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A Study of Inland Water Transport (IWT)-Steam Boats in India with special reference to United Provinces (Uttar Pradesh)

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ABSTRACT: India is a country of rivers. It has almost 9010 miles of navigable waterways, maximum of which falls under the erstwhile United provinces (1010 miles), now Uttar Pradesh. Hence, after the railways and the road transport, inland water transport (IWT) could have developed in India as a very important element of communication. Inland water transport always proved to be a crucial mode of transportation in a land endowed with mighty navigable rivers. The appointment of Merbahr, an officer in charge of boats, during the Imperial Mughal rule signifies the importance of water transport in India. The country boats made up of clinkers, though not mechanically propelled, were also used in warfare too. Riverine attack on the Portuguese settlements by Emperor Shah Jahan in 1662 can be referred here. But things changed rapidly with the introduction of steamships by the British East India company in mid-19th century. Indian country boats could no longer withstand the brutal British competition. Their boats, being steam propelled, were fast moving which reduced travel time of the movement of goods and passengers considerably. A situation so arrived at a time that the English ships enjoyed it 'near monopoly' in the cargo transportation of India during the British rule. Hence, the province endowed with such great navigable rivers with big potential for IWT did not developed in much effective way to reduce the ever-increasing pressure on the road and the rail transport. It could have emerged as a suitable alternative in transporting the food articles to the places affected by the famine which was shamelessly avoided by the railways giving cruder deaths to the millions of people of Bengal during famines of 1905 and 1943. But no English banker or capitalist came forward to invest in this sector. All that they wanted was the quickest, the maximums and guaranteed safe return on their capital invested in India as was in the case of the railways.

Keywords: IWT , Navigation, Steam Boats, United Provinces, Canal Navigation

I. INTRODUCTION

India is a country of rivers and have been used for different purposes over the years (Shama and Walia, 2016: Sonali 2014). It has almost 9010 miles of navigable waterways, maximum of which falls under the erstwhile United provinces (1010 miles), now Uttar Pradesh. Hence, after the railways and the road transport, inland water transport (IWT) could have developed in India as a very important element of communication. India and especially the United provinces is endowed with many and perennial navigable rivers like the Ganges, Yamuna, Ghaghara and so on. River transport has been practiced in India since times immemorial. We have reference in the epic Ramayana that Lord Rama with his consort Sita and brother Lakshman being sailed across the river Yamuna at Prayag (Allahabad) by country a boat man -Nishad Raj. Indian ships continued to occupy an unequal position down the 19th century (Mehta ,1940). Country boats with huge loads of grains, fodder stocks, wood and building materials plied through inland waterways in India with almost negligible cost.

Inland water transport always proved to be a crucial mode of transportation in a land endowed with mighty navigable rivers. The appointment of Merbahr, an officer in charge of boats, during the Imperial Mughal rule signifies the importance of water transport in India. The country boats made up of clinkers, though not mechanically propelled, were also used in warfare too.

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A. Steam Paddled boats in India

The invention of steam boat was made by Robert Fulton who first plied his boat in the river Hudson on 17th August 1807. His venture became financially and commercially viable and he would have been interested in introducing steam boats in India. (Sangwan,1991).

Ten years later in 1817 Captain Davidson of the Bengal Engineers brought an eight-horse power to dredge the Hoogly river but failed. The vessel was then purchased by the EICo., refurnished with double buckets and renamed as Pluto and pressed into clearing the river. But this country boats could hardly complete the steamships of the British East India company. The company brought steamship vessels to India in 1822 (Sangwan,1991). However, the era of mechanical propulsion started in India in 1923.

The first steam paddled boat which navigated Hoogly river was named as Diana in 1923 under Messrs Kyd and Co. It surprised the curious villagers with its smoke and speed. (Princep,1830).

