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Knell sounded for neutrino observatory in Nilgiris

Kalyan Ray, New Delhi, Nov 20, DHNS:

After keeping hundreds of scientists on tenterhooks for three years, the Centre on Friday finally sounded the death knell for the Indian Neutrino Observatory, which was to showcase India's science prowess to the world.



In the face of stiff opposition from NGOs claiming INO's disastrous impact on wildlife, Environment minister Jairam Ramesh has decided not to permit construction at Singara in the Nilgiri district. It falls within the buffer zone of Mudhumalai tiger reserve.

Curiously, Ramesh took the decision after agreeing that "scientists involved in the INO project are as mindful of environmental issues as the NGOs who are against it" and "commending the INO environment impact assessment for the sensitivity demonstrated to environmental issues".

The Rs 900-crore project involves setting up of detectors in a two-km-long and 1,300-metre-deep tunnel to look for an esoteric cosmic particle called neutrino. INO's research hub was to be located in Mysore. It was supposed to be one of the most important experimental physics facilities in the world.

But green activists were up in arms against INO. They first argued that it falls within an elephant corridor and subsequently pointed out that it is within the buffer zone of Mudhumalai tiger reserve notified in 2008.

When the project took off, the tiger reserve was nowhere in place. It was notified only last year. Singara site received geological and environmental clearance, but not the forest clearance. An official assessment was conducted by Rajesh Gopal, member secretary, National Tiger Conservation Authority. He ruled against the project.

Last August, ten of the world's top physicists, including Nobel laureates Sheldon Glashow and Masatoshi Kosiba, appealed to Prime Minister Manmohan Singh requesting him to salvage the INO project.

Ramesh admitted that veteran Indian Institute of Sciences ecologist R Sukumar, who worked in the Nilgiri forests for 20 years, had prepared a note on the INO project at his behest which clearly states "arguments against Singara are, to a very large extent, exaggerated and misplaced".

In a letter to the department of atomic energy secretary Anil Kakodkar — a copy of which is available with Deccan Herald — the minister said he thought "long and hard about the INO Project" but "the decision must go against Singara".

Scientists have now been asked to "seriously consider" an alternate site at Suruliya, close to Madurai in Tamil Nadu.

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
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