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Vande Bharat Sleeper — India's First Overnight Semi-High-Speed Train and the Railways Modernisation Story

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CURATED & WRITTEN BY

Bharat Choudhary

UPSC Educator & Content Creator •

[linkedin.com/in/epicbharat](https://www.linkedin.com/in/epicbharat)

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WHY IN NEWS

PM Modi flagged off India's first Vande Bharat Sleeper train from Malda Town Railway Station, West Bengal on January 17, 2026, on the Howrah–Guwahati (Kamakhya) route. The train reduces travel time by approximately 2.5 hours and offers airline-like air-conditioned overnight travel — marking a significant milestone in Indian Railways' modernisation from the legacy LHB coach platform to the indigenously designed Vande Bharat platform.

WHAT IS THE VANDE BHARAT SLEEPER?

The **Vande Bharat Sleeper** is an air-conditioned, overnight sleeper version of India's flagship semi-high-speed train platform. Unlike the Vande Bharat Express (Chair Car version, launched 2019), which serves day-time inter-city routes, the Sleeper variant is designed for overnight journeys of 8–15 hours — directly competing with the ageing Rajdhani and Duronto Express services.

Key specifications and features:

Fully air-conditioned overnight train with berths (sleeping accommodation)

Fares: **Rs 2,300 (3AC), Rs 3,000 (2AC), Rs 3,600 (1AC)** — premium over regular sleeper class (Rs 400–600) but comparable to Rajdhani Express

Journey: Howrah (Kolkata) → Guwahati (Kamakhya), connecting **10 major cities**

Travel time reduction: approximately **2.5 hours** vs conventional sleeper trains on the same route

Semi-high-speed platform: designed for 160 km/h operating speed (actual speed depends on track quality)

Manufactured at **Integral Coach Factory (ICF), Chennai** — India's largest railway coach factory

Route significance: The Howrah–Guwahati corridor is one of the most heavily travelled Northeast India routes, connecting West Bengal with Assam. Kamakhya station (Guwahati) is India's gateway to the **Kamakhya Temple** — one of the 51 Shakti Peethas — making the train particularly significant for religious tourism, which the Ministry of Railways has been actively promoting.

EVOLUTION OF THE VANDE BHARAT PLATFORM

The Vande Bharat platform represents the most significant shift in Indian Railways rolling stock design since Independence.

Railway coach history in India:

Platform	Launch	Max Speed	AC Availability	Status
ICF Coaches (Integral Coach Factory design)	1955	110 km/h	Partial	Being phased out
LHB Coaches (Linke Hofmann Busch, German design)	2000	160 km/h	Full	Current standard
Vande Bharat (indigenously designed)	2019	160–180 km/h	Full	Expanding fleet

The Vande Bharat Express (Chair Car) story:

Launched: February 15, 2019 (New Delhi–Varanasi route)

Designed and manufactured in India in 18 months under the **Make in India** initiative

First train in India with **automatic doors, bio-vacuum toilets, onboard WiFi, GPS-based passenger information system, diffused lighting** and ergonomic seating

Uses **distributed traction** (motors under each coach) rather than locomotive-hauled design — provides better acceleration and eliminates the need to change direction at terminals

The Sleeper variant additions: The Sleeper version adds overnight-compatible features including sleeping berths, privacy curtains, charging points at each berth, improved storage space, and enhanced insulation for quieter travel at speed.

NORTHEAST CONNECTIVITY — STRATEGIC DIMENSION

PM Modi's January 17 visit to West Bengal was specifically designed to accelerate Northeast India connectivity — a strategic priority for both security and development:

Infrastructure announced alongside the Vande Bharat Sleeper flagging-off:

Rs 3,250 crore in rail and road projects dedicated in West Bengal

Amrit Bharat Express trains flagged off to Nagercoil, Tiruchirappalli, Bengaluru, and Mumbai from North Bengal stations — connecting the region with South and West India

Foundation stones laid: Balurghat–Hili new rail line; Siliguri Loco Shed upgradation; Vande Bharat maintenance facility at Jalpaiguri; next-generation freight maintenance at New Jalpaiguri (NJP)

Northeast rail connectivity context:

The **Northeast Frontier Railway (NFR)** zone covers 7 states — Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Manipur, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura, and part of West Bengal

Railway connectivity in the Northeast is considered a **national security imperative** — reduces dependence on road transport which is vulnerable to blockades

The **Jiribam–Imphal rail link** (under construction) will be India’s longest railway bridge

The Union Budget 2024–25 allocated Rs 2.55 lakh crore to Indian Railways (highest ever) — with Northeast connectivity as an explicit priority

THE RAILWAY MODERNISATION DEBATE — SPEED VS. EQUITY

The Vande Bharat programme has attracted both admiration and critique in policy circles.

