

It's Development Versus Environment in Mumbai

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Summary

At the time when the entire world is talking about climate emergency, the government of Maharashtra has supported the idea of cutting about 2700 trees in Aarey, Mumbai, for a Metro car shed project. This issue may influence the voters of Mumbai city in the upcoming Maharashtra assembly elections.

Global Climate Change Movement

Inspired by a 16-year-old school Swedish student and environmental activist Greta Thunberg, a few days before the United Nations Climate Action Summit on in New York on 20 September 2019, [millions](#) of environmentally conscious people protested in the different cities across the world demanding appropriate actions to address the climate “emergency” situation. Thunberg herself participated in one such protest at New York’s Battery Park.

Later, speaking at the UN Climate Action Summit, Thunberg slammed the world leaders for the present situation. She said: “How dare you? You have stolen my dreams and my childhood with your empty [words](#)” “. The United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres said that “The climate emergency is a race we are losing, but it is a race we can [win](#).” Addressing the gathering, in the Summit Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi pledged to double India’s non-fossil fuel target to 400 [gigawatts](#).

The Aarey Colony Project

Somewhat contrary to this, , the government of Maharashtra has decided to cut about 2700 trees in Aarey in suburban Mumbai for a car shed project for its Metro III line project. A final clearance on the project was given by the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) on 29 August 2019.

Supporting the project, the Maharashtra Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis said that the Supreme Court (SC) of India’s order has clarified that the Aarey Colony, which is spread over 1,278 hectares, does not come under a forested area; it is government’s land and can be used for the [project](#).

Earlier, in its October 2018 judgement, the High Court bench had upheld the state government’s decision to ‘use’ of the land covered with trees for the [project](#). Special leave petition (SLP) was then filed in the SC by Amrita Bhattacharjee of the Aarey Conservation Group, on contesting this decision.

There is an issue of alternate location for this project which has been contested in the court. On this, the Mumbai Metro Rail Corporation Limited says that at the technical stage committee level few other locations such as Backbay Reclamation, Mumbai Port Trust, Kanjumarg, Dharavi, and Sariput [Nagar](#) were considered but , finally, Aarey was [accepted](#).

On 15 April 2019, the SC dismissed the SLP. However, a separate petition filed by the same group is still pending in the SC.

After the BMC clearance to cut the trees at Aarey, an environmental activist Zoru Bathena filed a petition in the Bombay High Court against its decision for cutting about 2700 trees. The Court has directed the state authorities to not cut a single tree in Aarey colony till 30 September [2019](#). The division bench of the court would begin hearing the petition from that day. The environmental activists, also, argue that this project is violation of the new water policy which bans construction work on the floodplains of the [rivers](#). Mithi river flows through the Aarey colony.

Maharashtra's Environmental Politics

The Shiv Sena, the alliance partner of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) does not support the project. Speaking at the India Today Conclave 2019, Aaditya Thackeray, youth president of the Shiv Sena, said that *Shed to Jayega* (the car shed will go). He clarified that this issue is not about "Shiv Sena vs BJP" but about "Mumbai vs environmental [damage](#)". The opposition parties such as the Indian National Congress and the Nationalist Congress Party have also opposed the proposed project. Shiv Sena and Congress have even decided to approach to the High Court against the BMC's [decision](#).

Not only in the case of the Aarey, the Maharashtra government's earlier stands on development versus environment issues have also raised concerns and differences among the political parties. Earlier, for the bullet train project to link Mumbai with Ahmedabad, the government had decided to raze 54,000 mangrove trees. the government of Maharashtra has also given powerful individuals permission to destroy the mangroves for their own projects. For example, as reported in the *DNA*, the lavish Seven Eleven Club in Mira Road has been built after cutting many mangrove trees. The majority stake, at 57.5 per cent, is owned by Narendra Mehta, a BJP legislator who was once Mayor of the Mira-Bhayandar municipality, and his brother Vinod [Mehta](#). A petition was filed in the Mumbai High Court against it by an environment activist Dhiraj Parab. On 20 September 2019, the court ordered the police to file a First Information Report against the [club](#).

Such a large number of mangrove trees have been cut in Mumbai even though they act as a barrier against the floods and salination. Besides, these trees are an effective protection from pollution as they absorb four time more carbon than the normal [forests](#). Notably, according to Central pollution Control Board's report of 2017-18, levels of PM 10 and PM 2.5 have steadily increased. Annual average of PM 10 levels in Mumbai was 166µg/m³ in 2018 and 151µg/m³ in 2017. Measuring of PM 2.5 started in 2015 and it was highest in [2018](#).

Conclusion

It is being alleged by the environmental activists that the decision for cutting the trees was taken in [haste](#) with an eye on the votes in the upcoming state assembly elections on 21 October 2019. Therefore, it would be interesting to observe whether environment issues or development models proposed by the incumbent attract the majority number of votes for the 36 seats in Mumbai city.

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