



By R. Haldorai

20 Dec 2008 06:17:00 AM IST

Locals smile, green activists frown

COIMBATORE: With Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) Chairman Anil Kakodkar committed to setting up the Rs.1000 crore India-based Neutrino Observatory (INO) in the Nilgiris Biosphere Reserve (NBR), the district's environmentalists have raised a banner of revolt terming the project as destructive of nature and wild-life.

The local people including the tribals, however, welcome the INO project in the hope that the project would generate more job opportunities in the area.

Kakodkar had called on Chief Minister M Karunanidhi on Thursday and urged him to give clearance to set up the INO at Singara near Masinagudi and Mudumalai sanctuary of Nilgiris district.

The Union Ministry of Environment and Forest has already conferred its support for the project.

Sources say that the AEC had earlier identified Rajasthan, Himachal Pradesh and Tamil Nadu as suitable places for setting up the project but later settled on the Nilgiris biosphere in Tamil Nadu as it was considered the safest zone in the aftermath of Mumbai terror attacks.

Tamil Nadu Green Movement (TNGM), which has written a letter to the AEC under the Right to Information (RTI) Act, inquiring the project's impact on environment, is awaiting a response.

Jayachandran, TNGM Joint Secretary, told the Express that if the chief minister gave permission, the TNGM would file a writ petition in High Court to stall the project. According to him, the project that would require the excavation of hillocks and forest areas to construct huge underground tunnels, would affect the Project Tiger of Mudumalai Wildlife Sanctuary.

He said the heavy manpower and machinery to be engaged in the project work would drive the wild animals away from Mudumalai.

Wildlife in Bandipur Sanctuary of Karnataka would also be affected by the commotion as the building materials could be transported to the proposed site only through Bandipur.

"The act of locals welcoming the INO in the hope that they will get jobs has already caused great concern among environmentalists. What kind of jobs will they get? Experts, scientists and technicians will come from North, East and West blocks of the country," Jayachandran said.

V Sivadass, an environmentalist, demanded that the AEC constitute a panel comprising experts from NGOs to study the impact of the project on environment and ecology.

"On behalf of the Masinagudi People's Livelihood Protection Movement, I would welcome the INO project and would give full support for the successful implementation as it would generate more jobs to the locals," said Dr K Jermina, former chairman of Gudalur Panchayat Union.

Mansinagudi Village Panchayat president Sangeetha also echoed the views of Dr Jermina.

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