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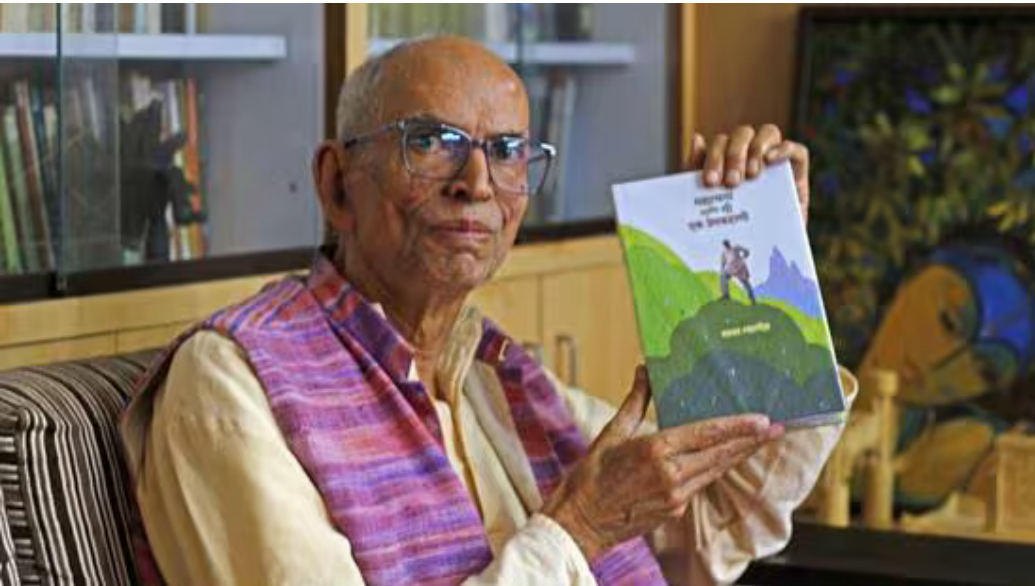
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Madhav combined rigour in his research with a deep sensitivity to issues of people's concerns and livelihoods

By Ashish Kothari



Madhav was one of the few scientists to support the struggles of Adivasis and other forest-dwelling communities to reclaim their rights to govern and use forests. (HT Archive)

Madhav Gadgil called his memoirs *A Walk Up the Hill*. It aptly summed up his life — bold, unconventional, swimming against the tide. In my three-plus decades of knowing and working with him, I found in him the rare ability to bridge several gaps, between various academic fields, and between academics and activism.

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His achievements in the ecological sciences, as founder of the Centre for Ecological Sciences at the Indian Institute of Science, Bengaluru, were remarkable. He was among the first ecologists in modern times to question the authenticity of the forest department's "scientific forestry", showing its ecological unsustainability. He provided a rigorous base of research for many people's movements challenging destructive "development" projects, among them the iconic struggle against the Silent Valley Hydel project in the 1970s-80s. His books on India's ecological history, co-authored with Ramachandra Guha, have been essential readings for generations of students. His contribution to the drafting of India's Biological Diversity Act (we were both members of the drafting committee) was crucial.

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Madhav combined rigour in his research with a deep sensitivity to issues of people's concerns and livelihoods, bridging what is often a huge chasm between advocates for the protection of nature and those of human rights. If this meant getting out of the lab and classroom, where he already excelled, into the messy arenas of what nature and people can teach us outdoors, he never hesitated. If it meant working in multiple languages and cultural idioms and communicating his findings and thoughts to the general public with minimum academic jargon, he reveled in it. If all this entailed challenging authority, he was not shy of it. He opposed policies and projects that he felt were ecologically or socially problematic. He was supportive of our attempt to create a participatory, holistic vision cutting across ecological-political-economic-social divides, in the National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan (NBSAP) process, of which he was on the national advisory body. His seminal report as head of Western Ghats Expert Ecology Panel set up by the ministry of environment, forests and climate change, was historic in its attempt to balance environment, development, livelihoods and rights. It was also inspirational that he stuck to his stand when the same governments that commissioned it rejected the findings and recommendations (as they did our NBSAP report for the same reasons –finding it too uncomfortable in its challenge to prevailing economic and ecological orthodoxy).

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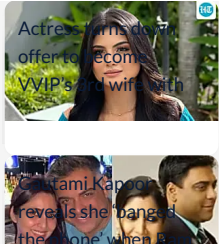
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Madhav was one of the few scientists to support the struggles of Adivasis and other forest-dwelling communities to reclaim their rights to govern and use forests. He spent considerable time helping villagers in Gadchiroli, Maharashtra, to prepare detailed plans for conservation and sustainable use of forests, an inspiring example of combining modern and traditional knowledge in the interests of both humans and the rest of nature. His very recent statement that the forest department should be dissolved and the Wild Life (Protection) Act repealed, generated huge controversy, and would appear to be “extreme”, especially in a situation where these can sometimes be a bulwark against the devastation caused by mining, dams and the like. But there was also a basis for it in that these have caused irreparable damage to the relationship between local communities and nature, disabled long-standing local institutions and knowledge systems that have sustained forests for long, and displaced or dispossessed a large number of forest-dwellers.

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In this and other issues, Madhav’s stands were at times at odds with others in civil society. At times, his view of traditional community practices and knowledge could be criticised as weak on caste and religious inequities. His championing of People’s Biodiversity Registers as a means of documenting the ecological knowledge of communities challenged the notion that only so-called “expert” institutions were the repository of such knowledge. But some of us found this still relied too much on the role of the outside ecological expert, who could inadvertently become dominating, especially as part of homogeneous government programmes. We felt that a more community-led approach such as what was demonstrated by Dalit women farmers of Deccan Development Society in their Community Biodiversity Registers, would be more appropriate. He was, however, always willing to enter into dialogue on such differences and focus on essential commonalities. The need to challenge India’s development trajectory and the centralisation of decision-making power in the State were aspects that made him a significant ally for ecological and social justice movements. In this, he mentored generations of young people into breaking through the shackles of academia.

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In mid-2025, Madhav lost his life partner, Sulochana, herself an accomplished meteorologist. As so often happens in the case of such inspirational and long-duration unions, one partner follows shortly after the other in search of other domains. I have no doubt they are forging new pathways with the same combination of intellectual rigour and human empathy they showed in their earthly journeys. Meanwhile, the rest of us will continue learning and being inspired by what they have left behind.

Ashish Kothari is an environmentalist based in Pune. The views expressed are personal

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By Dikshu C Kukreja



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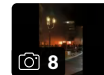
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