

A People's Charter for Redeeming Wayanad **Where ecology defines progress & development**

Who are we?

A people's movement to initiate action for conserving forests, river catchments, wetlands, farm lands and ensure water and food security for posterity. We are a diverse group of sustainable farmers, tribal communities, environmentalists and business people who are concerned about Wayanad.

Wayanad is one of the **youngest districts and parliamentary constituency** of Kerala and also one with the longest of human history in the state. What makes Wayanad unique is also its natural heritage which is one of the most biodiverse, ecologically rich yet fragile landscape.

Demography and Agriculture

Wayanad has a population of around 8.5 lakhs. The mountains and forests, the valleys and the monsoons together has created an ecosystem which also gave Wayanad the fertile land that gave bountiful crops of coffee, pepper, paddy and other spices that is the mainstay of the people of this land. More than 90% of the population of the district is dependent on agriculture either as cultivators, farm labour on in the allied sectors. It also has one of the largest percentage of tribes which constitutes 17% of the district's population. Paniyar, Kurichyar, Kattunaikkar, Mullukkurumar, Adiyar, Kanduvadiyar, Thachanadar, Kanaladi are some of the tribal people of Wayanad and many of them fall under the category of Particularly Vulnerable tribal group and Primitive tribal group.

Thanks to anthropogenic pressures and climate change, Wayanad is now facing recurring crisis of drought due to erratic monsoons. This is worsened by unscientific and mindless destruction of its hills, forests and wetlands that plays not just a big role in rainfall but also in the absorption and replenishment of surface and under ground water resources.

Wayanad as the Water tower of South India

Wayanad's forests are mother of over 13 rivers originating from the landscape from its Shola grasslands that are capable of acting like a sponge. Kabini, the major river of the district drains approximately 94tmc to Kaveri which not only is the main stay of farmers in the Mysore region of Karnataka as well as those regions of Tamil Nadu dependent on the Kaveri water for irrigation and also the main source of drinking water for Bengaluru, the IT hub of India. **Wayanad's landscapes** harbours a knot of isolated ridges in Wayanad which are is the Chembra-Vellarimala, Periya, Brahmagiris, Sugandhagiri, Kurichiarmala, Banasuramala, Manikkunnumala that make the entire landscape the critical catchment of river Kabini, one of the main tributaries of river Kaveri.

Wayanad's forest cover

The name Wayanad is said to be derived from different names like 'Waynad' (upper land- as its name denotes, an elevated plateau), 'Vayalnadu' (land of paddy fields) and 'Vananad' (land of forests). Out of the 2132 Sq Km land area of Wayanad, 1/3rd of the landscape in Wayanad are forests. Overall, forest cover in Wayanad has dwindled from 70% to 40% since 1970. Almost half (42%) of the district is under forest cover ranging from tropical evergreen forests to wet deciduous forests to grass land and shola forest ecosystems to mono crop plantations of teak, eucalyptus and mahogany maintained by the Forest department. It is home to several rich flora and fauna including the tiger and elephant.

Neolithic caves : Edakkal are two natural caves at a remote location at Edakkal. Inside the caves are pictorial writings believed to date to at least 6,000 BCE from the Neolithic man, indicating the presence of a prehistoric civilization or settlement in this region. The Stone Age carvings of Edakkal are rare and are the only known examples from South India. Today these historic caves are under the threat of largescale **quarrying** for granite stones. Uncontrolled tourism in these areas are also contributing to the degradation of these prehistoric caves.

It is in this context that any discourses around sustainability of Wayanad should be after understanding the depth of crisis in farming as well as of its environment. Given below is a brief description of the issues.

- 1. Farm Distress at its peak**- Like elsewhere in the country, farmer distress in Wayanad has led to farmers taking extreme steps with almost 5 farmer suicides being reported in the last 7 months. Reducing fertility of farmlands due to intensive agriculture practices using chemical fertilisers, pesticides and herbicides. Failing markets, extreme weather conditions and constant man- animal conflicts, all leading to increasing farm debts and distress have come to define farming in a district

which is known globally for its coffee, pepper and spices and is also one of the most important agriculture districts of Kerala. While Demonetisation drive at the harvest time of most of the important crops of Wayanad was a massive setback for the farmers, the excessive rains and massive crop losses across crops last year has dealt a lethal blow to the farmers of Wayanad. Added to this is the crisis of inadequate institutional credit and compensations when market or crops fail due to reasons not in control of the farmer. It is not just the farmer who is being impacted by this farm distress but the whole local economy which is dependent on the farmer and his/her income. **The district is also witnessing high number of cancer and kidney patients in some of the panchayats due to the unprecedented use of pesticides and chemicals.**

