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EDITORIAL ANALYSIS

Vande Bharat and India's Railways — Speed as Spectacle vs. Connectivity as Right

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INTERVIEW ANGLE

"When India allocates its highest-ever railway budget (Rs 2.55 lakh crore) but punctuality remains at 60%, is the Vande Bharat investment strategy a genuine modernisation or a spectacle? What does an equitable railway investment framework look like?"

WHY IN NEWS

India's first Vande Bharat Sleeper train was flagged off from Malda Town (West Bengal) by PM Modi on January 17, 2026. The Rs 2,300–3,600 per journey fares for the Howrah–Guwahati route stand in sharp contrast to ordinary sleeper class fares of Rs 400–600 — renewing a debate about whether Indian Railways' modernisation strategy is addressing the needs of its 22 million daily passengers.

THE VANDE BHARAT MOMENT

The Vande Bharat Express was genuinely impressive when it launched in February 2019 — India had designed and manufactured a world-class semi-high-speed train in 18 months entirely through its own engineering ecosystem (Integral Coach Factory, Chennai). It demonstrated that the "Make in India" aspiration in railway rolling stock was not fantasy.

The Sleeper variant extends this achievement to overnight travel — potentially replacing ageing Rajdhani Express coaches (some over 30 years old) with modern, air-conditioned berth travel. Reducing the Howrah–Guwahati journey by 2.5 hours is a meaningful improvement for passengers who currently endure 17+ hour journeys.

The question is not whether Vande Bharat is technically impressive. It is. The question is: for whom is Indian Railways building, and is the current investment composition aligned with that answer?

THE NUMBERS THAT MATTER

Who travels on Indian Railways:

Indian Railways carries approximately **22 million passengers per day** — making it the world's 4th largest railway network by traffic

Of those, approximately **90%** travel in **Sleeper Class (SL) or lower** (General/Unreserved, 2nd Class) — the unair-conditioned mass transit segment

The remaining ~10% travel in air-conditioned classes (3AC, 2AC, 1AC, Chair Car Executive)

The **Vande Bharat platform serves the 10%** — the aspirational and business traveller segment

The **90% depend on** trains that are often over 30 years old, without adequate toilets, with severe over-crowding, and subject to systemic delays

The punctuality problem:

Indian Railways' **overall punctuality** (trains arriving within 15 minutes of schedule) is approximately **60–65%** — meaning 1 in 3 trains arrives significantly delayed

The **Rajdhani and Shatabdi** premium trains have higher punctuality (~85–90%) because they get priority on tracks

Regular mail and express trains — the lifeline of the 90% — have consistently lower punctuality

Adding more premium Vande Bharat trains on limited dedicated rail infrastructure may **further crowd out** time slots for slower regular trains

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WHAT THE RS 2.55 LAKH CRORE BUDGET SHOULD PRIORITISE

India's Union Budget 2024–25 allocated **Rs 2.55 lakh crore** to Indian Railways — the highest ever allocation. This is substantial capital. The question is composition, not quantum.

High-priority items for the 90%:

Kavach (ATP) deployment: The Automatic Train Protection system (Kavach) can prevent head-on collisions and SPAD (Signal Passed at Danger) accidents — which still cause fatalities. As of 2025, only ~2,200 km of India's 68,000 km network is Kavach-enabled. Full deployment should be the highest safety priority

Suburban rail expansion: Mumbai, Delhi, Chennai, Kolkata, Hyderabad, and Bengaluru have chronically inadequate suburban rail capacity. Millions of urban commuters are forced to use roads because suburban rail cannot absorb demand

Station sanitation and basic amenities: Indian railway stations — particularly category D, E, and F stations serving rural India — lack functional toilets, waiting shelters, and drinking water. Capital investment in these has far higher welfare impact than premium lounge facilities at major stations

Track maintenance and upgradation: At least 12,000 km of track needs urgent upgradation to permit higher speeds and reduce derailment risk — not necessarily for high-speed, but for basic safety at existing operating speeds

The case for Vande Bharat investment:

Technology must be developed before it can be deployed — the Vande Bharat platform will eventually migrate to more affordable variants (Amrit Bharat Express uses the same supply chain)

Northeast connectivity via premium trains is a strategic investment; these regions have historically received under-investment

Tourism stimulus from well-marketed premium trains generates economic returns

THE AMRIT BHARAT COMPARISON

An important nuance: **Amrit Bharat Express** — launched alongside Vande Bharat trains in the same flag-off events — is designed specifically for the **2nd class and Sleeper class** mass-market. Amrit Bharat trains have push-pull configuration, higher speed than ordinary express trains, but non-AC sleeper accommodation.

