



POINT OF VIEW

Business as Usual

By Amita Baviskar

With a third of the world's humans under lockdown, the skies are blue and rivers run clear. Bears, nilgai and elephants wander through deserted city streets. If these signs of Nature reclaiming the planet unsettle the order of life-as-we-know-it, worry not. The ministry of environment, forest and climate change is working hard to ensure that environmental destruction continues as before.

The COVID-19 pandemic should have led the ministry to pause and press the reset button. There is credible evidence linking zoonotic diseases to the loss of habitat for wild biodiversity. Not that we need one more reason to protect what's left of our once magnificent forests, rivers and other ecosystems that sustain life on earth. However, various statutory committees of the ministry are carrying on with business as usual. In April alone, the Standing Committee of the National Board for Wildlife (NBWL) approved coal mining inside the Dehing Patkai Elephant Reserve in Assam. It allowed 768 hectares (ha) of forests next to the Binog Wildlife Sanctuary in Uttarakhand to be cleared for the Lakhwar-Vyasi dam project on the Yamuna river. It gave the green signal to all proposals for building highways, transmission and railway lines through national parks, sanctuaries and tiger corridors. As environmental lawyer Ritwick Dutta remarked, "If there is anything the species inhabiting India's protected areas need to fear, it's the members of the NBWL." Though its mandate is to protect wildlife, that mission seems to be missing in action.

The Forest Advisory Committee (FAC) of the ministry also continues to entertain and approve projects that should never have seen the light of day. This month, a subcommittee of the FAC recommended that the Etalin hydropower project in the Dibang river basin in Arunachal Pradesh be cleared. The project will destroy 1,150 ha of forest in an area where three different bio-geographic regions meet to create a megadiversity hotspot.

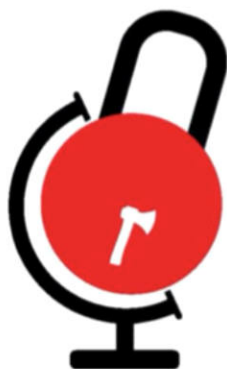
Clouded leopards and tigers live here. So do more than half of the bird species found in all of India. Rare flora and fauna inhabit these richly storied forests. In 2010, the ministry itself had designated this as an 'inviolable' area, during Jairam Ramesh's tenure. But now, it is to be dammed for a 3,097 MW project, a joint venture between the Arunachal government and Jindal Energy.

Not only environmentalists are aghast at Etalin. Geologists point out that major risks associated with its two dams are being ignored. The mountains and valleys of the Dibang basin sit atop a seismically active zone. In addition, climate change is rapidly melting the glaciers feeding rivers in the basin, creating lakes that are likely to overflow and cause major floods and landslides downstream. (The devastating floods of 2013 in Uttarakhand were in part the result of such a melting of the Chorabari glacier, feeding the Mandakini river.) The Dibang river debouches into the Brahmaputra and the effects of an earthquake or flood will be felt all the way into the densely populated floodplains of Assam. The new threats created by climate change should make the ministry tread even more cautiously.

That the FAC is considering such a proposal shows how warped its priorities have become. Union environment minister Prakash Javadekar tweeted that these projects promote "tourism, infrastructure, employment and growth." But what about the environment? Meanwhile, Etalin and other river projects on the Brahmaputra are pawns in an India-China contest of I-dammed-it-first, a race to claim the waters of this transnational river.

The COVID-19 pandemic is a reminder of how interconnected the world is and how fragile our political and economic control over its complexity. Yet the environment ministry persists in its wilful forgetfulness. ■

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A FULL-BLOWN CRISIS

The devastating impact of coronavirus on the economy is becoming increasingly clear. Here is what high-frequency data shows

By **Shivani Sharma**

Graphics by **Tanmoy Chakraborty**

PETROL, DIESEL DEMAND SLUMPS

India's fuel consumption slumped over 66 per cent year-on-year in April (till the 10th of the month)

Petrol sales fell 16.37 per cent to 2.16 million tonnes in March; ATF sales down 30 per cent

