

# KEEPING ABREAST OF OUR TIMES

.by

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1989 was a very sad year for transport in Lanka. We thought bus travel conditions were bad in the early 1950s, and so welcomed the 1958 nationalisation. We thought conditions bad in 1979 and government thought the reintroduction of private bus operation would bring improvements. In both cases improvements did emerge, but today riding buses and looking at buses on the road, things are now worse than ever. Yet what can transport managers and planners do when buses are burnt and strikes erupt unpredictably, entirely for non-transport reasons. So it has been a season of

Yet after a short modal survey and brief discussion on technology, environment, financing, congestion, policy and management, I hope to disseminate some rays of hope.

## **A Modal Survey in Lanka and the World**

The main modes of transport are sea, air, rail, inland waterway, pipeline and highway, the last subdivided into private transport (car, motorbike, cycle) public transport (bus and tram) and truck. Walking is also a significant mode of transport, especially in developing countries, but rarely receives proper recognition as such.

In sea transport, the 3rd and

4th generations round-the-world container vessels have swept the world, generating hub ports and feeder services. Colombo Port is to be congratulated on its successful hubmanship, and the CSC and its subsidiaries in developing regional feeder services. Yet it is said that APL, the biggest "round the globe" container carrier last year moved much of its transshipment transactions to the Gulf. The containerisation of sea transport has also infected the land. Where railways have been alert, they have captured the interface between sea and land, to the extent that double-stack container trains now carry Japan-Europe merchandise from Seattle to New York for on-shipment, avoiding the Panama. Yet in countries where railways have been slow in the uptake, container trucks have seized the opportunity of distributing and feeding to/from the ports. It is almost too late for our railway to move in and get a share of this business in Sri Lanka in the 90s. Non-containerised shipping suffers fragmented ownership, oversupply, undercutting, under-utilisation of vessels, insolvencies etc, a scene shared with fragmentally owned trucks and buses. The combination of huge global carriers like APL, Evergreen etc, and marginal undercutters on the high seas does not augur well for Sri Lanka's own shipping in the 1990s.

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The airways of Europe and North America are becoming saturated with congestion in similar way to the highways beneath, and that is one reason why railways and railway projects, at least in Europe, will bloom in the 1990s. As on the roads, most of the air congestion is due to proliferation of private craft. However the enormous growth of public air transport (the only public transport that VIPs use in many parts of the world) is straining the airports and helping break-down frontiers because of the enormous flow of people through customs, health and immigration barriers. In this scenario new rail/ airport interfaces are emerging as well as better bus/ air interchanges, but not significantly in Asia. Our railway was driven away from the air terminal by the Dutch consultants and indigenous administrators. At Bangkok, Calcutta and Dhakar, adjacent railways are spurned not withstanding their faster run to town than limosines or buses. In good time we will dig a tunnel at great cost to get the rail line back to the terminal, and one day may allow

buses to draw abreast the terminal entrance doors. The growing trend for flying ensures saturation for the new Katunayaka airport terminal in the late 1990s, and gives some measure of hope for Air Lanka in a world where air travel and air freight growth exceeds aircraft manufacturing capacities.

## **Railways**

Railways are flourishing in Europe China and India, but passenger railways at least are ailing in North America and Lanka, of course for different reasons, yet a common thread is the lack of interest in electric traction. The present government promised electrification in its manifesto. Hopefully it will find the money by borrowing or by taxation. Our railway's first priorities may well be engineering-wise to keep trains running and management-wise to restore the old railwaymen's pride and discipline in their vocation. Yet the railway must also take marketing much more seriously, much more dynamically than it has in the past, even when Mr. Samarasinghe was the lone-star market promoter. Its potential market includes the Government of Lanka in its several roles of producer, importer, trader & exporter. The railway must work on promoting itself as an efficient, energy-frugal, environment-friendly mode. Germany and Italy are vying to have 300 km/hr rail lines operative soon. (faster than Japan's bullet)

Australia is proposing even faster 350 mph trains travelling 800 km between Sydney and Melbourne in 2 hours yet we would be

happy indeed to cover the mere 116 km Colombo-Kandy or Colombo-Galle in an hour, or even two for that matter. In Holland and Denmark the railways are inviting buses on to the train platform to make interchange easier for travellers as well as to unclog exit paths. Yet buses are not allowed inside the courtyard of most railway stations in Lanka.

## **Waterways**

Inland waterways play significant roles in the transport of goods in USA, Western Europe and Bangladesh, the latter for passenger too. The much awaited canal linking the Rhine and Danube rivers is abuilding. Inland waterways could play a useful, if limited, role in Lanka too if there was political will for it. When one examines the existing water and rail infrastructures unobtrusively linking the Colombo Harbour with actual and potential warehousing and blending sites, it is amazing that so much merchandise, in containers and otherwise, tramp the streets of Fort and the arterial and lesser roads of the city. An armada of barges headed from Hekitta to Pamunugama a few years ago with President Premadasa at the helm when rivetting the canal bank thus far was completed. Since then the canal serves useful functions for bathing, laundry, and fishing boat parking lots, but few goods travel on it. Its use for navigation in the 1990s is doubtful unless rehabilitation is taken up again and reaches at least Nattandiya.

Pipelines are much used for gaseous and liquid bulk

commodities such as natural gas and petroleum products internationally and intra nationally. In Lanka they are used to transport much water, some crude oil and a little coconut oil. Pipelines for slurried solids, such as coal and iron ore have had troubled beginnings in America, but are beginning to overcome their spillage problems and water thirst if coal were to be pulverised, slurried and pumped in to ships on the West coast of New Zealand's South Island (to save rail transport in the wrong direction over the NZ Alps) it might be worth examining the offloading of pulverised coal in Trinco or anywhere else in the 1990s by slurry pipelines running into a power station, provided environment problems can be averted.

