



ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUE "KAS PLATEAU AND KAS LAKE": ROLE OF NGOs IN ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AND CONSERVATION

KEYWORDS

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ABSTRACT *Environmental pollution is the global problem. Kas (Plateau and Lake) is the scenic, eco-sensitive place of Satara district. Recently it has been included into the World Heritage Centres. The efforts have been taken to protect this place with the help of GOs and NGOs. Kas is known as the 'Valley of Flowers'. This place is polluted due to natural and human activities. The different NGOs have been working for the protection and conservation of Kas since last few decades. The NGOs have taken a lot of efforts to protect it. It is a duty of every citizen to give better contribution in protection of this world heritage place.*

Introduction:

There are different environmental issues in Satara district such as forest fire, New Mahabaleshwar Project, Save the Western Ghats, Boxite Excavation, Sand Excavation, Forest Cutting, Eradication of Plastic, Excessive use of Chemical Fertilizers, Water Pollution, Air Pollution, Excessive use of vehicles, Solid and Liquid Waste, Global Warming etc. These are common and sensitive issues. One of them Kas Plateau and Kas Lake are the major environmental issues in Satara District. Kas area is sensitive hot spot of biodiversity due to its varieties of unique endemic herbs, shrubs and other flora and fauna.

Kas is located about 25 km from Satara city. It is situated on the top of the Sahyadri ranges west of Satara. This plateau is known for its unique biosphere of the high hill plateaus and grass lands. The geographical area of the plateau is 1792 hectares and out of it the forest area is 1142 hectares. Most of the areas of the Kas Plateau are covered by forest. The height of the plateau is 1200 to 1300 meters from the sea level. The average rainfall in this area is 2500 mm. The various types of wild flowers of shrub, climbers are growing on the Kas plateau in between and after rainy season i.e. June to September every year. Recently Kas plateau has been included into the World Heritage Centre. The Western Ghats must become the eco-sensitive zone and it is a need of time.

About Kas Plateau:

Kas plateau is covered by beautiful natural scenes, dense forest which consists of various flora and fauna, mountains, dams, waterfalls and it is recognized as a 'Valley of Flowers'. Kas plateau is actually a flat top mountain with rocky surface with very thick soil cover. This area comes under very heavy rainfall zone. This combination gives it unique ecological features, which has created amazing variety of flora and fauna. Kas is a scenic and untouched place of tourism in Satara district. It is a hot spot of natural beauty and heavy rain. Kas and the nearby Koyana area is home to about 1,500 types of plants – 156 botanical families, 680 genera, 1452 species, 400 medicinal plants, and about 33 endangered varieties. More than 450 species of wild flowers bloom in and after monsoon season and most of them are endemic herbs. More than 850 species of flowering plants are reported from Kas plateau, out of these plants 624 species have entered in the Red Data Book & most importantly 39 species from this Red Data Book.

Kas Lake: A Natural Water Resource:

Kas Lake is situated 26 km from Satara city. It is on an altitude of 3500 ft from sea level; It is a man-made lake and it is the main source of drinking water to Satara city by siphon method. The lake is surrounded by lush green trees. It was built in 1875 during the period of British. It is built with stones

and soil. The soil is made up of the rock 'Jambha' which is red in color. The source of the river Urmodi is in the Kas Lake. The lake location is calm and surrounded by forests. Before ten years people and tourist at Kas Lake used to wash clothes, vehicles, animals, catching fishes, celebration of parties, boating due to this reason water was polluted. The different NGOs in Satara district stopped these activities.

Objectives of Study:

The major objective of the present paper is to discuss the basic environmental issues and role of NGOs in environmental protection and conservation of nature.

- 1) To understand the serious environmental issues of Satara District.
- 2) To understand the role of environmental NGOs in environmental protection and conservation.

Methodology:

This paper is mainly based on the data collection from the various key activists and volunteers of the organizations by conducting interviews with scheduled and field work observation.

Geo-Ecological Features of Kas Plateau:

The following are the important Geo-ecological features of Kas Plateau:

- 1) Kas plateau has unique vegetation and abundant endemic species, 2) The plateau is lateritic in composition. It possesses little accumulated soil in low lying area on the rock, 3) Locally, these lateritic rocky outcrops are called 'SADA', 4) Kas plateau is a very ancient habitat, established and stable in its course of evolution, 5) Globally, it has been recognized as one of the hotspot of biodiversity due to the unique ecosystem and high degree of endemism, 6) Kas has unique ecosystem, hence the flora and fauna of the region is unique, 7) Kas has evergreen plants as well as thorny are found, and many herbs found, which have high medical value, and hence to be protected. These are the features of the Kas Plateau.

Man has exploited natural resources unlimitedly while making his development. So, environmental issues gained increasing prominence in the latter half of the 20th century. There is a concept that out of world's total area twenty percent area must be reserved but still there is no fixed opinion. According to 2010 year's report 55926 species are recorded, out of it 791 species are extinguished, and 3565 are on the verge of extinguish (Maharashtra Times, 4th Nov, 2010).

