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Beijing could provide the solution

DNA / Venkatesan Vembu / Friday, August 6, 2010 2:26 IST

China has unveiled an ambitious space-age project that, if successful, could represent the future of urban mass transportation and liberate millions of commuters in cities around the world, including Mumbai and Bangalore, from the tyranny of traffic congestion.

The futuristic project, which will be road-tested in Beijing within a year, envisages a giant 'superbus' that will straddle the road, run on rails with cars whooshing beneath it, seat up to 1,400 passengers in an elevated chamber — and run at a top speed of 40 kmph, partly on solar power.

The project still has a few technical problems — and a cost consideration — to overcome, but Beijing transport authorities are pushing for it as a radical solution to the daily gridlock of the city. The advantage that the 'superbus' offers is that it won't take up road space and add to clogging (since cars can ply beneath it), and yet it can take a huge passenger load off traditional buses.

According to officials at Huashi Future Parking Equipment, a Shenzhen-based company whose chairman Song Youzhou owns the patent on the 'superbus', transport officials from several countries, including India, had made enquiries about the project.

Song, who unveiled the technology at the recent International high-tech expo in Beijing, says the idea for the 'superbus' — the most ambitious of his 120 patented ideas — came to him when he was stuck in a traffic jam a year ago. He claims that the 'superbus' (which he calls the 3-D Express), although seemingly a costly enterprise, would offer time and cost advantages over, say, laying a subway line.

Not everyone, however, is convinced that the project is operationally and commercially viable — or that it can be replicated in Indian cities.

"As with any novel technology, there is a bit of hype, and an expectation that it will change the future of transportation," Alok Jain, head of India operations at MVA Asia, a leading traffic and transportation consultancy, told DNA. "But the sceptical view is that unless you have a prototype, it's difficult to make a judgment."

In particular, Jain points to operational issues with the 'superbus' idea that still remain unaddressed, such as safety, and cost considerations. "The problem is not in the per-unit cost itself, but in the total cost of the infrastructure ecosystem." He points to China's experiment with the magnetic levitation (maglev) train in Shanghai, which never really took off elsewhere, as being illustrative of the challenges of scaling up.

Jain is even less certain about the prospects for the replication of the technology in Indian cities to beat traffic congestion. "Given the way our urban infrastructure is laid out and delineated, it would take anything up to 20 years to roll out something like this."

Indicatively, the Delhi BRT system took eight years to implement, whereas it normally takes only six to eight months, he points out.

Song, however, says that safety concerns are overstated, and points to an aircraft-style emergency evacuation system — which too he's patented. He says a prototype will soon be built, and once the world sees the test line

in Beijing, perhaps as early as next year, they will be convinced about the commercial and operational viability of the urban transportation system of the future.

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