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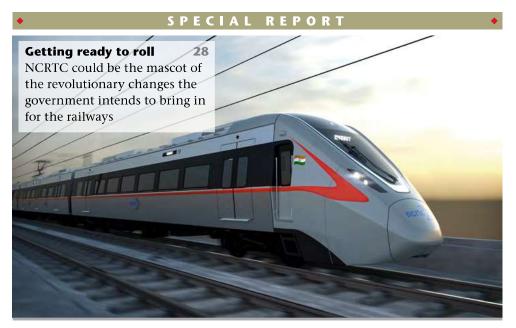
July 26 to August 8, 2021

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Issue No. 1105 for the fortnight July 26-August 8, 2021. Released on July 26, 2021

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Printed and published by Ashok H. Advani for Business India. Printed at Usha Offset Printers (P) Ltd., 125, Govt. Indl. Estates, Kandivili (W), Mumbai.

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Published at Business India, Wadia Building, 17/19 Dalal Street, Mumbai-400 001.

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f you have hurriedly driven past Sarai Kale Khan (an important inter-state bus terminal and also the additional end of Nizamuddin Railway Station) in Delhi recently, you may have missed noticing an adjacent modest-sized patch of barricaded plot with signs of some construction activity. But if you bothered to make a mental note of it, then the signage would have told you that the plot is being used to develop the Delhi-Meerut Regional Rapid Transit System (RRTS stretched across 82 km) which is being spearheaded by the National Capital Region Transport Corporation (NCRTC). Sarai Kale Khan, in fact, is the hub terminal for this service and there is a low buzz in the marketplace about this right now.

Signs of a major infrastructure project in the making are, however, more pronounced, if you drive past the main Ghaziabad Road, starting after the Anand Vihar terminal, which marks the end of Delhi border on the eastern side. Within a 5 km radius around the concluding terminal (Vaishali station) of Delhi Metro in this suburb, you will come across a host of signposts. Opposite Vaishali Metro Station (across the road), there is a marked underground section merging with the elevated track stretching for more than 1 km, with the launcher gantry machine in

action. About 2 km away from this site, there is an expansive 44,000 sq m facility for preparing casting materials for the project. And, as you go a bit further away, you will come across a 16,000 sq m construction site in the heart of Ghaziabad, where one of the important stations of the route is coming up.

On the way, you may also notice signs of the construction of a new track path running close to the Hindon river. Supervisors at these sites will tell you that in terms of manpower availability, the two rounds of Corona in the past year have somewhat affected the pace of the project - a fact that NCRTC's MD Vinay Kumar Singh, the man who is driving the project, does not deny. But, at the same time, he exudes confidence that, the project will see the light of day if there is no serious pandemic-led disturbance in the future. "We are hopeful that we will meet our target of the partial opening in 2023 and make it fully operational by 2025," he asserts. "The project got its final approval in 2019 and, outside of China, nowhere else has a project of this nature and scale been completed in such a short

Observers keeping a close tab on developments in the railways are also excited but for a different reason. "On the national infrastructure building side, I would call it a positive development," says Vinayak Chatterjee, chairman, Feedback Infrastructure Services. "A project of this kind goes much beyond integrating the suburbs of a major metropolitan city; it infuses a fresh, vibrant spirit in what we call sleeping towns even 100 km away. It's a service, which is positioned between regular metro service and mainline railway services."

The background

Market observers will tell you there's a lot riding on this \$4 billion dollar proposition. More than anything else, it will probably be one of the vibrant examples of what the Modi government intends to do vis-à-vis railway modernisation in the country, though bullet trains have attracted the most attention, even as there is no clarity on the possible dateline for their operational debut. "Since 2014, the government has put in a grand vision for railway modernisation on a long-term basis and it operates at three levels a network of bullet trains; expediting the speed of mail express trains to reduce travel duration; and, thirdly, building a robust network of short distance services with improved facilities. NCRTC's RRTS project fits in here," says Vinod Kumar Yadav, former chairman, Railway Board (retired late last year), while adding that the real difference will gradually become visible over the next 15-20 years.

