

# Jammu & Kashmir's Railway Dream: An Enduring Legacy of Maharaja Pratap Singh

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One of the busiest rail networks in the world, the Indian railways is the backbone of development and lifeline of many in the nation. With a total route network of 68,103 kilometers and more than 7,000 stations, Indian railways are an important component of infrastructure as they facilitate individual travel as well as the transportation of goods and services across states. The Indian Railways boast of running thousands of passenger and freight trains daily across diverse

terrains – from the Himalayan foothills to the coastal plains. The railway system is divided into 19 zones, each managing a different region with utmost efficiency.

The history of railways in India goes back approximately 160 years to 16<sup>th</sup> April, 1853, when the first passenger train ran 34 kilometers between Bori Bunder (now Mumbai) and Thane. Over time, several railway routes were laid to facilitate connectivity, such as the Bhore Ghat section connecting Mumbai and Pune. North India got its first

railway station in 1864 – the Delhi Junction – which soon emerged and continues to be one of the major railway stations in the nation. The Lucknow station, now known as the Lucknow Charbagh Station, came to be a prominent part of Northern Railway. Railway connectivity was not just limited to urban centres and popular towns of the nation, but was expanded even to the remotest regions, such as the North-East. For instance, the Darjeeling Himalayan Railway – which initially ran between Siliguri



and Kurseong was extended to Darjeeling in 1881. These steps were instrumental in enabling greater connectivity across regions in India, which would eventually foster increased economic integration and social cohesion across the country.

In colonial India, railways played a pivotal role in fostering economic ties, opening up markets and integrating diverse regions. However, during the colonial rules & post independence, there was one region which was not integrated into the Indian railway network for several decades which was the present day, Union Territory of Jammu & Kashmir (UT-J&K) and the then State of Jammu & Kashmir (J&K). While the rest of India reaped the benefits of the expanding railway network, UT-J&K largely depended on road connectivity until major rail projects were taken up in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. Among the several reasons cited for this were, the rugged mountainous

terrain of the region, which posed engineering and logistical challenges; political sensitivities and security concerns that served as catalysts in delaying infrastructure projects, financial constraints and lack of sufficient foresight. However, one striking reason which possibly served as an explanation as to why J&K remained out of India's railway grid for such a long period was probably the semi-autonomous nature of princely states. While the rest of India was directly governed by the British, rulers of the princely states had to navigate through the challenges of complex political dynamics and limited resources as a result of which many were unable to take up large infrastructure projects such as railways. Yet, there were some progressive rulers with significant foresight such as Maharaja Pratap Singh of J&K whose efforts in promoting rail connectivity in the region laid the foundations for future connectivity, but

they are often undermined in broader historical accounts. Such visionary rulers stand as examples to refute the popular perception that rulers of princely states were merely puppets of the British regime.

Despite the early vision of connectivity, it took several decades to bridge the gap between aspiration & reality along with substantial advancements in engineering techniques and political will - for efforts towards railway connectivity to flourish in full swing. The journey was gradual and layered, marked with a mix of highs and lows, and marked by several milestones, some small and some huge. A look at the chronology of railway development in the region offers a clearer understanding of how connectivity in Jammu and Kashmir evolved over time.

The construction of the railway extension from Suchetgarh to Jammu, which stretched over a distance of 17 miles, began in 1888 and was opened for use in the year







1890. Maharaja Pratap Singh was keen on connecting Srinagar via the railways. Therefore, in early 1902, surveys were undertaken under his leadership to explore the possibilities of railway connectivity to Srinagar via three different routes namely (a) Abbottabad to Srinagar, (b) Jammu to Srinagar via Banihal for a narrow gauge railway and (c) Jammu to Srinagar via Banihal, proposed as an electric railway. However, none of these projects could be realized owing to financial constraints and lack of formal authorization from the Government of India. However, the financial needs could have been easily addressed by tapping in the coal fields in the Ladda area, about 30 miles from Tikri, where around 2.5 million tonnes of coal were available. It remains unclear why these coal fields were never explored. Post 1947, the Jalandhar-Mukerian line was extended all the way up to Pathankot. This line was opened for rail traffic in 1952 and was the first step towards connecting Jammu with

the rest of the nation. The same railway line was further extended up until Madhopur and then up to Kathua in 1966. While this was merely a symbolic stretch, it definitely represented greater railway penetration in the region at least to some extent. However, there was still a long way to go until railway connectivity in J&K could fully translate into increased economic and social development and integration for the region.

