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Development frontier railway only way out of fuel crisis

Energy use in transport

The transport sector in Sri Lanka depends entirely on petroleum products for its energy needs, it accounted for over 75 per cent of total petroleum consumption in 1995. The petroleum bill of the country accounted for about Rs. 26 billion in 1995, which translated into 14 per cent of the country's export earnings. It is estimated that about Rs. 20 billion worth of petroleum is used in the transport sector. If 10 per cent of the petroleum used in the transport sector is saved by:

• way of a model transfer of passengers and goods from individual to mass transport and from road to rail.

• further improvements to the operational of public transport

...Rs. 2,000 million worth of foreign exchange could be saved per annum. This is equivalent to 60 per cent of the budget allocation for health or about 50 per cent of the budget allocation for education.

(Source: Ministry of Irrigation and Power, 1998)

Specific energy consumption of various transport modes

Vehicle	Passenger km/litre
Cars	25.8
Motor cycles	60.2
Three wheelers	83.2
Medium buses	180.0
Larger buses	257.0
Railway	500.0

Rail transport played a key role in the development of our country in British times. Through it, upcountry tea and rubber plantations could be developed through easy transportation of both inputs and produce to be shipped to markets abroad at least cost.

The transport policy and prevailing law of the then government was that the long haulage of goods was to be done by rail, while short haulage was by lorry. It was this rational policy that made it economic transport by rail possible. This same policy was adopted by foreign countries that continue to do so even now. However, after independence this policy was given low priority because of the transport lobby by the then UNP government.

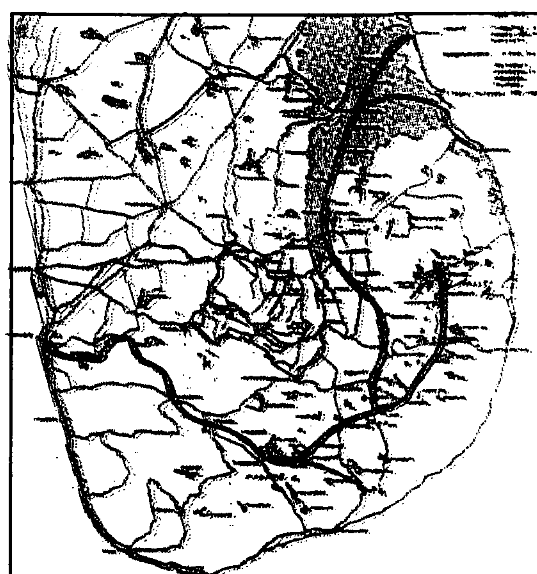
The tragedy of railway transport began with the sacking of the eminent Engineer B. D. Rampala the General Manager of Railways and replaced by appointing an administrative officer from the newly formed SLAS. I remember the time when I served the Survey Department in the good old days. All public servants had to truck their cars by rail if the distance travelled by the office exceed 50 miles, and could only travel by car if there was no railway en route. This policy was first adopted by the British who founded the railway before independence to save fossil fuels and make the railway viable. However this rational policy of both long haulage of goods and the restrictions for travel by car was lifted in the 1960s. Then the UNP lorry lobby transported tea by lorry to Colombo and Trincomalee, when previously it was done by railway.

It is interesting to note that when I discovered the Somawathie Chaitiya as indicated in the chronicle on the right bank of the old Mahaweli, which is in Ruhuna, I witnessed that curd was transported daily from Manampitiya all the way to Matara and sold as the famous Matara curd as railway transport was the cheapest.

As Senior Director of Planning in the then Ministry of Irrigation, Power and Highways, I had to visit the Walawe and the Galoya Development Schemes and became aware of the inadequacy of cheap transport for both passenger and goods.

That was the main reason for the underdevelopment of these schemes as everything was transported at a great cost by lorry although these schemes were built at great cost. Thus, when I was Director of Planning in the new Ministry of Mahaweli Development, I attempted to rectify this inadequacy of cheap transport, which I became aware of while I was in the Ministry of Irrigation, Power and Highways as it was the linch-pin for their development. I proposed the Development Frontier Railway a quarter of a century ago.

