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Title : THE MAN OF STEEL AND HIS PROTÉGÉ - 'Metroman' is a tough act to follow

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'Metroman' is a tough act to follow

Sidhartha Roy and Subhendu Ray

It was the early 1970s when Delhi's need for a mass rapid transit system for its increasing population was first felt. Many plans, studies and committees chafed this thought in the following decades, leading to the formation of Delhi Metro Rail Corporation (DMRC) in 1995. But things really got moving only in 1997 when Elattuvalapil Sreedharan (79), a senior Railway engineer of repute, was asked to take over as DMRC's managing director. A job Sreedharan had first flatly refused. "I was already 65 years old and didn't really need a job," he says.

With the Delhi Government persisting, Sreedharan finally relented but lay down his conditions before he joining as the Metro chief. "I demanded full independence, my own team and no interference if I had to deliver the project," he says. "They honoured my conditions."

With a small office in Lodhi Road, a handpicked team of employees and a no-nonsense attitude, Sreedharan got on to the task, which in the next five years, not only made him a household name in Delhi, but a national icon.

When DMRC opened its first corridor between Shahdara and Tis Hazari on December 25, 2002, it changed the way the city moved. Delimites now had a new commuting etiquette, a sense of responsibility towards public property and higher expectations from civic agencies.

THE BEGINNING

Born in a remote village in Palghat (Palakkad) district of Kerala, Sreedharan initially wanted to become a doctor. He eventually graduated from the Government Engineering College, Kakinada in April 1963 and started his career as a lecturer at the Kerala Polytechnic, Calicut. However, a year later he joined the elite Indian Railway Service of Engineers (IRSE).

Sreedharan earned his spurs after restoring the Panthan Railway Bridge in just 46 days, after 125 spans of the bridge were washed away in a tidal wave in December 1963. He was also in-charge of investigation, planning and design of the first ever Metro in the country in Kolkata from 1970 to 1975.

"Even as construction was going to start, Sreedharan opened a new design office. If he hadn't done that, Kolkata metro wouldn't have come up," says Professor SK Das, former IRSE and visiting faculty at the Institute of Engineering and Management, Kolkata.

Das, who worked with Sreedharan for four years at Kolkata Metro, says he was a completely hands-on boss. "His approach towards workers was that everything had to be done the way he wanted it. He, however, would never lose his temper during site inspections," he adds. "Even though I was a much junior officer but he would notice my work and guide me. He likes people who are serious and punctual," he says.

THE TASKMASTER

When Sreedharan retired in June 1990, he was in charge of building the prestigious Konkan Railway project, which was an engineering challenge.

'DECISIONS WERE QUICK AND EXECUTION QUICKER AT DMRC. THERE WERE NO PLEONS IN THE OFFICE BECAUSE FILES DIDN'T MOVE HERE. PEOPLE DID'



E SREEDHARAN 79
Revolutionised the way a public sector enterprise is known to function



MANGU SINGH 57
Will lead upcoming metro projects along with managing DMRC

THE MAN OF STEEL AND HIS PROTÉGÉ

METRO Those who've worked with the former Metro chief and his newly appointed successor say both men have very different personalities, but a lot in common too

After he took over as DMRC's MD, Sreedharan brought in a work culture that is not associated with public sector undertakings. "Decisions were quick and execution was quicker at DMRC. I came to DMRC on deputation and wasn't used to such a work culture," says a senior DMRC official who didn't wish to be named. "There were no peons at the DMRC office because files didn't move here, people did."

Sreedharan is very good listener but the last word is always his, the senior official says. "He is an inspiring leader who leads by example. He is the reason that most of us who had come on deputation, chose not to go back to our parent departments despite the huge work pressure here."

Anuj Dayal, Chief PRO of DMRC recalls a visit to Mexico many years ago when some of his colleagues expected to let their hair down and just take it easy for a few days. "The MD, however, ensured that we were on time for not only meetings but also lunch and dinners and maintained official etiquette during our stay," he says.

"It's due to his integrity and competence that Sreedharan has made the Delhi Metro what it is today," says M Ramachandran, former secretary, urban development ministry. Ramachandran, who was also the Chairman of DMRC for four years, feels that it was Sreedharan's personality, reputation and integrity that helped him push decisions without facing the usual bureaucratic red tape.

