

Arunachal to get toy trains so people can at least see them

After all, the state will not get a rail network for at least a few years

—By K.P. Narayana Kumar in New Delhi

If they can't travel in trains, they should at least be able to look at them.

That would appear to be the reasoning of Arunachal Pradesh governor J.J. Singh, who has asked railway minister Lalu Prasad for some heritage locomotives and coaches that can be displayed at public parks in the state.

It's about time the man (or woman) in the street in Arunachal sees what trains look like, says Singh.

After all, the state will not get a rail network for at least a few years.

"A huge proportion of people in the state have never seen a train. Only those who have travelled to Assam would have seen a train," adds Singh.

On Monday, Singh met Prasad and pitched for the trains. He got them.

He says that several private entities have volunteered to install the coaches and locomotives in schools and parks.

Singh's claim that many of Arunachal's citizens have not even seen a train may well be

true. Cinemas aren't common in the state and most villages do not have a single television set. In February, Singh promised television sets to 1,730 villages.

Indian politicians and administrators aren't known for their sarcasm or sense of humour, and it is unlikely that Singh's request has anything to do with the fact that several rail projects meant for Arunachal haven't moved at all.

Surveys for as many as five railway lines to the state are complete and the governor has urged the railway minister to ensure that work on these starts soon. He has also asked Indian Railways to consider partnering with state-owned power firms that have a significant interest in ensuring that a rail network to the resource-rich state is completed soon.

Singh says that Arunachal's tourism and horticulture businesses will also get a boost from a rail network.

Arunachal and Singh, however, will have to remain content with the for-display engines and locomotives for now. In the absence of a rail network to the state, it is unclear how these

will be transported, although they can be dismantled, transported by road, and assembled.

A former official of the Railway Board, the railways' apex management body, who did not wish to be identified, said security concerns (the geographical proximity of China to Arunachal) have been behind India's lack of seriousness when it comes to building a railway network in the state. "The railway projects in Arunachal are not getting the required support from the Centre. But, this is partly due to strategic concerns. There is need to have more open debates on this issue as many a time the Railway Board is not told why certain projects are not encouraged by the government. A railway line can bring prosperity to the state," he said.

For his part, Singh is not convinced a railway network in Arunachal will help the Chinese infiltrate into India easily. He adds that the Chinese hinterland is around 1,500 km from the Arunachal border— in any case, it is fairly inhospitable terrain.