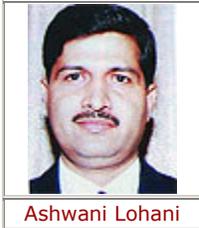


THE LURE OF STEAM

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I vividly recollect my early encounters with this new flavour of tourism when as a four year old, I used to be thrilled trying hard to tug at the whistle cord of a WP class steam locomotive at Kanpur (then known as Cawnpore) central railway station in early 60s.

The thrill returned some 30-odd years later when I pushed (and pushed really hard) the world's oldest steam locomotive, the Fairy Queen back on track, and in the process set a Guinness World Record in 1998. The push and the thrill continued with amazing regularity and finally culminated in the birth of the Indian Steam Railway Society in November 1999.

Steam heritage tourism

Steam heritage tourism had, by then, come to stay in India. Fairy Queen was a dream. It was a dream, which I dared to live, despite being a bureaucrat in a developing country. Its re-run in October 1997, after being in hibernation for over 90 years, acted as the trigger and suddenly steam locomotives started making their appearance, proudly, once again even if with the limited objective of hauling short distance tourist trains.

Soon it became fashionable even in elite railway circles to talk of steam runs. After the Fairy Queen, an HGS class locomotive was resurrected at Kolkata and run between Howrah and Tribeni in August 1999. This was followed by a steam run in distant Guwahati. Steam then appeared on the Neral to Matheran line, followed by the Kangra Valley Railway and then on the Kalka-Shimla line with the grand finale being the reenactment on the April 16, 2002, of the first train run of 1853 on the Mumbai-Thane section. This reenactment was the ultimate tribute which the highly bureaucratic, but surprisingly, efficient Indian Railways (IR) paid to the lure of steam. Periodic steam runs for tourists and even Bollywood film shoots have continued since then. The setting up of a steam center at Rewari in 2002 has also been a landmark event for this niche tourism segment.

What's next?

I say follow the British. Yes, India should follow the success story of UK. Steam heritage tourism in UK is a movement not only of the dedicated steam enthusiast but it has evolved into a big and growing tourism industry. The magnitude of operations can be gauged from the fact that today in UK there are more than 100 operating steam railways with a total length of over 500 km. These heritage railways have more than 1,000 operational steam locomotives, employ over 1,000 people, have a volunteer force of about 25,000 and are visited by over 8,00,000 tourists a year, contributing almost 60 million pound sterling to the economy.

Why only British? Steam heritage tourism has caught up in countries as well, some as diverse as China, Japan, Jordan, Sri Lanka, North Korea, Russia, Phillipines, South Africa, USA, Canada, Argentina and many more. The list is exhaustive. One wonder at this tilt towards steam in the age of diesel and electric locomotives. The answer is

simple yet inherently complex. It is like falling in love. It is nearly impossible to describe or explain the reason for the same.

Well, still I would attempt to explain the rationale. The invention of the steam locomotive has been the single most important event in the history of mankind. This invention marked the beginning of travel beyond the frontiers. And once man began to travel, his vistas changed, his thinking changed, in effect his whole life changed. Soon after the invention of the steam locomotive, railway systems started growing around them. And they grew real fast.

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However, with the passage of time, technological changes and increasing human aspirations necessitated more powerful, efficient and long reach locomotives. So by the mid 20th century, diesel and electric locomotives started making their appearance and gradually taking over the entire railway system. And then, slowly steam locomotives started getting missed. People started missing their smell, their sound, their rocking gait and their imposing presence. And why not? With fire in its belly, and a unique personality of its own, the steam locomotive is more human than anything else we know.

The steam enthusiast

Well, let us now talk of the typical steam locomotive enthusiast. I strongly believe that anyone who has had anything to do with steam locomotives in his lifetime, is in many ways superior to the one who has given steam locomotives the go-by. In one way love for steam falls in the same category as love for the Bullet breed of motorcycles. Both are macho. Well the breed is growing faster than one can imagine, perhaps fuelled by enthusiasm.



What do we do with them once they are in India. Take them on the Fairy Queen Express. For Rs 10,000, this two days all- inclusive tiger safari will perhaps be the best steam heritage tourism package anywhere in the globe. More than 12 hours of Guinness world record winning steam! The train runs every other Saturday from October through March and bookings can be made from the National Rail Museum based in New Delhi, or the International Tourist Bureau situated at the New Delhi railway station. bookings can also be made from any of the IR GSAs overseas.

Another option would be to take them to Darjeeling. The Darjeeling Himalayan Railway, hauled by perhaps the cutest steam locomotives ever to inhabit the globe, is now a world heritage site. A visit to this railway system comes with the added attraction of the beautiful hill station of Darjeeling. Similarly, a southbound tourist should not miss the X-class steam locomotives of the metre gauge Nilgiri Mountain Railway, one of the only two-rack railways in the world and a world heritage site. Chartered steam runs are, however, available on all the five hill railway lines.

A hard core steam enthusiast would do well to not miss a visit to the National Rail Museum in New Delhi. It boasts of one of the best collections of steam locomotives

anywhere in the world and the recently resurrected steam locomotive shed at Rewari, which is still waiting to do what all sheds are meant to - provide steam locomotives for train operations. What is gratifying is that the intrinsic value and potential of steam heritage tourism is now getting recognised. The present scenario reflects that this is bound to mature into a significant tourism segment in the country.

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