

Railways Fueling Development

The Indian Railways' expanding footprint in Jammu & Kashmir marks a transformative chapter in the region's development journey. From strategic connectivity to economic upliftment and national integration, the railway projects in J&K are more than just an engineering marvel - they are instruments of hope, progress, and unity.

The flagship Udhampur-Srinagar-Baramulla Rail Link (USBRL) project is one of the most ambitious and critical infrastructure initiatives in post-independence India.

More importantly, the project symbolizes inclusivity and accessibility. Once completed, it will drastically reduce travel time, improve mobility for students, traders, and tourists, and create employment opportunities through improved logistics and transport infrastructure. The socio-economic impact of this initiative is already visible. Enhanced connectivity has boosted tourism in Kashmir; rejuvenated apple and dry fruit exports through quicker transport routes, and **reduced dependence on road networks** prone to weather disruptions. Additionally, local youth are being absorbed into construction, hospitality, and supply chain sectors due to increased activity around railway projects.

However, challenges persist - including weather-induced delays, difficult terrain, and concerns of ecological sensitivity. While infrastructure development is essential, environmental safeguards must be integrated to ensure sustainability. Regular dialogue with local communities, transparent rehabilitation policies, and skill development programs should accompany these efforts to ensure inclusive growth.

The Modi government's focus on J&K's integration through infrastructure, including railways, reflects a larger narrative of "Viksit Bharat @2047" - where remote and conflict-affected regions are not left behind but are repositioned as engines of growth.

The railways are not just laying tracks - they are laying the foundation for a new Jammu & Kashmir: A future where aspiration meets opportunity, and isolation gives way to integration.

As the sound of engines nears the Valley, it brings with it not just passengers, but the promise of a connected, empowered, and prosperous Jammu & Kashmir:



■ ASHOK MALIK

As Prime Minister Narendra Modi celebrated his 75th birthday, speculation intensified about an alleged "age limit" rule within the BJP and the broader Sangh Parivar. Media and political murmurs pointed to the retirement of veterans such as L.K. Advani and Murli Manohar Joshi. Critics asked why Modi should be treated differently.

These are all good questions. In the choreography of the birthday commemoration, responses were strong and black and white. They were coloured by political perceptions - one way or the other - rather than facts and a reading of political trends. Now that the milestone birthday is behind us, a considered analysis is called for: This would involve studying modern political cultures, internationally and in India, as well as Modi's individual record.

The 1990s saw a marked shift in political communication and symbolism. As the Cold War ended, there was a new hope, an economic boom and an appreciation of politics as a technocratic or even peripheral exercise, amid widespread business and civil society autonomy. This was, of course, most true of the West. Yet, as can be expected, its influence was felt far wider, in other democracies as well.

Among its outcomes was a ageist cult that promoted youth in government as an end in itself. It placed a relatively lower emphasis

on apolitician's substantive credentials, not necessarily linked to his or her age. In the United Kingdom and the United States, for instance, it was difficult to be seen as electable if one crossed a fairly low and downright ridiculous age barrier. Take some examples. In the US, Bill Clinton finished his second term at 54, George W. Bush at 62, and Barack Obama at 55. Of course term limits prevented a third term, but the larger point is it was impossible for an older rival to win even a party primary. An entire generation of political talent was wasted or had careers timed out when there was still a lot to contribute. The UK was little different. Tony Blair retired at 54, Cameron left 10 Downing Street at 49, and Rishi Sunak at 44.

Public life has limited executive talent available anyway. Combine that with leavening and maturity that comes with years in the legislature and government, and one realises how the West haemorrhaged leadership in falling victim to a telegenic, media-driven youth frenzy. Gradually, even the UK and the US course corrected. Between 1997 and 2013, the average age of a US president at the start of a term was 52 years. Between 2017 and 2025, it went up to 75 years. At 79, President Donald Trump is as old as Clinton and a decade and a half older than Obama. In the UK, Keir Starmer took office at 61. He was already seven years old than Blair had been when the latter retired after a full decade as Prime Minister.

Clearly, as the political economy has become more complex and challenging, government has come to be perceived differently by voters. The skills they look for in leaders are age agnostic. Put another way, youth is less of a pressing priority. Deft, surefooted leadership, with an ideational (even ideological) ballast, counts for more, irrespective of age.

In India, multiple prime ministers have remained effective well past the supposed threshold. P.V. Narasimha Rao was in his seventies when he steered the country through the 1991 financial reforms. Manmohan Singh, Modi's direct predecessor, governed till 81. Even today, a Mallikarjun Kharge, the Congress president, or a Sharad Pawar of the NCP continue to play a central role well into their eighties.

