

## **Close Encounters of the IRTS Kind**

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As an academic who is not part of any of the several branches and layers of Indian Railways (IR) personnel, I am an 'outsider'. But since research on transport operations is part of my professional activities, I have had the opportunity to work on projects with IR, and interact with a significant number of IRTS officers over the years. I first encountered the IRTS species in 1992 when I attended a workshop at IIM Ahmedabad. Some informal encounters in Mumbai were also around that time – one of the persons I remember was M.B.Taly, who was already retired, but was doing some legal work on behalf of IR, and told me some interesting things about the Grand Chord and operations in the Dhanbad area.

Soon after, I wrote to RDSO Lucknow and got an invite from Mr Subramaniam of the IRTS, along with a railway pass. This was a cause of much excitement and I made full use of the First AC journey in the Pushpak to Lucknow, being at the door for much of the time. At RDSO, I also met Manoj Sinha of the IRTS, who, after hearing my enthusiasm for trying to understand the details of the Lucknow area (which I was visiting for the first time), remarked that I should have been a DOM or AOM – a compliment I treasure! It is true that I was interested in figuring out what the line that we passed before Manak Nagar was (later learned that it was the Utraitia-Alamnagar bypass line at Transport Nagar) and the third line between Manak Nagar and LKO, and going under the line from Moradabad. These were still the days of Chhoti Line and Badi Line in Lucknow and it was all quite exciting. I was thrilled to know that Manoj had been in NF railway and could tell me about the two different lines to Jorhat and some train that split into two and the two halves made their way along these two lines. He was amused that someone was interested in such obscure details. Many years later, he returned to RDSO and I had the chance to meet him once again.

Other interesting meetings all those years ago, in Chennai, were with S.Jagannathan, who gave me a good picture of operations in that part of the world, and later with P.Raveendran, who is now Chairman, Chennai Port Trust, and is also a storehouse of stories on culture, language, and much else.

The big turning point in my contact with the IRTS cadre was when I decided to spend part of my sabbatical year (two periods of six months each) at the Railway Staff College, Vadodara, in 2000 and 2001. The contact assigned to me was Arvind Kumar Srivastava (AKS), then Professor of Transportation Management at the College. He took a chance with a person he met for the first time (me) and apart from organizing some lectures to IRTS probationers at the College, he arranged for me to travel and meet various colleagues in different parts of the railways and understand this fascinating world. He accompanied me himself on many of these journeys, and with him, I visited New Delhi, Kota, Vadodara (of course), Mumbai, Palghat, Lucknow, Allahabad, Mughalsarai. These were early days of Control Office Automation and various techniques were being tried, based on axle counters and other technologies on different divisions. Palghat was memorable because we visited the divisional office during some sort of strike and we were whisked in, in the midst of a

demonstration. There we had animated discussions with Palghat division personnel on the ghat section between DC (Magudanchavadi alias Macdonald's Choultry) and MVPM (Mavelipalaiyam), where the double lines diverge significantly in their alignment. Many years later, I found that the section between Datia and Sonagir is even more striking in this regard. I must acknowledge AKS's openness, good humour, wide reading and experience, and conceptual clarity (though he came from a very different technical background), and through him, I met so many of his friends, colleagues, and also people whom he mentored at the Staff College. His accounts of the early part of his career in Sonpur and many other parts of North India were fascinating. Subsequently, I have visited him in Jhansi, Agra, Vadodara, Mumbai and Lucknow at different stages of his career.

The visits in the first part of my sabbatical at the Staff College were mainly in the divisional and zonal set-up, and in the second part, other organizations, including CRIS, RITES, Concor and also the Railway Board. I remember meeting D.P.Sandhu in Delhi, Nalin Singhal of Concor, and several other officers. Some of them have left the service and some have retired, but the access that I had to observation and discussion helped me understand railway working and different aspects of traffic management. I thought then – and continue to do so even now – that this was a most interesting job to have. I am still fascinated by Working Time Tables, the system maps that I see in many of the officers' cabins and also the dark brown boards with white paint with old holders of the post. While all parts of the job are interesting, the position of the Senior DOM is perhaps the most action-oriented and result oriented of the lot, for the sheer immediacy of action, the sense of purpose, and the liveliness of the situation on a daily basis.