- 2. Brief history of fragmentation of Forest Land :** Wayanad's forests have seen a high amount of fragmentation and loss of contiguity since British Raj days and post 1970. Wayanad witnessed widespread conversion of 4000 hectares of tropical wet evergreen forest were given under Wayanad colonisation scheme for world war soldiers. Pupally devaswom and Poothaadi Devaswom has diverted 3200 hectares. Private forests were taken by large tea estates like Harrison and Poddar with land area of 2000 hectares each. In 1970, under the Grow More Food Programme, anyone desiring to cultivate food was given large hectares of forest land - anyone cultivating such land prior to May 1971 was given legal ownership. Between 1977 and 1990, there was heavy encroachment of over 900 hectares of forest lands. In 1993, a new rule came into existence that legalised all encroachments prior to January 1977. To this day, the Forest Department is struggling with land disputes claims prior to 1977.

Large scale Govt Projects in Forest Lands : Large scale projects like the Banasura Dam, Pookode Dairy, Sugandhagiri Tribal Project, and various other estates claimed around 2,130 hectares of forest land. Vested forests were assigned to tribal in 1971; and in 2002, 2,800 hectares were transferred under Forest Rights Act. 733 hectares of pepper plantations under the Forest Department's Vanalakshmi Scheme were encroached in 2002. Subsequently, almost 2000 hectares of these lands were given, under the Forest Rights Act, to landless tribal between 2009 and 2012. Of the 40% which is currently demarcated as forest, plantations of teak, eucalyptus, silver oak - species that deplete the water table inside sanctuaries has reduced the tropical wet evergreen forests to monoculture plantations since 1860.

The alteration of native species has also seen the proliferation of non-native invasive species like *Lantana camera* and *Senna spectabilis*.

- 3. Alternative Ghat Roads, Rail and Airport will not solve the farm crisis:** The 440 Kv power line from Mysore to Kozhikode has clear felled over 50,000 old growth trees in areas like Thirunelli and Sugandhagiri. Thirunelli is one of the 88 critical elephant corridors in the country and is a critical range for elephants moving from Brahmagiri's to Kabini reservoir for their gene pool exchange and water. Wayanad already has **6 interstate roads** connecting to both Karnataka and Tamilnadu to rest of Kerala as well as **5 Ghat roads** that connect Wayanad to districts of Kozhikode, Kannur and Malappuram. While night traffic restrictions have been implemented in the 2 major highways connecting Wayand to Karnataka, for the protection of both wildlife and human life it has not restricted movement as alternate routes have been provided. It is also a fact that both roads and electricity has reached all the pockets of the district. It should be realised that any more National or State highways or Railway /airport projects would need massive destruction of hills, forests and wetlands which would be an irreparable damage to ecosystem and resultant dangers to our society.

A special mention of **the proposed Railway lines** in Wayanad has to be made here. The two proposed lines, one through the Bandipur wildlife sanctuary connecting Nanjangud in Karnataka to Nilambur in Kerala via Sulthan bathery in Wayanad and the other through Nagarhole wild life Sanctuary and Periya wildlife Sanctuary connecting Mysuru in Karnataka to Thalasserry in Kerala through Mananthavady **would need colossal destruction of natural forests and wildlife habitats besides the numerous hills and wetlands** which will be destroyed.

These projects will not solve the livelihood issues that 99% of the people of Wayanad face but will only add to the problems. Past experiences have shown us that this has always led to ecosystem damages and human distress.

What would help Wayanad and its inhabitants are proper maintenance of existing roads, improving frequency and comfort of public buses connecting remote villages to prominent towns and not more new roads and other infrastructure.

