

Green norms go easy on projects

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Looking for an image makeover, the environment ministry has eased green norms across most sectors - with some being in contradiction of its own stand in the Supreme Court.

The ministry on Tuesday exempted road, transmission and pipeline projects from seeking the consent of the gram sabha - a body of villagers - on the grounds that there was no rationale for seeking the approval of so many villages for such projects.

Shankar Gopalakrishnan of the Campaign for Survival and Dignity said the gram sabha's powers under the Forest Rights Act apply to any kind of project, and one cannot arbitrarily exempt some from them. "Better solutions exist to protect rights and ensure effective regulation than illegal exemption from the law," he said.

In fact, the ministry had filed an affidavit in the SC in the Vedanta case, stating that gram sabha consent is mandatory for every project where diversion of forest land takes place. It was on the basis of this view that the ministry issued a circular in 2009, making gram sabha consent mandatory for seeking forest clearance.

On the recommendation of a committee headed by Pulkesh Chatterji, principal secretary to the Prime Minister, and a letter from tribal affairs minister Kishore Chandra Deo, the ministry amended the 2009 circular - saying it would not be applicable for linear intrusion projects in forest areas.

The ministry also gave mining companies two years to seek clearance for forest land not approved for mining purposes, but part of the mining lease under the Mines and Minerals Development Act. This would probably allow companies to regularise the illegality in mining in forest areas not permitted by the ministry.

Rules for clearance and import of resource to coal-fired power plants were also eased as part of a slew of measures introduced by environment minister Jayanthi Natarajan to dispel the belief that the ministry was being a bottleneck for economic growth.

"Our mandate is to protect environment....but, industries are entitled for quick approval," she said.

GREENER SIGNALS

- Forest Rights Act circular of 2009 modified to exempt road, transmission lines, gas and petroleum pipelines from gram sabha clearance
- Thermal power plants allowed clearance on basis of imported coal, as against existing provision of mandatory approval from Coal India Limited
- Forest clearance exemption for government agencies for laying roads in naxal-hit areas