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Go or no-go is not the question

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The high-pitched debate between ministers in the public sphere over coal blocks and no-go areas is nearing an end. And it should, because it has only got sillier by the day. With the secretary-level talks getting nowhere, the matter is soon set to come up before the prime minister and the cabinet for a final collective decision by the UPA.

The argument between the main protagonists has been silly but the issue of where to mine and how much to mine is at the heart of what UPA has tried to make its mantra – [inclusive growth](#).

The [environment ministry](#) and [coal ministry](#) had agreed that the government should designate some coal-bearing forest areas as no-go zones – where mining would not be allowed. The logic proffered at that time was that some of these coal blocks lie under dense natural forests. The former is a precious resource while the latter an irreplaceable one. In a trade-off, some these irreplaceable forests should be saved.

The environment ministry carried out a joint exercise with the coal ministry, studying nine major coal mining areas that concluded that about 48% of the area under study (primarily in central and eastern India) was not viable for mining activities and fell in category A or 'no go' areas barred for mining. This was later scaled down to 35% after more areas were freed for mining, post regular clearances.

The demarcation was something like this: 203 blocks were to be in the no-mining zones and 449 in the go-areas. About 3,80,000 hectares of forest land would be opened up to mining, it was decided – about seven times the land area of [Mumbai](#) city.

The mining lobby, backed by the coal ministry, demanded 6,50,000 hectares of forests – roughly 11 times the size of Mumbai. Then it went all out and demanded that the no-go demarcation be dropped completely.

The coal ministry missed the woods for the trees. It has suggested that merely planting a few trees to compensate for loss of natural forests would do. It never explained how the squalor of mining towns was created around these vast devastated patches of forests. It did not, naturally, consider that for every tonne of coal dug, three-four tonnes of earth is wasted – dumped out. It is not required under the rules of business of the government to hold brief on behalf of the lakhs of tribals displaced by the mines, who dig their lands for a pittance – all for the greater growth of a country they never seem to become part of.

The coal ministry then sounded something of a *fait accompli*: do you need more power for the economy or not?

The deputy chairman of the Planning Commission, Montek Singh Ahluwalia, tried to sound like he had found the middle path. He suggested that the purpose of the exercise should be to protect tiger reserves. In his equation, saving dense forests equalled saving tigers which equalled sustainable development.

The pretentious naiveté of the debate arises out of two facts.

The Congress leadership and the PMO have never stepped out to frame a unified policy on the crucial linkages between the three – forests, tribals and development projects (including mining). There is a coal policy, an integrated energy development plan and a power capacity target. Then there is a tribal policy and an economic growth vision, a law and order view of Naxalism and a forest cover target. Each has been developed in their respective silos while UPA talks of inclusive growth.

Unless the UPA at some point candidly discusses how much of a trade-off it is willing to make at one end to give space for the other, the debate will remain ad-hoc and pretentiously based on defining what is really a forest worth saving – is it the forest patch with a tiger in it or a forest so dense where the sun doesn't shine or a forest that is a resource for its predominantly tribal population.

Then, none of the actors have so far talked openly of the business interests that underlie the debate. The first demarcation of no-go areas left most of the designated Coal India blocks free to mine but blocked many private investments, which corporate groups are advantaged by further opening of other coal blocks.

The debate on no-go areas is also a bit fictitious. The environment ministry does not really require this no-go tag (which has no legal sanctity) to stop mining in a forest patch it considers important when a project comes for its clearance.

The Forest Conservation Act and Forest Rights Act give the ministry enough powers to prevent destruction of any patch of forestland it considers invaluable. Neither UPA nor any government before it, has had the political will to really enforce these regulations. The ministry has the power to prevent mining if the people dependent on the forests say no and if the forest is considered ecologically important. What it lacks is the political backing within the set-up to use the powers at its disposal.

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