



Wednesday 6 October 2010

Weather
Max: 27°C
Min: 21°C



In Bangalore
Rain lightly

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DEVELOPMENT

Caught in a green row

The MoEF has referred the Gundya hydel power project to the Western Ghats ecology expert panel. A final view on the project will be taken after this panel submits a report. Meanwhile, locals and experts are not exactly in favour of the project, writes Ronald Anil Fernandes



If implemented, this power project may harm one of the world's 18 bio-diversity hotspots, the Western Ghats. We are talking about the Gundya hydel power project, at the centre of a row. The Hongadahalla Gram Panchayat in its meeting on April 11, 2005, unanimously resolved to oppose the hydel power project. Since then, several environmentalists have raised their voice against the project, which threatens to destroy hundreds of acres of forest land. Though Union Minister for Environment and Forests Jairam Ramesh has opposed the project, Chief Minister B S Yeddyurappa laid the foundation stone for the first unit (200 MW) of Gundya Hydel Power Project at Yettinahole, about 18 kms from Sakleshpur in Hassan district on May 24, 2009, amidst heavy police security owing to threat of protests from environmentalists.

The project



The Gundya Hydel Power Project, proposed by Karnataka Power Corporation Limited (KPCL), and located in Sakleshpur taluk of Hassan district and Puttur taluk of Dakshina Kannada district, involves construction of three weirs and two dams — a weir of 15 metres height across the Yettinahole, eight metres high weir across the Kerihole, 36 metre-high weir across the Hongadahalla, 62 metre-high dam across the Bettakumeri stream and about 90.50 m high earthen dam across the Hongadahalla river to store about 132 million cubic metre of water. These reservoirs are proposed to be connected by

interconnecting tunnels which lead water to Bettakumeri reservoir and then on to turbines at Gundya underground power house at Horibetta, about 8 kms from the Gundya checkpoint. The Phase I alone would include 7.8 km underground headrace tunnel and 3.1 km tailrace tunnel amidst the thick evergreen forests.

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The Expert Appraisal Committee (EAC) has considered this project thrice since 2008 and in its June 30, 2010 meeting in Delhi, finally decided to scrap the Hongadahalla dam from the scheme. Now, the total land requirement has decreased from 1,041 ha to 478.96 ha (private land 71.98 ha, forest land 113.22 ha and revenue land including river course is 293.76 ha).

Confusion

When it was reported that the Centre had given the green signal for Gundya project on July 12, the Union Ministry of Environment and Forests (MoEF) quickly clarified on the following day (July 13) that the MoEF has referred the Gundya hydel power project to the Western Ghats Ecology Expert panel, under the chairmanship of Prof Madhav Gadgil to look at the development and environmental issues in the context of the ecologically-significant, bio-diversity-rich and environmentally-sensitive Western Ghats region. "The MoEF will take a final view on the project once this panel submits its report," a MoEF release stated. According to Prof Madhav Gadgil, a former professor at the IISc, Bangalore, the panel is planning to visit some projects in the Western Ghats in the future.

A group of people under the banner of Malenadu Janapara Horata Samithi has been opposing the project ever since it was mooted several years ago.

Home to rare species

Speaking to Deccan Herald, Samithi President H A Kishor Kumar said that if the project is implemented, then it will damage more than 1,900 acres of evergreen rain forest in the Western Ghats. "Gundya is the only place where a rare species of frog Indirana Gundia is found. It is also known as 'purple frog' and 'pignose frog'. The endangered Lion-tailed Macaque, Mouse Deer, Cylon Frogmouthed Bird, Tigers, Great Pied Hornbill etc., are found here," he said and added that the implementation of project may affect all these endangered species besides destroying the natural forests which cannot be recreated by human beings. "They have evolved themselves to this stage in the course of thousands of years," he quips.



Referring to the visit of noted environmentalist and Chipko movement leader Sunderlal Bahuguna to Gundya on December 21, 2009, Kumar, quoting Bahuguna, said, "No man or government can create oxygen and water no matter how much money is spent. So we have no right to destroy them."

Interestingly, Hettur Devraj, one of the localites and convenor of Janapara Horata Samithi, said that every time the Samithi applied for some information through Right to Information (RTI) Act, it received different figures. "Be it the required land, project details or any other information pertaining to the project, we get different figures every time we seek it through RTI," he informs.

Not quite worth it?

Energy expert and power policy analyst Shankar Sharma told Deccan Herald that the project proposal to utilise its installed capacity for only 32 per cent of the time is probably one of the least beneficial hydel projects to our society because of the huge socio-environmental costs associated. "The thick evergreen forests will have a major impact on the bio-diversity rich Western Ghats," he said. Endangered and endemic species of flora and fauna in this area cannot be effectively rehabilitated, he pointed out.

Stating that the systemic weaknesses in according clearances to such high-impact projects are so many and so pervasive, Sharma opines that state governments seem to be convinced that getting environmental clearance is only a matter of time and that it is just a political game.

It may be recalled that KPCL Managing Director J M Jaamdar had told presspersons (on the day of laying foundation stone for the project on May 24, 2009) that the MoEF had sent a letter to the KPCL permitting it to go ahead with "pre-construction" works such as conducting the survey, demarcating the forest land, inviting tenders and so on. He had also said the KPCL had satisfactorily completed all the formalities involved in getting environmental clearance. Very often, the minutes of the public hearing contain gross misrepresentations and generally fail to record the issues objectively, basically to favour the project proponent. "Unless the people opposing the project on socio-environmental grounds are given adequate opportunity to explain their viewpoints, and unless such views are taken into objective account, the process of environmental clearance can at the best be termed a charade," opines Sharma.

Interestingly, according to an estimate, as much as 900 MW of power is lost during transmission and distribution (T&D), which is more than double the amount of power the Gundya hydel power project can generate. There are many benign options such as replacing the inefficient incandescent lamps by energy-efficient CFLs, reducing the T&D losses and other energy conservation methods. Do we really need the Gundya hydel power project then?

Alternative for Western Ghats?

Mohan, a resident of the project area, who is facing the threat of eviction, points out that wild animals stray into human habitats because we encroach theirs. "The Gundya hydel power project or similar other projects can be set up somewhere else. The required power too can be

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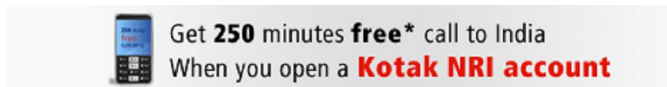
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brought from other sources. But can anybody replace the Western Ghats," he asks. That's a question bureaucrats need to ask themselves.

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By: Natarajan
On: 29 Jul 2010 10:22 pm

a very good article, it concerns about the destruction of ghat areas..many more stories of this and the like from DH and the reporter should be congratulated.

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By: dk
On: 29 Jul 2010 10:39 am

If all the people opposing the project get together and create enough support through awareness, maybe this project can be stopped through sheer public will! More scientists and environmentalists must be involved with the EIA process

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