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## **An elevated white elephant**

The debate over whether the Delhi Metro should be elevated or underground has reached a critical level in the High Court. Now, after Phase 1 is operational and before Phase 2 is fully built, we should reassess its performance and necessity. The Resident Welfare Associations' (RWA) plea is to take the Metro underground in their areas due to noise and privacy issues. Delhi Metro Rail Corporation (DMRC) Managing Director E. Sreedharan, however, favours the 1950s-style Elevated Metro due to cost reasons. Neither addresses the real issue of the Elevated vs Underground debate.

The Metro is not a profitable enterprise anywhere in the world. Globally, its ridership varies between 10 per cent (Kolkata) to 50-60 per cent. In Delhi, ridership is only 20 per cent of original projections in Phase 1. How can this project, first sanctioned on the basis of 31 lakh passengers, claim profitability if it is carrying only 6 lakh today? Reports of hidden subsidies, tax waivers and cheap land acquisition have already appeared in the media. But the real answer lies in the fact that its development model is designed to recover costs, not to ensure ridership. In other words, the Metro has to ensure property development to guarantee its own profitability. This is why the Master Plan says 500 sq m of land on either side of the Elevated Metro corridor will be declared commercial. So, the city pays for the development of the corridors to make the Metro profitable. If this line runs through residential/low-rise mixed-use areas like Defence Colony, they will be forced to go fully commercial. Zooming prices will force residents to sell and transform the area into high-rise malls, office complexes and cineplexes. This will put humongous pressure on all overloaded resources like water, parking, electricity, waste and security.

If the Metro lies underground, there are no concrete monsters on arterial roads, no commercial transformations — and no issues like noise. But there will be the costs. The Delhi Metro is 83 per cent elevated and 15 per cent underground. DMRC argues that cheaper elevated sections make the Metro a viable, profitable project. Costs to go underground will mean sacrificing many of the new routes it has chalked up. Yet, the lower costs of an elevated metro have actually encouraged a dangerous, uncontrolled route expansion. Is there a real need for so many routes? A Metro 15 minutes from everywhere in the city is an environmental disaster waiting to happen. Second, several routes were never in the original plan (last minute additions to accommodate Commonwealth Games requirements). Can't we have only essential routes that do not burden the residents to maintain them, and quality underground construction? There are no technical problems going underground, merely costs, system length and delivery time. All these affect the city's sustainability and are negotiable. There's no reason for an outdated, harmful, elevated white elephant.

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