

Experts flag large-scale clearing of vegetation in Mirzapur forest

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New Delhi: Environmental activists have flagged large-scale clearing of vegetation using heavy machinery, and construction of roads and other structures in a forested area adjoining Dadri Khurd in Marihan Range of Mirzapur Forest Division of Uttar Pradesh. The area was to be notified a forest in 1952, but wasn't, and now risks being developed under the terms of a new law passed last year.

The activists have alleged that the deemed forest land is under consideration for a thermal power project being developed by an Adani Group company. The FC Amendment Act or the Van (Sanrakshan Evam Samvardhan) Adhiniyam 2023 which was passed last year exempts unrecorded deemed forests altogether from its purview, paving way for their diversion for various infrastructure and other projects.

The Vindhyan Ecology and Natural History Foundation wrote to Secretary, Ministry of Environment, Forests and Climate Change on June 28 on a "serious and grave violation of the Van (Sanrakshan Evam Samvardhan) Adhiniyam, 1980 and Rules, Wildlife (Protection) Act 1972 and Environment (Protection) Act, 1986 in the Marihan Range of Mirzapur Forest Division in Uttar Pradesh."

"This area is part of the proposed Sloth Bear Conservation Reserve and is a crucial habitat for exceptionally rich and threatened wildlife of the savannah and tropical dry deciduous hill forests of the unique Vindhyan-Kaimoor ecosystem. This ecosystem includes at least 24 terrestrial animals listed in Schedule I of the Wildlife Protection Act 1972, well documented and recorded," the letter added.

VENHF undertook the first-ever scientific survey of wildlife in the Mirzapur Forest Division and Kaimoor Wildlife Division, using direct evidence surveys and camera trap surveys between 2016 and 2018. Based on their documentation, a 'Sloth Bear Conservation Reserve' was proposed by the then Divisional Forest Office-Mirzapur Forest Division in Marihan, Sukrit, and Chunar Ranges in 2019, the letter said.

Species documented in the area include Sloth Bear, Leopard, Bengal Fox, Striped Hyena, Asiatic Wild Cat, Rusty Spotted Cat, Sambar, Chinkara, Blackbuck and Mugger Crocodile.

The range is also a haven for birding, with grassland species such as the Indian Courser, Yellow-Wattled Lapwing, Sandgrouse, Savannah Nightjar, Indian Nightjar; raptors such as Red-headed Vulture, Griffon Vulture, Egyptian Vulture, Indian Eagle Owl, Mottled Wood Owl, Short-eared Owl, Brown Fish Owl; and several other species, many of which are endemic, threatened, and migratory according to the VENHF.

Thermal Power Project may come up

The same site was once proposed for a 1320 MW Coal-based Thermal Power Plant by M/S Welspun Energy (UP) Pvt Ltd, which was later transferred to Mirzapur Energy (UP) Pvt Ltd.

When the project was still with Welspun Energy, its environmental clearance was set aside by the Principal Bench of the National Green Tribunal in *Debadityo Sinha v. Union of India* on December 21, 2016, with a direction to restore the site to its original condition as per NGT judgement. Further on May 1, 2017, NGT also quashed a review petition filed by the project proponent.

Mirzapur Thermal Energy (UP) Private Limited (MTEUPPL), a subsidiary of Adani Power Limited has now applied for fresh terms of reference (TOR)--one of the first steps in the process of environmental clearance, as per details available on environment ministry's Parivesh website. The proposal states it's for a 2x800 MW Coal based Ultra Super Critical Thermal Power Project (TPP) at Village Dadri Khurd, Tehsil, Mirzapur Sardar, District Mirzapur, Uttar Pradesh which was submitted on May 8, 2024. Land area requirement for the proposed power station of 1600 MW capacity is about 365.19 Ha. out of which 364.57 Ha is non forest land & 0.62 Ha is forest land inside plant boundary.

Adani Power did not respond to queries from HT.

Arvind Mishra, DFO Mirzapur said he is yet to check if there are any lapses on the ground. Officials, however, said that the constructions are not associated with the thermal power plant and appear to be by other parties.

The Union environment ministry did not respond immediately on the violation of forest conservation amendment act in the area.

"The entire area of approximately 1000 acres where the project is proposed is surrounded by notified Reserve Forest in all directions and is located deep inside the Marihan Forest Range of the Mirzapur Division. This area is significantly important for wildlife and catchment of several rivers which flows and originate right inside the project site. The project proponent started altering the forest cover since 2010 and obtained 'Environmental Clearance' in 2014 by showing it as barren land devoid of wildlife. The NGT set aside the 'Environmental Clearance' in 2016, terming it as 'tainted' with emphasis on the shoddy impact assessment, and denied reviewing the judgment. They subsequently withdrew the appeal in the Supreme Court," said Debadityo Sinha, Managing Trustee of VENHF and petitioner of NGT case.

"As per a U.P. State Gazette Notification of 1952, the proposed place named 'Dadri Khurd' was transferred to the forest department and was required to be notified under the Indian Forest Act of 1927, which is still pending. However, the area must be considered as 'forest' recorded in 'government record' as defined under the Section 1A of the Van Adhinyam of 1980 and also the Supreme Court directions in the T.N. Godavarman case. This area is so rich and unique in wildlife diversity that a proposal for declaring the entire Marihan range along with its adjacent forest ranges as a 'Sloth Bear Conservation Reserve' was forwarded by the Divisional Forest Officer-Mirzapur in 2019," Sinha added.

Source: <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/experts-flag-large-scale-clearing-of-vegetation-in-mirzapur-forest-101719946931263.html>