

3,000 trees to be cut to widen road

DEFORESTATION MMRDA plans to hack 3,027 full-grown trees for project in Thane district

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MUMBAI: More than 3,000 heritage trees are set to be axed for a road widening project, just 40km away from Mumbai.

According to the data accessed under the Right to Information Act, the Mumbai Metropolitan Region Development Authority (MMRDA) will hack 3,027 full-grown trees, which form a canopy along the 20km Shirsad-Ambadi road in the Bhiwandi-Vasai taluka in Thane district, to convert the current two-lane road into a four-lane roadway.

This, in effect, means that 150 trees will be uprooted from every 1km stretch. Many of the trees that will be lost are indigenous and fruit-bearing trees such as banyan, mango, coconut and almond.

The area through which the road passes is located in the Tansa river basin, which is also a tributary of the Vaitarna River. The Vaitarna and Tansa Rivers supply drinking water to Mumbai.

According to environmentalists, deforestation leads to evaporation of surface water in water bodies and soil erosion that affects the quality of water. Trees are vital for protection of catchment areas, maintaining carbon balance and photosynthesis.

As Mumbai's growth has moved beyond its periphery over the last few years, areas in the MMR such as Vasai-Virar, Bhiwandi-Nizampur and Mira-Bhayander have come under immense pressure of urbanisation, industrialisation and real estate development. It has dis-

THE PLAN

3,027 full-grown trees, which form a canopy along the 20km Shirsad-Ambadi road in the Bhiwandi-Vasai taluka in Thane district, will be hacked to convert the current two-lane road into a four-lane roadway

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The Vaitarna and Tansa Rivers supply drinking water to the city

THE OBJECTIONS

MANY OF THE TREES that will be lost are indigenous and fruit-bearing trees such as banyan tree, mango, coconut and almond.

ACCORDING TO environmentalists, deforestation leads to evaporation of surface water in water bodies and soil erosion that affects the quality of water



■ The MMRDA plans to convert the two-lane Shirsad-Ambadi road into a four-lane roadway. VIJAYANAND GUPTA/HT

viewpoint

"While road widening is a welcome move, hacking of trees and transplantation are not. It would be criminal to destroy so many trees in the name of development or road widening. Why does every act of civil engineering treat nature as a disposable commodity?"

STALIN D. Vanashakti, NGO

TREES ARE VITAL for protection of catchment areas, maintaining carbon balance and photosynthesis

ENVIRONMENTALISTS have demanded realignment of the road to prevent trees from facing the axe

Wildlife Sanctuary (85 sqkm) and Tansa Wildlife Sanctuary (320 sqkm) on either sides of the road, the plan has no arrangement for an underpass or an over pass to facilitate the movement of wild animals between the sanctuaries.

"The trees will be trans-

planted, so they are not lost. The road widening is being done because it connects the national highways of Nashik, Pune and Gujarat," said SB Tamsekar, chief engineer, MMRDA.

"The trees will be transplanted to ensure that they are not lost. The road is being widened because it connects the national highways of Nashik, Pune and Gujarat. We arrived at a decision to cut trees only after conducting a study."

SB TAMSEKAR, chief engineer, MMRDA

Deliberate forest fires, illegal brick kilns threaten Thane district forests

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MUMBAI: Large-scale deforestation, illegal brick kilns and deliberate forest fires are threatening reserved forests in Wada taluka in Thane district, claim environmentalists.

According to them, the Wada region is rapidly losing its tree cover. The Vaitarna river basin that supplies drinking water to Mumbai flows through Wada.

A drive through the reserve forest shows axed trees and illegal brick kilns constantly emitting fumes on either sides of the road. The activity of making bricks by locals has gained momentum over the last few years with real estate development in the Vasai-Virar belt.

"Deforestation, which leads to a rise in temperature and consequent evaporation of the surface water, along with over-use of top soil for making bricks is turning the once densely-forested zone into a semi-arid zone," said environmentalist Stalin D. of Vanashakti, a non-government organisation.

Locals use fertile soil from the top layer, which measures about three feet, to make bricks. Loss of nutrients and bacteria makes the land unfit for plant growth because the deeper layers of the soil have a harder surface compared to the uppermost layers.

Confirming that locals make bricks during the summer,

THE PROBLEM

THE ACTIVITY of making bricks by locals has gained momentum over the last few years with real estate development in the Vasai-Virar belt

LOCALS USE fertile soil from the top layer to make bricks. Loss of nutrients and bacteria makes the land unfit for plant growth because the deeper layers of the soil have a harder surface compared to the uppermost layers.

Clement Ben, deputy conservator of forest, Jawahar region, said that he was unaware of the deforestation.

