

A Century of Suburban Service (from Westrail News)

Feb. 1961



A Century of Suburban Service

By
S. G. POTHAN

To thousands of city workers, the Western Railway suburban service is a commonplace which they take for granted and about which perhaps, they frequently grumble when the trains are overcrowded. But, I wonder how few suburban travellers have paused to consider the history behind these services, or the difficulties that had to be encountered and overcome, during nearly 100 years of its existence. Its history is almost like a romantic tale, and for that reason, if for no other, it is worthy to be told.

Unfortunately, there are certain gaps in its history and certain dates which cannot be precisely chronicled. It may seem somewhat strange that important historical documents should be missing in the railway archives, but thereby hangs a tale. In the second week of November 1905, the late King George V, who was then Prince of Wales, arrived in Bombay on an official visit. In honour of the royal visitor, the public buildings of Bombay were illuminated at night, mainly by the use then of coconut shells and oil butties arranged to bring into relief the architectural lines of the buildings. Early next morning, a man on duty inside Churchgate station, saw a dull glare on Queen's Road and going out to ascertain the cause, was astounded to see the Railway Headquarter Office in flames. The city fire brigade was alerted, within a short time it reached the site and by 8 o'clock the flames were brought under control, but by that time, the most important part of the building, including the Board Room and the Record Room, were reduced to a skeleton of ruin. It was in this fire that certain historical files were destroyed.

Now to go back to our story. Bombay is today the headquarters of two important railways, the Central and Western, but their early history presents one important difference. The G.I.P. or Central Railway, began with its headquarters at Bombay, whereas the Western, or B.B. & C. I Railway started away from Bombay about 160 miles to wards the north. The GIP was the earliest, the first small bit of railway line having been constructed in 1853 from Bombay to Thana. Two years later, the BB & CI Railway came into being and it was at Amroli, a small township about 3 miles north of the present Surat station, that the man with the pickaxe broke ground for the construction of the first section of line from Amroli to Ankleshwar a distance of 29 miles. The first train was run on this section on 10th February 1860. Once a beginning was made, the railway pushed ahead with the construction of the line to Ahmedabad and thereafter concentrated on the expansion of the line southward to Bombay. By the end of 1862, the line from Ahmedabad to Bulsar was constructed and thence the extension of the line south, towards its destined terminal at Bombay, engrossed attention. This took some little time, because the difficult waterways of the Narbada and Tapti rivers had first to be crossed and the Bassein creeks spanned, a no mean achievement for the 1860's. It was accomplished with skill and resolution and in three years time the line was brought by the end of 1864 to Grant Road. There it was halted for sometime.

The history of the suburban services is inextricably bound up with the growth and development of Bombay city and to understand

the background and origin of the service, let us peep into the history of Bombay just two years before the BB & CI Railway came to Bombay. Almost up to the year 1862, the city of Bombay, for all practical purposes, meant a cluster of buildings within the Fort area hemmed in by a fort wall, through which there were three gates, the entrance to which was challenged by an armed sentry at nightfall. The one in the north faced Bori Bunder and was known as Bazar



Churchgate

Gate, the second in the south was known as Apollo Gate, and the third facing westward, which intimately concerns our history, was Church Gate through which one passed to go to the Church or St. Thomas' Cathedral. The picture below is Church Gate, from which the station takes its name. If you look closely at this picture you will see the Cathedral tower. It is one of the landmarks of Bombay and stands unaltered today near the Asiatic Library and not far from Akbarally's Store.

What was it that led to the sudden development of Bombay, and when were the walls of the fortified city pulled down? Curiously enough, an important event in history, far away from Bombay was the principal cause for this sudden change. In the year 1861 the American Civil War broke out between the northern and southern States of America, and as there was a blockade of the American cotton ports, Lancashire was cut off from the main source of cotton for her mills. India was a cotton producing country and so a glorious and

unexpected opportunity presented itself for India to export cotton to meet Lancashire's demand. What followed was known as the "Cotton Boom", or "Share Mania", when the cotton trade brought a profit of £ 81 million, or 105 crores of rupees to Bombay. Fortunately for Bombay, the Governor at that time was Sir Bartle Fiere, a spirited and resourceful administrator (in whose honour the Floral, or now known as "Flora Fountain", was later built), who seeing Bombay rolling in wealth, decided to attract some of this money to an enterprise for creating a new city. He realised that to do so, the first requisite was to pull down the walls of the Fort and allow the city to expand. A project was formed for making allotments of land for private buildings and with the money realised a special fund was created for constructing important public buildings, all of which stand today in solemn grandeur facing the Oval maidan. Simultaneously, with building construction, a vast project was set afoot to reclaim the foreshore of Back Bay.