The BJP's history reflects this as well. In 2004 Atal Bihari Vajpayee campaigned for re-election at 79 and served in Parliament till 84. Advani carried the party through campaign after campaign well into his eighties, eventually finishing his parliamentary innings at 91. Murli Manohar Joshi headed influential parliamentary committees, shaping debates on education and energy, till the end of his term at age 85. Even the inflection point in 2014 was not because of a BJP age rule, but a generational transformation of a party reorganising to better reflect the sizeable mandate Modi had received. It was never a mechanical formula to be applied sans discretion. The nub then is not age but capacity and

capability. Despite his supposedly advanced years, Modi addressed more than 200 public meetings during the three-month 2024 election campaign. On most days, after three or four speeches in peak summer, he would fly back to Delhi for government meetings, policy reviews and decision making. In short, he was - and is - up to the job. Having said that, political longevity is more than just physical stamina. As the most gifted and intellectually agile politician of his generation, the key to Modi's popularity is his admirable and continual evolution. He re-trains himself to become fit-for-purpose, whatever the purpose. His policy prescriptions, his constant keeping up with citizen aspirations and urges, his external engagement strategy, his economic impulses: he is still the most contemporary political mind in India.

On individual subjects others may know more, but as an entire package there is nobody else on the horizon - not even those born years after him. From fintech to semiconductors, emerging technology to ambition in trade agreements, he is not the youngest in the room but certainly about the most current in his thinking. That is why Indians retain their faith in him. Given this, to assess a political career - and to measure Modi's enduring appeal - solely in terms of physical age is not just unfair but unrealistic. Voter choices are age neutral.

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Challenges and Opportunities in Efficient Agricultural Marketing

■ DR. BANARSI LAL

Agricultural marketing is a pivotal driver of rural economic growth, enabling farmers to access competitive markets and increase incomes and improve socio-economic status. The evolution from fragmented, inefficient marketing practices to modern solutions such as value chains, digital platforms and contract farming has created transformative opportunities for small farmers to participate in the structured markets. By leveraging technology such as block chain for traceability and precision agriculture for optimizing resources, farmers can increase efficiency, minimize losses and meet the growing global demand of high-quality, sustainability goods. Agricultural marketing is the study of all the activities in the procurement of farm inputs by the farmers and the movement of agricultural products from the farms to the consumers. Agricultural marketing is a link between farm and non-farm sectors. All the persons associated in agricultural marketing are interested in having an efficient marketing system. An efficient marketing system is an effective agent of change and an important means of raising the income levels of farmers and satisfaction of the consumers. The movement of goods from producers to the consumers at the lowest possible cost, consistent with the provision of services desired by the consumers can be termed as efficient marketing. An efficient marketing system for farm products ensures an increase in the farm production gets transformed into an increase in the level of income thereby increasing the additional income. Consumers get the satisfaction when they get the goods at the least possible cost. An ideal marketing system aims at giving remunerative prices of produce to consumers, uninterrupted supply of goods to

the consumers at reasonable prices. Agricultural marketing is important in economic development due to following facts. India is an agricultural country and one third of its population depends on this sector directly or indirectly. Agriculture is the mainstay of the Indian economy since time immemorial. Quality food is the growing demand of the increasing population. Adequate production and its proper marketing has become a high priority global concern. The Indian agricultural system has made tremendous progress in the recent past. The increased agricultural production has made new challenges to the Indian agricultural marketing system. An efficient agricultural marketing system is the need of the era. Marketing has been described as the most important multiplier of agricultural development. Agricultural marketing plays crucial role in accelerating the pace of economic development of any nation. Its dynamic functions are of primary importance in both agricultural and economic development. Marketing is as critical to better performance in agriculture as farming. Market reforms need to be an integral part of any policy for agricultural development. The National Commission on Agriculture emphasized that produce must be satisfactorily marketed. Marketing involves a series of activities in moving the goods from the point of production to the point of consumption. It is a complex subject.

