

PINK BRIGADE An estimated four lakh greater flamingos arrived at the Rann of Kutch this year. PHOTOS: SAUMIL SHAH (FLICKR.COM/SAUMIL)



End of the road for flamingos?

CONSERVATION Wildlife experts fear that the proposed road in the Kutch region will harm the flamingo population that arrives here annually, writes **Atula Gupta**

Travel through the Rann of Kutch in winters and the eyes see nothing but barren, white cracked land with not a single patch of green to signal life and break the monotony. But come here during the monsoons and the extremity of the morphological changes can easily amaze and astound. As sea, river and rainwater floods the marshland, the whole area is transformed into a huge inland sea. It is to this unusual land that flamingos of cold countries migrate each year to increase their brood and spread their speck of flaming pink in the desolate salty marshlands. But with development plans underway it is the same congregation that may cease to exist in this still untarnished region on earth.

The Gujarat State Public Works Department (GSPWD) has submitted a proposal to build a road across the inhospitable terrains of Kutch. The purpose, as per the proposal, is to provide greater access to Border Security Force (BSF) that guards the line separating Gujarat from Sindh region in Pakistan. This road is going to be at least 30 to 40 km inland of the border and somehow conservationists feel, the move will help tourism more than it will aid the BSF which already has a frontier road. It is now the decision of the Standing Committee of the National Board of Wildlife, chaired by Environment Minister, Jayanthi Natarajan that will decide the future of this saline ecosystem.

Flamingo city

In 1893, Maharao Shri Khengarji of Kutch reported for the first time the natural extravaganza of both greater and lesser flamingos touching down on the salty marshes of Kutch to nest specifically at Hanj Bet (Kutchhi for 'Flamingo mountain') and known today as the flamingo city. In April 1945, Salim Ali estimated that

half a million of these pink birds made up the congregation and it is still an enigma to naturalists as to why generations of flamingos have chosen this one spot when they could go anywhere on the 10,000-sq-km Rann. In fact, in all of south Asia, this is the only nesting grounds known of the areal pink brigade.

Some believe it has something to do with the dynamic flow of water. Fresh water flows from Pakistan and Rajasthan in the north and from Kutch in the south, while sea water floods in underground. The rich flow of nutrients from land and sea allows numerous micro-organisms to thrive, providing prawns and fish for humans, crustaceans for flamingos and fish for water birds like pelicans. Once here, the flamingos thus construct muddy nests, lay eggs and rear young ones while devouring on the crustaceans.

Latest reports say this year, an estimated four lakh Greater Flamingos have arrived here as against the average 40,000-50,000. Even the locals and regular bird watchers find the numbers a surprise, a phenomenon not heard of in the last 20 years. The proposed road falls north of the flamingo city which is now within the famous Kutch Desert Wildlife Sanctuary. The greatest fear of biologists, therefore, is that if the road is constructed, the movement of water will be impeded which will in turn imbalance the conditions suitable for the flourishing life forms. According to a report presented by wildlife experts, "The proposed alignment would result in stoppage of water within the Rann...The team is of the unanimous opinion that this road must not be built as it entails a huge financial and ecologically unacceptable cost."

Triple jeopardy

There are other reasons too that stand against the road construction. According

“IT IS STILL AN ENIGMA TO NATURALISTS AS TO WHY GENERATIONS OF FLAMINGOS HAVE CHOSEN THIS ONE SPOT WHEN THEY COULD GO ANYWHERE ON THE 10,000-SQ-KM RANN.

to the plan, the road will traverse the main refuge of wild ass in the Great Rann, sacred forest of Shravan Kavadia, and the Dholavira ruins.

Once found in southern Iran, Afghanistan, and western India, wild asses are an endangered species, now seen only in Gujarat and small adjoining parts of Rajasthan.

The 7,000-sq-m Shravan Kavadia which the road threatens, is one of the rarest mangrove systems in the world located more than 100-km inland from the sea and known for their enormous stature. Dholavira is the fifth largest site of the Indus Valley civilisation in the subcontinent and the road project has not even been sanctioned by the Ministry of Culture.

Further up, the road will pass through a small but critically connecting link between the Little Rann with the Great Rann. The former is already cut off from the Gulf of Kutch by two highway bridges, a railway line and a water pipeline.

Development woes

Both the cultural and natural heritage of Rann is at stake if the saline terrains are replaced with tarred expressways. To reap the benefits of a tourism industry that flourishes for five months, ironically, the very region that the state wishes to promote will pay the price of development and sustain irreparable damage.

The prosperity of Gujarat is often credited to the innate character of the state's residents to judge the future worth of a venture.

Rann's worth is its crusty terrain, roaming wild asses and visiting flamingos serenading locals and tourists alike. If the birds bid adieu to their centuries old winter homes, just because a concrete path was laid to lead to them, the loss will bear heavily on vibrant Gujarat.