Amaravati Threatens to March on Kondapalli

AYESHA MINHAZ

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Ayesha Minhaz (s.ayesha.minhaz@qmail.com) is an independent journalist based in Hyderabad.

The Government of Andhra Pradesh is awaiting clearance from the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change to divert 124 square kilometres of forestland to build Amaravati capital city region. What is the procedure to divert forestlands? What will be the consequences on communities dependent on the forest? Have other cities in India been built on forestland? What is the ecological value of the forestlands in question?

Come monsoons, and the newspapers of Andhra Pradesh (AP) are filled with pictures of plantation drives being taken up by every government department, school, hospital, non-governmental organisation (NGO), and even in private spaces.

In 2016, speaking at a gathering to celebrate World Environment Day, Chief Minister of AP N Chandrababu Naidu had announced that the target that year was to plant 50 crore saplings (ToI 2016).

“We have to double the green cover by taking up plantation in four lakh acres per annum in the next 10 years. We have to grow 25-30 crore trees every year,” Chandrababu Naidu posted on his social media account on World Environment Day this year (Naidu 2017).

Such similar ambitious numbers have been announced as targets and achievements have been made public. Citizens have been encouraged to plant saplings in every available space and geotagging was announced to monitor the growth of the plants.

For a state government that evidently dedicates a lot of time and money on plantation, the indifference towards forests appears incoherent with its conservation-enthusiast nature.

The suspicion arises because, while stressing on afforestation, the state government is seeking clearance from the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEFCC) for diversion of 12,444.89 ha (13,267.12 ha earlier) of forestlands spread across Krishna and Guntur districts for “Capital City Infrastructure Projects in Andhra Pradesh Capital Region.” [i]

In simpler words, the state government is waiting for a nod to cut down 12,444.89 ha of forests in order to accommodate infrastructure projects. For perspective, the geographical
area of the Hyderabad district (not greater Hyderabad) is 210 sq km (GoT 2015), and the
expanse of forests that the state government intends to divert is 124.4 sq km.

The ‘Green Hurdle’

The phrase “green hurdle” is associated with developmental activities rejected or revised to
ensure minimal damage to ecology. “Roadblock” is another popular term used to describe
the appropriate action taken under the laws. Such phrases do reflect the way forest (or
environment) conservation is perceived when developmental activities do not get sanctioned
or are just delayed.

The proposal of the AP government to divert 12,444.89 ha of forests for the capital region
faces one such green hurdle. The proposal was submitted to the MoEFCC in October 2015
and is currently being reviewed by the Forest Advisory Committee (FAC).

As per the Forest (Conservation) Act, 1980, any diversion of forests for non-forest purposes
requires an approval from the central government. When the MoEFCC receives a proposal
requesting diversion of over 40 ha of forestland, the proposal is sent to the Forest Advisory
Committee (FAC). After scrutiny of the said proposal, the FAC advises the central
government, which can then “grant approval to the proposal with appropriate mitigative measures or reject the same.”

However, in what is being touted as a hurdle, the FAC, on 16 May 2017, recommended that an Expert Committee be constituted by the MoEFCC to examine “the master plan” for the capital prepared by the AP government, and the “proposed land use of the forest” (see note 1).

One of the several land uses proposed is a Biodiversity Park. It is ironical that a forest might be cut down to raise a concrete building where a board reading “Biodiversity Park” can be hung. The proposed usage of the land is loaded with various other parks too. In close to 40% of the forest that has been requested, the state government wants to come up with a Cultural & Creative Industrial Park in one forest block and a Cultural theme park in another; Heritage, Adventure Eco Theme Park and Institution; Aerospace & Green Mobility Industrial Park; Integrated Cut Flower & Spice Park; and Integrated Infrastructure Park. “On receipt of the Expert Committee’s report the matter would be considered in the FAC and appropriate recommendations shall be made accordingly” (see note 1).

Such a recommendation does not come much as a surprise because the observations regarding the proposed land use and proposed compensatory afforestation sites (among other issues) have remained a constant in the last two FAC meetings, separated by a year. The FAC also observed that, “It is not clear whether the detailed land use plan as given is part of approved Master Plan” (see note 1).

