

Save Aarey Forest - Mumbai's Green Lung

Aarey Milk Colony:

The 1200 Ha Aarey Milk Colony is a biodiversity hub and a catchment area for the Mithi River that flows through the city of Mumbai. The Mumbai Metro Rail Corporation Limited (MMRCL) wants to locate its metro car shed within the forest. They have demanded the denotification of 165 Ha of forest land for this purpose. Despite citizens' outrage and the availability of 7 other alternate locations, the government of Maharashtra remains adamant about locating its carshed here. There have been allegations that the zoning of Aarey forest (From NDZ to Commercial) in the new Development Plan has been changed to benefit the builder lobbies in the city. The government has further denied in open court that Aarey is a forest despite the fact that government records clearly show the land having been declared as a forest as far back as 1969.

The Aarey forest is home to around 10,000 tribals - some of whom have already lost their homes, their lands and their livelihoods due to increasing encroachment by the State on forest land. The ones who havent been displaced already are under pressure to move into the SRA buildings or move out of the forest entirely.

One of the greatest challenges has been to educate ordinary mumbaikars about the importance of forests - why we need to protect them - and get them involved in this fight. It has been a challenge to counter government pro development propaganda. The 'anti-development is an anti-national' narrative seems to be overly powerful and extremely effective.

At the same time, the greatest strength comes from the fact that a lot of urban educated youngsters have been participating in the struggle (including risking arrests and detention). They bring with them a list of skill sets - from designing websites to handling social media to setting up petitions to filing RTIs. They are writers, artists, engineers, architects, freelancers, students. Bands like Maati Baani and Swadesi Nation have created musical scores to help raise awareness about the issue. Most recently, a youth based cultural initiative (using rap music) was set up to help raise funds and awareness regarding the Aarey forest controversy.

As more awareness spreads, more and more youngsters are joining the movement.

Here's what has happened ever since the proposal was passed to cut down trees in Aarey

Milk Colony

Context:

For over three years now, environmentalists from various organisations, along with activists, students and citizens, have been putting up a tough fight to protect Aarey forest and safeguard our future. However, now these green crusaders have been barred from entering the location where the work for the metro car shed has already begun. Over a 100 trees have already been chopped.

An air quality measurement by System of Air Quality Weather Forecasting and Research (SAFAR) found Mumbai's Air Quality Index to be at 244 ('poor') -- higher even than Delhi which fell from 204 to 183 ('moderate'). In fact, PM2.5 levels in Mumbai, recorded at 109, were almost twice the safe limit.

It is a well known fact that green cover in cities can help tackle rising air pollution -- The Nature Conservancy's study reports how urban trees can remove up to a quarter of PM pollution within a few meters, and can even function as a barrier for local residents, filtering bad air.

When government officials and citizens all over the world are investing in tree plantation drives to tackle air pollution and climate change, MMRCL is determined to fell thousands of trees for a metro car shed.

Aarey forest is part of the Sanjay Gandhi National Park, and supports an entire ecosystem of its own, with a rich biodiversity. An ecosystem like this takes hundreds of years to build up, and cannot be re-planted over night.

We are not against the expansion of the metro in Mumbai, but an ecologically sensitive area like Aarey forest, which functions as the largest natural air purifier for the city, cannot be cleared for the metro car shed. There are plenty of non-residential, and industrial locations for the metro car shed to be constructed -- but, not at the cost of Mumbai's lungs. The MMRCL went ahead without waiting for the National Green Tribunal to pass its verdict on declaring Aarey as a forest.

Social media has been flooded with posts to oppose the deforestation in Aarey Milk Colony. While it is common knowledge that the BMC (Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation) approved felling trees to construct a Mumbai metro shed, there are still a lot of questions left unanswered. When did they make the proposal? Who was on the committee that approved it? What are the varied reactions it has received? Here is a quick recap on everything that has happened in the Aarey Forest case.

In early August this year, a proposal was tabled to a panel of three experts from the Tree Authority (run under the BMC) for approval. The proposal made by Mumbai Metro Rail Corporation was regarding felling trees in Aarey colony in order to construct a Mumbai Metro

car shed. A week ago, the approval was granted to the BMC for felling 2,702 trees of which 2,238 were proposed to be cut and the rest were to be transplanted.

When it became public knowledge, the protests began immediately. This is due to the fact that in the concrete jungle that is Mumbai, Aarey Milk Colony is a treasured green patch. With increasing environmental awareness, people have come through to spread the message of conservation and stand against the opposite. Additionally, it was recently revealed that the loss of the trees will result in heavy floods at the international airport as the excess water during rainfall would be directed to Mithi river. This adds to the list of consequences we might have to face for giving up our greenery.

Sources:

1. <https://www.indiatimes.com/news/india/increasing-tree-cover-in-mega-indian-cities-can-help-reduce-particulate-matter-and-temperatures-264763.html>
2. <http://www.hindustantimes.com/mumbai-news/mumbai-s-air-quality-on-sunday-was-the-worst-for-this-winter/story-nL9Y67W9Bq1OBJTZlGDcZL.html>
3. <http://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/mumbai/residents-move-hc-over-metro-shed-at-aarey/article19848519.ece>
4. <https://ejatlas.org/conflict/threat-to-aarey-forest-due-to-the-construction-of-mumbai-metro-3-car-shed>
5. www.outlookindia.com/outlooktraveller/travelnews/story/69721/everything-you-need-to-know-about-the-aarey-colony-protest

EDITED AND COMPILED BY –

DR. Megha.k.khedekar

Convener, Scoop club