

One of the most powerful campaigns in coastal Karnataka was the *Save Western Ghats Jatha*ⁱ of 1985. There had been a huge outcry and many discussions on saving the Western Ghats prior to 1984, with a number of reports on the plight of the Western Ghats being published in the papers. A few of us like-minded people gathered to discuss this sorry situation. We felt that pointing out the disaster was easy but suggesting concrete actions to combat the situation would be more constructive though difficult.

We concluded that we needed to build awareness of the Western Ghats and empower the people of this region about what we could do to save its biodiversity. We decided that we would need to give people enough information on the importance of biodiversity and its significance for the ecology and survival of this rich ecosystem. More important was suggesting small actions everyone could take to combat the destruction of the region's biodiversity.

The plan

Our plan was simple - we would start a *jatha* in Sampaje and go through Mangaluru and move to Kundapur. We would meet people in groups, talk to them, convince them and move forward. A large part of it was meeting people in the streets in an unplanned, spontaneous way, wherever they were gathered. We had organised meetings with teachers, *gram panchayat* members, community-based organisations, leaders and opinion makers, youth *sanghas*, school children and self-help groups.

To reach people and convince them, we planned street plays, puppet shows and songs. There were very colourful and creative, eight-foot-high puppets, designed by Shashidhar Adapa.ⁱⁱ Shashi created a host of puppets so that we could build stories with different characters.

We planned and worked for a month to create various puppet shows. A very powerful show was a short one, which very clearly brought out why biodiversity is important, and how if destroyed,

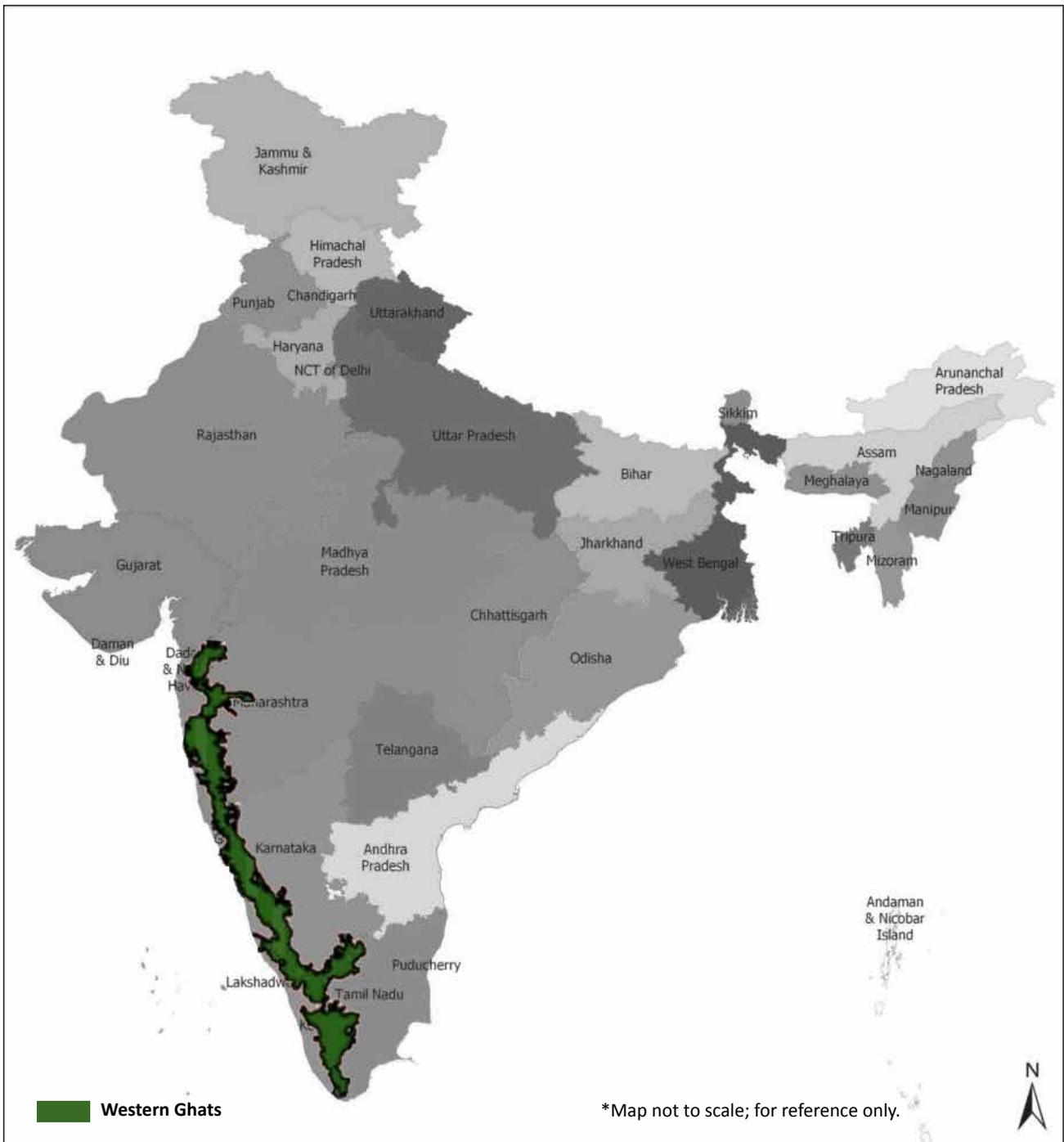
it could destroy the world. It concluded with the message: save biodiversity, save the forests and grow more trees. There was one show on the havoc plastic has created in this world, how it does not get degraded for thousands of years and stops the percolation of water into the soil and prevents replenishment of groundwater. The stress was on not using plastic in any form and when absolutely unavoidable, to recycle and reuse it. A lot of times, we had seen people burning plastic in the villages thinking that this was the best solution. The puppets conveyed the message very clearly and strongly that the burning of plastic pollutes the atmosphere and harms us.

