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Sci. & Tech.

Environmentalists oppose proposal to set up INO at Nilgiris

Chennai (PTI): The proposal to set up an India-based Neutrino Observatory (INO), an underground detector to test particles, at Nilgiri Hills has met with stiff opposition at its very nascent stage, especially from environmentalists.

Atomic Energy Commission Chairman Anil Kakodkar had met Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M Karunanidhi on December 18 to press for the state's approval for setting up the INO and reportedly told him that the locals had to be taken into confidence before going ahead with the project.

However, the scientists fraternity is keen to see the Department of Atomic Energy-funded project go ahead sans any road blocks, as they want to study one of the "least understood" particles -- neutrino.

"It is not a quarry or mining site which could affect the local environment, but is only a process of making a tunnel where there the INO lab would be set up," a scientist in the knowhow of the project told PTI.

Pushp, a small village in Tamil Nadu's Nilgiri Hills, has been chosen by the experts as the "best location" to set up the INO.

Contradicting scientists' statements, environmentalist Nithanand Jayaraman of Corporate Accountability Desk said the tunnel, which the DAE proposes to dig through the Singara hill, would destroy the entire biosphere of the region.

The government had already done a comprehensive Environment Impact Assessment (EIA) on setting up INO in this area. Officials are also in the process of conducting Environment Management Programme (EMP).

Scientists have expressed their willingness to address the concerns of the environmentalists, saying the EMP group would "sit across" the table and sort out the issues.

"This will be done within couple of months," an expert said.

While explaining about the process of tunnel construction, scientists said the debris created during digging the tunnel would not be dumped there. It would be used for constructing a big compound around the place, they said.

"The scientists fraternity would create an awareness among the locals about the project and its benefits," the expert said.

Jayaraman said the scientists have not addressed the environmental and ecological impact of the project. "To create a tunnel they would be using mine explosives. These explosives would definitely disturb not only the environment but also the wildlife living in that area," he said.

He refuted the scientists' claims on recycling the debris and said the waste had to be transported, the process of which would also create a lot of pollution.

"Even if they try to transport the wastage, trucks would be used, which would also pave way for polluting the area," he added.

According to Nanditha Krishna, Director C P Ramaswami Iyer Foundation, Chennai, the Nilgiris is the watershed area for not only to Tamil Nadu but also to Karnataka and Kerala. Any disturbance of ecology in the area would lead to a major catastrophe, Krishna said.

Forest department sources said the sound of heavy-duty trucks would disturb animals living in that area and it "may destroy" the country's first Tiger Reserve there.

Kakodkar said the selected site had all the necessary geographical features requisite of the project and that the experts were aware of the ecological concerns.

If there is a better site, it could also be considered, he said.

According to details posted on the INO website, neutrino is the "least understood" particles in nature and scientists have overwhelmingly supported Pushp as the ideal place to locate the underground workshop for studying it.

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Pushep has the geographical advantages such as the required 360 degree curve, ideal rock mass needed around the detector, hill height and absence of gorges.

Kakodkar is also of the view that the existing infrastructure such as roads would make the job easy.

The INO is a multi-institutional setup drawing professionals from various fields. The DAE funded project also has the Department of Science and Technology (DST) on-board.

Pushep, according to INO website, is a few hours' drive from cities like Coimbatore (TN) and Mysore and Bangalore (Karnataka), making it easily accessible.

The expert group of INO had gone through various sites in the country before zeroing in on Pushep, which is the "best".

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