

Uddhav Balasaheb Thackeray

**Chief Minister
Maharashtra**



**Mantralaya
Mumbai-400 032**

**Sub - Diversion of 160.94 ha. Forest land in WAN Sanctuary
for Akola-Khandwa Gauge conversion work by the
South Central Railway**

Dear Shri. Prakash Javadekar ji,

This is with reference to the proposed gauge conversion of the Railway line (Akola- Khandwa line) passing through the core critical Tiger Habitat of Melghat Tiger Reserve in Maharashtra. In pursuance of the uni-gauge policy, a proposal was submitted by the Ministry of Railways, seeking permission to start gauge conversion work on the existing meter gauge line connecting Akola to Khandwa for a total stretch of 176 km. The proposal includes open cutting of tunnels which involves cutting and blasting of rocks using heavy machinery and explosives. It also, involves realignment away from the existing track to ease sharp curves on 23.48 km out of a total length of 38 km passing through the core area of the Tiger Reserve. This amounts to realignment and not just gauge conversion along the existing railway track.

The Melghat Tiger Reserve is among the first nine tiger reserves of India declared in 1973-74. The tiger reserve is spread over an area of 2768.52 sq km and is a part of the Satpura - Maikal landscape which has the distinction of being one of the global priority Tiger Conservation landscapes. The proposed gauge conversion works between Akola- Khandwa passing through the core area of Melghat Tiger Reserve will result in substantial increase in railway traffic in the long run leading to huge disturbance to the core areas of the Melghat Tiger Reserve. Alongwith increase in the railway traffic, it would also lead to increase in speed of the trains, restrictions on future expansions and modifications and increase in pollution along the track. The core area has been made inviolate by rehabilitating 13 villages and 6 villages out of these are within 10 km distance of the existing railway line. Due to this, wildlife has significantly increased in the area. The Project would reverse the benefits accrued from rehabilitation and habitat development

The Wildlife Institute of India has also recommended that the best mitigation for the railway line is "Avoidance" of the upgradation through the tiger reserve and opt for alternative alignments. The proposal has also been considered by the Central Empowered Committee in Application No. 1422 of 2018 and the Central Empowered Committee has asked the National Board for Wildlife to reconsider its decision of diversion of 160.94 Ha of forest land for gauge conversion within the Wan Sanctuary of Melghat Tiger Reserve. The National Board for Wildlife has returned the proposal to the State Government with a request to review the proposal in the light of recommendations of the NTCA and WII.

Considering the long term irreversible impacts of gauge conversion on endangered species like the Tiger and their habitat, it would be appropriate to focus on alternative alignments which would not only ensure much required space for the wildlife but also bring railway connectivity and greater economic development to hitherto unconnected villages located in the Jalgaon-Jamod and Sangrampur talukas and benefitting almost 100 villages in the vicinity of the alternative alignment.

We, as a nation have been showcasing the achievements of Project Tiger to the world and our Hon. Prime Minister has himself said that "Conservation of Tigers is not a choice but an imperative"

Hence, I request you to support withdrawal the proposal and consider alternate alignment of the railway line outside the Melghat Tiger Reserve in the interests of wildlife conservation in general and for protection of the tiger habitat in particular.

Thank you

Yours sincerely,


(Uddhav Balasaheb Thackeray)

Shri. Prakash Javadekar,
Hon'ble Minister for Environment, Forest and Climate Change,
Government of India.