

Transport Co-ordination

By

M. R. MASANI

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Each agency of transport is a service essentially complementary to the others.

Of the four major carrier services in India, viz. air, water, roads and rail, air transport, though it has recorded commendable progress in the past two decades, is still in a developmental stage. Its growth, moreover, has to be planned from the point of view of strategy. It can therefore safely be ruled out from any discussion of the problem of transport co-ordination in India.

Coming to shipping, the ground for co-ordination has been covered to some extent by the Rail-Sea Co-ordination Committee in 1957. The Committee recommended the setting up of suitable machinery to assess the requirements of transport by rail and sea and to make suitable recommendations regularly with regard to the movement of commodities by these two agencies.

Coastal shipping and inland waterways possess valuable transport potential that can be exploited to tremendous advantage at negligible cost. The attraction of water transport lies in the fact that waterways are provided by nature and furnish a readymade artery of commerce. All that is needed is for waterways to be protected from silting and kept navigable. Unfortunately, navigation of inland waterways in India lacks both organizational and technical facilities. After a century of protracted neglect, efforts are being made to revive them, e.g. the setting up of the Ganga-Brahmaputra

Water Transport Board in Patna. These efforts, however, are necessarily proving abortive as nothing is simultaneously being done to define the role of inland navigation in national transportation.

The Major Problem

By far the major issue in regard to co-ordination of transport centres round the age-old rail-road



problem. With her 35,213 route miles, India today is equipped with one of the largest railway networks in the world. With the Indian railways made to dominate our transportation scene long before the advent of motor vehicles in the country, the official attitude has come to be considerably railway-oriented to the virtual neglect of all alternative forms of transport.

Refusal to Recognise Facts

With the first blast of competition to railway development from motor transport in the wake of the Great Depression, not only was there a conspicuous lack of steps to develop road transport,

but its spontaneous growth was systematically crippled by a load of taxation and licensing barriers unparalleled in the history of the world. The tragedy on our transport front is that even today, when all advanced economies having consigned their railway networks to obscurity as being of declining social and economic importance, are reaping the manifold advantages of road transport, railways in India are still being propped up to preserve their pride of place at the top of our transport structure. The result is that long distance and inter-State traffic, which is almost exclusively reserved for the railways, is denied the speed and efficiency highway transportation offers.

A well co-ordinated transport policy demands the provision of services in such a manner that every ton of goods carried or passenger transported moves through that agency of transport which is best suited for it. Our railways, no doubt, constitute an integral part of our communications network. They are not however sacred relic to be preserved against competition. Competition, i.e., a competitive spirit in the service of the community, is certainly well worth preserving. To quote Prof. Walker of Oxford University: "There is no decisive reason in theory or practice why a service such as transport should not be competitive and yet co-ordinated."

The Railway Lobby

Governing authorities in India have steadily fostered the notion that, for reasons economic and technical, the railways and the railways alone are suited to the haulage of certain bulky and basic industrial raw materials. This of course, is ridiculous. 25 and 30-ton articulated vehicle combinations in economies like West Germany, U.K. and U.S.A. have displayed the tremendous technical possibilities of road transport to haul the produce of iron and steel plants, as also a variety of other strategic materials. Unless the operational freedom of road transport is put on a par with the railways, its development is bound to lag behind.

Crippling Tax Burden

What is more, the entire road transport taxation structure ought to be rationalised *vis-a-vis* that of the railways. The motor vehicle user in India pays on an average a tax of Rs. 3,700 per annum, which is more than seven times the levy in a prosperous economy like U.S.A. at just Rs. 500 per annum.

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all authorities—Central, State and Municipal—road transport has to bear a crushing overall tax burden. Each State separately collects a Goods Tax, with the result that the same consignment is taxed several times over while in transit alone. The total incidence of levies is so great that at 6½ Ps. per ton-mile, taxation on road transport equals the average freight charged by the railways!

Restrictions Galore!

The motor vehicle licensing system is equally absurd and detrimental to development. For reasons best known to themselves, the Ministry of Transport, on the insistence of the railways, have recommended to State Governments that, as far as possible, road transport permits for routes exceeding 300 miles should not be issued without the approval of the railways. The 300 mile route limit is a restriction carried over from a ruinous period of competition some 30 years ago. It is an anachronism in the transport situation as it faces us today.

As for the issue of multi-State permits, the position is deplorable. The bulk of traffic operates on temporary permits valid for no more than one month, after paying separate taxes, often, to all the States traversed, although on paper the States have accepted the principle of single point taxation. From among the two hundred thousand trucks which ply on our roads, the Inter-State Transport Commission has recommended barely 1000 vehicles for regular (non-temporary) trunk route permits, and some of them are subject to the distance restriction of 300 miles.

Restrictions on the weights carried by road operators constitute an added deterrent to the industry's rapid expansion. Weak bridges, narrow roads and inadequate surfacing often compel the use of small uneconomic trucks on even arterial routes. In States such as Bihar, Orissa and Assam and in parts of Maharashtra, even a gross vehicle weight of 10 tons is not permitted.

