

REVIEW THE CHAR DHAM PROJECT - EDITORIALS - HINDUSTAN TIMES

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

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The ministry of environment, forest and climate change (MoEFCC) has sought responses from the ministry of road transport and highways (MoRTH) and the Uttarakhand government about the alleged violations of the forest conservation act during the construction of the Char Dham Pariyojana in Uttarakhand. The 12,000-crore Pariyojana, which was inaugurated by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in December 2016, aims to build an 889-km all-weather road, connecting the Hindu pilgrimage sites of Kedarnath, Badrinath, Yamunotri and Gangotri in the Himalayas. The issue of environmental violations in the project is being heard by the Supreme Court (SC), and the case is due to come up on September 8.

While there has been criticism of the project on environmental grounds (recent landslides in the state prove once again that it is risky to build in the ecologically-fragile zone), its plan of action illustrates how the Indian State has flouted procedures to push the project through. One, the government used a legal loophole to avoid conducting the mandatory Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA), including public hearings, to fast-track the project. Two, official agencies refused to abide by SC orders on stoppage of work. And, three, it suppressed a MoRTH's revised circular on the contentious issue of road standards in hilly and mountainous terrains to go ahead with its road-widening plans.

This is not all: A senior Uttarakhand government official tried to mislead MoEFCC by sending an "altered" report to the ministry, bypassing Ravi Chopra, the chairman of the High Powered Committee (HPC) set up by SC to look into the project. This "subterfuge", as Mr Chopra wrote it in his letter to the ministry, was conducted because five members of the panel felt that the project will cause "irreversible damage" to the Himalayan ecology, while 21 others (mostly government representatives) said that the ecological damage can be "minimised". The Chopra report has said that the project is an "act of irresponsibility and disregard towards the Himalayas", when it is becoming clearer that any development devoid of "honest and uncompromising ecological concerns" will bring "devastation and disaster on our heads". The Centre must take the Chopra report seriously, review its stand on the need for broader roads, and conduct a carrying-capacity study of the area. The government's stand will also define how serious it is about complying with green norms in general, and the larger issue of the climate

crisis.

END

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