

AIRPORT TO RKMP CABLE STAY BRIDGE : NECESSITY OR EXPENSIVE TOY ?

Shashidhar Kapur

Apropos recent reports in the media about a cable stay bridge over Upper lake receiving preliminary approval from GOI, sharing complementary views and suggestions is in order. It is mentioned that the bridge would reduce travel time from Airport to RKMP station by 15-20 min. and also shorten the distance by a few kilometers. Besides, it'll reduce the traffic jams on VIP road significantly and provide relief to 18 lakh population... Furthermore, it'll provide a futuristic look to Bhopal. It is also claimed that tourists would be attracted.

Perhaps a background check could be a good starting point. First things first - as it is, currently it takes between 30-45 min. to reach from Airport to RKMP Station - which is normal for a tier 2 city like Bhopal (1.30 hrs. for end to end of the city is considered normal). So, where is the pressing need? Moreover, the claim of shortening the distance defies logic since the existing road is already more or less the shortest route. Like many other spots in the city, VIP road and adjoining areas too have been experiencing occasional traffic jams at certain times - esp. during VIP movement and rains. However they're not permanent bottlenecks nor do they cover more than half the space. To claim it'll provide relief to 18 L population is to imply that the road caters to two thirds of Bhopal - which is a bit farfetched. As for giving a futuristic look, Bhopal's Vision is of A Futuristic – Heritage City... New Bhopal is for futuristic and Old city espouses Heritage. Hence locating a big structure on heritage lake seems misplaced. Such huge structures are more suited to New Bhopal, that too as exceptions; a mid-sized city with mega structures is an oddity - since they're often ill maintained and under utilised. As for attracting tourists - if at all - they'd be low income variety; no widely travelled person will come merely to watch a bridge. Thus viewed independently, the claims about proposed bridge's benefits appear a bit overstated and need as congestion remover overemphasized - certainly till near future..

Thus to make claims more rigorous due diligence ought to be applied before the DPR stage. The first obvious exercise is to conduct mobility survey of area - that too by an independent body which has no role in implementation. Secondly, get the videography done of the area during peak hours for a reasonable period to complement ground data.

In order to address the abovementioned public inconvenience various proposals have cropped up in the past couple of years. Initially a double decker road was proposed at the VIP road –it was outrightly rejected for blocking the view of heritage structures like Gauhar Mahal besides environmental concerns . The second proposal was of having a parallel road to existing VIP road - it too was rejected by ministry of environment for the dangers posited to biodiversity due to requirement of digging multiple pillars . A third proposal by Nitin Gadkari was for cable car but didn't appear feasible ; he'd also suggested sky bus. Next was the proposal a to build a bridge from Khanugaon to Shyamla hills - perhaps via Takia Tapu- that was shot down for environmental reasons as also for heritage concerns –that of disturbing the sanctity of the tomb. Shivraj Singh had suggested skycar –which was considered to be more of fancy toy which wouldn't be too useful in easing traffic congestion. Later, govt. came up with a proposal to have a parallel road to lakeside from Bhadbada to Santanagar. Now, the officers have tried to exploit the loophole about permanent construction within the lake to dig two pillars and get around the prohibition of any permanent structure within 35-50 m of FTL (ongoing demarcation may have something to do with it). This latest proposal of 17km long cable bridge faces more or less the same valid concerns once again. Some of them are as follows :

- Mismatch with Vision of Bhopal : A Futuristic- Heritage city of which Upper lake and adjoining region is the buffer which ought to be neutral no change zone...All major cities and zones (like NCR) have become messy due to lack of buffer spaces..Cities have been allowed to grow contiguously.
- The adjoining region is global heritage- in the form of cave paintings of prehistoric men in IG museum of man on Shyamla Hills - the proposed bridge will pass from closeby.
- International ramifications- Upper lake is a Ramsar site, any activity on it must fulfill the conditions of treaty.(Else, it may go into Montreux Record.)
- National Importance - Van Vihar National Park in the vicinity demands looking at long term side effects.