The focal point of our history is Churchgate and so let us try to visualise what the area, at or near about Churchgate, looked like when the railway first entered Bombay at Grant Road in 1864. The photograph below, fortunately preserved, was taken sometime in the same year



Churchgate area in 1864

by a man standing on a building somewhere near the present site of Flora Fountain, and facing westward towards Back Bay, or what we today call Marine Drive.

If you look carefully at this picture, you will see that in front of the tiled roofed building in the foreground, a broad road stretches towards the sea. That road is what we now call Churchgate Street. The cross mark shown in the picture is the spot where the Churchgate Railway Headquarters Office now stands. Look again at the end of the then Churchgate Street, and you will see a bund or bank of earth just before the sea, and in front of the bund you can see a road, which is what is today called Queen's Road. At or near this bund, is where the first Churchgate station was built. The broader road running right across the middle of the picture is Mayo Road, or the road in front of the Government buildings facing the Oval maidan. This picture portrays more than words can describe, the undeveloped condition of this area. To complete the picture, I cannot do better than reproduce an announcement in the Bombay Gazette of 6th February, 1859.

"Today Mr. Forjett with a fowling-piece shot a tiger within a few hundred yards of the fashionable drive on the Esplanade, and on the beach of Back Bay near Sonapore. Mr. Forjett promised the hide to Dr. Birdwood for the Museum.

Such was the state of things just before the BB & CI Railway broke ground in the neighbourhood of Churchgate.

In the meantime, negotiations were afoot by the railway to obtain land for extension of the line to Colaba. From the despatches of the Managing Agent of the railway to the Bombay Government it is seen that one alignment after another was suggested. At one time, the railway proposed Grant Road as the terminal station, later the claims of Marine Lines station were urged and finally plans for a proposed alignment from Grant Road to Back Bay "through the salt marsh and along the sea beach to Colaba with the terminus just outside the lately reclaimed land at Cooperage" was put forward. There was hesitancy on the part of the Bombay Government, because objection was taken to a railway line along the western face of the town,

as it was thought "It would interfere with the free circulation of air and exclude the sea breeze from the Esplanade and Rampart Row." Happily all these objections were eventually overcome, and by 1867 the BB & CI Railway were able to build a track along the foreshore and enter the Back Bay area, to a station of that name, somewhere near Marine Lines station. The exact spot on which the station stood cannot be determined. The year 1867 is crucial to our story for it was on 12th April 1867, that the first suburban service was inaugurated with one train each way from Virar to Back Bay. The stations were then named, "Viraur, Neela, Bassein, Panjo, Berewla, Pahadee, Andaru, Santa Cruz, Bandora, Mahim, Dadur, Grant Road, Bombay Back Bay." From 1867 to 1870 there was only one train each way daily, but by 1870 there was only much progress and instead of one train each day, the service had increased to five trains a day each way. It was in that year also that Churchgate is mentioned for the first time, from which we can surmise that in 1870 Churchgate had become a station at which trains terminated. Unfortunately, there is no picture of what that station looked like in 1870. It will be noted that in five years from entering Bombay, the railway had slowly but surely succeeded in entering and establishing a foothold in the heart of the city. More was yet to come.

The year 1870 and the decade that followed witnessed signs of great industrial and trade activity in Bombay. With the shifting of the "Cotton Green", or wholesale cotton market, from the Fort to Colaba, the latter assumed new importance. It was about this time that the Sassoon Dock and the Victoria Basin were built, at which foreign ships could load and discharge their cargo. The Railway Company after protracted correspondence and negotiations obtained permission from the Bombay Government in 1872 to extend the line to Colaba and establish a goods station there. This permission was grudgingly given, but it was made subject to the condition "That in the event of further reclamation being carried out in Back Bay, or any other measure of public

improvement being undertaken in that locality, the Railway Company shall move their railway, if called upon by Government to do so, to some other position between the Marine Lines Station and the Terminus at Colaba". We shall see later that this condition was enforced.

Thus Colaba, which was cut off from Bombay by the sea and was accessible only by a ferry boat, and had been joined by the causeway in 1835, had by 1873, or in less than 40 years, with its cotton depot, its docks, its bunders and its railway terminal, became an important centre of road, rail and shipping traffic. The railway built a goods station which was not a masonry building as permission was granted to erect only a semi-permanent structure mainly of timber. Unfortunately, no picture of this station constructed in 1873 is available. However, by this date the suburban service had made big strides and there were 24 trains each way daily.

