

Environmental activism in the Nilgiris: too early to rejoice?

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The past two decades have seen an increase in environmental activism in the Nilgiris, as well as other parts of Tamil Nadu and Kerala. It has evolved from protests, dharnas and the effective harnessing of science, technology and social media to mobilise people.

Activists have also taken judicial recourse to protect the environment, said Siddhartha Krishnan, an environmental sociologist at Ashoka Trust for Research in Ecology and Environment (ATREE).

On June 9, the Madras High Court had set the benchmark for dealing with the alleged encroachment of forest land in the Nilgiris. Chief Justice Sanjib Banerjee and Justice Senthilkumar Ramamoorthy of the Madras High Court said that “[not even an inch of forest land](#) must be encroached upon”.

The petitioner, S. Prabhakaran had approached the court and drew attention to the encroachment of forest land by a private resort that is under construction near Naduvattom town. In his petition, Prabhakaran said that this encroachment has led to the destruction of the habitat, damage to the ecosystem, deforestation and disruption in the natural flow of water. He also mentioned that the resort had laid pipelines to extract water from the forest and urged the court to order a survey at the location to demarcate the forest land. The Madras High Court instructed the district collector and the forest department to inspect the spot and retrieve the encroached land.

The court directed that copies of the petition are to be forwarded to the Advocate-General of the State, to emphasise the seriousness of the matter. The Court also instructed the district collector and the forest department officials to visit the spot and ensure that every bit of forest land is returned to its pristine state.

In another case in May this year, a group of environmentalists started an online petition to highlight this issue. The petition stated that shola forests, which have taken over 200 years to grow, were being destroyed overnight. The campaign gathered strength as many concerned citizens also signed up. There were 12,000 signatories on that petition.

Godwin Vasanth Bosco, a restoration ecologist and Founder of Upstream Ecology, said that the Nilgiri plateau is home to endangered and unique shola-grassland ecology. This type of vegetation is home to the largest number of endemic species in southern India and is also responsible for providing water to millions of people downstream. He pointed out that in the last few decades there has been a rampant violation of building laws in the district. Holiday homes and resorts, concretised roads and paved gated communities have mushroomed all over the district. At the same time, the stringent laws have made construction difficult for small landowners, farmers and indigenous people. Bosco said that increasingly Nilgiris has been facing extreme weather conditions; severe flooding and landslides in consecutive years because of the blatant disregard for the environment.

The pollution in the Coonoor river

In 2019, media attention was on a Coonoor-based NGO, Clean Coonoor, which undertook the cleaning the Coonoor river of garbage, building debris and automotive parts as well as raw sewage from a large number of households in the town.

In retrospect, their efforts were in vain. With the absence of a disposal option, raw sewage continues to be flushed into the river. In addition, effluents from the Cordite factory in Aruvankadu are piped into a small stream which eventually joins the Coonoor river. The World Wildlife Fund (WWF) has, since 2015, flagged the pollution in the upper reaches of the Bhavani and Moyar basins; one of the main sources of the pollution was the Coonoor river.



Preparations at the Coonoor Municipal Waste Management Centre for the Butterfly Park. Photo by P.J. Vasanthan.

According to the [WWF](#) report, “Water Quality Assessment in the upper reaches of the Bhavani and Moyar in The Nilgiris 2018”, samples from streams and rivers in the Nilgiris were tested at the South India Textile Research Association from February 2015 to 2018.

Sanket Bhale, Team Leader, Western Ghats-Nilgiris Landscape, WWF, said that data which was compiled over three years from February 2015 to 2018, noted that the level of pollution in the Coonoor river remained the same. Coonoor town discharges five MLD (million litres per day) of untreated sewage into the Coonoor river which eventually joins the Bhavani river, via Kallar. The Coliform bacteria in the water far exceeds the Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB) norms.

The WWF report said that the Ordnance Factory in Aruvankadu, which manufactures nitro-cellulose and nitroglycerin-based propellant, discharges its process effluents into a small stream. For three consecutive years, the report stated the same amount of pollutants in the water. However, Bhale said that the samples tested in 2019 showed that there was a slight reduction in pollution.

