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Opposition to Gundia hydel project grows

Staff Correspondent

Environmental groups plan to organise protests against project

- *The Gundia hydel plant will be operational for only around six months in a year*
 - *Kemphole mini-hydel plant will not have sufficient water after the Gundia project is commissioned*
 - *KPCL not adhering to transparency norms, say activists*
 - *Environment Impact Assessment not done*
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MANGALORE: The people of Dakshina Kannada, Kodagu and Hassan districts are preparing for one of the largest protests against the Gundia hydel project, which will straddle Dakshina Kannada (Sullia) and Hassan (Sakleshpur taluk) districts.

Environmentalists, tribal people and those living in urban areas have expressed concern about diverting river waters for drinking and irrigation purposes.

Addressing a press conference with office-bearers of the Malenadu Janapara Horata Samiti, the pontiff of Kukke Subramanya Kshetra, Vidyaprasanna Tirtha, said here on Tuesday that nobody should think that the protest is against progress and development.

The concern is about the manner in which "development" is taking shape in one of the most eco-sensitive areas of the world, the Western Ghats.

The coordinator of the Hassan-based Malenadu Janapara Horata Samiti, Kishore Kumar, said the State Government has approved the 300-MW Gundia hydel project, which will be implemented by Karnataka Power Corporation Ltd. (KPCL).

The project, he said, will prove to be disastrous for the three districts in the Western Ghats. Dakshina Kannada will be the worst affected as the only river that flows through the Western Ghats to Mangalore, the Nethravati, will dry up.

Mr. Kumar said the project involves the building of 16 bunds and three dams (anecuts) across rivers such as the Kumaradhara, the Hongadihalla and the Bettakumari and smaller ones such as the Kadumane, the Yettinahalla, the Keeri Holay, the Adda Holay, the Abil Biral Holay and the Lingada Holay, which are tributaries of the Nethravati.

The KPCL, in its pre-feasibility report, says that the river waters trapped by these bunds and dams will be diverted through a 21-km tunnel to the Bettakumari reservoir. The water in the reservoir will be used to generate power at the Gundia hydel power station. KPCL had earlier said that only 2 sq. km would be submerged, but it now says that over 480 hectares of rich rain

forest will be submerged.

It is also feared that the project will result in the fragmentation of rivers that originate in the Western Ghats and join the Nethravati. Many of the rivers are likely to change course during the monsoon and deprive the Nethravati of water. This will result in less water for Mangalore and also the towns and farmland along the Nethravati.

Mr. Kumar said another environmental concern is that the project will cut off the elephant corridor in the Western Ghats resulting in elephants straying into fields and human habitations in places such as Sakleshpur and Neriya and the highways in the area. A couple of such confrontations have been already reported in Sakleshpur, he said.

Four gram panchayats have already resolved to oppose the project. The project has been on the drawing board for 18 years. It was put on the back burner for a while by KPCL.

Revenue and forest land estimated at Rs. 530 crores will be submerged by the project. But the ecological and environmental losses are unquantifiable.

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