

A hot and angry Earth

www-deccanherald-com.cdn.ampproject.org/c/s/www.deccanherald.com/amp/story/opinion%2Fa-hot-and-angry-earth-2680103



A short video from Athens is doing the rounds on youtube and social media. On a popular food street in the city, diners sit on either side of the pavement looking on in disbelief -- as the road turns into a river in a matter of seconds, sweeping away tables and chairs.

This summer was the hottest that Greece has ever witnessed, so hot that the forests filled with dry wood and grass started to catch fire, making firefighters battle to put out the hundreds of blazes that sprung up across the country. Then came the rains. In less than a day, Greece received as much rainfall as the country normally gets in a year.

Climate change is not just global warming. It is a new era of extremes. As Prof Madhav Gadgil writes in his recent autobiography *A Walk Up The Hill*, it is the time of a “Hot and Angry Earth”. It’s not just Greece that is facing the impact of the climate crisis this year. The floods in Hong Kong were the heaviest that the region has seen in the past 14 years -- so heavy that even the iconic stock market was forced to close for two days in a week, unheard of previously. In contrast, the monsoon’s bounty has been meagre this year, with the Indian Meteorological Department saying that August had the lowest rainfall seen in the past 122 years. Extreme floods followed by extreme drought are the new normal, the results of a hot and angry earth.

One of the most poignant chapters in Prof Gadgil’s autobiography is Chapter 18, where he describes his experiences chairing the Western Ghats Ecology Expert Panel. The hill chain of the Western Ghats, whose landscapes I mapped using satellite images for my PhD thesis with Prof Gadgil, is a jewel in India’s crown -- running across the western

coastline of India, a region cloaked with dense forests and teeming with irreplaceable biodiversity. These 160,000 sq km of undulating terrain harness the monsoon, bringing water to hundreds of millions of people living in south and south-central India.

The original title for Gadgil's book was *Western Ghats: A Love Story*. The Ghats are his first love, and his early experiences with trekking in these hills inspired a lifelong fascination, indeed an obsession, with the protection of this unique, irreplaceable landscape. In 2010, when Gadgil was invited to chair an expert panel to study the current environmental and ecological condition of the Western Ghats, and recommend steps for its protection, he accepted immediately, aware of the urgent need to save this landscape from the perils of thoughtless exploitation.

Also Read:G20 per capita CO2 emissions from coal rise 7% from 2015: Report

Working with a large and dedicated team of experts who visited the length and breadth of the Ghats, commissioned 40 papers, organised a number of brainstorming sessions, and spoke to community groups, civil society and elected officials across most Western Ghats states, the expert committee finalised their report in August 2011. Sadly, the report's recommendations attracted wide controversy, and its conclusions were never accepted or put into practice.

Several years later, in 2018 and then in 2021, Kerala faced widespread floods, leading to hundreds of deaths, with lakhs of people ending up in relief camps where they spent several weeks before being rehabilitated. Most of the areas worst-hit by the rains, those that experienced severe landslides and the collapse of entire villages and small towns, were in landscapes classified as eco-sensitive zones by the Gadgil report. In an interview with the press, Gadgil called the floods a "man-made calamity", stressing that widespread deforestation, mining, quarrying and other activities had been carried out on hill slopes, with little thought to the consequences for the landscape or its people.

The floods that Kerala witnessed in 2021, and which Greece faced earlier this week, are not aberrations, but a sign of things to come. Prof Gadgil's autobiography gives us a rare glimpse of India's ecology and environment as it once was -- and could be again, perhaps, if we gave our natural heritage the importance it deserved.