This proposed Development Frontier Railway was to broad gauge the existing narrow gauge railway line to Kahawatte and take it beyond the Godakawela Saddle through a tunnel to the Walawe Basin with an extension to Kataragama. The main line from Walawe was thereafter taken through Uva to Galoya and the Mahaweli schemes. This proposed railway trace was indicated on the one inch topographical maps conforming to slope and geometric curve considerations. This proposed 350-mile railway trace served not only the Walawe, Galoya and Mahaweli schemes but also served the underdeveloped Sabaragamuwa and Uva areas and is indicated in the map, which indicates a reduced version of the same.



This map shows the Development Frontier Railway as envisaged in 1979 and indicates a clearer version of the proposed four stage construction priorities of the proposed railway in the present context to serve Mahaweli and other areas of underdevelopment.

The low priority given for the development the railway had a severe impact on the new development schemes like Galoya and Walawe, where public servants in the line department of education, health and other services resented being transferred to these places as it was considered to be a "Siberia" by them because of the transport problem. The different governments sent their political adversaries to these places as punishment. The government became aware that the same fate awaited the proposed Mahaweli areas and therefore appointed a four member Inter-Ministry Technical Experts Committee from the Ministry of Transport and the Ministry of Mahaweli Development to report on the Railway for the Accelerated Mahaweli with the present author as its chairman.

On the Report of Inter-Ministry Committee on Mahaweli Railway in retrospect, it must be said that this committee went into great detail and produced a 60-page report and annexes indicating the proposed railway trace on one inch to the mile topographical sheets together with details of a cost-benefit analysis, which was accepted by the government. Limited funds were allocated to locate the trace on the ground for the first stage of the project from Welikanda, Mahiyangana. After the detailed surveys, the forest was being cleared along the reservation for implementation, and the clearance had reached the proposed Ulhitiya station; when the bus and lorry lobby raised its head and prevented further development of the railway.

The envisaged railway was an all-weather railway, unlike the roads that were subject to seasonal flooding at Manampitiya. Even though it was to serve the Mahaweli for a start, it was later to serve Uva, Galoya, Walawe and Sabaragamuwa, where the cost of long distance haulage by road was three times that by railway.

The savings to the economy in the conservation of fossil fuels by this project were estimated as Rs. 500 million per annum, and was considered environmentally friendly. This project was economically feasible, socially desirable but was politically anathema because of the low priority given for development of railways by the UNP transport lobby.

Furthermore, it was also unfortunate that the bus and lorry lobby was instrumental in stultifying this project by converting the proposed K. V. Railway at Avisawella into a highway making it impossible to extend the proposed broad gauge line beyond Avissawella.

It is sad to note that this stultified railway project would have been a boon and the linchpin to develop the major development projects of Mahaweli. Galoya, Walawe, Uva and Sabaragamuwa, particularly to help the poorest of the poor and public servants who serve in these areas. This was a grave mistake taken by the UNP government, and could be rectified even by the present government if it were seriously interested in developing the underdeveloped areas of our country.

It is fervently hoped that the present government would set in motion the Development Frontier Railway as it will not only reduce the cost of inputs to the farmer in these regions. But it will also enable a better farm gate price for the agricultural produce that is produced by the farmer. It should be the main project that this government should undertake as soon as the terrorist war is over as we would be able to fruitfully use the armed services in its construction. The roads that are today heavily congested could be relieved by the construction of this railway, which will be capable of handling all long distance haulage including container transport.

Economic analysis in 1980 estimated a saving of Rs. 500 million in foreign exchange for fossil fuels. This would be sufficient to run a ministry. In addition, we will also have a cleaner environment with less pollution. However the 1998 estimate of annual savings was to the order of Rs. 2,000 million (at 1998 prices). At present with prices of fossil fuel spiralling in the world market we could save over Rs. 3,000 million in scarce foreign exchange and greatly reduce the pollution of our environment and contribute to the reduction of global warming that the world faces today.