



# THE NEW INDIAN EXPRESS

## Shettar has his way, gets Hubballi-Ankola line cleared

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BENGALURU: Just 10 days after he cancelled the ‘controversial’ Hubballi-Ankola railway line project, Karnataka Chief Minister BS Yediyurappa approved it at a special meeting of the state wildlife board on Friday. He later directed the forest department to send the file to National Board for Wildlife, a wildlife board member, who was present at the meeting, told The New Indian Express.

The move shocked conservationists, forest officials and wildlife board members, who had hoped to impress upon the authorities the adverse impact the railway line would have on the tiger reserve. The 150 km line proposes 80 tunnels and chopping down of 1.5-2 lakh trees.

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“We lost half the battle when the file was sent back to the forest department on March 18 with the note saying ‘discussion needed’. Then we lost it completely when the CM, along with Large and Medium-Scale Industries Minister Jagadish Shettar, Labour Minister Arbail Shivaram Hebbar and Congress leader RV Deshpande (non-board members), sat at the board meeting,” forest department sources said.

A board member said that the CM started reading out the pros and cons of the project, and Shettar took over midway, saying it was important for North Karnataka’s development and that former prime minister Atal Behari Vajpayee too had announced it.

“Shettar said afforestation activities could be carried out to replace that trees that would be lost. Deshpande added that since forests in Karnataka have improved, felling of a few trees would cause no harm. The CM’s announcement to take the project to the cabinet was cut short by Chief Secretary TM Vijay Bhaskar, who said the decision should be taken at the board meeting itself.

Forest officials tried to buy time by suggesting that the project be discussed with Forest Minister Anand Singh. But Yediyurappa cut them short saying he had already spoken to Singh. Quoting a 2013 IISc report, Shettar said that the project area has been reduced by 350 hectares and 3.4 km length. He added that money would be allocated for eco-development and claimed that the IISc’s mitigation measures were sufficient,” the board member said.

“Forest officials said the IISc report was never shared with them. They suggested the CM take an aerial view of the area that would be affected, but the ministers were reluctant. Board members tried to convince Yediyurappa that water in the peninsular region and endemic biodiversity would be adversely affected. They also said the existing Goa railway line is being doubled and Ankola development through Madgaon can happen. Board members also pointed out that the IISc report was not important as the National Green Tribunal cancelled the project in 2016. They also said that the project would take 10-15 years to complete and labour colonies would become permanent encroachments in the Western Ghats. The chief secretary said labourers would be housed in villages located 5-10km away from project sites. Eventually, the CM cleared the project on Shettar’s request,” the member said.

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