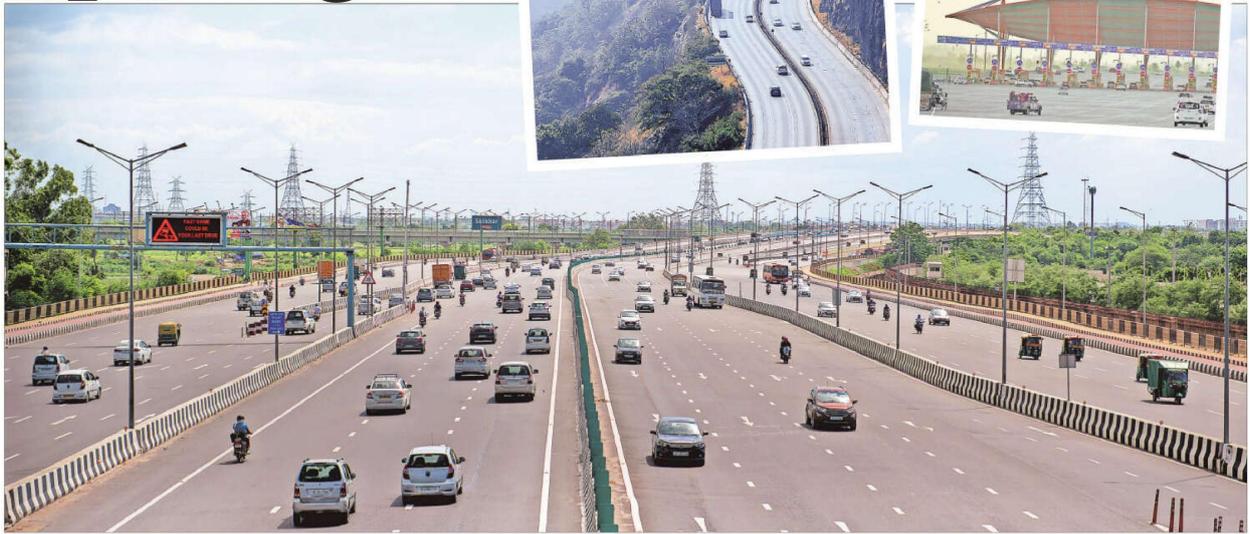


Spotlight

SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 15, 2026



THE FAST LANE

From just 93 km in 2014 to 3,052 km at present—with plans to increase the network to 26,000 km by 2033—how expressways and access-controlled high-speed corridors are going to rewrite the next chapter of India's infra story

KUNAL DOLEY

TILL ABOUT A few years ago, just the thought of undertaking a road trip from Delhi to Mumbai, or the other way around, would give the shivers to even the most experienced of drivers. With a travel time of over 24 hours, not to forget the journey through some of the most congested cities of the region like Jaipur, Kota, Vadodra and Surat, driving on the stretch would simply remain out of bounds for most people. But come 2027, all that could be history as the much-awaited Delhi-Mumbai Expressway which is going to be India's longest access-controlled high-speed corridor, will mark its completion. Spanning a little over 1,300 km, the major infrastructure project—which has incurred an expenditure of over ₹71,000 crore to date, as per reports—will significantly reduce travel time between the two metros to around 12-13 hours, besides enhancing connectivity and driving economic growth by linking industrial hubs and rural areas alike.

Like other similar projects, the partially-operational Delhi-Mumbai Expressway is designed for a top speed of 120 kmph, and its access-controlled nature prevents local traffic from entering the main carriageway. A central reservation or median separates the traffic moving in opposite directions, entry and exit are permitted only through grade-separated interchanges. Similarly, the 594-km Ganga Expressway—connecting Meerut to Prayagraj and which is soon going to become operational, as per an announcement made by its developer, the Uttar Pradesh Expressways Industrial Development Authority (UPEIDA) recently—will provide a major boost to east-west connectivity in Uttar Pradesh and slash travel time from the current 10-12 hours to about 6-8 hours.

In fact, Uttar Pradesh will account for 62% of India's expressway network after the Ganga Expressway launch, with over 1,200 km already operational and several more under construction, as per government reports.

Need for speed

India is well on a path to witness an unprecedented expressway boom. The numbers speak for themselves. Till about 2014, the length of access-controlled

national high-speed corridors and expressways in India was just 93 km; today, this figure stands at 3,052 km. Currently, India is in the middle of constructing 25 greenfield expressways spanning 10,000 km with an investment of ₹6 lakh crore at various stages of completion and deadlines.

As per a recent reply to Rajya Sabha by Union Road Transport and Highways Minister Nitin Gadkari, the government plans to operationalise 18,000 km of such access-controlled national high-speed corridors and expressways by 2028-29, and award a total of 26,000 km by 2032-33, alongside ring roads, bypasses, port connectivity projects and links to industrial corridors.

