Bengaluru suburban railway project: A deliberate slowdown?

To accelerate the pace of the suburban rail project which Bengalureans have been awaiting for close to four decades, the state Chief Minister and Chief Secretary should take charge and stick to the 40-month deadline fixed by the Prime Minister, writes Rasheed Kappan

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Metro extension to Whitefield has been delayed for years | Photo courtesy: Rasheed kappan

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For decades, as Bengaluru roads got hyper-congested by explosive vehicular growth, a dream project remained only on paper: A well-networked four-corridor suburban rail system, which could have dramatically decongested the roads. But an absolute fixation with the costly Namma Metro has sidetracked the rail project for 39 years!

Consider this: An operational suburban rail system could have completely avoided the recent flood-hit traffic mess on Outer Ring Road (ORR) that had an entire IT corridor in dire straits. The proposed 46.24 km Heelalige to Rajanakunte corridor runs almost parallel to the ORR and, if operational, could have offered commuters a ready, viable alternative mobility mode.

A section of the Metro extension to ITPL, Whitefield | Photo courtesy: Rasheed kappan

No urgency

The urgency to get the project started has been clearly missing, despite its apparent head-start over the Namma Metro. Unlike the flashy Metro, the suburban rail is proposed to be built over an existing rail network crisscrossing the city. Meaning: Drastically reduced land acquisition costs.

On June 20 this year, when Prime Minister Narendra Modi laid the foundation stone and announced a 40-month deadline for project completion, Bengalureans heaved a collective sigh of relief. They had the word from the country's most powerful man. And yet, it took another three months to see the Karnataka government make its first move.

It was September 22 when the State Infrastructure and Housing Minister V Somanna informed that a tender valued at Rs 859 crore had been finalised to build a 25-km stretch of the suburban railway system. The preparatory work for the 148-km network has cost the government Rs 120 crores.

Four corridors
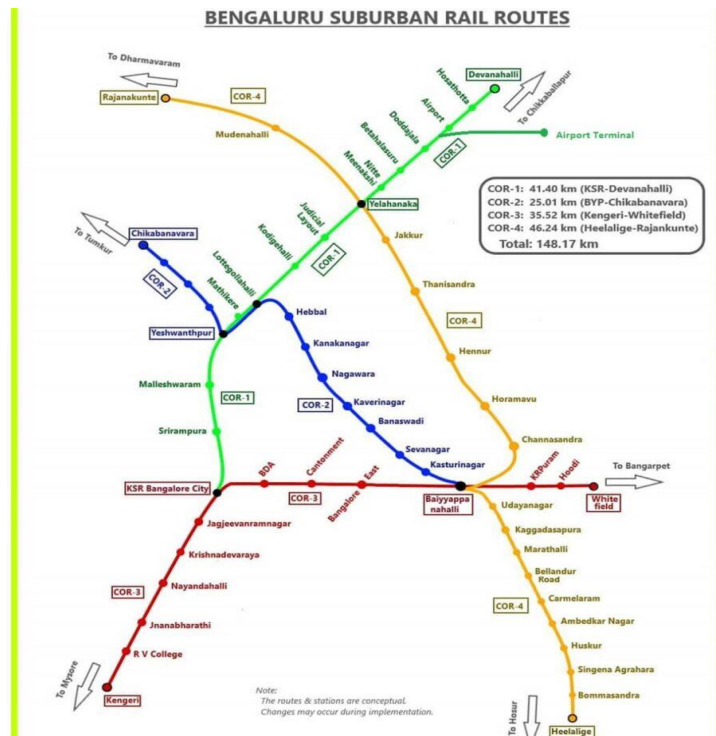
Suburban railway network with its four corridors | Photo courtesy: Rasheed kappan

Spread across 148.17 km, the suburban rail network will feature four corridors: The 41.4 km Corridor-1 will run from KSR Bengaluru City to Devanahalli, with an elevated stretch of 18.98 km with eight stations and an at-grade stretch of 22.42 km with seven stations.

