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**EDITORIAL ANALYSIS**

# The Dark Forest of Katlekan: Why the Western Ghats Still Matter

 **INDIAN EXPRESS**

28 August 2026 ·

**ENVIRONMENT****GEOGRAPHY****GS1****GS3**

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# The Dark Forest of Kotlekan: Why the Western Ghats Still Matter

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GS1

GS3



## INTERVIEW ANGLE

*"India reports rising forest cover while ecologists report falling forest quality. Both use the same satellite data. What is being counted, and what is being missed?"*

Source: [Original editorial](#)

The Indian Express

 Every fact web-verified against primary sources

## THE LIFT LINE

At noon in Kotlekan you need a torch to find a stream a few yards away. That darkness is not atmosphere. It is a structural property of intact rainforest, and it is the one thing plantation cover can never reproduce.

## WHY THIS EDITORIAL MATTERS FOR YOUR EXAM

The Western Ghats are among the most reliably examined topics in GS1 geography and GS3 environment, and this piece supplies the exact figures, the endemism argument and the **cover-versus-quality** distinction that most answers miss entirely. The Gadgil and Kasturirangan reports sit directly behind it.

**GS Paper 1:** Salient features of India's physical geography; distribution of key natural resources. **GS Paper 3:** Conservation, biodiversity, environmental degradation; environmental impact assessment.

## BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

**Kotlekan** is a tract of evergreen rainforest in **North Kanara (Uttara Kannada) district, Karnataka**, in the central Western Ghats. It is one of the last substantial patches of **primary, undisturbed** lowland-to-mid-elevation evergreen forest in the region.

The **Western Ghats** run about **1,600 kilometres** along the western edge of peninsular India, from the Tapi valley in the north to Kanyakumari in the south, across **six states**: Gujarat, Maharashtra, Goa, Karnataka, Kerala and Tamil Nadu.

| MEASURE                                  | FIGURE                                                        |
|------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------|
| Length                                   | About <b>1,600 km</b>                                         |
| Global standing                          | One of the world's <b>eight hottest biodiversity hotspots</b> |
| Share of India's flowering plant species | Nearly <b>half</b>                                            |
| Share of India's vertebrate fauna        | About <b>a third</b>                                          |
| Globally threatened species harboured    | Over <b>300</b>                                               |

Species named in the piece include the **Katlekan Marsh Nut** and the **Gund Day Gecko**, both narrow-range endemics, alongside **hornbills, mountain imperial pigeons and eagle owls** in the Katlekan canopy.

## THE ANALYSIS

### The distinction the piece is really making

The author, who wrote a doctoral dissertation on forest management and has seen forests across four continents, says the encounter with Katlekan revised his understanding of what a forest is. That is a strong admission, and it is the argument.

**A forest, in Indian official statistics, is a land parcel above a canopy-density threshold.** A rubber plantation qualifies. A eucalyptus block qualifies. A degraded scrub patch regenerating after clearance qualifies. **An intact primary rainforest also qualifies, and counts exactly the same.**

But these are not the same thing in any way that matters ecologically.

| PROPERTY                         | PRIMARY RAINFOREST                                        | PLANTATION OR REGENERATING WOODLOT        |
|----------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------|
| <b>Canopy structure</b>          | Multi-layered; closes light almost completely             | Single-layered, open floor                |
| <b>Species composition</b>       | High, with narrow-range endemics                          | Low, usually monoculture or a few species |
| <b>Soil and hydrology</b>        | Deep litter, high infiltration, sustained dry-season flow | Thin litter, higher runoff                |
| <b>Recovery time if cleared</b>  | <b>Centuries</b> , if at all                              | Years                                     |
| <b>Counted as "forest cover"</b> | <b>Yes</b>                                                | <b>Yes</b>                                |

The last row is the problem. It is entirely possible for India's reported forest cover to remain stable or rise while the country loses the forest that carries almost all the biodiversity, because a hectare of primary evergreen forest converted into a hectare of plantation is **statistically invisible**.

## Why endemism changes the moral arithmetic

The Ghats are not merely species-rich. They are **rich in narrow-range endemics**: species whose entire global distribution may be a few valleys or a single hill range.

This has a consequence that generic conservation language obscures. Elsewhere, clearing a patch of forest reduces a population. In the Western Ghats, clearing a specific valley can **extinguish a species globally**. The decision is taken at the level of a district clearance file, and its consequence is planetary and permanent.

That **asymmetry**, between the scale at which the decision is made and the scale at which it takes effect, is the strongest argument for treating the Ghats as a system requiring a level of protection above ordinary forest law.

