

**A project that has green activists seeing red**

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Mattewara forest is home to several species of antelopes, deer, and birds. Express photo by Gurmeet Singh.

While the Punjab government has stressed that its proposed 1,000 acre industrial park does not fall in the forest area of Mattewara but close to it, environmental activists and villagers are concerned that it could disturb the ecology of the area.

The reason: A 'cycle valley' is already coming up in Dhanansu village on 100 acres at a cost of Rs 380 crore, and this valley site is only 8 km away from the Mattewara forest range. Hence, another park will be exploiting the natural resources of the area, fear environmental activists who have started campaigning against the proposal on social media and even visiting villages near Mattewara.

Oddly, there hasn't been much hue and cry over Dhanansu cycle valley, which is in a less than 10 km radius of the 2,300 acres forest area of Mattewara, when the valley was planned in 2016.

The Dhanansu cycle valley will be at a 3-4 km distance to the proposed industrial park, as per the statement of Ludhiana Deputy Commissioner in a video message.

On Tuesday, a Chandigarh based student organisation called 'Sath' visited Sekhowal, Salempur and other villages.

Sukhwinder Singh, a human rights activist and member of 'Sath', said, "We went to villages and found that the land which is to be used for the industrial park is very close to the forest boundary wall. Hence, we cannot escape from exploitation of natural resources and even the wildlife will be affected. Moreover, the villagers are not very aware of the outcomes of this park coming up. This area is prone to floods as it is close to the Sutlej. I really wonder what is the idea behind using this land for an industrial park. We will be making villagers aware and many of them want to speak but are fearful. Hence we have told them that we will support them."

Meanwhile, nearly 500 acres of Sekhewal village falls under this project as well as another 28 and 20 acres of panchayat land in Salempur, Sialkiana villages respectively, said sources. The rest of the land is of the animal husbandry and horticulture departments in Machian Kalan and other villages.

Dheera Singh, former sarpanch of Sekhowal village, said, "Residents of this village do farming on panchayati land.

Most of us don't own land and hence we are not clear as to how we will be compensated when we have no land in our names. Panchayats have passed a resolution in favour of the park. Now we are in a fix as to what will happen to their sources of income."

Villagers are also concerned as to whether they will get employment in industry and fear exposure to pollution as they will be living close to the park. Haider Nagar village's panchayati land is also part of this project.

### **No Animal Welfare Board**

Gursharanjit Kaur, an activist who has complained to the NGT, said, "There is no Animal Welfare Board in the state, which shows the seriousness of government towards these issues."

Dr Sandeep Jain, state animal welfare officer appointed by the Animal Welfare Board of India (AWBI), said, "When the cycle valley is already at less than 10 km distance, another project at less than 10 km can cause extensive damage to nature. This project needs to be closely monitored and we will not give up."

### **Land bank**

The Punjab government has announced that it wants to start a pharmaceutical park on 1,350 acres land of the Bathinda Thermal plant, which has been closed down, while industrial parks on 1,000 acres of land in Ludhiana and Amritsar were announced as part of the Punjab Budget in February. This park was announced in that speech.

However Sibin C, director, commerce and industries, Punjab, said, "Yes we are creating a land bank for industry which may come from China. Hence, we will have ample options before us."

Meanwhile, Punjab's industrial policy, released in 2017, offers tax holiday and many other offers if new industry opens up. The role of PPCB will come up when environmental clearance will be sought, said board authorities.

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