In fact, four-lane and wider national highways, including expressways, now account for 48,568 km, up from 18,371 km in 2014. The share of highways with fewer than two lanes has declined from 30% to 9% of the total network, as per Gadkari. There is a strong focus on monetising road projects as well, which could generate up to ₹15 lakh crore for the Ministry of Road Transport and Highways (MoRTH), he added.

Besides the Delhi-Mumbai Expressway and the Ganga Expressway, some of the other soon-to-be opened major projects include the 210-km Delhi-Dehradun Expressway, 258-km Bengaluru-Chennai Expressway, 470-km Delhi-Amritsar-Katra Expressway and the 108-km Ahmedabad-Dholera Expressway.

Among the routes that are already operational include the Mumbai-Nagpur Expressway (635 km), Purvanchal Expressway (connecting Lucknow with Ghazipur, 340.8 km), Agra-Lucknow Expressway (302.2 km), Yamuna Expressway (connecting Greater Noida with Agra, 165.3 km), Delhi-Meerut Expressway (96 km), Eastern Peripheral Expressway (connecting Kundli with Palwal in Haryana via Uttar Pradesh, 135 km) and Ahmedabad-Vadodra Expressway (93 km), among others.

If that isn't enough, in 2024, the government of India presented an ambitious 'Vision 2047' plan envisioning the construction of up to 50,000 km of access-controlled highways and expressways, with Indians gaining access to the expressways at a distance of 100-125 km from any point in the country.

"Expressways got a major boost over the past decade during which more than 6,000 km of such high-speed corridors were constructed," says D Sanyal, managing director of CRAPHTS Consultants, a specialised consulting agency that provides services in the areas of transportation planning, highway engineering and road safety, among others. "At the current rate of construction, it is possible that nearly 18,000 km of expressways would become operational in another 2-3 years' time, he adds.

In a similar announcement made while inaugurating two major expressway projects—the Delhi section of Dwarka Expressway and the Urban Extension Road-II (UER-II)—in August last year, Gadkari affirmed that India's logistics cost will come down to single-digit by the end of 2026.

At present, the logistics cost of India is 14-16%, China's is 8%, and Europe and the US have 12% each. The significant reduction, as per Gadkari, will enhance

India's competitiveness on the global stage and streamline supply chains across industries. "Transportation facilities are often considered as prime movers of the economic engine of the country," says Sanyal of CRAPHTS Consultants. He cites the example of Delhi-Meerut Expressway. "Travel between these two places was fraught with many impediments till the expressway materialised. Not only has there been a significant reduction in travel time, it has actually balanced (distributed) the economic potential of each city, thereby redefining urban dynamics," he explains.

Expressways have also been able to reduce vehicular pollution, by as much as 27%, if one were to go by the 6-lane Eastern Peripheral Expressway (EPE) that connects Kundli to Palwal via Ghaziabad across the National Capital Region, for instance.

UPCOMING EXPRESSWAYS

DELHI-MUMBAI EXPRESSWAY	Connecting: DND Flyway, Delhi to JNF, Mumbai	Distance: 1,350 km	Status: Partially operational	Estimated cost: ₹1 lakh cr	Travel time: 13 hrs
AMRITSAR-JAMNAGAR EXPRESSWAY	Connecting: Amritsar to Jamnagar, Gujarat	Distance: 915 km	Status: Under construction	Estimated cost: ₹80,000 cr	Travel time: 13 hrs
VARANASI-KOLKATA EXPRESSWAY	Connecting: Varanasi, UP to Kolkata, WB	Distance: 710 km	Status: Under construction	Estimated cost: ₹35,000 cr	Travel time: 11 hrs
MUMBAI-NAGPUR EXPRESSWAY	Connecting: Mumbai to Nagpur, Maharashtra	Distance: 701 km	Status: Nearly fully operational	Estimated cost: ₹55,000 cr	Travel time: 8 hrs
GANGA EXPRESSWAY	Connecting: Meerut to Prayagraj, UP	Distance: 594 km	Status: Under construction	Estimated cost: ₹37,350 cr	Travel time: 8 hrs
DELHI-AMRITSAR-KATRA EXPRESSWAY	Connecting: Delhi to Katra, J&K	Distance: 588 km	Status: Under construction	Estimated cost: ₹40,000 cr	Travel time: 6 hrs
RAIPUR-VISAKHAPATNAM EXPRESSWAY	Connecting: Raipur to Visakhapatnam	Distance: 465 km	Status: Under construction	Estimated cost: ₹20,000 cr	Travel time: 5 hrs
BENGALURU-CHENNAI EXPRESSWAY	Connecting: Bengaluru to Sripetnurbudur	Distance: 258 km	Status: Partially operational	Estimated cost: ₹17,930 cr	Travel time: 2-3 hrs
DELHI-DEHRADUN EXPRESSWAY	Connecting: Delhi to Dehradun	Distance: 210 km	Status: Partially operational	Estimated cost: ₹12,000 cr	Travel time: 2.5 hrs

