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Arunachal villagers fight to save sacred forest from BRO road project

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Residents of Nyukmadong village said Border Roads Organisation destroyed more than 80% of the 36 sq. km forest without consultations or compensation



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Almost 60 years after becoming collateral damage in one of the fiercest battles between Indian Army soldiers and Chinese invaders, a village in Arunachal Pradesh is fighting a war to protect a sacred forest from a project for preventing a repeat of 1962.

But the 217 families of Nyukmadong, an off-the-highway village in West Kameng district, seem to be losing the fight against the Border Roads Organisation (BRO), a wing of the very

Perched 8,389 ft above the mean sea level, Nyukmadong is about 40 km short of Sela, a strategic pass at 13,700 ft on the way to Tawang. The place is known for a Buddhist-style war memorial on a 1.5-acre plot overlooking the site of a battle on November 18, 1962.

The villagers said more than 80% of the 36 sq. km sacred forest has been destroyed for an alternative “strategic” road to Sela. More than the “heritage trees” felled along the alignment of the 34 km road from Banga-Janga-Gompa to Naga GG (BJG-NGG), the damage has been done by earth dumped indiscriminately on valuable trees and medicinal plants down the slope from the edge of the under-construction road, they said.

“We have been running from pillar to post. Officers of the GREF (General Reserve Engineering Force under BRO) do not care about the destruction to the landscape and appeals to the State government have fallen on deaf ears,” Yeshi Tsering, a retired horticulture officer and chairman of the local committee told *The Hindu*.

Nyukmadong is not the only area affected by the new road. The other impacted areas are Gyandrabangsa, Halftangmu, Penpeytang, Chendhuphu, Yangphu and Changphunakphu.

According to Dipayan Dey of the Kolkata-based South Asian Forum for Environment, the road project is an example of trespassing and ignoring the rights of a local tribal community to the land and the forest ecosystem they are dependent on.

“The WWF (World Wide Fund for Nature) declared the patch as a community reserve forest because of its rich biodiversity. The red-listed Indian red panda is found in this area. Community representatives said the deforestation (for the road) affected their traditional holy sites, locally called *phu*,” he said.

Permission after felling?

Locals said the destruction of their sacred forest began more than a year ago without any community consultation or participatory meeting. The community leaders lodged a formal complaint with the Additional Deputy Commissioner of West Kameng on June 14, 2021, to stop the project.

When this made no headway, the community members lodged a first information report against the BRO at the Dirang (the nearest town 17 km from Nyukmadong) police station on August 24 under relevant sections of the Indian Penal Code. This could not arrest the destruction of the forest.

The villagers received a major blow when the State's Principal Chief Conservator of Forest, R.K. Singh granted the "diversion of 97.95 hectares of forestland" to construct the BJG-NGG road before he was transferred to Mizoram.

The letter of approval on April 6 this year to the commanding offer of the 97 RCC (GREF) said the permission was for 12 months subject to conditions such as adherence to conservation laws. "The letter was almost a year too late," a local activist said.

The local stakeholders said much of the damage to the sacred forest cannot be reversed. "Nothing can compensate for the loss to the biodiversity, but the community as landowners should be paid for re-greening the bald patches," Mr Tsering said.

After a meeting with green activists from outside the State, community leaders from Nyukmadong and adjoining areas decided on September 10 to approach the National Green Tribunal.

The BRO did not respond to questions about bulldozing through the Nyukmadong forest.

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