

# A PROJECT STILL NOT ON TRACK

Relevant for: Indian Economy | Topic: Infrastructure: Railways

Activists from the Greater Visakha City Committee of the CPI(M) stage a protest against what they called the 'shifting of Waltair division to Rayagada', outside the railway station in Visakhapatnam on March 26, 2022. | Photo Credit: DEEPAK K.R.

In 2019, there was excitement in Andhra Pradesh when Union Minister of Railways Piyush Goyal announced a new railway zone, the South Coast Railway (SCoR), with Visakhapatnam as its headquarters. Three years on, construction has still not commenced.

The SCoR will comprise the Guntakal, Guntur and Vijayawada divisions. Waltair division, which covers the northern areas of Andhra Pradesh, parts of Chhattisgarh and Odisha, will be split into two parts. While one part will be incorporated into the new zone and merged with the Vijayawada division, it is proposed that the remaining part will be converted into a new division with its headquarters in Rayagada under the East Coast Railway (ECoR).

Sensing dissatisfaction among the people about the split in the Waltair division and the merger of one part with the Vijayawada division, leaders of various regional political parties have been appealing to the Railways Minister to leave Waltair division as it is after utilising one part of it for the creation of Rayagada Division. In a recent reply to a question from Rajya Sabha member G.V.L. Narasimha Rao on the project, Union Railways Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw said a committee had been constituted to study the demands and concerns. This has given rise to apprehensions that the government is trying to delay the project further.

The feeling of alienation among the people of north Andhra in erstwhile united Andhra Pradesh began when the South Central Railway (SCR) zone was formed in 1966, covering Secunderabad, Hyderabad, Vijayawada, Guntakal, Guntur and Nanded, but not Srikakulam, Vizianagaram and Visakhapatnam. The failure of successive governments to meet the demand of the people for merging the Waltair division, part of the ECoR, with the SCR added to their woes. The formation of a new zone with its headquarters at Visakhapatnam or a merger of the Waltair division with the SCR has been a long-pending demand.

In 1983, a Railway Recruitment Board (RRB) was set up in Bhubaneswar following intense lobbying by politicians from Odisha. The RRB recruited candidates for the three divisions of Khurda Road, Sambalpur and Waltair of the erstwhile South Eastern Railway. When Telugu-speaking candidates went to Bhubaneswar to attend the RRB examinations, some of their hall tickets were torn up and they had to return home without taking the exams. The issue was taken up in Parliament and Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao instructed the Railways Minister C.K. Jaffer Sharief to ensure that Waltair division was merged with the SCR. This, however, did not materialise.

In 1996, Union Railways Minister Ram Vilas Paswan wanted to have a new zone in his constituency at Hajipur, and announced six more zones in the country. The move proved that where there is political will, there is a way.

The ECoR's formation with its headquarters at Bhubaneswar, and its functioning from 2003, resulted in further neglect of north Andhra, and led to the demand for the creation of a new zone in Visakhapatnam. The demand grew louder due to the extension of popular express trains such as Visakha and Prasanti to Bhubaneswar, a decrease in berth quota for Visakhapatnam, and a diversion of long-distance trains via Duvvada.

The provision for the establishment of a new railway zone, in the Andhra Pradesh Reorganisation Act, 2014, came as a shot in the arm for the people of north Andhra. Though there were initial demands that the capital of Andhra should be located in Visakhapatnam, as it has the best connectivity by air, rail, road and sea, the people settled for a new railway zone for which they had been fighting for years. Their hopes have been crushed time and again. This time round, the popular expectation is that the Centre will walk the talk.

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