Corridor-2 (25.01 km) will operate between the Baiyappanahalli Terminal and Chikkabanavara. The elevated stretch of 12.9 km will have six stations, and the 12.1 km at-grade stretch, eight stations. A new station at Jalahalli and an interchange station at Lottegollahalli are on the project agenda.

Spanning a total length of 35.52 km, Corridor-3 will run from Kengeri to the IT hub of Whitefield. Currently, the Southwestern Railway has taken up the 17.05 km Bengaluru Cantonment – Whitefield stretch under this corridor for the quadrupling of tracks. Of the nine stations along the corridor, four are elevated.

The last and longest Corridor-4 has a total length of 46.24 km and is proposed to operate between Heelalige and Rajankunte. The elevated stretch of 13.29 km will have four stations, while the longer at-grade stretch is proposed to get 15. Heelalige is barely six km away from Electronic City and could potentially shift a big chunk of the Hosur road traffic to the rail.

A train under skeletal service at the Kempegowda International Airport Halt Station | Photo courtesy: Rasheed kappan

Skeletal network

Even with an existing skeletal network with severe frequency issues, several rail commuters have tried the rail route. They board the long-distance and MEMU trains from the city to alight at Heelalige. To cover the last mile to their offices in Electronic City, they either take a cab or a BMTC bus. But due to the notorious delays in long-distance trains, this travel mode is patchy at best.

Now, what about the Metro lobby's alleged interest in getting the suburban network delayed? To understand this better, seasoned urban rail activists draw attention to Corridor-1 leading to Devanahalli, a branch of which extends all the way to the Kempegowda International Airport (KIA) Terminal. This is far beyond the currently operational Airport Halt Station on the airport's periphery, where passengers alight the train and board shuttle buses to the Terminal.

Suburban vs Airport Metro

Considering the enormous boost to airport connectivity – KIA stands at a distance of about 35 km from the city centre – the Centre had imposed a rider that Corridor-1 with its airport link be taken up on priority by the project implementation agency, the Rail Infrastructure Development Company (Karnataka) Limited (K-RIDE).

But K-RIDE chose to focus first on the Baiyappanahalli – Chikkabanavara line (Corridor-2) and shifted Corridor-1 to the last in its priority list. This triggered an outcry among commuter rail activists and those seeking a robust, reliable, high-frequency train service to the airport. They pointed fingers at the Bangalore Metro Rail Corporation Limited (BMRCL) and other interests for the delay, and dubbed it 'deliberate.'

City residents protest seeking commuter rail | Photo courtesy: Special arrangement

It is seen as a battle for ridership. After years of planning, an Airport Metro link has finally seen some action on the ground. The first pier for this 38.44 km Phase 2B (airport line) is taking shape near Chikkajala. The bulk of the line will pass right through the Outer Ring Road from Central Silk Board to Hebbal, crossing K R Puram en route. An estimated 2.1 lakh daily commuters are expected to take this line.

Ridership, a non-issue?

In a city with a population exceeding 1.4 crores, should ridership be an issue at all? This is the question posed by traffic analysts and mobility experts alike. The more transport options, the better, they contend. Once the first phase of KIA Terminal-2 opens in the last quarter of this year, the airport's passenger-handling capacity will go up by 25 million per annum. This will require multiple commute options to the city, including the suburban rail, Metro, BMTC's Vayu Vajra buses and cabs.

While land acquisition costs are relatively low for the suburban rail link, the Airport Metro line still has issues. The BMRCL August 2022 Newsletter shows that an additional 13,000 sqm of land is yet to be acquired. It is estimated that, realistically, the first passenger will board the airport line only after June 2026. But mobility experts, well versed with the Metro's slow pace of work, feel it could take at least another two years.

This is precisely why they want the Airport suburban line to be the first priority. The planned alignment will run along already existing lines from Heelalige to Baiyappanahalli and thereon along the Channasandra line, crossing Hennur, Yelahanka and Doddajala. Double tracking and electrification have been completed in several stretches of this line.