The Western Ghats Committee's Report on the Protection of Kas Plateau:

The Western Ghats Committee was recommended by the Government under the chairmanship of Dr. Madhavrao Gadgil and the committee has given following recommendations to the government for the implementation. The recommendations are as follows: "As per the committee's recommendations every local government should form biodiversity committee on the basis of biodiversity law". According to experts some wild species of Kas will decline due to changes in the regional climate. It is the need of time to oppose social worker, nature lover and researchers against the non planned activities at Kas to save rich flora and fauna of the region.

A Seminar on 'Save Kas - Save Heritage':

A seminar on 'Save Kas-Save Heritage' (Community Awareness and Sustainable Development) was organized in Satara district, state of Maharashtra, India on 1st April 2012 and 200 participants including 18 speakers and 35 experts as well as 24 organizations at International, national, regional and local level participated. The seminar was organized jointly by two NGOs i.e. Ranwata of Satara and TERRE Policy Centre (Technology, Education, Research and Rehabilitation for the Environment), Pune. Dr. Enrich Bharucha, Chairman of Maharashtra State, Biodiversity Board, Advocate Hema Ramani, (Bombay Environmental Action Group), Mr. Homi Khusrookhan, President of BNHS (Bombay Natural History Society), Dr. Archana Godbole, President of AREF (Atlanta Research and Education Foundation), Dr. Madhav Gokhate, (Ex-chief conservator of forest) and Sandip Shrotri, (President of Ranwata) and Organizer of Seminar.

The main objective of the seminar was to commence the process of the conservation of plateau of Kas as natural heritage for sustainable development. It is not only for keeping this beautiful, colourful carpet with endless variety of the flora for the years as show piece. The prime objective of seminar was community development through a stakeholder's and local people's dialogue to ensure the development and engagement of the local communities. The locals must be given an opportunity to involve in the developmental process of Kas plateau and they should earn income for their survival. If the locals are involved in the process they should take better care of the plateau of flowers. All the participants, eminent personalities and NGOs were agreed to give priority to the locals.

Concluding Remarks of Seminar:

1) Biodiversity conservation on public land is a very complex matter; management area like Kas is a challenge, 2) There is urgent need to: i) build scientific data, ii) educate communities, iii) more is achieved by advocacy than confrontation with Governments, iv) development will take place at a furious pace and will be unstoppable and v) restrict and control tourist traffic, 3) Action to benefit local people, 4) In future we shall also continue to meet the local people from the villages surrounding to build conservation support at grassroots level.

Role of NGOs in Saving the Kas Plateau:

The NGOs suggested that the eco-tourism is only sustainable means to conserve bio-diversity of the region and it also enhance economic status and living standard of the local people. The government has declared Kas Plateau as a restricted area and due to various efforts taken by NGOs and due to restrictions in these area biodiversity, plants are protected. This is the gift to all the NGOs and this is one reaction from Mr. Sunil Bhoite, 'Drongo' NGO volunteer of Satara district.

The NGO M.N.Roy Institute, Karad and Sarp-Mitra in Satara District are aware of this problem, they come together for working on these issues and organized different activities to solve these problems. The decrease in the number of insects and butterflies has affected the growth of flowers and plants. Environmental NGOs are creating awareness about serious

issues by performing various activities and try reduce the intensity of these problems. The Ranwata, Drongo, Astha, Vanrai, Elements of Nature Conservation Association, Geo-Soft Nature Club, all these NGOs organized various activities to create awareness among the tourists and locals such as lectures, rallies, slide shows, posters exhibitions, documentaries etc, and they suggested that, it is necessary to protect environment with the help of proper sign boards at the proper place, guides for providing information, and ban on plastic carry bags and food items etc. There should be provision of dust bins on the plateau. The local villagers should be given priority to guide tourists for the sake of their survival and protection of plateau. Sarp-Mitra Sanstha, Animal Welfare Trust, Drongo, M.N. Roy, ENCA and Astha organizations writing articles in news-papers, magazines and documentaries on T.V., group discussion on Radio, seminars on save the wild-life, posters exhibitions, the NGOs throw lights on save the fauna on Kas Plateau.

NGOs Oppose to Proposed Development Activities of Kas Plateau:

There is also fear of excavation of bauxite in Kas region. But this restricted area comes under the forest department, so it is protected. It is also necessary to have collaboration of forest department and pollution control board for the protection of Kas plateau. The Drongo and ENCA organizations have strongly opposed these activities. In the flowery season the local people, forest department, Nagarpalika and NGOs should unanimously come together to protect and conserve Kas plateau. The M.T.D.C (Maharashtra Tourism and Development Corporation) has planned to develop Kas plateau as a new hill station like Mahabaleshwar and Panchgani. The proposed development of Kas like three star, five star hotels, airports and other private transport facilities will destroy the natural beauty of the region on one side and biodiversity of plants and animals on other side. All environmental NGOs in Satara district have strongly opposed to the government's proposed plan.