However, even if the plans are sanctioned, they can be modified as per Clause 41(1) of the Andhra Pradesh Capital Region Development Authority Act, 2014:

> The Authority may, on a reference from the Local body concerned, make such modifications to the sanctioned perspective plan, master plan and infrastructure plan, or area development plan as it thinks fit and which in its opinion are necessary.

Apart from the scrutiny of land use, the site inspection team from the regional office has recommended against denotifying a particular block of forest: “the area of proposed 890.43 ha of the Kondapalli Reserve Forest should not be allowed to be diverted and disturbed.”[ii] The state government, however, went ahead and proposed the building of a Centre for Sports and Physical Training and Agri-Tourism in this particular stretch of forest (see note 1).

This makes one wonder whether the state has deliberately opted to overlook the observations made by the FAC, or if it has genuinely failed to understand the concerns raised.
Economic Liabilities

Chigurupati Ramachandraiah, economist with the Centre for Economic and Social Studies, Hyderabad and an urban planner, suggests that such moves to acquire large expanses of land should be viewed with suspicion.

Since day one of the announcement of the capital city project, it was clear that there was an eye on huge takeover of lands (farm, forests etc). The districts where new capital is coming up are high density in terms of population and low in terms of availability of land. The dry districts of Rayalseema fare much better in terms of land availability, but the government chose the current site.

Further, Ramachandraiah explains,

There is no justification to denotify these forestlands. There is a huge economic liability of doing away with such large tracts of land. These are public lands belonging to all. If approved, this might be diverted to a pool of land which will eventually be leased off or given to private contractors or be assigned to developers in PPP models.

The government has maintained that the blocks of forests that are proposed to be diverted are “degraded,” and has ignored the fact that there are people who depend on some of these very blocks for wood or forest produce to earn a livelihood.

A local leader (who wants to remain anonymous) from Kondapalli village adjoining the Kondapalli Reserve Forest is not yet aware of the plans to cut down a part of this forest. The local leader states that they actually need the Kondapalli forest to be improved in terms of the kinds of plantations. “We have been requesting the forest department to plant softwood trees and some other saplings which would help produce organic colours, but in vain,” he said.

When asked whether the diversion will impact the prospects of villagers, he says,

Along the periphery, the softwood trees in the forest might have become less dense than they were around a decade ago. But still, it is the major source of income for the people as most of us are makers of the famous Kondapalli toys.

To justify the proposal to divert forests, the AP government is relying on a clause in Section 6 of the Andhra Pradesh Reorganization Act, 2014:
The Central Government shall facilitate the creation of a new capital for the successor State of Andhra Pradesh, if considered necessary, by denotifying degraded forest land. (94 [4])

“As per the state reorganization act, it is the obligation of the center to help the state with the formation of the capital and allowing de-notification of the forest,” states Sreedhar Cherukuri, Commissioner, AP Capital Region Development Authority. The “if considered necessary” phrase of the act is being justified by saying that there are “no alternative lands available.” “There is no alternative land to build what has been proposed. We have looked into everything,” assured Cherukuri.

However, in its recommendations and remarks to the FAC, the regional office of Chennai had submitted an observation that “the justification is rather weak” and that “it would not be therefore completely wrong to assume that the forest land is probably being chosen because of the ease in diversion” (note 2).

This observation is worrying. For one, it is unsettling to read “ease in diversion” being used by the regional office of the forestry division of the MoEFCC while speaking about forests. Secondly, and more importantly, this would mean that the role of the forests in the capital region might have been relegated to providing land for developmental projects.
Kondapalli toy.      Image Credit: Rahul Maganti

Forests as Source of Land
The planning and execution of the building of Bhubaneswar—capital of Odisha—spanned both pre- and post-independence periods. Interestingly, the site selection of Bhubaneswar has been attributed to the vast presence of forestlands by historians and authors.

As per the estimates of the public works department (1946), the estimated cost for land acquisition was quoted as ₹5.6 lakh, which was less than the ₹7 lakh requested for “Jungle Clearing and Levelling” (Kalia 1994).

Atul Chandra Pradhan (2013), a retired professor of history, wrote the following to about the site chosen for Bhubaneswar: “acquisition of land at Bhubaneswar was easy as there were barren lands as well as forests.”

