

India's Tryst with the Bullet Train

Shinkansen, which literally means 'New Trunk Line' in Japanese, was conceptualized in 1930. The concept resembled a bullet, and the name stuck on. The first bullet train ran from Tokyo-Osaka (513 km) in 1964 in a record four hours, and thus began the saga. My own encounter with the bullet train came in 1995 with the start of my love affair with Japan. It left me awed. With years, I became better at carrying the expected stoic expression while in Japan, but have always marveled this wonderful Japanese engineering married to high safety. Thanks to a fully automated signaling and an amazing zero accident record, the acceptable average delay is a mere 60 seconds (anything more is explainable) and the average running time between trains is 3 minutes! Interestingly, there is this famous "7-minute miracle" i.e. the cleaning time taken between disembarking and new passengers coming on board. Shinkansen truly is an icon of everything we relate with Japan - efficiency, safety and high service.

We are hopeful to ride the Shinkansen in 2022 as it begins the first India run, and then onwards routinely as it spreads itself in other parts of India. While on the first run, let me share an interesting fact. The first Indian passenger train ran on April 16, 1853. The Shinkansen will share a special history with that. The first train ran between Mumbai and Thane, which are stations the Shinkansen too will cover. If it's first run were from Mumbai to Ahmedabad (unlikely), then it will mirror the journey of the first Indian passenger train.

This venture will bring forth much for both countries. Business opportunities for Japan for one, and we should strive to create worthwhile opportunities for our Japanese colleagues. The best business model is one in which both parties equally benefit. Besides more High-Speed Rail projects, the Dedicated Freight Corridors and Asia-Africa Growth Corridor are other great mutually beneficial opportunities.

The long-term benefit for India would be the "Make in India" and "Transfer of Technology" as regards High-Speed Rail, which is being actively discussed by National High Speed Rail Corporation Ltd (NHSRCL), DIPP and Japan External Trade Organization (JETRO). This will help us conceptualize many more fast rail projects. One is already submitted by NHSRCL for Government consideration i.e. the Hyderabad-Nagpur High-Speed Rail using ideas from the initial experience. Purportedly, this will cut travel time from 9 hours to 3 hours! As you can see, the bullet train has already fired our imagination. In the immediate future, the Shinkansen project will generate 20,000 jobs, 3000 people will be trained in Japan and High-Speed Rail Training Institute will be set-up at Vadodara. Not to forget, Ahmedabad-Mumbai will be covered in 2 hours! Probably the best time to buy property in Ahmedabad.

In making Shinkansen an India reality, we will need to overcome many challenges. Some of these we are accustomed to i.e. land acquisition, funding, hullabuh about this being a non-populist project, etc. Some will be new, like listening to experts and absorbing. To mirror the "accident free" image in India, we need to first understand and not begin with counter suggestions. All difficulties must be dealt with deftly. Other Asian countries are fast embracing the High-Speed Rail. China has gone ahead to beat

the speed record! With the completion of the first project and seeping in of the technology, we will gain the confidence to revamp and upgrade our archaic railways. For this, timely achievement is critical. We will gain confidence that 'we can', a confidence which will then echo in other slow moving projects, like industrial corridors. This project can act as a catalyst for us.

In short, the Ahmedabad–Mumbai bullet train will become a permanent symbol of Indo-Japan friendship – a symbol which we will experience, see and feel every day. It could equally become a symbol of 'on-time' India.



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