And, going by the indications, the Delhi-Meerut services, in all likelihood, will become the first example of a vastly improved service on track. Similar upgrades have significantly contributed to the structured growth of many mega global cities like Paris, London, Madrid, New York, etc, in recent decades. "The major USP of this kind of project is that they are gamechangers, if undertaken correctly," Chatterjee underlines.

The game-changing project owes its genesis to a study commissioned by the Indian Railways way back in 1998-99, focussing on new services to manage growing traffic in India's leading metros. The study identified the possibility of an RRTS network in a city like Delhi that would provide seamless and easy connectivity using fast commuter trains. The study emphasised on spreading the Delhi Metro network expeditiously keeping in mind the intra-city commuter transportation of about 20-40 km. On the other hand, RRTS was expected to connect multiple cities with a high-speed rail-based transit system that will cover large distances in quickly.

The proposal was further pushed by the Planning Commission in 2005, when it had set up a task force under the chairmanship of Secretary, Ministry of Urban Development (MoUD), to develop a multi-modal transport system for the National Capital Region (NCR). The task force had delivered



Singh: the project will be fully operational by 2025

an Integrated Transport Plan for NCR 2032, which prominently emphasised the need to have a robust Regional Rapid Transit System (RRTS) and had identified eight corridors, while prioritising three - Delhi-Ghaziabad-Meerut, Delhi-Panipat and Delhi-Gurugram-SNB-Alwar – for implementation (see graph: Regional population and length of regional rail). In March 2010, the National Capital Region Planning Board (NCRPB) swung into action, appointing consultants to carry out feasibility study and prepare a Detailed Project Report (DPR). Three years later, the NCRTC came into being, following an approval from the Union Cabinet. And its execution began on 8 March 2019, when the Prime Minister laid the foundation stone of India's

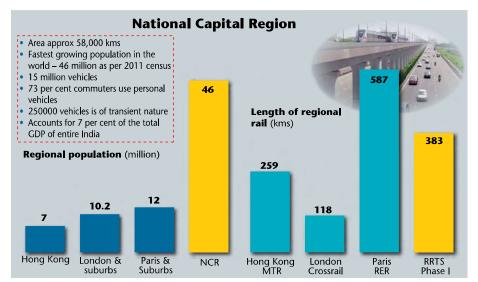
first Regional Rapid Transit System on Delhi-Ghaziabad-Meerut route.

Current status

The project, to be partially unveiled in 2023, is expected to kick-start a highspeed regional network in India's capital and its performance could well be emulated in other metro cities, which also share the growing congestion issue. Once implemented, the NCRTC RRTS Corridor will be India's first highspeed regional transit system, with a design speed of 180 kph. NCRTC is mandated to implement the RRTS project across Delhi NCR and it already unveiled the first look of the first RRTS in September last year. "This project should have been brought in place much earlier, by at least five years. But then it's better late than never. It's an efficient service and it will add to India's drive to modernise its public transportation," says OP Agarwal, CEO, WRI India, and a former Urban Transport Advisor with the World Bank.

As a corporate entity, NCRTC typically smacks of federal co-operation, wherein the government of India has 50 per cent ownership, with the remaining stake being held equally by four state governments – Delhi, UP, Haryana and Rajasthan at 12.5 per cent each. "NCRTC works under the administrative control of the Ministry of Housing & Urban Affairs, government of India," says Singh.

In the inaugural Delhi-Meerut stretch, construction is in full swing in





the priority section, which comprises a 17-km stretch. "The foundation work is almost completed for about a 17-kmlong priority section between Sahibabad and Duhai. Construction of all the five stations of the priority section - Sahibabad, Ghaziabad, Guldhar. Duhai and Duhai Depot is in progress," says Singh. Simultaneously, the maintenance depot at Duhai is also taking shape and civil works on underground and elevated sections in Delhi and Meerut have also gathered pace. According to Singh, NCRTC has constructed more than 800 piers in 82 km of corridor, while piling or foundation work has been completed in more than 32 km. The making of the viaduct is already in progress, with 16 launching gantries, which has also created a stretch of about 7 km of the RRTS Viaduct. Meanwhile, leading multilateral agencies have committed substantial funding support (in the form of long-term loans) for the project. They include ADB (\$1 billion), NDB and AIIB (\$500 million each). The Union government will be pumping in 20 per cent of the remaining projected investment amount, while the Delhi and the UP state governments will be putting in 3.22 per cent and 16.78 per cent of the required investment respectively.

