

“HUL goes off plan, fells 300 trees in Kodai”

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MERCURY CONTAMINATION

HUL goes off plan, fells 300 trees in Kodai

SV KRISHNA CHAITANYA @ Chennai

CONSUMER goods giant Hindustan Unilever Limited (HUL) has cut down over 300 trees inside its now-defunct thermometer factory that lies adjacent to the Kodaikanal Wildlife Sanctuary. The felling of trees now poses a serious threat of mercury contamination to the adjacent Pambar Shola forest. An on-site tree removal assessment, done based on Google Earth imagery and local eyewitnesses, reveals that HUL has clear-felled more than four acres of dense canopied and fully-grown trees. Tree-cutting was reportedly carried out in January last year.

The area in question receives extreme rains and is prone to soil erosion. Earlier studies have showed, even with vegetation, the presence of significant concentrations of mercury in the

sediment collected from the stream bed that receives water from the factory drains. These drains join the Pambar stream which feeds the Vaigai river.

A spokesperson from the company told *Express* that they had

to remove the trees for remediation of 'mercury-contaminated' soil, and had obtained the necessary permissions from the Dindigul District Hill Area (Preservation of Trees) Committee and the District Forest

Officer (DFO). However, such clear-felling of trees was not envisaged in the HUL's Soil Remediation Upscaling Plan, approved by the Tamil Nadu Pollution Control Board.

The Upscaling Plan was prepared following the directions of a Scientific Experts Committee, appointed by the Supreme Court Monitoring Committee, and the HUL is mandated to carry out remediation according to the plan. Similarly, tree protection and soil conservation studies were conducted by the National Botanical Research Institute, Lucknow, and the Central Soil and Water Conservation Research and Training Institute, Udhagamandalam.

Express is in possession of the approved plan and the two studies, and none of them gives HUL the liberty to cut the trees in the guise of soil remediation. P4

MAR 2018

JAN 2020

FOUR ACRES OF TREE COVER STRIPPED OFF

A comparative analysis based on Google imagery shows the extent of tree cover removed at Hindustan Unilever's site in Kodaikanal. More than four acres of dense canopied and fully-grown trees, accounting to over 300, were clear-felled by the company in January last year

News Item in The New Indian Express newspaper, Chennai Edition dated 19th August 2021

CHENNAI: Consumer goods giant Hindustan Unilever Limited (HUL) has cut down over 300 trees inside its now-defunct thermometer factory that lies adjacent to the Kodaikanal Wildlife Sanctuary. The felling of trees now poses a serious threat of mercury contamination to the adjacent Pambar Shola forest. An on-site tree removal assessment, done based on Google Earth imagery and local eyewitnesses, reveals that HUL has clear-felled more than four acres of dense canopied and fully-grown trees. Treecutting was reportedly carried out in January last year. The area in

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'Remediation began before approval'

The tree protection study identifies the contaminated factory area, demarcated as C1, as the zone having the highest aboveground and fine-root biomass. The soil conservation study identifies contaminated factory area, demarcated as C2, as the zone with the highest density of trees, and recommends extreme caution during excavation and back-filling. Demarcated areas C1 and C2 containing heavily mercury-contaminated soil and prone to moderate erosion have been denuded of vegetation, as have areas demarcated as A2 and B2 with steep slopes prone to severe erosion. In response, the HUL spokesperson said, "Trees in the remediation area, within the factory premises, are required to be removed to execute excavation and remediation of soil. Utmost care was taken to ensure felling of only necessary trees. As per the remediation plan submitted, HUL is committed to replanting trees as advised by the relevant authorities once the work is completed."

In October, the District Hill Area Committee granted permission to fell trees. At that time, the remediation site fell within the eco-sensitive zone (ESZ) of Kodaikanal Wildlife Sanctuary and as per the ESZ guidelines. Environmental activists claim the company had begun remediation, excavation, and removal of hazardous

wastes before it had any authorisation in hand. “Consent to Establish (CTE) was granted on March 17, 2020, over a month after clear felling of trees. The CTE is only for civil works and site preparation, and not clear-felling of trees. Consent to Operate for excavation was granted in December 2020. This is a clear violation of NGT order,” said Nityanand Jayaraman, an activist. Meanwhile, Dindigul Collector S Visakan, who assumed charge only a few months back, told Express that he will look into the issue and take appropriate action. Environment Secretary Supriya Sahu said, “I am told HUL had obtained permission for tree-felling under the Private Forest Act. I have sought a report from the concerned authorities.”

Four acres of tree cover st ripped off

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