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## Kanti miffed over mangrove felling

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**KOLKATA:** Deforestation of mangroves at Shankijahan in Kultali, Sunderbans, has led to a major debate. Unhappy with the deforestation exercise, Sunderbans affairs minister Kanti Ganguly has questioned the role played by the forest department.

This is the second time this week that a CPM minister has pointed fingers at a department run by another minister of the party. The forest department is under CPM minister Ananta Roy. Earlier, land and land reforms minister Abdur Rezzak Mollah of the CPM had questioned urban development minister Asok Bhattacharya's department's role in selling off plots along the EM Bypass.

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According to Ganguly, the Trinamool Congress-controlled South 24-Parganas zilla parishad had directed the forest department to embark on the deforestation drive. Forest officials, he said, had destroyed mangroves over a large area. "Now, if you ask for a report from the forest department, how can they give a neutral answer," the peeved minister asked.

Recently, social worker Tushar Kanjilal, who is also the secretary of the Tagore Society for Rural Development, had complained to the minister about the felling of 25,000 mangrove trees over 89 bighas in Shankijahan. "The reckless felling of trees is going to affect the ecology of Sunderbans in a major way," Kanjilal wrote.

RSP MLA Tapan Hore had also raised a question in the state assembly about tree felling in the Sunderbans. Speaker Hasim Abdul Halim has already asked Ganguly to make a statement in the assembly next week on deforestation of the mangroves.

But SUCI, a Trinamool ally, has now started accusing CPM for the deforestation. The party pointed out that Gopalganj panchayat, where the deforestation happened, is controlled by the CPM. SUCI's MP from Joynagar, Tarun Mondal, alleged that CPM men were involved in felling trees and the local BDO did not report against them. He complained about a nexus between the BDO and CPM panchayat members of Gopalganj. "If tree felling has happened, why did the CPM-controlled panchayat not object to it," Mondal said.

"The zilla parishad plans to set up a mangrove research centre. Moreover, eight hectares in Sunderbans have been selected for setting up a mini-Sunderbans and for that, land is being prepared for the afforestation programme that is going to take place next week. The forest department has cleared some bushes in the area for planting mangroves including some of a rare species," Dr Mondal said. He claimed Ganguly was trying to "malign the SUCI" as he has not been invited to the mangrove research centre's inaugural programme about to take place next week.

Forest officials, in their report, had however mentioned that no major deforestation had taken place. The forest department's report said that the area had only been cleared of some bushes and made ready for the afforestation programme. The forest department is soon going to forward the report to chief minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee, who is known to be a nature lover.

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