In 1825 another small steam paddle steamer, the Enterprise, came to Calcutta from Falmouth, England through the Cape under James Henry Johnston in a voyage of 113 days. Johnston's endeavor could not bring in much financial interests among the British investors. Nevertheless, his voyage certainly took permanent place in the history of steam navigation in India, being the first steam ship that came to India from England.(Samachar Darpan, 10 December 1825).

The first propelled craft, Diana, with the capacity of 89 tons ferried passengers in a 50 miles patch between Kulpi Road to Calcutta. The efficacy of these 3 ships, Pluto, Diana and Enterprise, more specially Diana equipped with rocket salvo mechanism, was confirmed during the Anglo Burmese war of 1824-1826 when British troops were ferried through them across the Irrawaddy river. Rangoon fell to the British on 11 May 1824. Diana created an awe in the minds of the Burmese who called it locally as Mertembo or 'fire devil'.(Ghosh Amitabha, 1975 : Introduction of the Steamboats in India, Bulletin of the Victoria Memorial, Vol. IX). It marked the beginning of the steamer technology in India. The EICo. now took steamer as altogether a new technology which could augment their power. The transportation of large bodies of troops from one destination to another seemed to raise the level of security and stability of the empire. It could also transfer the Compnay treasure with greater security and less expense. (Samachar Darpan, 10 July 1833).

B. Steamers in the United Provinces (Uttar Pradesh).

It was first time in the province that in 1834 a monthly steamer service on the Ganges from Calcutta to stations upstream begun for carrying the East India company officials and stores. In 1842 a regular fortnightly service grew up between Calcutta and Agra on the river Yamuna. A network of steamer services soon developed extending as far as Garh Mukteshwar (398 miles) ahead of Allahabad. It was felt that it would lead to greater commerce and communication between Bengal and Agra (then Agra being under Bengal Presidency), like rail and road communication.(Sangwan,Satpal,1991). The journey between Calcutta to Allahabad could now be completed in 23 days in the upstream speed of 3.1/3 miles per hour. Comparatively the country boats used to take 3 months for the same to Cruise. In the downstream it attained the cruise speed of 6 mi per hour brining the arrival time in Calcutta to 20 days.

The Imperial records testify the beginning of steamer services in the united provinces by the end of the 19th century. Only steamer plying in the rivers of this provinces belonged to the Indian General Navigation and Railway Company which provided a feeder service on the Ghagra starting from Digha Ghat in Bengal. Steamers reached daily up to Barhaj in Gorakhpur and Ayodhya in Faizabad on every 4th day which was the farthest port off Digha Ghat at a distance of 293 miles. Cargo included general merchandise, jute, food grains, wine, beer, manufactured iron, acids and salt. The steamers had capacity to ferry 300 to 600 passengers and a cargo load of 25 to 75 tons. Passenger berths from Calcutta to inland towns had to be booked three weeks in advance-such was the popularity of inland waterways in this country in the middle of the 19th century. (Bhatnagar,et.al, 1995)The economic life of the people increased due to this new technology, a claim in the Imperial records never ascertained on facts.

It was also expected that the digging up of canals along the upper Ganga, the lower Ganga and the Yamuna would also result in the improved Canal navigation. But to our dismay the IWT became effective only in places like Allahabad, Banaras, Gorakhpur, Ghazipur and Basti where river bed was deep enough in the Ganges and Ghagra. While postponing the beginning of the Ganga Canal Lord Ellenborough commented that no canals can been made exclusively for navigation. He was right that canals crisscrossed the countryside for irrigation of the fields irrespective the nearby towns. Hence in the United Provinces the main lines of the upper and lower Ganga Canal extending 275 miles and Agra Canal 100 miles which were navigable throughout the year, it was expected that a considerable flow of traffic to Calcutta would be developed. But to our dismay the traffic volume remained abysmally low and only local type. (Imperial). The average numbers of boats plying in these canals remained limited to an average 259 numbers per month and the traffic receipts didn't cross the average of Rs.15000 per annum which was about the half of the amount of navigation working expenses.