The case for Vande Bharat investment:

Technology demonstration: Proves India can design and manufacture world-class rolling stock indigenously — reducing import dependence for railway equipment

Passenger experience: Addresses the persistent complaint that Indian Railways offers poor service quality on intercity routes, particularly for business and middle-class travellers who have shifted to air travel

Tourism stimulus: Premium train connectivity to religious and heritage destinations drives tourism revenue

Manufacturing ecosystem: ICF Chennai’s Vande Bharat production has created domestic supply chains for train components

The counter-argument (equity dimension):

Vande Bharat Sleeper at Rs 2,300–3,600 is **5–8 times more expensive** than ordinary sleeper class fares (Rs 400–600)

90%+ of Indian Railways passengers travel in sleeper class or lower — the segment that most needs better connectivity and safety infrastructure

Every rupee spent on premium Vande Bharat maintenance facilities is a rupee not spent on upgrading suburban rail or level crossings (which account for 40%+ of railway fatalities)

India’s **passenger train punctuality** remains around 60–65% — fundamental operational performance, not rolling stock aesthetics, is what most passengers need improved

UPSC RELEVANCE

Prelims: Vande Bharat Express — first launch (February 15, 2019; New Delhi–Varanasi); first Sleeper launch (January 17, 2026; Howrah–Guwahati); ICF (Integral Coach Factory; Chennai); LHB coaches (Linke Hofmann Busch; German design; from 2000); Northeast Frontier Railway (NFR); Kamakhya Temple (51 Shakti Peethas; Guwahati); NJP = New Jalpaiguri.

Mains GS-3: Indian Railways modernisation: technology, investment, and equity challenges | Infrastructure investment in Northeast India: strategic and developmental dimensions | Make in India in defence and infrastructure — Vande Bharat as a case study | Railway safety and connectivity trade-offs in capital allocation.

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VANDE BHARAT SLEEPER — CORE DATA:

First Vande Bharat Sleeper flagged off: January 17, 2026; Malda Town station, West Bengal

Flagged off by: PM Narendra Modi

Route: Howrah (Kolkata) → Guwahati (Kamakhya); 10 cities on route

Journey time saving: ~2.5 hours vs conventional sleeper trains

Fares: Rs 2,300 (3AC) / Rs 3,000 (2AC) / Rs 3,600 (1AC)

Manufacturer: Integral Coach Factory (ICF), Chennai

Max design speed: 160 km/h (Sleeper variant)

VANDE BHARAT EXPRESS (CHAIR CAR) — REFERENCE DATA:

First launch: February 15, 2019; New Delhi–Varanasi route

Design and manufacture: 18 months, entirely in India; ICF Chennai

Features: distributed traction, automatic doors, bio-vacuum toilets, onboard WiFi, GPS PIS

Current fleet: 100+ Vande Bharat trains operational across India (as of 2025)

RAILWAY COACH PLATFORMS:

ICF coaches: 1955–present (being phased out); 110 km/h; design from Swiss firm

LHB coaches: 2000–present; 160 km/h; German design (Linke Hofmann Busch)

Vande Bharat: 2019–present; 160–180 km/h; indigenous design

NORTHEAST FRONTIER RAILWAY (NFR):

Zone HQ: Maligaon, Guwahati, Assam

Coverage: Assam + 6 sister states + part of North Bengal

Key challenge: mountainous terrain, flood-prone areas, strategic border proximity

Jiribam–Imphal rail link (under construction): will have India's longest railway bridge

OTHER RELEVANT FACTS:

Kamakhya Temple (Guwahati): one of 51 Shakti Peethas; major pilgrimage site; dedicated to goddess Kamakhya (form of Shakti)

Rajdhani Express: India's premier overnight air-conditioned train; launched 1969 (New Delhi–Howrah)

Make in India — Railways: 100% FDI permitted in railway infrastructure (under automatic route)

Indian Railways budget 2024–25: Rs 2.55 lakh crore (highest ever)

Indian Railways network: 68,000 km track; 7,500+ stations; 22 million passengers/day

Sources: PIB, ZeeBiz, The Hindu, Indian Railways

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