

Forest Trumps: 631 trees for the sake of one road

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North Bengaluru, infamous for its depleted groundwater table, was all set to lose a major chunk of a notified forest land. The 65-km peripheral ring road (PRR), being executed by the Bengaluru Development Authority (BDA), would have bisected the 703-acre Jarakabande Kaval near Jalahalli into two and taken away about 25 acres of forest land. About two km of the PRR project -- proposed right in the middle of the forest -- would have brought down at least 631 trees and also sliced through a lake. As compensation, the BDA had offered to provide around 35 acres of land near the Bannerghatta reserve forest.

But thanks to the Deputy Conservator of Forests, Bengaluru Urban division, that plan is history now. Alarmed by the planned destruction of the forest land, the DCF gave a clear 'no' to the BDA and directed the authority to file a fresh proposal with the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change under the Forest Conservation Act 1980.

The forest land provides ecological services such as controlling of floods, soil and water conservation etc. Once land-use pattern changes, the natural setting gets destroyed. Later, we curse floods, depleting ground water table and erratic rainfall --BK Singh, IFS (retd)

"We are filing a fresh proposal for seeking forest clearance. Simultaneously, the Karnataka State Pollution Control Board (KSPCB) is finalizing the environment impact assessment report. We did our best to minimize acquisition of forest land while preparing the road alignment. The project requires very little forest land," BDA Commissioner HR Mahadev told Bangalore Mirror.

As per the original plan, the 25 acres of forest land is part of the 1,800 acres required for the implementation of the PRR project, which passes mostly through agricultural land. The eight-lane corridor will also come in the way of 33,838 trees including 9,304 trees in TG Halli catchment.

This is, however, not the first time that northern Bengaluru is witnessing loss of forest land or being eyed by authorities intent on bringing 'progress' to Bengaluru. About 471 acres of Peenya plantations were given to HMT industry and the defence; a residential layout has come up on the 285-acre Mallathahalli reserve forest. Bangalore University, GKV campus and Veterinary college stand on forest land too

DCF's letter to BDA "Unlike the south, North Bengaluru has very few forest lands including Jarakabande, Marasandra and Machohalli. Around 68 acres of Machohalli forest was given to 33 religious institutions recently. A road through Jarakabande would fragment the habitat. It is also going to be a loss of lung space," a senior forest official said.

Environmentalism Suresh Heblikar said the authorities should stop acquiring forest land or axing trees by rerouting the road alignment. "The government should create sustainable cities. Where will one get water, milk and food if authorities keep asphaltting the city and its outskirts? An environment impact assessment should study the spillover effect," he said.

Retired Indian Forest Service (IFS) officer BK Singh said most compensatory measures proposed in exchange of getting forest land have failed. "The forest land provides ecological services such as controlling floods, soil and water conservation. Once land-use pattern changes, the natural setting gets destroyed," he said, adding Jarakabande forest is a home to a high population of sandalwood trees.

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