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Hubballi-Ankola line: The railroad to disaster

The project will be a major setback to the people of North Karnataka in particular and the Western Ghats region in general



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More than 3,00,000 trees of the primary forest are going to be felled to clear the way for the proposed rail line. Credit: DH File Photo/Irshad Mahammad

At a time when the world is facing frequent, ghastly episodes of cyclones, hurricanes and deep depressions leading to violent storms that claim several lives, and while India has pledged to achieve net-zero emission by 2070 at the global climate conference CoP26, the Karnataka government has approved a 168.23-km railway line between Hubballi and Ankola that diverts virgin forest land of 595 hectares. Global warming and consequent climatic changes have been held responsible for natural disasters, death and destruction. While the overexploitation of forests and other landscapes are believed to be the main causes for the collapse of ecological systems, India, unfortunately, does not seem to have learnt any lessons from the recent catastrophes.

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The proposed construction of the Hubballi-Ankola railroad looks like a project of fulfilment and commitment rather than a necessity for serving a large cause that benefits a vast number of people in the region. The railway line runs through the dense forests of the Western Ghats, one of the world's biodiversity hotspots of the UN, where three elephant corridors, a tiger reserve and a wildlife sanctuary are located. The project includes 34 tunnels and nine stations that disconnect and fragment a large number of habitats of elephants and tigers. Indeed, it is an environmentally disastrous project that will be a major setback to the people of North Karnataka in particular and the Western Ghats region in general.

More than 3,00,000 trees of the primary forest are going to be felled to clear the way for the proposed rail line. The forests down below the famous Magodu falls are a treasure trove of valuable, terrestrial resources that span the vast swathes of the Western Ghats, which were formed millions of years ago and believed to be much older than the Himalayan forests. Such enormously rich forests have given millions of people precious wealth like water, air, medicinal plants, soil nutrients and a number of other products like honey, fruits and wood material on a sustainable basis.

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Further, the most important feature of the Western Ghats are the rivers that irrigate millions of acres of agricultural land and also produce hydropower for hundreds of

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temperature as the country's economic activities rise.

Constant threat

At a time when the world is under the constant threat of rising temperature and, thereby, climate change, the government needs to think about what nature has gifted us, which could be retained so that it won't compound the worsening situation. As a matter of fact, the government may look at the Western Ghats as a predominant environmental specimen that has been catering to the basic needs of millions of people and can also mitigate the climate crisis. Unfortunately, these forests, over the past few decades, are fast-declining due to the encroaching projects that satiate the economic avarice of the state and the private sector.

Instead, the government should think of the Ghat region of North Karnataka as a range that fulfils the needs of communities in terms of agriculture, water, soil, biodiversity and grasslands. These salient features of the region have credited the land between Ranebennuru and Belagavi with a very special tag, namely the ecotone belt, which means this stretch of the region is compressed with four ecosystems (forests of the Western Ghats, the scrub jungle, the pond ecosystem and the grasslands within 45 km of breadth and the running length of 200 km between these two towns). If North Karnataka is distinct in its taste, flavour and nutrients of food and fruits and vegetables, it is because of this ecotone belt, which is uniquely situated and nowhere else to be found in the country.

If the government is serious enough with regards to the sustainable development of the state, there is a need to take into account both direct and indirect values of these forests in terms of protecting agriculture, horticulture and animal husbandry. Because the loss of these enormous trees will affect the region by disturbing the monsoon and the pattern of flow of water in the rivers. There are four more rivers towards the north of this proposed rail line, namely the Kali, the Malaprabha, the Ghataprabha and Mahadayi. These rivers are the lifeline of the entire North Karnataka region where millions of acres of land are irrigated.