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## Gundia project: need for deeper study stressed

Shama Sunder

*Panel members visit project site; KPCL asked to submit report on extent of land to be submerged*

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*KPCL officials claim project will not submerge large tracts of forest land*

*Various groups submit representations to save the Western Ghats*

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**Reality check: Members of the subcommittee appointed by the Expert Appraisal Committee for River Valley and Hydroelectric Projects at the Gundia project site in Hassan on Saturday.**

HASSAN: Members of the subcommittee appointed by the Expert Appraisal Committee for River Valley and Hydroelectric Projects who visited Gundia on Saturday stressed the need for a thorough study on the merits and demerits of the Gundia hydroelectric project.

The subcommittee's report to the Union Ministry of Forest and Environment in this regard will be incomplete unless the project is studied in detail, subcommittee chairman Devendra Pandey said.

The three-member subcommittee comprising Mr. Pandey, member-secretary S. Bhaumik and B.P. Das visited three major spots in the region: Bettadakumari, Hongadahalla and Yettinahole. They were accompanied by a team of Karnataka Power Corporation Ltd. (KPCL) officials headed by Chief Engineer Ramesh. A group of farmers and coffee planters also accompanied the team.

The opinions of various groups were exchanged at Hongadahalla. During the interaction, KPCL officials told the subcommittee that the proposed project would not adversely affect forests in the Western Ghats. Only some forest land would be submerged during the implementation, they said adding that the local people were willing to provide the land required for a monetary

compensation.

In reply, Mr. Pandey pointed out that according to a Supreme Court judgment pertaining to land acquisition for huge projects, farmland and plantations located amidst thick vegetation would still be considered forest land. Hence, all forest laws would be applicable even to planters and farmers, he added. Mr. Pandey asked the KPCL officials to submit a report to the committee on the exact areas of forest land, revenue land and private land that would be submerged if the project materialised. He told presspersons that as ownership of the land was yet to be clarified, KPCL had been asked to supply the details.

When asked whether it would be better for the details to be supplied by an independent body rather than KPCL, Mr. Pandey said, "We will not blindly accept the report given by KPCL; the report will be scrutinised." He said that about ten such projects across the country were yet to be given environmental clearance.

### 'Major threat'

Malnad Janapara Horata Samithi president H.A. Kishore Kumar expressed his apprehension over the claim that a large area of forest land would not get submerged in Hongadahalla. He pointed out that two dams, 90 metres high and 1,320 metres long, would be constructed for storing water.

The KPCL officials said that only a small portion of forest land would be submerged. However, Mr. Pandey argued that a new road would also have to be constructed. Before leaving the spot, Mr. Pandey told presspersons that their visit was not comprehensive enough.

Kuduremukh Wildlife foundation president Nirain Jain, Kenneth Anderson Wildlife society president Hari Somasekhar, student representatives from Krishna Law College and village residents submitted representations against the project.

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