

Explained: Why has Uddhav Thackeray decided to create a reserved forest inside Mumbai?

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The Aarey Milk Colony, spread over 3,162 acres, was established in 1949 as a centre for processing and marketing milk for Mumbai and adjoining areas.

Maharashtra Chief Minister Uddhav Thackeray on Tuesday (September 1) announced that the state government would designate a 600-acre parcel of land in the heart of urban Mumbai as a reserved forest.

Where is this land located?

The Aarey Milk Colony, spread over 3,162 acres, was established in 1949 as a centre for processing and marketing milk for Mumbai and adjoining areas. Over the last 70 years, this sprawling green area has been steadily eaten away at its edges – and 1,282 acres were acquired by the state for projects such as Film City.

Once located on the edge of the city, it is now part of the sprawling western suburb known as Goregaon. Only 1,800-plus acres of green space, which is home to 290 species wild of flora and fauna, remain in the last green bastion of rapidly concretising Mumbai.

Is the area under threat of encroachment?

The land falls under the eco-sensitive zone of the Sanjay Gandhi National Park, and is home to around 10,000 individuals who live in 27 tribal hamlets. As Mumbai rapidly urbanises, and takes up big ticket infrastructure projects like the Metro, a section of urban and transport planners had voiced the need to utilise a part of this sprawling open space.

Aarey has been at the centre of a storm since October last year, after the Mumbai Metro Rail Corporation Limited (MMRCL) decided to construct a car shed for the Rs 32,000 crore underground Colaba-Bandra-Seepz Metro corridor, and cleared the site of over 2,000 trees, leading to a public outcry.

In the run up to the Maharashtra Assembly elections, the [Shiv Sena](#) led by Yuva Sena Chief Aaditya Thackeray had seized on the environmental issue, and protested against the proposed car shed. After he was sworn in as Chief Minister, Uddhav Thackeray put a stay on the work on the car shed.

So has Uddhav insulated the Aarey forest area from future threats of encroachment?

On Tuesday, the Chief Minister announced that he planned to earmark the Aarey forest land as a reserve forest. However, of the 1,800-plus acres of open space available, only 600 acres will be earmarked as forest.

The reserved land parcel does not include the land on which the controversial car shed for the 33.5 km-long Colaba-Bandra-Seepz corridor was expected to come up.

What is the process of earmarking the land as a forest?

Under Section 4 of The Indian Forest Act, 1927, the state government can “constitute any land a reserved forest” by issuing a notification in the Official Gazette, “declaring that it has been decided to constitute such land a reserved forest”, and “specifying, as nearly as possible, the situation and limits of such land”.

Under the law, the government must also appoint a Forest Settlement Officer (FSO) “to inquire into and determine the existence, nature and extent of any rights alleged to exist in favour of any person in or over any land comprised within such limits or in or over any forest-produce, and to deal with the same”.

The FSO will seek suggestions and objections from residents and others within 45 days of initiating the process. After taking into account the suggestions and objections, the process of turning the land into a reserved forest will be completed. Thereafter, the area will be protected from any construction.

So why has the government decided to notify the area as a forest at this juncture?

The Shiv Sena had portrayed itself as a champion of environmental concerns by opposing the construction of the Metro car shed on Aarey land.

But while Thackeray imposed a stay on the construction after becoming CM, a four-member committee of officials that he had appointed, recommended the lifting of the stay. In its report submitted in January, the Committee pointed out there was no viable alternative for the car shed.

Thackeray, however, has been insistent that an alternative should be found. Last week, he held a meeting on the issue with senior state government officials, during which he is learnt to have been informed that finding a new plot would lead to massive cost overruns and delays.

While the state continues to look for a viable plot, the decision to notify part of Aarey as a forest is seen as an attempt to erect a defence against potential blowback from environmentalists and Mumbai’s woke constituency in case the state ultimately goes ahead with building the car shed in Aarey.

The fact that elections to the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) are less than 18 months away, has also played a role in the announcement. The Shiv Sena would want to claim that it has taken steps to improve the quality of life in Mumbai.

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