THE STORY ABOUT CHECKING

Adversity spurs innovation! Passenger earnings were way below target and the Railways was facing a serious financial crisis. What was not known at that time was that these earning targets were fixed on some parameters which were not too realistic. In any case, the need of the hour was not to cry over spilt milk and crib endlessly about targets, but to find ways to fulfill them. So the targets remained in place and the chase - a chase with a five-month handicap!

During detailed deliberations, interesting aspects on ticket checking came to light. Ticket checking consists mainly of three elements: people travelling without tickets, people travelling with improper tickets, and unbooked luggage. The two latter aspects (although substantial in scope) are the easiest to control. The decision was made to focus on the first aspect (people travelling without ticket). This aspect may be termed as the "real" ticket checking effort and the most difficult to implement.

Ticket checking involves various activities which have to be fulfilled for making it effective. The first obviously is to sell tickets to passengers desirous of buying it. This is not as simple as it sounds! Great strides have been made via IT for booking unreserved tickets. This has been a massive project executed across the country by operationalising a network of terminals connected to a single server dispensing unreserved tickets of various types. Yet, the demand for tickets is different at each type of stations. Broadly, all stations may be classified as Large [including categories as A1 and A], Medium [including B, C, D] and Small [classified as E and F]. The larger stations have a clientele that require tickets instantly in large numbers, like suburban passengers. Their numbers are huge and patience is in short supply! Any delay will lead to a pile-up and consequently long queues will inevitably follow. The difficulties may be mitigated to some extent by providing Season Tickets for days [weekly], months and even quarters. Yet this pressure remains and ticket dispensing remains a major issue. A related issue is cash collection from counters. Returning exact change can be time-consuming in an environment where time is of the essence. The answer lies in rounding-off the fares and mechanizing dispensation. A better idea would be to have a coin operated vending machine [COVM] which combines both requirements. To this end, IR decided to install 4500 COVM's in all large stations

across the country depending upon some threshold values. For other types of stations, medium and small, a decision was made to appoint RTBSs i.e. Rail Ticket Booking Sevaks which eliminates the need of employing extra staff. That left the small road-side stations, called 'E' class stations: where the train passing staff traditionally performs the function of ticket sale. It has been seen that, in view of the heavy work load associated with passing trains, timely ticket sale to desirous passengers is well-nigh impossible, resulting in people (who are willing to buy a ticket) travelling without tickets. It was decided to replicate the RTBS concept to these stations as STBS, with minor changes. With these concepts in place, ticket sale to all passengers would be (by and large) assured. Refinements would follow - in the form of selling unreserved tickets through mobile phones, web, etc. Improvements are a never ending process and drive change/technology.

The major problem is with ticket checking. Introduction of more and more trains every year propels the need for more checking staff to man additional coaches. This in itself would be a self-defeating purpose if the objective was to make this business profitable. The manpower costs would outstrip the earnings realized. It was felt that the shortage of staff would have to be met by some other method and that could only be technology. The question arose: was such a technology available? Efforts were made to find one- these are still on-going. But it was realised that airports have a scanning system for boarding passes - so do metros. So why not railways? Once the kind of technology was visualised, the next objective was to find the right technology. The objective would be two-fold: to scan each ticket before a passenger enters the station platform and the second is to ensure that the entry through the scan has been registered on the chart which would finally be in the possession of the TTE/ conductor before the start of the journey. This implies that each *bonafide* passenger would be checked before he/she actually boards a train, in fact, before he/she even enters the station. While not eliminating the workload of the staff, this would definitely reduce it drastically. It would also ensure that only *bonafide* passengers enter the station platform thus eliminating the congestion at platforms, the provision of amenities for a disproportionate number of people and unwanted/ unlawful crowds at FOB's.

The other option that was considered was to provide a ticket checking device at the entry of each coach where a passenger has to 'swipe' his/her ticket at the door of the coach. This device may or

may not be linked to the computer preparing the reservation chart. At least, it will ensure only *bonafide* passengers. However, the need for checking might still remain.

It was decided that the first option was more desirable and needed to be pursued. Thereafter. all sorts of grave scenarios were foretold. It was told that the provision of a technical barrier at the time of entry to the station would lead to its own problems - not agreed to. Fears were voiced about the porous nature of stations open on all sides - these were again overruled since a major portion of the passengers enter normally.

The more serious issues are:

– <u>Finding the right technology:</u> The right technology is one which can check tickets while simultaneously updating the database in the computer. This would require a scanner and a barcode identity on the ticket. The alternative - a manual entry, would negate the very theory of manpower requirement. The technology has yet to be established and proven. The efforts are underway.

– <u>Allowing wait-listed passenger to pass this tech-barrier</u>: Technically, a wait-listed passenger is not allowed to board a train/ coach unless berths are available in which case his ticket gets confirmed. In case it is to happen against a last minute cancellation or a confirmed passenger not turning up, then the reservation should be handed over to an RAC passenger. Only then the wait-listed passenger gets a chance. It appears logical, therefore, that we should not permit such passengers to enter a platform if they are not going to board the train. A more fundamental question is: why issue wait-listed tickets at all? This is the scenario in which we are at present.

Some of the other questions being examined are: do we issue and check platform tickets?; how much before the scheduled departure of a train should passengers be allowed to enter a station so that the ticket cannot be re-circulated?; etc. The doubts are endless, only the tenacity to move in the right direction is required.

Trials were carried out to implement the scheme manually pending availability of technical aids. It was decided to provide a bank of manually operated gates through which all passengers would pass, have their tickets checked and ticked on charts provided to TC's manning these 'gates'. The objective was to have a gate system manually operated wherein all the benefits of a technology driven system could be replicated. This means that a small group of static staff would man these gates and simultaneously check five to six trains. It was decided to conduct this experiment at dead-end stations (for ease of implementation) and of different types: small, medium and large. The trials were monitored by senior officials across the country. The results threw up all the problems envisaged, e.g., congestion at entry points since majority of the passengers arrived within half an hour before departure of each train; segregating reserved and unreserved passengers; time to check each passenger and tally with chart of each train and coach. It was a nightmare and finally abandoned.

But the lessons learnt are interesting. It is increasingly clear that the idea is a good one and a step in the right direction. It has multiple spin off benefits - reduced congestion on platforms and FOB's; provision of adequate passenger amenities commensurate with actual travelers; security related issues of restricted entry and baggage scanning; reduction in manpower required for trains, etc. The problem now lies in effective implementation. Let us hope it succeeds.