It is meagre consolation to learn that the Delhi-Mumbai Industrial Corridor or DMIC, the country's largest infrastructure project, will run between the Sanjay Gandhi National Park and the Tungareshwar wildlife sanctuary in Mumbai and not through the park, as earlier thought.

The $90 billion project, which was conceived and initiated by the previous United Progressive Alliance government, is now one of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's pet schemes. It is in consonance with the Rs 98,000 crore bullet train between Ahmedabad and Mumbai.

The 1,483-km long Delhi-Mumbai Industrial Corridor will run from Dadri in Uttar Pradesh, on the outskirts of Delhi, to the Jawaharlal Nehru Port at Nhava Sheva on the mainland across the Thane creek in Mumbai. Besides cutting into the northern portion of Mumbai's lungs – the Sanjay Gandhi National Park – it will eat into forest land in adjoining Thane and Dahanu too.
Mumbai park threatened

Mumbai is unique – not merely among mega cities with more than 10 million people, but among any city in the world – because it has a 104 sq km park, nearly a quarter of the city’s area, in its very midst. Kenya’s capital, Nairobi, has a slightly bigger park – the Nairobi National Park – but that is located 7 km south of the city centre and its wildlife is kept at bay by an electric fence. It isn’t hemmed in on all sides as the Sanjay Gandhi National Park is by Mumbai’s high-rise buildings and ubiquitous shanties.

Mumbai’s park, one of the most visited in the world, will lose nearly 11 hectares of forest because an existing small railway line connecting Diva, in the southeast, and Vasai, in the northwest, will have to be extended on both sides for the industrial corridor. This will take a toll of 1,300 trees. It will also have an impact on the wildlife on the park, already hemmed in by development, much of it illegal, on the park’s periphery.

In any case, it isn’t as if animals – including 35 leopards at last count – observe boundaries. They need larger forests near cities than in sanctuaries in remote rural areas because of the shortage of deer to prey on. In every national park and sanctuary, it is imperative that large cats should be able to migrate to nearby forests at will. Though corridor authorities said they planned to build underpasses and overpasses to enable animals to cross over the proposed railway corridor,
experience has shown that even underpasses constructed for humans in the bowels of Mumbai – like the ones at the Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus and Metro film theatre – aren’t maintained properly and flood during the monsoons, making it difficult for pedestrians to use. So, it’s unlikely that the underpasses for animals will be in any better condition.

As it is, leopards tend to enter the housing colonies on the periphery of the Sanjay Gandhi National Park in search of dogs, which are easier to prey on, and sometimes attack humans in the process. Leopards who wander out of their habitat have also been run over on the Ghodbunder Road on the northeast of the park. The rail corridor will only make things more difficult for them and other animals like monkeys, hyenas, deer and wildcats, not to mention the noise that will disturb their habitat.

In 2004, the Alva brothers – Nikhil and Niret – made a documentary for the National Geographic channel on Leopards of Bollywood. They used footage from Goregaon’s Film City, which lies on the southwest edge of Sanjay Gandhi National Park, to inject some sensational shots of sultry Bollywood dancers gyrating at a film set, but casting a wary eye over their sculpted shoulders to ensure that a big cat wasn't eyeing its prey.

**Land acquisition problems**

In Dahanu, on the border between Gujarat and Maharashtra, which has been designated an eco-sensitive zone, the corridor will not run parallel to the existing railway line, which is a violation of the Dahanu Regional Plan.

But that’s not the only problem with the corridor. The route curves through six states in the north and west of the country like a scythe facing eastwards. For the most part, these are already fairly developed parts of the country, especially in Gujarat. There is discontent, however, among those whose land will be acquired for the industrialisation and urbanisation planned for a couple of kilometres on either side of the corridor.

For instance, in Dholera, in Gujarat, planned as a 920 sq km special investment region, farmers have objected to the pooling of their land. Although landowners can retain half their land, the price of which is meant to escalate with economic growth, they have to be resettled under new planning rules. Last year, the Gujarat High Court stayed land acquisition for the project.
The powers-that-be, as always, haven’t taken kindly to dissent regarding the corridor. At an international conference organised by Urban Age, an initiative of the London School of Economics and Deutsche Bank in Delhi in November 2014, Amitabh Kant, who then headed the Delhi Mumbai Industrial Corridor Corporation, took strong exception to a question from an Indian activist regarding people's protests in Dholera.

He asked whether this was typical Western criticism of India's ability to do things on its own. Kant went on to spearhead two of Modi’s favourite programmes – Make in India and Start Up India – before taking over as the CEO of Niti Aayog, the successor to the Planning Commission, early this year.

Other planned corridors include one that will enable a very high-speed passenger train to cover the distance from Delhi to Chennai in just six hours. Both this and the bullet train project are inexplicable. Apart from questions about how they will keep fares low so as to undercut cheap airfares, the difficulties these will cause to those who live on both sides of these corridors and need to connect for social or economic reasons are mindboggling.

**Lopsided development?**

Also on the anvil is a Mumbai-Bangalore economic corridor, being planned with British help, which is expected to generate an investment of Rs 300,000 crore. This is also a legacy of the UPA government. It promises to create 2.5 million jobs, which seems as illusory as the UPA's much-vaunted but abortive Special Economic Zones.
Most of these routes are part of the Diamond Quadrilateral rail corridors between the four big metros of Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata and Chennai. This is the rail equivalent of the Golden Quadrilateral for highways, the pet project of former Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee.

In principle, green activists welcome the priority given to rail over road when it comes to hauling goods or ferrying people as rail traffic has a lower carbon footprint. However, in the case of Delhi Mumbai Industrial Corridor and related projects like the Amritsar-Delhi-Kolkata and Chennai-Bangalore industrial corridors, there is the real danger that these projects might appropriate land belonging to peasants without fair compensation and also place barriers between families and farms.

What is more, these corridors leave out huge regions of central and eastern India. It is entirely possible that this will only accentuate lopsided development of the country and drive an even deeper wedge between cities and the countryside.

In the mid-1980s, when he was leading a campaign against two dams in the remotest forests of eastern Maharashtra, the activist Baba Amte said that the region broadly between the outskirts of Mumbai to that of Kolkata was the cummerbund of India because, like a waist, it contained much of India’s minerals and timber. This is also the most neglected part of the country and it is not accidental that the Naxal rebellion has found fertile ground to grow in this belt across states – in Chhattisgarh and Jharkhand, as well as contiguous parts of Orissa, Bihar, Andhra and Maharashtra.

When Sunita Narain, who heads the Centre for Science and Environment in Delhi, led a Tiger Task Force some years ago, she asked a pertinent question: “How is it that India’s poorest people live in the most resource-rich regions?”

The votaries of Make in India ought to remember that they do not neglect vast swathes of the countryside, several of which are reeling from two years of drought and an epidemic of farmers’ suicides, while criss-crossing the country with freight and industrial corridors.

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