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|  | ***25 years journey of struggle and reconstruction***  **National Alliance of People’s Movements**  **National Office:** 6/6, Jungpura-B, New Delhi – 110014 **| Ph:** 011-24374535  **Twitter:** @napmindia **|** **E-mail:**  [napmindia@gmail.com](mailto:napmindia@gmail.com) **|**  **Blog:** [www.napmindia.wordpress.com](http://www.napmindia.wordpress.com) **|** **Web:** [www.napm-india.org](http://www.napm-india.org) |

**For Urgent Attention: Review of Cost-Benefits of**

**Proposed Semi High-Speed Train Project**

8th July, 2020

To,

Mr. Pinarayi Vijayan,

Chief Minister,

Government of Kerala

**Sub: Urgent Need for Review of the Cost-Benefits of Semi High Speed Train Project and Decision in the interest of the ecology, economy and people’s livelihoods.**

Sir,

At the outset, which wish to convey our appreciation for the methodical and diligent way in which your administration, with the able leadership of T. Shailaja in the Health Ministry has been handling the unprecedented Covid-19 crisis. We noticed that on many occasions, such as during the floods of 2018 & 2019, the Shabarimalai issue and now during Covid, the State has taken on challenges, with some progressive stands, despite non co-operation from the Centre. We also acknowledge the importance of initiatives like ‘Kerala Dialogue Conversations’ that the state has recently launched.

We have, however, been disturbed by the ‘developmental approach’ of the state, which we still hope will be and has to be different from the other mainstream parties of the country. The post-flood ‘reconstruction’, threat to Western Ghats by reckless construction projects, the massive widening of NH-66, unabated black sand mining in Alappad, the sudden revival of destructive Athirappilly Project and now the Semi High Speed Train Project, all raise very serious questions about the commitment of the government towards environmental protection and people’s livelihoods – both of which are part of a sustainable development framework. We have been bringing various concerns to your notice through multiple ways and expect a rational stand from you in this regard as well.

This particular communication is with regard to the Semi High-Speed Train Corridor also known as Silver Line Project from Kasargod (north) to Thiruvananthapuram (south), proposed to be constructed at an estimated cost of INR 67,000 crores. We are given to understand that the Kerala Rail Development Corporation Limited (KRDCL), a Joint Venture Company under the Government of Kerala and Ministry of Railways, Govt of India, has proposed a 532 kms long track for connecting the two ends of the state. While 3,000 acres of land are to be acquired for the tracks and an additional 2,500 acres would be taken for ‘development’ of smart cities and other commercial establishments near the proposed 10 stations, the actual and full extent of land being frozen for the project is not yet known. While sanction for the project itself is awaited from centre, there is information that land acquisition process has already begun!

Although the state government maintains that ‘only 6,395 families will have to be evicted’, Mr. E Sreedharan (the key architect of Delhi Metro) estimates that at least 20,000 families, which means at least around 80,000 persons, will be displaced by the project. The past experience of a small number of 326 families evicted for the Vallarpadam Container berth, a decade back, shows that even as on date only 76 families have been resettled, while the remaining 250 families are yet to be rehabilitated. Hence the ‘displacement and rehabilitation of almost 80,000 people for the current project should be minimized at all costs and at best, avoided.

It is learnt that about 132 km of paddy fields would be utilised for the rail project. Filling up of a large extent of paddy fields is likely to hinder the free flow and percolation of water, affecting the water table, leading to drought-like conditions. Multiple scientific studies have confirmed the fact that wetlands act as one of the main sources for ground water recharge. Hence filling up of wet lands in the guise of ‘development’ could prove detrimental, in the long run. Since high boundary walls would have to be raised on both sides of the entire 532 kms track, except at urban areas, KRDCL has stated that around 1,000 RoB / Under bridges would be constructed at every 500 mts. This means, one would have to travel at least one km to crossover the track and there is no guarantee that adequate number of RoBs all across would be built. People of the state are already apprehensive about flyovers, with the experience of Palarivattom flyover fresh in memory.

Construction of underpass / over bridges in water logged / marshy areas or near rivers could lead to them being flooded, even with a small down pour. The alignment passes through Trichur, Ernakulam, Kottyam and Pathanamthitta Districts that had faced 25 ft of flooding during the last two floods. The high boundary walls on both sides could affect the rescue operations in the event of future floods. These walls would also make agricultural practice with tractors, tillers and harvesting machines difficult in the many paddy fields in the stretch! Erection of these high boundary walls over 532 kms would mean literally divide the entire state of Kerala into two! Ironically, a similar proposal by the previous government was (rightly) torpedoed by the Opposition for the very same reasons, but is now walking the same path, while in power!

