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Opposition to Gundia hydel project growing

By Our Staff Correspondent

HASSAN, DEC. 9. Vriksha-Laksha Andolana, an environmental organisation involved in the "Save Western Ghats" campaign, has extended support to Malenaadu Janapara Horata Samiti of Sakleshpur, which is ready to launch an agitation against the proposed Gundiya High Head Scheme of Karnataka Power Corporation Ltd. (KPCL) in the Western Ghats area.

Support

KPCL has planned to harness the Gundiya in the upper reaches of the Western Ghats, near Sakleshpur, and claims that the scheme is economically viable owing to the high power potential, heavy rain, and minimum submersion of land.

Villagers in the area, who are apprehensive of being affected by the proposed scheme, have formed samiti to protest against its implementation.

They have already conducted meetings and staged dharnas in Hongadahalla and Hassan.

Addressing presspersons here on Thursday, the coordinator of the andolana's State unit, Anantha Hegde Ashisara, said that the organisation would support the fight against the setting up of the hydel project, as it would be detrimental to the eco-sensitive area.

He said that the andolana would support any non-violent agitation planned by samiti to stall the project.

Natural heritage sites

Expressing concern over the plans of KPCL to set up hydel schemes in the Western Ghats, Mr. Ashisara urged the Biodiversity Board to declare areas including Agumbe, Devimane Ghatta, Yana, Bisile, Mukambika, and Gundia forest range as natural heritage sites.

The Karnataka Environment Study Report-2003 had declared these areas eco-sensitive spots in the area, he added.

Assessment study

He exhorted the Government to order a detailed environment assessment by an independent team of environmental experts and urged it to take the views of the local people into consideration before taking up any decision regarding the implementation of the scheme.

He said that the authorities of KPCL had submitted a detailed project report to the Government seeking clearance.

However, the Union Ministry of Environment and Forests, the State Forest Department, and Karnataka State Pollution Control Board had refused to clear the project, he said.

Unsatisfactory

Mr. Ashisara said that though KPCL had promised to take up a compensatory afforestation programme during the setting up of the Sharavathi Tail-race Project, the implementation of the programme was unsatisfactory.

KPCL had concentrated on monoculture afforestation.

Criticising KPCL for its failure to provide details of the project, he said that the company was not being transparent and called for a public debate on the implementation of the project. Taking exception to KPCL's claim that the cost of power production from the Gundriya project would be cheaper, he said that the power company had not included environmental damage in its calculations.

The cost of production would be more if environmental damage was taken into consideration.

Failure

Citing various cases where the Government had failed in rehabilitating the affected people and taking up compensatory afforestation work, Mr. Ashisara said that Gundriya scheme would affect the elephant corridor, besides damaging medicinal plants and affecting the ecological balance.

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