

On the right track

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Dawn 29/5/05

Railway

THE journey from Lahore to Hyderabad is smooth, the train leaving Lahore Station on time, making its way past the densely packed squatter settlements which seem to spill over onto the tracks. Children run along narrow lanes, skirting around puddles of stagnant water, dogs bark at the passing train as if it were an intruder in their domain.

From the window of my compartment I see the chaos of urban living, drooping electricity wires connecting overloaded transformers to shops and businesses, the visual cacophony of bill boards advertising soap and cooking oil and air conditioners, products designed to make life livable.

There are people everywhere, sitting besides the tracks, loitering outside tea stalls, waiting patiently at the railroad crossing. There are ill-fed horses and long-suffering donkeys standing beneath the open sky, carrying their burden from place to place, resigned to destiny. And there are women, in veils, covered, hidden from view, carrying young children or the day's grocery, breathing the toxic air of the city which shelters them.

I am travelling by Karachi Express, offering my support to the country's largest civil organization in its effort to provide health care to under-served populations. Under the able leadership of the chairman, Pakistan Railways Board, this is the first initiative of its kind where a public sector organization reaches beyond its expressed purpose to provide a service to those who have been marginalized from the process of development in the country. This is also a

Railways is perhaps even more challenging than that of establishing rail links within and across the borders of our country. This challenge is daunting indeed, if not in terms of logistics then certainly in terms of the imagination and the infinite possibilities held within.

In the first week of May, at the height of the summer in Tharparkar, Pakistan Railways set up two medical camps in the desert for two days, staffed by twenty PR employees and volunteers. Supervised by the divisional medical officer Karachi, Dr Mushtaq Ahmed Qureshi, the camps were held at Pithoro and Khokrapar stations. Railway carriages were put to use for the administration of intravenous drips, the station master's office at Khokrapar became a reception room for patients, and the entrance hallway at Pithoro served as a vetting area for patients who would be registered and then referred to one of the several specialists volunteering their time and energy for this activity.

Currently, Pakistan Railways is engaged in the challenging tasks of laying a new track from the port at Gwadar to Quetta, and in replacing the 1.676 metre gauge track with broad gauge track between Mirpurkhas and Khokrapar on the border with India. The railway line from Mirpurkhas to zero-point would pass through 130 bridges. This shall certainly be a feat of engineering, requiring great discipline, determination, planning and exceptional leadership.

available, free of charge, thousands of bottles and tablets and tubes of medicines. Lab equipment was carried from Karachi for blood grouping, haemoglobin testing and investigative purposes. Railways electricians were on call constantly, standing by to ensure that the apparatus and air conditioning were running smoothly.

At Pithoro, in two days, a total of 1,862 male patients were registered. Of the 1,230 female patients who sought medical help, 44 asked for tubal ligations which were performed immediately at the DHQ hospital in Pithoro. Through the data collected it was apparent that chest diseases, particularly tuberculosis, were rampant, as were water-borne diseases such as gastroenteritis and diarrhoea, particularly amongst children. Eye diseases afflict many of the people of this region, possibly due to the blowing sand and the lack of water.

Most of the patients attending the camp owned no land and worked for a wage on the vast tracts of land owned by local landlords. Some had paid up to Rs. 300 in taxi fare to come to the medical camp, a reflection of the desperate need for health care and the miserable failure of the government's rural health programme. I had worked in Mirpurkhas several years ago and had come to know that a hari's total remuneration for a month's work on the *wadera's* land amounts to two sacks of grain. I remember being told that invariably one sack was sold to buy medicines as a result of ill-health. With one sack of grain left, a hari was to provide for his family of between six to eight or more people.

The horror and injustice of this truth stood in sharp contrast to the Oxbridge accent of the nazim of Pithoro who welcomed the Pakistan Railway's endeavour to link Khokrapar to the

the country. This is also a wonderful example of public and private sector collaboration for the welfare of our citizens.

Pakistan Railways, with a roll of 86,000 staff members, is, after the ubiquitous armed forces, the largest employer in the country. In one year, the vast network of trains carries some 70,000 passengers over 18 million kilometres, traversing terrain which begins with Dargai nestled in the Hindu Kush to Keamari on the coast of the Arabian Sea. Pakistan Railways carries approximately 5,000 tons of freight over four million kilometres, passing through many of the 687 stations which punctuate the 11,000 kilometres of track weaving intricate patterns across the landscape of this country.

