

**The Role of Western Railway's
Suburban Services
In the Development of Bombay
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THE ROLE OF WESTERN RAILWAY'S SUBURBAN SERVICES IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF BOMBAY

By

S. S. RAMASUBBAN

General Manager, Western Railway

An event of great significance in the efforts which the Indian Railways have been making towards self-sufficiency took place on 14th October, 1961 when the Prime Minister inaugurated at Chittaranjan the first electric locomotive built in the Chittaranjan Locomotive Works. This event, unique in itself, highlights the vital role that electric traction is destined to play in providing the ever increasing volume of rail transport required by the country's rapidly growing economy. The citizens of Bombay have witnessed the operation of electric traction for well over 30 years. It cannot be gainsaid that of all forms of transport, the suburban electric train service occupies the place of pride. This service has become an integral part of the lives of the citizens of this great city, for over 12 lakhs of them make use of it daily for commuting to and from their places of work – in fact, the tempo of life of the city depends, in a great measure, upon the successful operation of this service day in and day out.

To the citizens of Bombay electric trains are commonplace and they take them for granted; but few pause to consider how the history of these services is inextricably interwoven with the growth of this great city and how the advent of electric traction helped the city to grow to its present dimensions. This is indeed a fascinating story.

Sea-girt and restricted by nature, the main Fort and Colaba area were even a hundred years ago the centre of official and business activity but the need soon became apparent for a transport service between this area and the outlying habitations extending upto Virar. It was way back in April 1867 that the first suburban service with one train each way was inaugurated between Back Bay station and Virar

with ten intervening stations. The number was increased to 5 trains a day each way in 1870.

In the years that followed the advent of BB&CI Railway, Bombay had been growing fast. Its trade flourished, the port developed, and the city became the centre of a flourishing textile industry. The result naturally was a great increase in population. The city became congested and due to the high rents and lack of housing accommodation as well as the fear of epidemics, many people were forced to seek their abode in the open areas extending beyond the island, to which the railway gave access. On the then BB&CI route, the conditions were more favourable as there were several habitable localities at a convenient distance served by the local train service. This was the beginning of the great stimulus in Bombay to suburban migration. Thus, from 10 trains daily in 1870, the suburban train service had expanded by 1888 to 32 local trains daily carrying 10 million passengers annually. In 1900 the daily trains increased to 45.

Many then foresaw that in the coming years the demand on the local Railway line would exceed the capacity of a steam train service and it was in 1904 that it was first proposed to electrify the suburban train service. Due to the intervention of many factors, however, the proposal did not materialise. It was actively revived in 1912, only to be shelved again due to the First World War. In the meantime, Bombay's population was showing an alarming increase and due to the apprehension engendered by a dangerous epidemic which then occurred and the consequential desire of the people to keep away from the affected area, many of the citizens were drawn away from the crowded city to places of better light, ventilation and more

healthy and desirable surroundings. Many of them began to look afield and sought relief in the convenience afforded by the city's railways. Doubtless, in every case where other conditions were found to be satisfactory, the governing consideration at the time of this exodus was easy accessibility brought about by the convenient suburban train service. Obviously the question of accessibility was largely dependent upon the speed and frequency of the local train service. On the subject of 'Locomotion in the Twentieth Century' H. G. Wells wrote over fifty years ago "the more frequent the local service the more it comes to be relied upon". It was on account of the frequency and punctuality that the local train service of the then BB&CI Railway came to be more and more relied upon from year to year, as evidenced by the fact that from 24 trains per day in 1873 the number had gone up to 144 trains per day in 1922-23. The attraction of suburbs which had been created by the suburban railway train service had caught on and the pressure on this service, the transport artery of the city, accordingly increased. Soon it was realised that the time had come when steam traction should be superseded by a more efficient motive power, namely electric traction.