Hence no new technological innovations were introduced in the canal navigation systems. The Irrigation Administration Report of the United provinces, 1928 refers that the existing system was maintained only which included maintenance of the depth of water of the navigation channel, danger signals and flags etc.
British are the nation of the shopkeepers has rightly manifested it in their actions in the utter neglect of the development of inland water transport system in India which promised them no big return on the investment. After the spread of railways, no expenditure was made on the improvement of the natural waterways except on the Ganges between Allahabad and Balia where an attempt was made to keep the depth of the river adequate for the plying of country board and the river steamers. Following chart prepared on the basis of the information supplied by the Imperial records will demonstrate the above observation in brief.

Table 1: Returns on Canal Navigation per annum (in Rs.).

Year	Income	Running Cost
1880	15000	10000
1881	10000	8000
1904	7000	-
interest on capital		35457
Annual Loss		22000

Source: Imperial gazetteer of India, 1909- Economic, volume III.

Hence the Agra canal was closed for navigation in the year 1904.

C. Destruction of indigenous shipping industries
But things changed rapidly with the introduction of steamships by the British East India company in mid-19th century. Indian country boats could no longer withstand the brutal British competition. Their boats, being steam propelled, were fast moving which reduced travel time of the movement of goods and passengers considerably. A situation so arrived at a time that the English ships enjoyed it 'near monopoly' in the cargo transportation of India during the British rule. Asoka Mehta, the Deputy Chairman of the Planning Commission of India thus lamentably commented and I quote 'Complex forces destroyed Indian Shipping. Britain was a sea power- shipping was its lifeline. They came as traders but remained as rulers, but in that magical metamorphosis they never relaxed their hold over sea- the carrying trade had become their monopoly' (Mehta, 1940?). During the first world war when British ships were requisitioned for war elsewhere, English International trade suffered badly. On the insistence of the nationalist thinkers, who tried to revive India's past glory in shipping, Scindia Steam Navigation company came into existence in 1919 to fight the imperialist economic policies. The government hostile policy, however, never allowed Indian shipping industries to grow and by the time of the World War II India's total cargo tonnage reduced to mere 0.23% of the world tonnage. Indigenous companies had to fight for their existence.

D. Death of IWT
The ultimate blow came with the expansion of railways and roadways which became the fastest and cheapest mode of transport. The British capitalists and the banks invested heavily in the expansion of the railways due to the provision of Guaranteed return on their investment. Hence while disposing off before the British Parliamentary Committee Sir Arthur Thomas Cotton, a British General and an irrigation engineer who devoted his life to the construction of irrigation and navigation canals throughout British India who was a great supporter of canal irrigation in India, strongly put forward his views in 1872 as what India wanted was water carriage: that the railways have completely failed: they could not carry on a required price: they could not carry on a quantity offered and they cost the country 3 million a year. The steam boat canals would not have cost 1/8 that of railways. They would have carried any quantities at nominal prices and at any speed, and required no assistance from the treasury and combined with irrigation. But unfortunately, his advice fell into deaf ears of the government and wasteful investment in railways continued unabated leading to the neglect and natural death of IWT.
Navigational hazards like dredging of the river bed during the dry weather was neglected, and inadequate navigational aids with adequate infrastructure like the terminals lead to the complete debacle of the Indian shipping industries when the British left India. The British as a competitor never allowed indigenous shipping companies to grow and hence there witnessed a considerable reduction in the total mileage of the navigational waterway.

II. CONCLUSION

The province endowed with big navigable rivers and stupendous potential for IWT did not developed in much effective way to reduce the ever-increasing pressure on the road and the rail transport. It could have emerged as a suitable alternative in transporting the food articles to the places affected by the famine which was shamelessly avoided by the railways giving cruder deaths to the millions of people of Bengal during famines of 1905 and 1943. But no English banker or capitalist came forward to invest in this sector. All that they wanted was the quickest, the maximums and guaranteed safe return on their capital invested in India as was in the case of the railways.

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