

Activists question Karnataka government's ambivalent stance on environment

While welcoming Minister's directives to clear encroached forest land, activists have sought to know if the government will also roll back some of the mega projects being pushed by it in the Western Ghats

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THE HINDU BUREAU



A file photo of the Western Ghats near Talacauvery in Kodagu district. | Photo Credit: K. MURALI KUMAR

Will the government's directive to officials to recover encroached forest land in the Western Ghats limit itself to removing resorts and homestays or will it be part of a larger policy initiative to put a halt to infrastructure projects that have a negative bearing on ecology?

This is the question being raised by environmentalists and activists after **Karnataka's Minister of Forests, Ecology and Environment Eshwar Khandre directed the officials to clear encroached forest land, and resorts and homestays** that have mushroomed after 2015 from ecosensitive areas in the Western Ghats.

The response followed a slew of landslides in the State as at Shirur in Ankola, where 11 persons died, apart from the tragedy in Wayanad in Kerala which has claimed nearly 300 lives so far.

While welcoming Mr. Khandre's directives, the activists wished to know if the government would also roll back some of the mega projects being pushed by it in the Western Ghats that are as destructive in scope.

At cross purposes

Akhilesh Chiqli, an environmentalist from Sagar in Shivamogga district and president of the Jan Sangram Parishat, said the government was working at cross purposes. He pointed out that the government was pushing for the **Sharavati Pumped Storage Project, the DPR for which was cleared by the Central Electricity Authority on Friday.**

"But the project requires 153 hectares (378 acres) of land and it will come up in the core area of Sharavathi Valley Lion-Tailed Macaque Sanctuary. The lion-tailed macaque is a highly endangered species and endemic to the Western Ghats. The area also has wetlands and is a biodiversity hotspot harbouring the Great Indian Hornbill and the project would be ruinous to the ecosystem," he added.

Railway projects

Questions are also being raised about the need for railway line projects through eco-sensitive zones such as the Mysuru-Kushalnagar, Hubballi-Ankola, and Talaguppa-Honnar or new roads and broadening of existing ones in hilly areas. Though the railway projects will not be directly implemented by the State government, activists say it should spell out its opposition in unequivocal terms.

Mr. Chiqli wondered whether there would be a more nuanced approach to development in harmony with the environment after the recent landslides and hoped that the State would implement the provisions of the Madhav Gadgil Committee or the Kasturirangan Committee report on the Western Ghats.

A section of activists wondered whether the Minister's directives for clearance of encroachment would translate into reality at the ground level.

Earlier proposal

This is because multiple reports had been submitted in the past about the mushrooming of illegal resorts and homestays in eco-sensitive zones of national parks and wildlife sanctuaries and nothing was done about them.

The National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA) in November 2022 submitted a report, after a field study in the BRT Tiger Reserve, that there were nine homestays or resorts situated in Biligiriranga Hills villages, including some within 50 metres of the boundary of the tiger reserve. One of the properties was running as a full-fledged resort during the period of the NTCA inspection in the name of environmental education. But after two years no action was initiated to curb such activities, said the activists.

Video conference

Meanwhile, sources in the Forest Department said the Ministry was firm on its decision to clear the encroachments and Mr. Khandre would hold a videoconference with the field-level department officials within the next few days to seek its implementation.

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