The project now seems to be getting a strong cushion, with the entry of Bombardier (now Alstom India) in the play, as the entity has bagged the contract for rolling stock (a deal worth over ₹2,500 crore). Alstom has already unveiled the prototype design and is now getting ready to kick-start the

production of the first train. According to Alain Spohr, managing director (India & South Asia, Alstom), the scope of work also includes designing, supply, installation, testing and commissioning of signalling & train control, supervision, platform screen doors and telecom systems for the 82.15 km corridor, as well as maintenance services for RRTS train sets.

"In accordance with India's vision of 'Atmanirbhar Bharat' and as per the Make-in-India guidelines, the RRTS trains are 83 per cent localised and are being made in Alstom's manufacturing facility in Savli, Gujarat. The Savli facility will produce the bogies and car bodies and will also undertake final testing of the trains. The propulsion systems and electricals are being manufactured at the company's Maneja site in Gujarat," says Spohr. And he is certain that the production schedule for the beginning of the grand show is well under control. "Unveiling the design of the RRTS trains was done in September 2020. The mock-up train has been completed and manufacturing of the first train set will commence this month. Train deliveries will be done in alignment with the contract requirements," he adds.

Meanwhile, with some visible action in the inaugural RRTS project, those in the know are increasingly curious about the present status of the two projects, which are expected to be larger in terms of coverage area. As per details provided by NCRTC, the second project – Delhi-Gurugram-SNB-Alwar RRTS Corridor – is going to be the longest and most expensive of the three

and will be executed in three stages. In the first stage, a 107-km stretch from Sarai Kale Khan in Delhi to SNB Urban Complex (Shahjahanpur-Neemrana-Behror), just ahead of Bawal (Haryana), will be created, touching various regional nodes like Gurugram, Manesar, Panchgaon, etc. In the second stage, the line would then be extended from SNB to Sotanala, covering a distance of 33.3km, with Shahjahanpur, Neemrana and Behror in between. The final extension of the corridor will be from Sotanala to Alwar.

A detailed project report (DPR) of this corridor has been approved by the NCRTC Board, as well as by the state governments of Haryana, Rajasthan and Delhi. And, now, the DPR is under consideration of the Union government of India for approval. The DPR of the third project - Delhi-Panipat Corridor - has been approved by the NCRTC Board and Haryana state government and it now awaits the green signal of the Delhi state government and the Centre (see graph: Prioritised corridors). "The two Haryana projects will consume over \$9 billion but raising funds will not be an issue, as big agencies are chasing us," says Singh. "We have already kick-started some pre-construction activities for the Sarai Kale Khan-SNB project and are confident of getting these projects up and running within five years of getting the final approval."

Advanced features

The real benefits of the project are expected to be delivered to commuters soon. Despite good road conditions, anybody travelling between Delhi-Meerut using cars or public buses will vouch for the fact that even in offpeak hours, travel time is around 2.5 hours (if you are using your own vehicle) and can go upto three hours (by public transport). But when the full stretch of the inaugural RRTS project gets going, travel time will come down to 55 minutes. "When the SBN (Haryana) line also becomes operational, the commuter starting at Meerut would be able to reach Delhi airport in 70 minutes flat," says Singh. And, this would become possible as Sarai Kale Khan will be the hub terminal for all the three lines in Delhi, where RRTS service to other routes would be readily linked. It would be maintaining an average speed of 100 km/hour (optimum capacity being 180 km/hour) which would make it three times faster than the Delhi Metro, which usually covers 30 km in an hour.