An agricultural marketing system encompasses all the activities, institutions and processes involved in moving agricultural products from producers to consumers. This system involves multiple players - farmers, wholesalers, retailers, processors, transporters and storage facilities - all work collectively to ensure food reaches

consumers in the right condition, at the right time and at fair prices. In developing nations, this system becomes more important as it determines the livelihood of millions of small farmers and affects the food security of majority of the population. Maintaining the pace of increased production through technological developments and assurance of remunerative prices to the farmers for their products to sustain the growth of non-agricultural sectors. An efficient marketing system leads to the optimization of resources use and output management. Marketing system can effectively distribute the available stocks of modern inputs and thereby sustain a faster growth rate in agricultural production. An efficient marketing system ensures higher level of income to the farmers by reducing the number of middlemen, regulating marketing services and providing better prices for the products. An efficient marketing system widens the market for the product by taking them to remote corners of the country by having better transportation and communication facilities. An improved agricultural marketing system helps in the growth of agro-based industries, stimulates their production and brings overall development in the economy. Better marketing system helps in the adoption and spread of new technology among the farmers and farmers get more returns by selling produce. The additional returns got by the farmers can be invested in agricultural sector and this will help to disseminate the technology among the farmers. Employment can be created in the economy by developing different marketing activities. Marketing activities add value to the products and this helps to increase GNP and NNP of the country. By efficient marketing system better living standards can be provided to the people by the producers by

making food available to the consumers at low prices. Creation of utilities in the products viz. place, time, form and possession. Utilities increase the price of the farm produce. All these facts indicate that an agricultural marketing system plays an immense role in the economic development of any nation. More efficient agricultural marketing system would be the economic development of the nation. An important landmark for improvement of agricultural marketing system in the Indian economy dates back to the recommendations of the Royal Commission on Agriculture, 1928 which pertained to regulation of marketing practices and establishment of regulated markets. Though agricultural marketing is estate subject, the Government of India has been playing a far-reaching interventionist role in terms of laying down general policy framework, framing of quality standards and providing technical and financial support to the states for creating infrastructure and administrative set-up. The Government interventions in agricultural marketing in India have taken of the following forms: (a) Regulation of buying and selling practices by establishing regulated markets. (b) Administration of prices at different levels of marketing. (c) Promotion and creation of infrastructure and other facilities. (d) Direct entry of government or cooperative societies as buyers and sellers in the market with a view to influencing the demand or supply of the products. (e) Regulation of imports and exports of agricultural commodities with a view to influence the supply and demand. All these measures introduced by the government improved the marketing system and helped the farmers in getting better prices.

Agricultural marketing scenario has undergone a sea change in India over the last four decades especially after the onset of technological revolution in the country. There has been a rapid increase in the marketable and marketed surplus of different agricultural commodities. This has been on account of increase in agricultural production and also due to the increase in the marketed surplus-output ratio of commodities. Overtime the marketed-surplus-output ratio of agricultural commodities has increased. The farmers of the WTO members' countries are free to market their products in these countries and hence have increased competition. India is now an important member of WTO countries. As such the role of agricultural marketing in India has widened from the existing i.e. sell whatever is surplus on the remunerative prices to produce only those commodities which have good demand in domestic as well as in the international market and sell them in the form and at place where prices are high.

The marketing organizations should assist the producers in increasing the production of those goods which are in demand. For this the various marketing functions related to marketing of various products should be performed efficiently. Marketing organizations especially the regulated markets can help the farmers by taking new initiatives and extending the provision of credit facilities to the farmers. This will develop a loyalty among the producers-sellers towards the regulated markets. This facility will increase the freedom of producer-sellers to dispose of their produce profitably in the market. There is a need to develop channels for supply of agricultural inputs to the farmers in the market. This can be done by allotting shops to the input suppliers in the market and devel-

oping adequate channels for movement of agricultural inputs along with arranging easy availability of seeds varieties demanded by the farmers. There should be transportation provision to carry the produce from production places to the consumption places. This can be done by operating transport system to help small farmers on cooperative basis. Market extension service should be provided to the farmers to guide them about the enterprises and varieties to grow in the area based on market demand. Strengthening of market intelligence activities in the mandi to advise the farmers as and where to sell the produce. Study the profitability of enterprises, marketing costs, margins and price spread so as to guide the farmers. Strengthening of storage system in the market can be done by encouraging the private entrepreneurs to construct more number of godowns in the rural areas. Involving Non Government Organisations (NGOs), Self Help Groups (SHGs) and Farmers Producer Organisations (FPOs) actively in the marketing activities would help to make the marketing system friendlier. Patent system for varied plant estates produced in the country should be introduced to safeguard the farmers of the country. The rise of digital technologies, growing consumer awareness about food quality and increasing government efforts for agricultural development all create opportunities for building more efficient and inclusive marketing systems.

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Will GST Second Gen Next Reform Benefit the Commoner?

