

Dawn
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PR's travails
Pak Railways

THE latest reports from the Pakistan Railways do not give rise to much optimism about its future. At one time the backbone of the transportation system in the country and a prime revenue earner, PR has been on the slide for the past several decades. Not only has its budget been in the red, the quality of its services has also been declining. As a result, over the years the trend has set in for the railways to lose passengers and freight. Two years ago under the direction of the president, a special effort was made to spruce up the railways, and its prospects began to brighten up somewhat. But obviously the effort has not been sustained and a week ago the railway authorities brought it to the prime minister's notice that adequate funds were not being provided to this sector. Its share in the PSDP has fallen to 7.2 per cent this year from 8.5 per cent in 2001-2002.

It appears that the government has written off the railways as a key constituent of the country's transportation system. Earlier this was done to give a boost to air and road transportation — the National Logistics Cell receiving special favours under General Ziaul Haq's regime. With the railways starved of funds and attention, not surprisingly precious little expansion and upgrading have taken place. The rolling stock is mostly obsolete and worn out and has not been replaced as it should have been. The tracks have not been substantially expanded and not many new services have been added. As a result, the utility and attractiveness of the railways as a mode of travel has declined and the passenger and freight traffic

has gone down. This has naturally affected its profitability and served as a disincentive for government investment. No government has attempted to break the vicious cycle and put the railways back on track.

Given the lack of vision in government planners and policymakers and their failure to comprehend the indispensable role of the railways in the national life of the country, the only solution to the problem they have been able to suggest is privatization of some sectors and services. There has also been talk of selling off some shares in the open market. But will this really prove to be a shot in the arm for the railways? If the problem is simply seen to be one of balancing the railway budget and prevent it from going into the red, privatization may be seen as an answer. But the real challenge is to develop the railways as a utility which can provide an efficient and cost-effective facility for passenger and freight transportation. It is plain that privatization will only make rail travel more expensive for the common citizen while improving services in the sectors that are in demand. Any private entrepreneur will seek to recover his investment as well as make a healthy profit. This will defeat the basic goal of providing a cheap and convenient mode of inter-city transport. It is important that the government acknowledges the role of the railways and accepts its responsibility of providing financial, managerial, administrative and infrastructural support to it. Initially this would call for greater investment, but as services improve and are expanded, revenues will start flowing in.