



Modi walks tall on highest rail bridge

More than 130 years ago, the Maharaja Hari Singh dreamt of a railway to link the Kashmir Valley to the rest of the Indian subcontinent (Amrit Dhillon writes).

He proposed the idea in 1892 and engineers from the ruling British colonial power surveyed the harsh terrain, reporting on the feasibility of a railway.

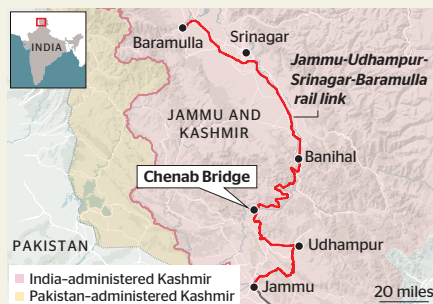
The plan was ultimately rejected and over time it appeared to have been shelved.

Yesterday, however, the Maharaja's dream came true 64 years after his death. Narendra Modi, the prime minister, opened the world's highest railway bridge, linking the valley to India's vast train network. Modi said it was "the crown jewel of

India". The Chenab bridge is being hailed as an engineering marvel, a symbol of India's strength, coming at a sensitive time after a terror attack in April that killed 26 people in the Pahalgam area of the contested Kashmir region. The outrage triggered a four-day clash between India and Pakistan last month.

Modi said as he walked across the bridge waving a large Indian flag: "Pakistan will never forget ... its shameful loss. Today's event is a grand festival of India's unity and firm resolve. This is a symbol and celebration of rising India."

The visit was his first to Kashmir since the conflict. The bridge is the centrepiece of the Udhampur-Katra-Baramulla project, a 169-mile line through



the mountainous region with 36 tunnels and 943 bridges, connecting Jammu and Kashmir by train for the first time with India's rail network.

It is expected to halve to about three hours the time to travel from the town of Katra, in the Hindu-majority Jammu region, to Srinagar, the main city in Kashmir.

The £200 million bridge stands 1,278ft

above the river bed, higher than the Eiffel Tower. India has hailed the Chenab span as the "world's highest railway arch bridge". Several road and pipeline bridges are higher but Guinness World Records confirmed that the Chenab trumps the previous highest, the Najiehe in China.

The bridge proposal was revived in the 1980s

The Chenab bridge, the highest in the world, was opened by Narendra Modi parading the Indian flag

and approved in 2002. Its construction sends a message about modern India and it is hoped to boost regional trade, providing an all-weather link. During winter the road between Jammu and Kashmir and the rest of India is often blocked by heavy snow.

For the state-owned Indian Railways, the bridge was its biggest civil engineering challenge. Work began in 2017 but the first problem was getting materials and manpower to the site. The first engineers reached the area by mule or on foot. Small factories were set up around the site to produce the steel, concrete and pylons.

Electricity had to be specially generated and water for the concrete was piped from far away. The bridge was designed to withstand wind speeds of 165 mph and severe earthquakes.

Since the span must stand up to fierce winds, a paint was developed that resists corrosion for up to 15 years.

In August 2022, the two sides of the bridge finally met. In February 2023 work to lay the railway tracks began and train trials followed.

Modi also announced further support for those families who suffered in the recent conflict, during which 80 people were killed in India and Pakistan. He said: "Their troubles are our troubles."