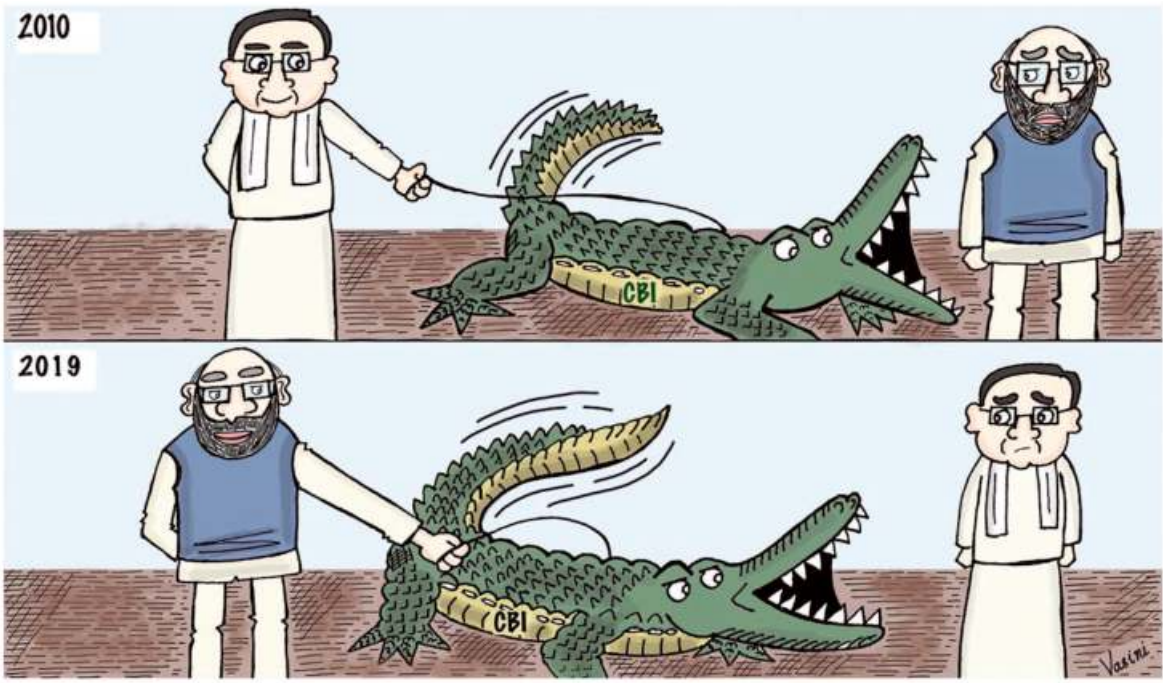
Instead of releasing data in a more timely manner, the government seems more keen on 'dashboardisation'. There is a perceptible shift from the timely release of structured data to publishing data dashboards with cumulative statistics. There are now dashboards for everything – from the number of BHIM transactions to the number of 'Smart City' projects taken up. The problem with this is that we never get the full picture. For instance, during Question Hour in Parliament, if questions are asked on start-ups, statistics are provided only about the start-ups under the Centre's Startup India Scheme. Similarly, questions on employment generated by MSMEs are answered only with data on employment generated under the Prime Minister's Employment Generation Programme.

Why is the full picture so important? Let's take the case of a recent report that said that in an Uttarakhand district called Uttarkashi, not a single girl child was born in 133 villages in three months. A closer look revealed that while concerns about foeticide and infanticide were valid, another vital piece of data in this story would have assuaged concerns – the fact that in another 129 villages in the same region, no male child was born in the same period.

Merely putting out some numbers on a dashboard do not help data journalists, researchers and the public study data over time and identify trends. It is important to know not only the numbers but also how these numbers were arrived at. This is not the case right now.

Data are crucial, particularly for journalists, so that they can report accurately on various issues, especially at a time when fake news is rampant. It is a fundamental right for the public in a democracy to be informed. The government can earn the trust of the public only when it is transparent about numbers and timely in their dissemination.

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DATA POINT

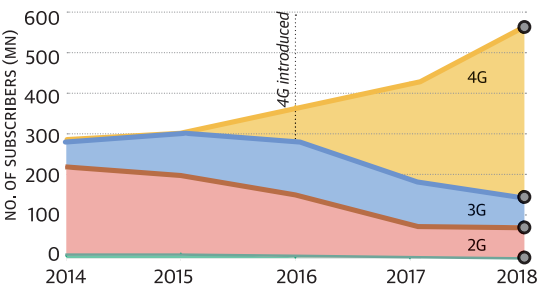
Hooked to high speed wireless

The number of wireless data subscribers doubled between 2014 and 2018, largely due to the cheaper prices of data. On average, wireless subscribers in 2018 used 7.6 GB of data per month, which was 29 times higher than in 2014.

