

PRESERVING THE PARADISE THAT IS THE WESTERN GHATS

— LUIZINHO FALEIRO, Ex-CM & Ex-MP (Rajya Sabha)

Time is running out for this ecological wonder - the Western Ghats, and Goa should lead the way in protecting the world heritage site for posterity. Excerpts from Luizinho Faleiro's about-to-be released book



State butterfly



Goa is an integral part of the Western Ghats, the Sahayadri Range of Mountains that extends from Maharashtra to Kerala passing through Goa and Karnataka. Goa once had a lush green forest cover, perhaps one of the best in all of India, for the land is merely an extension of the Western Ghats that stretches up to the Arabian Sea, a sliver of land bordered by the Western Ghats on the East and the Arabian Sea on the West.

Whenever I read about the Western Ghats or they come up in discussion, I am reminded of the Ramayan that remains deeply ingrained in my mind, in this context, the part wherein Lord Hanuman brings the mountain to retrieve the 'Sanjeevani' herb to save Laxman during the battle with Ravana. The Western Ghats are one of the richest biodiversity hotspots in the world and home to Ayurveda and Naturopathy. Goa, though it has but a small portion of the ghats within its boundaries, has six Wildlife Sanctuaries in these forests, preserving the flora and fauna, and where one can explore a wealth of herbs that could be utilised to improve human life and humanity. But, are the forest truly protected or are they under threat? To

answer that question we would have to look at the Ghats and how they are placed today vis-à-vis the past.

A WORLD HERITAGE SITE

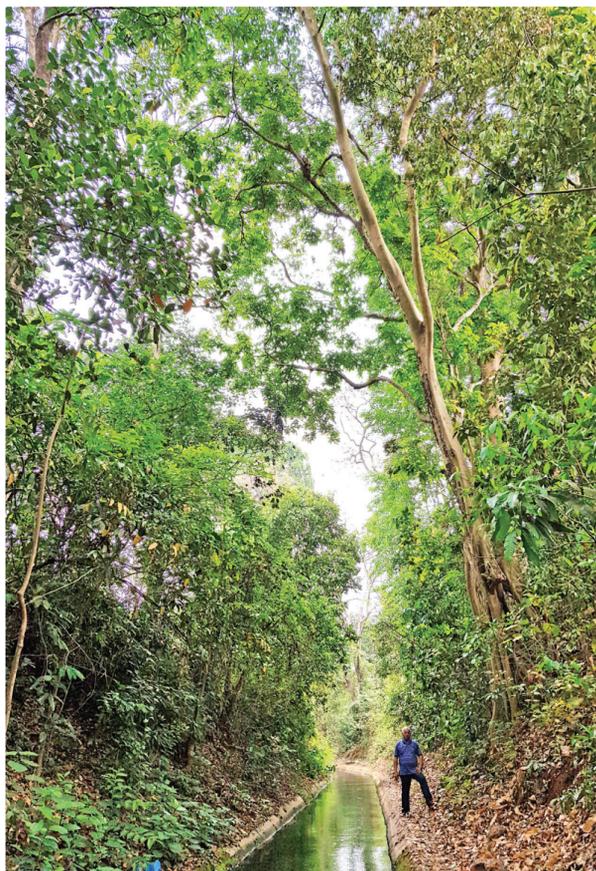
The Western Ghats are classified as one of the world's eight global biodiversity hotspots. They have been inscribed by UNESCO as a World Heritage Site, with 39 sites that dot the ghats landscape identified as world heritage sites, in the States of Maharashtra, Karnataka and Kerala. Goa doesn't have a single site in its portion of the Western Ghats listed by UNESCO and this exposes the State's casual approach towards conserving the mountain range or even taking pride in it.

The Western Ghats are older than the Himalayas, a veritable treasure trove of bio-diversity and home to a wealth of flora and fauna, some of which may not even have been identified as yet. They are known to have more than 5,000 plant and 140 mammal species, 16 of which are endemic, among these being the lion-tailed macaque and the Nilgiri tahr. Of 179 species of amphibians found in the Western Ghats, 138 are endemic to the region, while of the 508 bird species, 16 are endemic, including the Nilgiri

flycatcher and the Malabar parakeet.

