

Bending the rules — on nod for Neutrino project

[A year after the National Green Tribunal suspended](#) the environmental clearance granted to the India-based Neutrino Observatory (INO), the Expert Appraisal Committee (Infra 2) of the Ministry of Environment, Forests and Climate Change has overturned the NGT verdict and [granted environmental clearance](#) for the project. The observatory, which is to come up in Bodi West Hills in Theni district, Tamil Nadu, is regarded as a symbol not just of India's push for research in particle physics; it also signals the intent to nurture centres of excellence. Neutrinos are subatomic particles that are extremely difficult to detect. The laboratory cavern will be located 1,300 metres underground, with an access tunnel. The rock cover is necessary to minimise the naturally occurring cosmic ray backdrop. The project has become controversial on environmental grounds, given the proposed site's proximity to the Mathikettan Shola National Park in Kerala's Western Ghats, a global biodiversity hotspot. However, considering the project's national importance, the Environment Ministry had taken up the proposal for clearance as a "special case". The green signal is conditional on getting the consent of the Tamil Nadu Pollution Control Board and the National Board for Wildlife. Despite the 17 conditions laid down by the Expert Committee while granting approval, the manner in which the clearance was granted leaves much to be desired.

The project has been approved under category B item 8(a) — building and construction projects — of the Schedule to the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) Notification, 2006. But it should have been treated as category A as the project lies just 4.9 km from the national park in Idukki district of Kerala. The NGT had ruled that it was indeed a category A project and the Tamil Nadu State expert appraisal committee also noted that it could not be appraised under category B 8(a) as tunnelling and other activities went beyond the scope of the section. According to the 2006 notification, projects or activities that come under category A require "prior environmental clearance" from the Environment Ministry. Side-stepping the EIA requirement on technical grounds both by the project proponents and the Ministry is surely not the ideal way to go about such matters. For one, the EIA was done by the Salim Ali Centre for Ornithology and Natural History, which is an "unaccredited agency". And though a public consultation with local people who have a "plausible stake" in the project was conducted in July 2010, the details of the meeting were submitted only by the end of February 2018. The importance of the project notwithstanding, treating it as a special case and bypassing the environmental clearance protocol sets a wrong precedent.

The India-based Neutrino Observatory (INO) collaboration has issued a clarification in response to the above editorial. [Read here.](#)

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