

Mongabay India

[Video] Complexities of siting a windfarm in the Western Ghats

Ayesha Khan

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- *Farmers in Kharpud village, Maharashtra, claim that a windfarm in an adjoining hilltop causes annual flooding and erosion during monsoons, affecting their crops and livelihoods.*
- *The 133 turbines part of the Andhra Lake Wind Farm spread across 194 hectares of reserved forest land contiguous with the Bhimashankar Wildlife Sanctuary in the Western Ghats, and fall within its buffer zone.*
- *Local leaders and activists allege that the approval of the project disregarded the Forest Rights Act (FRA) by fraudulently obtaining consent and restricting community access to forests.*
- *Ecologists and activists state that the case study highlights the need for implementing stringent Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) before the approval of any project, including those for renewable energy, especially near forest areas.*

Every monsoon, Deoji Vaman Medge's rice field gets flooded with rainwater that brings along debris and rocks from the adjoining hill, damaging the crop. A resident of Kharpud village in Maharashtra's Khed taluka, Medge, like other farmers from the region, spends hours getting rid of the debris. This seasonal challenge started in 2011, when a wind power project came up in the area and an access road for transportation of material to the project site was laid.

"They constructed a road uphill to reach the windfarm. It was poorly done. Now, all the rainwater, along with rocks and mud, flows down that road into our fields. At times, we have to resort to using bulldozers to clear the debris," says Medge. He claims to have suffered huge losses due to the crop damage.



A view of the turbines part of Andhra Lake Wind Farm. Photo by Ayesha Khan.

Announced in 2009, the Andhra Lake Wind Farm is a [106.4 MW](#) wind power project spread over 14 villages of Khed and Maval talukas, contiguous with the Bhimashankar Wildlife Sanctuary. With 133 turbines, the windfarm [installed](#) by Wind World India (formerly Enercon-India) and Apraava Energy (formerly CLP), covers [194 hectares](#) of reserve forest land in the northern Western Ghats, a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

The region is primarily inhabited by tribal and traditional forest dwelling communities, such as the Mahadev Kolis and Katkaris, who depend on the forests for collecting firewood, fodder, timber and non-timber forest produce (NTFP) to be sold in local markets. Most people from the

communities practise agriculture, mainly rice farming which is rain-fed and takes place typically from June to October. For the rest of the year, the land remains dry and uncultivated.



A village's story of loss in renewable energy expansion

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Medge says that since the installation of the windfarm, village residents repeatedly complained to the project authorities about the issue of landslides and recurring floods that inundated their fields. Barring some compensation, no concrete solution has been proposed. “After many complaints, only some farmers received compensation unofficially, which was also infrequent. No step has been taken from the company to stop the flooding,” he told Mongabay-India.

[In 2022](#), the residents of Kharpud held protests by blocking the road to the wind farm to demand fair compensation, but they still await a solution.



Deoji Vaman Medge, a farmer in Kharpud, Maharashtra. Every monsoon, Medge's rice field gets flooded with rainwater that brings along debris and rocks from the adjoining hill, damaging the crop.

Photo by Ayesha Khan.

Alleged violation of laws

The wind power project has been facing opposition since the time it was approved by the Ministry of Environment, Forest, and Climate Change (MoEFCC) in 2009. Activists argued that the project was cleared by fraudulently gaining consent from local residents and by misrepresenting facts on ground. Pradeep Chavan, member of Kalpavriksh, a Pune-based NGO working with the communities, told Mongabay-India that this was a violation of the Forest Rights Act of 2006 (FRA), which aims to acknowledge and grant rights to traditional forest-dwelling communities.

“As per the Forest Rights Act, a certificate should have been issued through a gram sabha resolution indicating that all formalities have been carried out under the FRA and that the villagers have given consent to it, having understood the purpose of the project. But [in this case], it was noted that a false certificate was given by the gram panchayat and no such consent was taken from community members,” he said.

The locals allege that their movement in the forest was also restricted during the construction of the project, which is another violation of the FRA. Tanaji Bhokte, the sarpanch of Kharpud, told Mongabay-India that project officials put up barricades blocking forest access to the local residents, claiming to be under orders of the forest department.

Read more: [More than 15 years on, implementation of Forest Right Act is lagging, new report finds](#)

Bhokte further said that the project promoters had promised to implement CSR practices along with providing jobs, electricity and other development activities for the communities, but none have been fulfilled.

“While setting up the wind project, the company officials told us that they will provide us services pertaining to sanitation, health and education to improve our living conditions, but till date they haven’t implemented these services. They gave temporary jobs to some people during the construction phase, but nothing after that. Only three to four men are now employed as watchmen,” Bhokte explained.

Impact on ecology

The wind farm project is also under scrutiny due to its close proximity to the Bhimashankar Wildlife Sanctuary.



A board displaying the way to Bhimashankar Wildlife Sanctuary. Photo by Ayesha Khan.

