The March of a Mission

The single most important thing about keeping the past close to our hearts and etched in our mind, is that it motivates, inspires and guides our way forward. The biggest of changes have been led by the simplest of people who hold in them a strong realization of how wrong things are and a deep conviction to do whatever it takes to reverse this order. At times, their efforts, their persistence and their courage get the desired outcome and at times get lost in the pages of untold history. But, what matters and what needs to be remembered is that each of these efforts contribute in the own significant way towards bringing about change, reversing an unjust order and voicing the concerns of the weak, the marginalized and the victimized. Every generation has its heroes, its rebels and its fighters who try to carry on the legacy of protesting against the unfair, unjust practices of the day and pave way for a better tomorrow. What is prudent for these agents of the change is to take a look back and learn from the unsung heroes of the past and try to draw from their experiences, knowledge and courage.

The Save the Western Ghats march of 1987/88 was one such endeavor on the part of a motley group of people who came from all walks of life but converged together as they felt the need to protest. They were united by the goal of speaking out against the rabid damage being caused to the pristine Western Ghats. They questioned the Development paradigm which affected the forests, natural water streams and left the people of the region further impoverished and removed from their roots. They marched across the length of the Western Ghats to tell the people that they need to wake up and understand the peril that this natural heritage is facing and take charge of it.

With a month to go the Save the Western Ghats Conclave 2012, it is certainly important to look back at some of the people who participated in the Save the Western Ghats March and learn from their conviction, courage and experience.

The Core Marchers were selected from a large number of applicants who wanted to join the cause after hearing about it from newspapers and other well wishers. There were people from all age groups who marched to spread awareness. The youngest core marcher was Gautam, a 6 year old boy from Palaghat in Kerala. His parents worked with rejuvenating old springs and his early association with the environment drew him to this march. The oldest marcher was Shri P.V Phadke from Maharashtra who was 75 during the march. But this did not deter him from marching nearly 30 kms every single day. Teachers, Students, Journalists, Government officials, Trekkers, Authors, Activists, Scientists, Social Workers and

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www.savethewesternghats.org
people from various other walks of life came together and marched for 100 days. There were various concerns identified by the marchers during the March. This March was a great opportunity for the people to not only see the condition of the Western Ghats first-hand but also to form an informed opinion by talking to the people inhabiting those areas and understand their perspectives on the problems and the solutions being offered. One of the key problems identified by many of the marchers was of the destruction of Tropical Forests where no trees could be spotted by the Marchers for large distances. The reasons for such mass deforestation were many ranging from Industrial plantations, to Eucalyptus plantations to construction of Dams. In some parts of Karnataka, affected people had been raising their organized vice and protesting through Satyagrahas and filing writs in the Supreme Court.

Many other marchers drew attention to the apathy of the Forest Department officials and the lack of amenities for the inhabitants of this region. They shared the stories about lack of proper health, education and sanitation facilities in the region. The marchers also witnessed the rise in interest of the tribals’ of the area to plant trees in their region. But, they were routinely dissuaded by the forest officials from doing so. Earlier these very tribal members were paid by the Forest officials to fell trees but once they refused to do so, there was no more work available for them.

The Marchers of 1987/88 had also noted that their efforts were finding resonance with many people across the Western Ghats. While the response was lukewarm in the larger cities and towns, there was a massive turnout of support and strength from the rural areas. Men, Women and Children of all age groups congregated at such meetings and expressed their solidarity with the cause and pledged support towards conserving the Western Ghats. Many of the marchers by the end of the March got together to work with the people they had met during this long and eventful journey and translate their vision into reality. In this manner, the march transcended the 100 days of activism and was transformed into a Social Movement which is continuing till date.

It has been 25 years since the March, and the vision of the marchers and the believers of the mission are still being carried forward by new torch-bearers. Old problems persist, new problems are emerging and the magnitude and impact of both issues and agitations have changed with time. But, the goal of conserving the Western Ghats and preserving this Heritage site is still driving thousands of people. And each one, in their own big and small way is trying to keep the dream alive. The dream of Saving the Western Ghats.