■ BAIRAJ CHAWALGAMI

In fact, for the first time since the independence of the country we are hearing about GST GenNext Reform taken by BJP/NDA government at the insistence and leadership of the popular Prime minister Narendra Modi. The Prime Minister Modi deserves a standing ovation and pat at his back for taking the revolutionary step of reforming the GST structure to benefit the businesses, consumers of India and the pertinent question arise will the new GST rates which stand slashed considerably benefit the ordinary, common man. Consumers are benefitting from GST Reforms 2.0 through lower costs of the essential goods and services and it will greatly and considerably benefit and give relief to the common man from sky rocketing prices. Prime Minister Narendra Modi hailed the next-generation GST reforms which he said would improve the lives of citizens and at the same time ensure ease of doing business for all, especially small traders and businesses. He said, "During my Independence Day Speech I had spoken about our intention to bring the Next-Generation reforms in GST. The union government had prepared a detailed proposal for broad -based GST rate rationalisation and process reforms, aimed at ease of living for the common man and strengthening the economy." It will be a Diwali gift for you." The reforms, he said, would directly benefit the common man, farmers, MSME's, women, youth, and middle-class, while strengthening India's long-term growth. PM Narendra Modi announced next-generation GST reforms. These reforms aim to improve citizens lives and ease of business operations. The GST council agreed to rate cuts and reforms proposed by the union government. Nirmala Sitharaman announced major GST rate

cuts, implementing a two-tier tax system. Common man and middle-class items stand at reduced prices with effect from 19th September. PM said glad to state that @ GST Council, comprising the union government and states, has collectively agreed to the proposals submitted by the union government on GST rate cuts & reforms, which will benefit the common man, farmers, MSME's, middle -class, women and youth. The wide-ranging reforms will improve lives of our citizens and ensure ease of doing business and ease of living which will be a big relief to common citizens. It will also benefit small business and traders. This taxation policy eliminated the hassle of various taxes like service tax, value added tax -VAT and excise duty. GST is a single tax aimed at simplifying the business compliance and reduce burden on consumers as well. The, GST implementation abolished the cascading impact of taxes, i.e. tax on tax. GST lowered the burden of taxes on the industrial sector; lowering production costs. Prices, of the consumer goods and services will automatically become less. GST 2.0 reform will benefit government, industry and the common citizens by reducing prices of goods and services, stimulating economic growth. In a historic step forward overhauling India's indirect tax system, GST council. Chaired by Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman approved sweeping rate rationalisation reforms, cutting down the existing four-rate GST structure to just two slabs - 5 per cent and 18 per cent. The council scrapped the 12% and 28% tax slabs, implementing a simplified two-rate system aimed at reducing the burden on consumers and boosting economic activity. The reforms will come into effect from September 22, 2025. GST simplified to

a two -slab structure [5% & 18%] .GST reforms cut taxes on household essentials [soaps, toothpaste, Indian breads]to 5% or nil boosting affordability. Life -saving drugs ,medicine bringing reduced from 12% to nil or 5% making healthcare affordable. Two, -wheelers, small cars, TV's AC's cement cut from 28% to 18% bringing relief to common man/middle class. Farm machinery, irrigation equipment cut from 12% to 5% ,reducing farm costs giving benefit and relief to farmers. Tobacco, panmasala, aerated drinks, and luxury goods taxed at 40% aiming to discourage the consumption of such goods. The 56th meeting of the GST council ,chaired by finance minister Sitharaman has now approved Next -Gen GST reforms ,with focus on improving the lives of the common man and ensuring ease of living and ease of doing business for all, including small traders and businessmen. In line with the PM's vision the GST council has recommended a comprehensive reform package that includes rate rationalisation with a simplified two-slab structure [5% & 18%] ,sweeping rate reductions across sectors ,with focus on common man ,labour intensive industries ,farmers and agriculture ,health ,key drivers of the economy. The revised GST rates will ensure timely relief for the common man, households, farmers, and businesses. GST reforms prioritize consumers by lowering rates on essentials and high valued items. Keeping the essential goods in tax slab of 0-5% will definitely benefit the common man. Reforms bring direct savings to households by reducing taxes on everyday essentials and packaged goods. GST rate cut on AC's Dishwashers and TV's -LCD ,LED is a dual win. It increases affordability for consumers while strengthening India's electron-

