



The broadest tunnel of Samruddhi Mahamarg that was inaugurated on Thursday. *Deepak Joshi*

Samruddhi Mahamarg opens fully: Mumbai to Nagpur travel time cut from 17 to 8 hours

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THE HINDU Hridayasamrat Balasaheb Thackeray Maharashtra Samruddhi Mahamarg is now open end to end after the 76-kilometre leg between Igatpuri and Amner (Thane) was inaugurated by Chief Minister Devendra Fadnis on Thursday, providing a seamless 701-kilometre connectivity from Mumbai to Nagpur. The six-lane expressway that is now fully operational will reduce the travel time between the two cities by half from 17 hours to around eight hours.

The event organised at Igatpuri was also attended by Deputy Chief Ministers Eknath Shinde and Ajit Pawar and other ministers of the Mahayuti government.

The completion of the last leg brings the entire project to realisation after decades of intricate engineering issues, political will and huge investments. The project was initially estimated at Rs 55,500 crore, but as it crossed various technical and logistical barriers and the project cost rose to over Rs 61,000 crore.

At the inauguration, Fadnis, who initially conceptualised the project in his first tenure as a CM, said, "This is not merely a road, it

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is a corridor of Maharashtra's economy. It directly connects 24 districts with JNPT and paves the way for growth, transportation, logistics and opportunities in agriculture, tourism and industrial development."

The final stretch of the corridor passing through Nashik and Thane districts had some of the most challenging construction tasks. The 76-kilometre section comprises five twin tunnels of 10.73 kilometres in length, including the broadest tunnel in the country near Igatpuri that is 8 km long and 17.61 metres wide. It also has India's first fire-fighting system in a tunnel. As many as 17 viaducts with an aggregate length of more than 10.56 kilometres had to be built in hilly and forested territory.

"Because of a thick forest block, absence of access roads, hilly terrain and high rainfall in Igatpuri, we had to work with utmost caution. Nevertheless, we adopted the best safety measures to facilitate a safe working environment," said K Mallikharjuna Rao, Business Unit Head, Hydro and Underground, Afcons Infrastructure Ltd, who were a part of construction of the twin tunnels.

This section also has interchanges at Igatpuri, Khurghar and Amner. More than 60 low and high voltage power lines had to be shifted for the construction along with the new rail overbridge. The road now provides a safer route to the scary Kasara Ghat and shortens the journey time from Igatpuri to Kasara to eight minutes.

The Samruddhi Mahamarg is a greenfield expressway designed by the Maharashtra State Road Development Corporation (MSRDC) that passes through 392 villages in 26 talukas in 10 districts. It directly links Nagpur, Wardha, Amravati, Washim, Buldhana, Jalna, Chhatrapati Sambhaji Nagar, Ahilyanagar, Nashik and Thane and indirectly serves many others such as Chandrapur, Nanded, Dhule, Palghar and Raigad. The highest speed limit is fixed at 120 kmph on flat terrain and 100 kmph in ghat sections.

Shinde said, "We initiated the project in our term and completed it in our term only. This access control road will prove to be a game changer in economic activity between Mumbai and Vidarbha.

Earlier, the farmer who used to travel for three days to come to Mumbai with farm produce now is able to reach the same day."

Besides its huge size, the expressway has been built focusing on conservation and intelligent engineering, according to MSRDC officials. For the conservation of wildlife, 92 overpasses and eight underpasses have been built for the safe passage of animals. Over 3.3 million trees have been transplanted with native species and 1,000 farm ponds have been created along the road to support agriculture in the regions.

Fadnis also highlighted advanced features such as temperature sensitive fire fighting systems, rainwater harvesting systems and well designed inter-

changes. "The fire fighting system and temperature sensitive surfaces are designed such that they get activated when temperatures rise above 60 degrees Celsius and self-deactivates when the temperature goes below 30 degrees Celsius," he said.

The expressway will also facilitate the transportation of goods between MIHAN in Nagpur and JNPT in Mumbai with faster and more reliable cargo movement. In future, there are proposals for 200 MW of solar power generation along the route, with 22 facility centres being planned to benefit travellers. A gas pipeline from Konkan to Nagpur through this corridor is also planned that will ensure constant fuel supply to industries along this route.