The RRTS service is a clear response to that dreaded anticipation of Delhi becoming the most populated city in the world, toppling Tokyo from the numero uno position on this parameter in the next 5-10 years. RRTS is billed as a panacea to effectively deal with the rising level of population, (a substantial chunk of which is contributed by vehicular traffic, 41 per cent of which comes from outside Delhi, as per a survey) and the growing congestion on the national capital roads. "The city is increasingly becoming unmanageable and, here, RRTS, with its highspeed attributes, can help people from nearby states to opt for commuting daily rather than deciding to stay in the national capital," Singh points out.

Another senior official of the corporation underlines successful global examples wherein RRTS have significantly contributed to the structured growth of some noted mega cities. "Take the example of Paris or Madrid. They have a core circumference running into several kilometres, where they do not allow any serious fresh development. So, the new development is happening outside this zone, which is easily accessible for commuters on both sides. And that is how they have population vehicular congestion in a limited area." And this is a point which most of observers support.



"If somebody has to open a 100-seat office, why would he opt for a high-priced rental in the heart of Delhi or even its happening suburbs like Noida or Ghaziabad? asks Vinayak Chatterjee. "He can open it in the vicinity of a station on this route, at a fraction of the cost, and it would work well for him, as the global examples show."

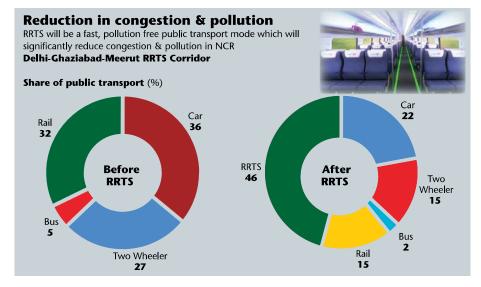
A major transit point

Easy connectivity with other modes of transportation at strategically important locations is a major highlight of the project. For instance, its upcoming Ghaziabad station is 100-200 metres away from the Shaheed Sthal Station (the last junction of Rohini West Delhi). So, anybody travelling from Meerut and planning to visit North or West Delhi can readily hop on to the Delhi Metro Red Line here. Similarly, the Anand Vihar terminal will be

a major transit point, connected with regular train, metro services and interstate bus services.

"All RRTS stations and trains are being designed keeping in mind the concepts of 'universal accessibility' and 'multi-modal integration (MMI)'; therefore, fashioning RRTS corridors according to the convenience & comfort of the passengers and integrating them with various modes of transport like airports, Indian railway stations, inter-state & intra-state bus terminus, metro stations, expressways and highways, wherever possible, will facilitate seamless movement of commuters from one mode to another, encouraging people to use public transport," Singh explains. The other critical promise of RRTS pertains to making a significant contribution in checking the rising pollution levels in the city. As per the Functional Transport Plan, 2032, more than 1 million (about 1,107,043) vehicles cross Delhi's borders every day (based on 2007 data). About one-fourth of vehicular traffic is of a transient nature, such as NCR to NCR via Delhi. RRTS will relieve the roads by significant vehicular traffic travelling within NCR, which does not have an origin or destination within Delhi. Once operational, RRTS is expected to act as a transportation backbone for the entire NCR region and will reduce Co2 emissions by 250,000 tonnes every year (see graph: Reduction in congestion & pollution).

In terms of technological architecture, the project is promising to deploy many new components or constituents for the first time in the country.



According to Yadav, former chairman, Railway Board, the fastest train running in India today is Gatimaan Express (between Delhi and Agra) at an optimum speed of 160 km. And, in many other stretches of leading express trains, the railways have enhanced the speed to bring down travel time. "But, even in those stretches, we can't go beyond the 160 km/hour limit, because this is the optimal speed limit which the existing embankment can support. But RRTS is putting in place new a embankment, which will support 180km/hour speed," he says.