## **Highways**

The highways, byways and foothpaths are of course the most prolifically used transport arteries anywhere in the world. Some cities like Los Angeles have built so much of urban highway that more than 40% of land space is devoted to roads and parking lots, and some countries like U S A have built so much of intercity superhighways that they seemingly cannot now afford to maintain them. Lanka shares the motoring illusion of everywhere that if roads were made wider, or double-decked, or access-limited or flown one over the other, then vehicular traffic demand could be accommodated. Few countries, except Switzerland accept the maxim that traffic fills space. Thus the building of roads goes on in parallel with the growth in car owner-

ship presently about .01 cars/capita in Lanka upward towards saturation at .6 cars/capita (more than one per average family) in USA. As they congest still more, traffic signals and sophisticated computerisation are introduced to "manage" the roads until there is no give in the system and traffic congeals upon the least untowards incident, sometimes tying up cities for several hours. In urban areas, the development in Europe and reintroduction in USA, France and Britain of very modern tramways (styled "light rail transit") on streets largely reserved to them and pedestriains offers some hope for less traffic congestion and less air pollution in the 1990s.

## Vehicles

In most US cities except New York and Chicago over 90% travel by car, a bare 10% or less takes bus, tram or train. In most third world cities, buses predominate in passenger flow, but because each bus is filled with 30-150 passengers, they represent a minority of vehicles against cars carrying an average 1.5 persons apiece. Buses and trams are efficient in energy and space-usage, yet cars obtain favour and are given free or tokencharged public land to park on.

Buses and trams find favour paradoxically only in countries of very high car-ownership such Netherlands and Switzerland, where whole streets and central areas are reserved for trams, buses and pedestrians, with cars kept out. Futhermore cars, and even parking on private land, are heavily taxed, part of the tax being handed on to public

transport operators to enable the latter to improve their services, increase capacity and keep their fares down. In low car-ownership countries, like Lanka and India, the opposite applies. Cars park for Rs 1/ hour on land worth commercially at least Rs 20/ hour, but buses are charged heavy taxes out of which a portion is handed back as "subsidy". Some Indian States charge buses 35 % passenger fare tax. Lanka buses pay 1% tax on fares, and moreover pay Rs 9 per litre for diesel which costs the country about Rs 5. In 1989 the Transport Boards collectively paid the Government on these two items alone:-

Diesel tax on about 100 million litres Rs 400 M  
 Passenger fare tax of 1% Rs 25 M  
 Total on these two items Rs 425 M

## Buses

The so-called "loss" in 1988 was Rs 225 million (68 cents/vkm) which had to be met by borrowing which in turn incurred interest, Rs 60 million being added to the "loss", yet media scribes, and the Ameer Commission write of "horrendous losses"

If government wants to tax bus passengers and bus operators it is entitled to do so, but it should not pretend that resultant "losses" are signs of inefficiency and waste.

Whereas Europe gives buses priority at traffic lights, in pedestrians malls etc, in Lanka, India, Indonesia etc buses rank lowest. If there is a good bus-stop like that outside the former Fort (Echelon Barracks) Police, a luxury hotel springs up and the bus-stop is banished. Bus routes are diverted because foreign consultants cannot acco-

modate them in their junction designing. A request was received last year that the bus-stops in St Michaels Road Kollupitiya be removed with a suggestion that people could walk leisurely to the Kollupitiya Station to catch their bus. The catch-word is "security", but the real reason is that occupants of adjacent buildings want to park their cars and do not like to walk to far-away parking lots. It looks doubtful whether buses will provide better service in Lanka in the 1990s unless they obtain positive priority on the streets against cars, and are reorganised in planned integration.

Lorries too are a highway mode, using the road to collect and deliver food and every variety of goods. They have become bigger and bigger, 44 tons being the maximum load in Europe. A lot of people, including motorists, pedestrians and residents don't like big lorries, but the truck owners have powerful voices. Vehicles wear out roads in proportion to the 4th power of the load on their axles. If 8 tons per axle causes x amount of damage. 16 tons will cause 2<sup>4</sup> (=16) times as much damage. Even 12 tons per axle will cause 1 1/2<sup>4</sup> (=5) times as much. Some places (eg New Zealand, Oregon) impose axle-load taxes based on sealed hubodometers so that heavy lorries at least pay tax in proportion the damage they cause. In most countries lorries are run mostly by one-vehicle owners, are in oversupply, and engage in pricecutting to survive, causing instability to professionally managed firms. Shifting heavy loads to rail and barge is one way to reduce road damage and maintenance cost, traffic noise, congestion and diesel particulate emission, but seems unlikely to happen in Lanka in the 1990s.

Last but not least, pedestrians and cyclists are also transport.

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modes on the road, but they receive scant attention. Originally roads and paths belonged to pedestrians, but now they are made to climb steep stairs to cross them, or descend into murky subways. They are fenced in on the footwalks, and blamed by other road users. In Lanka the fences are counter productive, keeping pedestrians on the carriageway, preventing their regaining the footpath. Sidewalks are rarely maintained. Adequate pedestrian pavements have recently arrived on Galle Face Centre Road land-side where people don't walk, on Horton Place where few people walk, and on the Galle Road between Galle Face and Kollupitiya, where reasonable footwalks were there before. Many roads have no footwalks at all. Where they exist walks are encroached by parked cars and vans. It is difficult to foresee better conditions for pedestrians in Lanka in the 1990s. However in Britain, pedestrianisation of town centres is proceeding at pace to catch up with earlier German and Swiss standards so that the quality of walking environment will improve there in the 1990s.