

Metro phase I: A hard, but gratifying journey

CMRL Officials Recall Hurdles Passed

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Chennai: In 2011, even as struggled to handle land owners and contractors, Chennai Metro Rail Ltd officials were asked to stop construction of the elevated corridor above Kathipara grade separator. Police feared concrete blocks could fall on the passing convoy of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh visiting the city. It was not the only challenge they had faced and overcome.

On Sunday, when Prime Minister Narendra Modi inaugurates the 10-km line from Washermenpet to AG-DMS, the 45km phase I will be completely operational, the culmination of a decade-long toil by hundreds of workers, engineers and officers.

"Police were also worried that someone might hurl an explosive at the convoy from the site above the Kathipara separator. But we convinced them that we cannot stop work and took full responsibility of safety," recalled Ramanathan, then head of



ALL SET: Minister M C Sampath with CMRL MD Pankaj Kumar Bansal, inspects work for the last leg's inaugural at Central metro lower platform

the construction department.

From resolving problems in acquiring land to facing the wrath of residents over traffic diversions and termination of contracts, there were several stumbling blocks. "We faced different issues in different areas. For the high court to Washermenpet stretch, it was hard convincing people to go ahead, especially after cracks developed in churches. In Anna Nagar, residents argued that work was affecting their routine and they could not take cars out of their homes. Now, they are thanking us," Ramanathan said.

A FULL CIRCLE

Metro phase-I circuit will be complete with the inaugural of its last leg today

2009 | Elevated corridor construction begins at Vadapalani

2011 | Underground corridor construction begins at Nehru Park

June 2015 | 1st line - Koyambedu to Alandur (11km) opened

Sept 2016 | Little Mount to Airport (8.6km) and Alandur

to St Thomas Mount (1.29km) opened

May 2017 | Nehru Park to Koyambedu (8.05km) opened

May 2018 | Central Metro to Nehru Park (2.65km) and AG-DMS to Little Mount opened

Today | Washermenpet to AG-DMS (10.1km) opened

To build a network of international standards that can serve the city for at least another century, several consultants from abroad including France, Hong Kong, Singapore were roped in. Awareness on the cutting-edge technology was raised in premier academic institutions. Tenders were put out in international newspapers like Wall Street Journal that eventually brought major players to build the structure, systems and the trains. It was not easy.

Termination of at least two contracts led to the project being unduly delayed. When a Russian

contractor abandoned the Anna Salai worksite, Ramanathan recalled, they continued to keep the tunnel boring machines running, as it could lead to the soil collapsing. "Nowhere in the world is there an underground line between elevated stations. Here, between Meenambakkam and Airport, the line goes almost under the road for a few metres. They were changes made during the construction as it was an aircraft flying zone. Even work to build the roof of airport station could be executed only two or three days a week," he said.

The biggest challenge came

in the way of land. Officials were forced to spend much of their time shuttling between courts. "The issue was particularly with private parties occupying government land, who went to the Supreme court. It was one of the challenges we faced in the initial two or three years. But all said and done, everything was in our favour," recalled Somasundaram, who served as chief general manager in CMRL.

Syed Munir Hoda, chairman of CMRL when the project was signed in 2007, recalled working out of a 600sqft office with a team of three in Taramani and visiting several localities to pacify angry land owners. "It was a tedious job. We organized meetings in localities like Vadapalani and Alandur, showed visuals of the future stations and the facility. People were sceptical," he said. "Though a bit late, the phase is now complete. However, it will be effective only if the network is built like a spider web, connecting all parts, and a commuter can hop on to one or two trains to reach any destination."

The 118.9km phase II may become part of the spider web when it connects suburbs with the city's core, a few years down the line.