

coverstory

The Race to Destruction

USHA TURAGA-REVELLI

Quote: As part of the road work that was started with the blessings and grants of the AP Government, big pits were dug at many places and salt water will stand there, rendering the ground saline. The intervention will hit the natural high tide and ebb phenomenon and the wave action typical to estuary areas, explain experts. "The road may not be of any use once the Krishna Pushkarams are over but the damage will be deep and far-reaching," laments KLN Murthy.

Blurb: The two Telugu states are emerging as veritable theatres of environmental destruction as forests are denuded, mountains are nibbled away, rivers are killed and air is polluted

Amaravathi Pain Clinic! Thus, proclaims a prominent signboard outside a shop in the Governorpet area of Vijayawada. "It is a sign that reminds me of the way we rush through our work, permissions and orders as part of that great capital building exercise. It's truly Amaravathi pain," a senior official of the Andhra Pradesh Government, who drives by that road every day to work, jokes.

Jokes apart, though, the new development in the two Telugu states, is now being recognised as among the shoddiest, most destructive, short-sighted exercises of all times, both on planning and implementation levels. While experts bemoan violations at many levels, the environment continues to be the first and the biggest casualty, the damage caused to ecosystems lethal and irrevocable.

The latest in a string of violations is a road being laid through the Krishna Wildlife Sanctuary in Krishna district of Andhra Pradesh, for the convenience of the pilgrims to the Krishna Pushkarams. Environmental activists were quick to react and file petitions in the court to stay the work. Imran Siddiqui of HyTi-CoS (Hyderabad Tiger Conservation Society) who first got the work on the road stayed, has now filed an additional petition in Hyderabad High Court seeking restoration of the habitat, asking for an order to this effect to be issued to the government.

Krishna Wildlife Sanctuary is one of the last-surviving Ecotone regions, an area between marine and



Stone Quarrying in Visakhapatnam

terrestrial habitat, and hence an important ecological zone. It is the river mouth and home for vast tracts of mangrove forests and many rare species of animals. "Forests are not just those which have big trees with big canopies. In the Krishna Sanctuary road case, the district collector filed a counter saying there is no forest where the road is being laid. But the definition of forest is broad and has much deeper significance. There are deemed forests and by ecological standards, even a desert is a forest," points out Imran Siddiqui.

"Often we consider the mangroves and wetlands as wastelands. That is not right. They are quite important for eco-balance. The KWS road project is a violation on many counts. The Wildlife Act, the Supreme Court guidelines and even Coastal Regulation Zone Rules. That is why we are asking for an immediate damage assessment," says Murthy Kantimahanti, Conservation Biologist with Eastern Ghats Wildlife Society, a not-for-profit organisation fighting on eco-issues.

As part of the road work that was started with the blessings and grants of the AP Government, big pits were dug at many places and salt water will stand there, rendering the ground saline. The intervention

will hit the natural high tide and ebb phenomenon and the wave action typical to estuary areas, explain experts. "The road may not be of any use once the Krishna Pushkarams are over but the damage will be deep and far-reaching," laments KLN Murthy.

The biggest victim of the latest venture of the Government may be the Fishing Cat, a rare species that is an indicator of an Ecotone, and the animal now faces the threat of extinction.

Roads, the arteries of development, have now come to symbolise mindless environmental destruction in India. "There is a super highway near Paderu-Lambasingi area in Visakhapatnam district. A vehicle goes by that road may be once in five minutes. Why do we need such roads where massive destruction of forests is involved?" asks Imran, who has

been personally instrumental in saving vast areas of forests in both the States. So it was with the Pulicat Lake where Coastal Zone Regulations were grossly violated in spite of staunch opposition from activists and experts. The recent Naval Fleet Review was another case in point where an event caused long-term damage. The silver linings are few and far between. The National Green Tribunal recently directed Ministry of Environment and Forest to take penal action against TSGENCO for illegally undertaking the Bhadradi Thermal Power Plant works without prior Environmental Clearance but there are many more violations that go unchallenged.

The two Telugu states are emerging as veritable theatres of environmental destruction as forests are denuded, mountains are nibbled away, rivers are killed and the air is polluted.