4. **Human-Animal Conflicts** : The fragmentation of wildlife landscape, habitat degradation of landscape of large mammals like elephants and tiger has seen an increase in Human elephants conflicts. In Kerala, 22 deaths have occurred in 2016-17 with the forest department giving away 9.63 crores as compensation, the highest in almost a decade. Since 2013, the number of deaths due to elephant attacks in the state have been close to 20 every year, a clear indication that this is a pattern which is going from bad to worse. Forests in Wayanad are their natural path to migrate from Bandipur to Mudumalai and in the middle of this there are some 104 settlements with some 2600 odd tribal families as per wildlife records. In Feb 2017, Wayanad saw 72% deficit rainfall - besides elephants, other animals like, bison, deer and boars, made regular incursions into their villages. Wayanad is also known for Kysanaru Forest Disease which is primarily caused by loss of forest cover. Thus, a land where forests and farms and wild animals and humans have survived together for centuries have now become a war zone with farmers looking at forests and its inhabitants as enemies of mankind.

5. **Floods and Landslides** : Aug 2018 saw one of the worst floods and landslides in Kerala in over 100 years. Wayanad witnessed several landslides and the cause of which was attributed to human induced land use changes. An assessment of 1231 flood related data, there were 568 landslides and mudslides in Wayanad ; Thirunelli and Thrissilery saw a phenomenon called land subsidence , close to 6000 acres were submerged in floods. Out of 23 Panchayats and 3 municipalities, more than 50% were affected with landslides and floods. Several people were isolated for many days due to landslides and many farm lands have been declared "unsafe" for human habitation. Unscientific road cutting, use of heavy machinery like earthmovers, deforestation on private lands for timber , loss of native tree cover by planting silver oak monocrop are some of the primary causes for landslides during heavy monsoon.

6. **Unregulated Tourism:** Wayanad's rich natural capital attracts lakhs of tourists to the district. With a population of 8.5 Lakh people, Wayanad attracts another 8.24 lakh of people from India and abroad as tourists. Wayanad has seen impacts of this unregulated tourism in the form of conversion of coffee estates and wetlands for large scale resorts. The population challenges that comes with this is in the form of managing waste in the district and further damaging the fragile ecology. There is no thought on carrying capacity of the landscape which has resulted in-depletion of precious water and energy resources being shared by farming and tourism sectors during dry seasons. The recent outbreak of fire in various wildlife sanctuaries and forest lands by miscreants have also increased the risks of people coming from various places to use our landscape without responsibility.

Under these circumstances, we the people of Wayand who are concerned not just about the future of farming and our livelihoods but the future of our beloved Wayanad appeal the following to all the candidate standing in the upcoming general elections for our mandate:

1. Ensuring freedom from debt and assuring sustainable income for farmers :

Keeping in mind the intense debt pressure on the farmers of Wayanad and given that it is the only aspirational district (Backward District) in the state all farm loans be waived off urgently. It is also important to provide interest free loans to farmers to revive the farming sector.

(ii) It is also important that other measures including legal binding of the minimum support prices declared by the Central Government, immediate, adequate and hasslefree compensations for crops destruction due to weather or wildlife etc be taken to help buffer the risks that our farmers face from forces of market and nature.

(iii) Given that the human animal conflict has become one of the most important issue for farming in Wayanad both immediate and permanent solutions for reducing wild animal intrusions into farms should be taken. Expenditure for which has to be borne by the state.

(ii) The intensification of farming in the last two decades has changed the agriculture practices in the district towards over use and misuse of toxic chemicals. **A mission mode work towards making the district organic** in the next 5 years is an imperative. This would not only help the soils and biodiversity from the harms of excessive toxic chemical usage but also protect farmers and farm labourers from the occupation hazards of using these chemicals in farm as well as eradicate their presence in our food. This would need a coordinated effort between the central and state government to achieve the same. Conversion of farm lands in Wayanad to organic will also benefit down stream areas by reducing the chemical load in the rivers and streams.

(iii) The long history of cultivation of food crops and the unique ecology has created a **rich heritage of traditional varieties** of many crops in Wayanad. While Wayanad varieties of Coffee, pepper, turmeric, ginger and cardamom are famous in the global markets for their unique flavours, the district is a treasure house of traditional paddy varieties and that of many other field crops. While there are many efforts on ground by farmer groups and NGOs to conserve and popularise these local, traditional varieties, a concerted effort has to be made to sustain these varieties that also has a great market potential there by making it remunerative for farmers.

(iv) Assuring irrigation by ensuring that the existing large irrigation projects (Banasura Sagar and Karapuzha Dams) deliver on their promised irrigation and invest in a series of check dams and farm ponds and canals as part of a watershed based development plan.

