LESSONS FROM AAREY

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

The tumult in Mumbai over the cutting of trees for building a depot for one of the many metro lines coming up in the city carries many governance lessons. One of them is transparency, to which governments pay much lip service, while acting in exactly the opposite way. In the case of the Aarey controversy, this has been quite literally so. The Bombay High Court had ruled in favour of felling over 2,000 trees in a small patch of Mumbai's largest green area to make way for the project. Those opposed to the cutting believed they had recourse to further legal options, but felt cheated when Mumbai Metro Rail Corporation Limited, acting with secrecy and stealth and under cover of darkness, began cutting trees in Aarey within hours of the judgment. There was no need for this unseemly haste, even if the government feared appeals against the High Court order and further delays. After all, governance cannot be a cat and mouse game with the people. It is not as if those opposing the specific location of the car shed are against the metro.

Delhi Metro showed the way in how people can be won over by the simple method of talking to them. The first managing director of Delhi Metro Rail Corporation, E Sreedharan, placed much emphasis on interactions with residents along the metro route to explain to them the benefits the transport system would bring. As a result, Delhi Metro was able to cut more than 31,000 trees and transplant 6,000 more without much opposition, while also finding a way to accommodate the concerns of tree activists at the location of one car shed.

Another issue that the controversy has highlighted is the high value people accord to trees, green areas, and open spaces in India's overcrowded, poorly planned cities. Aarey is spread over 1,278 hectares, and the car shed will take up just 33 hectares of this space. Environmentalists have made the case that this patch is a vital part of the entire "urban forest", precious in concrete-filled Mumbai. As more and more small towns become cities, and generate demands for better infrastructure, clearer definitions of forests and green areas are needed. Regardless of whether one opposes big infrastructure projects, or supports them, debate of the kind that has been sparked over the environment costs of the Aarey Metro Line 3 car shed since the time the project was first mooted, is healthy and necessary. India cannot aspire to leadership in the fight against climate change in the international arena, and at the same time dismiss or discourage conversations on the environment at home

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