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Beyond Metro — Why RRTS Is the Missing Tier of India's Urban Transport

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Beyond Metro — Why RRTS Is the Missing Tier of India's Urban Transport

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INTERVIEW ANGLE

"India has invested over Rs 5 lakh crore in Metro Rail across 20+ cities. The RRTS model requires a different institutional and funding architecture. What does the RRTS experience tell us about the gaps in India's urban governance framework, and how should inter-city mobility be planned for the next 25 years?"

The completion of the Delhi-Meerut Namo Bharat RRTS corridor is not merely an infrastructure milestone — it is a proof-of-concept that India can design and operate regional rapid transit at speeds that genuinely compete with private cars for intercity journeys within metropolitan agglomerations.

But the more important question is: what comes next? And why has it taken India this long to get here?

THE CONCEPTUAL GAP — WHY METRO ALONE WAS NEVER ENOUGH

India fell in love with Metro Rail in the early 2000s. The **Delhi Metro's Phase I** (2002-2006) transformed urban transport discourse — it was clean, punctual, and genuinely reduced road congestion in dense corridors. Cities across India queued up for their own Metro systems: Bangalore, Hyderabad, Mumbai, Chennai, Kolkata, Pune, Jaipur, Ahmedabad.

But a critical error crept in: Metro Rail, designed for dense intra-city corridors with station spacing of less than a kilometre, was being asked to solve a problem it was not designed for — **regional commuting across 40-80 km distances**.

The result was predictable: Metro systems that run fast within their limited urban cores, but fail to attract the car-using commuter who travels from Gurgaon to Central Delhi or from Thane to South Mumbai. These journeys require a different product — fewer stops, higher speeds, greater comfort for longer sitting times.

The **missing tier** in India's urban transport hierarchy was precisely what RRTS addresses: fast regional rail between a major city and its satellite towns at 100-160 km/h, with comfortable seating rather than standing-room-only Metro rolling stock.

WHAT NCR'S EXPERIENCE TEACHES ABOUT GOVERNANCE

The RRTS took roughly **15 years from concept to first operational section** (2023). This is not unusual by global standards — France's RER took decades; Japan's Shinkansen network evolved over 60 years. But it reveals structural challenges in India's infrastructure governance.

Challenge 1: Multi-state, multi-authority coordination. RRTS corridors cross state boundaries — Delhi-Meerut crosses Delhi and UP; Delhi-Gurugram-SNB crosses Delhi, Haryana, and Rajasthan. Creating NCRTC as a **joint venture with equity from all affected states** was the institutional solution. But equity contributions require multi-year budget commitments from state governments whose fiscal calendars and political incentives differ. Delays in state equity disbursement slowed the project repeatedly.

Challenge 2: Land acquisition across jurisdictions. Acquiring continuous right-of-way across multiple districts in different states, with different land laws and collector-level bureaucracies, compounds the standard land acquisition challenge. The RRTS route through UP encountered significant delays in land notification under the RFCTLARR Act.

Challenge 3: Funding model complexity. The multilateral loan model (ADB, AIIB, NDB contributing ~40% of project cost) introduces conditionalities, procurement rules, and reporting requirements that slow execution. Domestic bonds or sovereign borrowing might execute faster, albeit at higher cost.

THE PREMIUM CLASS QUESTION

Namo Bharat's **Business Class** coaches — with reclining seats, at-seat charging, and Wi-Fi — are a deliberate policy choice to attract car-using middle-class commuters who would otherwise never take public transport for long-distance daily commuting.

This is sound thinking. The environmental and congestion externalities of a daily car commuter on the Delhi-Meerut Expressway are enormous. Every premium-paying RRTS passenger who leaves their car at home is a justified subsidy from the broader public. The marginal cost of adding premium seating is modest; the behavioural shift it enables is significant.

Critics who argue that public transport should be austere and uniform are applying the wrong lens. The goal is **ridership maximisation across income segments**, not ideological uniformity. Singapore's MRT and London's Elizabeth Line both have differentiated offerings.

WHAT INDIA SHOULD BUILD NEXT

The NCR RRTS Master Plan envisions **8 corridors** — but only 3 are in active development. The other 5 remain in DPR or concept stages. This pace is inadequate given the urbanisation pressures India faces.

More importantly, the RRTS model needs to be **replicated beyond NCR**: Mumbai-Pune, Bengaluru-Mysuru, Chennai-Vellore, Hyderabad-Warangal are all corridors where 160 km/h regional rail would dramatically change commuting patterns, reduce highway congestion, and support secondary city economic development.

The institutional model — a **special purpose vehicle with central + state equity** — worked for NCR. It can be templated. What is needed is the political will to create these vehicles for other metro regions, backed by central capital and multilateral financing.

The Namo Bharat RRTS is India's first — it should not remain a one-of-a-kind experiment.

UPSC RELEVANCE

RRTS vs. Metro, NCRTC (JV structure), Namo Bharat, multilateral funders (ADB, AIIB, NDB), NCR planning, PM Gati Shakti.

MAINS GS-2:

Urban governance; Centre-State institutional models; metropolitan area planning.

GS-3:

Urban infrastructure investment; sustainable transport; reducing transport sector emissions.

INTERVIEW:

"Metro Rail investment has transformed urban India but also created fiscal stress on states. How should India balance Metro expansion with RRTS development for regional connectivity?"

📌 FACTS CORNER — KNOWLEDGEPEDIA

DELHI-MEERUT RRTS (NAMO BHARAT):

Length: **82 km** | Stations: **25** | Speed: **160 km/h operational**

Operator: **NCRTC** (JV: Central Govt 50% + Delhi/UP/Haryana/Rajasthan 50%)

Rolling stock: **Alstom** (Savli, Gujarat) — Make in India

Funding: ADB + AIIB + NDB + GoI + State govts; total cost ~₹30,274 crore

Classes: Standard + **Premium (Business Class)**

RRTS NCR MASTER PLAN:

Total planned corridors: **8**

Under construction/operation: **3** (Delhi-Meerut, Delhi-Gurugram-SNB, Delhi-Panipat)

Remaining: **5** (Delhi-Alwar, Delhi-Faridabad, Delhi-Hapur, others)

KEY INSTITUTIONAL POINTS:

RFCTLARR Act 2013: Governs land acquisition (Right to Fair Compensation and Transparency in Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation and Resettlement)

PM Gati Shakti: Multi-modal infrastructure connectivity plan (2021)

NCR Population: ~46 million across 4 states

COMPARISON — METRO VS. RRTS:

India Metro investment: ~Rs 5 lakh crore (20+ cities)

RRTS: Intercity regional; higher speed (160 km/h vs. 60-70 km/h); fewer stops

Sources: The Hindu, NCRTC, PIB

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