It was in 1923 that plans and estimates were ultimately sanctioned for the Churchgate-Borivli (22 miles) section to be electrified and an important milestone was reached when the first electric trains were run on the section on the 5th January 1928. At the same time, the tracks between Grant Road and Borivli were quadrupled – Churchgate was later remodelled into a new terminal for electric trains and the great project of river bridging, namely the Bassein Bridge over the Bassein Creeks was taken up and completed. The introduction of electric traction thus ushered in a new era and Bombay was provided with the finest suburban train service in India. Electrification of a further 16 miles of track from Borivli to Virar followed in 1936. Fitted with electric power and automatic colour light signalling, and with that ingenious safety device namely the "dead-man's handle" in its trains, the risk of loss of life of

passengers due to train accidents has been reduced to a minimum.

Freed from the limitations of steam power, the new electric suburban train service was ready to make a significant contribution to the growth of Bombay City and its developing suburbs, as the journey time was reduced by one-fourth by the use of electric traction. In keeping with the expansion of trade and industry (and consequently the population of Bombay) in the two decades following 1930, the suburban service of the then BB & CI also increased enormously. By the year 1950 the number of passengers carried annually had risen to 158 millions and the number of trains run daily to 230. This tempo of increase continued till by 1955-56 the number of passengers carried touched 178 millions with a complement of 294 trains a day.

It had then become plain that the facilities available at the two-line Churchgate station were inadequate to handle any further increase in the traffic and that a wholesale remodelling was warranted. Great forethought and planning were devoted to designing a new Churchgate station and yard. To increase the frequency of trains, three lines with two platform faces each were provided, and a highly effective route relay interlocking system of signalling was introduced to ensure quicker reception and despatch of trains and a spacious concourse was provided to facilitate the movement of the enormous number of passengers using the station. The new Churchgate station and yard was opened on 9th June 1957. This helped in increasing the frequency of train services, particularly during the peak hours in the morning and evening. The number of trains, which was 300 per day in October 1956 has now gone up to 386 trains as today. The number of passengers carried has also registered a steep increase from 178 millions in 1955-56 to 234 millions in 1960-61.

Today over 6 lakhs of suburban passengers use the Western Railway trains daily to move to and from their places of work. During the

morning and evening peak periods, trains leave Churchgate station at intervals of 4 minutes. It is obvious that this achievement would not have been possible but for the change over from steam to electric traction. Apart from carrying millions of passengers, the suburban trains provide other invaluable services to the city. Perishable goods such as fish, milk, vegetables are quickly and cheaply transported to markets – not to mention the remarkable Tiffin Carrier Service of Bombay, which would not have been possible without the suburban railway service, for, no other form of transport could so cheaply carry those heavily laden trays of tiffin carriers which may be seen arriving on week days to Churchgate station!

In passing, one more fact merits mention. For over 40 years the season ticket suburban fares were kept so low that the Railway sustained a loss every year. It, however, derived consolation from the fact that its suburban service was helping the trade and industry located in the city, from which the Railway derives the bulk of its revenue on the long distance goods and passenger traffic. There is, however, no denying the fact that, with its system of season tickets at concessional rates, the suburban train service provides the cheapest means of transport. Thus, viewed as a whole, the suburban train service has helped not only in the development of Metropolitan Bombay and its suburbs but it has

also integrated this vast far flung area into a social and economic whole that it is today, and the credit in a large measure for this should rightfully go to the introduction of electric traction in this area.

The adequacy of its suburban service is a matter of constant concern to any railway system in the World. It is so also with the Western Railway and it may be added that the Railway is not content to rest on laurels in this matter. We are constantly endeavouring to improve and augment this service. Besides gradually increasing the number of trains year by year, we have recently introduced some 9-coach rakes in replacement of the old 8-coach rakes to increase the accommodation available per train. Large scale works incidental to the running of these longer trains have already been completed and it is our intention to gradually run all the trains with 9-coach rakes. Simultaneously, a proposal to introduce a 3rd track between Churchgate and Grant Road is also under consideration.

The great event of inaugurating the first India-made electric locomotive at Chittaranjan by our Prime Minister further strengthens our conviction that we shall be able to cope with our traffic problems in the future, pledged as we are to strive always to provide the public with a still better service.

Take the best out of past, and on it build future.

-Paul Kruger
