CONSTRUCTION

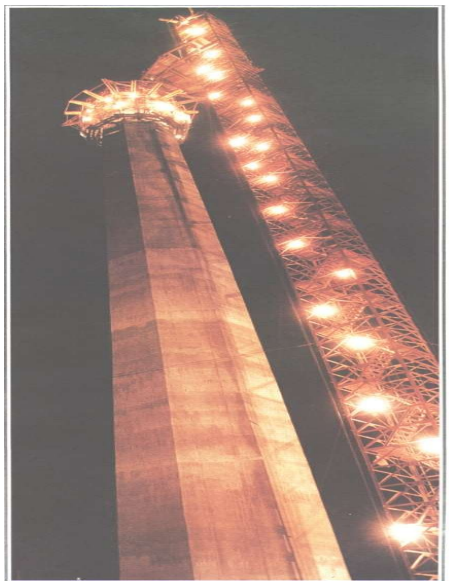
The Challenge

The task was formidable. As Karlis Goppers pointed out in his Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA) report in July 1997: With a total number of 2,000 bridges and 92 tunnels to be built through this mountainous terrain containing many rivers, the project is the biggest and perhaps most difficult railway undertaking during this century, at least in this part of the world. The various problems, had been carried out efficiently and in a very short time.

Tracking its way through:
A track through one of the many tunnels

The largest railway project in this part of the world in the last five decades threw up a whole range of difficulties technical, financial, emotional and psychological. The rocky Sahyadris had to be bored through, 1,500 rivers had to be forded, a railway line had to be built out of nowhere. And once in a while, a poisonous snake, or a tiger, decided to take a close look at goings-on! In the face of collapsing embankments and unrelenting mountains, the engineers had to be tough. But they also had to be deeply sensitive to the feelings of those who had given up their land.

Family life took a backseat during those arduous years; when the engineers went to work, their wives did not know if their husbands would return home that night. Many engineers stayed away from their families during this period, not even returning home for festivals like Diwali.



Panval Nadi viaduct
A pier completed in 12 days

At the very least, working conditions were uncomfortable; in June 1994, Mahad had floods 10 to 12 feet above the road level, and when they receded, Konkan Railway jeeps had six-inch layers of silt on the seats. Four workers in the Byndoor tunnel in Karnataka faced their own battle with water they were thrown back 60 feet by a sudden gush.

Water was not the only element that posed danger. Mr. A.F. Shevare, the then Chief Engineer of Ratnagiri (North and South) and Kudal, who succeeded Mr. B.R. Kulkarini, recalls how, during the monsoons in July 1997, an entire mountainside collapsed at Ukshi. Machines were buried under the debris, but 200 labourers had a miraculous escape. People like 30-year-old Ravi Kapoor, an Executive Engineer, had amazing luck as will. On October 10, 1997, three months before the Pernem Tunnel was completed, a major collapse took place, just above where he was standing. Mr. Kapoor found himself in chest-deep soil, his helmet crushed and a boulder on his foot. A colleague, Mr. V. Jayasankaran, stayed back to rescue him, and Mr. Kapoor escaped, but only just. Mr. Jayashankaran later received an award for bravery. Thanks to Mr. Jayasankaran s alertness, several other workers lives had also been saved; earlier, on August 26, 1997, it was his timely warning that resulted in workers being evacuated when a serious collapse occurred at Pernem Tunnel.

For those who kept going despite the toughest of challenges, the sense of achievement made it all worthwhile.According to Mr. D.R.Shyama Sundar, the then Regional Railway Manager in charge of the 363.88 km. Section between Roha and Sawantwadi, “the task was so difficult that when I travel along the route, I find it hard to believe that we built it!” It was the very challenging nature of the work, he adds, that led to the team spirit that was so crucial in the successful completion of the project.

As one engineer pointed out at celebratory function in Kudal on January 25, 1998, the day before the through commissioning of the Railway: If people had considered this merely as a job, it would have taken 25 years to complete. The then Chief Engineer of Panaji, Mr. S. Balakrishna, put it simply: After seven years of hard struggle, he said, we have proved that the impossible is possible.

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