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Gundia project against people and environment: activists

Shama Sunder

'Project report has been prepared in a hurry and contains mistakes'

It will destroy Western Ghats: Hegde

'Impact of project on environment, people

not studied'

HASSAN: Chief convener of Vrukshalaksha Andolana Karnataka, Asheesara Anantha Hegde, has cautioned the local people, including farmers, to be alert and study the report on the Gundia power project before agreeing to its establishment. Any mistake on their part would have disastrous consequences, he added.

He was presenting the various arguments regarding the project at a public hearing presided over by Deputy Commissioner Naveen Raj Singh at Hongadahalla village in Sakleshpur taluk — 90 km from Hassan — on Wednesday.

Mr. Singh said he would record the minutes of the meeting and send it to State Government soon.

Mr. Hegde said the Gundia forest was internationally famous as it had rare species of animals and medicinal plants, and as many as 30 rivers which originated in the Western Ghats.

He said if the project was implemented, it would not only destroy the Western Ghats, but also affect rainfall and drinking water in Hassan district. "The Gundia forest is the nucleus of the Western Ghats. Agitations have been staged against the project for the past three years. People have also urged the Government not to accept the Environment Impact Assessment (EIA) report for the project, prepared by the Institute for Catchment Studies and Environment Management (ICSEM), as it has committed mistakes. The report has been prepared in a hurry. There is no consistency in it. The impact of the project on the local people and the environment has not been studied at all," he said.

'A big project'

Mr. Hegde said the project was not meant to be a small hydroelectric generation project. Five dams were to be constructed. This would be one of the biggest projects in the country, when completed. He said the project would require 973 hectares of land, in addition to which 1,450 hectares of forest land that would have to be acquired. The Karnataka Power Transmission Corporation Ltd. had not calculated the number of trees to be felled to draw high-tension power

lines, he alleged. In Kaiga alone, 80,000 trees had been felled.

Mr. Hegde said that the Western Ghats had been recognised as a biodiversity hot spot, but unfortunately the Government was trying to destroy it by launching such projects. This would also affect tourism in the region, he added.

He said the project, which was expected to generate 400 MW of power, involved the construction of weirs across the Yettinahole, the Kerihole, the Hongadahalla, and dams across the Bettakumari and Hongadahalla rivers.

Water would have to be transferred from these rivers through a tunnel to the Bettakumari balancing reservoir from where it would be carried to the underground powerhouse at Gundia to produce power.

If this was permitted, a huge forest area would have to be destroyed. The movement of heavy vehicles and blasting of rock would further destroy the ecological system. Mr. Hegde said the proposed project would take away 774 hectares of reserve forest land and 107 hectares of revenue land. He said protected hills such as the Pushpagiri and Brahmagiri, which had medicinal plants, would be affected.

President of the Malnad Janapara Horata Samiti Kishore Kumar said that the Heralalli, Haladalli, Vanaguru, Subramanya and Hethhur gram panchayats had passed resolutions against the project.

Y.B. Ramakrishna, an engineer who has worked for environmental protection for more than 30 years in Sharavathi and Western Ghats, said there might be frequent earthquakes once the proposed project was completed.

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