

**Rail Line in Tropical Forests Threatening the Livelihood of Local
Communities in Western Ghats, Karnataka, India.**

Study conducted by:

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UTTARA KANNADA

KARNATAKA

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1.0: Rail line in tropical forests threatening the livelihood of local communities.

1.1: Introduction/background:

The proposed 168 Km long rail line was to be constructed at a cost of INR 11.53 billions. The initial work and laying of rail line progressed at snails speed, main reason being the meager allocation of INR 0.020 billions in rail budget. Even this amount was not utilized as the land acquisition process ran into problem because the affected farmers have rejected the compensation package demanding higher compensation.

Uttara Kannada district is one of the hilly regions covering an area of 10,24,679 Hectares of geographical area 81% of the area is under forest. In recent days due to launching of various developmental projects and increasing land hunger from the people has greatly reduced the forest area, which has become the prime concern. Out of the existing forest 30 to 40% is degraded and biotic pressure on the forests is too high.

As per the national forest policy of 1952, the hilly region like Uttara Kannada district should have 66% of the total geographic area under forests for maintaining the ecological balance. The extent of forest in the district is much more below than the required standard for maintaining the natural balance. The proposed rail line cuts across one of the pristine forests in the Western Ghats, which hosts several endemic species of flora and fauna.

Because of the denudation forests in the watershed areas streams and the wells may dry up due to depletion of underground water. The proposed line passes through the Western Ghats cutting across the forests from sea level to upper ghat area may further sub-divide the forest into smaller fragments. This may lead to soil erosion, frequent forest fire in summer which further destroys the existing forests. The wild life movement becomes restricted and they may likely to be killed during their regular migration when they cross the railway line since it runs amidst the forest. Therefore any destruction of forest area for non-forestry purpose may lead to a lot of environmental problems, which the human beings may not be able to restore.

Required land to construct Ankola-Hubli Rail line.

- Total distance of the track 164 kilometers.
- Forest area 965 Hectares
- Garden land 13 Hectares
- Dry land 235 Hectares
- Built up land 3 Hectares
- Wet land 38 Hectares
- Total cost 11.53 billion INR

Villages affected: Mishrikai, Kirwatti, Tambur, Kodlagadde, Ramanguli, Kaigadi, Ramankoppa, Idagundi, Telangar, Birgadde, Kanchinhaal, Kodlagadde, Vajrali, Hebbulu, Honnali, Agasur and Nandigadde.

Since the inception, the project was facing serious threat from environmentalists. The rail line has to pass through the rich natural forests of Western Ghats, cutting across the best forest region of Uttara Kannada district. Parisara Samrakshana Kendra pioneered in creating awareness about the destruction of 1000 hectares of Natural forests. While conducting a series of meetings in the remote hill villages, it was able to convince the farmers about the disastrous impact of rail line. Ramachndra Gaonkar of Telangar village in Yellapur taluka " I will not loose the farm but if the rail line is built, the entire village will be losing its source of water. We will not be able to cultivate our land as the rail line will destroy the water courses" Through, this statement might seem to be too extreme, it is only obvious if one visit the hilly terrain. The steep hill slopes are already making way for landslides. These landslides have caused fear among people. They do not want to see such landslides.

The local people also point out the difficulty they and forests will be facing once the rail line is built. They are apprehensive about increased timber smuggling from the forests through the trains. The villagers also question about the fate of wildlife with coming of rail line. When the forest is contiguous the wildlife moves freely by following regular migratory paths. These paths will be destroyed causing hardships to wild life and intern they may attack villages.

The Member of Parliament from the region Mr. Anath Kumar Hegde says" For the sake of development the region we will have to compromise and sacrifice these forests". Many politicians have threatened to launch agitation in North Karnataka to get this project completed. However, Bhaskar Geral, who is from the region where rail line passes says" Please tell us how this rail line is giving to bring development? Will it give jobs to our people? No. Who will be the laborers? All of them from outside Karnataka? Once the rail line is built, who will be working there? Again outsiders. The rail line will be a tool to exploit hinterland and people. Local people will not benefit from this grand scheme."

1.2: Rejection by the Advisory Committee:

Advisory Committee constituted by the Central Government (India) rejected the proposal of construction of new broad gauge Hubli-Ankola Railway line under following observations.

- The construction of the proposed new railway track from Hubli to Ankola for transporting mainly iron ore has no much justification. On the other hand, this will simply be a tragedy on the prime forests of Western Ghats and of the biological hot spot of the country. Vast stretch of prime forests shall be subject to serious soil loss, bio-diversity degradation, and adverse impact on hydrological system of major rivers and irreversible effect on fragile ecosystem of Western Ghats.
- There is marginal difference of 18 kilometers in the distance between existing and the proposed railway track for which such a large area of beautiful forests and biologically hot spot fragile Western Ghat should not be sacrificed.
- It is proposed mainly for transportation of iron and manganese ores from Bellary Hospet region and it will not help local people as no passenger traffic is envisaged. In view of these observations the Central Government rejected the proposal.