"There are five different types of forest such as reserved, identified and acquired under my jurisdiction. I will have to ascertain the exact place where deforestation is taking place. I will send my patrolling team to inspect the area," said Ben.

At present, Maharashtra's forest cover is 21 per cent, instead of the desirable 33 per cent, with a poor success record of compensatory forestation.

"Driven by poverty, locals cut trees and start forest fires; ignorant that they are destroying the same forest they are dependent on for their survival. It is important to involve them for joint forest management," said Stalin.

GOVT TO DECIDE ON ACTION AGAINST 40 CHARITABLE HOSPITALS IN CITY

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MUMBAI: Irked with no heed being paid to the notices issued by the public health department, the government has now decided to take the issue of flouting of norms by 40 charitable trust run hospitals in the city in its hands.

The deputy chairman of the legislative council, Vasant Davkhare, has called for a meeting to decide on the action to be taken against the 40 hospitals that have not reserved 10 per cent beds for below poverty line patients. The hospitals were also to provide 10 per cent reservation for treatment at concessional rates for poor patients.

A committee appointed by chief secretary Jayant Banthia had formed 49 teams to inspect the hospitals run by charitable trusts and had found that 40 of them were flouting norms.

"The meeting will be aimed at understanding the problem and coming up with solutions as suggested by legislators," Davkhare said, while referring to an issue raised by Congress legislator Sanjay Dutt in the legislative council on Tuesday.

"Charitable hospitals get concessions for electricity, water and other amenities. If they are not ready to follow the norms under which they were given land, these concessions should be cancelled," Dutt had said.

Sena legislator Deepak Sawant said that the governor should reorganise a committee, which was previously disbanded, comprising the chairman, deputy chairman and legislators to personally visit the hospitals and get a list of beneficiaries periodically.

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Thakur, Kadam deny beating up traffic cop

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MUMBAI: The crime branch of the Mumbai police has failed to get any substantial information from the one-day custodial interrogation of the two MLAs arrested for allegedly assaulting Sachin Suryavanshi in the Vidhan Bhavan premises on March 19, said sources.

The MLAs — Ram Kadam (Maharashtra Navnirman Sena) and Kshitij Thakur (Bahujan Vikas Aghadi) — have been granted bail by a local court, after the crime branch said that it did not need their custody.

According to sources, during questioning Thakur and Kadam have denied beating up Suryavanshi. Kadam reportedly claimed that Suryavanshi had assaulted Thakur. He also alleged that he was just standing in the lobby, while the duo was having an argument. Owing

GURU SATAM GANG MEMBER ARRESTED FOR DEMANDING EXTORTION MONEY

MUMBAI: Following a two-week operation, an extortionist, allegedly from the Guru Satam gang, was arrested on Sunday. The arrest signals the resumption of underworld's extortion activities after a lull for a year.

According to crime branch sources, a south-Mumbai based developer had received a call from a Skype number earlier this month. The caller identified himself as underworld don Guru Satam and demanded Rs1 crore, with a threat of dire consequences for failure to pay up.

A couple of days later, the developer received a call from a local number. The caller identified himself as Prakash, a member of the Satam gang. The developer then approached the anti-extortion cell. On the suggestion of the police officials, the developer agreed to pay up. The caller fixed a meeting at a spot near the Reay Road railway station on Sunday. Later, he changed the spot to a hotel near the Byculla railway station.

The AEC team, led by senior inspector Nitin Alaknure, had laid a trap near the hotel. As the caller came to collect the money from the developer, he was arrested. A 9 mm pistol and 5 live rounds were recovered.

Alaknure said that the arrested accused has been identified as Ashok Patil, 43, who worked as a watchman in Kamote near Panvel. Patil had been arrested earlier in connection with the murder of a postman in 1989 and had served a seven-year term at the Arthur Road jail. He was released in 1996.



■ MLAs Kshitij Thakur (left) and Ram Kadam were arrested on March 21. They have now been released on bail.

to the commotion that ensued, he had a fall. Most of the people who had gathered were trying to pacify the duo and were not involved in the fight, he alleged. Kadam claimed that he does not remember who all

were present in the premises during the fight.

Thakur also reportedly told the police that he did not beat up the MLAs and it was Suryavanshi who had taunted him and spoken rudely to him

CASE RECAP
MARCH 18: MLA Kshitij Thakur and police sub-inspector Sachin Suryavanshi had a heated argument on the Bandra-Worli sea link, after the PSI fined Thakur's driver for speeding
MARCH 19: There was a meeting in the cabin of the deputy speaker of the legislative council, which was attended by Suryavanshi. After the meeting, the policeman apologised
TWENTY MINUTES after the meeting, Suryavanshi was attacked by MLAs in the Vidhan Bhavan premises.

