

Hundreds protest as Kaiga nuclear plant expansion threatens Western Ghats

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Activists say the expansion plan could wipe out 54 hectares of forest in the Western Ghats as well as threaten the lives of those residing in the vicinity of the plant.

Environmental activists, religious leaders and residents living in the vicinity of the Kaiga Atomic Power Station held a public protest in Mallapura on Sunday raising concerns over the expansion of the power plant.

"We are going to the strike," 34-year-old Milana Bandekar said, pointing to a group of women headed to Mallapura in the government bus from Karwar in Uttara Kannada district of Karnataka. Mallapura is adjacent to the Kaiga Township where employees of the power plant reside.

The Kaiga plant had started commercial operations in November 2000, after being commissioned in 1989. The plant set up 56 km away from Karwar, currently has four functional units generating 220 MW of power. 33% of the power generated is reserved for Karnataka.

This is the first of many such large protests set to be organised against the Kaiga expansion plan after all environmental regulatory hurdles were cleared at the state and Centre level on Aug. 29. The plant currently has four units but the Nuclear Power Corporation Ltd. under the Department of Atomic Energy has proposed a fifth and sixth unit.

However, activists want the project to be shelved. They argue that expanding the Kaiga plant will take up 54 hectares of forests in the eco-sensitive Western Ghats in the buffer zone of Kali Tiger Reserve. They urged the government to consider replacing it with other safer and cheaper power generating options like solar and wind energy.

Other than the pristine wildlife zone that will be destroyed, activists point out due to lack of an elaborate safety protocol, the entire project might put the lives of the people living in the vicinity of this plant in danger

Another source of contention is the nuclear plant's overdependence on water. Once functional, the two expanded units will consume 7,500 cubic metres of water per hour.

"The water used by the upcoming units can be used by 15 lakh people instead," said Shankar Sharma, a power policy analyst, at the convention.

Shankar also questioned the government's lack of acknowledgement of reports of radiation levels in these areas.



A Tata Memorial Centre report in 2010 had said there was a spurt in cases of cancer over the past two decades in Kaiga. Experts insist that this is because of the radioactive pollution caused by the nuclear power plant. The government has neither acknowledged such reports, nor has it carried out any assessment on its own.

Vishwesa Theertha, the chief seer of Udupi's Pejawar mutt, addressing the crowd, said, “Scientists have explained what will happen here and we must resist the expansion of this power station.”.



The organisers of the convention also got support from Ex Karwar MLA Satish Sail who said that he along with others are going to fight the issue on legal front and ensure that the project does not see the light of the day.

“Today, science, spirituality and the culture of this region has come together because we have not received a response from the Indian government,” said IISc professor TV Ramachandra.



Additional Director of the Ministry of Environment, Forests and Climate Change Dr Shruthi Rai Bharadwaj while clearing the project had reportedly noted that many villagers were in favour of the project as it would result in more jobs and local infrastructure in the area. She also acknowledged there was some opposition to it.

In December 2018, local environmental groups — Uttara Kannada Zilla Praisara Samrakshana Samiti, Bedti Aghanashini Kolla Samiti and Vruksha Laksha and residents of the area – had also opposed the expansion of the power plant during the mandated public consultation process.

Recently, even Gangadharendra Saraswati Swamiji, the seer of Sonda Swarnavalli Mutt, had also opposed the nuclear plant's expansion.