

Prakash Gole

8, Nagar Road,
Yeravada,
Pune 411006

16th May, 1995

H.E. Dr. P.C. Alexander,
Governor of Maharashtra,
Raj Bhavan,
MAHABALESHWAR

Sir,

We thank you for kindly sparing time to see us in Mahabaleshwar despite your busy schedule.

The Mahabaleshwar-Panchgani Plateau is one of Maharashtra's most precious resources and is the source of some of its most important river systems. For some time past, concerned citizens and environmentalists have been deeply disturbed by the twin forces of excessive building activity and deforestation, which have threatened this environmentally sensitive region.

In response to these perceptions, in 1983 the Government of Maharashtra set up a Mahabaleshwar-Panchgani Regional Planning Board in order to prepare a comprehensive Regional Plan and to regulate the use of land. The Plan which came into being some two years later was a landmark, and made important recommendations for checking runaway building activities and destruction of forests. Regrettably however, the provisions of the Plan were implemented strictly only for the first two to three years, while an Additional Collector was specifically stationed on the plateau. Thereafter, especially with the abolition of the post of Addl. Collector, the situation has returned to the status quo ante or worse, which is a matter of deep concern.

We therefore take the liberty of placing before you:-

- (a) a Note on the general problems perceived to be affecting the environment of this region, and
- (b) Copies of letters to the then Hon'ble Chief Minister and the Secretary, Forests regarding the widening of the main Panchgani-Mahabaleshwar Road to highway proportions. We had strongly opposed this on the grounds that it was totally unnecessary for the road to be so wide, and also that it would have enormous destructive potential for the region as it would positively invite a large volume of through traffic. Nonetheless work on this road is still going on.

May we earnestly request you, Sir, to use your good

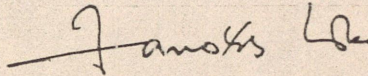
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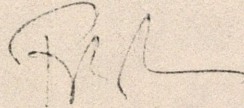
offices with the appropriate authorities in the vital cause of conserving the environment of this region, which is under severe threat.

Thanking you,

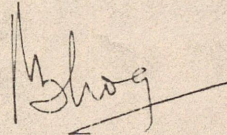
Yours faithfully,



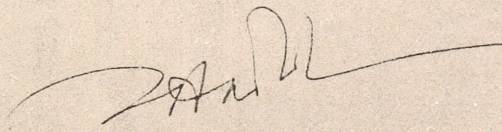
F.F. WADIA
Ecology Society, Pune
Bombay Environmental Action Group
Member of Former Mahabaleshwar-
Panchgani Regional Planning Board
Member, Task Force on Hill Stations



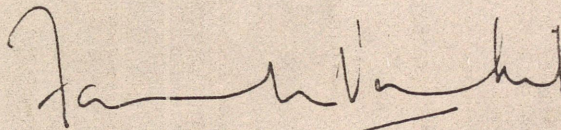
PRAKASH GOLE
Director, Ecology Society, Pune.
Member of Former Mahabaleshwar-
Panchgani Regional Planning Board



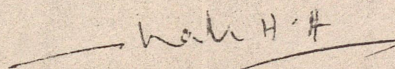
N.P. BHOG
Social Civic & Environmental Forum
Pune.
Member, Task Force on Hill Stations



Col. S.A. MOHITE
Mahabaleshwar



FARAH VAKIL
Bombay Environmental Action Group



HASMUKH SHAH
Parisar, Pune

Vice Admiral M. P. Awati (Retd.)
PVSM, VrC

Chairman
Prakash Gole
Director

ECOLOGICAL SOCIETY

(Registration No. E-822 (Pune)
under the Bombay Public Trust Act 1950)
1 B ABHIMANSHREE SOCIETY
PASHAN ROAD, PUNE 411008, INDIA
TELEPHONE : 0212-336408

May 25, 1996

H. E. Dr P. C. Alexander
Governor of Maharashtra
Raj Bhavan
Mahabaleshwar

Sir,

The Ecological Society has been studying Mahabaleshwar forests and their birds since 1994. Our observations point out that vestiges of primary forests remain only at a few places on the plateau. They are: Lodwick point to Bombay point, Bombay point to Falkland point, Blue Valley Ride and the source region of the Solshi river. It means over 60 p.c. of the plateau area is occupied by secondary forests, scrub and barren and rocky areas. About 150 people are engaged in wood-cutting daily, i.e. "manufacturing" dead wood and then carrying it away. 3 to 4 tonnes of wood is removed daily from the forest. These forests are incapable of regenerating this biomass annually, leading to their rapid deterioration.

This has affected bird life. Birds peculiar to Western Ghats, especially those 14 endemic species that are not found anywhere else in the world, are fast disappearing from Mahabaleshwar. This is a serious loss not only to the natural heritage of Maharashtra, but also a loss on the global scale.

It is therefore, of utmost urgency that this loss of forest should be arrested forthwith. The recommendations of the Regional Plan in this respect should be implemented immediately, especially "earmarking of suitable areas in rotation for genuine deadwood collection under supervision....." (Page 67 of the Regional Plan). In addition the following measures appear to be necessary:

1. The Forest Department should take the lead in organizing the wood-cutters into a cooperative represented by a Committee.
2. The Committee should be involved in joint forest management including reforestation of degraded lands on pain of confiscation of their right to collect wood from the forest.
3. Likewise local NGOs and schools should be involved in reforestation through joint forest management of definite degraded areas.
4. Priority should be given to regeneration and restoration of indigenous forest and not to the plantation of exotic species. The Ecological Society has some experience of restoration of original forest in Western Ghats and will be glad to cooperate with the authorities in carrying out restoration experiments on the plateau.
4. Areas of special scientific interest should be designated and managed to guard their sanctity, i.e. restriction of vehicle movement nearby, of

Vice Admiral M. P. Awati (Retd.)
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Prakash Gole
Director

ECOLOGICAL SOCIETY

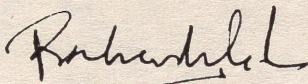
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- movement of hawkers, establishment of stalls selling food and other items.
6. An awareness centre similar to one set up in the Mumbai-Pune Borghat should be established. Literature on flora and fauna, on cultural, natural and scientific aspects of Western Ghats, maps, posters and other items that will create love of nature and awareness of its conservation should be kept for sale there. The Centre should operate throughout the tourist season. Interested NGOs, school and college students should be entrusted the task of running it on joint management and profit-sharing basis.
 7. As the carrying capacity of the plateau is fully exhausted and acute water scarcity and waste disposal problems are experienced, no commercial buildings of any sort should be allowed to be built.
 8. No tree-cutting on private land should be allowed. In particular provisions of Section 7.1.2(b) of the Regional Plan should be implemented in full.
 9. The municipalities should be allowed to collect a restoration tax over and above the tourist entry fee charged at present. The proceeds of this levy should be utilized for the restoration effort.
 10. Urgent steps should be taken to develop other areas/places indicated in the Regional Plan on sustainable basis and not just for commercial tourism as is the policy at present.

We hope that you will kindly instruct the authorities to take these steps urgently to save Mahabaleshwar from further urbanization.

Thanking you,

Yours sincerely,



Prakash Gole
Director,
Ecological
Society

Dr F. F. Wadia
Member, Maha-Panch. Regional
Planning Board

Shri N. P. Bhog
Social, Civic and
Environmental Forum, Pune

Col. S. A. Mohite
Mahabaleshwar

Farah Vakil
Bombay Environmental Action Group