"Not just roads, now it is pipelines too. For Mission Bhagiratha, long pipelines are laid through forests and it is estimated that more than 1,200 hectares of forest land is being destroyed for the pipelines. Warangal, Adilabad, Nizamabad, Medak...every district in Telangana is losing forests. We have lost track of how much forest we are losing but one RTI query told us that a whopping 3,000 trees are cut every day to be brought into Hyderabad, for use by hotels as firewood. Just Hyderabad," Imran expresses his anguish.



Dr Purushotham Reddy



Murthy Kantimahanti



Imran Siddiqui



Pulicat Lake. Photo: Neeharika Satyavada

Tragically, the State is turning out to be a bigger perpetrator in terms of destruction. Permissions are granted rapidly, contracts awarded with lightning speed and funds released without any ado. There is no environmental impact assessment or dialogue with experts as projects trundle on hastily laid tracks and contractors go on the rampage. Rivers are ruled by the sand mafia. Hills are playgrounds for quarry owners. Forest lands are granted to pharma giants. And agricultural land converted into real estate.

"Forests, hills, rivers... There is now extensive quarrying near the Simhachalam range and the hills will soon disappear," Murthy says.

"A senior minister in the Telangana Government recently called out in a speech to plant saplings in the city under Harita Haaram to resolve drought. Is that a joke or what? That's why the Hon'ble Chief Justice reacted so sharply, asking if planting tiny saplings is a substitute for chopping down 30-40 yr old trees. And permissions without discretion? It seems the Forest Department has become a facilitator for felling trees rather than providing protection."

And now the mother of all green murders is just round the corner with the AP Government seeking to de-notify a whopping 19,256 hectares (about 47,000 acres) of forest land. The State Government not only seeks clearance from the Union Ministry of Environment and Forests to divert the forest land but also begs for a waiver on equivalent compensa-

tory afforestation. "It smacks of nothing but greed. A Govt of India official walked out of a meeting in disgust at the State Government's unholy gluttony. The Centre asked why we need almost 50,000 acres where 200 acres would be sufficient to build the whole infrastructure needed for a new administration to function," reveals a senior official. "In fact, the whole projections for the capital region, including population growth, are highly unlikely to happen in reality in even next 50 years. So what are we destroying so much for?"

What brings on such arbitrary decisions? What makes governments ignore laws and guidelines? Why is there such utter disdain and disregard when it comes to the environmental impact of a project? And why is the environment always the casualty?

"Our political parties lack the will to protect the environment. None of the manifestoes mentions the party's approach and policy on the environment. In fact, every party must have an environment cell to work full time on these laws, policies and issues. And while all parties are like that, the two Telugu states have parties that came to power on single-point agendas, the language there, separate state here," analyses Dr Purushotham Reddy, Environmental Activist.

"We are now becoming like China where water, earth and air are all completely messed up. The need of the hour is restoration. Each block of forest needs a distinct restoration plan depending on factors such as climate, species, terrain, etc. And, of course, new

plantation wherever necessary," Imran Siddiqui advises.

The total absence of foresight is going to cause calamities, warn experts. "Ecosystems are delicate and even small changes can cause a big effect. As in the case of the KBR National Park and the proposed flyovers under the SRDP in Hyderabad. Governments have to go beyond this narrow thinking and connect to the global debate. They should work out sustainable development goals recognised by the UN," adds Dr Reddy.

"The statutory decision-making bodies such as the Wildlife Board have to be constituted properly. People need to vote for leaders and parties that have a policy for the environment," says Imran. "Yes, in democracies, people need to question the government. They should strengthen courts and help them protect the environment. People should live for a cause that is larger than their own lives," Dr Reddy is clear.

It is a sign of a failed society that courts are needed to come to the rescue of the environment. It is sad that people still need to be told that it is important to plant trees. It is alarming that those in power have no ears for expert advice. It is appalling that those in power and policy-making positions cannot see beyond their own interests. It is indeed tragic that contractors and middlemen decide the fate of a land and that development is an ivory tower built on the graves of a million forests. And that the two new states should race each other to imminent disaster.



Sand mining at Avanigadda