

Sunday Herald Art & Culture

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Handpicked consultants working backwards

Praveen Bhargav points out how the environmental policy is being rushed through with the help of hurriedly constituted Environmental Impact Assessment.

WILDLIFE FIRST FEATURES

The Ministry of Environment and Forests is presently making energetic attempts to rush the proposed National Environmental Policy through without any independent scientific opinion or serious public debate. It appears, amongst other things that the underlying objective of the draft policy is to hasten economic development by weakening the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) regulations to reduce delays in environmental clearances. If approved, this has the potential of causing serious damage, considering the fact that EIAs are already turning into a farcical exercise.

Environmental Impact Assessments (EIA) are mandatory for companies planning projects in ecologically sensitive areas. While this is a very necessary exercise, the manner in which it is carried out is a story of absolute deceit which results in hijacking of the positive intent with which EIAs came to be. EIAs are waylaid by the companies from the start, right from the time the consultants are handpicked and how they are co-opted to deploy their often non-existent expertise to cover up marked deleterious impacts the company's operations would have on the environment.

Such consultants have mushroomed all over the country to cater to companies which require mandatory EIA reports on the likely deleterious impact on the environment arising out of their activities and a plan to mitigate those impacts. The consultants, often unqualified and plainly inept, first rustle up a report called the Rapid EIA (REIA) which almost always gives a clean chit to the company. These reports are carelessly cobbled together, bereft of rigorous data and glosses over or even suppress obvious facts about potential environmental damage.

Most consultants have arrived through relatively short routes. They are usually retired government officials or scientists who have published little in peer reviewed journals. They prepare their launch pad by playing to the media

to build up a halo of a crusading environmentalist. Concerns expressed avowedly on behalf of the environment are merely ruses for other hidden consultancy agendas. In reality, the consultants wear two hats- one, as environmentalist for salability and status and another, as EIA consultants.

The road to environmental protection is littered with stark examples of how various EIAs have tried to paper over possibly catastrophic ecological damage inflicted by various projects. When a large Public sector iron ore mining company planned a dam across Kachige Holey (a tributary of the river Bhadra) inside the Kudremukh National Park it hired a specialist EIA consultant to prepare a report on the environmental impact of the proposed dam, the report was found to be inadequate and factually incorrect by several conservation groups which voiced serious objections at the mandatory public hearing.

The report overlooked several obvious ecological facts relating to the area where the proposed dam was to be built. First, that the proposed submerged area was a national park; second, that the area was one of the 25 global biodiversity hotspots; third, that it was a habitat for several endangered flora and fauna and that the area was of watershed value where three important rivers of peninsular India originated.

Another glaring case study concerns the same mining company. The EIA, for reasons best known to the consultants, did not carry out studies pertaining to sediment discharge arising from open cast iron ore mining in a 7000 mm rainfall area which is subject to severe rain storms of high erosivity.

On the other hand, a sedimentation study done by two reputed scientific institutions during the monsoons found that over 67,000 metric tons of sediment entered the Bhadra River during 60 days of sediment sampling, just downstream of the mining area.

The sediment loads were also estimated to be 20 times more than the upstream of mining area. Such heavy silt loads entering the River, very close to where it originates, would surely have serious long term impacts on the reservoirs and irrigation canal network down river.

Yet another EIA on the proposed mini hydro-electric power project at the Brahmagiri Wildlife Sanctuary shies away from the truth. Brahmagiri sanctuary is a vital corridor for elephants facilitating local migratory movements within the protected area network of Bandipur-Nagarahole-Mudhumalai-Wayanad region.

Habitat fragmentation and its consequent edge effects have been unanimously recognised as the primary cause for the destruction of tropical forests. The mini hydel power project would most certainly lead to fragmentation of this important habitat.

However, the EIA consultants have energetically glossed over several important ecological issues concerning the area to arrive at a predetermined result that the projects environmental impacts are minimal.

The same consultants carried out another Rapid Environment Impact Assessment of the proposed 57 MW wind mill project on Bababudan Hills and

increased sedimentation following land use changes; erection of over 75 wind turbines along the ridge of the Bababudangiri mountain range would involve large scale construction activity disturbing the corridor for animal movement; the chances of birds getting caught and killed by the rotor blades of the wind turbines is great.

Overlooking these facts, the Rapid EIA concluded that the proposed wind power project would in no way interfere with the ecosystem and has no other harmful effect. These case studies demonstrate that EIAs have turned into an absurd practice of *working backwards* with a preconceived goal that is set by the company.

If an EIA is to be above board, the consultants selected must have an impeccable track record. Funding links between the company and the consultants must be severed. The consultants must have some accreditation and be independently funded by the government. Only if such mechanisms are in place can we expect Environment Impact Assessments to be meaningful and help in making informed decisions. This would not only ensure that economic development progresses unhindered but would also address genuine environmental issues and concerns.

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