

Light Railways in West Bengal

Sikiduro

WHILE presenting the Railway Budget for 1950-51, the late Gopalaswami Ayyangar observed:

"... The further integration with the Union of the Federal functions of these States has resulted in the addition of a route mileage of 7,560 to the Indian Government Railways. The railway system of India will, from 1950-51, cover the entire country, with a route mileage of 33,084 miles. With the exception of 33 miles of unimportant branch lines, this nationalised undertaking will enjoy the monopoly of rail-transport in the country" (italics ours).

The railways not taken over in the various States are shown in Table I.

Out of 33,084 miles of railways in India, 2,220.61 and 380.99 route miles are of 2'-6" and 2'-0" gauges which are owned and operated, by Government Railways (Table II).

The financial position of the Light Railways not acquired so far, is probably no worse than that of the other similar railways already acquired by the Government. The Parlakimedi Light Railway of 2'-6" gauge was purchased on 23rd January 1950. The Matheran (Hill) Light Railway of 2'-0" gauge consisting of 12.61 miles was purchased in 1948. The excessive price paid for this Light Railway was severely criticised in the Report of the Indian Railway Enquiry Committee, 1947. After a thorough examination by the Finance Branch of the Railway Board in 1944, it was definitely decided that the line should not be purchased for another 25 years, as it would be a liability even if it were got free of cost. In 1947, the proposal came up again and it was decided to purchase this railway at a total cost of about Rs 12 lakhs. The Tezpur-Baliapara Railway has recently been purchased. The acquisition of the Bakhtiarpur Bihar Railway involved legal proceedings. Indian Government Railways took interest in the matter.

In West Bengal, the position is peculiar in the sense that besides the Broad and Narrow Gauge railways, there is a total route mileage of more than 308 with a capital at-charge of about Rs 2,11 lakhs invested in 8 Light Railways with 2'-0" and 2'-6" gauge as shown in Table I. Out of these 8 Light Railways, specially two, viz, the Barasat-Basirhat Light Railway and Bengal Provincial Railway both with

2'-6" gauge covering 52.24 and 41.58 route miles with a capital-at-charge of Rs 30 and Rs 16 lakhs are serving the frontiers and the granary of West Bengal respectively. The need for the B P Railway will be greater after the completion of DVC Scheme.

(i) runs from Ahmadpur to Katwa, a distance of 31¼ miles; (2) from Bankura to Rainagar, a distance of 60 miles; (3) from Burdwan to Katwa, a distance of 32½ miles; (4) from Majerhat (Calcutta Corporation) to Falta, a distance of 26¼ miles; (5) from Barasat to Basirhat

and to Hasnabad, a distance of 55 miles, a branch line from Bellighata (Calcutta Corporation) to Barasat—16 miles; (6) from Kadamtolta (Howrah) to Amta, a distance of 25 miles and a branch from Amtapur to Champanagar on the Damodar river—a distance of 19 miles; and (7) runs from Kadamtolta (Howrah) to Sheakhala with a branch to Janai—a distance of 8 miles.

It will be seen that most of these light railways are, in the Burdwan Division of West Bengal, through which activities of DVC will operate. According to the agreements, the purchase dates of (1) to (4) were end of March 1948, 1947, 1946, and 1947 respectively or on March 31 in the last year of any subsequent

TABLE I

Name of State	No. of Railways	Route Mileage	Remarks
1. West Bengal	8	308.50	
2. Bihar	5	149.24	
3. Assam	1	20.10	Since taken over by the Union.
4. U P and Delhi	1	92.50	
5. Barsi	1	202.57	Incorporated in England.
6. Miscellaneous	1	3.31	
Total	...	776.22	

TABLE II

Name of old Railways	(Route mileage)		
	Total	2'6" gauge	2'0" gauge
1. Assam	1,785.14	—	74.01
2. Bengal Nagpur	3,388.34	924.83	—
3. B B & C I	4,087.06	580.20	—
4. EI	4,379.23	17.14	—
5. EP	1,889.08	127.93	—
6. GIP	3,617.22	201.56	12.61
7. Mysore	711.67	102.20	—
8. Saurashtra	1,342.10	140.31	—
9. Cutch State	72.00	72.00	—
10. Dholpur	55.44	55.44	—
11. Scindia State	294.37	—	294.37
Total	...	2,221.61	380.99

