

## Mining plan for Jharkhand forests may get a relook

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**New Delhi:** The environment ministry has sought the reassessment of the sustainable mining plan for Saranda and Chaibasa forests in the Singhum district of Jharkhand so as to facilitate mining. The Saranda forests are India's largest, contiguous Sal forests spread over 82,000 hectares (ha), and the current plan says mining should not be allowed in the dense forest.

Following justice MB Shah's 2014 report on illegal iron and manganese mining in Jharkhand in 2014, the environment ministry commissioned the Indian Council of Forestry Research and Education (ICFRE), Dehradun, to study the carrying capacity of Saranda forests. The sustainable mining plan for the forest published in 2018 is based on findings of the ICFRE study.

The plan said that there is sufficient iron and manganese ore available in the eastern boundary of Saranda bordering Chaibasa -- enough, indeed, to last for 50 to 100 years. It said mining could be allowed in these parts with adequate safeguards because the forests were already fragmented. It also recommended that very dense forests with canopy density above 70%, spread over forest area of more than 1 ha be left untouched. According to the Indian Bureau of Mines, Jharkhand has about 4,000 million tonnes of iron ore.

"As a policy, the dense and biodiverse forest with significant wild flora and fauna population should not be diverted for mining purpose, especially when sufficient mineral deposits are available elsewhere for feeding the related industries," the plan said.

This is the plan that the ministry wants reviewed.

It has directed ICFRE to revisit the sustainable mining plan. The terms of reference for the reassessment, seen by HT, suggest an evaluation of the economic value of iron ore and

other minerals in Saranda; the requirement of iron ore given the growing needs of the country; and the reassessment of resources in Saranda for extractability as per the national steel policy 2017; and the study of international case studies of mining in biodiversity rich areas.

“We are working on a new sustainable mining plan for Saranda. It’s in response to a government order,” said SC Gairola, director general of ICFRE. In a letter dated January 6 regarding constitution of a committee for reassessment of the mining plan, ICFRE has sought nomination of members from the ministry of steel and the Wildlife Institute of India. The letter also states that the first meeting of the committee is likely to be held on January 16.

The MB Shah commission’s investigation found several gross violations in Saranda, including increasing capacity of mines at the cost of severe ecological impact. “Contrary to the principle of Public Trust Doctrine, commercial interest of a handful of lease holders to earn more windfall profits at the cost of society, ecosystem, tribal and natural resources has been encouraged which have had adverse impact on forest, environment and social fabrics of the state and the country,” the commission said.

“Saranda forests are a huge catchment for rivers and streams in the region. Jharkhand faces water scarcity every summer. If these forests are opened up the remaining rivers and streams will dry up. Many streams have already turned seasonal there. The rich Sal forests are rich in biodiversity and provide minor forest produce to local tribals. The tribal communities of Saranda will be very badly impacted if the forests are destroyed,” said CR Babu, Delhi University professor emeritus and a biodiversity expert.

“Reassessment was suggested because there were several representations from the state government on the long term vision for the area. The reassessment doesn’t mean that conservation areas will be reopened immediately. It’s only to find what other areas can be explored. I believe a reassessment is also an opportunity to explore what other conservation measures can be taken. The TOR (terms of reference) are not final, and will be finalised during the first meeting,” said a senior environment ministry official.

There are at least eight rivers flowing in Saranda forest division, including the south Koel river, Samtha, Sarako, Koina, Deo, Karo, Hanisada and Bistruli.

“The terms of reference proposed require several social and economic aspects to be addressed. Any reassessment should follow a deliberative approach that can draw on community experience and external expertise equally. Otherwise it will remain a piecemeal exercise to open the extremely sensitive Saranda forest for mining. This is something that needs to go beyond ICFRE’s expertise,” said Kanchi Kohli, legal researcher at the Centre for Policy Research.

Source: <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/mining-plan-for-j-khand-forests-may-get-a-relook/story-lhtufgW2yzgVF9WgduXDEN.html>