## The hydrological argument, which is the one that persuades non-ecologists

The Ghats generate the rivers of peninsular India. The **Godavari, Krishna, Kaveri, Tungabhadra, Periyar and Bharathappuzha** all rise there. The range intercepts the **southwest monsoon**, producing the orographic rainfall that fills the reservoirs on which the peninsula's agriculture, drinking water and hydropower depend.

Intact forest **regulates the timing** of that water: it slows runoff, recharges groundwater and sustains dry-season base flow. Degraded **catchment** does not. The result is more flooding in the monsoon and less water in summer, from the same annual rainfall.

**This is why the Ghats are an economic asset and not only an ecological one**, and it is the argument most likely to land with a state government weighing a clearance.

## The unresolved policy history

The piece implies a policy failure without naming it, and the exam requires the specifics.

| REPORT                                                          | YEAR        | CORE RECOMMENDATION                                                                                                                                    | OUTCOME                               |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------|-------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| <b>Gadgil Committee</b><br>(Western Ghats Ecology Expert Panel) | <b>2011</b> | Treat <b>the entire Ghats</b> as an Ecologically Sensitive Area, in three graded zones (ESZ 1, 2, 3), with decentralised decisions through gram sabhas | Rejected by states as too restrictive |
| <b>Kasturirangan Committee</b> (High Level Working Group)       | <b>2013</b> | Ecologically sensitive status for about <b>37 per cent</b> of the Ghats, roughly 60,000 sq km, distinguishing cultural from natural landscape          | Accepted in principle                 |

Successive **draft notifications** on the Kasturirangan boundary have been issued and repeatedly lapsed or been reissued, with states contesting the extent. More than a decade after Gadgil, **there is still no final Ecologically Sensitive Area notification in force for the Western Ghats as a whole**. That vacuum, rather than any single project, is what the column is describing.

## DATA AND INSTITUTIONS VAULT

### PRELIMS-GRADE FACTS:

The Western Ghats run about 1,600 km across six states: Gujarat, Maharashtra, Goa, Karnataka, Kerala, Tamil Nadu.

One of the world's eight hottest biodiversity hotspots; harbours nearly half of India's flowering plants, about a third of its vertebrate fauna, and over 300 globally threatened species.

UNESCO World Heritage Site since 2012, inscribed as a serial property of 39 component sites.

Katlekan lies in Uttara Kannada (North Kanara) district, Karnataka.

Gadgil Committee (Western Ghats Ecology Expert Panel), 2011: entire Ghats as an Ecologically Sensitive Area in three graded zones; chaired by Madhav Gadgil.

Kasturirangan Committee (High Level Working Group), 2013: ecologically sensitive status for about 37 per cent of the Ghats, roughly 60,000 sq km; chaired by K. Kasturirangan.

Peninsular rivers rising in the Ghats: Godavari, Krishna, Kaveri, Tungabhadra, Periyar, Bharathappuzha.

The Ghats are older than the Himalaya and are a fault scarp formed by the rifting of the Indian plate from Madagascar, not a folded mountain range.

Anamudi (2,695 m) in Kerala is the highest peak in the Western Ghats and the highest in peninsular India.

The Palghat (Palakkad) Gap is the major break in the range and a significant biogeographic boundary.

Forest cover in the India State of Forest Report, published biennially by the Forest Survey of India, is defined as land over one hectare with tree canopy density above 10 per cent, regardless of ownership, legal status or species composition.

Density classes: Very Dense Forest (above 70 per cent), Moderately Dense Forest (40 to 70 per cent), Open Forest (10 to 40 per cent).

A biodiversity hotspot, in Norman Myers's criteria, must have at least 1,500 endemic vascular plant species and have lost at least 70 per cent of its primary vegetation. India has four: the Western Ghats and Sri Lanka, the Himalaya, Indo-Burma, and Sundaland (Nicobar Islands).

**“forest cover” is a canopy-density measure, not an ecological one.** *It counts plantations, orchards and even tea and coffee estates above the density threshold. Forest cover is therefore not the same as recorded forest area (the legal category) and neither measures forest quality. Rising forest cover alongside falling forest quality is not a contradiction; it is what the definition permits.*

*the Western Ghats are a fault scarp, not fold mountains. They are the eroded edge of the Deccan plateau, formed during the break-up of Gondwana, and they are geologically far older than the Himalaya. Calling them a fold mountain range is a standard error.*

*the hotspot is “Western Ghats and Sri Lanka” as a single unit. Counting them separately gets India’s hotspot count wrong.*

## THE DEBATE

**For strong protection on the Gadgil model:** the endemism means local decisions carry global consequences; the hydrological services support the peninsular economy; and a graded zoning system with gram sabha involvement is both ecologically coherent and democratically grounded.

