

NO SPACE FOR FORESTS

Environment Ministry puts economy first

WESTERN GHATS UNDER SIEGE

Hubballi - Ankola Railway project

POINTS OF CONTENTION

- Disturbs ecologically sensitive regions in Western Ghats
- Affects 596 ha of protected area, 178,325 trees to be axed
- A railway line exists just 80 km north



Kaiga Atomic Power Plant units 5 & 6 expansion

POINTS OF CONTENTION

- Current project disturbs the Kali tiger reserve
- A 100-km long power transmission line along a 75-meter-wide corridor will cut through pristine forest
- 54 ha forest land to be diverted, 8,700 trees might be felled



₹21,000 Cr
Cost of the Project (estimated)

Sharavathi pumped storage Hydroelectric Project (Proposed)

POINTS OF CONTENTION

- The valley already has three dams and four power generation units.
- 150 ha of forest area of the Sharavathi Lion Tailed Macaque Sanctuary to be diverted.
- Classified as endangered by the IUCN, the lion tailed macaque is endemic to the Western Ghats
- The habitat of the 'near-endangered' Deccan Mahaseer, and numerous other endemic species could also be affected



₹4,862 Cr
Cost of the Project (estimated)

NO CONCERN

'Wildlife Board an active agent in environmental destruction'

The Union government believes that environmental laws and regulations are a major hurdle to India becoming a 5 trillion dollar economy, says Ritwick Dutta, co-founder of Legal Initiative for Forest and Environment, in an interview with *DH's* Ashish Tripathi. Excerpts:

Can we compare the approach of NDA and UPA governments towards environment?

If one compares the NDA and UPA regimes, so far as forest, environment and wildlife clearances are concerned, there is no difference in either the number of projects approved or the rate of approval or rejection. The Environment Ministry acts on dictation given by other ministries.

The approach of both governments has always been to approve all projects irrespective of the social and environmental concerns. However, under the present regime, there is a sense of pride in approving the destruction of forest, rivers and coastal areas. The environment minister proudly announces on social media about how much forest land, national parks and sanctuaries have been allowed to be diverted to ensure ease of doing business and to promote economic growth.

Under the UPA, there were at least some initiatives to protect the environment: creation of the National Green Tribunal, protection of the Western Ghats and imposing moratorium on new industries in polluted areas. Also, there was some guilt while approving the destruction of nature.

What impression does the recent meeting of the National Board of Wildlife (NBWL) via video conferencing give?

Many standing committee meetings of NBWLs have taken place through video conferencing even before the lockdown. There is no evidence to show that the decisions would have been different if the meeting was held in person. Our concern should be about the outcome and process. Today, we do not have a functional National Board for Wildlife; it has not met even once after it was reconstituted in 2014.

The powers are exercised by the Standing Committee headed by the Union Environment Minister, who is also the cabinet minister in charge of Industry. The standing committee's entire functioning is illegal—it has no power or authority under the Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972 to divert national parks and sanctuaries for activities which are not for the benefit of wildlife.

What does this hurry say about the government's policy?

Today, there is a belief that once the forest land, national parks, sanctuaries, coasts are opened up and criss-crossed with highways, railway lines, canals, transmission lines and pockmarked with mines and malls, India will magically achieve its double digit growth. The economic advisers of the government however, never factored in cyclones, droughts, floods and now the Covid-19 pandemic.

With respect to the NBWL, in 2018, all 39 proposals for diversion for protected areas were approved; in 2019, all 64 proposals were approved and this year, all the 14 projects involving transmission lines, highways, railways, canals have been approved. The NBWL rather than being a protector has become an active agent in this destruction.

Our budgetary allocation for protection and regeneration of ecosystems is consistently reduced, while active efforts are made to destroy these entities. It is not just the government that has failed the environment; India's judiciary, which at one time played an important role in protecting the environment, is largely a silent spectator; civil society is also largely unable to raise their voice for fear of state retaliation.

