

AT THE COST OF AAREY

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

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The fracas over the deforestation of a large patch of Aarey Milk Colony reached a crescendo last Friday, after the Bombay High Court declined a petition by environmental activists to have the green zone declared a protected forest. Mumbai Metro Rail Corporation (MMRC) authorities got to work right away and chopped down 2,141 of their intended 2,185 trees in the 33-hectare forest patch picked for a metro car shed. The cutting, which occurred overnight, triggered widespread protests that brought on a crackdown by the Mumbai Police, who arrested 29 protestors and kept them locked up till Sunday.

A fundamental bone of contention is that the Maharashtra state government has no policy that clearly defines a "forest". The problem is commonly faced in other states as well, and even the Central government is yet to come up with a proper legal definition. This glaring oversight has long served as a pretext for development projects to treat India's forest cover with scant respect.

The defence offered by the MMRC is that the Metro project has been in the works for several years, and now that 90% of the trees have been axed, shifting the proposed car shed to a different site will result in a big increase in expenses. Given that the Supreme Court stay on the tree-felling has come only after the event, many residents seem reconciled to what happened. If the Metro relieves Mumbaikars of the city's acute traffic congestion and pollution, some reason, maybe a few thousand trees being chopped would have been worth it. The Aarey forest, though, is the city's lungs—and nothing will be able to replace it if it's gone.

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