

Protests in Kerala against Ban on NH 766

What is the issue?

- Kerala's Wayanad district has witnessed a series of protests recently against a ban on night traffic on the forest stretch of NH 766.
- NH 766 is a key highway between Karnataka and Kerala that passes through the Bandipur Tiger Reserve in Karnataka.

Why are there protests?

- The night ban was first enforced a decade ago.
- But the immediate trigger for the current agitation was a recent Supreme Court (SC) direction to the Ministry of Environment, Forest & Climate Change and the National Highway Authority of India (NHAI).
- SC had asked for a suggestion for the alternative routes so that NH 766 could be shut down permanently.
- Since then, Wayanad has witnessed an ongoing indefinite hunger strike and several protest marches.

Who are behind the present protest?

- On 8th August 2019, the SC upheld the night traffic ban, which was supported by Karnataka and Tamil Nadu while Kerala wanted it lifted.
- The court asked the NHAI to upgrade the alternative road and sought the Centre's opinion on closing down NH 766 permanently.
- The protest in Wayanad is backed by all political parties in Kerala, religious organisations, traders and youth organisations.
- People fear that a blanket ban on traffic would impact the Wayanad's economic development.

In what circumstances was night traffic on the highway banned?

- **August 2009** - The district administration of Chamarajanagar district, Karnataka, banned night traffic on the 19-km forest stretch of NH 766.
- This was after the project officer of Bandipur Tiger Reserve had prepared a report on the number of animals being hit by vehicles at night.
- **Report** - 44 vehicles were on this 19-km stretch in a span of 30 minutes.
- It said that night traffic would affect behaviour biology, disrupt their life cycle and make them stray to human habitats.

- Using the central Motor Vehicle Act and the Karnataka Motor Vehicle Rules, the district administration banned traffic from 9 pm to 6 am.
- Vehicles were stopped on both sides of the stretch and allowed to resume the journey in the morning.

Were there no protests then?

- After the ban, the representatives of people in Kerala and transport operators in both states petitioned the Chamarajanagar Deputy Commissioner, who lifted the ban.
- **High Court (HC)** - Then conservationists moved the Karnataka High Court, which reinstated the ban by an interim order.
- At one point, it observed that the interest of protecting wildlife is important, and no less important is the need to protect the interest of the public, who are commuters and traders.
- In 2010, the court upheld the night traffic ban.
- **Alternative route** - It is 35 km away, which would cost time and money besides raising prices of commodities.
- The HC directed the Karnataka government to upgrade this road running from Mananthavady (Kerala) to Mysuru via Gonikuppal (Karnataka).
- The Kerala government moved a special leave petition in the Supreme Court; conservationists too were impleaded.
- Kerala's suggestion for an elevated highway through the forest reserve was turned down by the ministry.

Has the night ban met its objective?

- According to Bandipur Tiger Reserve project director, animal fatalities have come down significantly (nearly tenfold).
- If the highway is opened, fatalities would increase manifold.
- Spread over 990.51 sq km, Bandipur Tiger Reserve is part of interconnected forests that include,
 1. Mudumalai Wildlife Sanctuary (Tamil Nadu),
 2. Wayanad Wildlife Sanctuary (Kerala) and
 3. Nagarhole National Park (Karnataka).
- Variety of wildlife moves from one stretch to another, cutting the states.
- Bandipur has 140 tigers, 1,600 elephants and 25,000 spotted deer, as per the forest department sources.

Is there no way to avoid the highway?

- The Kollegal-Mysuru-Kozhikode road has existed for 200 years.
- It was declared a national highway in 1989, then named NH 212 and later

renamed NH 766.

- The opening of the Pune-Bengaluru Hyderabad-Bengaluru highways, and the development of the Bengaluru-Mysuru Expressway, made NH 766 a major link between Kerala and the rest of the country.
- NH 766 is also used by transporters of essentials from Karnataka to Kerala, and by commuters from Kerala to Bengaluru for want of good rail connectivity.
- **Two other roads** exist between Wayanad and Karnataka.
 1. A road between Mysuru and Mananthavady (Wayanad), part of which passes through the Nagarhole National Park, has been closed for night traffic from 6 pm to 6 am since 2008, on the recommendation of a committee appointed by the SC.
 2. Another road, the only alternative that remains available for night traffic, is the one that the High Court referred to in 2010.
- Also between Mananthavady and Mysuru, it runs via Kutta, Gonikuppal and Hunsur in Karnataka. This too cuts through forest.

Source: The Indian Express

