

# Indian Railways

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Synopsis: The history of Indian Railways goes back to 1853. Since then it has grown into a vast network. It is the single largest employer in the world. But there are many challenges before it including tough competition from private sector in transportation by roads. It has undertaken the 'Project Unigauge' on a large scale. By 2004 all of its existing metre and narrow gauge will be turned into broad gauge. Similarly, route-electrification has been undertaken. It has introduced many new, innovative and progressive schemes and yet it has to cover a long distance in the matters of safety, punctuality, sanitation, consumer satisfaction, reservations, behavior of staff etc. Corruption is rampant in the railways and it needs to be checked immediately. It needs mass restricting in many areas.

The history of Indian Railways goes back to the year 1853 when the first train steamed off from Bombay to Thane, a distance of 34 km. Since then Indian Railways has grown into a vast network of 7,043 stations spread over a route length of 62,600km, with a fleet of 7,806 locomotives, 39,929 coaches, 3,444 electric multiple units and 3,46,394 wagons in 1993. The growth of Indian Railways during these years can be said to be really phenomenal. The network runs multi-gauge operations including Broad Gauge, Metre Gauge and Narrow Gauge. The railways in India provide the principal mode of transportation for freight and passengers. It brings people together from the farthest, sightseeing, pilgrimage and education. India railways have been a great integrating force during the last 100 years. It has integrated the economic life of the country and helped in accelerating the development of industry and agriculture.

Indian Railways is the single largest employer in the world with about 2 lakh employees. It handles 70-75% of the bulk movement and contributes about 2.6% of the G.D.P, and its sales revenue is equivalent of 8% of G.D.P. Its engine efficiency is 92% and it boasts the highest asset utilization rate in the world. But on the minus side 40% of its wagons movement is empty. It offers over 104 types of concessions to its travelers—so much so that almost half the passengers on a train are discount passengers. During 1995-96 the Indian railways incurred loss of Rs.12.16 billion in passenger service and transportation of essential goods. It is divided into 9 zones and further sub-divided into 59 divisions. Divisions are the basic operating units.

The main objective of railway planning has been to develop the transport infrastructure to carry the projected quantum of traffic and meet the development needs of the economy. So far Indian railways have implemented Eight Five Year

Plans, apart from Annual Plans in some years. During the plan-periods, the emphasis has been on a comprehensive programme of system modernization. During the decade 1991-2000, about 60% increase in total traffic is anticipated. With most of the hard-core routes nearly saturated, it is going to be the most challenging to maintain viability in the face of rising costs and competition from the private section in transportation by roads. To meet these challenges, it would be necessary to improve staff productivity, efficiency, reliability, safety etc. with adoption of appropriate technologies like more power and energy-efficient locomotives and also to make substantial investment for network development wherever the existing line capacity is under strain.

The 'Project Unigauge' was launched in 1992-93 and under it the Indian Railways is determined to transform the existing meter and narrow gauge into broad gauge by 2004. About 12,000 km. of lines has been identified for conversion by 1997, the end of the 8<sup>th</sup> Five Year Plan. The gauge conversion during 1950-92 has been 3,100 km. Between electrification was done. With this, out of 62,600 route km, 12,875 route km. has been electrified. The target for 1996-97 is 634 km, with which the Eighth-Plan target of 2,700 km. will be achieved.

The Indian Railways has done many significant things in regard to the services offered which include introduction of second-class sleeper coaches, A.C sleeper and Chair Cars, dieselization and electrification, introduction of direct trains connecting several additional pairs of cities, superfast trains like Rajdhani and Shatabdi Expresses. But still there are many areas where the customer satisfaction is not there. For example, as regards safety, punctuality, sanitation, amenities on trains is still much to be done and improved. Corruption is rampant in railways and the number of accidents is on the increase. The cases of bomb-explosions, robberies, thefts etc. are also increasing.

The Indian Railways needs a massive restructuring and re-orientation to customize to the needs of the customers. The falling share of the railways traffic is another point of concern. In 1950s, it carried over 80% of both passenger and freight traffic. Today, its share of originating passenger traffic is just 20% and that of freight 35%. The plain support for the railways has also fallen from 80% to about 15% of the total capital expenses during the last 5 years. Yet the monolith Railways carries over 70-75% of the bulk traffic and 80% of the long-distance passenger traffic.

The A.F. Ferqusson report has made many suggestions and recommendations to affect mass restructuring. In regard to passenger traffic, cargo movement and organizational matters. Some of these recommendations are- reduction in transit time, strengthening customer interface

facilities, introduction of schemes like overnight/frequent traveler scheme' inter-modal transport facilities, capacity addition, rotation of menus, improvement of hygiene, offering communication facilities on the trains etc.