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Gundia: Eco-disaster in the making?

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Sept. 26: Even as 65-year-old Subbegowda, a local biodiversity expert from Hongadahalla leads the way into the pristine tropical rain forests pointing at various plant and tree species and rattling off their local names, a brown keelback snake slithers right past him with its meal in its mouth.

The serpent literally poses for the camera bobbing its head up and down, gulping down a frog, before disappearing into the dense undergrowth.

‘Indrella Ampulla’ is the next name that Subbegowda utters. For, he is standing next to a mollusc which is slowly inching its way on the forest path. “This snail is endemic to the Western Ghats,” he says. As we made our way through a natural tent of creepers with purple flowers in full bloom, he excitedly points out to a plant species, which he says has been in existence in this ecologically sensitive hotspot right from the Jurassic era.

It is only when he shows us the freshly laid elephant dung that his face assumes a troubled look. The dung sits pretty on a milestone, which reads “KPCL”. “I still can’t believe how anybody can think of plundering these precious forests,” he says sadly.

Subbegowda is referring to the controversial Gundia Hydro Electric Project (GHEP), proposed to be built by the Karnataka Power Corporation Ltd (KPCL), which will cut through tens of kilometers of virgin tropical forests of the Western Ghats in Kodagu, Hassan and Dakshina districts.

“Why can’t the government spend the same thousands of crores of rupees on setting up solar panels atop all the city structures, instead of damaging these natural reserves? Why is it so important to lose out on precious species of flora and fauna, just to take electricity to Bengaluru city? KPCL proposes to build a 60 ft road, and a tunnel in the forest patch that we are now standing on. There are elephants, gaur, wild boar, porcupine, armadillo, mouse deer, lion tailed macaque and several other endangered species in these forest ranges. Are we ready to sacrifice them all?” asks Subbegowda.

KPCL proposes to build weirs across streams such as Yettinahole, Krihole and Hongadahalla and divert the water towards Bettakumbri River, where a dam with a catchment area of 35 sq km will be constructed. Water from the streams will be brought to Bettakumbri dam via an interconnecting tunnel of 9.9 km.

The project to be implemented in three phases proposes to harness 200 MW from the first phase by diverting Addahole and Girihole rivers, which converge to form the Kumardhara River, a major source of water for wildlife in the Bisle Reserve Forest. The project is also said to damage the traditional elephant corridor, which starts from the Bramhagiri ranges and Pushpagiri Wildlife Sanctuary in Kodagu; Yesalur, Bisle state forest, Yettinahalla, Hongadahalla and Bajemane reserve forests in Hassan; and moves upwards towards Kudremukh wildlife sanctuary.

What started off as a silent revolution has now picked up as a strong movement, with the locals sensitised to the subject protesting against the project, which was proposed in the year 1998. After continuous studies for the past decade, the Expert Appraisal Committee (EAC) constituted by the MoEF, has shockingly just

advised the ministry that it can go ahead with the project. The anxious locals, biodiversity and wildlife experts, and environmentalists, are however breathing a small sigh of relief after ecologist Prof Madhav Gadgil and his team of members from the Western Ghats Ecology Expert Panel, paid a two-day visit to the project site.

For Subbegowda too, Gadgil's visit has assumed much importance. "All is not lost yet. We are all keeping our fingers crossed that this advisory panel will recommend to the MoEF to spike the project. If not, we have to be prepared for a huge disaster," he adds with trepidation.

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