Two other capital cities, Chandigarh and Gandhinagar came up in sites acquired from villages. A total of 17 villages with agricultural land were displaced in the first phase of the building of Chandigarh (Shah and Bagchi 2016). Out of the 57 sq km land acquired for the capital region of Gandhinagar, 28 sq km comprised the 30 sectors of the city and the rest of the 29 sq km covered the cantonment, natural park and forest and industrial estates (Shah and Bagchi 2016).

Bhubaneswar, Chandigarh and Gandhinagar were built prior to 1980, when diversion of forests for non-forest purposes did not require approval of the central government.

The planning and ongoing execution of Naya Raipur, the capital city of Chhattisgarh which came up after the amendment of the above rule, was reviewed for a comparison with Amaravati. “Land with minimum forest cover and wildlife” was one of the criteria mentioned for site selection. Those forests falling within the selected site have been listed as one of the “economic catalysts” by the Naya Raipur Development Plan, 2031 (NRDA 2008).

The Naya Raipur plan seems to have a totally different approach to that of AP’s ambitious Amaravati, where the main focus seems to be land.

The activists following Amaravati closely have filed right to information petitions (RTIs), written letters, approached courts, and are trying to curtail environmental consequences.

E A S Sarma, former secretary to the Government of India and activist, says,

I had written to the state government (Municipal Administration and Urban Development Department and the Chief Secretary) several times without any response whatsoever. The state was in too much of a hurry to construct the concrete city to have enough time for considering the environmental implications.

Sarma filed an appeal with the National Green Tribunal, urging the court to look into the
lapses, including the coming up of a city on floodplains and diversion of the forestlands. This appeal, along with three others, is now awaiting judgment and the FAC too has taken note of the same.

Sarma also speaks about “Ecology condition No 10 of statutory Environment Clearance (EC) accorded for the Amaravati project,” which states that the “The Proponent (Andhra Pradesh Capital Region Development Authority or APCRDA) shall utilise natural features such as forests and hills to create regional green networks as committed.”

Sarma adds,

If the forestlands are now permitted to be diverted for non-forest purposes as proposed by APCRDA, it will amount to an outright violation of the Environment Clearance (EC) itself, which in turn will lead to revocation of the EC for the Amaravati project.

It will be pertinent to note here that (the erstwhile) AP violated rules in the past. The 2013 report of the Comptroller and Auditor General of India (CAG) on compensatory afforestation in India points to one such instance where “express orders of the Supreme Court were flouted by Andhra Pradesh State Electricity Board (APSEB) in Andhra Pradesh where the diversion of forest land in National Parks and Sanctuaries was allowed without seeking prior permission of the Supreme Court.”

Supposing that the state government of AP addresses all concerns raised by the FAC, there still exist both logistical and ecological issues.

A “huge backlog” in the compensatory afforestation front of the Polavaram Project has been pointed out by the regional office.

Though the non-forest land for compensatory afforestation is identified and though the funds are committed by the Government of Andhra Pradesh, the actual afforestation is going to be difficult given the experience in the ‘Polavaram Irrigation Project’ in Andhra Pradesh. (see note 2)

Despite the pile-up of compensatory afforestation works, if one assumes that the assurance given by the Andhra Pradesh government is implemented true to the word, the ecological concerns still stand unaddressed.

Ecological Costs

The ecological impact of attempting to replace a natural forest with tree plantations is twofold: one is the effect on the natural ecosystem of the forest that is being diverted, and
the second is the nature of the afforestation activities carried out in non-forestlands or degraded forests. The forest blocks that the state wants to divert fall under the Eastern Ghats.

The Eastern Ghats are a discontinuous range of mountains, unlike the Western Ghats. The scattered ranges have strong connectivity in terms of flora and fauna. These are eroded and disconnected by four major rivers: Godavari, Krishna, Kaveri, and Mahanadi (Ramesh and Kaplana 2015).

One of the observations listed in the minutes of the FAC meeting held on 3 May 2016 regarding these forests was that human interventions have “weakened this patch connectivity” (see note 2).

Forest ecosystems do not remain constant while parts of the forestlands are diverted or the boundaries of these forests are being altered by successive governments for developmental activities.

T R Shankar Raman, scientist at the Nature Conservation Foundation, explained,

Most of the research we have today about the problem of forest fragmentation shows that maintaining the large continuous forests is crucial. It is not to say that the smaller bits of forests are not important. But, smaller patches of forests are more prone to disturbances and consequences like edge effects.

