

DISASTER: THE TAJ CORRIDOR PROJECT

The Taj corridor debacle was reported extensively throughout the country highlighting the public outrage at such a preposterous idea initiated by the UP government under the leadership of Ms. Mayawati, Chief Minister of the state who feigned ignorance when asked about the project but later accepted that she was aware of the project.

The project first came to light by an article in the Sunday Times of India as claimed by Union minister of Tourism Mr. Jagmohan who immediately wrote to Ms. Mayawati asking her to stop it.

With the report in a major national daily UNESCO took its stand and threatened to de-list the monument from the 'World Heritage Site' and include it in the 'World Heritage in Danger' list eventually losing its status.

Work was stopped on the site once the Archaeological survey of India (ASI) filed a police complaint against the project and the Supreme Court submitted a public interest litigation (PIL) which alleged that the project should be held in contempt of court as it was against the Supreme Court ruling of saving the environment around the Taj. Agra Development authority says that it did not probe the proposal as it came from the office of Chief Secretary Mr. Bagga.

The Pioneer, brought to public notice the disastrous effect of the already done construction work on the site. Huge amount of sand and yellow soil is piled on the banks of the river. With the oncoming monsoon season the river would swell

The Taj project a major fiasco.

Centre came to know of it through newspaper, claims Jagmohan.

Mayawati denies knowledge of the project.

ASI objects and PIL filed in SC.

Agra Dev. Authority says project from chief secretary office.

Monsoons to bring disaster with the construction already done.

and wash away the pile of sand and soil and set it as artificial banks along the Taj damaging its foundation. The river would overflow into the Mehtab Bagh area and inundate it along with settlements and agricultural fields in the vicinity leading to heavy loss of life and property. Following this Mr. Jagmohan asked the UP government to undo the damage it had done, which is actually not possible before the onset of the monsoons. One good outcome of the fiasco was that the government assured that not only would Taj be spared of this but environmentally sound development would take place near it. Other heritage cities too, like Ajmer Sharif, Pushkar and Vrindavan, would get a similar treatment to increase their tourist potential.

Once the PIL had been filed the SC asked Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) to look into the matter angered by the fact that National Project Construction Corporation Ltd (NPCC), the agency awarded contract for the project, had the audacity to put up a board claiming that the project was sanctioned by the Supreme court and continued work even after SC stayed it.

Many newspapers carried articles asking for the project to be scrapped to protect the National Treasure from the whims and fancies of certain politicians and bureaucrats whose sole interest in the project is to make money and are least bothered about the environment and archaeology. Sonu Jain, News Correspondent with Indian Express pointed out that the work which is the joint responsibility of the centre and state was being done by the court which has issued over 60 directives to protect the Taj from damage.

Jagmohan asks UP govt to undo damage done.

Government assures safety for Taj.

Says environmentally sound development for other heritage cities too.

SC initiates action on PIL, asks CBI to investigate.

Newspapers demanded scrapping the project.

SC doing center's and state's duty

Debate in LS over the issue

A serious debate ensued in the Lok Sabha following SC's order. Strong objections and questions were raised by the MP's from Sawajwadi Party, Congress (I) and Left front.

Jansatta and Hindustan Hindi, came out stronger on the issue accusing the politicians of having monetary gains as the drive behind the project and not environment. The very fact that Mayawati first refuses then accepts knowledge of the project, then blames Jagmohan of having known and demanding his resignation to project a clean image supports the papers claim. Acceptance also came once copy of her letter to Union Minister of Environment and Forests, Mr. T.R. Baalu was disclosed to the public by political rival Mr. Kalyan Singh.

To gets the facts a little clearer Mayawati accuses Jagmohan of having known about the project and demand his resignation stating that he was acting on her rivals behalf to create rift between BSP-BJP coalition in UP. Jagmohan reiterates saying that ASI had filed FIR and that he and Mr. Baalu had brought the subject in the Parliament. He also pointed out that the matter is under sub-judice and court will decide matter.

The clean image of Jagmohan and Mr. Baalu was shattered by Akshaye Mukul, News Correspondent with and The Times of India who

say that MoEF knew of the project and that Jagmohan is involved in similar destructive work at the Red Fort.

Akshaye Mukul further details that MoEF had informed UP govt of sanction of 17 Crores to NPCC. The letter was sent to the Water Ministry too which is controlling NPCC. NPCC has also agreed that the contract was handed to them

Political mud slinging takes place with Jagmohan. Baalu, Mayawati and Kalyan Singh in the midst. Grave irregularities reported in awarding the contract. Jagmohan's resignation demanded. Reporters reveal Jagmohan and MoEF not clean. CPCB too gives equivocating statements.

without proper tendering. CPCB also informed MoEF of problems with the project stating NPCC has not taken environmental clearance and paradoxically submitted an affidavit in SC saying that the project did not need the clearance because it was not amongst a list of 30 categories that required it.

The final outcome was that the Government put Union Environment secretary on compulsory leave and stayed his transfer till further investigations. CBI asked to file charge sheet against him in a case of fraud for tampering with the files along with UP environment minister Mr. Nasimuddin Siddiqui. CBI to also investigate Mayawati's, other senior leaders and officials' role in the project.

CPCB too submitted a report saying NPCC abstained from meetings and that their findings are not based on study. Their report that land is not available and the ecology will not be hurt by the project is baseless and that no study was done on the impact on the foundations of Taj.

WWF-India as an ENVIS Centre/Node has been keeping a tab on the media activity on environment related issues and carries out analysis on different issues in media.

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