Other interactions and impressions I recall are Vikas Chaube's summary of plans that the railways had made during the Kumbh Mela, Badrinarayan's writings on various matters, and P.S.Sandhu's explanation of the coupon system in the Mumbai suburban system. I was also associated with a study with Shobhit Bhatnagar, then at the Staff College, where we tabulated a bewildering number of ways passengers could get tickets on the Indian Railways.

While at the Staff College I taught many IRTS probationers (this was prior to the establishment of IRITM) and a few others the basics of operations research and also supply chain management. Many of the officers of those times are very much in touch, and doing interesting things – R.Gopalakrishnan and K.N.Singh, to name just two. AKS's senior colleague at RSC, S.C.Jethi, was equally encouraging, and in fact, was keen to take up teaching the topic in a more mathematical way than I had anticipated. This I found intriguing – here I was, trying to teach material in a practice-oriented manner suitable to the railway domain and there he was (from that domain), wanting to teach it more conceptually!

Many great railway trips have been in the company of or facilitated by my IRTS colleagues – the narrow gauge line from Gwalior to Sheopur Kalan, a night ride in a diesel loco on the Secunderabad-Kurnool line, a trip to Nanded and being received with full state honours at the Gurudwara there, a quick visit to obscure but historically important Royapuram station in Chennai, and many more. A particularly memorable experience was sneaking into Rail Bhavan like a rat through one of the rear entrances – I found that though my railway

colleague knew quite a few people in the building, even he needed some sort of pass to enter the hallowed precincts – and on one visit, we just got impatient and took our chances.

Somewhere along the way, I encountered M.Ravibabu, who was doing his Ph.D. at IIM Ahmedabad and that association also has continued, through his tenure in RITES, Hyderabad, Chennai etc. One memorable trip was with him and his colleagues, from Raipur to Jharsuguda in an inspection saloon, to try to understand the possible options for quadruple line operation in that part of the network. Another person whom I have met in multiple roles is Praveen Pandey, in Bangalore and Lucknow. A few associations were semi-academic in nature, while they were doing various courses at IIM Bangalore and other places. Subsequently, through various associations, I have met people across the spectrum, from Member Traffic to recently joined probationers, and enjoyed the interactions. Some of these associations have not been steady, but are still alive, for example, with P.Uniyal, who was at the Staff College and is now associated with the Institute of Rail Transport.

During a sabbatical semester in Guwahati, Leena Sarma helped me meet some IRTS people in Maligaon, to explore the possibility of conducting a training programme, but they firmly told me that their training was all through the Railway Staff College, and that was that! Many years later, I could persuade some railway people to come to Mumbai for knowledge sharing sessions on a couple of occasions. By then, I had visited IRITM Lucknow on multiple occasions and had very pleasant interactions with several of the younger officers of the cadre – Shivendra Shukla facilitated these interactions the last few times.

A very nice opportunity to interact with senior officers of the IRTS was in a study of the Allahabad division, through RITES, where I had occasion to work closely with R.B.Das, V.K.Roy, Ranjan Jain, all of whom had retired at the time but were very engaged in the details of operation and railway working, and who provided very sharp insights. Hari Ram Rao was my host at RITES in that study.

In Mumbai, several people have encouraged our work and provided support to our efforts: among them Madhav Pathak, S. Mudgerikar, and S.S.Chandrayan. The suburban system in Mumbai is such a traffic challenge that invariably, IRTS officers are in charge of both the Central Railway and Western Railway divisions in my city.

The IRTS cadre offers opportunities that are unparalleled, in managing a large system in its entirety, interacting with so many parts of the system – from the various engineering components to the human, material and financial aspects, co-ordination with the government and local administration, and most importantly, being the only face that IR has with a customer, both passenger and freight. This allows an IRTS officer to be very versatile and branch out into almost any area of his or her interest – it could be information technology, logistics, general administration or management, associated sectors such as ports, cement, coal, shipping, containerization, warehousing, and a host of others. IRTS officers have gone on to do so many interesting things even outside the railways, including urban development, international organizations, and private and public institutions. It has been very refreshing and stimulating to have interacted with this group of people over so many years. My association with this cadre continues today, and regardless of how the IRTS reinvents itself, I am sure it will retain its unique character.