

SPOTLIGHT



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10 years on, metro rail phase 2 rolls into action

Hyderabad's metro rail network is set to expand with the much-anticipated second phase, starting later this month, which will bring the Old City into the fold. With a budget of ₹24,269 crore, the project will create five corridors, in addition to the three corridors of phase I. For local residents, business owners and commuters, the proposed works signal upheaval, but also spark hope for smoother commute and renewed connectivity in one of Hyderabad's most historic quarters, reports **V. Geetanath**

Later this month, the bustling streets of Hyderabad's Old City will witness the rumble of excavators – not for routine roadworks, but to mark a transformative step in the city's urban transit story. The much-anticipated second phase of the Hyderabad Metro Rail (HMR) project is set to commence, starting with the demolition of approximately 400 properties along the 3.5-kilometre stretch from Darulshifa to Shalibanda. This marks the beginning of land acquisition for the long-stalled metro overhead line connecting Mahatma Gandhi Bus Station (MGBS) to the proposed Chandrayangutta junction station, a distance of 7.5 kilometres.

Following the demolition, the roads will undergo remarking while barricades will be set up to manage traffic and geo-technical studies will be taken up next month. These preliminary activities will pave the way for constructing the towering pillars and viaducts over which metro rail tracks will be laid.

This metro line is part of five new corridors proposed by the current Congress government in Telangana, spanning 76.4 kilometres at an estimated cost of ₹24,269 crore. To be taken up as a joint venture between the State government and the Centre, the project includes a significant loan component of ₹11,653 crore (48%). The financial partnership will see the State contributing ₹7,313 crore (or 30%) and the Centre ₹4,230 crore (or 18%), with the latter also extending a sovereign guarantee.

It has been a long wait – 10 years, to be precise – but the wheels of Hyderabad's metro rail expansion are finally turning again. This recommencement comes seven years after the HMR began its first phase of commercial operations across three corridors comprising 57 stations: the 29-km Red Line from Miyapur to L.B. Nagar, the 29-km Blue Line from Nagole to Raidurg, and the 11-km Green Line from Jubilee Bus Station to MGBS. These corridors opened in phases starting in November 2017, with the final stretch of JBS to MGBS being inaugurated in February 2020.

Driving this renewed momentum is Chief Minister A. Revanth Reddy, who has taken a hands-on approach to the metro's revised blueprint. Under his leadership, Hyderabad Airport Metro Limited (HAML), the agency implementing the project, has been tasked with integrating the existing metro lines into a seamless circular loop. This involves connecting the terminal stations of



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Nagole and L.B. Nagar, and linking all the corridors to the proposed metro route extending to the Rajiv Gandhi International Airport (RGIA) in Shamshabad on the outskirts of Hyderabad.

"We were the second-largest metro rail network in the country after Delhi Metro when we launched the first phase in 2017," says HMR and HAML managing director N.V.S. Reddy.

"Now, we are in the third position with Delhi Metro expanding to 415 kilometres and Bengaluru at 74 kilometres. If we delay further, we risk slipping to the ninth position, as cities like Mumbai, Chennai, and others are investing heavily, between ₹50,000 crore to ₹1 lakh crore, on building new metro lines," he explains.

According to him, metro projects spanning approximately 980 kilometres are currently under construction across 19 cities in the country.

The blueprint

As someone who steered the HMR's first phase from conceptualisation to commissioning, N.V.S. Reddy is confident about delivering this expansion within four years once the joint venture and loan agreements are firmed up. He says leverag-

ing the latest construction technologies, including the use of U-shaped girders for the viaducts, could expedite the process.

"Except for the Old City stretch of about six kilometres, where properties are being acquired under the Land Acquisition Act, very little private land is needed for the second phase. The right of way (RoW) is readily available in most of the proposed corridors, and we plan to utilise government lands for the stations, parking and depots," he explains.

Expressing confidence that the Centre will grant approval for the joint venture soon, he says, "Work will commence in the Old City first, and we will ensure that none of the 106 religious and heritage structures are disturbed. Engineering solutions will allow us to bypass these sites. Property owners in the area are being compensated generously, with ₹65,000 per square yard being offered against the official rate of ₹23,000 per square yard."

Similar to the first phase of HMR, the second phase will largely feature elevated viaducts, except for a 1.6-kilometre underground stretch inside the RGIA. All the proposed new lines are extensions of the existing 69.2 kilometres from phase one: Red Line from Miyapur to Patancheru, Blue Line from Raidurg to Kokapet, and Green Line from MGBS to Chandrayangutta.

The airport will be accessible from all three metro lines, with seamless connections through extensions linking the Nagole and L.B. Nagar stations. A twin station will be established at Nagole to serve Blue Line travellers heading to the airport, while Green Line commuters can board at the Chandrayangutta interchange station. Those on the Red Line will have the option to join the route at MGBS or L.B. Nagar.

What sets the second phase apart is its entirely new financial model, a departure from the first phase, which was executed as the world's largest public-private partnership (PPP) metro project. In phase one, the government invested ₹2,970 crore, with ₹1,204 crore provided by the Centre as 'Viability Gap Funding', and the concessionaire, L&T Metro Rail Hyderabad (L&TMRH), investing ₹17,974 crore.