ics manufacturing ecosystem. Products like Ultra -High Temperatures UHT milk, pre-packaged and labelled chena or paneer; all Indian breads will see nit rates. Household goods like soaps, shampoos , toothbrushes, toothpaste ,tableware, bicycles now at 5% .Food items such as packaged namkeens, Bhujia, sauces, Pasta, Chocolates ,Coffee ,Preserved meat etc .reduced from 12% or 18% to 5%. Consumer durables such as TV's [LCD/LED] , AC's ,dishwashers 28% to 18%. The GST will ensure that it is citizen-centric ,business -friendly, and aligned with India's global growth ambitions. GST is a milestone because it subsumed 17 different taxes and 13 cesses into one unified tax. It eliminated cascading of taxes [tax on tax] .Created a single national market with common rates and procedures. The adoption of a simplified GST structure and wide-ranging rate reductions marks a new chapter in India's tax journey .By focussing on affordability for citizens ,competitiveness for businesses and transparency in compliance, these reforms make GST not just a tax system ,but a catalyst for inclusive prosperity and economic transformation. To sum up it can be said with certainty that the GST reform and tax reduction is a festival of relief and renewal not only for the economy but for the common man. It is beneficial for the middle classes, farmers, women and youth and so it is inclusive and a big relief to the poor and middle-classes. It is in fact a revolution aimed at the relief to the common man as well as to the business community. Bravo PM Modi and Finance Minister N. Sitharaman for this big economic and fiscal revolution which will benefit the common man and the business community.

YOUR COLUMN

Proposal for Bahu Fort-Har Ki Pauri-Mahamaya Temple Corridor and parking lots in Heritage City, Jammu

Dear Editor,
We express our gratitude to Lieutenant Governor Manoj Sinha and Commissioner/Secretary Mandeep Kour, Housing & Urban Development Department, for their interest in our representation regarding the proposal for road connectivity linking the historic temples near Bawe Wali Mata. We also appreciate your support in considering this project under the Scheme for Special Assistance to

States for Capital Investment (SASCI) Reforms.

Following a productive meeting on 13th September 2025 at the Smart City office and a joint site visit on 15th September 2025 at the Bahu Fort parking site-with representatives from Jammu Civil Society, Department of Forest, Ecology & Environment, and other concerned departments-we observed that junior forest officials present lacked adequate understanding of the deep cultural and religious significance of this corridor related to the 8th-century presiding deity of Jammu.

Under my chairmanship, Jammu Civil Society met on this matter, with prominent members including Suresh Sharma (Former Judge), Vinod Sachdeva, Arjun Singh Chib, and others. We unanimously resolved to forward the follow-

ing proposals for your kind consideration: Construct a new road interlinking the historic Bawe Wali Mata, Har Ki Pauri, and Mahamaya Mata temples to form a safe, motorable religious corridor for devotees and tourists, including golf carts and wheelchairs for elderly and differently-abled persons; Provide alternate connectivity from the New JDA Parking (Bawe Wali Mata) to Har Ki Pauri temple, incorporating facilities such as lifts, escalators, or golf carts; Allow an additional route from New JDA Parking to Bawe Wali Mata with support for golf carts and wheelchairs; Maintain, widen, and upgrade existing roads-including Bawe Wali Mata road, Ropeway (Gandola) point to Har Ki Pauri, and Mahamaya Mata Temple road-to ensure safe all-weather usage; Upgrade temples by constructing larger halls and providing basic amenities,

given the current limited space that restricts the number of worshippers; Upgrade the old parking area of Bawe Wali Mata; Utilize the JDA park for entry and exit of devotees to Bawe Wali Mata Temple to reduce congestion; Equip all roads with adequate lighting and surveillance cameras for safety; and Construct shelter homes (Sarai) at Har Ki Pauri and Shri Mata Mahamaya Temple for devotees and tourists.

It is important to highlight that these 8th-century temples have seen little development over successive governments, resulting in long waiting times, discomfort for senior citizens and differently-abled persons, and challenges including hawkers and monkey menace. Implementing this proposal will enhance the area's development, increase visitor footfall year-round, and promote economic growth and employment in

Jammu.

Additionally, we propose including parking lots at key locations such as Tourist Reception Centre, Government Girls High School at City Chowk, Mubarak Mandi Complex, Hari Singh Park, Parade, and Jewel Chowk under SASCI reforms.

We trust that Dr. Devansh Yadav, Chief Executive Officer, Jammu Smart City Ltd, will consider our proposal favorably and facilitate the development of road connectivity and parking facilities to improve convenience for devotees and residents of Jammu's heritage city. A thanks was presented by Vinod Sachdeva, Co-Chairman, Jammu Civil Society. Thank you for your attention to this important matter.

CA Pardeep Gandotra
Chairman, Jammu Civil Society