Amrit Bharat Express at Rs 500–800 fares serves the 90%. Vande Bharat Sleeper at Rs 2,300–3,600 serves the aspirational middle class. Both exist in the same political event — PM Modi flags both simultaneously — but the publicity spotlight falls overwhelmingly on Vande Bharat.

This is partly a communications choice: Vande Bharat generates more political and media resonance. But policy should not mistake communication priorities for investment priorities.

THE STRUCTURAL CHALLENGE — TRACK CAPACITY

Both Vande Bharat and Amrit Bharat trains run on the **same track network** — there is no dedicated high-speed infrastructure in India (unlike Japan's Shinkansen or China's HSR network). A Vande Bharat train running at 130–160 km/h requires **time slot priority** on tracks — which comes at the expense of slower trains.

India is building the **Mumbai–Ahmedabad High-Speed Rail (MAHSR)** using Japanese Shinkansen technology — but it will not be operational until at least 2026–2028, and serves a single corridor. Until dedicated high-speed tracks exist at scale, adding high-speed premium trains necessarily creates tension with mass-transit operations on shared tracks.

UPSC RELEVANCE

Prelims: Vande Bharat Express (first launch Feb 15, 2019; ICF Chennai); Amrit Bharat Express (push-pull; mass-market); Kavach/ATP (automatic train protection; RDSO certification; SIL-4); Mumbai-Ahmedabad HSR (MAHSR; NHSRCL; Shinkansen technology); Indian Railways punctuality; NFR (Northeast Frontier Railway zone; HQ Guwahati).

Mains GS-3: Indian Railways investment strategy — premium vs. mass transit trade-off | Railway safety infrastructure: Kavach deployment and accident prevention | Infrastructure equity: rural vs. urban, mass vs. aspirational | Northeast connectivity as security investment.

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VANDE BHARAT PLATFORM:

Vande Bharat Express (Chair Car): launched Feb 15, 2019; New Delhi–Varanasi; ICF Chennai

Vande Bharat Sleeper: first run January 17, 2026; Howrah–Guwahati; fares Rs 2,300–3,600

Vande Metro: under development for suburban service

Amrit Bharat Express: push-pull; non-AC sleeper; mass market; Rs 500–800 range

INDIAN RAILWAYS — SCALE:

Network: ~68,000 route km (4th largest in world)

Daily passengers: ~22 million

Zones: 18 (including Metro Railway Kolkata)

Employees: ~14 lakh (one of world's largest employers)

Budget allocation 2024–25: Rs 2.55 lakh crore (highest ever)

KAVACH (ATP):

Full name: Automatic Train Protection system

Technology: RFID + UHF radio; SIL-4 (highest safety integrity level)

Functions: prevents SPAD (Signal Passed at Danger), head-on collision, overspeeding

Coverage (2025): ~2,200 km of 68,000 km network (only 3.2%)

Developer: RDSO (Research Designs and Standards Organisation, Lucknow) + TEXMACO, Medha, Kernex

MUMBAI–AHMEDABAD HSR (MAHSR):

Technology: Japanese Shinkansen (E5 series); collaboration with JICA

Implementing agency: NHSRCL (National High Speed Rail Corporation Limited)

Length: 508 km; 12 stations

Expected operational date: 2026–2028 (partial); 2027+ (full)

OTHER RELEVANT FACTS:

ICF (Integral Coach Factory): Chennai; established 1952; manufactures ~4,000 coaches/year

LHB coaches: Linke Hofmann Busch design; 2000 onwards; anti-climbing feature prevents derailment pileup

NEP railways: Northeast India has 6,000+ km route; highest strategic density in any region

Sources: Indian Railways, PIB, The Hindu, NHSRCL

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