It is reported that of the entire project cost of Rs.67,000, upto 10 % would be borne each by the Centre and State while the remaining 80 % would be raised through loans from domestic and foreign institutions (especially Japan), indicating that it would eventually be a huge debt on the citizens of the state. Some independent estimates indicate the eventual project cost could shoot upto Rs. 1 lakh crore. Even as the Railway Board has only sanctioned the survey and not the full DPR, it is reported that during your (CM’s) visit to Japan, you had submitted the ‘feasibility report’ and other allied papers before the Board of Directors of JICA for availing loan of INR 55,000/- crores. Questions have also been raised as to why much of the equipment including rolling stock has to be imported from Japan, when India itself exports rolling stock to South Africa and many other countries.

KRDCL has not yet furnished specific details about the expected number of passengers the train service would cater to. Since the Project is being built with tax payers money, KRDCL has an obligation to substantiate its claims with facts and figures to clear the apprehensions about its feasibility. The proposals for 10 smart cities, with real estate and other commercial establishments, in the vicinity, for which tender has already been floated, allegedly even without proper sanctions from various Government agencies is a matter of deep concern. Would such a project, at such high costs, be really helpful to the broader and common sections of the society or only be of some use to select businesses and professional classes merits more thought.

Activists in the state claim that the Sabari Rail Project which required only 3% of the cost of the estimate of the Semi High Speed Train Project is now abandoned after spending around INR 253 crores. Another similar project which was mooted in 2011 was also abandoned in 2018 after spending 30 crores and the company itself was dissolved! When one smart city floated by the previous Govt with much fan-fare could not progress much even after a decade, the idea of developing 10 smart cities adjacent to the 10 stations, by KRDCL, a new entity, is quite preposterous.

The expected timeline for completion of the Semi High Speed Project is 2035, by which time, there would be drastic changes on the transport front already. The Railways has already started operating various trains at 160 to 200 kms / per hour in certain sections. Nizamuddin - Jhansi Gatiman Express runs with a maximum speed of 160 kmph currently. Such type of trains will be operated in many sectors including Kerala. It is understood that, by then, the speed per hour on the National Highways, which is already permitted at 90 kms/ph would increase substantially. Hence a project proposing 180 to 200 kms per hour in 2035 would be obsolete, by the time it is operational.

The Central Govt has also recently ordered the doubling of the Ernakulam-Kayamkulam via Alleppey railway sector and sanctioned INR 1500 crores for the project. After completion of the doubling of the remaining Ettumannor to Chingavanam sector in Ernakulam- Kayamkulam track and on completion of the doubling of the track via Alleppey, there would be no necessity for a separate line, spending around INR 67,000 - 1,00,000 crore and displacing 80,000 - 1,00,000 people of the state. The possibility of ‘employment generation’ by the Project is also very limited. Going by the experience of the Kochi Metro, except for manual labour work during the limited construction period, that too for migrant workers, there are not many avenues of work likely to be created.

While the Environment Impact Assessment (EIA) of the Semi High Speed Project is stated to have been done, there are serious allegations that the EIA has not happened in a fool-proof manner, with adequate information to and consultation with the affected people. This is a serious breach of mandatory legal requirements. The track proposed is through landslide and avalanche prone areas and the environmental risks should not be underplayed.

***It is anticipated that it could take approximately 5 years to overcome the recession due to the Corona pandemic in the state. When people all over the world including in Kerala are struggling due to the pandemic, such a massive investment of tens of thousands of crores and eviction of upto 1,00,000 people for the project, without adequate discussion with all the elected representatives, including MLAs, MPs and local leaders, consent of the concerned villages and without a rational cost-benefit analysis, environmental and financial feasibility assessment is most unfortunate and unfair.***

***We appeal to you to immediately review the costs and benefits of the Project, by taking on board opinions and views of all concerned sections in the states and in particular the people of the villages / areas who would stand to potentially be displaced.***

We look forward to an acknowledgment of these concerns and a reasoned policy decision, in the interest of the people, ecology and economy of Kerala.

Thanking you,

**Medha Patkar,** Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA) and National Alliance of People’s Movements (NAPM); **Dr. Sunilam, Adv. Aradhna Bhargava,** Kisan Sangharsh Samiti; **Rajkumar Sinha**, Chutka Parmaanu Virodhi Sangharsh Samiti, NAPM, Madhya Pradesh;

**Aruna Roy, Nikhil Dey, Shankar Singh,** Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS), National Campaign for People’s Right to Information; **Kavita Srivastava**, People’s Union for Civil Liberties (PUCL); **Kailash Meena** NAPM Rajasthan;