The rejection letter has once again raised the controversy of development verses destruction. The politicians are determined to fight to build the rail line and claim that forest destruction is not an issue and it should be sacrificed for benefit of all. So, is this rail line will be boom to people in North Karnataka and coastal Karnataka? Or it is a bane for local people? As the politicians debate over the issue the forests are waiting for a fresh lease of life.

1.3: Dialogue on Ankola – Hubli Railline

A meeting was held in Telangar to discuss possible benefits and damage of Ankola – Hubli Rail line on October 20, 2004.

The benefits would be through transporting manganese and iron ores and through passengers. The ores are depleting natural resources and the ores present in Hospet – Bellary from where proposed rail bring the ores would lost within few years. Therefore the villagers opined that it is not wise to lay a rail track mainly to transport the ores. Another discussion was that instead of exporting the ores the Government should also consider to establish manufacturing units in that area. There may be some benefits from passenger traffic. However, it may not help local people because already there exists a national highway and buses or tempo would go to near to passenger's places and there are frequent buses, Tempos. Some participants said that although

journey in train is cheaper many times people have to pay substantial amount to reach the railway stations.

Employment: Provides employment opportunities however, on the other hand farmers forest dwelling communities and agriculture and other labors loose their employment.

Agriculture: Majority of the farmers surrounding the proposed rail line are marginal farmers having less than a hector of land. Constructing Rail line in these patches of land would further fragment the land and life of these farmers becomes difficult. Besides there will be impact on social, cultural aspects, there will be thefts and other social problems. It is also evident that construction of Rail track caused water logging in the land during monsoon season where as construction of tunnels creates problems to ground water and causes water scarcity to grow crops. Maitri Kala Balaga, Prakruti/PSK jointly organized the meeting. Mr. B.G. Hegde Geral and Mr. Narasimha Hegde have attended the meeting on behalf of Prakruti.

1.4: Survey and awareness campaigns:

Prakruti had conducted series of awareness campaigns in the villages that would be affected by proposed rail track. We have also collected data on people's response to lobby with the politicians and bureaucrats. The facts were presented in the media and a letter was sent to Advisory Committee about the problem of establishing the rail track.

The survey revealed that 80% of the people in the villages opposed establishing the rail track. 15% said that they cannot say any thing about it and it is beyond their capacity as the Railway Department and local politicians want to establish this rail track. Only 5% of people said that rail track should be established because it helps to development of the district. Many of these farmers have very small patch of land ranging from 0.4 to less than a hectare. They fear that constructing the rail track in their farm would further fragment the land and the life of the farmers would become difficult. On the other hand many of these farmers have already displaced as refugee or lost their land during the construction of highway. They fear that establishing the rail track would further damage their livelihood.

1.5: Submitting the revised proposal.

Now the Southwestern Railway, Karnataka has submitted the revised proposal to the MoEF (Ministry of Environment and Forestry) for consideration.

Railways has submitted this revised proposal seeking diversion of only 245 hectares of forestland compared to previous requirement of 965 hectares. The reduction of 720 hectares of forestland in the revised proposal raises doubt about the actual area of forest required for the project. How is it possible to reduce the destruction of forest area by more than 70 percent?

As the project involves destruction of the best remaining natural forests in the Western Ghats, it is very important to conserve these forests.

We requested the MoEF (Ministry of Environment and Forests) to reject the revised proposal and help conserve the fragile ecosystem in the Western Ghats on the following grounds.

1. It is not going to benefit the local people instead threatens livelihood of local people (villagers, farmers, and forest dwelling communities, Non Timber Forest Produce collectors).
2. Loss of biodiversity in the Western Ghats which is one of eighteen biological hot spot of the world.
3. The proposed rail line passes thorough elephants, bison's and other animals' corridors thus degrading and fragmentation of their habitat.
4. It may create havoc in the valley causing water logging in the agriculture field and drying of streams/rivers in summer.
5. It is absolutely a false claim that only 245 ha of forestland is required to complete the project in thick evergreen forest area. This is a play to get the permission from the MoEF. Our experiences with earlier projects in the Western Ghats have proved that the actual loss of forest will be more than what is proposed in the actual project.
6. The railway department claims that proposed rail line is to transport iron ore from Bellary-Hospet, which is going to deplete within near future as it is rightly mentioned in the Advisory Committee report. What happens to the rail line once the iron ore is depleted? Who will bear the cost of maintenance?
7. Only some vested interested people are demanding the construction of the rail line for their personal profit ignoring environmental costs.
8. The area (Yellapur and surrounding region) is facing water scarcity and drought conditions will become regular phenomenon with the deforestation.



Figure 1: Protest camp against Ankola – Hubli rail Line organised by PSK.

