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# Nepal's proposed international airport poses a threat to the environment (/spotlight/nepals-proposed-international-airport-poses-threat-environment)

Nijgadh is planned to be the largest airport in South Asia in terms of area, covering 8,045.79 hectares. While a new international airport is needed, the Nijgadh dream comes with an environmental nightmare, write Harsh Mahaseth and Pranjal Risal for South Asia Monitor



(/contributors/13715/Harsh Mahaseth and Pranjal Risal) **By Harsh Mahaseth and Pranjal Risal**

(/contributors/13715/Harsh Mahaseth and Pranjal Risal) | Feb 02, 2021



Nepal has decided to build another international airport at Nijgadh, around 175 km from the national capital Kathmandu. This place lies in a densely forested area covered with tropical and subtropical vegetation.

While there are other places where the airport can be built, the government has decided on this area for strategic and economic benefits. The government has made large promises which are hard to keep, and it often bypasses key requirements like having an Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA).

### **Concern for air accidents**

There have been instances of flights crashing around Kathmandu valley before landing. In 1995, due to concerns raised by these air accidents, the then government headed by Sher Bahadur Deuba directed a consulting firm to assess the feasibility of eight sites that could be suitable for Nepal's second international airport. Out of those locations, Gadhimai municipality was selected as the ideal location; however, not much happened after that. The valley is shaped like a bowl surrounded by high altitude hills, making it challenging for the pilots to land safely. After these incidents, there was an urgency to create another international airport.

In 2008, the interim government, headed by Pushpa Kamal Dahal, contracted another company to conduct a detailed feasibility study which was conducted and submitted to the government in 2011. The project was stalled due to uncertainty over the execution plan. In 2015, a flight skidded off the runway shutting Kathmandu's Tribhuvan International Airport (TIA) down for four days. The frequent crashes have landed TIA amongst one of the most dangerous airports in the world.

### **Need for another airport**

Nepal desperately needs another international airport in order to tackle the growing flow of international passengers. According to a report published by the Asian Development Bank (ADB), the number of international passengers at TIA will reach 7.29 million by 2028, and the current airport cannot handle the rush.

Nijgadh is planned to be the largest airport in South Asia in terms of area, covering 8,045.79 hectares. While a new international airport is needed, the Nijgadh dream comes with an environmental nightmare.

## Problems with Nijgadh

The process of due diligence and the EIA reports are crucial elements for any long-term project to help understand the possible impacts on the concerned stakeholders. A debate regarding the construction of an international airport 27 km from the Nepal-India border in Nijgadh has raised controversy over its environmental impact. The proposed area lies in a densely forested area, with around 90 percent covered with tropical and subtropical vegetation. Nijgadh is the only place in Nepal between Pashaha and Lal Bakaiya rivers that would allow holding a plane in the sky for 15-16 minutes no matter which direction it enters the Nepalese airspace. Nijgadh's proposed airport location is far away from Churiya and Mahabharat ranges and from the Indian border. This makes Nijgadh the best site for airport construction.

The government has promised compensatory plantation of trees in a 1:25 ratio after the said project's commencement. One element of the assessment has attracted particular criticism: 2.4 million trees will need to be felled over 8,045 hectares, to build the proposed airport. The stakeholder committee points to the impossibility of EIA's "compensatory plantation at a 1:25 ratio," meaning that 25 trees are to be planted for each tree that is cut down. The committee argues that this is not actually possible since it would require 38,294 hectares of land - five times the area required for the proposed airport - and the cost of the plantation would be around Rs. 13,980 million, a lot more than the NRs 2,670 million allocated in the EIA.

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The project also ignores Section 68 of the Forest Act (1993) that allows the government to clear forests only if there are no alternative options to implement the project. The committee says there are alternatives to Nijgadh, notably Murtiya of Sarlahi district, which would require clearing only 2,700 hectares of land.

Beyond the flawed EIA report, the stakeholder committee says that the proposed Nijgadh site's costs are manifold. The site is part of a heavily forested area, which reduces the number of people who will be displaced; even so, 1,476 households of Tangia Basti that live in the middle of the forest will need to be relocated. Deforestation from a single area could lead to as much as 650 million cubic metres more of rainwater not being absorbed by the forest anymore (10 million

cubic water at any time will cover a width of two km, a length of two km and a depth of 8 feet), and it will greatly increase the risk and severity of flooding in Gadhimai, Kalaiya, and Birgunj in the West and Gaur Bazaar in the East.

