INDIAN RAILWAYS CENTENARY

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A Century of Railways

THE enthusiasm with which the Centenary of the Indian Railways is being celebrated is proof positive that much of our railway history has by now been forgotten or that we no longer bother to weigh the cost. One cannot think of modern India without the railways. What was a mere geographical expression, railways have turned into a nation, according to some. There may be others who question, are we a nation yet: But to ask whether British subjection and the common tight against it welded us into a nation or whether it was the instruments through which the alien power acted — the English language or of the railways, both introduced for the purposes of administration and promotion of British trade which did it would be to mistake the instruments lot the purposes they served to carry out. That we have dissociated them is evident. We welcome the advent of the railways today as the triumph of mind over matter, ofscience against supeistitions, as a symbol of progress, visible and the most widely demonstrated example of what science can do. Railways have carried this message to the farthest corners and made the remotest villages aware of the change that had come over the country.

To the Englishman in India, the first railway that steamed out a too years ago from Bori Bunder appeared more irresistible than the "infantry of artillery which conquered at Plassey of Assave "The field of conquest on which we have now entered, embracing the whole dominion guar ded by the Indian seas and the Himalayan mountains.'" said the *Bombay Times* . is a bloodless one." Thus is history falsified. Neither was Plassey won by the superiority of British arms nor was the held of conquest, on which the railways entered on that day a bloodless one.

Railways had to come as also the transformation wrought by them. But the social cost involved, in terms of human lives and suffering, could have been considerably lessened by timely and intelligent adaptation. That march of conquest, however, is by no means over. It is still on, though we who collect the coastal statistics, which the railways started to throw up in the process of opening up the hinterland to the free movement of goods, which meant so far the inflow of imported manufactures and outNow of raw materials and now represent the movement of the products of organised industries in one direction and that of te produce of subsistence agriculture in the other, may not record its progress.

The story of the development of railways has often been told. The powerful drive behind it. of course, was primarily political and administrative, Helping commerce, which meant opening up the country to British manufactures and securing important supplies for British manufacturers, came a close second. The consequenecs are equally well-known. Adaptation to changing circumstanees which could have enabled the country to develop and hold her own was denied, not only by the rapidity of railway construction but by every single

factor connected with the course, direction and manner of development of railways. Britain had passed through a couple of decades of railway promotion before promoters turned their attention to India and the foundation of the policy that was to change the face of this country was laid firmly in the .40s of the last century. This was long before the Mutiny, which only speeded up and expanded what had already been planned and set going.

In the 30's steam navigation to India had been successfully sponsored by almost the self-same set of promoters and P & O had succeeded in wresting a subsidy from the East India Company. But this was only a dress rehearsal of what was to follow. Following this rue, which was readily taken up by the Government of India, the East Indian Rail was Company and the Great Indian Peninsular Railway Company, both of which had been formed in 18.15 obtained from the Board of Directors terms of investment which were set by a standard type of contract—the guaranteed interest Railway contract, first signed in London in August 1849, The; capital which moved from England to India under these terms formed the largest single unit of international investment in the 19th century.

It was a member of the Governor-General's Council who clinched the argument thus: "that independently of commercial considerations, rail roads might have been invented and used as instruments of Government. In India the importance of them for conveying the troops and all that the troops require is incalculable" and that. "the Government of India might very well be justified in making rail roads for the attainment of them".

In Britain, on the other hand, the main emphasis was on the commercial aspect of railways. India was no longer considered an *El Dorado*. The people were poor and in many parts thinly scattered and the Court of Directors thought that the remuneration for rail roads in India must be drawn chiefly from the conveyance of merchandise and not from passengers. This was, incidentally, a serious miscalculation. Ever since the opening of the 'first lines in the toco's. Indian railways have always carried a relatively heavier passenger traffic.

The ancient mines of Golconda may not yield diamonds any more, the *Times* wrote wistfully in 1847 but there was "the worth of a shipload of diamonds in the cotton fields of Deccan." The dependence of Manchester on uncertain supplies of cotton from America was a source of considerable anxiety, though in this particular matter, Britain was doomed to be disappointed. The *Economist* went one better. There was no tropical raw material "for the production of which India is not as well, or better adapted than any other country; while its dense and illustrious population would seem to oiler an illimitable demand for our manufactures." How the Court of Directors and the Parliament were brought round to accept the guarantee to the railways which had been repudiated by Peel in strong terms as not only unprecedented but very indiscreet" can only be explained by political and not economic reasons. The chapter throws penetrating light on the .movement of capital to undeveloped areas which has a bearing on the present situation.

The violence of the impact of railways was so overwhelming that its effects are writ large on every aspect of Indian life, social, economic and political. Break up of the village: economy, separation of rural industry from agriculture and the destruction of our industries in that process are some of these. Proponents of steam navigation in Britain had observed that "the manufactures of England have in *some* instances superseded those of India." (Italics ours.) The builders of railways could claim that by the time their task was completed, the manufacturers of England had, in *all* instances superseded those of India. These do not exhaust the influences of the railways which pervaded even the physical features of the country. Lines had been laid, with little regard to the natural drainage of the country, increasing thereby the incidence of floods and spread of malaria.

Today .all that is past. We no longer need the railways to prove to us the superiority of reason over faith or of science over custom. But the legacy that railways have left behind m the shape of the distorted pattern of our industry and agriculture will take decades to rectify in the most favourable of circumstances. The primacy of the coastal areas, the location of industries and regional specialisation of crops and the lay-out of internal communications, when these are studied, we will probably conic to realise that the country is not at the end of the era of railway development but only at the beginning. Experts have hazarded the guess that the great age of railway building is over, what we will see in the next 100 years is more of consolidation than expansion. This is also the Planning Commission's attitude to the problem, since the Five-Year Railway Plan aims at nothing more than replacement and rehabilitation. There is little of expansion. It may not be possible to foresee the future lines of development of railways very clearly until the pattern of economic development takes more concrete shape. That is to say, assuming that the main lines have all been laid, if the village is going to be the centre, what are they going to be? Even if feeder lines are all that remain to be constructed, the network of railways in the future would exceed many times the trunk routes in length. But prophecy is risky when improvements in communications have left railways far behind and fanned out in several other directions.

Of the early prophets, Marx was, as always, right in thinking that when you have once introduced machinery in the locomotion of a country which possesses iron and coal, you are unable to withhold it from its fabrication". But Marx was wrong in his timing, for British rule did withhold it for nearly a century. The manufacture of locomotives successfully pursued and then abandoned in 1925 is an instance in point that is closed to the railways. The bond that the railways were laid to strengthen has been burst but the question of the proper utilisation of these erstwhile instruments of bondage for our own purposes hangs perilously where Britain left it. The march of reason and of science started a 100 years ago has yet a long way to go.

With a view to enable contracting parties to open the whole line at the earliest, period with the least possible outlay, it might be advisable to permit of the laying down, in the first instance, of a single fine of railway, with all necessary passing places but this should distinctly apply to the permanent way only, as the earthworks and masonry (but more especially the masonry works) should be construe ted for the reception of a double line."

From the Report of F W Simms, Escj, CE, who had been sent out by the Hon'ble Court of Directors in June 1845 to investigate the practicability of opening a railway line to connect Calcutta with Mirzapur and the North Western Provinces.