

Centre seeks fresh demarcation of 100 acres of forest land leased to Vainu Bappu Observatory

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CHENNAI: Questioning the need for keeping reserve forest land in the possession of the Indian Institute of Astrophysics in Javadi Hills in Vellore, where it operates the Vainu Bappu Observatory (VBO), the regional empowered committee of Union Environment Ministry has called for fresh demarcation of 100 acres of forest land, of which only 10 acres was cleared and built upon.



Established in 1970s, VBO is located in the picturesque Kavalur village in the Javadi Hills and operates as a national facility for optical astronomy. It houses the 2.3 metre Vainu Bappu Telescope, which is one of the largest telescopes in Asia.

Though the committee has recommended renewal of lease for 40 years, the institute was asked to justify why it wants to retain 90 acres of additional forest land when it is reportedly utilising only 10 acres. "Hence, the actual possession of the land under the institute shall be demarcated in the ground by ground survey/GPS survey and apropos with the kml file and the details shall be submitted to the government of India," the committee said.

The committee has also imposed restrictions on the institute from carrying out any kind of non-forestry activity in the remainder of the 90 acres. The state government has been asked to prepare a suitable wildlife mitigation plan and enumerate a complete list of trees existing in 100 acres, especially sandalwood trees and submit the details to the Integrated Regional Office, Chennai.

As per the official documents accessed by *The New Indian Express*, the lease period for 100 acres of forest land had expired in 2012 and since then the Indian Institute of Astrophysics has been trying to get fresh renewal for 50 years. It approached the Supreme Court seeking exemption of payment of Net Present Value (NPV) on the total land under possessions.

The apex court gave the relief saying, "The NPV may not be chargeable on total forest land which is under the possession of the institute, because the institute is using upto 10 acres of forest land only

for non-forestry purpose and rest of the forest land is maintained as forest. Hence, the NPV may be chargeable on 10 acres alone," the order reads.

When this was the case, questions were raised as to why the institute wants to retain the forest area other than 10 acres already cleared and being utilised. The site was inspected by Assistant Inspector General of Forests (AIGF-Central), Integrated Regional Office of Union Environment Ministry in Chennai on November 20, 2020.

The Indian Institute of Astrophysics gave an undertaking before the regional empowered committee that it will protect and manage forest areas at its own cost with the guidance of the forest department.

On the applicability of compensatory afforestation, the project has been exempted considering the fact that the State Advisory Group during the previous renewal process in 2004 had granted exemption as a special case. However, the committee has directed the institute to carry out extensive plantation of indigenous species as recommended by the Forest Advisory Committee in the remaining forest land under the control of the institute. The state forest department was asked to extend support in selection of species and monitor to ensure successful implementation.