The forest is also home to 500 species of birds, 23 endangered flora, and 22 endangered wildlife species. These will certainly be displaced when the forest disappears - and it is not clear where they can go. The airport site is in the middle of the contiguous Terai arc landscape that extends from Uttarakhand and Uttar Pradesh in India to Kanchanpur in Nepal. The Terai Arc, as it is colloquially called, encompasses multiple wildlife reserves including the Jim Corbett National Park, Valmiki National Park, and Pilibhit Tiger Reserve in India, and in Nepal, Suklaphanta National Park, Banke National Park, Bardiya National Park, Chitwan National Park, Parsa National Park, and the forest beyond Nijgadh.

The corridor has been one of the most successful and least disruptive efforts in the region for the conservation of tigers, rhinos, and elephants. The free movement of animals across the arc has been a major factor in the success of the project. Hence, the proposed airport interrupts the arc. Moreover, it has been said that 90 percent of the land where Nijgadh International Airport is going to be constructed lies within the dense forest, so 24,50,821 trees (of which many are protected species of trees like Sal, satal, etc.) have to be cut down if the project is to be implemented.

Since the forest is a natural habitat for 700 species of birds, 22 species of plants, and 23 species of animals (including rare animals like tiger, elephant, rhinoceros) human-animal conflict is likely to prevail and the security of the airport (if constructed) and the lives of this bio-diversity and humans both will be in threat.

According to experts, the trees and natural heritage in the area can be used for scientific research on climate change and destroying them contributes to environmental hazards affecting the world itself. 'Plantation program' that the government plans to do after destroying the forest seems to be impractical since the required area of land with the quality to hold the essence of this forest is not available.'

From the perspective of hydrologists, the proposed construction site is very sensitive in the context of the source of waters and the EIA does not contain the assessment regarding the effect of turning the forest into the concrete area on the water which strongly determines the future of agriculture and fishing business (popular in that area)

EIA of the proposed site strongly shows that there will be a huge negative impact on the forest which is considered to be the bio-corridor of the world and the EIA also doesn't include all the aspects that should be considered. More than 75 percent of the land in that area is a cultivable one and the business of wood and timber can be a major source of economic revenue and employment opportunity for Nepal from that area.

Experts have also said that the proposed project is nothing but a conspiracy to completely destroy the forest and bio-diversity which is extremely important from a national and international environment perspective and also from the perspective of water generation so such activities should be stopped immediately. It has also been said that the project halts the fundamental right of people to live in a clean and healthy environment guaranteed by the constitution and is against the principles and core values of national and international environmental laws regulations and commitments of Nepal.

In December 2019, the Supreme Court of Nepal issued an interim order to stop all the activities regarding the clearing of the forest in Nijgadh. The court issued an interim order asking the government to stop all the activities. The case's final decision has not been made yet.

During the Nepal Investment Summit held in April 2019, this airport attracted bids from six international investors, including Qatar. According to government estimates, \$3.5 billion is required to develop the Nijgadh airport.

### **Alternative airport sites**

The vegetation of the proposed Nijgadh area is no less different from the Parsa National Park. However, the forest conditions of Murtiya are very poor. No huge investment is needed to clear the forest in Murtiya as in Nijgadh. Likewise, if Simara is chosen for the airport, only 70,000 trees felling would allow having an airport site that would meet the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) standards while meeting the 29,000 feet cruise height within 100 nautical miles. So this begs the question why Nijgadh? Currently, there is also another international airport being constructed in Pokhara. Looking at it from an efficiency perspective, these types of upcoming infrastructure projects and similar developments do enhance economic growth but along with comes the cost on the environment.

In order to have a more sustainable approach with regards to policy making, maybe the government should reconsider its decision keeping all stakeholders in mind as the proposed site is non-compliant with environmental standards, and its consequences and effects would be felt by the coming generations.

(Harsh Mahaseth is an Assistant Lecturer at Jindal Global Law School and a Research Analyst at the Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Jindal School of International Affairs, O.P. Jindal Global University. Pranjal Risal is a third-year law student at NALSAR University of Law, India. The views are personal)

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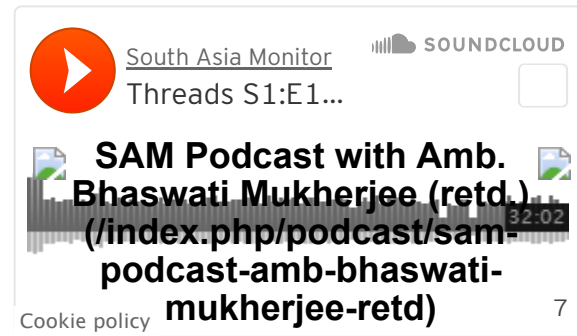
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