

*Published in the Special Number of the
Gujarat Chamber of Commerce Bulletin by
Gujarat Vapasi Mahamandal, Ahmedabad. (Jan 64)
(Reproduced from Economic Times Article)*

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INTER-STATE TRANSPORT BY ROAD

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The field of inter-State transport by road is a jungle of restrictions and handicaps. The many impediments that reduce the efficiency inherent in inter-State transport assume strange dimensions and one is left to wonder how this branch of traffic is able to survive at all. What is particularly distressing is that, but for the periodical appointment of Committee to study the acute position in this regard, little has been done to bring about a real improvement. The way in which the recommendations made in 1959 in this respect by the Road Transport Reorganisation Committee appointed by Government, of which I had the privilege to be the Chairman, have been practically put in cold storage is typical of the fate of the reports of the other official Committees also. All along, the transport situation in the country has been gradually deteriorating and threatens to worsen in the near future.

Prior to 1940, restrictions on road transport were non-existent. Goods vehicles moved about freely all over the country and carried all kinds of commodities. But when the Railway suffered losses during the recession in the 1930, the Government, which had a vested interest in them, felt that such losses were due to competition by road transport. The result was the birth of the Motor Vehicles Act of 1939. The Act imposed numerous restrictions on the movements

of motor vehicles, on the assumption that the interests of the Railways should be protected from what was termed as "unhealthy" competition.

The feeling that was generated in the 30's soon developed into something akin to rancour towards road transport. There was a severe shortage of transport during and after the Second World War. This did not deter the authorities from denying to road transport its rightful place in the economy of the country. In 1945 was framed a "Code of Principles and Practice" for the regulation of the road transport industry. This 'Code' sought to hamstring goods traffic by confining it to a radius of 75 miles and argued that permits beyond the distance should be granted only if it was established that the Railways could not handle the traffic.

As the transport shortages were mounting from the inception of the Plans, Government sought to improve the situation by attempting an amendment to the Motor Vehicles Act of 1939 in 1956. A feature of the amendment was the appointment of an Inter-State Transport Commission to look after the coordination and development of inter-state traffic. However, Government, in whose minds prejudices sowed long back were still alive, did not arm the Commission with the necessary powers. It was left to function purely as an advisory body. To make its deliberations still more ineffective a seat

on it was given to the Railways. As may be expected, beset with these handicaps and the chronic indifference of the States in matters relating to road transport except of course, when it comes to coveting the tax proceeds. The Commission has succeeded in merely scratching the surface of the problem. States do not see eye to eye on many issues, and all these factors continue to hold in hostage the real interests and progress of inter-State traffic.

That the States display but a casual interest in the problem of inter-State traffic is clear from the fashion in which the number of inter-state permits to be granted is fixed. This is arrived at arbitrarily, nor is it periodically renewed in the light of progress. Consequently, the number allowed always trails behind the demand. States which are at different levels of economic development wrangle over parity in the number of permits to be granted, with the result the pace of progress in the whole region is grievously retarded. The position in respect of permits over routes transversing more than two States is even worse. Such traffic is, even at this date, presumed to be in the province of the railways. Consequently trucks are allowed to ply on such routes only under temporary permits valid for a short time in some cases just sufficient for a return journey. No wonder that, when recently the Inter-State Transport Commission directed the issue of 320 permits over some such routes on a regular basis, it was acclaimed as historic achievement.

Till recently there was no reciprocal agreement between States as to the levy of taxes on inter-State permits. Even though operator had paid all the taxes in his home State, he had to pay

them all over again in the other State. After prolonged persuasion, the I.S.T. Commission has succeeded in making the States agree to a single-tax system, but they have refused to extend the facilities to the cases of temporary permits which are demanded in large numbers. They also insist on collecting separately the goods tax in each State, so that the same consignment, moving by road, is taxed many times over.

Our primeval road system is another basic handicap to inter-State traffic. Due to weak bridges and Road foundation, various States prescribe different weight limits for trucks. Consequently, goods have to be transhipped at State borders, calling for much waste of time, labour and money. Alternatively, trucks have to carry uneconomic loads. In Bengal, the authorities have practically stopped issuing further permits on the Grand Trunk Road till it is widened and improved and the congestion now prevailing is relieved. Cases are also not wanting where, due to unbridged river crossing and unplanned repair schedules, trucks have to take a lengthy detour, thus adding to the travel time and expenses.

The notorious octroi check posts that dot our highways are a source of considerable delay and harassment in their own way. The callous detention of the vehicles and the corrupt practices they give rise to, have been pointed out repeatedly to be a source of great waste of economy and effort. Their entire abolition, recommended long ago, is still overdue.

For all these reasons, inter-State traffic continues to be undeveloped. The apathy of Government towards this vital problem has done great harm to our economic expansion. During the Second

Plan, the Railways, whom Government continue to regard as the main-stay for all our transport needs, buckled under the heavy demands thrown on them. Consequently, production targets lagged behind and the momentum gained was lost.

Where exactly are we heading at this rate? Those who are aware of the facts have taken serious alarm at the rate at which the gap in the transport capacity is widening. They have given facts and figures that graphically portray the magnitude of the impending chasm. According to them under the Plan schemes and the Emergency, production during the III plan will exceed targets and create a need for 375 million tons of long distance transport. The Railways-despite the discriminatory bounties extended to them by Government can clear 260 million tons and no more, and that too only if they make the best of it. As the road transport industry has, for long, been kept under duress, it can, along with the moribund inland water transport system, dispose of another 40 million tons at the most. The question remains : what is to happen to the balance of 75 million tons? To put it more impressively, the magnitude of the gap will be five times what we had two years back. It is at once evident that, if our current Plans are to have any validity at all, we should meet the impending disaster half-way before we head for total catastrophe.

The only way to escape the debacle is to deliver road transport from the restraints and pin-pricks mentioned above. The Indian Roads & Transport Development Association has estimated that we will require at least 60,000 inter-State permits. So the I.S.T. Commission should be vested with the requisite powers and, as recommended by the Road Transport Reorganisation Committee, it should freely grant the permits once the need for additional, demand is established. The number of permits, viz. 320, now for issue is of course ridiculously inadequate.

But before the I.S.T. Commission can take these steps and act as is expected of it, a fundamental anomaly in its composition requires to be removed. It requires little imagination to see that the Commission will remain a mere show piece as long as the Railways are given a strong voice in its decisions. Can those interested in the road transport industry ever aspire to be given a seat on the Railway Board by the same logic?

The growth in the long distance road transport resulting from an imaginative handling of the subject cannot harm the interests of the Railways now or at any time in the foreseeable future. On the other hand, by lifting the excessive burden on the railways, it can afford them some relief and the capacity thus released can be used by them to satisfy the supreme needs of defence and its correlated industries and the demands of its neglected passengers and customers.

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