

Gandhidham-Deesa Rail Link

THE opening of the Gandhidham-Deesa metre gauge system by the President of India on October 2, 1952 was a landmark in the economic development of the country, as it established a rail connection between the proposed major port of Kandla and its vast hinterland consisting of Rajputana, Central India, the southern Punjab and Delhi. It was also a significant event because the border State of Cutch, centrally administered at present, was connected for the first time by rail with the rest of India. Due to lack of railway, road and telegraph and postal facilities, Cutch has remained a backward area so far. The State is rich in minerals like gypsum, lignite, bauxite, coloured clays, ochres, coal, etc, which need exploitation. The new rail link, therefore, ushers in an era of all-round economic activity in the State.

The Gandhidham-Deesa rail link takes oil from Deesa, the terminus of the 17-mile long Palanpur-Deesa branch of the Western Railway. The genesis of the construction of the link is to be found in the partition of India. There was tremendous congestion in Bombay because of the loss of Karachi port and the Government gave very high priority to the development of a port on the west coast. The West Coast Major Port Development Committee, set up by the Government of India to investigate the possibilities of developing new ports on the west coast of India between Kathiawar and Cutch and on the Mormugao-Cochin coast recommended that a major port should be established at Kandla in the Gulf of Cutch and that the port should be connected with the broad gauge and metre gauge systems on the mainland.

Together with the survey of Kandla, work on the construction of the metre gauge link was commenced from the Deesa end in January, 1950 and completed in less than three years. The length of the rail link is 170.04 miles and its cost Rs 5.67 crores. The Kasturbhai Lalbhai Committee had estimated the cost at Rs 4½ crores roughly. Thirty-one stations are provided of which 25 are crossing stations with central cabin, upper quadrant and double wire signalling. There are as many as 311 bridges en route.

Diesel locomotives will be used eventually on this section although

steam locomotives are being used at present as a temporary measure. With the location of the oil installations in the Kandla port area, it will be both convenient and economic to operate diesel locomotives.

The rail link traverses four different varieties of terrain. The territory between Deesa and Varahi (64 miles) is more or less flat and is irrigated by the river Banas. The principal crops of this area are bajra, millets and castor and rape seeds. Potatoes are cultivated in the bed of the River Banas near Deesa. The bridge over the river Manas, the largest river crossed by the railway, consisting of 14 spans of 80 feet plate girders on concrete piers, has been constructed in record time at an estimated cost of Rs 30 lakhs. The river remains in spate during the second half of the year. The work on the bridge was commenced in April 1950 completed by the middle of next year, the total time taken being only 15 months, of which for four months during the monsoon period, the work had to be entirely suspended.

The railway line traverses the next 37 miles on a soil which is salty and unsuitable for any vegetation. This portion crosses the Ranns at the junction of the Little Rann and the Great Rann. The Ranns of Cutch are vast tracts of barren salt marshes lying north of Cutch and Kathiawar. During the south-west monsoon the Ranns get flooded making any vehicular traffic impossible and isolating the State from the rest of India for a great part of the year. The construction of the Railway embankment across the Rann is a feat of great engineering skill. By protecting its southern slope with stone pitching to a thickness of two feet provision has been made for the flood water to stand against it to a maximum height of 8 feet during the flood season.

For over 46 miles between Adesar and Bhachau, the railway line passes through the rocky undulating areas of Cutch. It is on this section that there are comparatively many bridges since a large number of streams and rapids have to be crossed. For the last leg of the journey for 23 miles the land gradually slopes down towards the sea between Bhachau and Gandhidham, the temporary terminus of the rail link pending the construction of the

new port at Kandla.

Gandhidham lying about 7 miles from the new port of Kandla is a new township conceived with the two-fold purpose of rehabilitating the large number of displaced persons from Sind and of providing a township to serve the needs of the new major port.

The work in connection with the extension of the metre gauge Gandhidham-Deesa Railway to the port itself is proceeding. Thirty-one miles of railway line and 16 miles of roads have already been completed within the port area. On the completion of the port in 1955-56, the rail-borne port traffic is estimated to be of the order of 200,000 tons of oil and 100,000 tons of general cargo. One passenger train is expected to run daily in both directions.

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