"RRTS is a complex first-of-its-kind project being implemented in the country. In this light, adoption of world-class technological systems and processes to achieve much needed efficiency becomes critical," explains Ritu Singh, AGM (IT), NCRTC. For instance, NCRTC has opted for the ballast-less track to achieve the design speed of 180 km/hr of RRTS for the first time in India. The high-performance ballast-less tracks will require low maintenance and thus reduce lifecycle costs. RRTS trains will also have push buttons for the selective opening of doors on a need basis. This would eliminate the requirement of opening all doors at every station, thus leading to energy saving.

RRTS trains will also have business class (one coach per train) with spacious, cushioned, comfortable and reclining seats inside of the train, and for Business class passengers, a unique lounge will be available at the platform level. NCRTC is adopting a state-of-theart automatic fare collection (AFC) system that will make a big difference in commuters travel in the modern transit system. AFC will offer QR Code based ticketing (Digital QR & Paper QR) and EMV (Europay, Mastercard, Visa) Open Loop contactless card based on NCMC (National Common Mobility Card) standards. Thus, RRTS commuters will be able to use any NCMC card issued by any Metro or Transport Authority or financial institution in the country. The system, therefore, will be fully 'open loop' from the first day of operations. This will ensure a contactless entry-exit that will be seamless, easy, comfortable, and quick.

The corporation has also adopted a clutch of high-end technological platforms for project execution and



Alstom has already unveiled the prototype design

its management at a later stage. "The approach of utilising state-of-the-art IT tools like BIM, SPEED (a project monitoring tool developed by NCRTC), Common Data Environment, & GATI (a GPS based attendance app developed by NCRTC) are helping us tide over several challenges posed during various phases of the project," Ritu Singh claims.

The system, meanwhile, will also be equipped with European Train Control System Level 2 (ETCS L2). As per details provided by the technical team of NCRTC, the implementation of the modern European Train Control System Level 2 (ETCS L2) signalling is expected to make RRTS one of the most advanced signalling and train control systems in the world. This system will also be the world's first to deploy the combination of the latest ETCS Standard, the latest Digital Interlocking and Automatic Train Operation (ATO) over Long-Term Evolution (LTE) radio. "The ETCS

Prioritised corridors in Phase-1

- Out of 8 identified corridors, 3 are prioritised in Phase 1.
- The Delhi-Ghaziabad-Meerut corridor is the first RRTS project being implemented in India and will be closely followed by Delhi-Gurugram-SNB-Alwar and Delhi-Panipat corridors.

Prioritised corridors in Phase - I (383 km)
Delhi - Ghaziabad - Meerut
82 km
Delhi - Gurugram - SNB Alwar
198 km
Delhi - Panipat
103 km

signalling system will not only facilitate interoperability but will also ensure train movement at quick frequencies, thus reducing the waiting time for passengers. It optimises line capacity in complete safety by anticipating and adapting the speed of the trains through continuous train control and supervision via a radio-based signalling system," adds Alstom's Spohr.

Meanwhile, as NCRTC officials claim, in their pursuit to create India's response to Crossrail in London, RER in Paris, and Cercanias in Spain, the corporation is engaging leading players to assist in different legs of this mega project. These include: L&T, AFCONS, KEC and APCO on the civil construction side, IRCON for traction, etc. The corporation has also forged a strategic partnership with global rail construction and management majors KRNA of Korea and Adif of Spain. "Whether it is the technology front, financing or solving another multi-modal integration kind of issue, we have learned a lot on this co-operation. Within the country also, there are agencies who have worked in MRTS projects, such as Mass Rapid Transit Projects, and they are also supporting us in this effort," MD Singh recently told a group of investors.

Challenges ahead

"When this project was initially conceived, even within government circles there was a feeling that it won't work as meeting financial closure would be a big issue. But it has not only gone past those critical preliminary stages but the construction action is maintaining a steady pace despite Covid troubles and this is admirable," says Vinod Asthana, a former Indian Railways Traffic Services official, who has served as director with IRCTC was MD of Central Railside Warehousing Co. "But there could be many issues going ahead," he underlines.