Quickest access

Airport-bound passengers look for the quickest way to catch their flights. Does the Airport Metro offer that convenience, asks Rajkumar Dugar, a rail activist who has been campaigning for the suburban network for years. "The Airport Metro will run from its starting point, the Central Silk Board, to Hebbal at an average speed of 34 kmph, and from there to the Terminal at about 60 kmph. So, the total runtime from Silk Board to the Terminal will be 90 minutes."

Reaching the airport by road during a 24-hour timeframe could take a minimum of 45 minutes and a maximum of 120 minutes. "If someone is in a hurry, why would they take the Metro? Besides, the Metro line takes a route along the ORR, as an Eastern semicircle, which caters to only about 25% of the city. In the case of suburban rail, the SBC Station will be a hub, quickly shifting and heading straight to the airport," he reasons.

Metro extension to Whitefield has been delayed for years | Photo courtesy: Rasheed kappan

Coordination, not conflict

But why see the suburban and Metro as different systems in conflict and competing for ridership? Why not set up a single public transport corporation, suggests Dr Ashish Verma, a transportation engineering expert at the Indian Institute of Science (IISc) Sustainable Transportation Lab. "This single agency can coordinate all the public transportation needs of the city, from buses to suburban rail to the Metro."

Under a single agency like a Bengaluru Public Transport Corporation (BPTC), multiple commute options could be integrated, schedules and routes synced for maximum convenience. "This is the best way to optimise the resources and services of the BMTC, BMRCL and the suburban rail system. In European cities like Berlin, Zurich and Amsterdam, multiple modes of transport run under a single operator, and they include even tramways, ferries and cable cars," Dr Ashish points out.

Such an integrated mobility system will help complement routes and schedules of multiple commute options. "Common ticketing will then become a cakewalk. You could then have common passenger information systems accessible on Mobile Apps, and displays, trip planners, all integrated."

Since such an integrated approach is not even on the horizon, the BMTC continues to complain that its revenues are falling due to the Metro, and the Metro complains about the suburban rail's potential to take away its ridership. "This is nonsense. In the end, all these are public transport services, and they need to work together."

Conspiracy charges

But the conflict gets complicated when allegations of one service scuttling another crop up. Rajkumar charges that there is a conspiracy to ensure the failure of the suburban service. He cites the new Yeshwantpur to Devanahalli MEMU service launched recently without studying the demand. "It is a 16-car train, starts 40 minutes late, and runs empty. This is done intentionally to drive away commuters," he says.

Low patronage, he points out, could then be cited as an excuse to withdraw the service and let BMRCL get the upper hand. Airport-bound trains that stopped at the KIA Halt Station had faced the same problem. Low frequency and reliability concerns kept the commuters away. The Bangalore International Airport Limited (BIAL) has had its shuttle bus services running from the Halt Station to the Terminal. But that has not really helped boost ridership.

The message is clear: Fast-tracking the suburban rail project and leveraging the already existing network of tracks when the long-distance trains are not chugging could be the way out. Rajkumar draws attention to the density of the existing rail network: "Within a 50-60 km radius from the City Railway Station, Bengaluru currently has about 500 km of running tracks and 70 railway stations."

This, he feels, can be easily leveraged for two hours of suburban service in the morning and evening. "They are not doing this, and instead are introducing trains in a way that it fails."

Done rightly, the train ridership is bound to soar. Hundreds of office-going commuters queue up daily for existing skeletal services that operate between the SBC City Railway Station and Whitefield, one of the two biggest IT hubs in Bengaluru. Over 2,000 daily train commuters are part of WhatsApp and Telegram groups that track the live running status of trains, delays and cancellations. This organic, lively mobility ecosystem by the people could be the springboard for a full-fledged system to forge ahead.

Suhas Narayanamurthy has been a frequent user of this skeletal service for years. He even ran a Facebook page on suburban trains called the Namma City Express. "I would hop onto the train from Hebbal to Heelalige, and even from Carmelaram to Baippanahalli. Shifting to the Metro at Baiyappanahalli, I would head to Majestic. It has worked well for me," he recalls.

