

# Raika Forest Protest (2021)

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I want you to imagine a place where man resides in harmony with nature. Houses surrounded by lush green forests, a river flowing by its side and lofty mountains standing high with pride. Now what if I say all this paradise is getting ruined due to the building of a government structure.

Something very bitterly similar is happening in the Raika forest in Jammu. It is a part of the Bahu Conservation Reserve and is only 3.75km away from the Ramnagar Wildlife Sanctuary. Established in 1981, Bahu reserve has an area of 19sq.km which is home to various species of flora and fauna like rock pigeon, red-vented bulbul, wild boar, rhesus monkey etc.

It all started when in October 2019, during the 117<sup>th</sup> advisory meeting, the administrative officials of Jammu High Court (currently in Janipur)

forwarded a proposal to Principal Chief Conservator of Forests demanding forest clearance over an area of 40.65 hectares (813 kanals) to set up a new high court. The new campus would have residential provision for 35 judges, along with a helipad and other modern facilities which according to a report by Daily Excelsior could be accommodated in the current complex.

In order to execute the said proposal, nearly 38,006 trees have to be chopped off and almost 40 houses relocated.

But despite of all these obstacles,



the appeal got sanctioned within four days. The first nod came from the Forest Advisory Council and then from the State Administration Council. The governor Satya Pal Malik also gave his consent on the

condition that 3000 trees can be cut off.

However, the whole appeal was unjustified and illegal because it was passed under the Jammu and Kashmir Forest Conservation Act (1997), Section II of which clearly states that; “District Planning and development Board concerned may accord permission for construction of rural roads, execution of electric irrigation and public health engineering works or such other developmental works when passing through demarcated or un-demarcated forests subject to the condition that ‘the land required for the purpose does not exceed two hectare of forest land’ and permission shall be accorded only once for an



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Kashmir as a Union Territory under Article 370.

As a protest against this unacceptable decision, on 14<sup>th</sup> of February, 2020; the members of “Climate Front-Jammu” under the leadership of Anmol Johri(founder) gathered near the forest with banners and placards and even hugged the trees as a mark of empathy. They chose this day to emphasize the love and bond we share with our mother nature and thus reminding us of our roots.

JDA also claimed that there is 80000kanals (4000 hectares) of land available that is not approached by the authorities which makes the whole process even more questionable.

Litigants Aavin Kumar Chadgal and Satyam Arora plead to the National Green Tribunal (principal bench) for the termination of the project. They put forward several strong reasons to support the plea; like violation of the Jammu and Kashmir Forest Conservation Act (1972), violation of the agreement allowing only 3000 trees to be butchered, not using the



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individual case without any further extension.”

Furthermore, it allows “only five hectares of land clearance that too for rural road connectivity purpose. It cannot be used for the construction of residential buildings.” Although the Indian Forest Act (1927) would have made the approval difficult, the whole operation was completed before the announcement of Jammu and



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empty land allotted for them, and most importantly the huge irredeemable biodiversity loss.

Raika- Bahu is an eco-sensitive region. The conservation reserve, the sanctuary and its proximity to River Tawi makes it an extremely valuable ecosystem. Also Jammu lies in seismic zones IV and V. Destruction of this many trees would not only adversely affect the biodiversity, but also result in catastrophic natural calamities like earthquakes, flash

floods etc.

But the plea was turned down saying that it is entirely a law-abiding procedure and has the support of higher governing bodies.

The project has a divided response from the locals. While some are seriously distressed about the conditions of the environment in the future, some are quite optimistic about the improvement of the region.

Chadgal and Arora said that, they are “legally exhausted” and the only option left is the support of the masses.

The incidents question us of our own consciences; is it really important to build a modern government building ignoring its disastrous outcomes on our surroundings? It points at the sheer ignorance of the government at the declining condition of the environment. I think it is high time we rise from the deep slumber we are in, to protect what is ours.