TABLE III

Light Railways in West Bengal

Name of Railway	Gauge	Class	Route mileage
1. Ahmadpur-Katwa	2'-6"	III	32.26
2. Bankura-Damodar	2'-6"	..	59.95
3. Burdwan-Katwa	2'-6"	..	32.47
4. Kalighat-Falta	2'-6"	..	26.25
5. Barasat-Basirhat	2'-6"	..	52.24
6. Bengal Provincial	2'-6"	..	41.58
7. Howrah-Amta	2'-0"	..	44.00
8. Howrah-Seakhala	2'-0"	..	19.75
Total	...		308.50

Subsidy is being paid to AK, BK, BDR and BP Railways by Eastern Railway.

period of 10 years, on giving 12 months' previous notice.

In the case of (6) and (7), the District Board of Howrah or Hooghly in conjunction have the right under Section 41 of the Bengal Tramway Act, III of 1883, to purchase the Companies' property on the expiration of any period of 7 years subsequent to 26th March 1923. If purchased by the District Board of Howrah or Hooghly, the price to be paid, will be equal to the value of the whole line, plus a bonus of 20 or 15 per cent respectively.

A District Board took the advantage of such an agreement in Behar. Unless strong consciousness and public opinion are created and the District Boards take keen interest in the present condition and future development, it is doubtful whether they would move in the matter. There may be difficulty of finance as well.

BARASAT-BASIRHAT LIGHT RAILWAY

Barasat Basirhat Light Railway under the managing agency of Messrs N L Roy & Sons, Ltd, Calcutta, registered on July 30, 1933 with various agreements with the District Board of 24 Parganas, con-

sists or 4 sections, viz, Barasat and Basirhat, to Chighrighata on the Main Line and from Beliaghata Bridge to Patinukur and Patinukur to Belgatchia. Upon the expiration of 21-years from the date of the Bengal Government Order (Bengal Government, ' Railway Department Notification No 86-R dated 15th April 1933) authorising the construction of the line or at the end of every 7 years thereafter, the District Board, by giving six months' notice, can purchase the undertaking by paying the company 20 times the average net annual profits of the 4 years preceding the transaction, together with a bonus of 20 per cent thereon.

BENGAL PROVINCIAL RAILWAY

The Bengal Provincial Railway was registered in 1890 with the sections Tarakeswar to Rudrani, Rudrani to Magra and Magra to Tribeni. The Railway system consists of (a) Bengal Provincial Railway 33.27 miles and (b) Deshghara Jamalpur-gunj Railway 8.31 miles. The order was published under the Bengal Government Railway Department Notification No 1 dated 4th January 1896.

The construction, maintenance

and working of the extension from Magra to Tribeni had. the approval of the Secretary of State on 12th February 1904.

In the event of the District Board of Hooghly wishing to purchase the Bengal Provincial Railway at the end of 21 years after the date of the Government order sanctioning the construction of the Railway or at the end of every 7 years thereafter, the promoters bind themselves to make it over at a price two-fifths in excess of the original capital outlay.

In the case of Deshghara-Jainalpur-gunj Railway, the Government may, by giving 12 months' previous " Notice of Purchase" determine the contract either on March 31, 1948, or on March 31 in the last year of any subsequent period of 10 years. There are also certain other special clauses. If the contract be determined by " Notice of Special Purchase" the President shall pay to the company 25 times the average of the yearly earnings during the last preceding 3 years or 115 per cent of the total capital expenditure, whichever may be greater.

The area through which the Ben-

TABLE IV
Capital Liability of Light Railways in West Bengal
(in thousands of rupees)

Railway	Date of registration	Managing Agency	Authorised capital	Subscribed capital	Debenture or pref. shares	Rate of interest
1. Ahmadpur-Katwa	1914	Messrs Mcleod & Co Ltd	17,25	17,24	300	3½%
2. Bankura-Damodar River	1914	" "	35,00	34,00	400	"
3. Burdwan-Cutwa	1914	" "	17,81	17,80	350	"
4. Kalighat-Falta	1915	" "	30,00	*19,50	1,150	"
5. Barasat-Basirhat	1903	Messrs N L Roy & Sons Ltd	21,00	19,00	450	4½% since changed
6. Howrah-Amta	1895	Messrs Martin Burn Ltd	16,00	16,00	500	4%
7. Howrah-Sheakhala	"	" "	6,40	6,00	—	"
8. Bengal-Provincial	1890	" "	Not available			

* Rs 3 lakhs subscribed by Government.