According to the Satara Forest Department's Record, over 3.5 lakh tourists, nature lovers and research scholars have visited the Kas plateau during the past two months (August, September, 2010). It is estimated that these tourists have contributed about Rs. 50 lakhs to the hospitality and service sectors. Hundreds of flowers bloom at the plateau during the monsoon, drawing numerous tourists and students of botany and other faculties. In September alone, 14571 four-wheelers, 3107 two-wheelers came at the Kas plateau (Daily Sakal 9th Oct., 2010).

Kas is brought into focus due to media and its effect is that the number of tourists has increased. So it is difficult to maintain the biodiversity of the plateau and manage to forest department. This issue has become serious at present. On the holidays the crowd of tourists makes the spot uncomfortable. Simultaneously there is an increase in vehicles so the control system has totally collapsed. In the month of September, on Sunday there were 11500 vehicles and 75000 tourists visited to the Kas plateau (Daily Sakal, 27 Sept. 2011).

Today there are no hotels or any other shelter on the plateau but tourists are arriving in more numbers. Therefore, standard model of ecotourism should be prepared. Incoming capacity of the region need to be monitored and local people should be encouraged to serve the tourist through their household activities. The existing activities of tourists at Kas plateau have raised certain problems like plucking flowers and plants, careless parking, driving on natural lawns, i.e. in the habitat of wild plants, garbage of eatables and plastic bottles have become common problems at Kas. But these wild flowers and existing ecosystem of Kas plateau is gradually shrinking due to the increasing human activities like animal rearing, herding and mainly due to the tourist arrivals in increasing numbers.

The rich people have acquired land at Kas plateau for business purpose. They have taken permission for construction and because of it there will be loss of biodiversity. It will become desert as like Table Land of Panchgani, so all NGOs have strongly opposed the development of new constructions at Kas plateau. The forest department has taken decision of barricades to protect flora and fauna of the plateau, but its adverse effects are seen on animal and birds.

All NGOs in Satara district have played a pre-vital role in protection and conservation of Kas plateau. They have also taken lot of efforts for inclusion of Kas into the list of World Heritage Centre. According to them sign boards, way maps, information charts etc. should be used at the plateau for tourists. They have not only strongly opposed construction of barricades but stopped it. The NGOs have given suggestions that locals should be given priority for their economic benefits and survival. The forest department should make separate provision for vehicles and charges should be collected from them. The collected amount should be used for the development of locals. The locals should be involved in tasks such as forest guards and guides.

The Satara Nagar-Parishad had suggested boating plan in Kas Lake, but its water is used for drinking purpose to Satara city and it would be polluted, so all NGOs have strongly opposed it. The government decided to increase the height of Kas Lake but all NGOs opposed it because of it there will be loss of biodiversity in the area. They suggested that instead of increasing height of Lake it is beneficial to increase its depth for storing water. The NGOs suggested that there should be provision of online registration to reduce pressure of tourists. After 6 p.m. there should ban on vehicles because of high speed of vehicles reptiles and animals are killed. There should be restriction on parties because they use fire for preparing food and sometimes they left without dousing it and it becomes the cause of forest fire. The various NGOs suggested that Kas plateau should be made National Park and there should be information centre with the help of media. The eco-tourism centre and eco-village system should be established.

Suggestions for protection and conservation of Kas plateau:

The various suggestions for the protection of Kas plateau are as follows:

- 1] Protection of rare plant species, animals, and birds by different NGOs is a prime duty at Kas plateau, 2] Kas plateau should be protected as the world heritage centre, 3] Priority should be given to appoint local forest guards at the time of flowery season, 4] To check and register the vehicles and make provision for vehicle parking away from the flower plants and collected amount should be used for the development of locals, 5] To oppose forest cutting, animal hunting and smuggling of medicinal plants etc, 6] To ban on smoking, use plastic bottles, bags, waste food, stereo-sound, throwing used battery and camera cells and drinking wine bottles, plucking plants and flowers, 7] Oppose to the new constructions like resorts, lodging boarding, hotels etc, 8] To create awareness among tourist use of sign boards on the ways to guide them. 9] To avoid barricades around the plants and flowers, 10] Deny permission for boating at Kas Lake and instead of increasing its height its depth should be increased, 11] Kas plateau should be made reserved area and eco-sensitive zone, 12] To establish information centre with the help of media, 13] Kas plateau should be made the National Park and information centre and 14] Pollution free vehicles should be used, 15] To implement eco-village system in the surrounding areas of Kas.

Concluding Remarks:

It is clearly revealed from the study that there is a need to protect and conserve the scenic places like Kas. NGOs role cannot be neglected in protecting Kas. Kas has been protected and conserved by different NGOs in Satara district and as a result of it has been included into World Heritage Centres. NGOs have played an important role in protecting Kas. If all NGOs come together and fight with the wrong decisions of the government, there is possibility of a new social movement for environmental protection and conservation.

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