"He already had a reputation when he joined as MD and that is why he perhaps enjoyed more powers than what another head of a public sector utility would," Ramachandran says. "However, it should also be kept in mind that the central government and other associated agencies also facilitated the project, such as making land available."

After 14 years at the helm of DMRC, Sreedharan has finally hung his boots but he leaves behind a vast legacy. Delhi's expectation from the Metro are now higher than when Sreedharan joined DMRC and it remains to be seen how his successor carries the mantle.

Singh must rise up to managerial challenges

Mangu Singh is the new Metro man but it is not an easy job, following in the footsteps of a legend like E Sreedharan. Fifty seven year old Mangu Singh joined the elite Metro Rail Corporation (DMRC) along with E Sreedharan in 1997, as a chief project manager. However, not many would have thought that Singh, who rose through the ranks to the post of executive director and then director (works), would supersede many seniors in DMRC to bag the top job.

Putting all speculations to rest, Sreedharan chose him as his successor before ending his own 14-year old stint with DMRC.

"Singh is one of the most competent engineers that DMRC has but he has always been a silent worker and let his work talk for him," says a senior DMRC official who doesn't wish to be named.

There is a lot in common between Singh and his legendary former boss. "Both are from a rural background and have a modest upbringing," says Anuj Dayal, chief PRO of DMRC. Both are good listeners, have high level of personal integrity, are punctual and interestingly both have retained the same personal staff — such as their private secretaries and drivers — from the beginning of their careers. "Singh never eyed for the top seat

'WHILE SREEDHARAN'S APPROACH WAS TO GET WORK DONE AS ADVISED BY HIM, SINGH IS SOFT SPOKEN, HAS A VERY FRIENDLY DEMEANOUR AND IS MORE TECH SAVVY'

and became the top man just through his own capabilities and quality of work," says Dayal.

A MODEST START

Singh was born in Alawalpur Nainu village, in district Bijnor, Uttar Pradesh and is the eldest of seven siblings. He graduated in civil engineering from University of Roorkee (now IIT Roorkee) in 1979 and joined the Indian Railways Services of Engineers (IRSE). He is known for his contribution to the Kolkata Metro project and is considered the most experienced engineer of underground constructions in the country.

Like Sreedharan who is still fighting fit, Singh has been an athlete and does yoga and goes for walks regularly. He is a teetotaler and vegetarian who doesn't watch films, but only catches up with sports programmes on television.

Though he is an also a workaholic like Sreedharan, Singh is perhaps less hands-on and prefers to delegate authority. "He doesn't talk much and is very composed even during a crisis," says Dayal.

"The first underground section of Metro (Central Secretariat to Delhi University) was Mangu's baby and it is after this section that DMRC really built its reputation," he says. "He is also the environment expert of DMRC and the credit for getting carbon credits for Metro goes to him," he says.

Though he is one of DMRC's most competent people, managing the organisation, which has grown over the years, could prove to be a herculean task.

"Sreedharan was a brilliant professional manager and though Singh is a great engineer, it is yet to be seen how he does as a manager," says Professor SK Das, former IRSE, who has worked both with Sreedharan and Singh.

"He loves mathematics and has a brilliant analytical approach and I think he is the right person to lead DMRC after Sreedharan," he says. "While Sreedharan's approach was get work done as advised by him, Singh is soft spoken and has a very friendly demeanour," adds Das. Singh is also more tech-savvy than Sreedharan, who used to hate working with computers and never used a mobile phone.

THE ROAD AHEAD

Former Urban Development Secretary M Ramachandran, who has worked with both Sreedharan and Mangu Singh for four years as the Chairman of DMRC, says the situation when Sreedharan joined DMRC and now are much different.

"When Sreedharan joined DMRC, he was already respected and carried a reputation and didn't have to bother about many things that you have to take care of when you are part of a system," he says. Mangu Singh is still in particular and might have to face some interference in his work unlike Sreedharan, he says. "There is, however, not much interference in DMRC's daily affairs as such."

Ramachandran also said that Sreedharan had the advantage of the Metro not being operational when he joined, so there were no particular expectations. However, in Singh's case, Delhi Metro is already operational and carries a reputation and work is also going on for its Phase III expansion.

