Uranium exploration to be non-invasive?

TS Wildlife Board assured in 2016; demand for fair, independent Environment Impact Assessment

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While the term ‘invasive’ is open to interpretations, a few Board members, who attended the meeting, assumed that it would be an aerial exploration for the mineral. file photo

HYDERABAD
The Telangana State Board for Wildlife was told that no invasive or destructive methods would be used for exploration of uranium in 83 square kilometres of Amrabad and Nagarjunasagar Tiger Reserve areas, when the proposal came before it in 2016.

However, the proposal by the Atomic Minerals Directorate for Exploration & Research, under the Department of Atomic Energy, which has got conditional approval recently from the Ministry of Environment and Forests, paving way for the survey, clearly has some invasive aspects.

While the term “invasive” is open for interpretations, at least a few members of the Board who attended the meeting assumed that it would be an aerial exploration for the mineral.

Minutes of the first-ever meeting by the Board in December 2016, when the proposal was cleared, mentioned that the members had sought clarification from the user agency about the exploration, and were informed that “there is no involvement of any invasive or destructive methods for the exploration and no roads or infrastructure is involved.”
Besides, the minutes assure that “however, since the area is falling under Amrabad Tiger Reserve, even if the presence of uranium is confirmed, mining cannot be permitted at a later stage at any cost.”

Aerial surveys

A few members are now demanding that the proposal be redirected to the Board in view of the changed scope of the project. “Since the scope of project has changed significantly from aerial surveys using drones or satellite imagery to drilling of 4,000 holes... a fair and independent Environment Impact Assessment (EIA) should be conducted and the proposal should also be placed again at State and National Boards of Wildlife,” says Imran Siddiqui, Director of the Hyderabad Tiger Conservation Society, who is a member of the Board.

The State Forest department knew all along that the exploration would be invasive and would require digging of 4,000 bore holes, each up to a depth of 250 feet. The project proposal submitted on March 19, 2015, also mentions two kinds of equipment, including non-core rig and compressor, and core drilling rig and pump both to be tugged on wheels.

The proposal was forwarded to the Divisional Forest Officers concerned for processing. While the DFO of Achampet Wildlife Management Division recommended in favour of the exploration in the Udumilla block, his counterpart from the Nagarjunasagar recommended against it.

The Conservator of Forests/Field Director of the reserve, who conducted the site inspection much before the Board meeting, specifically said that he agreed with the recommendations of the DFO, Nagarjunasagar and not with that of the DFO, Achampet, while dwelling elaborately on how the exploration could disturb wildlife and cause habitat fragmentation.

Notwithstanding the objections, the Principal Chief Conservator of Forests (PCCF) had recommended in favour of the proposal, with a few riders, that only existing cart tracks, roads and footpaths in the forest areas should be utilised for movement of vehicles, men and machinery; and that there should not be any felling of trees or lopping of branches, among others.