



The debate around the Silver Line

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(MainsGS3:Infrastructure: Energy, Ports, Roads, Airports, Railways etc.)

Context:

The SilverLine project is the proposed semi high-speed railway in Kerala funded partly by the State government is yet to convince the people that the railway line can be a catalyst for a progressive transformation of Kerala's economy.

Japan model:

- Many critics of the new railway question the very idea of high-speed travel in Kerala, arguing that there would not be enough riders.
- But it may be useful for Kerala to go over the experience of Japan in building the world's first ever high-speed rail line, called the Shinkansen.
- In the 1950s, there were serious doubts about its viability, in a country that had been devastated by the Second World War.
- However, ever since its inauguration in 1964, Shinkansen has been a powerful agent and a symbol of Japan's economic resurgence.

Large exporter of skills:

- By the 1980s, Kerala had achieved most of the preconditions required for an economic take-off as its record in public health and education was not only the best in the country but comparable to that of the East Asian tiger economies.

- However, the economic opportunity slipped away for Kerala, which received a relatively low share of public sector investments in infrastructure, and research and academic institutions.
- Over the decades, Kerala has been a large exporter of skills and estimates suggest that between one and one-and-a-half-million people from Kerala are employed in high-skilled jobs outside the State, most of them outside the country.

Knowledge-led economic growth:

- There is now a growing realisation that new economic activities have to be nurtured within Kerala, drawing on the talents of its educated job seekers.
- The Kerala State Planning Board has outlined the possibilities for knowledge-led economic growth as the modern economic activities can thrive across the length and breadth of the State, given its dispersed nature of spatial development.
- In addition to tourism and information technology, the sectors in which Kerala sees potential include healthcare, life sciences, biotechnology, media and animation, space and aeronautical technologies, and artificial intelligence.

Effective public transport:

- Building an effective public transport system is central to realising Kerala's economic ambitions and the proposed semi high-speed railway, which will cover 11 of Kerala's 14 districts, assumes importance in this context.
- The SilverLine could serve the function of a fast-paced suburban rail system for the whole of Kerala, with each of its stops becoming nodes for future economic growth.
- This could be similar to the way the local trains have uplifted the economy of the Greater Mumbai region or to the long-run impacts made by the London Underground railway.

Damage the environment:

- There are concerns that the rail project may damage the environment in the short run, especially during the construction stage but in the long run, public transport system such as the SilverLine, run on renewable energy and capable of carrying more than a million passengers a day, will help reduce pollution and carbon emissions.
- The fears that the construction of the semi high-speed rail will cause natural calamities also seems unrealistic because even as it crisscrosses an earthquake-prone terrain, the Japanese high-speed rail network has seen no fatal accidents in over the last six decades.

- However the concerns regarding environmental impacts and compensation to those who lose their land for the project must be looked into.

Conclusion:

- The SilverLine is not a vanity project, but part of a long-term effort to modernise the economy and create new jobs in Kerala.
- Thus, the planning for the railway should not be done in isolation, but go hand in hand with the measures to reinvigorate the industrial, technology and tourism sectors in the State.

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