By Varun B. Krishnan

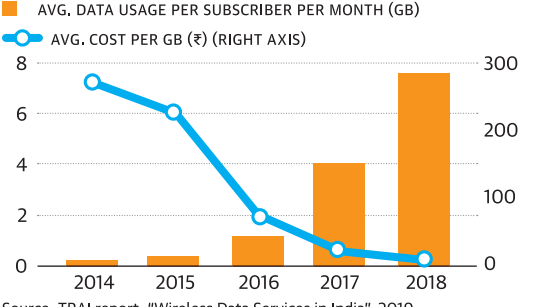
Forging ahead

The number of 3G users peaked in 2016. In 2018, 4G was most widely used, while 2G and 3G users accounted for 12% each of the total wireless subscriber base



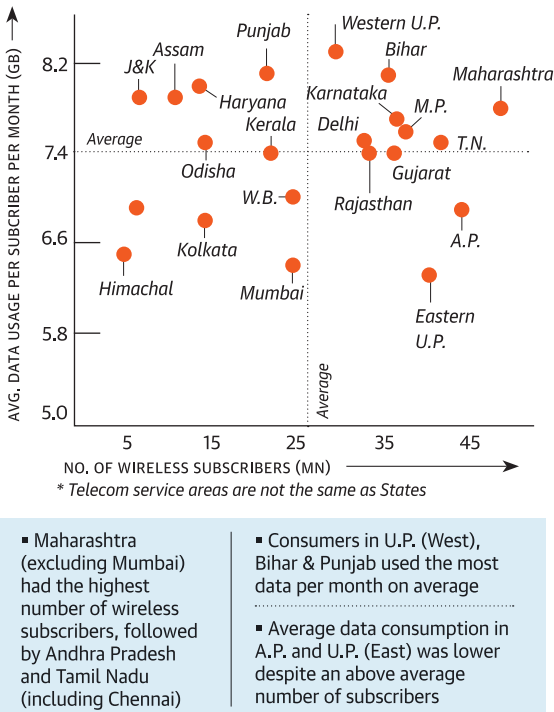
Cheap data

The average cost of data fell dramatically in 2016, with Reliance Jio being a huge disruptor. Correspondingly, there was a steep climb in the total number of data users



Going giga

Across service areas*, Indian wireless data subscribers used at least 6 GB of data a month in 2018. The average consumption of data was 7.6 GB a month



The Hindu

FROM THE ARCHIVES

FIFTY YEARS AGO AUGUST 26, 1969

Through the 'silk route'

Crossing through Indian territory in the Gilgit area illegally occupied by Pakistan, the first Chinese caravan entered Pakistan through the Mintaka Pass yesterday [August 24]. Radio Pakistan this morning reported the arrival of the Chinese caravan comprising 50 camels carrying merchandise for barter trade. The Radio did not say what the Chinese caravan brought in, but it mentioned that Pakistan's goods for the barter covered a wide range from medicinal herbs to surgical goods. The 456-mile caravan route which passes through the Mintaka pass crosses Indian territory now under illegal occupation of Pakistan. Pakistan authorities are laying out a red-carpet welcome to the Chinese traders who come through the "silk route", from Sinkiang. Radio Pakistan said that the Chinese traders would be flown by helicopter to Gilgit, on Wednesday. A civic welcome awaits them there. The Pakistan Resident at Gilgit and several other officials had arrived at the border well in time to receive the caravan yesterday. The Chinese Cultural Attache in Rawalpindi was also present when the caravan arrived, according to Radio Pakistan. The exchange of goods between China and Pakistan would take two days.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO AUGUST 26, 1919.

Gokhale Memorial.

Poona, August 25. - His Excellency Sir George Lloyd this evening at the request of the President and Councillors of the Poona City Municipality unveiled the portrait of the late Mr. G.K. Gokhale, C.I.E. There was a large gathering present including Lady Lloyd, members of the Executive Council of the Government, and many Indian gentlemen. Mr. L.J. Apte, President of the Municipality, in requesting His Excellency to unveil the portrait expressed regret that Mr. Gokhale had not lived to see the dawn of a wider political life now before India.

His Excellency before unveiling the portrait referred to Mr. G.K. Gokhale's life's work and career which he remarked had been dramatic from start. At the age of 21, he was professor of the Fergusson College, a few years later, the editor of a not unimportant journal, sometime later legislator in the Bombay Council at 40 and envoy of the Imperial Government. At the same time he was forming societies and institutions which were vital in character and would carry on his work after he had gone.