(v) A total restriction on the imports of agriculture produce, especially pepper and other spices from other countries thereby ensuring that our farmers get a remunerative price in the market. There is also need for revisiting of all such existing and upcoming multilateral and bilateral treaties like RCEP that put our farmers in a disadvantage in the market and their livelihoods in danger.

2. Conservation and increase in area of natural forests involving local tribal wisdom.

- (i) There is an urgent and important need to adopt strategy of "avoidance" and ensure that no more natural forests are converted for any non-forestry purposes – linear intrusions like roads, transmission lines and railways, quarrying, mining and large infrastructure projects. Public consultation on every project, as part of SEIA.
- (ii) There is a need for a mission mode work in converting the monoculture plantations to natural forests in a time bound and scientific manner with the involvement of local population, primarily tribal people.
- (iii) Incentivise tribal people for nurturing land areas to be converted as groves along riverine patches by promoting Non-Wood forest produce.
- (iv) Payment for ecological services: Promote the planting of native varieties of trees of Western Ghats in the coffee plantations (both small and big) which had always played a big role in maintaining the micro climate in the region.
- (v) Securing critical wildlife corridors from road networks and human settlement.
- (vi) Systematic removal of *Lantana camera* and *Senna spectabilis* and ensuring eco restoration by maximising species diversity through tribal employment programmes.
- (vii) Securing critical mountain network systems like Chembra-Vellarimala, Banasura, Periya, Manikkunnumala, Brahmagiri etc from any further loss of native flora and its rocks to quarrying and tourism.
- (viii) Enhancement of riparian buffer for conserving flood plains of rivers and its' feeder systems.

3. Enabling growth of Agro based industries :

The only industry that should be encouraged in a district like Wayanad is such industry that forms part of the forward and backward linkages of agriculture. Special efforts should be taken to support and promote micro, small and medium enterprises in the food sector. Even this has to be done keeping in mind impact it could have on the natural ecosystems. With a special focus on organic farming there is tremendous scope in creating markets and jobs in these sectors. This will also open up numerous entrepreneurial possibilities for educated youngsters.

4. Regulated tourism and Land Use management :

- (i) Conducting carrying capacity study of every tourist place in Wayanad and ensure there is a scientific process to the cap in people visiting these places. Several World tourist spots are already leading the way due to damage to ecology.
- (ii) Tourism that supports and sustains local agriculture needs to be supported. Forest areas and settlements of ethnic tribal habitat needs to be completed exempted from tourism.
- (iii) A policy to ensure wildlife corridors are secured from any tourist activity as seen in the recent judgment by Supreme Court in Masinagudi, Tamil Nadu evicting resorts squatting on elephant corridor.
- (iv) Wayanad as a destination for sustainable model of tourism that effectively reduces the damage to ecology due to dumping of waste, use of ground water resources and switching to more off grid solutions for businesses operating in the region.
- (v) Banning zooification of tribal cultures and diversion of tribal lands for profit is an important human rights issue that needs to be tackled to regulate tourism.
- (vi) Improved bus transport network that reduces the need for private transport use contributing to

- air pollution and traffic congestion on landslide prone hills.
- (vii) Adopting sustainable means of sewage water management that would ensure reduced water pollution.
 - (viii) Leveraging NREGA for hill slope management using bio-remediation using promotion of native grasses, vetiver, lemon grass and bamboo.
 - (ix) Complete ban on conversion of wetlands to reduce impacts during floods and landslides. From an area of almost 40,000 Hectares in 1970s the district paddy area has nose dived to 8000 Hectares due to unbridled development over this ecosystem.
 - (x) With severe threat of landslides, Complete ban on any alternate Ghat roads on the Western Ghats including trekking paths.

5. Promotion of Bamboo cultivation in farm lands :

Bamboo to be promoted as a crop in farms to avoid any further depletion of the same from forest lands for human use. Bamboo is a primary fodder for elephants in the region and needs to maintain its' natural genre and cycle for the sustenance of Elephants inside forest land. Encouraging bamboo cultivation leveraging NREGA in farmlands will provide win-win situation for farmers and environment.

Wayanad needs a healing touch and it would take a visionary leadership and central as well as state governments working in a mission mode to revive this bountiful land back to its feet.

Sincerely Yours,

Wayanad Karshaka Koottayma
(Wayanad Farmers Collective)

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