

20/12/2011

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B. D. Rampala

- an engineer par excellence

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History is replete with initiatives of lone individuals that revolutionized the way people live. Civilization itself is a cumulative result of initiatives of such individuals who had the courage and perseverance to see their convictions through. One such individual is B. D. Rampala who became the first native chief mechanical engineer in 1949, of the then Ceylon Government Railways and went on to become the General Manager during the period 1955 - 1970, in what is now Sri Lanka Railways.



Eng. B. D. Rampala

Globally, since it was introduced as a means of transport in the UK in the early 19th century, rail transport has been adapted by many countries and the technology developed to maintain its position as the foremost means of mass transportation overland. Today the steam locomotive is all but obsolete and has been over taken by diesel, electric and maglev locomotives, in that order of increased technological sophistication, attaining phenomenal speeds, fuel efficiency and passenger comfort that people are no more confined to smaller locales in their daily routines.

Strict discipline

The reduced travel times has made possible travel on daily basis from farther distances to work in cities, schooling from home, routine shopping and even, more frequent, cross border travel to visit parents and relations.

In Sri Lanka steam locomotives made their debut in the 1860's at the behest of British colonialist tea and coffee growers unable to cope with transport demands of their increasing export trade. The *Anguru Kaka Wathura Bibi Duwana Yakada Yaka* as the natives of that time called it aptly described its size and voracious appetite for coal and water while belching smoke with its characteristic hissing noise. It reigned supreme for almost a century, but then mankind was impatient for ever better comforts and quicker pace of life. Sri Lankans were no exceptions and as fate would have it, a son of the soil, B. D. Rampala took up the reins of the railways of the country and delivered on them. Much have been written of this doyen of Sri Lanka Railways and the strict discipline with which he managed.

Transportation systems

The short period within which he transformed the railways in the country to suit the times is etched in the history of local railways as its golden era. The dieselization of locomotives, introduction of centrally controlled electronic colour light signal system, launching of express train services under different names, providing better station facilities, etc. were all done in that period. In short he did what was necessary in his time so that the country and its people enjoyed the fruits of global developments in this field of that time.

A natural question that arises in this

context is how have the country's railways fared since B. D. Rampala handed over the reins in 1970. Has it kept pace with global trends and infused new technology to the sector as had many progressive countries done bringing improved transportation systems to their masses. Our big neighbour India is already building on the success of its Kolkatta and Delhi Metros to have new Metros in its other states like Chennai, Mumbai, Bangalore etc. Bangladesh, a developing country too has already drawn up plans for its own Metro rails. Countries in the west are of course far ahead as are Japan, South Korea, China, Taiwan, Singapore, Malaysia etc. in providing the modern conveniences of rail travel to their people. Railways in those countries are carrying a significant proportion of the total passenger load.

In Sri Lanka, originally seen as a means primarily for freight, it became popular for its commuter functions, surpassing the latter at some stage to reach a peak. But thereafter there has been a steady decline, losing much of its passenger share to road transport due to reasons like travel time, reliability, comfort etc. Currently only 7 percent of the daily passenger load of the country is retained by the railways.

Human resources

The almost three decades of terrorism, up to the mid 2009, also took its toll, both on the rolling stock and infrastructure of the railways. It is true that the government purchased new rolling stock from time to time in the past but this was not sufficient to arrest the decline. A 10 year railway development strategy ordering new Diesel Multiple Units to replace the old diesel locomotives, upgrading the Southern railway track after the damage due to the 2004 Tsunami and rebuilding the Northern line destroyed by war is now being implemented by the government. It is also extending the Southern line from Matara to Katragama. However isn't the zest and revolutionary thinking and steering of the sector that B. D. Rampala amply demonstrated in his time missing in the mere repair, restoration and extending of the existing and by now very old system despite its well known limitations. If not what is holding us back!

Analysts have shown the economics of transforming the system from diesel locomotives to electric locomotives by way of the savings to be had from the fuel and maintenance costs alone. Benefits to be had from electrification would set off the new investments necessary, not to mention the additional benefits of reduced pollution, passenger comfort and the more productive use of human resources through reduced travel time. More importantly the reduced travel time and improved passenger comfort could increase the commuter percentage of the railways helping reduce the road transport congestion to a great extent.

In 1997/98 the Institution of Engineers, Sri Lanka, the apex corporate body of engineers in the country submitted its recommendations for electrification of at least the most used sections in the suburbs of the country's railways. Cabinet approval too was granted and the implementing company was also to be set up before interest on it waned for reasons not clear. Subsequently the Institution of Engineers, Sri Lanka submitted a new proposal in August 2008 for electrification of that section of the railways between Panadura and Veyangoda as the most used by commuters. The IESL has revived its proposals as recently as 2010.

It is under such a background that the engineering fraternity, particularly the railway engineers, would be commemorating their great mentor, B. D. Rampala's memory aptly with a memorial lecture on the theme 'An engineering perspective of the past, present and future of Railways' to be delivered by Eng. (Prof.) Amal Kumarage tomorrow (December 20 from 1715 hrs, at the Wimalasurendra Auditorium of the Institution of Engineers Sri Lanka (IESL), at 120/15 Wijerama Mawaha, Colombo 07 which will be open to the public.