We created another story around the water cycle, which told of how water-bearing clouds are formed by the temperature of seawater and how the clouds, thus formed, travel to the land and how they are stopped by the trees/forests so that we get water from the rain. We also spoke about the rains and how rainwater is collected and goes to the sea through streams and rivers. Here, we were emphasising the importance of forests in the water cycle.

Another story we built was around eclipses. Using balls and torchlight, we demonstrated how eclipses are formed. This was explained through a story and the characters were some children and their grandmother. Apart from these stories, we also spoke of water harvesting and optimal use of water, and other natural resources.

Some special memories

Our fifth show was in a small *panchayat* near Sampaje. The show was organised by the *panchayat* members who had gathered along with the village community. There was a brief introduction and a few leaders spoke, after which we performed our puppet show on the detrimental effects of plastic on the ecosystem and society. The puppet show gave a vivid account of what happens when there is a lot of plastic on the ground; when there is no degradation, it does not allow water to sink in; the metabolic action of the soil stops, and nothing grows in the otherwise fertile land.



The Western Ghats is the mountain range along the west coast of the Indian peninsula from Tamil Nadu to Maharashtra through Kerala, Karnataka and Goa. Well-known for its natural beauty, this region is among the top eight biodiversity hotspots in the world and is home to over 300 globally threatened flora, fauna, bird, amphibian, reptile and fish species.

The land becomes completely useless. Immediately after the show, there were a lot of questions, which we answered. The crowd decided to pick up plastic and not use it in future. Fifteen years later, I had a chance to visit this village and the *panchayat* even today has remained plastic-free. They handle plastic very efficiently. The people are aware of the plastic menace and do not use plastic and whatever plastic comes to the village is dumped in a place which is collected by the *panchayat* and disposed of systematically.

Another memory is of a small school, built unusually on barren land. Normally in the coastal belt, there is a lot of greenery around the school. In this school, there was no compound wall, and the compound was unkempt, with no trees and plants. We performed two shows, the first one was on the water cycle, and the second was on the importance of trees. The children were very smart. They asked a lot of questions. It was a small habitation known as '5-cent houses' – the land is given to poor landless people to build their houses and is usually far from the village centre and usually barren. Our point was that, even with these limited resources, could we do something to make the school green? The teachers also got involved and decided to make the school green. By now, the people from the habitation had also come together and they said they would make the school and the habitation green. This motivated the inhabitants to go anywhere they could to get plants. They got saplings for free from a nearby nursery and started planting them. Today, the school has a beautiful compound with big and strong trees around it. The beauty is that this act has not remained limited to the school, but the entire habitation is now lush green.

In a school near Bantwal, we performed our play on eclipses. This was the most challenging piece mainly because it required a background of light and shadow and we needed total darkness to perform this play. The school was quite big and semi-urban. The science teacher at the school helped us a lot to put up the play. By now, we had a lot of practice, and the play came out very well. The discussion was very intense with a lot of questions from the children. A person who went out during an eclipse was found dead, a lot of women had miscarried, and all sorts of things were said by the students. We spoke with evidence. We asked - had they themselves seen all these things that they had heard about? We reiterated the fact that we need to be more scientific and form our opinions based

on evidence and facts, believing only that which can be proved. We felt that the discussion was very fruitful.

