

Explained: The battle over mining in Chhattisgarh's Hasdeo forest

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Congress leader [Rahul Gandhi](#) recently expressed his disagreement with a decision taken by his party's government in Chhattisgarh to allow coal mining in the Hasdeo forest.

The state government had in March given a go-ahead for coal mining in an area of 1,136 hectares under the second phase of Parsa East-Kete Basan (PEKB) coal block.

Responding to a question over the issue during an interaction with students at the University of Cambridge Tuesday, Rahul said: "I have a problem with the decision myself."

About the ongoing protests in Chhattisgarh, often under the 'Save Hasdeo' banner, he said: "I know that the protest is going on and in some ways the protest is justified."

The Hasdeo Arand forest

A sprawling forest in the northern part of Chhattisgarh, Hasdeo Arand is known for its biodiversity and also its coal deposits. The forest falls under [Korba](#), Surguja and Sarguja districts with sizeable tribal population. The Hasdeo river, a tributary of Mahanadi, flows through it.

Released in 2021, a report on the region by the Indian Council of Forestry Research and Education (ICFRE), an autonomous organisation under the Ministry of Environment, Forest & Climate Change, termed Hasdeo Arand the "largest un-fragmented forests in Central India consisting of pristine Sal (*Shorea robusta*) and teak forests."

Mining activity

The Hasdeo Arand Coal Field (HACF) is spread over nearly 1,880 sq km and comprises 23 coal blocks. The demand for mining picked up around 2010, when the Chhattisgarh government recommended forest clearance for diverting 1,898.328 hectares of forest land for Parsa East and Kente Basan (PEKB) coal fields. These were allotted to Rajasthan Rajya Vidyut Utpadan Nigam Limited (RRVUNL). The PEBK coal block is run by Adani Enterprises, the official Mine Developer and Operator in this venture.

However, this first move was followed by multiple court orders, forest assessment reports, and protests by forest-dwellers.

In June 2011, the Forest Advisory Committee of the Environment ministry recommended against diverting the forest land for mining. The then Environment minister, the Congress party's Jairam Ramesh, overruled this decision, saying coal mining will be done in an area away from the dense forests.

In 2012, Forest Clearance was granted by the MoEF for mining in phase I of PEBK coal mines, which limited mining to 762 hectares and a reserve of 137 million tonnes.

In March, the Chhattisgarh government said that it has given permission to Rajasthan Rajya Vidyut Utpadan Nigam for coal mining in an area of 1,136 hectares under the second phase of PEBK coal block.

The environmental impact

As of May 2022, two studies by the ICFRE and Wildlife Institute of India (WII) have come out. Both have underlined the importance of biodiversity in the region that mining will undoubtedly affect. They also address the issue of human-elephant conflicts, noting that while Chhattisgarh has less elephants compared to other states, it accounts for a significant percentage of conflict due to habitat loss or clearing of forests. Further deforestation could lead to elephant movements spilling over to urban areas, these studies have noted.

The ICFRE also noted the loss of the natural environment and the “serious impact on the community in form of loss of livelihood, identity, and culture” with regards to tribal people living in the area, if mining were to be allowed. But it backed considering mining in four blocks: Tara, Parsa, PEKB and Kente Extension with “strict environmental safeguards”. It further said that the PEKB block was a “habitat to rare, endangered and threatened flora and fauna”.

Though cases are pending in various courts and a further study has been suggested by even the ICFRE, in March 2022 the Chhattisgarh government approved the second phase of mining in PEKB coal block.

The protests

Some organisations, as well as individuals, have actively campaigned against the mining in the area over the last decade. In October 2021, a 300-km-long march was undertaken by around 350 people from tribal communities to [Raipur](#) alleging “illegal” land acquisition.

On May 24, RRVUNL CMD told ANI after meeting officials in Chhattisgarh: “Rajasthan will plunge into a severe power crisis if it fails to get coal from Chhattisgarh”.

He claimed that activists were “misguiding” local people, and that more than 8 lakh trees had been planted in Chhattisgarh against those felled for mining. Sharma said local people had benefited in terms of jobs, education, and that a “100-bed hospital” will be started in Sarguja soon.

On May 25, a press conference was held in Delhi ‘by Friends of Hasdeo Arand’ who alleged that fake gram sabhas were constituted to indicate “consent” by the tribal people for mining activities. They said that Hasdeo Arand’s issue was not merely local, but linked larger issues of jal, jungle, zameen (water, forest, and land rights) of the marginalised groups.