(1), (2) (3) and (4) are Branch Lines worked under guarantee terms while (8) is owned by an unassisted company. (5) to (7) are companies' lines subsidized by District Boards. There is no uniformity in the system of working.

TABLE V
Financial Position in 1951-52
(in thousands of rupees)

Name	Capital outlay	Gross earnings	Working expenses	Net earnings	% of working expenses to earnings	% of net earnings on capital-at-charge	Dividend paid in 1949-50 (yearly)	Lowest & Highest prices of shares (Rs)
(1) A. K.	20,95	4,91	4,56	35	92.85	1.67	2-13/16%	60-70
(2) B. D. R.	41,97	7,79	8,32	—53	106.79	—1.26	2-13/16%	60-69
(3) B. C.	21,72	5,55	5,08	47	91,50	2.17	3½%	60-79
(4) K. F.	28,27	4,44	7,24	—2,80	163,20	—9.92	3½%	59-70
(5) B. B.*	29,74	12,65	11,77	88	93,03	2.97	Nil	39.50
(6) H. A.	54,95	28,84	22,45	6,39	77,83	11.63	3-3%	64-80
(7) H. S.	13,04	6,42	5,47	95	85.16	7.31	(½ yearly) 3-3%	60-75
(8) B. P.	15,43	3,64	3,28	36	89,99	3.47	(½ yearly)	

* Figures for 1949-50.

† Not available.

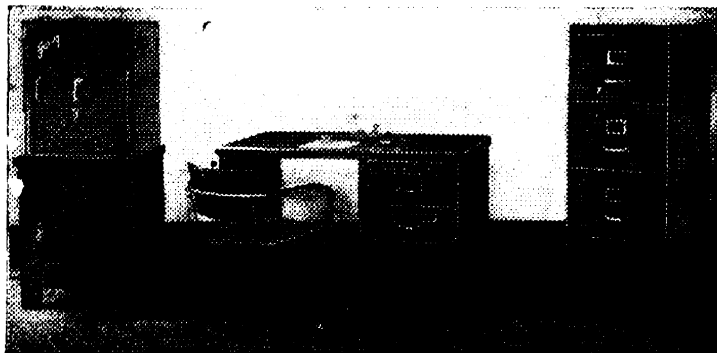
gal Provincial Railway, passes has no other mode of transport. Due to its physical features, construction and maintenance of roads are also difficult.

In view of the present inflation, the money value of assets of all these railways has appreciated considerably, though the assets have not been properly maintained; on the other hand, due to the fall in net annual profits during the recent years, the railways can be purchased cheap under the agreements. Further, the Indian Government Railways will save the subsidy, that is now being paid, eg, by the Eastern Railway. Therefore, this is the most opportune moment to acquire these Railways. In the event of the Government taking them over, the employees will also get better conditions of service, etc.

It is, therefore, advisable that these railways should be taken over by the Indian Government Railways immediately and re-orientated to meet future exigencies. Apart from convenience of operation, such exigencies may arise for defence purposes in the case of the Barasat-Basirhat Light Railway. All these Railways can easily be worked by the Eastern Railway as a similar gauge of 17.14 miles, viz, Santipur-Nawabdwip Section is already being worked by that Railway.

Both operational efficiency and wider national interests demand that undue consideration should not be given to the vested interests. In view of the conditions under which these railways are run, the discomfort and annoyance to the travelling public, the restricted nature or transport, etc, it is upto the State of West Bengal to convince the Transport Board of the Union Government that these Railways can no more function as small pockets in the State when the managing agents are unable to improve them. The late Gopalaswami Ayyangar was opposed to acquiring these Railways but since then, the Tezpur-Baliapara Tramway Company Ltd running the railway from Tezpur to Baliapara, a distance of 20 miles, has been purchased by the Government and is being run by the North Eastern Railway. If the Railways in West Bengal cannot be acquired by the Union Government, and run by the Eastern Railway, then the West Bengal Government should be allowed to take them over. These lines could be run by the Director-General of Transport so as to improve the transport system in an area served by the DVC,

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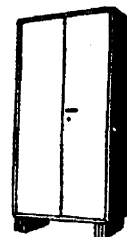
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