- Local Importance - Fatehgarh, Gauhar Mahal, Kamalpati palace call for careful planning.
- Ecological Importance - Proposed Bird sanctuary in Van Vihar is likely to be adversely impacted by noise pollution.
- Aesthetics – There should be clarity about “beauty” and “glamour” – former is natural and latter man made...Even granting 50 pc for each, that limit is already reached...Half the area around lake is already covered with manmade structures whereby any further construction should be paused.
- Landscaping : Constructing a bridge in the middle of lake takes away the grandeur...Without it, on a foggy day the other shore is invisible..This is unlike a bridge on sea /river where there is no limit either in front or parallel side.
- Futuristic : This aspect can be introduced by operating the already installed 3D water screens for film shows.
- Track Record : The handling of all big projects in the recent past doesn't exactly inspire confidence : Smart City , RKMP , Metro , Gammon etc.

As intellectuals and thought leaders, it is incumbent upon us to not merely comment upon concerns but also offer doable alternatives. In that light following can be some of the viable alternatives in the same budget and timeframe :

- Prima facie, bottleneck on VIP road can be almost entirely removed by converting the existing four lane into six lane ...It can be easily done by shifting footpaths beyond the railings using angular brackets (in place of solar panels-which may be shifted further)...Space vacated by footpath shifting would add one lane on each side.
- Two additional lanes retrieved by shifting footpaths could be reserved for public transport, govt. vehicles and prepaid private modes of transportation.

- The biggest cause of bottleneck appears to be the patch from Kilol Park to Smart Road on Polytechnic Square – a flyover from the end points will connect the traffic to Link road No 2 at Bharat Mata square – same point as proposed in the cable stay bridge.
- As it is ,some more breathing space would be created ahead of Kilol Park due to Professors' Colony redevelopment.
- Sometime in the near future-simultaneously with proposed bridge- metro rail will reach Karond – An airport shuttle service can link it.
- A western bypass is also under way – which could take off some load – only a portion of people coming from airport side go to RKMP(must be surveyed for exact number)...Rest would take the proposed bypass.
- Ayodhya Bypass is being upgraded to 10 lane - 2 of its lanes could be reserved for public transport , govt. vehicles and prepaid private modes of transportation...That would offer an alternative route from Airport to RKMP only marginally longer than current distance-with reserved lanes one could reach within the current time frame.

At a later stage ,

- There is a demand for extending metro rail to Airport post 2028-which would connect to RKMP.
- A tunnel could be considered instead of the bridge at the VIP road -with a road above it -at the current level..That'll make it 8-12 lane
- A tunnel could also be considered under the lake in place of portion of proposed bridge above lake to preserve the natural look- though there would be environmental concerns. Studies show that tunnel is more

effective and economical than a bridge if length is more than 1.6 km – the proposed portion above lake is 2 km .

- Another tunnel under the road from Shanker Dayal Sharma square to near Old GPO via Moti Masjid –to preserve heritage look at ground level- could provide one more alternative route.
- Ultimately ,like all metropolitan regions, there would be another airport for new Bhopal on the other /Eastern side of the city : Raisen /Narmadapuram road.
- Sooner than later many new modes of transport will be introduced - such as air taxis with take off from vertiports – multimodal transport system would ease congestion.

All said , congestion and bottlenecks would persist till such time that public transport carries 50 pc commuters or thereabouts. The abovementioned suggestions can provide a roadmap for Lake and adjoining areas till 2047 - by which time it is expected that population would stabilize between 35 - 50 L (already the rate of growth of population is dipping in Bhopal)

With the above suggestions, same impact as the proposed cable stay bridge can be achieved in the same budget within the same time frame- albeit with little or no adverse impact on sensitive ecosystem and heritage. The idea is to approach this concern in a Holistic and Integrated manner – In the light of Master Plan, Metropolitan region Vision et al. It is good that Bhopal should aspire to imbibe the best practices of others (also avoid their worst moves)...but equally important is the ambition to preserve originality for coming up with a Bhopal Model for other Tier 2 cities to emulate. The cable stay bridge proposal must be vetted more rigorously before DPR- pending final approval. It ought to be a Glocal (Global-cum –hyperlocal) approach ...New Bhopal as global metro and old city as hyperlocal urban space ...Futuristic , Environment friendly , heritage preserving and citizen centric.
