

RTI data shows decrease in conversion of land in Pune notified and demarcated as reserved forest

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Pune: Forest department data indicates a decrease in conversion of land in Pune notified and demarcated as reserved forest land in the last five years, alarming environmentalists.

As per the RTI information, obtained by Jeetendra Ghadge of "The Young Whistleblowers Foundation" in August this year, only 549 hectares of forest land were notified as reserved forest land in 2023-24 in Pune, a stark decrease from 1,750 hectares declared in 2019, with some variations in a few years, like in 2021-22, when 2,598 hectares of land were declared as reserved forest land.

The process of declaring an area as a reserved forest is governed by the Indian Forest Act of 1927, a key piece of legislation designed to protect and regulate forest resources. The procedure begins with a notification under Section 4, which initiates an inquiry into rights and claims over the land. The final declaration under Section 20 formally establishes the area as a reserved forest, subjecting it to stringent protection measures.

According to Ghadge, the main reason behind this is the real estate lobby and local apprehensions about demarcations. "When any site is declared under Section 4 of the Act, many objections are raised by real estate developers. The land cost is so high that no one would want to let go of it. Along with this, there is backlash from agricultural landowners and farmers, which needs to be taken care of. There was some progress from 2019 to 2022, however, it has reduced significantly. There should be an enquiry as to why there is such a delay."

The state forest department claimed that the information obtained under RTI was only representative of the last five years, while most of Maharashtra's forest land was already reserved in the last five decades.

"The bigger picture is that before 2019 as well, we have put several parcels of land as reserved forest area, now covering 84 percent of the state. Maharashtra has done extremely well. There is a parcel of 6 lakh hectares of land that also comes under protected forest area. And around 1 lakh hectares are known as deemed forest, where any form of activity requires permission from the central govt under the Forest Conservation Act. All of this comes to around 60.53 hectares of land, which is under our protection already. There is only a small chunk left which is now in different stages of reservation," said Kalyan Kumar, additional principal chief conservator of forest, Maharashtra Forest Department.

Senior officials told TOI that after the department sends a proposal to the district collector for notification under Section 4, a forest settlement officer looks at all objections raised by people who have rights over the land. This is a lengthy process, which takes almost a year, and many times escalates to courts.

"This is a continuous process as any new land submitted to us by project agencies under FCA also needs to be notified all over again. The reduction in the number observed is solely because we have only a minimum amount of land left to notify, and it will be done soon," said Kumar.

Pune's forest division has observed several obstacles when it comes to demarcation and conversion of land. Currently, there are over 228 court cases relating to encroachments, objections to conversion to forest land, still pending, in the twelve ranges of the department in Pune only between April 2023 and March 2024.

Meanwhile, Aurangabad and Nashik have fared well with 800 hectares and 1,393 hectares of forest land reserved in 2023-24, while Kolhapur only notified 335 hectares in the same year. Despite a betterment in the former two circles, there is a decrease from the land notified in the last few years. In 2019, Aurangabad notified 7,800 hectares of land as reserved forest, Kolhapur notified 13,172 hectares in 2021-22. Nashik, however, saw an improvement from 2019 when no land was notified.