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TN officials study plan for lab inside a forest
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CHENNAI: It's a matter involving the largest creatures walking the earth, elephants, and the smallest particles in the universe — sub-atomic particles called neutrinos, the existence of which most people are unaware of. The battleground is the ecologically-sensitive elephant corridor in Mudumalai.

While scientists from across the country is waiting for a nod from the Tamil Nadu forest department for construction of an India-based Neutrino Observatory (INO) in Singara, just outside the Mudumalai wildlife sanctuary, environmentalists are opposed to the project as it would endanger wildlife in an already damaged eco-system.

The proposed site for the INO, near the TNEB's Pykara Ultimate Stage Hydro Electric Project, cuts through the elephant corridor, say environmentalists. As the site is on the periphery of the core tiger territory in a sanctuary that is the model for conservation in the country, the state forest department is in a quandary.

The INO is an effort to build a world-class laboratory to study fundamental issues in physics. More than 50 scientists from about 15 institutes and universities including the Bhabha Atomic Research Centre, Tata Institute of Fundamental Research and the Chennai-based Institute of Mathematical Sciences have come together for the project. Considered the most ambitious of its kind in the country, the INO has been allocated Rs 470 crore under the 11th Plan and Rs 450 crore under the 12th Plan.

Neutrinos are neutral, elementary particles. At least three types of neutrinos and their anti-particles exist. Neutrino oscillation has generated excitement in the particle physics community. "In a sense, neutrinos hold the key to several important and fundamental questions on the origin of the universe and energy production in stars," says Prof N K Mondal, spokesperson, INO.

Environmentalists have raised objections to the proposed lab as it will cut through prime forest. "We are not against scientific advancement. We are against the proposed site as it will block an important elephant corridor," says A C Soundararajan, member, Nilgiris Wildlife Association.

The observatory will be built under the ground in the middle of the forest, which is home to elephants, tigers and leopards. Since the observatory is to be built at least 1,000 metres under the ground, the tunnelling will cause damage to the environment, he says.