Edge effects refer to disturbances such as weed proliferation, desiccation, and loss of forest-interior species that occur along the hard edges between forest fragments and surrounding land uses, such as farms, reservoirs or built-up areas, Shankar Raman said.

At least 19 species of flora are native to the forests that the AP government seeks to divert. The fauna include panthers, jungle cats, with an occasional bear or hyena, and a dozen other species, including reptiles (see note 2).

The site inspection team had made observations in the first meeting itself about efforts to be made to "develop ecological patch connectivity to scattered Eastern Ghats, especially in the Krishna–Guntur region, which connects the Nallamala hills through Kondapalli hill towards southern side and to the Papikondalu at the northern side of Eastern Ghats. These corridors may even support environmental conservation and function as lung spaces" (note 2).

Abi Tamim Vanak, Fellow, Ashoka Trust for Research in Ecology and the Environment (ATREE), Bengaluru, said,

The reserve forests should be maintained as is and it should be ensured that
the cities are built around without disturbing or destroying the natural systems. There should be focus on preserving the native diversity of the flora and fauna in-situ instead of diversion of forestlands and attempts to compensate it with afforestation.

Compensatory afforestation, from the time it became mandatory in 1980 for all diversions of forestland for non-forest purposes, has attracted more criticism than praise.

Vanak suggested,

The term “compensatory afforestation” is a misnomer. This effort should be called plantation and not afforestation. More often than not, the compensatory afforestation activities are monoculture (planting of one species in an area) in nature.

Even when it is not monoculture, plantation activities by the forest department limit themselves to a handful of tree species, which may or may not be native to the particular ecosystem. Corroborating what Vanak said are the annual reports of afforestation activities taken up by the forest department of AP.

The latest report available on the website of the AP Compensatory Afforestation Fund Management and Planning Authority (CAMPA) is their annual plan of operation (2012–13). This belongs to the erstwhile AP, which was yet to be bifurcated, but is still representative of the kinds of species planted:

Regeneration of open areas and barren hills in 10,385 ha with valuable forest species like teak, red sanders, eucalyptus clones mixed with bamboo, silver oak, sandalwood and indigenous non-teak secondary hardwood species. (AP CAMPA nd: 6)

Another report from 2010–11 shows that a few species remain a constant over the years, hinting that the productivity of these trees in terms of forest produce seems to have taken precedence over maintaining diversity. It states that “92.83 lakh seedlings” were raised in nurseries across the state with species like “Teak, Red Sanders, Bamboo, and secondary timber species, NTFP (non-timber forest produce) species etc.” to be planted in “4,235 ha” of land that year.

However, monoculture plantations or lack of diversity are not the only concern regarding compensatory afforestation. In AP, the issue seems to be the afforestation activities taken up in natural vegetation, like scrub forests, grasslands, and savannas.
Even though it has legal sanction, the ecological impact of plantations on the open ecosystem cannot be ignored.

Shankar Raman explained,

Such open ecosystems comprise largely of scattered shrubs, thorny bushes, and isolated trees within extensive grasslands. Although not dense in nature, these types of natural vegetation are very important in their own right. While some areas are village commons and grazing lands, others are recorded as forestland under the control of the Forest Department.

When the number of trees in these forests does not look high, they stand the risk of being wrongly declared as degraded, which will, in turn, increase the risk that the area will be selected for unwanted afforestation activities.

Shankar Raman added,

When afforestation is done on such lands, it disturbs and destroys the natural habitat of endangered and endemic species like the great Indian bustard, Jerdon’s courser, and blackbuck antelope.

In its proposal submitted to the MoEFCC, the value against the column “Non-Forest Land required for this project” has been mentioned as “0 ha.” The regional office has remarked that this should be looked at again. It has also been noted that "No indication of any attempt to use non forest area is seen in the proposal."

Eventually, the proposal to divert the forestlands may or may not be approved. Whichever way, it is not just the government that needs a refresher course on why forests should not be treated as freely available lands.

All the silent accomplices in the destruction of the forests need it too. We all do.

References:


Notes

1. Minutes of Forest Advisory Committee meeting held on 16 May 2017.

2. Minutes of Forest Advisory Committee meeting held on 3 May 2016.