**Against, and the objection is real:** the Ghats are inhabited. Millions live in these districts, many in plantation and agricultural economies that long predate the reports. A blanket ecological designation over an inhabited landscape imposes concentrated costs on people who did not create the problem and are not compensated for solving it. Kerala’s and Karnataka’s political resistance to the Gadgil report was not manufactured; it came from those districts.

**Where the honest position lands:** the Kasturirangan distinction between **natural** and **cultural** landscape was an attempt to answer exactly this, and it was reasonable. The failure since has not been in the choice between the two reports. It has been in **never finalising either**, which gives ecology no protection and residents no certainty. A decade of draft notifications is the worst of both outcomes.

## HOW TO THINK ABOUT THIS

The transferable frame: **a metric that aggregates unlike things conceals the change that matters.** Forest cover sums primary rainforest and eucalyptus plantation into one number. Watch for this everywhere: enrolment numbers that conceal learning outcomes, hospital-bed counts that conceal staffing, road-kilometre targets that conceal quality, employment figures that conceal underemployment.

The diagnostic question: **what would have to get worse for this number to fall?** If the answer is “very little”, the metric is not measuring the thing you care about. India could lose every remaining hectare of primary rainforest and, if it were replanted, report no decline in forest cover at all.

The second frame: **match the scale of protection to the scale of the consequence.** Where an outcome is local and reversible, local decision-making is right. Where a district-level decision causes a global and permanent loss, as with a narrow-range endemic, the decision belongs at a level that internalises that consequence.

## WAY FORWARD

- 1 **Finalise the Western Ghats Ecologically Sensitive Area notification**, since a decade of lapsing drafts protects nothing and settles nothing for residents either.
- 2 **Report forest quality alongside forest cover**, disaggregating primary and old-growth forest from plantation and regenerating cover in the India State of Forest Report.
- 3 **Give the remaining primary forest patches a distinct legal category** with a higher protection standard, since Katlekan-type tracts are irreplaceable on any human timescale.
- 4 **Compensate the districts that bear the restriction**, through ecosystem-service payments funded by the downstream states and cities that use the water, so that conservation is not an unfunded local [mandate](#).
- 5 **Make clearance decisions for narrow-range endemic habitat a national-level determination**, because the consequence of the decision is not local even though the file is.

## PYQ LINKAGE AND PRACTICE

Connects to standing themes on **biodiversity hotspots, the Gadgil and Kasturirangan reports, and environmental clearance**. Practice question: *“India’s forest cover has remained stable while its forest quality has declined. Examine the reasons for this divergence and suggest a more meaningful measure of forest health.”*

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Source: The Dark Forest of Katlekan: Why the Western Ghats Still Matter — Ujjayari.com | Free UPSC & State PCS Editorial Analysis

### ● KEY ARGUMENTS AT A GLANCE

Writing in the Indian Express, the author argues from the Katlekan dark forest of North Kanara that a genuine primary rainforest is qualitatively different from the dry, fragmented woodlots that pass for forests elsewhere in India, that the Western Ghats running 1,600 kilometres along the peninsular edge are the living ecological spine of the country and one of the world's eight hottest biodiversity hotspots, harbouring nearly half of India's flowering plant species, a third of its vertebrate fauna and over 300 globally threatened species, and that this system is being steadily plundered while the country reassures itself with forest-cover statistics.



### SUPPORTING

- The physical description carries the argument: in Katlekan the canopy closes so completely that at midday a visitor needs a torch to see a brook a few yards away, which is a structural property of intact primary rainforest that no plantation or regenerating woodlot reproduces.
- The author, who wrote a doctoral dissertation on forest management and has seen forests across four continents, reports that the encounter revised his own understanding of what a forest is, which is a claim about the gap between the category and the reality it is supposed to name.
- The Ghats support narrow-range endemic species such as the Katlekan Marsh Nut and the Gund Day Gecko whose entire global distribution may be a few valleys, so a local clearance decision can be a global extinction decision.



### MAINS ANSWER FRAMEWORK

#### QUESTION

*India's forest cover statistics show stability or improvement even as ecologists document degradation of primary forest. Examine the reasons for this divergence, and discuss what an ecologically meaningful measure of forest health would require. (250 words)*

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