What are the implications of such decisions on the ground?

More people die of water and air pollution in India than anywhere else in world. More people depend on the natural ecosystem for their livelihood and survival than any other country. And yet, every action to protect these entities are regarded as a waste of financial resources. By building massive structures we have weaponised the environment and so when cyclones and floods happen, it is these man-made structures that kill us.

Have your say

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Forest clearance, from page 1

Interestingly, Shivamogga has emerged as the centre of a dreaded zoonotic disease, the Kyasanur Forest Disease (KFD), with a fatality rate ranging from 3 to 10 per cent. There is a fear that a proposal to set up projects like pumped storage deep inside the forest might yet again result in an outbreak of infectious diseases.

Pointing at the possibility of such a scenario, Ramachandra said, "Removal of native species of vegetation and forestation with exotic monoculture like acacia, eucalyptus and teak has deprived the dependent population (monkey) of their food, forcing them to enter human habitations. This has brought diseases like KFD (a viral infection) into human colonies. Nipah virus is also linked to changes in ecological conditions that have led to fruit bats coming out of their natural habitat and feeding on agricultural produce consumed by humans."

Forest ecology and ecosystem management expert Dr M D Subash Chandran, who has studied this region extensively, says, "Even a small intervention will have irreversible damage to one of the last remains of the primary forests and disturb the habitats of numerous endemic species, including the myristica swamps and the lion tailed macaque."

However, the project proponent KPCL clarified that there will not be any greater disturbances, as the project is taken up underground. "This project is crucial for grid balancing, particularly to manage the less predictable renewable energy. Considering the terrain and the available infrastructure, there is no alternative to this site. The environmental assessment will be done if the survey results are favourable, and to my understanding the ecological impact will be negligible as the entire project will be undertaken underground and we don't need any new structures," KPCL Managing Director V Ponnuraj told *DH*.

Deliberate push

Karnataka's deliberate push for the controversial Hubballi-Ankola railway project, despite repeated rejection by several statutory bodies, raises doubts over the role of vested interests in the project. In fact, the project was cleared by the board in the absence of several members just based on recommendation of 'special invitees'. Even though the project was conceived with an aim of providing transport facility to the iron ore, members of the state board with a background in the mining industry, including forest minister Anand Singh, had conveyed not to recommend the project.

Supporting their claim, a cost-benefit analysis done by the user agency for a period of over 30-years has revealed negative revenue for passenger service besides suggesting no significant revenue in freight operations. Considering the revenue possibilities, there are both rail and road alternatives to the project.

If the rail network does not serve the purpose, the existing Hubballi-Ankola-Karwar National Highway-52 (Old NH-63) which runs almost parallel to the proposed railway alignment underutilised, according to the observations of many statutory authorities.

NE up in arms against projects in eco-sensitive zones

SUMIR KARMAKAR
GUWAHATI, DHNS

Who can't buy oxygen with money, can we? Gauhati University's zoology student Diksheeta Chutia's post was retweeted by many within minutes on May 24. On the same day, hundreds took to twitter and posted several similar catchy and strong posts on #SaveDehingPatkai, an online campaign launched to oppose the Centre's move to allow coal mining at Saleki, a part of Dehing Patkai Elephant Reserve in eastern Assam.

The "twitter storm" campaign topped the twitter trends that evening. The campaign was launched by the varsity's Eco Club and was later joined by students from Dibrugarh University, Tezpur University and Bhattadev University.

"Since we can't move out to the streets and protest due to the lockdown, we decided to do twitter storm, which has become a popular mode of campaign which nowadays," said Bidyut Bikash Das, an alumnus of Gauhati University, who is

also part of the campaign. "The coal mining being carried out near Dehing Patkai has already badly impacted the environment and lives of the indigenous people living in the fringe villages," environmentalist Debarshi Raj Barman told *DH*. "Any form of mining (be it open cast or underground) will destroy the already endangered animal species like hoolock gibbon, 300 species of birds, mammals and the endemic orchid species in and around Dehing Patkai forest. More mining will increase the human-elephant conflicts and pollute waters in the rivers and streams there," he said. "It is really surprising to see how the government used the lockdown time to move ahead with such a controversial project. They know that aggrieved people can't protest much now."