**Prafulla Samantara,** Lok Shakti Abhiyan; **Lingraj Azad,** Samajwadi Jan Parishad & Niyamgiri Suraksha Samiti, Manorama, Posco Pratirodh Sangram Samiti; **Lingaraj Pradhan, Satya banchor, Anant, Kalyan Anand, Arun Jena, Trilochan Punji, Lakshimipriya Mohanty and Balakrishna Sand, Manas Patnaik**, NAPM Odisha;

**Sandeep Pandey** (Socialist Party of India); **Richa Singh &** **Rambeti** (Sangatin Kisaan Mazdoor Sangathan, Sitapur); Rajeev Yadav & Masihuddin bhai (Rihai Manch, Lucknow & Azamgadh)**; Arundhati Dhuru & Zainab Khatun** (Mahila Yuva Adhikar Manch, Lucknow), **Suresh Rathaur** (MNREGA Mazdoor Union, Varanasi); **Arvind Murti & Altamas Ansari** (Inquilabi Kamgaar Union, Mau), **Jagriti Rahi** (Vision Sansthan, Varanasi); **Satish Singh** (Sarvodayi Vikas Samiti, Varanasi); **Nakul Singh Sawney** (Chal Chitra Abhiyan, Muzaffarnagar); NAPM Uttar Pradesh

**P. Chennaiah,** Andhra Pradesh Vyavasaya Vruthidarula Union-APVVU, **Ramakrishnam Raju,** United Forum for RTI and NAPM, **Chakri** (Samalochana), **Balu Gadi**, **Bapji Juvvala**, NAPM Andhra Pradesh;

**Jeevan Kumar & Syed Bilal** (Human Rights Forum), **P. Shankar** (Dalit Bahujan Front), **Vissa Kiran Kumar & Kondal**(Rythu Swarajya Vedika), **Ravi Kanneganti** (Rythu JAC), **Ashalatha** (MAKAAM), **Krishna**(Telangana Vidyavantula Vedika-TVV), **M. Venkatayya** (Telangana Vyavasaya Vruttidarula Union-TVVU), **Meera Sanghamitra, Rajesh Serupally**, NAPM Telangana;

**Sister Celia,** Domestic Workers Union; **Maj Gen (Retd) S.G.Vombatkere**, NAPM, **Nawaz, Dwiji, Nalini,**NAPM Karnataka

**Gabriele Dietrich,** Penn Urimay Iyakkam, Madurai; **Geetha Ramakrishnan,** Unorganised Sector Workers Federation; Suthanthiran, **Suthanthiran, Lenin** & **Arul Doss,**NAPM Tamilnadu;

**Vilayodi Venugopal, CR Neelakandan, Prof. Kusumam Joseph, Sharath Cheloor,** **Vijayaraghavan Cheliya, Majeendran, Magline,** NAPM, Kerala;

**Dayamani Barla,**Aadivasi-Moolnivasi Astivtva Raksha Samiti; **Basant Hetamsaria, Aloka Kujur,** **Dr. Leo A. Singh, Afzal Anish, Sushma Biruli, Durga Nayak, Jipal Murmu, Priti Ranjan Dash, Ashok Verma**, NAPM Jharkhand;

**Anand Mazgaonkar, Swati Desai, Krishnakant, Parth,**Paryavaran Suraksha Samiti; **Nita Mahadev, Mudita,**Lok Samiti; **Dev Desai, Mujahid Nafees, Ramesh Tadvi, Aziz Minat** and **Bharat Jambucha**, NAPM Gujarat;

**Vimal Bhai,** Matu Jan sangathan; **Jabar Singh,** **Uma**, NAPM, Uttarakhand;

**Manshi Asher** and **Himshi Singh,** Himdhara, NAPM Himachal Pradesh

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**Faisal Khan,**Khudai Khidmatgar, **J S Walia,** NAPM Haryana;

**Guruwant Singh,** NAPM Punjab;

**Kamayani Swami, Ashish Ranjan,** Jan Jagran Shakti Sangathan; **Mahendra Yadav,**Kosi Navnirman Manch; **Sister Dorothy,**Aashray Abhiyan, NAPM Bihar;

**Rajendra Ravi**, NAPM; **Bhupender Singh Rawat**, Jan Sangharsh Vahini; **Anjali Bharadwaj** and **Amrita Johri**, Satark Nagrik Sangathan;  **Sanjeev Kumar**, Dalit Adivasi Shakti Adhikar Manch; **Anita Kapoor**, Delhi Shahri Mahila Kaamgaar Union; **Sunita Rani**, National Domestic Workers Union; **Nanhu Prasad**, National Cyclist Union; **Madhuresh Kumar, Priya Pillai, Aryaman Jain, Divyansh Khurana, Evita Das; Anil TV**, Delhi Solidarity Group, **MJ Vijayan** (PIPFPD)