

Kant Enclave ruling: Proposal to restore 425 acres of Aravalli forest in Faridabad gathers dust

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A proposal to rehabilitate nearly 425 acres of the Aravalli forest land in Faridabad, tabled by the forest department a year ago, has been gathering dust despite Supreme Court directions calling for the restoration of the area.

Forest department officials confirmed that the proposal, which was drawn up in line with the apex court's Kant Enclave ruling of 2018, has been awaiting the state government's approval for over a year, despite funds for the same being available.

Officials also said that there has been no correspondence between the forest department and the Haryana government on the matter since February 2020, when the proposal was first sent for approval. They attributed the lack of correspondence to the Covid-19 induced lockdown and a subsequent administrative reshuffle within the forest department.

"We have not started any plantation work in Kant Enclave because the restoration plans are yet to be approved. The matter has been pending for a year now. There has been no communication to us from the head office, or the state government, about the same since the proposal was sent," said Raj Kumar, district forest officer, Faridabad.

Senior officials at the state level, including Haryana's principal chief conservator of forests, said they will take up the matter on priority to ensure compliance with the Supreme Court's judgement.

When asked whether there are any immediate plans to proceed with reforestation in Kant Enclave, Tajinder P Singh, secretary to the government and chief conservator of forests, Haryana, responded that he is not aware of such a proposal. "It is probably with the head office. I am not aware of it in the secretariat," Singh said, suggesting that inquiries instead be directed to the principal chief conservator of forests, Haryana.

VS Tanwar, the principal chief conservator of forests, Haryana, said, "I was not aware of this proposal since it was submitted before I took charge. During my tenure, there has not been any communication with the state government on the matter, but I will send across a reminder so that the work can be taken up in compliance with the Supreme Court's judgement."

In September 2018, the Supreme Court had ordered the demolition of structures in the erstwhile Kant Enclave colony, developed near Anangpur village in Faridabad's Surajkund area, ruling that it had been built on Aravalli forest land in illegal collusion with officials of the then Haryana government. In its judgement, the court had also observed, "The damage caused to the Aravalli hills, as already noted, is irreversible. However, perhaps some of the damage could be remedied - at least we hope so."

On the court's directions, R Kant & Co — the developer found to be in violation of forest law — had already deposited a sum of ₹5 crore with the Aravalli Rehabilitation Fund "for rehabilitation of the damaged areas."

Accordingly, in December 2019, the forest department drew up a plan to reforest Kant Enclave's 425 acres over a period of five years, using only native species of trees and shrubs. This land, as previously reported by HT, is accorded legal "forest" status by virtue of a notification under special sections 4 and 5 of the Punjab Land Preservation Act (1900).

"The plantation work was to be done on a budget of ₹5 crore. The developer had already deposited the penalty amount in the ARF sometime in 2018. We made the restoration plan in December 2019 and it was sent for approval sometime in February 2020," said Suresh Punia, former district forest officer of Faridabad.

At least 33 illegal structures in Kant Enclave were demolished in October 2019, more than a year after the apex court's ruling. An HT team visit to the site on Thursday found that the area is overrun with the fresh growth of *Prosopis Juliflora* (colloquially known as vilayati kikkar), leading to significant densification of the green cover.

HT also observed multiple packs of stray dogs on the premises, as well as several peafowls and a jackal, which are protected under the Wildlife Act.

While rubble from the demolitions of privately owned structures is still lying at over a dozen sites scattered throughout the complex, other constructions, including at least two overhead water tanks, pavements, power lines and roads, are yet to be removed. Forest department officials said they plan to use these utilities to facilitate restoration work, when it eventually begins.

It was also noted that the area is frequented by locals from Anangpur village, which abuts the rear boundary of Kant Enclave. Three young men, who did not reveal their names, said they often come to the area to race motorcycles, while another local from Anangpur said he prefers to do his morning jogs and exercises over there.

Source: <https://www.hindustantimes.com/cities/gurugram-news>