Inadequacy of Roads

The inadequacy—both quantitatively and qualitatively—of our road system itself is a tremendous set-back to the industry. Our road density is alarmingly low. With just 36 miles of road per square mile of area, we stand way below in the world scale—with 450 miles of corresponding road in Belgium, 360 miles in France, 228 miles in U.K. and 76 miles in Ceylon. Of this ridiculously poor road mileage in India, barely 34% is surfaced. And even these few surfaced miles are sub-standard,

with vast segments of them riddled with pot-holes. The loss to operators from the wear and tear on vehicles and increased fuel consumption has been estimated at Rs. 60 crores per annum by the Indian Roads Congress. This is a staggering national waste which can easily be avoided.

Road development, unfortunately, has been regarded as an expendable item in our successive five year plans. While year after year the coffers of the State swell with increasing revenue from road operations, the investment allotted for road construction and maintenance is cut as fine as possible. In the second and third five year plans, the railways were allocated about 70 per cent. of the total investment earmarked for transport and communications. The country's need for more and better roads is far greater than her need for an indiscriminate expansion of the railways. The railways have no counterpart in the inherent potential of road transport to expand. They easily reach the limits of their capacity within allocable resources, beyond which they are in no position to handle the traffic offered. The flexibility of road

transport renders it an undisputably more efficient mode of handling our mounting traffic demands.

Need for a Realistic Approach

If the economy is to be saved from the throes of a severe transport shortage, it is imperative that road transport be put on a par with the railways and its development fostered as rapidly as possible. Of the 375 million tons of traffic demand estimated at the close of the current Plan, the railways may at best cater for 260 million tons. Road transport which carries barely 20 million tons of traffic in India today, will of necessity have to shoulder the bulk of the remaining 115 million tons by 1965-66. It is mere wishful thinking to hope that it will be able to do so if its growth continues to be hamstrung by restrictions and artificially crippled in the interest of preserving the monopoly of the Indian Railways. Unless there is a realistic shift of emphasis from rail to roads and the two services are co-ordinated within the framework of a bolder transportation policy based on economy, efficiency and a larger perspective, the country's transport problem will continue to plague it.



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Coastal shipping and inland waterways possess valuable transport potential that can be exploited to tremendous advantage at negligible cost. The attraction of water transport lies in the fact that waterways are provided by nature and furnish a readymade artery of commerce. All that is needed is for waterways to be protected from silting and kept navigable. Unfortunately, navigation of inland waterways in India lacks both organizational and technical facilities. After a century of protracted neglect, efforts are being made to revive them, e.g. the setting up of the Ganga-Brahmaputra

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Refusal to Recognise Facts

With the first blast of competition to railway development from motor transport in the wake of the Great Depression, not only was there a conspicuous lack of steps to develop road transport,

but its spontaneous growth was systematically crippled by a load of taxation and licensing barriers unparalleled in the history of the world. The tragedy on our transport front is that even today, when all advanced economies having consigned their railway networks to obscurity as being of declining social and economic importance, are reaping the manifold advantages of road transport, railways in India are still being propped up to preserve their pride of place at the top of our transport structure. The result is that long distance and inter-State traffic, which is almost exclusively reserved for the railways, is denied the speed and efficiency highway transportation offers.

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Restrictions Galore!

The motor vehicle licensing system is equally absurd and detrimental to development. For reasons best known to themselves, the Ministry of Transport, on the insistence of the railways, have recommended to State Governments that, as far as possible, road transport permits for routes exceeding 300 miles should not be issued without the approval of the railways. The 300 mile route limit is a restriction carried over from a ruinous period of competition some 30 years ago. It is an anachronism in the transport situation as it faces us today.

As for the issue of multi-State permits, the position is deplorable. The bulk of traffic operates on temporary permits valid for no more than one month, after paying separate taxes, often, to all the States traversed, although on paper the States have accepted the principle of single point taxation. From among the two hundred thousand trucks which ply on our roads, the Inter-State Transport Commission has recommended barely 1000 vehicles for regular (non-temporary) trunk route permits, and some of them are subject to the distance restriction of 300 miles.

Restrictions on the weights carried by road operators constitute an added deterrent to the industry's rapid expansion. Weak bridges, narrow roads and inadequate surfacing often compel the use of small uneconomic trucks on even arterial routes. In States such as Bihar, Orissa and Assam and in parts of Maharashtra, even a gross vehicle weight of 10 tons is not permitted.

Inadequacy of Roads

The inadequacy—both quantitatively and qualitatively—of our road system itself is a tremendous set-back to the industry. Our road density is alarmingly low. With just 36 miles of road per square mile of area, we stand way below in the world scale—with 450 miles of corresponding road in Belgium, 360 miles in France, 228 miles in U.K. and 76 miles in Ceylon. Of this ridiculously poor road mileage in India, barely 34% is surfaced. And even these few surfaced miles are sub-standard,

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