But all is not lost. In the middle of the first wave of the pandemic in July 2020, the National Green Tribunal (NGT) came to the rescue of the residents of Coonoor and took *suo moto* cognisance of the issue after a report appeared in Vikatan e-magazine, captioned “Coonoor Misery: Increasing waste

of river water; Elephants looking for good water.” In an order on July 17, 2020, the NGT instructed that a joint committee headed by the District Collector be formed.

An inspection was done in September 2020 and samples were collected. It was found that the Ordnance factory discharges 1,000 KLD (kilolitres per day) of effluents into the stream which eventually joins the Coonoor River five kilometres downstream.

According to the [report](#) by the Joint Committee appointed by the NGT, it was found that the effluents do meet prescribed norms except in the case of Total Dissolved Solids which exceed the limits at certain times. The good news is that the factory has submitted a proposal to the Ordnance Factories Board, Ministry of Defence to install a zero liquid discharge system, the approval of which is reportedly pending.

The joint committee also reported that the Coonoor Municipality has taken steps to keep the Coonoor River clean by erecting a chain-link fence to discourage the dumping of waste into the river.

Proposals are in the pipeline for a sewage treatment plant further downstream, the report said.

The NGT said that a survey must be taken of households in Coonoor Municipal limits which are not connected to a septic tank or soak pit. Those households which do not have any space should be provided with a common public place for a soak pit or septic tank. This would stop the flushing of raw sewage into the river.

Closure of Sterling Biotech

The case of Sterling Biotech Ltd, a pharmaceutical company, which was discharging effluents through sewage pipes into the Pykara Dam was served [closure notice](#) by the Tamil Nadu Pollution Control Board in June 2018 after failing to meet the deadline to set up the zero discharge effluent treatment facility.

N. Mohan Raj, a resident of Ooty, wildlife enthusiast and a former honorary wildlife warden for the Mudumalai Tiger Reserve said he used satellite imaging data to monitor the quality of water in Ooty's water bodies.



The ground is being prepared to plant indigenous plants. Photo by P.J Vasanthan.

Mohan Raj said that every five days he would download images of Ooty's water bodies and he found that the effluents from the Sterling Biotech which were piped into the Sandynallah lake move to Pykara Dam.

He said that it was possible to gauge the percentage of algae formed by the pollution and that it was seen right down to the Moyar River. This data was shared with the WWF report which helped to shut down the polluter, Mohan Raj said.

Another battle in the Nilgiris

Back in 2019, the Madras High Court had expressed concern that the domination of exotic invasive species such as wattle and eucalyptus in the Western Ghats was between 65 percent and 75 percent, threatening the native biological diversity. This resulted in there being no secondary or fresh growth of indigenous trees and plants, including grass which is fodder for elephants and gaur, forcing these wild animals to venture into villages and towns.

To increase awareness, Clean Coonoor set up a butterfly park with native grasses and shrubs on reclaimed land which is part of the Coonoor dump yard. This initiative is to introduce indigenous flora to the area which was earlier a landfill. The Coonoor dump yard which also has an ornamental garden at the site is run by Clean Coonoor with the assistance of the town's Municipality.

P.J. Vasanthan, Trustee, Clean Coonoor said that the planting is likely to be completed by October. At present, there are more than 200 plants, he said. The plants include the *Strobilanthes cuspidatus*, a variety of the *kurinji*, which blooms once in seven years. These plants will attract butterflies, he said.

There is, however, another battle looming. Environmental groups are against the Tamil Nadu government's proposal to construct a hydroelectric project in Kundah taluk. The Tamil Nadu Generation and Distribution Corporation Ltd (TANGEDCO) has proposed the Sillahalla Pumped Storage Hydroelectric Project to produce 1000 MW and is estimated to cost Rs. 42.05 billion (Rs 4,205 crores).

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