

River-linking project won't be allowed through tiger reserve, says Jairam

“24 km of proposed link canal runs through Buxa Tiger Reserve”

Ananya Dutta

KOLKATA: The linking of two major rivers in north Bengal – as part of the National River Linking Project – would not be allowed through the Buxa Tiger Reserve (BTR), said Union Minister of Environment and Forests, Jairam Ramesh on Sunday.

Environmental concerns related to the project – particularly the splitting of the elephant corridor into two parts and the cutting down of trees to make way for the canal – were raised by State's Forest

Department officials during Mr. Ramesh's visit to north Bengal on October 1.

“I will take up the matter. The project will not be allowed if Buxa is submerged,” Mr. Ramesh told *The Hindu* over telephone, adding that an alternative must be sought.

Important component

Of the 137 km of the proposed link canal between the Teesta and Sankosh rivers, 24 km runs through the BTR and another nearly 35 km through other forest areas, said R. P. Saini, BTR's field director.

According to information provided, by the Water Resources System Division of the National Institute of Hydrology, this link is an important component in the planned link between Manas, Sankosh, Teesta and the Ganga that will connect the Ganga and the Brahmaputra.

Dams are proposed at Manas and Sankosh as a part of the project.

The link passes through parts of north Bengal that shares a border with Bangladesh thus raising security concerns as well.

“If executed, the project would cause a major disturbance in the forest areas. Firstly, it would split the elephant corridor, which was already fragmented towards the south of the reserve by a Railway line, into two zones,” said Dr. Saini.

Secondly, to construct a canal that is eight to ten metres broad would mean lakhs of trees have to be chopped. It would also affect tiger and rhino conservation efforts and cause irreparable damage to herbs, shrubs, soil and other things that constitute the bio-

diversity of these forest areas, he added.

In 2009, the National Water Commission has suggested an alternative route between Jagihopa and Faraka through the Teesta which passes through a forest free zone.

However, this may require a greater investment because of an unfavourable gradient in some places, Dr. Saini said.

“Despite the expense, we must press for the alternative channel to be used because the environmental cost that the project demands is huge,” he added.