

India 1968

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In February 1968 *The Railway Magazine* ran a tour of India, and an old friend and I decided to go on it. We had travelled widely on the railways of Western Europe, especially in France, Germany and Spain, and also in Yugoslavia, but apart from a visit I had made to Moscow, this would be our first trip beyond Europe. Why *The Railway Magazine* had decided to run such a tour I do not know – it had not done so before and has not done so since – but probably it was the idea of one of the Deputy Editors, Ian Yearsley, who had lived for some years on the sub-continent and had a keen interest in the region. He was the tour leader and did the job very well.

Fifty years is a long time but fortunately I have my photos of the trip and my friend's comprehensive notes to help to bring details back to mind. Some things described in the notes are completely forgotten, while others are still fresh in the memory. Examples of the former are the long flights in either direction. From London we caught a British Overseas Airways Corporation Boeing 707 which stopped in Zurich, Rome and Karachi before reaching Calcutta. On the return from Bombay, we stopped at Beirut, Geneva and Paris before reaching London. These flights must have been so lengthy that these days I should regard them as horrendous experiences to be avoided at all costs. But I have no recollection of them whatsoever, so they cannot have been so appalling or I would remember them now. A friend has pointed out, however, that air travel in those days was not the ordeal it has become today. So perhaps that is the explanation.

Briefly our itinerary was as follows:

- 10 February: leave London
- 11 February: observation at Howrah station
- 12 February: Howrah Amta Light Railway; Calcutta Eastern Railway Depot
- 13 February: day free in Calcutta.
- 14 February: Calcutta-Bagdogra by Air India 'Viscount' *Mysore*. Sukna-Darjeeling by DHLR.
- 15 February: Darjeeling-Sukna by DHLR; by Air India 'Viscount' *Punjab* to Calcutta; on 19.55 'Amritsar Mail' from Howrah to Moghul Sarai.
- 16 February: Moghul Sarai depot; Varanasi Depot
- 17 February: on 'Kalka Mail', electric loco 20200, via Allahabad, Kanpur etc. Tundla Jct CWD 12534 to Agra Cant.
- 18 February: Gwalior Light Railway. Dholpur.
- 19 February: Agra. Visit Taj Mahal. Agra Cant Depot. 'Taj Express' to Delhi.
- 20 February: Delhi Depot; Shahdara-Saharanpur Light Railway
- 21 February: 2572 YP metre gauge to Bandikui Jct; 2573 YP metre gauge to Jaipur.
- 22 February: Jaipur depot; Jaipur Works
- 23 February: Air India 'Viscount' *Gujrat* to Bombay. Bombay Port Trust
- 24 February: Bombay Parel Works;

- 25 February: Bombay Victoria Terminus train to Neral. Neral-Matheran Railway
- 26 February: Bombay-London Air India Boeing 707 *Everest*.

So what experiences still remain fresh in the memory? Several in fact, but one in particular comes to mind. In the group was a well known American enthusiast, Rogers E. M. Whitaker, a writer for the New Yorker. He later wrote a book *All Aboard with E. M. Frimbo, World's Greatest Railroad Buff*. which is an entertaining account of his many travels by train both in the USA and in other countries. On the Darjeeling line I happened to be in the same carriage as him, and an hour or so after leaving Sukna, the tiny 0-4-0 saddle tank pulling our train of four carriages was well into its stride and making good progress 'up the hill'. I had never heard any engine being worked so hard for so long, and it seems quite likely that Rogers Whitaker had never heard anything like it either. He stood up, thrust his hands into his trouser pockets (he was wearing a pin-stripe grey suit, no tie, which made him resemble to my eye a Wall Street financier) and gazed out of the windows at the vista passing below – villages, tea plantations, hills and distant mountains – and said, 'Gee, what a trip! Gee, what a trip!, Gee what a trip!'

How many times he actually said this, I am not now sure, perhaps half a dozen, perhaps more. But the point is he was not speaking to any of his companions in the carriage. He was so moved by the whole experience that he felt compelled to say his thoughts aloud. At that time of course the Darjeeling line was still being operated as a proper railway. There was a full service of freight trains as well as passenger, and though it was all single-line the passing loops and reversals were all operated very smartly and with minimal delay. In fact, the whole railway was a really smart operation. When I returned some years later, there were no freights at all, and diesel trucks threw out immense quantities of black smoke as they struggled up the hill.

Other features of the trip that are still memorable are the Howrah-Amta Light Railway; all the attractive engines - the modern WP and WG classes on the broad gauge, the YP and YG on the meter gauge, and of course the older Pacifics and 4-6-0 'Mail Engines'; travel in named expresses such as 'The Taj Express' and in night sleeping car trains such as the 'Kalka Mail'; and of course the whole fascinating ambience of Indian Railways. All these good things make the 1968 trip truly memorable. Gee, what a trip indeed!