

Empty Wagon Movement in India - A Preliminary Study

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INTRODUCTION

BACKGROUND

The problem of providing adequate wagon capacity on the Indian Railways has been severe for quite some time. In a more general context, the National Transport Policy Committee (Report of the National Transport Policy Committee, 1980, p. 21) observed that "During the last decade in particular, the growth of transport capacity lagged behind requirements of the economy, so much so that difficulties and problems arose in almost every part of the country in regard to movement of essential commodities needed for industrial and agricultural development and for meeting the consumer needs of the community." And the Railways, being the principal mode of transport of goods and people over long distance, have found it difficult to meet the increasing requirements for railway services.

A major problem, it is felt, has been the shortage of wagons. Acquisition of new wagons every year has been more for replacement of old ones and as a result there has been virtually no net increase in the number of wagons in the past few years. In fact, the wagon stock has gone down in recent years as a result of withdrawal from service of good number of overaged wagons. As a result, it is argued that the supply of freight services has not grown in consonance with the demand for the same. However, as Rao and Sriraman (1985) observe, such a facile explanation is inadequate primarily because the shortage of wagons can be assessed only in relation to the demand for them.¹ They note that since the demand for freight movements is variable over space and time, an allocation of wagons which appears inadequate may turn out to be a surplus by proper and efficient scheduling over space and time. It is further pointed out that shortage in the availability of wagons have mainly resulted from the persistent deterioration in turnround time of wagons. This has been partly due to the sharp increase in the average lead of freight traffic from about 550 kms. in 1960-61 to about 750 kms. in recent