In a country where inordinate delays in mega infrastructure projects have traditionally been the norm rather than the exception, the 'so far, so good' performance put up by NCRTC is undoubtedly receiving kudos from most quarters. But, as Singh (a quintessential railway man who had previously served as CEO of High Speed Rail Corporation), says, challenges are inherent, considering the presence of

multiple stakeholders. "Being owned by multiple state governments and Central agencies, NCRTC has to face a lot of complexities and challenges in terms of on-time approvals, preplanned clearances and accountability to various stakeholders involved in the decision-making process. A new official in a critical nodal agency at the state level can demand a fresh explanation on a decision and you have to convince him. But so far, our team has managed well," says he. However, Singh confirms that, while land acquisition has also been an issue with the corporation, the participating states which were not looking so enthusiastic initially, are increasingly providing more support.

For maintaining a good pace in the Delhi-Meerut project, the state government is also being credited with expediting the process of land acquisition at strategic points like Duhai, where a major depot is also coming up. Late last year, UP Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath had publicly expressed his intention of extending the line to Muzaffarnagar and a formal note has been submitted to the NCRTC, which will initiate a feasibility study.

And, now, to the most critical issue from the commuter's point of view for a superior service of this nature, what could be the possible cost structure? Can it be something that could strike the right balance between getting good returns, without pinching the targeted commuters? Singh does not say much, while maintaining that it will be comparable to Delhi Metro fares. The corporation in its original DPR had conveyed an average cost structure of about ₹2 per km for the commuter and a ridership of 800,000 per day after its complete operations begin. "There is always a difference in the cost structure mentioned in the DPR and what is charged when operations begin. I think the cost structure for a service like this should be such that it could draw a sizeable chunk of even two-wheeler operators, if they are driving on the route. For those who are travelling in regular buses between Delhi-Meerut, paying ₹40-50 and spending three hours one way, because of affordability reasons, this would not be the service," maintains O.P. Agarwal, who adds that the high



NCRTC has constructed more than 800 piers in 82 km of corridor

ridership figure will not happen readily. "It's the usual norm for new railway services anywhere in the world. The projected ridership numbers are always on the higher side. Delhi Metro had projected touching three million daily riders many years earlier, but it happened only recently."

Economic activities

Agarwal also makes a strong pitch for making an integrated plan to give a serious rejig to economic activity along the corridor instead of a few patches. "A capital-intensive initiative like this just can't be a paragon of civil engineering. You need to hand over the additional job of creating fresh economic activities along the stretch to a nodal agency. In this case, the NCR Planning Board can probably be entrusted with this responsibility," he advises. Adds Madhusudan Prasad, former secretary, Urban Development Ministry: "There is enormous scope to create residential, business and leisure zones along the stretch. I think, state governments involved in these projects will put more emphasis on this aspect once the corridor is ready. They may increase the FAR (floor area ratio) to incentivize and support fresh economic activities in those pockets," he points out.

Analysts monitoring the project are expecting the first three services to get into the up and running mode in the next eight to ten years in the best case scenario. And considering the good start, more action in the coming months is expected. After having

awarded the contract for rolling stock, NCRTC management now it scouting for partner to operate and maintain the project for which it has already floated RFQ. "It is as per the metro rail policy of 2016, which has allowed O&M to be handed over to the private parties. We want to join hands with private players who will not only bring efficiency but also economies of scale. Our doors will be open for everybody including MNCs," says Vinay Singh. The contract expected to be closed in the next few months would be awarded on gross cost basis.

Meanwhile, with the projects' construction canvass becoming bigger, some interesting theories have begun doing the rounds in the marketplace which presents the rationale behind the implementation pace of this project. "For the Narendra Modi led government, the most attractive piece of the pronounced railways modernisation drive has been the bullet trains. But we know the difficulties it is facing and, despite the recent signs of some serious momentum building on the Ahmedabad side, it is unlikely to be completed before the next general elections in 2024. But, with RRTS partially in place, this could well become the mascot of revolutionary changes they intend to bring in railways," says the top executive of a leading infrastructure consultant firm. With such theories beginning to build up, the project may well loose its low buzz attribute soon.

RITWIK SINHA