In 2011, Kalpavriksh wrote a letter to the Principal Chief Conservator of Forests highlighting the irregularities in granting forest clearance to the Andhra Lake Wind Farm especially since it lies [two to 3.5 kilometres from the biodiversity-rich sanctuary](#). The letter stated that this was a violation of the Wildlife Conservation Strategy, 2002 (WCS), which suggests that no such project should come up in the 10- kilometre radius of a wildlife sanctuary, known as the buffer zone.

The Bhimashankar Wildlife Sanctuary is spread over an area of 130 square kilometres and lies in the evergreen forests of Bhimashankar, where the river Bhima originates in the northern Western Ghats. It is a major sacred forest which has been protected for centuries by people on religious grounds. A large diversity of flora and [fauna](#) is found in the sanctuary including animals like panthers, mouse deer, hyena, and pangolins among others. It is also recognised as an [Important Bird Area \(IBA\)](#). The sanctuary was declared in 1985 mainly to protect the habitat of Maharashtra's state animal, the giant Indian squirrel, which is endemic to the Western Ghats.



Maharashtra's state animal, the giant Indian squirrel. [Photo](#) by NA Nazeer/Wikimedia Commons.

In 2010, an expert panel was appointed by the government to suggest ways to protect the Western Ghats. Under the chairmanship of ecologist Madhav Gadgil, the [Western Ghats Ecology Expert Panel \(WGEEP\)](#) surveyed the Bhimashankar region and the wind energy project.

“There were reports asked from within the forest department about whether a windmill project in the area would adversely affect the forest and the wildlife. The range forest officer in-charge (then) was an honest, straightforward man. He gave a report saying that this is the northernmost stretch and it is rich in wildlife and amongst other things the Indian giant squirrel, (shekru) is very common here, and all that will be disturbed. It (the wind project) should not be gone ahead with. They suppressed the report of this Range Officer,” Madhav Gadgil, ecologist and chairman of the WGEEP, told Mongabay-India. When the WGEEP examined the site, they noted that the project was given clearance by misrepresenting facts.

“We had visited the wind farm site in 2011 and one of the members, Renee Borges, an expert researching the giant squirrels, found nests of the squirrels on the site where the wind farm was being installed. So it was clear that the clearance was given on false premises,” Gadgil added.



Windfarm concerns in Bhimashankar, a biodiversity hotspot

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A [2018 study](#) in the Western Ghats by researchers from Indian Institute of Science found that the wind farms reduced the abundance and activity of predatory birds and changed the behaviour and physiology of lizards and [rodents](#) in the region.

“It has been scientifically proven that the infrasonic noise of the windmills negatively impacts the audibility of birds and rodents. It also impacts bird behaviour and their breeding biology,” said Tushar Pawar, a wildlife researcher working in the sanctuary.

When the project was cleared by the government in 2009, Atul Kale, an activist from a nearby town, had filed several queries under the Right To Information (RTI) Act, and found many discrepancies and irregularities in the case. A significant violation he noticed was the cutting of many more trees than was permissible under the company’s contract.

“The company had permission to cut 26,000 trees but our investigation revealed that many more trees were cut. There was no check from the authorities on the number of trees that were felled. However, the then Member of Parliament from the area, Shivaji Adhalrao Patil, had sent a letter to the Prime Minister’s office detailing that over 2,00,000 trees were cut during the construction of the project,” explains Kale.

Mongabay-India reached out to wind project company Apraava Energy (formerly CLP). At the time of publishing, we did not receive email responses.

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Need for EIA

These events in Kharpud village underline a larger debate on exempting wind, solar, and other renewable energy projects from a process called Environmental Impact Assessment or EIA. Such an assessment evaluates the environmental impacts of a proposed development activity and ensures that these are taken into consideration in the project planning. It provides an opportunity for project-affected communities to participate in the decision-making process, ensuring their voices are heard and their concerns are addressed.

India has made a global commitment to meet 50% of its energy needs from non-fossil fuels by 2030 and attain net-zero carbon emissions by 2070. The country has also agreed to halt and reverse biodiversity loss by 2030.



Area below the wind farm site flooded during monsoon due to channelised rainwater flowing through the access road built for project construction. Photo by Pradeep Chavan.

While speaking to Mongabay-India, Kanchi Kohli, an independent researcher working in the area of environment law and policy said that the purpose of an EIA is to understand the impacts and help governments and people make good decisions. It doesn't necessarily mean denying a project.

“I think it’s a huge onus on the private sector or the government to be able to facilitate this well, so that even when there is an impact it is acknowledged, and addressed. And if you cannot address it, you’re looking for better compensatory mechanisms for it,” she said.

This story was produced with the support of Internews’ Earth Journalism Network.

Banner image: A view of the turbines part of Andhra Lake Wind Farm. Photo by Ayesha Khan.

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