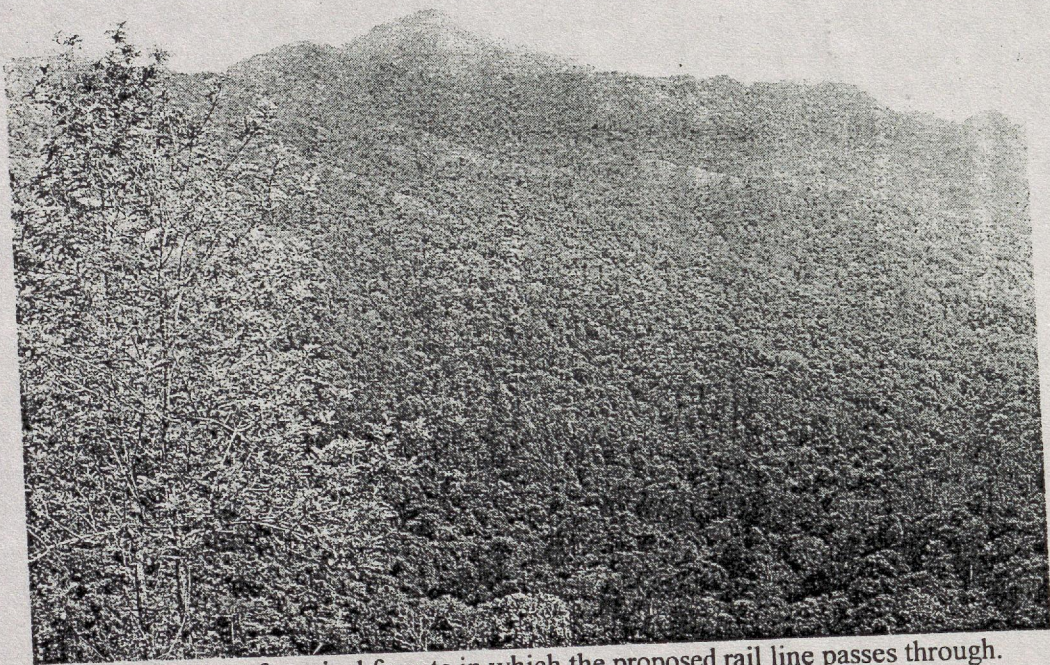
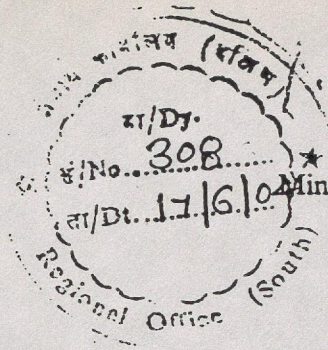


Figure 2: Section of tropical forests in which the proposed rail line passes through.



F. No. 8-134/03-FC
Government of India
Ministry of Environment & Forests
F.C. Division

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Paryavaran Bhawan, CGO Complex,
Lodhi Road, New Delhi - 110 003.
New Delhi, the 10th June, 2004.

To
The Principal Secretary (Forests),
Government of Karnataka,
Bangalore.

Sub: Diversion of 965 ha. of forest land for construction of new broad gauge Hubli-Ankola Railway line in favour of South Western railways, Karnataka.

Sir,

I am directed to refer to your letter No. FEE 237 FGL 2002 dated: 29-11-2003 on the above mentioned subject seeking prior approval of the Central Govt. under Forest (Conservation) Act, 1980 under Section-2 of Forest (Conservation) Act, 1980 and to say that the proposal has been examined by the Advisory Committee constituted by the Central Government under Section 3 of the aforesaid Act.

The Committee observed that "The construction of the proposed new railway track from Hubli to Ankola for transporting mainly iron ore has no much justification. On the other hand, this will simply be a tragedy on the prime forests of Western Ghats and of the biological hot spot of the country. Vast stretch of prime forests shall be subject to serious soil loss, biodiversity degradation, adverse impact on hydrological system of major rivers and irreversible effect on fragile ecosystem of Western Ghats." Further, the Committee also observed that the rail distance between existing Hubli - Vasco railway line is 230 km., whereas the distance between proposed Hubli - Anokola - Karwar is 212 km. There is a marginal difference of 18 km. in the distance between the existing and the proposed railway track for which such a large area of beautiful forests and biological hot-spot eco-fragile Western Ghats should not be sacrificed and it will also not help to local people as no passenger traffic is envisaged. It is proposed mainly for transportation of iron and manganese ores from Bellary-Hospet region. The Committee also considered that the mines are continuously depleting resources, hence the utility of the proposed railway line may not exist in long run.

In view of the observations made by the Advisory Committee, the Central Government do not find any justification for the proposal and therefore, hereby rejects the proposal on merit.

Yours faithfully,

Sd/-

(Anurag Bajpai)
Assistant Inspector General of Forests

17/6/04

2i Copy to:

1. The Principal Chief Conservator of Forests, Government of Karnataka, Bangalore.
2. Nodal Officer, Office of the PCCF, Government of Karnataka, Bangalore.
3. The Chief Conservator of Forest, Regional Office, Bangalore.
4. RO(HQ), New Delhi
5. South Western Railways
6. Monitoring Cell, FC Division.
7. PC to IGF(FC)
8. Guard file.

11/6/04

(Anurag Bajpai)
Assistant Inspector General of Forests