The time had come when the slender foothold the railway had obtained in the city had to be strengthened.

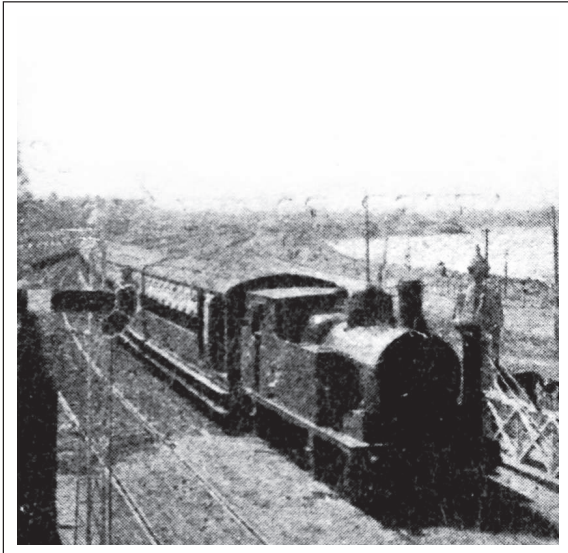
Churchgate faced the centre of the Fort and being nearest to the heart of the city, it soon began to grow in importance and portend signs that it would eventually occupy the pride of place in the suburban section. It is evident that the old station at Churchgate, such as it was in 1873, was unequal to the growing demands made on it. In 1876 it was therefore rebuilt and was a quaint structure which looked partly like an English inn as you can see from the picture reproduced below.

Besides the limited conveniences it provided, it consisted of two platforms, one Up and one Down. The Up platform was used by passengers coming from Marine Lines station and the Down platform by passengers bound from Churchgate



Churchgate Station 1876

to Marine Lines and beyond. Passengers had to use a level crossing at the south end of the station. This level crossing is obscured by the tree on the left hand side of the picture. It served a dual purpose and was used, not only by passengers coming from the Fort area who wished to go on to the Down platform, but also to prevent pedestrians crossing the line and to



A Down Local from Colaba at Churchgate Level Crossing
control trains from and to Colaba. The picture reproduced above shows a "Down" local from Colaba passing this same level crossing to enter

Churchgate station. You will see from the picture how undeveloped the area was west of the railway line.

You must remember that at this period the Back Bay reclaimer had not reclaimed the foreshore in the Churchgate area and the waters of the sea came almost up to the station. The picture shown below this page of Churchgate station gives you a graphic idea of the nearness of the sea.

As the years rolled on, the demand on the suburban service became heavier, and with the stimulus of industrial development and improving trade, the population began to increase, housing became inadequate, and the people began to look for residence to the open spaces in the north and beyond the creek. The habit of living in the country and coming daily into the city to work, or transact business, spread from year to year. By the year 1888, nearly 10 million passengers made use of the suburban services. This was a big stride forward. But great difficulty was experienced in working the passenger traffic into and out of Bombay, more particularly at Grant Road where the carriages and wagons were stabled, and at Colaba where suburban and main line trains terminated. At the



Panoramic view of Churchgate Station

latter station, 52 passenger trains were worked in and out daily and as there was no room for standing trains, which could only be accommodated at Grant Road, it was necessary for three daily main line passenger trains to be worked back empty over the line between Grant Road and Colaba. Also since the Loco running shed was at Parel, light engines had constantly to run between Parel and Colaba. All this seriously impaired traffic working. The station at Colaba was so cramped, that not infrequently on arrival of a main line train, it had to be shunted to give place to a suburban train, even before the main line passengers could take their luggage out of the train. It was thought that the problem could be solved if additional siding accommodation could be provided at Marine Lines station and it was made the terminus for all long distance passenger trains. Since the question was of general interest to the people of Bombay, it was referred by Government to a Committee. In 1888, the Committee stated that the enlargement

of Marine Lines station was not a satisfactory arrangement as it would require more land being taken up by the railway to which the people of Bombay would strongly object for it would restrict the already limited area used for recreation. The Committee recommended instead the enlargement of Colaba station as the only permanent means of coping with the problem. Accordingly, a block of land, between Woodhouse Bridge Road and Lower Colaba Road, was given to the railway and in 1896 a new station at Colaba was built. The picture below gives you an idea of the station building built in 1896 and which was in use up to 1930.