Genuine efforts were made to deepen railway connectivity in J&K only in the year 1969 when a new plan to extend the line beyond Kathua up to Jammu was formulated. Although challenging, this endeavour was achieved in an impressive time span of just three years and the Kathua-Jammu section was opened for goods traffic on 2nd October, 1972. Passenger travel did not trail far behind as the first passenger carrying train Srinagar Express (Now and henceforth referred to as Jhelum Express) was inaugurated shortly after. The momentous occasion was

marked by the presence of several imminent ministers like the then Union Minister of Railways, T.A. Pai. It was indeed a great feat and wishes congratulating and appreciating the effort poured in from the then President and Prime Minister of India and well. The Jhelum Express was received at Jammu in what was a pompous affair. What made all of this particularly special was the fact that the work on this project did not come to a halt or a standstill even during the Indo-Pak war, which was definitely a rare feat.

This monumental event was witnessed by a number of people as Jammu was brought to the railway map yet again after a painfully long period of 25 years. The station quickly became a revered destination for the rural as well as urban folks who gathered in large numbers treating it as a place of great significance and connection. The Jhelum express, decked up as a bride in honour of the special occasion, departed from New Delhi on 1<sup>st</sup> December, 1972

arrived at Jammu Tawi on 2<sup>nd</sup> December with Mr Om Mehta, Minister of State for Transport and Parliamentary Affairs and Mohd. Shaffi Qureshi, the Deputy Minister of Railways as Chief Guests on board. In addition, three other trains, namely the Kashmir Train (now the Jammu Mail), the Sealdah Express and one other Passenger Train (Jammu-Pathankot) were introduced and commenced operations beginning this day. Naturally, the number of trains increased with the Bombay (now Mumbai) - Jammu Tawi superfast that began operations on 24<sup>th</sup> December, 1976. This shift marked the beginning of a transformative period for Jammu, connecting it with the rest of India. Over the years, there has been a steady increase in railway services in the region, with new trains being introduced regularly. Today, Jammu enjoys robust connectivity with several superfast trains including the Rajdhani Express, bolstering its integration into the Indian Railway Network.

Despite all the efforts, questions still remained regarding the railway connectivity to the Kashmir valley and therefore, the Government of India came

up with a project which was declared as a project of National Importance. This project entailed the construction of a 326 km long railway line beyond Jammu, which would pass through the mighty Himalayas, in an effort to integrate the Kashmir Valley into the nation's railway grid. Further extension to Udhampur was also planned, the construction of which commenced in 1995 and the Jammu-Udhampur station was unveiled on 13<sup>th</sup> April, 2005.

A survey was undertaken in 1997 beyond Udhampur to Srinagar in Kashmir. This section was to be characterized by long tunnels and bridges, including the Chenab Bridge which was yet to be constructed. In the Kashmir valley, trains were already running between Banihal and Baramulla. In addition to this, the Udhampur-Katra Line was also inaugurated by the Prime Minister, Mr Narendra Modi, by flagging off the first passenger-carrying train. This was of particular importance because the commencement of railway operations on this route meant an easy commute for Mata Vaishno Devi's devotees from practically every corner of the nation

to reach the base camp at Katra. This would not only enable passengers to witness the extraordinary scenic beauty and picturesque views enroute, but would also boost tourism in the region. Improved connectivity will naturally attract a larger number of visitors and tourists in the Valley and other parts of UT-J&K, thereby contributing significantly to local tourism revenue, generation of employment opportunities and supporting the overall economic development of the region.

