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Mini-hydro projects still a major threat to Western Ghats

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The Kunthur/Panaja range reserve forests where rare medicinal plants, endemic evergreen trees and endangered fish find habitat, could be submerged if the project is implemented, according to a study.

Special Arrangement

Project planned in Puttur taluk could submerge over 1,800 ha

The blanket ban on all new mini-hydro power projects in the Western Ghats, ordered three months ago by the Karnataka High Court and celebrated by environmentalists, may not, after all, be as all-encompassing as was intended.

A 24-MW hydro power project proposed for the Kumaradhara in Dakshina Kannada's Puttur taluk could well become a reality as it was sanctioned on 'private land' prior to the High Court order. The hydel project, proposed by Kukke Hydro Powers Pvt. Ltd., could submerge 1,882 hectares of land, including agricultural fields and prime forests, according to a report commissioned by the Western Ghats Task Force in April.

Although the company claims that the project involves "no submergence of land, hence no loss of species... [or] any resettlement or rehabilitation of the people," a study invited by the Task Force warns of "complete dislocations of

traditional livelihoods associated with agriculture, horticulture, cattle wealth, and forest-based livelihoods.”

Cropland and plantations account for 36 per cent of the land that could submerge while forests constitute 46 per cent, it adds. This includes the Kunthur/Panaja range reserve forests where rare medicinal plants, endemic evergreen trees and endangered fish find habitat, says the report by the Centre for Ecological Sciences at the Indian Institute of Science (IISc.). The Kumaradhara originates in Kodagu and joins the Gundia and the Netravati in Puttur taluk.

Dozens more

By the admission of Karnataka Renewable Energy Development Ltd. (KREDL), the project proposed by Kukke Hydro Powers is one of the dozens of similar mini-hydro projects that still stand a fighting chance of being commissioned in the Western Ghats despite the High Court order.

“Any project, sanctioned in privately owned land, before the High Court order was made, could be legally commissioned,” said a KREDL official who did not want to be named. “Nearly half of the 158 projects sanctioned before the High Court order could become operational if they get approval from the Forest Department,” the official told *The Hindu*. In January, residents of five villages in Puttur taluk protested against the project, whose promoters, they said, had blocked their access to the river. Meanwhile, the Mangalore DCF has booked a case against the company for felling trees without permission on the site of the proposed project.

The hydro power project is “ecologically and economically unviable” and “needs to be shelved”, says the report prepared by a team led by T.V. Ramachandra of CES.

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