

# Villagers near Mussoorie Divided over Cutting Trees for Building Road

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Residents of over ten villages situated on either side of the Devalsari forest, almost 55 km from Mussoorie, are divided over the issue of getting a four-km road built which would connect their villages with each other. One section of villagers is insisting on a direct road (to facilitate more tourism) which involves felling of trees while another section is in favour of a circuitous road which would save a number of deodar trees from being cut.

Arun Prasad Gaur, coordinator of the Devalsari Environment Protection Committee, which is mooting for trees not being cut, told *TOI*, "Some villagers are saying that a four-km road should be built from Odarsu to Bangsil since it would be a shorter route connecting these villages. But if this road is built, it would cut through the forest and a number of trees would have to be felled. This would destabilise the ecology since more vehicular and human movement would start in the area." He added that an alternate route from Odarsu exists which would also meet the villagers' requirement without any trees having to be cut.

However, Jayprakash, pradhan of Vyonsari village said that a direct road was more beneficial to the area. "The villagers can supplement their livelihood by opening eating outlets on the road which will also enable tourists to reach the villages here in a shorter time," he claimed.

Meanwhile, environmentalists and nature lovers, many of whom frequent the area which is rich in flora and fauna, said that a road built to promote tourism in the area "would be a disaster." "A road already exists in both Odarsu and Bangsil but villagers want another road which passes through the forest to shorten the distance by two km. Such a move would destroy the rich biodiversity of the area which is the main attraction for tourists," said conservationist Sanjay Sondhi.

He added that the area had recorded 135 bird species, 130 butterfly varieties and 10 bat species in a survey done in the last four years.

Heritage activist Lokesh Ohri pointed out that it was rare to find "such a beautiful Deodar forest as the kind which exists in Devalsari." "Construction activity should be minimised here to preserve the place as much as possible. For many locals, this is a sacred forest as well since they regard it as the abode of Brahma and Shiva. In fact, many people believe that the forest appeared almost overnight miraculously."

When contacted, Dheeraj Pandey, divisional forest officer of Mussoorie, too, said that efforts should be made to create minimum damage to the ecologically rich area. "If an alternate route is available to go to the villages, it should be prioritised rather than creating a new one at the expense of the green cover."