

# IN REVERSE GEAR: ON DRAFT EIA NOTIFICATION

Relevant for: Environment | Topic: Environmental Conservation, Sustainable Development, and EIA

The Union Ministry of Environment has been in the spotlight on more than one occasion during the pandemic, as it worked to push through retrograde environmental decisions in an atmosphere of general paralysis. In April, Environment Minister Prakash Javadekar used a virtual conference to ensure that the National Board for Wildlife's Standing Committee stamped its approval on several projects, with serious implications for conservation. He now wants to hurriedly make a fundamental change to the process of project approvals, by introducing a new Environment Impact Assessment (EIA) Notification. Now in draft, it seeks to replace the existing EIA notification of 2006. The proposed provisions show that the Ministry has gone to great lengths to reduce or even remove public participation, and by extension independent expert opinion, from the process of granting environmental clearances; public reporting of violations may also not be taken cognisance of. While there can be no argument about the importance of development projects, it has resorted to sophistry in classifying activity for exemptions. Section 26 provides a list of projects that would not attract environmental clearance or permission, including coal mining and seismic surveys for oil, methane and shale gas on some lands. Section 14 provides exemption for these and some other projects from public consultation, also limiting the scope of public involvement to the districts concerned, in the case of national parks and sanctuaries where pipeline infrastructure will pass. Roads and highways get liberal concessions. Further, it retains the clause that if a public agency or authority considers the local situation not conducive to participation by citizens, the public consultation need not include a public hearing.

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In spite of the far-reaching nature of its proposed actions, the Centre has displayed unseemly haste to get them in place and Mr. Javadekar has not aided credibility by trying to shut down public responses to the draft early. It took a Delhi High Court order to extend the deadline to August 11. The exercise has been further muddled by the mysterious blocking of some activist websites calling for the EIA proposal to be dropped, and demanding a new approach towards conserving natural resources for future generations. Clearly, the Centre's attempts at weakening checks and balances are not new. A study of coal mining clearances shows that 4,302 hectares of forest were diverted during 2014-18, favouring extraction over conservation. COVID-19 has powerfully demonstrated the value of nature for well-being: of lost forests and captured wildlife bringing virus reservoirs closer to humans and foul air destroying their health. While there might be a case for some changes, much of the proposed EIA system can only make things worse, and should not be pushed through.

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