

VIEWPOINT

GREAT THINGS TO LEARN FROM CHINA

by Kochouseph Chittilappilly

As the year draws to a close, it's time to take stock. Opinion is unanimous that we require rapid strides in infrastructural development. But other than holding discussions, have we progressed any further?

I had been to China in September on a business visit. It's been some years since I last visited it. Coming to think of China, there are a few similarities between it and India such as a large population, fast growing economies and an educated workforce. But the similarities end there. There is a huge gap in terms of Infrastructure. I was to witness this in the following days.

My journey took me to its eastern provinces. It did give me a taste of modern China. The progress that they have made is only to be seen to be believed. The roads were all wide and well maintained. There were flyovers everywhere. They even seem to have perfected the art of building flyovers. In fact, a number of flyovers could be seen over a flyover. I was dumbstruck to see cars cruising along at over 90 km/hr, through the heart of Shanghai city, along an elevated highway at peak hours.

I found that the highways were constructed with adequate space left, possibly for future usage, and lined with well pruned trees. Later, I found to my amazement, trees about 5-6 metres high, grown elsewhere, being transplanted along the highway. Couldn't help admiring



their wisdom and foresight. I travelled by car from a city called Ningbo to another city called Haining. It was a two-hour drive along the Ningbo-Shanghai Express Highway. We happened to cross the Hangzhou Bay Bridge over the sea. Opened in 2008 at a cost of USD 1.7 billion, it is a six-lane bridge, about 36 km long. Truly an

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amazing structure. It reduces the distance between Ningbo and Shanghai by 120 km. The people simply didn't seem to mind paying an equivalent of ₹620 as toll fee.

The surprise didn't end there. Much more was in store. Before I returned, I also happened to travel along the Qingdao Jiaozhou Bay Bridge, the longest sea-crossing bridge in the world. It's about 41.58 km long, with eight lanes. It cost USD 2.3 billion and was opened to the public in June 2011. One has to pay a fee equivalent of Rs 1390 for the 4-hour journey along the road and through the bridge.

My driver said that he would gladly pay the amount

rather than waste fuel and time by taking an alternate route. I stopped midway to admire the view. The bridge was illuminated all along with rows and rows of lights mounted on the median and side railings. I could see big ships as tiny specks on the sea. It was a fabulous moment.

It's strange but in India, invariably all infrastructural projects are mired in allegations and counter-allegations. It doesn't seem to be so in China. Corruption doesn't seem to be completely non-existent, though. But concerted efforts and

commitment are plainly visible when it comes to execution of projects. As I could see, all Express Highways pass through densely populated areas. But they are all elevated ones which do not require massive displacement of people.

You may well remember the hue and cry in Kerala generated over the Express Highway a few years ago. Many alleged it would divide Kerala into two halves. A project that could have revolutionized the state failed to take off. And it is left ruing lost opportunities.

It's not just about the roads and flyovers. Train travel was equally fascinating. I am reminded of a joke. Someone asked which is the longest toilet in the world?

Pat came the reply, The Indian Railways. Thinking of it, isn't it true? Our railways might extend from Kanyakumari to Jammu. But our experiences with the railways have always been harrowing. The few, cramped, trains that we have run late and chug along, polluting the environment. It seems that our Railway is yet to hear of modern means of disposal of waste.

My travel required me to connect between a couple of cities in China by train. I was quite apprehensive. Perhaps, it stemmed from my fear of the Indian Railways. I travelled in a bullet train from Canton to Hengyang. Canton South Railway Station looked more like an airport. All baggage is screened at the entrance. From an elevated entrance, the passengers reach the platforms through their respective gates. The tickets are checked electronically. The gates open only 15 minutes before the departure time. The interiors of the bullet train resemble an aircraft, almost. The crew was smartly dressed, alert and quick to respond to the needs of the passengers.

The train quickly reached its cruising speed at 300 km/hr. I realised that the train was moving, only when I looked out. On one occasion, we could even pre-pone our tickets, at no extra cost, though we had to stand all the way. The Chinese have already built about 5000 km of high speed rail. I was to travel in the bullet trains many more times during my stay. It was a different experience, altogether.

I couldn't but help compare the state of affairs in China to ours. Recently, I happened to listen to Dr C Rangarajan, Chairman of the Prime Minister's Economic Advisory Council. He was candid enough to admit that India was undertaking only about 1/5th of infrastructural projects when compared to China. My experience has left me wondering. How long would it take to replicate this in India?

Still, there is no adequate land to meet industrial needs. Our roads continue to be narrow, filled with pot holes. Our weak infrastructure is creaking under tremendous pressure. Yet our politicians boast about investor meets and preach of the need for attracting investment. Do you honestly think that there would be industrial development without improving our infrastructure?

Strong, adequate infrastructure is an essential concomitant of vibrant industrial growth. Our politicians and administrators could well take a cue from China. They should rather visit the place. Certainly, there are lessons to be learnt.

Let's hope that 2012 would usher in a new wave of infrastructural development which in turn would propel industrial and economic growth. Wish you a happy new year.

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(The views expressed in the article are the author's own).