A campaign poster against coal mining near Dehing Patkai forest in Assam.

Dehing Patkai is locally known as Amazon of the East.

In its April 7 meeting, the National Board for Wild Life (NBWL) took decisions regarding several projects across the country including at least five in Assam, Arunachal Pradesh and Mizoram. The NBWL, a body under the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEFCC), also took steps for extension of drilling inside Dibru Saikhowa National Park in Tinsukia and Dibrugarh district in eastern Assam. Forest clearance for alignment of roads to connect Miao and remote Vijayanagar via Namdapha Tiger Reserve in Arunachal Pradesh was also approved.

The recent nod for 3,097-MW Etalin hydroelectric project in Dibang Valley in Arunachal Pradesh also drew strong protests from the communities as well as ex-

ponents. Similar "twitter storm" campaign is underway against the Etalin project.

On May 18, conservationists and former members of the NBWL together wrote a letter to MoEFCC seeking rejection of a key sub-committee's nod for the project that would involve axing 2.7 lakh trees.

Assam forest minister Parimal Suklabaidya, who visited Dehing Patkai on May 27 said the place where the coal mining was proposed was away from the reserve areas. "But we will make sure that our forests, wildlife and ecology is protected," he said.

Narayan Sharma, an assistant professor of environmental biology and wildlife sciences, Cotton University in Guwahati, said, "The forests of this region have been historically exploited for coal, oil and expansion of tea gardens. What remains today are the shadows of their pasts. Despite all these, the forests of upper Assam still harbour stunning biodiversity which is unparalleled in the world. We should not intervene and jeopardise their habitats."

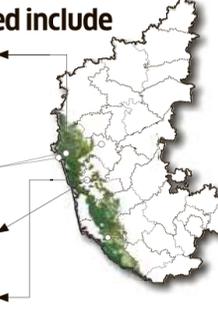
Recent Wildlife Board approvals



- ASSAM, DEHING PATKAI ELEPHANT RESERVE Purpose: Coal mining
- GOA, XELDEM Purpose: Power transmission line
- MIZORAM, DAMPA TIGER RESERVE Purpose: Road widening
- GUJARAT, GIRNAR WILDLIFE SANCTUARY Purpose: Underground electric line
- TELANGANA, MANCHERIAL DISTRICT Purpose: Railway line
- UTTARAKHAND DEHRADUN, TEHRI GARHWAL DISTRICT Purpose: Dam construction
- RAJASTHAN, MUKUNDR TIGER RESERVE, KOTA Purpose: Limestone and Masonry mining

Projects cleared include

- 2017: Kaiga Hydel Power Project 54.09 ha in Non-protected areas (Dandeli Wildlife Sanctuary)
- 2016: Hubballi Ankola Railway line
- 2019: Sharavathi Pumped Storage Project
- 2018: Sharavathi bridge



DISEASES OUTBREAKS LINKED TO ECOLOGICAL DESTRUCTION

MOSQUITOES (Deforestation leads to increased breeding of mosquitoes)

- Malaria
- Dengue
- Chikungunya
- Zika virus

ZOOONOTIC DISEASES

- Nipah Virus
- Leptospirosis
- Kyasanur Forest disease

Wildlife Clearance in Karnataka

Year	Proposals	Pending with SG/MoEFFC	Disposed (Approved)
2015	4	0	0
2016	46	0	14
2017	23	1	1
2018	32	0	6
2019	38	4	0

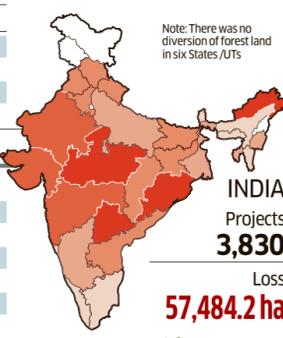
Forest clearance for various projects from 2016-2020

