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## Roads, railway tracks turn deathtraps for animals



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Official records say Uttara Kannada district has one of the most dense and diverse forest covers in the entire Southern peninsula. However, environment enthusiasts are waging a losing battle to conserve the biodiversity.

Data shows that the district, which till 1973 had nearly 67.73% of its total land under forest cover, is losing its greenery at the rate of 13% per year. According to a report by environment scientist T V Ramachandra and others at Indian Institute of Science, Bengaluru, by 2013, Uttara Kannada had only

32.08% of its total land under forest cover. The report mentioned that development works, agricultural activities, encroachments and other non-forest activities had robbed off the green cover.

If the past was tense for the pristine forests in the cradle of Western Ghats, the future seems to be uncertain due to 'development' works that cut through the district.

While projects such as Seabird, Gerusoppa Dam, Supa Dam, Kaiga Atomic Power Station reduced the forest cover by nearly 64,355 hectare in the last few decades; new projects such as Hubballi-Ankola Railway Line, widening of Sirsi-Kumta State Highway, expansion of the Kaiga plant, mini-hydro projects, enhancement of port capacity, etc., are expected to eat further into the evergreen, semi-deciduous and reserve forest areas. Neighbouring Belagavi district, where a small portion of Western Ghats runs, is also not spared as railway and national highway works are set to bring down thousands of trees.

Environmentalists are fighting against the implementation of Hubballi-Ankola Railway Line, as the 163 km broad gauge would destroy over 1.78 lakh trees in 1,472 acres of the core forest areas, which comprise a tiger reserve and an elephant corridor. The project, which was proposed at an estimated cost of Rs 453 crore in the Railway Budget of 1997-98, will now be completed at an estimated cost of Rs 3,750 crore. A recent report submitted by the National Tiger Conservatory Authority of the Union Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change, not only recommended scrapping of the project, but also stated that if implemented, it would result in a total environment loss to the tune of Rs 623 crore. The project is expected to be completed in 10 years, from the date of commencement.

Ananth Hegde Ashisara, former chairman of the Western Ghats Task Force, said the railway line between Hubballi and Ankola is neither economically viable nor environmentally feasible.

Governments are also pushing for the implementation of Tinai Ghat-Castle Rock railway doubling project, which requires 10.45 hectares of forest land, out of which 9.57 hectares falls within the Dandeli Wildlife Sanctuary. More than 1,700 trees will have to be cut for this project.

Ironically, there are already two railway lines — Londa-Khanapur and Alnavar-Londa-Castlerock — that pass through the Western Ghats of Belagavi and Uttara Kannada districts and they have become deathtraps for animals. In the last few years, more than 20 Indian bison, two elephants and several other animals have lost their lives on these tracks.

People are also flabbergasted at the pace at which the sanctions for the widening of highways are being given in the last few months. Projects which were in abeyance for decades are being implemented in months now.

The widening of National Highway 4A that connects Belagavi with Goa border via Khanapur, Ramanagar, Anmod Ghat, was first proposed in 2005 and was to be completed in two phases. While the first phase — connecting Belagavi with Khanapur — had no objection from anyone, the second phase that cuts through the thick forest of Londa region, required proper mitigation measures. However, the National Highway Authority of India, which received approval for the second phase in principle called a tender and started cutting of trees inside the reserve forest area within days of receiving permission in October. Officially, more than 22,622 trees will be rooted out to widen the present 14 metre road to 26 metre road.

Sachin Patil, Wildlife Warden of Belagavi, rues that government is widening a road which is hardly in use, as there are two alternative roads connecting Belagavi with Goa. Moreover, the Goa side of highway is not being widened. “No proper mitigation measures are being taken to reduce roadkills. This stretch is an elephant corridor and also a house for tigers, black panthers, and other rare species,” he said.

The Union government is also rushing to upgrade the Sirsi-Kumta State Highway into a National Highway (NH-69) by widening it under the Sagar Mala Project. The project, estimated to cost Rs 360.63 crore, is expected to be completed in 18 months. Conservation Biologist Keshava H Korse said, “No one asked for this project. The present road is sufficient for the traffic the highway sees. Devimane Ghat is highly sensitive and in hilly areas, no one expects to zip through the hairpin curves.” He fears that cutting of 15,072 trees from the hill side would result in flooding, landslide and other disasters. Alongside, there are proposals to upgrade six other State Highways in Uttara Kannada district into National Highways under the Sagar Mala Project.

Environmentalists fear that the proposed installation of fifth and sixth nuclear reactors at the Kaiga plant would result in further destruction of trees in the region. While laying high voltage wires for the first four units, the Nuclear Power Corporation Of India had removed thousands of trees from the 732 hectare forest land. Though there is a proposal for laying of underground cables, there is no clear picture as to how much forest land would be engulfed for this purpose.

There is confusion among officials and elected representatives regarding the implementation of proposed 12 mini-hydro projects across Uttara Kannada district. While officials claim that the project has been dropped, elected representatives campaign for elections saying hydro projects would light up houses in the remote villages of the district.

The proposed capacity enhancement of ports such as Belekeri, Amdalli, Karwar, Tadadi and Ankola will not only destroy the estuaries of River Kali, Sharavathi and Aghanashini, but is set to spell doom for Western Ghats as higher number of heavy vehicles would ply on these sensitive roads. Diversion of rivers such as Kali and Aghanashini will also have a huge impact on the Western Ghats as they have to draw pipelines inside the forest area, which will result in the destruction of large tracts of forest.