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Gundia's fate hangs in the balance



in the news: The Gundia project area in the biodiversity-rich Western Ghats

The fate of the controversial 400-MW Gundia Hydroelectric Power Project envisaged by the Karnataka Power Corporation Limited (KPCL) will in all probability soon be decided, as the Western Ghats Ecology Expert Panel (WGEEP) headed by Madhav Gadgil is expected to submit its report to the Environmental Appraisal Committee (EAC) shortly.

The Ministry of Environment and Forests (MoE&F) had referred the project to the Gadgil panel, set up on March 4, 2010 to look into development and environmental issues in the context of the ecologically-significant, biodiversity-rich and environmentally-sensitive Western Ghats region.

The WGEEP comprising Prof. Madhav Gadgil, Renee Borges of the Indian Institute of Science, Bangalore, G.V. Subrahmanyam, Advisor-Research, MoE&F, and Vidyanayak of Nagaraike Seva Trust, Guruvayanakere, visited the project site near Sakleshpur in Hassan district on September 16 to study the possible ecological damage because of the implementation of the project. The EAC had also clarified earlier that clearance would be given subject to various conditions including recommendations of the panel. Members of the sub-committee headed by Devendra Pande, S. Bhaumik and B.P. Das, appointed by the EAC for river valley and hydroelectric projects, visited the Gundia project area last December and stressed the need for thorough study of the possible ecological damage because of the project.

Another team of six scientists from the Indian Institute of Science conducted a three-day study in the area from August 29 to 31 as per the request of Prof. Madhav Gadgil.

Dharna

The National Alliance for People's Movement (NAPM) staged a dharna in Bangalore and submitted representations to the panel, opposing the project, on September 15.

At the same time Wild Life Matters Trust (WLMT), a Bangalore NGO, submitted a memorandum to the panel requesting it to deny environmental clearance to the project, citing depletion of natural resources and the possibility of wiping out of many flagship species of flora and fauna.

The memorandum was submitted based on a detailed study report prepared by WLMT. The report stated that in case of implementation of the project nearly 6,000 hectares of forests would be destroyed and the loss of such a large tract would spell doom for various species of flora and fauna, including many endangered species.

Stating that the Western Ghats in Karnataka has already been subjected to massive abuse in the name of 'developmental projects,' the report said that most of the hydroelectric projects of the State are in the Western Ghats.

The destruction, submersion and fragmentation of the area due to such projects alone have been so massive that its sensitive ecology has been irreversibly damaged. The study states that the Gundia project will increase threat from human interference, deforestation and habitat fragmentation.

The proposed project area is covered on all sides by protected areas such as Pushpagiri, Brahmagiri and Kudremukh sanctuaries and if the animal corridors are blocked, the issue of man-animal conflict is likely to take serious proportions.

The project area, identified as the Malnad-Kodagu corridor in the Western Ghats, has Asian elephants, tigers, Asiatic wild dogs, greater spotted eagles, white-backed vulture and long-billed vulture, among many other endangered animal species.

"The conservation of these species cannot depend upon a site-based approach alone and requires the protection of larger landscape, hence the need to keep this area as continuous as possible," the report states.

Carbon sink

The corridor covers an area of about 21,345 sq. km., making it the largest corridor in the Western Ghats, the report stated. Quoting experts, the report also states that the Western Ghats is one of the most important carbon sinks in the world for reducing emissions and global warming and is critically important for wildlife survival.

Interestingly, the report has listed the objections to the comprehensive environmental impact assessment (CEIA) and environmental management plan (EMP) for the project submitted to KPCL by the Institute for Catchment Studies & Environmental Management (ICSEM).

Terming the CEIA as highly biased in favour of implementation of the project, the memorandum demanded that the CEIA should be done by reputed and premier scientific institutes like the Indian Institute of Science (IISc).

The network

The Gundia Hydel Power Project, 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 m height across the Yettinahole, eight m high weir across the Kerihole, 36 m high weir across the Hongadahalla and 62 m high dam across the Bettakumeri stream.

These reservoirs are proposed to be connected by interconnecting tunnels which will lead water to Bettakumeri reservoir and then on to turbines in the Gundia underground power house at Horibetta, about 8 km from the Gundia checkpoint.

Though Union Minister for Environment and Forests Jairam Ramesh too had opposed the project, Chief Minister B.S. Yeddyurappa laid the foundation stone for

the first unit (200 MW) of Gundia Hydel Power Project at Yettinahole, about 18 km from Sakleshpur in Hassan district, on May 24, 2009, amidst heavy police security owing to threat of protests from environmentalists and others concerned.

Despite officials' claim that no work has taken place after the foundation was laid, sources in the Forest Department say that the KPCL has been conducting survey works at the site.

The 'marking stones' in the region, including at Horibetta forest, prove the point.

Experts' panel stresses need for thorough study of the possible ecological damage from the project