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## **AEC chief bats for neutrino location, says it fulfils all geographical requirements**

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Amidst objections from environmentalists to the location of the proposed India-based Neutrino Observatory (INO) at Singara near Mudumalai in the ecologically sensitive Nilgiris biosphere, Atomic Energy Commission chairman Anil Kakodkar on Friday said it was the best possible location for the project.

A day after he called on chief minister M Karunanidhi to seek clearance for locating the underground neutrino observatory in the mountain terrain close to the Pykara ultimate stage hydro-electric project area, Kakodkar conceded that local concerns and apprehensions from an environmental point of view had to be taken into account. "The CM is right," he said, when he was asked about Karunanidhi's view that the local people had to be convinced before the project could be approved.

However, the AEC chairman listed reasons why the location was ideal for the neutrino observatory, which will be part of a pioneering study in particle physics. More than 50 scientists from about 15 institutes and universities have come together to set up INO as they believe neutrinos, which are sub-atomic particles and said to be the most numerous kind of particles in the universe, hold the key to several important and fundamental questions on the origin of the universe and production of energy in the stars.

"The advantage of the place is that it has all geographical features (the project needs)," Kakodkar said, while answering questions here. The neutrino detectors, he said, would require a 360-degree earth curve. "It is an extremely sensitive detector, which needs a rock mass for at least a kilometre." A mountain feature at least one km or one and a half km high, with little or no gorge area, and other essential features were found at the chosen spot, he noted. And as the detectors would be placed in tunnels, the tunnels should be straight without any big turnarounds'.

With a pre-existing road, the location was ideal for the observatory. The multi-institutional group promoting the DAE-funded project had considered a few other sites before zeroing in on the present one, and had done an impact assessment, he added. However, if a better site was available, the group was open to considering it.

On the argument that the observatory should not come up in what was an elephant corridor, Kakodkar said the group was alive to this factor. "Our assessment is that this traffic is insignificant compared to the tourist traffic already there."

Environmentalists in Nilgiris have been opposing INO from the beginning. INO has been conceived on a scale larger than any other basic science project in the nation. It is estimated to cost Rs 920 crore.

Initially, three possible sites were identified: Singara in Mudumalai, Rammam in Darjeeling and the 8,800 metre long tunnel near the Rohtang Pass at Manali. Singara was chosen primarily due to safety, accessibility, minimal disturbance (during construction stage) to the environment. The state forest department has also opposed the proposal, as the site was right in the middle of a prime elephant corridor and in the periphery of the core tiger territory. EOM

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