2014 and 2022, found that every ₹1 spent on highway development led to a ₹3.2 increase in gross domestic product (GDP). The study, which was recently quoted by Union Gadkari in a written reply to Rajya Sabha, found that districts with highway projects recorded a 9.19% reduction in travel time between factories and suppliers and a 4.93% reduction between factories and customers, compared with control districts. Similarly, time taken to reach schools declined by 16.6%, access to health services improved by 9%, and average travel time to markets fell by 7%. The number of mandis accessed increased by 8%.

In a similar announcement made while inaugurating two major expressway projects—the Delhi section of Dwarka Expressway and the Urban Extension Road-II (UER-II)—in August last year, Gadkari affirmed that India's logistics cost will come down to single-digit by the end of 2026.

At present, the logistics cost of India is 14-16%, China's is 8%, and Europe and the US have 12% each. The significant reduction, as per Gadkari, will enhance

"However, it is the area of freight transport that gains the most because of these expressways through faster travel speeds (less travel time), safe delivery of commodities including perishable goods, less per capita transportation cost and a host of other attendant benefits," adds Sanyal. Commenting on the Masterplan for expressways, which he was a part of, Sanyal says the most important policy decision that was taken while initiating this study was that the alignments of the proposed expressways would be largely 'greenfield' alignments, thereby avoiding the 'legacy' value constraint.

According to Sanyal, the legacy values of the national highways system were not really adequate for the 'next' stage of economic development and as such, the need for an upgraded system was being felt for a long time. "The vision behind this was to connect all parts of India through a network of high-speed, high-efficiency and safe road corridors that could support the transportation of men and materials all over the country in a safe, efficient and economic manner. In fact, this is the basic premise for all high-speed transportation corridors," he adds.

Development of expressways is a recent phenomenon in India's road development, says N Ranganathan, an urban transport expert and a former professor of transport planning and dean of studies, School of Planning and Architecture, Delhi. When the government started thinking of road development and operation, "a number of problems manifested in terms of delays, congestion, accidents, high energy consumption, pollution, etc," as per Ranganathan. For instance, "India's logistics costs were high (13-15% of GDP). Transportation facilities were poor and many other factors led to a need for quality of roads over and above connectivity. Expressways were the answer," he adds.

Development of expressways is a recent phenomenon in India's road development, says N Ranganathan, an urban transport expert and a former professor of transport planning and dean of studies, School of Planning and Architecture, Delhi. When the government started thinking of road development and operation, "a number of problems manifested in terms of delays, congestion, accidents, high energy consumption, pollution, etc," as per Ranganathan. For instance, "India's logistics costs were high (13-15% of GDP). Transportation facilities were poor and many other factors led to a need for quality of roads over and above connectivity. Expressways were the answer," he adds.

The new reality

Among the sectors that are being reshaped by India's expanding road infrastructure is real estate—with new development corridors being unlocked, planned urban expansion being facilitated, and a demand catalysed across residential, commercial, and industrial and warehousing segments.

"From a real estate investment perspective, the ongoing infrastructure push in the form of expressway development presents a strategic entry point, especially in markets where key sections of major projects are nearing completion. Early-stage investors in such catchment areas are likely to benefit from higher-than-average returns as improving connectivity is likely to enhance demand across asset classes, leading to significant appreciation in capital values," says Vimal Nadar, national director and head, research, Colliers India.

Last year, Colliers analysed eight major expressways, including the Nagpur-Mumbai Expressway (Samruddhi Mahamarg), Ahmedabad-Dholera Expressway, Jaipur-Delhi Expressway, Meerut-Delhi Expressway, Delhi-Chandigarh Expressway, Delhi-Agra (Yamuna Expressway), Bhopal-Dehra Expressway, and Lucknow-Agra Expressway (Purvanchal Expressway), and identified eight micro-markets across 30 emerging cities in India, where land prices are projected to rise up to 5.2 times by 2035.

Nagpur emerged as the top performer due to the operationalisation of the 701-km Samruddhi Mahamarg Expressway. With an expected return of 5.2x by 2035, the city in Maharashtra has become one of the most sought-after investment destinations. Some of the upcoming micro-markets in Nagpur, as per the report, include Hingna, Samruddhi Circle, Warda Rd / Besa, and Shivmadka.

Nagpur is followed by Jaipur (3.4x by 2035) and Lucknow (1.9x), all three of which are anticipated to establish strong presence in India's real estate and market in the coming years, the report adds.

"However, it is always prudent to diversify real estate exposure, check historical trends while simultaneously focus on clear land titles, RERA compliance, credibility of developers, and future micro-market specific growth prospects," adds Nadar of Colliers India.

