

What Ails Sri Lanka Railways ?



Roofs of shanties coming very close to the Kelani Valley rail track between Maradana and Nugegoda.



Train suddenly appears over the bend blocked by unauthorised shops, at Nugegoda, to cross a busy highway (also Kelani Valley railway).



Another unauthorised construction beside the Kelani Valley railway near Kirulapona.

Some background information about the Kelani Valley railway:

The Kelani Valley railway line serves a very important suburban corridor of the capital city. It covers almost all the important towns like Narahenpita, Kirulapona, Nugegoda, Maharagama and Kottawa on the way towards Homagama, which is more or less the outer suburban limit. But, despite this significance, it has so far failed to contribute massively towards the reduction of traffic along the High Level road, especially during the peak hours. If one looks at the peak traffic distribution along the suburban railway lines, the KV's share along this corridor is only around 10% whereas the other suburban lines, the Coastal Line and the Main Line, contribute more than 25% to this figure in their respective corridors. Reasons for this under performance are many and varied. However, as I see, the more conspicuous ones could be summarized as below (if you want more information on this topic, please read the book on Sri Lanka Railways by Dr. David Hyatt or the Sinhalese book by Sirisena Rajapakse on 'දුම්රිය ගමනාගමනය'):

The Kelani Valley railway used to be a narrow gauge railway up until 1990s when it started to be broad-gauged. However, while broad-gauging, they used the old alignment due to various reasons, the constructions shown in the photos not being the last. Although these people could and should be relocated (because they have encroached the lands belonging to the railway), it never materialised. As a result of keeping the old alignment, speeds on this line are very much restricted and only power sets could be run. Furthermore, the Kelani Valley doesn't enjoy the privilege of having a double line (very important during congestion hours) which all other suburban lines do.

About the history of this railway line, it used to run further down towards Ratnapura and Opanayake through beautiful landscape before 1976-77. The small train was a popular mode of transport among the 'Sri Pada' (Adam's peak holy mountain) pilgrims although it could hardly compete with the speeds provided for motorists by the improved road conditions along the High Level road. When the proposal came for broad-gauging the line in the 60s, some MPs who had up to that point strongly supported the move, suddenly started to object the proposal. There was talk in the town that they had received bribes from the influential lorry drivers in the area who transported vegetables to the capital and who feared that the trains would grab their chances of transport.

The possibility of reinstating this latter part of the KV line dwindles every day as people encroach the lands there as well and become the de facto owners of such property. JF Tours, which runs some tourist trains in association with the railways, used to operate a narrow gauge sentinel steam railcar on the existing track (a middle rail was kept to facilitate running narrow gauge trains when the line was broad-gauged) till recently, but this practice also seems to have fallen into disuse. The countryside just 20-30 kilometers outside the capital is so scenic if not panoramic, and it is hard to understand why the railways cuts off avenues of revenue like this.

Dear reader. It rests with you whether such things shall be. If you are a Sri Lankan and interested in the country's development, don't just read these stories and forget. Please ascertain whether what I am talking about is true or not first and decide what you should do to stop such things from happening in the future. Remember, good train services provide for less traffic along the roads. Imagine what would happen to the Galle road or Kandy road if train services came to a standstill.