"Sreedharan's successor would have learnt a lot from him in the last 14 years and it is up to him how he wants to emulate him," says Ramachandran. He adds, "As this Metro is the consultant to many other metros coming up in country, Singh would not only have to run DMRC but also provide leadership to the upcoming Metro projects."

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Manmohan Singh at the Science Congress inaugural. PTI

If science seems stuck, so do the Prime Ministers

Read the speeches at the Science Congress: same lines, same themes down the years, from Vajpayee to Singh.

AMITABH SINHA
NEW DELHI | JANUARY 7

» *I would like to see a hike in investments in R&D from the present 0.86% of the GDP to 1% this year, and to be further increased to 2% over the next five years: Prime Minister A B Vajpayee at the 2000 Indian Science Congress, Pune.*

» *We must aim to increase the total R&D spending as a percentage of GDP to at least 2 per cent by the end of the XII Plan Period from the current level of about 1 per cent: Prime Minister Manmohan Singh at the 2012 Indian Science Congress, Bhubaneswar.*

A coincidence? May be. But consider this.

» *We will promote public private partnerships, to increase funding for frontier areas of scientific and technological research: Singh at the 2005 Indian Science Congress, Ahmedabad.*

» *We have to increase public private partnerships and catalyse significantly increased interaction between publicly owned Science and Technology institutions and industry: Singh at the 2012 Indian Science Congress, Bhubaneswar.*

The Science Congress is the largest congregation of scientists in the country, held every year from January 3 to 7 and inaugurated by the Prime Minister. It started in

1914 and the 99th edition just completed in Bhubaneswar. It is a permanent engagement on the Prime Minister's calendar and after Independence there have been only two occasions when the Prime Minister has not been able to make it.

The event is supposed to showcase the best in Indian science and an occasion for the Prime Minister to announce the big-ticket policy initiatives of the government related to science.

But the speeches of the Prime Ministers in the last 10 years reveal how repetitive this exercise has become reflecting either a policy stasis in the sector, lack of bold reforms or both.

Each year, the PM underlines the same themes: increase in investment, de-bureaucratization of scientific establishments, public-private partnerships. So much so that sometimes the Prime Ministers use the same quote to make the point. Like Vajpayee in 2000, when he quoted Nehru to say: "As we enter the new century, I recall the stirring words of the first Prime Minister of India, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, who said, 'Scientists are a minority in league with the future'". Vajpayee used Nehru's same quote two years later in Lucknow.

Singh followed him a few years later. He quoted Winston Churchill as having said that "The empires of the future are going to be the empires of the mind" in 2008 and then

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Science Congress

reused the same quote in 2009.

The intention of increasing the investment on R&D to at least 2 per cent of the GDP has been repeated almost every year in recent times — in 2002, 2007, 2008 and 2009. Of course, the growth in GDP means that in absolute terms the money going to science has gone up even if it has remained stuck at just under 1 per cent of GDP.

Similarly, freeing the lab from bureaucratic red tape has been a refrain down the years. In 2002, Vajpayee said that "bureaucratism is an enemy of a result-oriented approach and must be shunned, for it demotivates our scientific talent." The next year, he echoed this: "We have to ensure that our scientific institutions do not become afflicted with the culture of our Governmental agencies...the main cause leading to frustration among young scientists is seniority displacing merit and talent suppression."

Singh then struck the same notes in 2005 on the "tyranny of bureaucracy" and

the perils of bureaucratic systems in 2009. In 2010, he reiterated the need to "liberate Indian science from the shackles and deadweight of bureaucratism and in-house favouritism."

Another favourite, enduring theme: the decline of universities. In 2007, Singh referred to the "widespread concern about the decline in the standards of our research work in universities" and called for a "massive" upgrade. Two years later, he said: "We need strengthening of institutional leadership in universities and research institutions."

The one visible movement forward was in the spread of institutions. In 2008, the PM announced the launch of eight new IITs, 30 new Central universities, five new Indian Institutes of Science Education, seven new IIMs and 20 new Indian Institutes of Information Technology. Three years later, the PM announced the establishment of the eight new IITs and the five Indian Institutes of Science Education.