These are a few examples of our performance in public and in schools. In many places, people took an oath to conserve the environment and in other places, they immediately got on to cleaning up the surroundings, planting saplings, and picking up plastic. The most important part, we believe, was the discussions – the questions people had, and that we could clear their doubts. The *jatha* lasted for 15 days. We, as a group, moved from one village to other speaking, discussing, and making decisions for change. Everywhere people welcomed us with open arms, gave us food to eat and a place to stay. We would stay in schools and *panchayat* offices. On a few occasions, we stayed in some people's houses too.

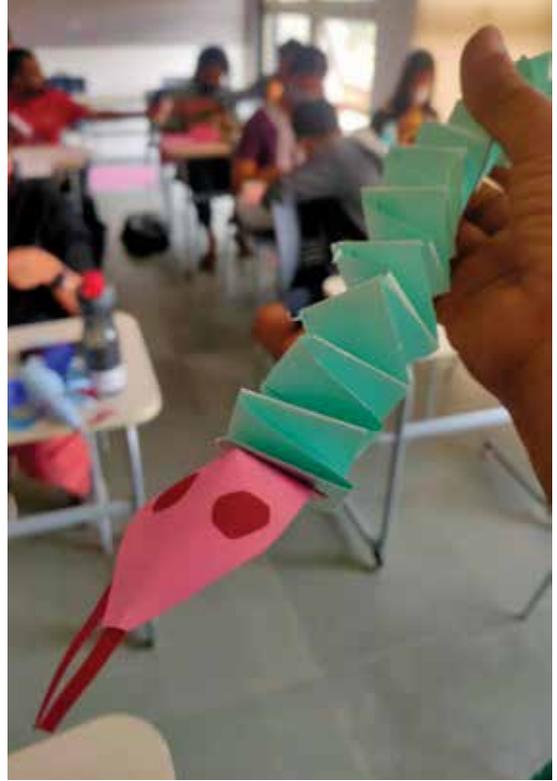
It was not always easy, in a few places, we had to face opposition. For instance, in one of the most famous temples of South Kanara, we were not allowed to perform the play. We fought with the management of the temple. They were adamant. In the end, we performed shows outside the temple premises. We collected all the people who had come to the temple, made a huge circle, and performed on the open ground. This was a very effective show, with a lot of discussion and oath-taking by the public. The most difficult places to perform were the marketplace and the streets because people kept moving about in these places, going about their business. We could not stop them, so we had to throw our voices so powerfully that they stopped what they are doing to look at us. Schools and villages were the most peaceful places to perform.

Executing the jatha

Planning and preparation were key to the success of this *jatha*. This planning took us more than six months. The route was chalked out in detail. People were contacted well in advance. A pre-*jatha* discussion was a great help in all the places. When we found that a particular route would not work, we changed it. There were many teams working simultaneously. The research team did a lot of the groundwork in collecting information and sharing it with the participants. The performance team created the plays and prepared the performances which included the play, puppetry and songs. Three separate teams practised and prepared the performance well in advance. The publicity team worked very hard to get media coverage and

publicity in that era of newspapers. But the most important part was mobilising a group of committed people – the core group was made up of highly committed people. The success of this initiative was due to the commitment of the people involved and the coordination between all various groups. The

impact of the *jatha* was immense. Even today we see the impact – plastic-free *panchayats*, people growing trees in public places, *yuvak sanghas* involved in environmental work. The impact of the *Save Western Ghats Jatha* has been very positive.





The use of puppets as a pedagogical tool. Umashanker Periodi's puppet workshop with student-teachers at the Azim Premji University, Bengaluru.

Endnotes

- i Jatha: an organized event in which a group of people walk through the streets together to celebrate something, spread a message or protest against something.
- ii Shashidhar Adapa is a renowned Indian production, set and puppet designer.



Umashanker Periodi is Head, Karnataka State, Azim Premji Foundation. He has over thirty years of experience in the development sector. He has contributed extensively to the National Literacy Campaign as well as towards adivasi education in BR Hills, Karnataka. He has been training grassroots-level field workers and primary school teachers in, what he calls 'Barefoot Research'. He is also a founder member of the Karnataka State Trainers' Collective. He may be contacted at periodi@azimpremjifoundation.org