

Ganga waterway project cleared after overruling expert panel

Environment Ministry and inland waterways body differed on clearances

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India's longest waterway project, one terminal of which was inaugurated by Prime Minister Narendra Modi earlier this week, was made possible only after a high-power Committee of Ministers and senior officials from multiple Ministries overruled the recommendations of experts appointed by the Environment Minis-

try. The latter had recommended public consultations and a full-fledged environment clearance, documents made available through the Right to Information (RTI) Act show.

As part of the the Modi government's ambitious plan to make stretches of the 2,500-km-long Ganga suitable for transporting containers, it decided to make navigable a 1,390-km stretch of

the river between Varanasi in Uttar Pradesh and Haldia in West Bengal. The project entails construction of 3 multimodal terminals (Varanasi, Sahibganj and Haldia); 2 intermodal terminals; 5 Roll On-Roll Off (Ro-Ro) terminal pairs; a new navigation lock at Farakka; assured depth dredging; an integrated vessel repair and maintenance facility; a Differential Global Positioning System (DGPS); a River Information System (RIS); and 'river training' and river conser-

vancy works.

The ₹5,369 crore project is partly funded by the World Bank. However, to enable container barges and ships to carry at least 2,000

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tonnes, the project requires the river bed to be dredged to enable a minimum draft of three metres along the river, as well as to make the river channel at least 45 metres wide.

Since early 2016, the Un-

ion Ministry of Environment and Forests and the Inland Waterways Authority of India (IWAI), which is attached to the Union Shipping Ministry, have been at odds over whether this dredging required environmental clearance (EC). This process involves a consultation with locals likely to be affected by the project and residing at locations along the river, where major constructions would be executed.

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Not so placid: The recommendation for environmental clearance and public consultation was rejected. ■ R.V. MOORTHY

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The IWAI contended that clearance was not necessary, as the proposed terminal at Varanasi was not a “port” and that only “maintenance dredging” was required. This activity was required to make an existing channel suitable, and was not a greenfield, dredging effort. Therefore, as per the provisions of the Environment (Protection) Act, it was “exempt” from an environment clearance process.

The Expert Appraisal Committee (EAC), a committee of experts constituted by the Environment Ministry and tasked with recommending whether major infrastructure projects ought to be given the go-ahead, has differed. Such exemptions were valid, it said, as per records of a meeting on May 18, 2017, only if the “project had applied for a prior environmental clearance.” The Union Environment Ministry supported the EAC’s recommendation, even arguing that “...a terminal was part of a Port.”

However, a meeting on October 24 between Union Shipping and Roads Minister Nitin Gadkari, Union En-

vironment Minister Harsh Vardhan, and senior Secretaries of the Environment, Water and Shipping Ministries, decided that an environment clearance was not required.

This was because the EAC had not provided “cogent reasons in support of their observations and recommendation” and that existing laws exempted jetties and multi-modal terminals (like the one in Varanasi) from an EC process.

At this meeting, too, the Union Environment Secretary C.K. Mishra recommended that the project should apply for an EC “in view of the involvement of dredging component.”

On December 21, 2017, the Environment Ministry issued an office order agreeing that no environmental clearance was required and approved the project for further processing by the Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs, with some “environmental safety measures.”

Being a World Bank funded project, it was necessary for approvals to be in place before December 31.