Last-mile shuttles

On the train service to Electronic City, he draws attention to the shuttle vehicles operated by some IT companies to and from Heelalige station. "They ferry their employees both in the morning and evening," he says but hastens to add that the last-mile connect is still a problem.

To address the big gaps in the first and last mile from the stations to offices/homes, Suhas had come up with a business model. He elaborates, "I suggested a shared cab service from all stations to their destinations. Regular train travellers could book a cab onboard before they reach the station so that they could just hop on and reach their offices/homes quickly. But then, Covid happened and couldn't pursue it."

Suhas could see the demand and wanted more trains and coaches on certain routes to expand the skeletal services. He approached the South Western Railway (SWR) Divisional Manager but was told that the demand did not translate to passenger numbers.

He knew why the mismatch happened. "Back in 2016, I could see the bogies packed with passengers. But many were not taking tickets or renewing their monthly passes. The Railways estimate demand by the number of tickets sold. Obviously, ticketless travel did not reflect in official ridership."

Viable alternative

Yet, despite these teething issues and punctuality problems, the skeletal service has slowly emerged as an alternative to the highly congested roads. This is particularly evident on the K R Puram to Whitefield stretch, where construction on the Baiyappanahalli – ITPL Metro extension has been extremely slow. "There are 102 trains operating from KSR to Whitefield. Some trains that go to Marikuppam also stop at K R Puram, Hoodi and Whitefield," notes Suhas.

The absence of a Unified Metropolitan Transport Authority (UMTA) to coordinate commuter issues across multiple modes has often been cited as a reason for the festering Metro-suburban conflict. "Since 2009, without a UMTA in place, BMRCL used to override suburban rail meetings to ensure that the two alignments do not overlap," recalls urban mobility analyst Sanjeev Dyamannavar.

Feasibility reports for Metro or suburban rail, prepared by consultants, were always influenced to show Metro as a far better service, he notes. Sanjeev has been actively tracking the progress of both projects for decades. "The State bureaucracy never tried to interact with the Railway Board or Railway Technical officers to find a suburban rail solution," he notes.

One constant solution offered by most mobility experts to navigate the problem is a single agency to plan, convene and coordinate the various transport modes.

Sanjay Sridhar, policy and strategy advisor for the Centre's Urban Movement Innovation Fund, reiterates this: "The governance around mobility is fractured. I feel a Bengaluru Metropolitan Transport Authority (BMTA) should be an overseeing and not an implementing agency. It should track even the last-mile connect modes such as the Ola / Uber cabs, Yulu and Rapido bikes as well."

This, he says, is a case of competing priorities and can never be resolved without an authority such as BMTA. "This authority should be chaired by the Chief Minister himself since he is the minister in-charge of the city. It should also have the Mayor, the Transport Minister and representatives from other agencies on board."

CM should take charge

So, what next? To accelerate the pace of the suburban rail project and stick to the 40-month deadline fixed by the Prime Minister, the State Chief Secretary and Chief Minister should take charge, contends Sanjeev Dyamannavar. "This is the way to go since the project cuts across Bengaluru and involves multiple agencies including the BBMP, BWSSB, BMRCL, NHAI, BESCOM and GAIL."

The Chief Minister and Chief Secretary, he says, should monitor and review the project on a monthly basis and see that all the necessary clearances from different agencies are expedited. "Basically, it is now an administrative issue since everything else is now in place for the work to begin. They should, for instance, ensure that both road and rail traffic diversions required for the project are done without hassles."

Significantly, he insists that the interference from the Metro be stopped. "They should be kept away, and the Chief Minister should give directions on the project. The elected representatives should also keep a watch so that the bureaucracy is constantly on the job," he says, echoing the sentiments of lakhs of Bengalureans awaiting a robust suburban rail system for close to four decades.

Rasheed Kappan is a senior journalist based in Bengaluru with nearly three decades of experience. In the past, he has worked in the Deccan Herald, The Hindu and The Times of India, covering issues related to urban mobility, sustainibility, environment and the interface between policy, planning and activation on the ground. A graphic cartoonist, he is the founder of Kappansky and explores the linkages of art, media and innovation through multiple creative platforms.