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PM to open critical J&K railway link

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NEW DELHI: Four and a half months after the hanging of Afzal Guru, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh will extend an olive branch to the Kashmir valley by inaugurating the 17.7 km railway line from Banihal to Quazigund. The line will realise the 114-year-old dream of connecting Kashmir valley with Jammu and enable a much reduced travel time of approximately 20-25 minutes.

In what will be his first-ever visit to Kashmir since Guru's execution, Singh will 'dedicate' the rail link to the people - which includes the country's longest transportation tunnel through the Pir Panjal range. The 11.2 km long tunnel - called the T-80 or the Pir Panjal tunnel - has been constructed using the New Austrian Tunnel Method (NATM) for the first time

The rail link, part of Udhampur Srinagar Baramulla Railway Link (USBRL) project, has been executed by the Ircon International, a railways PSU. "This method has paved way for

THIS IS SINGH'S FIRST VISIT TO THE VALLEY SINCE AFZAL GURU'S HANGING. THE RAIL LINK CONNECTS JAMMU TO KASHMIR VALLEY.

many more transportation tunnels now being undertaken in the country," Ircon officials said.

The Prime Minister's visit is tentatively scheduled for June 25. With the PM set to visit the Valley amid peace overtures by the Prime Minister-designate of Pakistan Nawaz Sharif, New Delhi is all set to broaden the ambit of consultations on Kashmir to start a "constructive dialogue" with all shades of opinion.

During the visit, the PM is also scheduled to release a stamp in the name of Kashmir's famed poet Ghulam Ahmed Mehjoor, while inaugurating the Mughal Road:

It was the late Maharaja Pratap Singh, who in 1898, had first toyed with the idea of connecting Jammu with the Kashmir valley.