Thakur in the Vidhan Sabha.

On March 19, there was a meeting in the cabin of the deputy speaker of the legislative council, Vasant Davkhare, which was attended by Suryavanshi. After the meeting, Suryavanshi had apologised.

"Fifteen to twenty minutes after the meeting, Suryavanshi was attacked by 16 MLAs," said a crime branch official. In the first information report registered at the Marine Drive police station, Suryavanshi has identified only Kadam and Thakur, while nearly 14 others were also mentioned in the complaint.

Meanwhile, the crime branch is likely to get the CCTV footage from Vidhan Bhavan on Thursday.

Officials said as not many witnesses were coming forward, only the CCTV footage could throw light on the details of the incident.

Three-year-old girl raped in Thane



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THANE: Taking advantage of the Holi celebration in his locality, a hawker allegedly raped a three-year-old at New Indira Nagar in Thane on Wednesday.

Narayan Hatkar, police inspector, said, "The child knew Mohan Singh, 23, alias Chotu, as he lived in the neighbourhood. When people were busy playing Holi in the afternoon, the girl was alone at home. Singh called her on the pretext of buying chocolates."

He took the girl to an isolated spot near the Cidco tunnel and allegedly raped her. He fled

Ward boy held for molesting minor

A 23-year-old ward boy was, on Wednesday, arrested for allegedly molesting an eight-year-old girl when she had come to his hospital for her mother's check-up two days ago.

According to the Malad police, the victim is a Class 2 student. "When her mother went to get her MRI scan done, Omkar Pradip, who was sitting at the reception counter, called the girl and molested her. The girl narrated the incident to her mother at

home," said an official from the Malad police station, on condition of anonymity as he is not authorised to speak to the media.

The girl's mother filed a complaint with the Malad police on Tuesday. The accused has been booked under IPC section 509 (word, gesture or act intended to insult the modesty of a woman) and sections of the protection of children from sexual offences act 2012.

the spot when the girl started crying.

Passers-by saw the girl and informed the police about the incident. The police took the girl to a hospital, where the doctors

confirmed that she had been physically abused. The girl confirmed Singh's involvement, after which he was arrested.

During interrogation, Singh confessed to his crime.

'Can't act against owner over demolition notice'

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MUMBAI: A civic body cannot prosecute the owner for failure to comply with a demolition notice issued to his dilapidated building, the Bombay high court held, while quashing the criminal proceedings initiated against a city developer.

The court considered that Parvati Sadan, the ground-plus-one structure in Ghatkopar built by Silver Land Developers, was not an unauthorised structure and hence the provisions of the Mumbai Municipal Corporation (MMC) Act, 1888, cannot be applied against it.

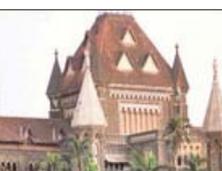
In November 2010, a junior engineer had inspected the

PROCEEDINGS QUASHED

IN NOVEMBER 2010, a junior engineer had inspected Parvati Sadan in Ghatkopar and issued a notice to Silver Land developers, asking them to carry out the necessary repair work

ON INSPECTING the premises in February 2011, the junior engineer had found that no repair work had been carried out. He then lodged a complaint with a court at Dadar

THE COUNSEL for the developer argued that section 475A of



the Mumbai Municipal Corporation Act, which has been invoked against the firm, did not provide for punishment for non-compliance of such a notice. Justice Dharmadhikari accepted the argument.

"There is no question of the applicant's work being termed as unauthorised as the notice under section 354 does not set out any allegation of that kind," the judge said, adding, "The notice calls upon the applicants to pull down a portion of the structure or demolish it. The failure to comply with it is not made punishable under either clause (a) or (b) of subsection (1) of section 475A."

HC ASKS MoEF TO REPLY TO ADARSH SOCIETY'S PETITION

MUMBAI: The Bombay high court, on Wednesday, directed the Ministry of Environment and Forests (MoEF) to file an affidavit in reply to a petition filed by scam-hit Adarsh co-operative housing society within two weeks.

The society has filed a petition challenging the union ministry's order to demolish the controversial high-rise building in Cuffe Parade for want of prior environmental clearance. In January 2011, the MoEF had declared the 31-storey structure illegal, claiming that it was being built without valid prior environmental clearance. The ministry had also ordered razing of the structure.

The society also wants their case to be transferred to the National Green Tribunal, set up to deal with environment-related issues.

HTC

neer had found that no repair work had been carried out. He then lodged a complaint with the Shindewadi court at Dadar. The counsel for the develop-