IN KARNATAKA

Year	Projects	Loss (in ha)
2016-17	20	199.20
2017-18	15	320.71
2018-19	7	140.64
2019-20	15	202.67
Total	57	863.2

States with Highest and Lowest forest clearances

State	Projects	Loss (in ha)
Madhya Pradesh	458	9,234.53
Odisha	64	9,982.9
Arunachal Pradesh	9	4,983.09
Telangana	49	7,571.21
Kerala	9	7.48
Tamil Nadu	14	70.81



Loss of trees in the last decade



SOURCE: KARNATAKA FOREST DEPARTMENT ANNUAL REPORT: 2016 - 2019, CENTRE FOR SCIENCE AND ENVIRONMENT REPORT, LOK SABHA QUESTIONS TO MINISTRY OF ENVIRONMENT, FOREST AND CLIMATE CHANGE, PARIVESH PORTAL, MINUTES OF MEETING OF 57TH MEETING OF NBWL

COMPILED BY: PRAJWAL SUVARNA
DH GRAPHICS: RAMU M

Other projects

Little up the Ghats from the Sharavathi Valley, NBWL's previous permission in January 2020 to take up doubling of the existing railway line from Casterlock to Kulem and Kulem to Madgaon in neighbouring Goa and widening of road along the Karnataka border may also end up impacting the wildlife and their habitat in the region. "The doubling project's alignment from Tinaighat to Casterlock falls within Karnataka and the state had also submitted a proposal for clearance. Despite the Regional Empowered Committee resolving to support the project by both the states as a whole, the standing committee of NBWL in a hurried manner cleared the

proposals of Goa," explained an activist from Goa.

Coming out strongly against the new normal of according virtual clearances devoid of proper site inspection and investigation, former member of the NBWL Praveen Bhargava said, "The Apex Court's ruling in the Lafarge Judgment insisted that in case of any doubts on the status of land made by the user agency, it shall be inspected by forest officials along with the members from the ministry to ascertain the status of forests. But during the lockdown, this may not be possible. Hence these 30 plus proposals must not be implemented and considered afresh after the end of the pandemic."

The decisions at the State Board for

wildlife are no different. Sanjay Gubbi, a senior member of the Karnataka Wildlife Board, said, "Some projects that have serious ecological consequences are cleared without providing any opportunity for field inspection. Two recent examples are the Hubballi-Ankola railway line and the Sharavathi pumped storage project. When it comes to the State Board for Wildlife, members are not even given adequate meeting notice to study the documents to be well prepared with reasonable arguments."

Gubbi also noted that the board is now becoming a medium to get project clearances, while its duty is to advise the government in selection and management of protected areas, policy formulation

for the conservation of wildlife, and harmonising the needs of forest dwellers and conservation of wildlife.

Well-known activist S R Hiremath raises concern about the lack of participatory approach while planning and executing conservation projects making them unsustainable. "Nature can never be managed well until people close to it are involved in its management and a healthy relationship is established between nature, society and culture."

Subash Chandran sums it up, "The emphasis today should be on restructuring economy with least disturbance to pristine ecosystems."

(With inputs from Anitha Pailoor and Mrityunjay Bose)

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(With inputs from Anitha Pailoor and Mrityunjay Bose)

"Unfortunately, these days most citizen conservation campaigns have been restricted to a rhetorical outcry on social media, or models that are based on revenue generation using online petition engagements. Wildlife conservation for many is a fashion statement. Sadly, these social media heroes are becoming the face of conservation and misleading the public, media, and importantly the younger generation. Though many youngsters have the right intentions, they are misguided by these social media heroes. The number of individuals who succeed to get measurable on-ground changes are far and few"

Scan the QR code to read the full interview of noted conservation biologist and member of the Karnataka State Board for Wildlife

SANJAY GUBBI