"HMR's first phase is the only metro rail project in the country's 23 ongoing metro ventures to operate under the PPP model," explains CEO of L&TMRH and managing director K.V.B. Reddy. "We secured a ₹11,000-crore loan at 10% interest rate from banks led by the State Bank of India. While we are the best in managing operational expenses, the high interest rate on capital investment has resulted in losses. However, we have brought down our debt through financial re-engineering and reduced our interest rate to 6%," he reveals.

Regarding parking facilities, lessons from the first phase are being put to use. For the second phase, officials are planning to secure sufficient land to provide ample parking at the proposed 54 stations across the five corridors.

Joint venture model

What makes phase two economically viable is the Centre's joint venture model, which includes a sovereign guarantee. This crucial provision allows loans to be secured at an interest rate of just 2% from multilateral agencies like the World Bank, Asian Development Bank or Japan Interna-

tional Cooperation Agency.

These loans also come with long repayment periods and a moratorium for the first few years, says the HMR managing director.

This sovereign guarantee is, however, not extended to the private sector. "More PPP projects can be successful if such an option is made available to them," chips in L&TMRH CEO.

L&TMRH is ready to step in as an EPC (engineering, procurement, and construction) contractor for the second phase once tenders are issued, expected sometime next year. "We are ready to be part of the Telangana growth story. We have the full spectrum of expertise – civil, electrical, signalling and communication. Only rolling stock needs to be procured. No other firm has this capability. We have 2,500 engineers working on minimising construction time. We can deliver much faster if the RoW is provided," says K.V.B. Reddy.

Meanwhile, the first phase of the Hyderabad Metro has grown exponentially, now carrying about 4.75 lakh passengers daily, with a peak of 5.64 lakh riders. This is a remarkable increase from the initial 20,000 passengers when operations began in November 2017.

Currently, 57 three-coach train sets run daily, completing 1,075 trips with a frequency of 2.5 to 5 minutes during peak hours and 7 to 10 minutes during non-peak hours.

What's more, the system maintains an impressive punctuality rate of 99.86%.

For the second phase, HAML has 'conservatively' estimated that the five new routes, once operational, could easily handle up to eight lakh passengers daily, with the potential to rise to 10 lakh. This projection is not far-fetched, considering the ridership surges observed in other cities. Bengaluru, Nagpur, and Pune have seen daily passenger count double after metro lines were extended with improved inter-connectivity – from 60,000 to 1.5 lakh and even 7.5 lakh. Chennai's daily ridership also soared from 40,000 to 2 lakh passengers after adding new lines, metro rail officials point out.

Reshaping urban travel

The government's recent flurry of announcements regarding phase two has also sparked anticipation among the commuters. "I have been using the metro since phase one was launched, but since it currently ends at Miyapur, I am forced to take an autorickshaw to reach my house in Madinaguda. The proposed extension to Patancheru will be a boon for scores of residents in this part of the city, connecting us to other suburbs," says U. Krishna Ved (54), a management consultant.

Residents of the Old City, sidelined in the first phase, are particularly optimistic. "We are hoping that the metro will finally cater to us," says private company employee M.A. Haq (50). "Many employees, students, and others use the existing services to reach bus and railway stations or areas like Hi-Tec City and Raidurg, but from far-off points like Malakpet or MGBS. Everyone is looking forward to the new services and will welcome it with open arms," he adds.

But, of course, not everyone is entirely satisfied with the proposed routes for phase two. Citizens like M. Sampath Reddy and BJP leader S. Malala Reddy are urging the government to include other rapidly growing residential areas such as Medchal via Kompally, Shamirpet via Thumkunta, Suraram-Gandimysamma, and ECIL-Keesara.

Kanchana, another resident, questions why Mehdiapatnam was excluded from the plan. Asked about these concerns, N.V.S. Reddy clarifies, "There are a lot of demands from various areas, but we cannot cover every route in one go. Since 2017, the Centre has made RoW – a wide road with space for utilities like power, telecom and water pipelines – a precondition for approving metro rail projects. We will consider other areas in subsequent phases as the city continues to expand."

Focus areas

Residents also highlight other challenges that need to be addressed. B.Rajendra Prasad from Saroornagar stresses the importance of improving first and last-mile connectivity to residential colonies, in collaboration with the Telangana State Road Transport Corporation (TGSRTC) and other transport agencies.

Similarly, graduate student M.A. Hadi advocates for a common ticket system integrating all modes of public transport.

Another persistent concern among commuters is the lack of adequate parking facilities, which many feel needs urgent attention.

Metro rail officials inform that the Centre has mandated the implementation of the National Common Mobility Card for all public transport systems, aiming for a nationwide roll-out next year. However, talks with the TGSRTC on route and service integration are yet to make progress. Officials believe intervention from top political leaders could expedite collaboration and pave the way for seamless connectivity.

"Private players are allowed to operate shuttle service between specific destinations, but only the TGSRTC is permitted to offer pick-and-drop services at multiple points," an official clarifies.

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N.V.S. Reddy is optimistic about the progress of phase two, asserting it will be a "cakewalk" compared to the first phase, which took seven years to complete.

"The Chief Minister is closely monitoring the work. He has conducted 10 reviews and also ensured release of funds for initial works," he says.

Encouraging public participation, the HMR chief has invited citizens to contribute to the project by suggesting station locations, the number of stations, and even their names, underscoring the collaborative spirit driving the metro rail's expansion.