

A lifetime of railways, but some more please

The Railway Staff College (RSC) started in 1952 in a beautiful premise, has served the nation in a basic manner by training thousands of IR officers. The service rendered is not just to the IR, but to the transport sector and in a broader sense to logistics and supply chain management.

My personal love affair with the Indian Railways has multiple dimensions: the institution, childhood memories, the Metre gauge (MG) system and many more. Given my excitement for railways, the RSC has been almost a pilgrim center for me. My first visit was in December 1970, as a tourist with my parents on a Rajasthan/Gujarat trip. I got a little more insight into the RSC when my father came for a refresher course sometime in the 70s. My next visit was during the first term break, when I had joined IIM Ahmedabad as a student in Sep 1976. The library and the model room held a fascination for me, not easy to describe. During the second year and then following up as a Research Associate, I started a course and research projects connected with railways, and that brought me to RSC on many occasions.

One of my first visits connected with the railways and the transport sector was to visit the RSC within a few weeks of my joining IIM in October 1985. Since then, I have made innumerable visits to be involved in programmes, joint research and case writing.

The association is even more cherished since I have been associated with IR ever since I was born, 63 years ago. My father had his career in the IRSE, starting in 1945 with the then Madras and Southern Mahratta Railways, and later with the Southern Railway, Dandakaranya-Bolangir-Kiriburu Railway project and 4 IR zones before retiring in 1981.

My memories of railway colonies are from Madurai (1960, when I was five?) Tadval (a small station on the Bhima river near Solapur), Hubballi, Visakhapatnam and Secunderabad, as I schooled in these towns, enjoying rail-oriented vacations. My father, like a typical IR officer, experienced about 22 transfers in a career spanning 36 years. I remember my mother, not just taking these moves in her stride, but expertly managing transfers with clear lists of what would be packed to be sent by a parcel van and what would go in the saloon that facilitated our move.

My tryst with the railways in my growing years has been with the MG, at Madurai, Tadval, Hubballi. Even Secunderabad, Guwahati and Ahmedabad had meter gauge, and what was special was that they had rather rare stretches of double line MG. The broad gauge always seemed a bit distant and impersonal, not only because of the daunting size but also because the journeys from Guntakal for our vacations were by regular train berths/seats rather than by saloon that was a veritable home on wheels.

One way , not the other

Another exciting, though constraining aspect about MG

was its unidirectionality in the coupling. I was not even aware of it, though I lived close to yards and stations in my childhood until, during one of my vacations at Guwahati, I read the fascinating project report of the Assam Rail link project, that was to cover all the way from Barsoi (near Katihar) to Fakiragram in Assam. With direct connectivity to the Northeast having been lost out due to the formation of East Pakistan, this project was conceived right after independence and a new MG link had to be laid through the Chicken Neck area. An important design element was the number of reversals along the new route that had to be an odd number, as there had been a reversal on the East-West MG main line at Lalmanirhat in East Pakistan.

Only locomotives and saloons had the privilege of couplings that could connect flexibly on either side.

The proposed line, which built on branch lines, had two reversals at Barsoi and at Mal Bazaar. Hence, a third reversal would be required on this new line to ensure that the rolling stock could connect with one another. Siliguri was a possibility as existing narrow-gauge lines considered for conversions had a reversal. Finally, it was decided that there would be only one reversal at Siliguri, being the significantly more important town, and the reversals at Barsoi and Mal Bazaar would be avoided, achieving faster train movements. Today as you travel via Barsoi, you will see a long bulbous turn East of Barsoi. The Mal Bazaar station was avoided by bypassing it.

Another important consequence of the unidirectionality was the inability to have bypasses at junctions. A fascinating legacy was that Secunderabad MG station had a bypass at Malkajgiri station, used only by freight trains and all freight trains had to enter Maula Ali for reversal. Ahmedabad had a bypass for freight trains too, and that was the correct way to connect between Sabarmati and Asarwa, the stations on either side. However, the coaching stock from Udaipur side entering the Ahmedabad MG Station coaching yard without going on the bypass had a protocol of not mixing with the Mehsana/Delhi trains.

The MG system was considered inferior to the broad gauge primarily due to carrying capacity and maximum permissible speeds, even though it had a per kilometer construction cost advantage. I think the MG crossed the 20-coach train length much ahead of BG. Trains in Northeast like the Assam Mail had more than 20 coaches, but one still saw rooftop traveling. Converting critical stretches of the MG had begun as I grew up my father involved on the Pune-Miraj-Kolhapur conversion. Senior IR leaders still rooted for the MG.

For MG aficionados like me, it is somewhat sad from a high of over 25000 kms, the MG network has now dropped to under 3500 kms, about 5% of the total network.

I am happy though that from a heritage perspective, some MG lines have been identified for preservation. **RB**



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