

Metro now turns truly cosmopolitan

Workers from South Africa arrive in city, hired by CMRL for tunnelling operations

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CHENNAI: After the Chinese workers, now South Africans too have joined the metro bandwagon in Chennai.

Nearly six to seven South Africans are here as part of the contract for a joint venture between Chennai Metro Rail Limited (CMRL) and Afcons Infrastructure Limited-Transtunnelstroy Limited, sources at CMRL said.

“They are hired for operating the Tunnel Boring Machines (TBM) used for the construction of underground stations from Washermanpet to Chennai Central. They will stay for a period of two years till the operations are complete,” said a CMRL official.

Several officials attribute the need to employ the Chinese and South African workers to their expertise in tunnelling operations.

“They have been roped in since they are proficient in handling the TBMs. But we



MILES TO DIG The TBM, launched on Monday, will tunnel about 1,349.9 metres from Washermanpet to Chennai Central – PHOTO: SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

have also employed some Indians for the tunnelling, who have worked at the Delhi metro rail construction,” said an official.

Sources indicate that contractors sign up for joint ventures with the foreign-based

companies so that they get qualified to meet the high degree of requirements placed by CMRL.

“In many cases, the contractors can acquire the contract from CMRL only if they fulfil certain parameters.

And, the contractors say, it is to satisfy those conditions that they enter into joint ventures with foreign companies. But the details of the contract can't be shared since it is confidential,” a source said.

Forty Nepalese workers have also been employed, but they won't be involved in the tunnelling operations.

“The Nepalese will perform some of the manual work along with the Indians. As they have already worked in the construction of Delhi metro rail, they know the system and hence we brought them over,” an official said.

While some of the South Africans reside in a multi-storey apartment near the sites, the rest live in the Labour colony in Vayalanallur along with the Chinese and Indian workers, sources said. The officials professed no knowledge when asked about the wages of the South African, Chinese and Nepalese workers.

Meanwhile, the TBM at the Washermanpet station was launched on October 1 and will tunnel about 1,349.9 metres from Washermanpet to Chennai Central.

Two TBMs assembled

Similar to the Nehru Park station, this site will also deploy two TBMs. Though both have been assembled, it would take a while to commission the second one, say officials.

“For a start, the TBM broke the diaphragm wall. But full-fledged tunnelling work will commence only after 10 days. Although the TBMs are capable of drilling at a speed of 6-10 metres, they will begin at two metres initially,” a CMRL official said.

Tunnelling operations commenced at the Nehru Park station in late July and the first TBM has drilled about 84 metres so far. The second machine will start running by October 15.