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## Speed rail: Another white elephant set to trample city?

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Bengaluru, Sept. 8: After the Metro Rail and Mono Rail, the city is now being promised a High Speed Rail Link (HSRL) to Bengaluru International Airport (BIA), infuriating green activists who are afraid it will sound the death knell for hundreds of more trees without serving any real purpose.

They see no sense in the government trying to make the lives of 30,000 air passengers easier while leaving over 20 lakh people in the more central areas of the city to make the best of poor infrastructure and transport. "When there are so many other issues requiring its attention why is the government bent upon seeing the HSRL project through," they ask, pointing out that the project was not even discussed in the legislature or in public forums.

They also don't see what purpose the high speed rail link will serve when there are already several trains to Devanahalli on the existing tracks. Their opposition to the HSRL is not without basis, as environmental scientists too feel that the project has not been thought out very scientifically.

T.V. Ramachandra of the Energy and Wetland Research Group of the Indian Institute of Science says the government has never conducted a carrying capacity study of Bengaluru to help it assess how much development the city requires and what project should come first.

"The government is sleeping over suggestions made by scientists and researchers to conduct a study to see how much more development the city can handle. How can a project like HSRL be initiated without even studying its impact on the city," he wonders. Green activists feel the judiciary is misled by project developers into believing that the greenery that is destroyed, will be fully restored after its completion.

Ritwik Dutta, an environmental lawyer in the Supreme Court, says the compensatory afforestation which is done for mega developmental project does not really fulfill the requirements of the law. "The trees are replanted several miles away from the infrastructure site whereas the law specifies that they should be planted at the same site to restore the environmental conditions that existed before the project was launched. The developers usually occupy all the land, without making provision for the trees that must be replanted there," he says. With 30 per cent of the city's green cover having vanished in the last few years the Greens feel they are fighting a losing battle.

They would like to see a more pro-active approach from the people at large and the judiciary to development projects to make sure the government is more sensitive to environmental concerns when planning them and does not take impulsive decisions that will cost it more trees.

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