

# The heavy footprint of a light rail

A part of the land that has been earmarked for acquisition for the light rail in Kerala are wetlands

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A light rail is a symbol of modernity that would surely appeal to the vanity of a society's establishment. What is less evident though is the cost at which it could come. These are not just the upfront costs of installing one but also the hidden environmental impact, which can vary enormously according to geography and the project's spread. A light rail project has found favour with the Government of Kerala. Its unique selling proposition, apparently, is that it will reduce very substantially the travel time between the two extremities of the State, namely the capital city of Thiruvananthapuram in the south and the town of Kasargod in its north. So far, the project has mostly drawn criticism from environmental groups but there are also economic considerations that must be brought to the table when judging its desirability. It may seem odd to say this as the economy is embedded in nature and we cannot ignore environmental cost. However, there are instances when the environmental impact of alternative projects is the same but the economic returns vary significantly and vice versa.

## Environmental costs

What are the environmental costs of yet another rail line in Kerala? The land here is of an undulated topography combined with an often rocky surface that is prone to crumbling when dislodged. Excessive quarrying and construction have already left it vulnerable to torrential rain, as seen in the devastating landslides recorded across the State in recent years. Therefore, the first thought that comes to mind when contemplating another railway, light though it may be, is how it will impact the stability of the earth's surface along its course. So far, we have only considered the consequences of the land use at stake. However, natural capital comprises not only the earth's surface, and the services it renders to us, but also the ecosystem as a whole. It has been pointed out that a part of the land that has been earmarked for acquisition for the project are wet-



lands, including paddy fields. This should concern us. Paddy is the staple food of Malayalees. Its production in Kerala has been in decline for over half a century. Part of this is explained by economic factors but some part of it is due to the lack of an assured water supply. A double whammy of building over paddy fields and shrinking water bodies threatens food security. There is a recognisable pattern to the development strategy of the present government in Kerala. Two years ago, it had dismissed protests by the villagers of Keezhattur in Kannur District against a highway project that would destroy their paddy fields. It now has a chance to listen to citizens' concerns on the plan to install a light railway across the State, the consequences of which will be far more widespread.

## Taking into account alternatives

It is not anyone's case that the government should not develop transportation. The point is that it should take into account all alternatives. Kerala already has a railway line that is two-laned for the most part. There is an international airport in every urban conurbation. It is well connected by road, with one of the higher road densities among States. But of the highest promise are the possibilities of transportation over water. There is at present an ongoing project for transportation through inland waterways. Finally, nothing prevents the government from developing a sea-borne ferry service connecting Thiruvananthapuram with Kasargod, and all the ports in between. This would leave the land untouched.

There is an irony in the pitch for a light rail by a Communist government. In the 1950s, when it was believed that land reforms would deliver the land to them, the peasants hopefully sang "we will (one day) harvest all the fields". Now, by their actions, the ruling class seems to be saying to the workers who installed them in power "we shall (one day) kill all the fields". Spoken in Malayalam, the statements rhyme.

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