Today, the Chenab bridge, a part of the Udhampur-Srinagar-Baramulla Railway Line (USBRL), an engineering marvel worth INR 14,000 crore, which boasts of being the world's highest railway bridge stands as a testament to India's engineering prowess in connecting Jammu to Kashmir viz. Katra to Banihal. The 1,315 m bridge stands at a height of 359 m above the height of the river bed, taller than the Eiffel Tower and approximately twice the height of the Statue of Unity, is the tallest railway arch bridge in the world. The bridge runs between Bakkal and Kauri fulfils the purpose of connecting Banihal and Katra. The **Anji Khad bridge** south of the Chenab bridge too is an important part of the USBRL and has been a major infrastructure project in the Jammu Division. It will strengthen regional connectivity and foster stronger ties between the mountainous region and the rest of the country. This cable-stayed bridge spans a steep gorge and has an asymmetrical design, featuring cables anchored to a single massive pylon. One among many other upcoming projects the construction of







this bridge comes as a boon for the people of UT-J&K, who having suffered from poor connectivity for decades together, now see a glimmer of hope among the citizens as it has made commuting and transportation of goods significantly easier as compared to the past. The long approach road to the bridge will provide access to 73 villages in the region which were earlier accessible only by foot or by boat. This implies that villagers will be able to reap the benefits of better road connectivity, easier travel, access to markets, healthcare, education and overall better integration with the rest of the region. Moreover, the use of this bridge will lead to an impetus for the industrial and agricultural sectors in UT-J&K as it would make it easier to transport goods and local products such as apples, handicrafts, etc., from UT-J&K to all parts of India. And finally, the bridge will provide all-round connectivity to UT-J&K unlike earlier times, where the land route of the 300-km Srinagar- Jammu National Highway would be rendered inoperational due to seasonal hardships.

Retired Major General S.P. Sinha opined that the bridge holds 'great strategic significance' and that it is a vital piece of infrastructure for the mobility of Indian troops and artillery from the rest of India and to Kashmir and the Ladakh regions. From a defence standpoint, this bridge, by facilitating 365-day connectivity in the region, would help to contain cross-border terrorism sponsored by foreign elements. And since the bridge connects UT-J&K and Ladakh, it will also facilitate the movement of Indian troops, equipment and supplies, towards the northern borders, especially the ones facing China. Given the fact that Ladakh shares a long and sensitive border with China, the Line of Actual Control (LAC), fast and reliable rail connectivity would help to respond to China's advances in situations of tensions or conflict. Now that the final section of the Chenab bridge was inaugurated by the Prime Minister on 6th June, 2025 which was the USBRL, passing through some of the most challenging terrain, the 272 km long rail line with 36 main tunnels covering nearly 120 km, eight escape tunnels, and

943 bridges spanning rivers, gorges, and mountain passes, it has made the Chenab Bridge fully operational, adding yet another feather to the glorious cap of the railways of UT-J&K. With UT-J&K's first Vande Bharat Express, which will run between Katra and Srinagar, it will substantially reduce travel time from six to seven hours by road to just three hours by train, while offering unmatched comfort, scenic views and the unique experience of traversing the marvelous Chenab Bridge for commuters, tourists and pilgrims.

Thus, the long tale of development of railways in UT-J&K - spanning decades of resilience, effort and engineering breakthroughs - ultimately traces its origins to Maharaja Pratap Singh's revolutionary vision. Although, the conditions that prevailed during his reign did not allow for the immediate execution of his elaborate plans, the commissioning of surveys for multiple railway projects by him, kindled the aspirations for a connected and integrated UT-J&K. His dedicated and steadfast initiatives not only demonstrated an acute understanding of the holistic

significance of railways from economic and social development standpoints, but also the willingness to envision long-term growth despite the resource constraints of his time. The fact that these aspirations guided infrastructural progress in the region stands as a testament of his legacy - an overshadowed one, yet crucial in the broader narrative of UT-J&K's railway expansion. Wouldn't it only befitting and a gesture of gratitude that recently inaugurated Jammu Railway Division be named the Raja Pratap Singh Jammu Railway Division?

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## TIMELINE OF JAMMU AND KASHMIR RAILWAY