Interact with the marchers of 1987/88 at our special session ‘Down Memory Lane’ on 30th November at the SWG Meet 2012 at Mahabaleshwar.
UNESCO World Heritage Site Status: The Road Ahead

After a long and sustained period of campaign by the Indian Government and some conservationists, India’s prized nomination got the requisite amount of support and votes and was declared as a World Heritage Site. The Western Ghats of India got this coveted status on July 1 which will go a long way in putting it on the global map. A total of 39 sites along the Western Ghats were accorded this status which include mountain ranges, national parks and wildlife sanctuaries. None of the 39 sites were in Gujarat and Goa. The Western Ghats is one of the 8 ‘hottest hotspots’ of Biological Diversity and has a high level of endemism. It is home to at least 325 threatened bird, reptile, amphibian and fish species. The UNESCO site describes Western Ghats as, older to the Himalayas and says that it represents geomorphic features of immense importance with unique bio-physical and ecological processes.

While this declaration was met with a lot of enthusiasm by the Civil Society and Environmentalists, many government observations called it an anti-development measure. In an ironical yet anticipated move, the Karnataka Government has sanctioned 4 new Hydel projects in the Sakaleshpur region of Western Ghats and has allotted 14 mini-hydel projects in the region. Therefore, the question remains whether this new status and international posturing might translate into better conservation on the field.

The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) while welcoming this addition exercises a word of caution. The IUCN Director, Tim Bradman said that, “We welcome these sites to the World Heritage List, but note the conservation challenges that they face will need additional monitoring by the World Heritage Committee to ensure that these sites meet the requirements that accompany this listing as flagships for Global Conservation.”

UNESCO has pushed for a key recommendation of the WGEE Panel and has asked the government to ensure Community participation in the local ecology. It has clearly stated that no industrial development should commence without the consent of the locals. While the Government asserts that they have necessary regulations in place to abide by the UNESCO conditions, only time will tell whether this tag can lead to concrete interventions on the field and preserve this Biodiversity Hotspot.

The session on the importance of the UNESCO World Heritage Site Status will be debated on 30th November at a parallel session of the SWG Meet 2012.
Civil Society Activism: The Bhavani Water Diversion Intervention

Though a significant amount of time has passed since this issue grabbed eyeballs, it is important to bring it back to notice when we are trying to rejuvenate the spirit of Civil Society Activism and Interventions through the SWG Meet 2012. The Bhavani water Dispute started in the year 1997 when the Kerala Government proposed to divert water from the Bhavani to the Manthampotty stream joining Nellipuzha River, tributary of Bharathapuzha River. This project was envisaged to irrigate 2000 hectares of irrigated land and provide drinking water to 20,000 people. But out of the 180 tribal hamlets of the Attapady Valley, nearly 44 hamlets (7200 tribal people) depended entirely on the water from Bhavani. This rugged terrain did not support piped water supply, large scale ground water development projects and even open water sources depended on the river for recharge. Moreover, the vision of the water diversion swept many anomalies and inaccuracies under the carpet. The Western Slopes which the project aimed at irrigated already were irrigated by 4 other projects and received high rainfall from South-West and North-West Monsoons. The Kerala Government obtained sanction from the Central Government by mentioning that the water is being diverted from a ‘stream’ and not mentioning the Bhavani River. The impact of the construction and the actual estimation of the flow of water to be diverted was also contrived to attain approval for the project.

Tamil Nadu Green Movement took up this issue, collected all evidence and presented the issue to the Prime Minister, MoEF & Chief Ministers. Tamil Nadu Green Movement led the people agitation in Tamil Nadu and was instrumental in forming Bhavani River Protection Committee, which had representations from all political parties, welfare associations, and farmers. A resolution was passed at the meeting held on 12/01/2003 to stop the dam construction work at Mukkali. Finally all the efforts of TNGM paid off and the diversion was stopped on April 24, 2003. (Follow this link to know more about the issue)