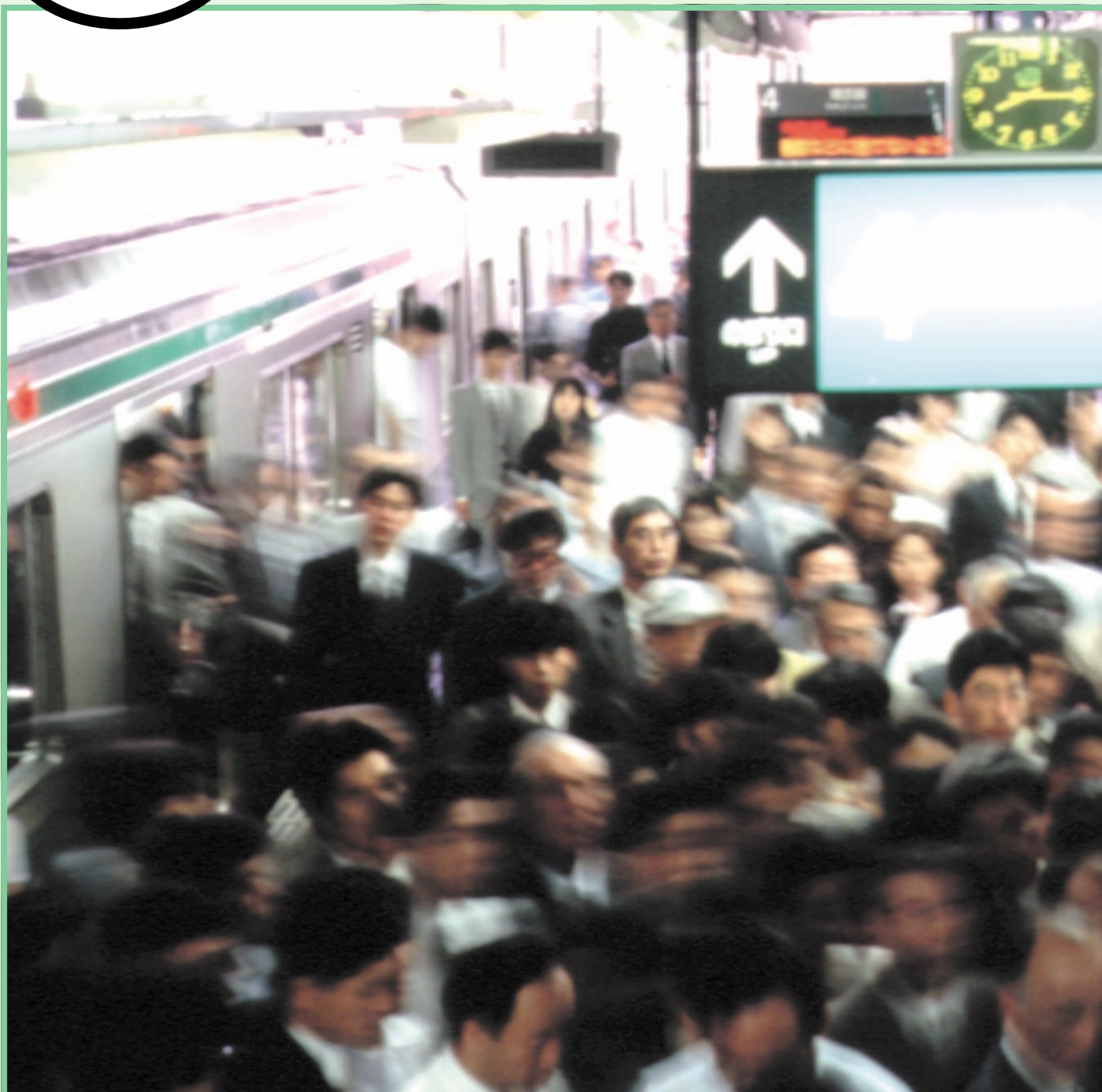


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FEATURE: Evolution of Urban Railways

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2-2, Yoyogi 2-chome, Shibuya-ku,
Tokyo 151-8578, Japan
Tel (81 3) 5334 0623
Fax (81 3) 5334 0624
Email info@jrtr.net
URL http://www.jrtr.net

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Morning rush-hour crowds on platform
of JR East Saikyo Line at Ebisu
Station (M. Mashima Photo Office)

Editorial

Significance of competent urban railways

In the early 1960s, Tokyo was growing rapidly and people suffered from overcrowded trains. The photographs of terribly congested Shinjuku Station became infamous worldwide with a large number of part-time 'pushers' stuffing passengers into trains arriving every 2 minutes. In the mid-1960s, the late Mr Satoshi Isozaki, then JNR's Vice-President, published an article in a popular monthly magazine, saying that Tokyo's commuter trains should be free-of-charge. He wanted to emphasize the difficulties of building new tracks to ease congestion in large cities such as Tokyo. JNR managers at that time thought it was impossible to invest large sums in Tokyo's suburban services for which passengers were only paying greatly discounted season-ticket fares. Mr Isozaki therefore suggested making commuter trains free and using public funds to build and operate such railways.

The government and the public ignored his opinion, but after a series of fatal accidents on overused lines, JNR was forced to invest heavily in quadrupling five main lines radiating from central Tokyo to the suburbs. It was not a business decision, but a humanitarian one taken by the state-owned railway to prevent further misfortunes. Although most JNR managers thought they could never recover such investments, the number of passengers increased dramatically as Tokyo's population continued to grow. Moreover, inflation caused by high economic growth reduced the burden of the initial investment to a considerable extent, and people could afford higher fares due to their higher disposable incomes brought by the growth. As a result, overcrowding was not reduced as much as expected, but all the quadrupled lines became profitable despite the overall financial collapse of JNR. The JNR privatization could not have been conceived without these profitable urban lines.

Among the world's large cities, only a few including London, Paris, Berlin, New York, Tokyo, and Seoul have built effective urban rail networks. However, alongside high-speed intercity services, good urban services are probably the only passenger lines that will survive the coming century.

T. SUGA

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