Development of expressways is a recent phenomenon in India's road development, says N Ranganathan, an urban transport expert and a former professor of transport planning and dean of studies, School of Planning and Architecture, Delhi. When the government started thinking of road development and operation, "a number of problems manifested in terms of delays, congestion, accidents, high energy consumption, pollution, etc," as per Ranganathan. For instance, "India's logistics costs were high (13-15% of GDP). Transportation facilities were poor and many other factors led to a need for quality of roads over and above connectivity. Expressways were the answer," he adds.

Development of expressways is a recent phenomenon in India's road development, says N Ranganathan, an urban transport expert and a former professor of transport planning and dean of studies, School of Planning and Architecture, Delhi. When the government started thinking of road development and operation, "a number of problems manifested in terms of delays, congestion, accidents, high energy consumption, pollution, etc," as per Ranganathan. For instance, "India's logistics costs were high (13-15% of GDP). Transportation facilities were poor and many other factors led to a need for quality of roads over and above connectivity. Expressways were the answer," he adds.

The way forward

The financing of Indian expressways is achieved through a combination of public funding, private investment, multi-lateral lending and tolls. However, a significant amount comes from Central government allocations, especially under Bharatmala Pariyojana. In the 2023-24 Union budget of India, MoRTH was allocated ₹270,000 crore, of which a large share was dedicated for expressways and economic corridor developments.

"While building expressways is a capital-intensive exercise, land acquisition remains a major bottleneck. As per a report tabled by MoRTH in Rajya Sabha last year, nearly 700 highway projects were delayed as of July 2024, 35% of which were due to land acquisition disputes, often exacerbated by inaccuracies in land records, resistance from local stakeholders, and prolonged compensation negotiations.

"There are communities living alongside the expressways. Many of them might have given their land parcels for the construction of the facility. It is very important that their needs be addressed adequately and expeditiously," says Sanyal of CRAPHTS.

An expressway touches almost all areas of life and living and by that token, the number of stakeholders is many as are the number of challenges. "The way forward is to have a sound development policy backed by guaranteed flow of funds, encouraging capable professionals to develop and undertake innovative designs and to have builders with commitment and integrity to public goods. Last but not the least, the road users must treat these facilities as their own assets," adds Sanyal.

"As the country is heading towards a \$30-trillion economy, 80% urbanisation, and 1-billion motorised vehicles, there is a need to develop an extensive expressways network of 1,00-km grid, translating into a length of about 50,000 Km. The journey is exciting, and that calls for commitment, determination and dedication," adds Ranganathan.

As India heads towards 80% urbanisation, 1 bn vehicles, there is a need to develop an extensive network of expressways

Among the sectors that are being reshaped by India's expanding road infrastructure is real estate—with new development corridors being unlocked, planned urban expansion being facilitated, and a demand catalysed across residential, commercial, and industrial and warehousing segments.

"From a real estate investment perspective, the ongoing infrastructure push in the form of expressway development presents a strategic entry point, especially in markets where key sections of major projects are nearing completion. Early-stage investors in such catchment areas are likely to benefit from higher-than-average returns as improving connectivity is likely to enhance demand across asset classes, leading to significant appreciation in capital values," says Vimal Nadar, national director and head, research, Colliers India.

Last year, Colliers analysed eight major expressways, including the Nagpur-Mumbai Expressway (Samruddhi Mahamarg), Ahmedabad-Dholera Expressway, Jaipur-Delhi Expressway, Meerut-Delhi Expressway, Delhi-Chandigarh Expressway, Delhi-Agra (Yamuna Expressway), Bhopal-Dehra Expressway, and Lucknow-Agra Expressway (Purvanchal Expressway), and identified

Among the sectors that are being reshaped by India's expanding road infrastructure is real estate—with new development corridors being unlocked, planned urban expansion being facilitated, and a demand catalysed across residential, commercial, and industrial and warehousing segments.

"From a real estate investment perspective, the ongoing infrastructure push in the form of expressway development presents a strategic entry point, especially in markets where key sections of major projects are nearing completion. Early-stage investors in such catchment areas are likely to benefit from higher-than-average returns as improving connectivity is likely to enhance demand across asset classes, leading to significant appreciation in capital values," says Vimal Nadar, national director and head, research, Colliers India.

Last year, Colliers analysed eight major expressways, including the Nagpur-Mumbai Expressway (Samruddhi Mahamarg), Ahmedabad-Dholera Expressway, Jaipur-Delhi Expressway, Meerut-Delhi Expressway, Delhi-Chandigarh Expressway, Delhi-Agra (Yamuna Expressway), Bhopal-Dehra Expressway, and Lucknow-Agra Expressway (Purvanchal Expressway), and identified