Relocating Beliefs

How do authorities negotiate with the dilemma of religious structures coming in the way of infrastructure projects?

Shantanu Nandan Sharma

VS Reddy, managing director of the Hyderabad Metro Rail Corporation (HMRC), prefers to be known as a poet rather than an engineer. As if to prove it is no taunt, he recites a line: “My structures are damsels dancing in the moonlight.”

Reddy has abandoned his professional career and his “damsels” may now be “dancing in the moonlight,” but it hasn’t been easy. Not long ago, the upcoming metro rail project faced uncertainty owing to a number of religious structures. Hyderabad is a heavily polarized city, home to a large number of Hindus and Muslims. Reddy had the onerous task of overcoming the shifting of temples and mosques. No surprise that he is not the most popular official in Hyderabad.

Reddy actually moves around the city to inspect his “damsels” accompanied by a security detail these days. State intelligence reports claimed he could be a possible target for attack in sensitive pockets.

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Some officials are first sent to appeal to the temple priest or the imam with a request for relocation. Muslim officials are usually sent to negotiate with mosque trusts, and Christian officials to churches. Local government officials, and not concessionaires, L&T usually get involved in the negotiations.

Up to 2 crores sanctioned for each structure. Money is spent from state government’s utility shifting budget. One temple, one mosque, one church.

A Muslim prayer place near a metro rail pillar

A Christian cross that fell on the metro line was shifted after many rounds of negotiations

Step 1 >> Negotiations

Step 2 >> Shifting Grants

According to the local report when a religious trust refused to move a temple...
locate the religious structures. What happens if the doles fall? "If a priest or an imam refuse to move, we island (buy adjoining land to isolate to the structure) the structure," says Reddy. The metro is being rolled out as a public-private partnership (PPP) project, with L&T as the private partner.

That's one in the Corner!

In India, the land of diverse beliefs and religious, Hyderabad is hardly the only city where infrastructure meets religion, often with undesirable consequences. The same corner and corner in both urban and rural lands would inevitably have a structure belonging to one religion or the other. A tree or even an incomplete concrete structure becomes "sacred" and consequently, immovable.

The widening of highways, expansion of airports and rolling out of metro rail networks during the last one and half decades are all worth millions of dollars.

But they are often up against multiple faiths, inescapably unshakable, of a large swath of people. Given that religion evokes unbridled passion in India, removing religious structures is a challenge.

Authorities cannot take recourse to law to remove these types of infrastructure bottlenecks. Because there isn’t one - except the land acquisition act. That means agencies, be it government or private, have to rely on their negotiation skills with the management of religious institutions. It is never easy. Money doesn’t always work: Moving court would only result in delays. Not even a legal threat would unnerv the people who manage these institutions thanks to the risk it carries.

"It’s not religious temples or mosques that hold up infrastructure. It’s "Temples of Justice" - India’s dilatory legal system - that act as a major bottleneck at all stages of infrastructure creation," says Shashikant Pathak, ex-executive director of Bhartiya Group that has interests in building townships, among others. Indeed, infrastructure cases are stuck in agitations for decades. India is ranked 14 out of 189 countries in the World Bank’s Ease of Doing Business index. Due to this grim scene, infrastructure companies prefer "managing" religious trusts to moving court. "The only recourse is to fall back on out-of-court unofficial settlements. The encroachers are often persuaded to shift the structure by parties with a hefty sum," adds Pathak who was a civil servant for 16 years before shifting to the private sector.

Let’s Sit & Talk

Government agencies - National Highways Authority of India (NHAI), metro rail corporations and city development authorities - too prefer the same method. Only that it is an unwritten rule.

Last week in Jaipur, the famous Rajgir temple Mahadev and Khasthurmin Mahadev temples were demolished to pave the way for the construction of a metro rail. Officials of the Jaipur Metro Rail Corporation executing the 12 km-long project first convinced the management of the two centuries-old temples before relocating those. Yet, there was trouble in the air. About 400 cops were deployed in the area and about a dozen persons were taken into preventive custody. "We convinced the temple management that the relocation is out of sheer necessity," says Nihal Chand Goel, chairman and managing director of Jaipur Metro. In Jaipur, six out of 13 temples have been relocated to roll out the metro.

But what happens if the management of a temple refuses to shift the structure? The Delhi Metro Rail Corporation (DMRC), which has rolled out 180 km of metro line, has encountered numerous issues concerning a 365-square-meter mosque and a large temple named Shyam Giri near the Shastri Park station. The matter dates back to 2003 when the temple refused to relocate.

Dealing with the Mosque

Dealing with the Shyam Giri temple claims:

- DMRC took away a large portion of its land
- It finally allowed the temple and the adjoining ashram to function in a smaller area (it constructed a boundary so that the temple wouldn’t encroach DMRC’s land in future)

According to DMRC records (RTI dated September 26, 2013), the temple still encroaches 11,500 square meter area of its 7,45,245 square metre land in Shastri Park.

"Is there any law in India under which a masjid can be relocated? We are no way obstructing the main station. We want an early resolution to this issue""

Ismar Hussain Chisti, president, Ahly Sunnat Wal Jamaat Committee

Case Study 2

The Delhi Metro

How unresolved issues relating to a temple and a mosque continue to cast a shadow

Location >> Shastri Park Metro Station, Delhi

Issue >> Delhi Metro Rail Corporation (DMRC) bought 155 acres from Delhi Development Authority (DDA) in September 1998. But as it turned out, the areas occupied by Shyam Giri temple and Sabri mosque were part of the purchased land

"Our temple has remained in this place for the last 700 years. Who is DDA to sell our land to Delhi Metro?" Raman Giri Mahajan, head priest, Shyam Giri temple

Dealing with the Mosque

Dealing with the Sabri mosque claims:

- It’s not an unauthorised mosque as claimed by the Delhi Metro
- It wants a final resolution on its status so that it can be reconstructed at the same location
- There has been apathy even after Delhi High Court directed the LG to resolve the issue within 2 weeks", in a judgment dated December 07, 2014