Prabhu signs $5-lakh pact with UNESCO for Darjeeling railways

Written by Samudra Gupta Kashyap | Guwahati | Updated: January 21, 2017 3:05 am

Darjeeling Himalayan Railways (File Photo)

The Darjeeling Himalayan Railway is all set to receive a major conservation boost with the Indian Railways on Friday signing a fund-in-trust agreement worth $5,33,332 to enable UNESCO develop a Comprehensive Conservation Management Plan (CCMP) and a framework for an effective management system for it. Signing the agreement in Darjeeling, union railway minister Suresh Prabhakar Prabhu described it as a historic moment and said Indian Railway was committed do everything possible to perversely the priceless heritage of the DHR that was declared a World Heritage by UNESCO in 1999.

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“Conservation and preservation of heritage starts in the minds and hearts of people. Indian Railway is proud of its heritage and is committed to do everything possible for preserving its priceless heritage,” Prabhu said. Prabhu also thanked the people of the Darjeeling Hills for being an integral part of the Darjeeling Himalayan Railway Eco-system and their efforts in preserving and conserving it.

While the CCMP for Darjeeling Himalayan Railway had actually commenced in April, 2016, once successful, it would be replicated in Nilgiri Mountain Railway and Kalka Shimla Railway too. While Nilgiri Mountain Railway was declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2005, Kalka Shimla Railway was given the same status in 2008. The three together are called Unesco’s ‘Mountain Railways of India World Heritage Site.’

“This Fund-In-Trust agreement is the first step towards realising the CCMP, and aims at assisting the Ministry of Railways in enhancing the conservation and management of the Mountain Railways of India,” Northeast Frontier Railway CPRO PJ Sharma informed. An effective management system would in turn serve as the master document for formulating projects towards future interventions in respect to heritage matters of DHR and the other two mountain railways, he added.

With several stake-holders operating in the area, the Darjeeling Himalayan Railway has been severely affected by rampant construction along the line and in coming up of urban settlements, lack of inventory of historic buildings that have been already demolished, renovated, restored or reconstructed has also added to its problems.

“Lack of a management plan for the World Heritage property and an undefined buffer zone along the length of it has also severely threatened the future of the World Heritage property. There is lack of meaningful collaboration and clear governance arrangements to deal with regional issues affecting the DHR with special regard to the World Heritage property and buffer zone management,” CPRO Sharma said. The CCMP, once completed and implemented, is expected to remove the existing anomalies and ensure proper conservation of all the three heritage railways, he added.

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