Currently, Pakistan Railways is engaged in the challenging tasks of laying a new track from the port at Gwadar to Quetta, and in replacing the 1.676 metre gauge track with broad gauge track between Mirpurkhas and Khokrapar on the border with India, a distance of 135 kilometres cutting through the shifting sands of Tharparkar. The railway line from Mirpurkhas to zero-point would pass through 130 bridges of which five are the major bridges over Mithrao canal, Jamrao canal, Thar canal and the Left Bank Outfall Drainage canal. This shall certainly be a feat of engineering, requiring great discipline, determination, planning and exceptional leadership.

The consequences of this link between Khokrapar and Munabao in India will be manifold. Other than building people to people contact, the link would enable the trade of commodities and the exchange of ideas across the border. The establishment of a broad gauge track and the renovation of seven railway stations along the route shall also foster economic ties and boost the concomitant social development of a region long neglected by the state and its functionaries.

In this last month, another initiative taken by Pakistan

leadership

The specialists, lady health visitors nurses, skilled birth attendants, technicians and ward boys were drawn from the staff of the Hassan Hospital run by PR in Karachi. One specialist, Dr Arif Majid, volunteered his services from the private sector, carrying with him 500 pairs of glasses which were to be donated to the community after the requisite eye tests were conducted in the well-furnished "eye lab" set up at Pithoro railway station's waiting room.

Everyone involved in this effort seemed to share one vision: to provide health care to the citizens of areas that lie between the realm of the neglected and the desolate. An idea which grew out of a conversation held several years ago with Mr Shakil Durrani, now chairman of the Pakistan railway board, bore fruit despite the odds and the barren environment of government indolence. Before taking on his current assignment at the ministry of railways, Mr Durrani had served as secretary, ministry of population welfare. At that time I served as a goodwill ambassador for the United Nations Population Fund, and had held a discussion about the deplorable health profiles of women living in remote rural areas.

Mr Durrani was keen to mobilize mobile service units to serve these areas, and I had suggested that the government should utilize existing infrastructure such as the railways to motivate people towards planning their families and towards improving the health profiles of mothers and children. Several years later, that vision became a possibility. In his capacity as chairman, Mr Durrani mobilized Pakistan Railways to set up medical camps in the region of Tharparkar, putting to work in a novel way the apparatus and infrastructure of a system which serves to connect remote regions to the urban metropolises of the country.

Despite the fact that the Railways' health budget is limited, Pakistan Railways made

Railway's endeavour to link Khokrapar to the main line. This gentleman reiterated his belief that such a link would invigorate the economy of the area by encouraging trade. I asked him how the people who tilled his land would become a part of the market economy when they had nothing to live on and even less to invest in trade. There was no answer.

That silence accompanied me on my journey to Khokrapar, the desert stretching endlessly before me like an unanswered question. How do these communities manage to survive with no basic facilities, hardly any jobs, no land to till, and scarce water to drink? How do those who rule the land justify their lifestyles, the fat on their bodies, the rot in their souls, when all around one there is nothing but hunger and despair? The vehicle carrying myself, the divisional superintendent, PR Karachi, Mr Junaid Qureshi, and the director health and medical services, PR, Dr Aitzaz Ahmad, broke down several times, its wheels unable to find traction in the shifting sand.

While we waited for the engine to cool down, I listened to the sound of the desert, and heard beneath that silence the lament which spoke of inequity and injustice and the inability of the government to see beyond the blinkers meshed out of macro economic indicators. In the distance I could hear the rhythmic clattering that broke through that haze of despair, the gentle chugging of the train carrying doctors and technicians and medical supplies to Khokrapar, that last outpost of our country which had been forgotten and forsaken until the peace process gained enough momentum for our leadership to recognize the needs of the hour.

It is that recognition which needs to be considered seriously for its impact both within and outside the country; it is the strength embodied in the power of one which needs to be replicated so that each one of us becomes the agent of change so desperately required in such desperate times.