

Kerala launches tunnel road project, forest dept says no survey sanctioned

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The development of the two-lane ghat road had hit a roadblock over delay in getting additional land cleared by the Environment Ministry. (File)

The Kerala government on Monday “launched” a 7-km tunnel road cutting through virgin forest in the Western Ghats between Kozhikode and Wayanad districts. However, the forest department said they had not even sanctioned a survey through the forest belt.

The road is envisaged as an alternative route to the 13-km Thamarassery Ghat road along the Kozhikode-Wayanad-Bengaluru highway. The development of the two-lane ghat road had hit a roadblock over delay in getting additional land cleared by the Environment Ministry. The tunnel road is expected to reduce the Kozhikode-Bengaluru distance by 7 km.

After the “project launch”, Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan said the tunnel road would be completed within three years. “The project has got administrative sanction from Kerala Infrastructure Investment Fund Board for Rs 658 crore. The project is expected to cost Rs 900 crore. Work will begin after three months,” he said.

“As the ghat road passes through forest, development of that road has limitations. The idea of the tunnel road has evolved as a solution to overcome practical hurdles in all alternative projects. The government is aiming at development while ensuring conservation of nature. The government has conducted detailed study about environmental issues and the 7-km road will be constructed underground through the forest,” he said.

The state government had assigned Konkan Railway Corporation the task of preparing the project report and construction. On September 22, the corporation began a field survey of the proposed tunnel route, which has reported massive landslides over the years.

However, Kozhikode Division Forest Officer M Rajeevan said no sanction was given for conducting the survey in the forest land. "The proposed route is dense forest, which is virtually free from human intervention. We haven't given sanction for any government or private agency for the survey," he said.

The state government has said that because the road will be underground, it will not cause any loss to the forest. However, on April 17, 2018, the Union Environment Ministry had revised guidelines for diversion of forest land for non-forest purposes. Regarding construction of tunnel, the revised guidelines said the forest Act would apply not only to the surface area but also the underground area beneath the forest. For tunnel projects, conditions related to underground mining would be applicable, it said.

Wayanad Nature Protection Forum president N Badusha questioned how the government would start work in three months without green clearance. "We are awaiting the detailed project report and will plan further action. The proposed alignment is a highly sensitive forest land," he said.

Meanwhile, work on a 945-metre tunnel along NH 544 (between Thrissur and Palakkad) is pending completion for 11 years. Construction of the twin-tunnel began in 2009, but work was delayed due to several factors like financial crisis in the contractor firm, protest against damage from blasting of rocks and lack of clearance from the forest department. The cost of the project was estimated at Rs 900 crore in 2009, but it has now risen to Rs 1,100 crore.

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