The Western Ghats, considered an ecologically sensitive region, has approximately 52 species that are moving close to extinction. The main reasons for the loss in bio-diversity is habitat change, over-exploitation, pollution and climate change. None of these are natural factors but manmade and so should also be reversible. The Western Ghats Ecology Expert Panel, appointed by the Union Ministry of Environment and Forests to assess the biodiversity and environmental issues of the Western Ghats, designated the entire region as an Ecologically Sensitive Area and assigned three levels of Ecological Sensitivity to its different regions.

I have always been very passionate about the environment, having raised these issues several times in the Assembly and even brought in Bills for protecting the ecology. The trees and river protections bills are examples of my efforts. I had also suggested a Protection of River Authority, Protection of Lakes, Protection of River Tributaries, and though the government had accepted these bills then, it is very, very sad that it has not happened. In the meantime, we continue to pollute our rivers, our lakes, destroying the



ecology, the environment and the biodiversity. But it has not always been so and Goans have been part of efforts to understand the Western Ghats and its plant life.

HOME TO AYURVEDA AND CONTRIBUTION OF GOAN VAIDYAS TO ITS STUDY

Goa may have the smallest area of the Western Ghats within its geographical boundaries compared to the other three western states of Maharashtra, Karnataka and Kerala but its contribution to understanding the flora and fauna of the range of mountains has been enormous and goes back centuries.

Much of this came to light at the seminar titled 'Contribution of Konkani to Hortus Indicus Malabaricus.' Three Goan vaidyas were named as having played a major role in the compilation of the Hortus Indicus Malabaricus, they were Ranga Bhat, Vinayaka Pandit and Appu Bhat. The Hortus Indicus Malabaricus is an extensive work, comprising 12 volumes with 794 copper engravings on it about 742 plants and is believed to be the earliest printed work on the flora of Asia and tropics (1678-1703). It describes plants from the region with multiple uses as well as with medicinal properties.

The Hortus Indicus Malabaricus, according to a paper presented at the

seminar by scholar Madhusudhanan, includes modes of preparation and application, based on pre-Ayurvedic knowledge of the ancient, renowned, hereditary physicians of Malabar. The ethno-medical information presented in Hortus Malabaricus was culled from palm leaf manuscripts by Itty Achuden, a famous physician of Malabar at that time. He dictated the material in Malayalam, which was then scrutinized by three Konkani gymnosophist priest-physicians (referred to in the text as 'brahmins'), Ranga Bhat, Vinayaka Pandit and Appu Bhat, followed by a process of thorough verification, discussion with other scholars and general agreement.

The final draft was translated into Portuguese by the official interpreters of the Dutch East India Company. From Portuguese, the text was rendered into Dutch and thence to Latin. The introductions, forewords and dedications given separately in various volumes also contain valuable insights into the cultural, social, political, historical and linguistic conditions of 17th century Malabar. The descriptions of plants comprising their habit, foliage, flowers, fruits, colour, smell, taste and practical value appear in Hortus Malabaricus under their Malayalam names. The plates bearing illustrations have been inscribed in Roman, Malayalam and Arabic scripts. Konkani names are given in Devanagiri script. Nearly all the plants are illustrated.

Hortus Indicus Malabaricus followed Colloquios dos Simples (Garcia de Orta, 1565), that was published about a century earlier and which was a checklist on the medicinal plants of India, considered the first published botanical work on the plants of Western Ghats. What led to these works was the interest that the Europeans, who came to this part of the Indian subcontinent had, in the flora and fauna of the Western Ghats. Hortus Indicus Malabaricus is considered to be the most comprehensive printed work on the natural wealth of Asia and of the tropics, and was compiled and published between 1678 and 1693 by Hendrik Adriaan Van Rheede tot Draakenstein (Van Rheede hereafter), the then Dutch Governor of Cochin.

In another paper at the same seminar, Dr. V. Rajeev Shenoy, presented on the contribution of Konkani Brahmins to the work with respect to

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