You may probably wish to know the exact location on which this station stood and what the station yard looked like. Fortunately, a picture is available which is reproduced on the next page.

This is a most interesting picture and I would ask you to look at it carefully. On the right of the



Colaba Station 1896



Colaba Station Yard

picture you will see a road forking into two, the one on the left goes to Colaba, and the one on the right to Cuffe Parade. Look at the building at the junction of these roads, it is "Imperial Mansions" which stands today unaltered. It helps you to fix the location of the station yard which is where "Badhwar Park" is today. The Colaba station itself was at the spot now occupied by the Naval Transport Depot. You can visualise from the track on which you see a train, that the alignment took the line through Badhwar Park and under Woodhouse Bridge (recently demolished) to Churchgate station.

By the turn of the century, the demand on the suburban services continued to increase and presented new problems. In the year 1904, the advisability of electrifying the services was first mentioned, the suggestion having been made by the Bombay Government to both the GIP and BB & CI Railways, but nothing could be done due to the outbreak of the First World War. To illustrate the pressure on the services it may be mentioned

that in 1914 the number of passengers carried amounted to 24 million, but in 1922 the figure had reached 45 million. Something had to be done to cope with the problem. Certain essential improvements to provide a better service were introduced, such as track circuiting and train control, quadrupling the tracks between Mahim and Parel and provision of extra rakes. But these improvements were palliatives and were insufficient to carry the enormous suburban traffic with real efficiency or economy. In 1923 therefore, plans and estimates for electrification were sanctioned at a cost of Rs. 2½ crores. The scheme covered two local tracks of line from Churchgate to Borivli, a distance of 22 miles two through tracks from Grant road to Bandra and also the electrification temporarily of the section from Colaba to Churchgate. On 5th January 1928, an important milestone was established and the first electric train was run from Churchgate to Borivli, a distance of 22 miles. Electrification necessitated extensive remodelling of Churchgate station. A picture of



Churchgate Station after Electrification

the station as it looked like after electrification is given on the next page. With the provision of a foot overbridge, the level crossing was practically closed to pedestrian and road traffic and was used almost exclusively for passing trains going to and coming from Colaba.

About this time it became known that Colaba station and Churchgate would be affected by the Back Bay Reclamation project, by then well in progress. To allow unimpeded access to the areas to be reclaimed on the foreshore, the railway by order of Government, was directed to



Churchgate Station in 1930



New Churchgate Station

relinquish the section of the line from Churchgate to Colaba; but this could not be done until a terminal station could be found. Plans were set afoot and a site was selected at Bellassis Bridge and Bombay Central came into being and was opened on 18th December 1930. From the midnight of 31st December, Colaba which had been the terminus from 1873, or for 57 years, ceased to be a station. The main line terminus was henceforth Bombay Central and Churchgate the terminal of the suburban section. To prepare for its altered status, Churchgate had for a year previous been in the process of thorough remodelling and the level crossing and foot overbridge dismantled. A picture of what it looked like in 1930 is reproduced on the next page.

From 1930, and the two decades that followed, there was a phenomenal expansion in industry and trade and an enormous increase in the population, which continued to exert a growing and irresistible pressure on the suburban services. In 1930 the number of suburban passengers was 30 million. In 1939-40, or 10 years later, the figure had leaped to 48

million passengers and 15 years later, or in 1955-56, the figure touched the giddy height of 178 million. It was plain, that the facilities available at Churchgate to handle this traffic, had become inadequate and a wholesale change was warranted. Great forethought and planning were devoted in designing a spacious and imposing station building to harmonise with the large storied buildings in the neighbourhood. To increase the frequency of trains, three lines with two platform faces each were provided, a highly effective route relay interlocking system of signalling to ensure quicker reception and despatch of trains was introduced, a spacious concourse to facilitate the movement of the enormous number of passengers using the station was provided, and to obtain the maximum use of the limited space available for office accommodation, an edifice consisting of a 7-storied building, 108 feet high, was raised over the concourse. The new Churchgate station building was opened on 9th June 1957.

The new station is a far cry from the small beginnings of a one train daily suburban service in 1867. But that service, though it began in an obscure and humble way, with a precarious foothold in the city, grew up along with the city and stood up to the unprecedented demands made on it during each milestone of its history. So we come today, to a period when the service has reached maturity and gigantic stature, with 369 electric trains running in and out of Churchgate, bringing into the city in the morning, and taking back to the suburbs in the evening, after the day's work is done, a total of 600,000 suburban passengers each day.
