

150th anniversary of Calcutta trams

February 28, 2023

In news– On February 24, Kolkata's iconic tram service celebrated 150 years since the first tram was flagged off.

History of Calcutta trams-

- **The first trams, drawn by horses, took to Calcutta streets on February 24, 1873.**
- **Today, Kolkata remains the only city where trams are still plying.**
- However, once upon a time, in the heyday of trams, **they were a popular mode of urban transport that could be found across India**, in big metropolises such as Delhi, Bombay, and Madras, as well as smaller towns such as Nasik, Patna and Bhavnagar.
- The second half of the 19th century saw rapid urban development in India, especially in the three Presidency cities of Calcutta, Bombay and Madras.
- It is in this environment that the idea of tramcars emerged. While **a licence for horse drawn trams was granted in Bombay in 1865, due to multiple reasons, the project fell through.**
- Instead, **the first trams entered service in the then British capital of Calcutta in 1873.**
- **The horse-drawn trams plied on a 3.8 km route between Sealdah and Armenian Ghat Street.** However, by the end of the year, **the service was discontinued as the venture was not economically viable.**
- **In 1874, the first horse-drawn trams emerged in Mumbai,** plying on two routes – Colaba to Pydhonie via Crawford Market, and Bori Bunder to Pydhonie.
- **Nasik would be the third city in India which saw trams –** a four-horse-driven tram (with two cabins) that would

travel a distance of around 8 km, from the present day Old Municipal Corporation building located on the Main Road to the Nashik Road railway station.

- **Horse-drawn trams also debuted in Patna in 1886**, with tracks stretching between Patna City (Old Patna) and Bankipore, 3 km away.
- **These initial tram systems were little more than horse taxis being driven on fixed lines. They were slow and required an immense number of horses to be viable,** making them difficult to succeed economically.

Arrival of the locomotive-

- **In 1880, trams re-emerged in Calcutta, when Lord Ripon inaugurated a new, longer, metre-gauge route between Sealdah and Armenian Ghat Street** via Bowbazar Street, Dalhousie Square and Strand Road.
- Two years later, **The Calcutta Tramway Company would experiment with steam locomotives** (instead of horses) to pull trams.
- **However, locomotives were never universally adopted for tram systems.** This was primarily because **older locomotives were notoriously unreliable** and often very polluting, drawing opposition from citizens.
- **Thus, by the end of the 19th century, The Calcutta Tramway Company would boast of seven locomotives and over 1000 horses,** with both being used to pull trams.
- **Mumbai, Nasik or Patna would never switch to steam locomotives.**
- **The Cochin State Forest Tramway began operations in 1907, transporting teak and rosewood** from the forests of Palakkad to the town of Chalakudy in Thrissur District.
- **At the time, this was the longest tram route in India,** stretching nearly **80 km** and the only one not geared towards urban transport.
- **In 1926, under** the reign of Colonel **Maharaja Raol Sir**

Shri Krishna Kumarsinhji Bhavsinhji, locomotive-driven tramways were introduced in the Princely State of Bhavnagar.

Electric trams-

- **In 1895, Madras (present-day Chennai) saw India's first electric tramways enter service** with seven cars.
- This was a revolutionary new mode of transport, connecting the city's docks to its inland areas.
- **Unlike steam locomotives, these were far cleaner and less noisy,** and thus immediately became a preferred option.
- **By 1902, Calcutta saw its first electric tramcars,** plying between Esplanade and Kidderpore, and Esplanade and Kalighat.
- **Bombay would see electrification too, in 1907,** under the newly formed Bombay Electric Supply and Tramway Company (BEST).
- **Cawnpore (present-day Kanpur) saw a 6.4-km track** between the railway station and Sirsiya Ghat, which became **operational in 1907.**
- **Delhi saw its first trams a year later, in the area now called Old Delhi.** In their heyday, trams could be seen in Jama Masjid, Chandni Chowk, Chawri Bazaar, Katra Badiyan, Lal Kuan, and Fatehpuri as well as Sabzi Mandi, Sadar Bazar, Paharganj, Ajmeri Gate, Bara Hindu Rao and Tis Hazari.

The demise of India's tram systems-

- **By the 1960s,** tramways, which were once seen as a revolutionary development in urban transport, had all but **vanished in India.**
- **Today, Kolkata remains the last city which still operates trams,** though these old colonial relics are perpetually at risk of being discontinued.
- Trams saw their demise due to a variety of reasons, from

the emergence of better alternatives to issues with economic viability.

- **Patna would be the first city to discontinue tram service in 1903, on account of low ridership.**
- **Nasik shut down its tramways in 1933**, in the aftermath of successive years of famine and plague.
- **Cawnpore** shut its trams down in the same year after running into insurmountable losses.
- **Madras's tram company would go bankrupt in 1950**, operating its last tram in 1953.
- **In Bombay, as the suburban railways extensively connected the city to its suburbs and buses took to the streets, trams quickly became obsolete.**
- Not only were they slower, they had far more limited reach. In fact, as early as 1926, BEST actually launched its own bus service.
- Trams would chug on in the city till 1964. **Delhi would see trams being discontinued on account of urban congestion in 1963.**

The future of trams-

- However, recently, trams have made their way back into public consciousness, if not in India, abroad.
- **Melbourne operates the largest tram network in the world** and plans to continue upgrading its system.
- One of the reasons behind this is that trams are seen as among the most sustainable modes of urban transport available.
- **In 2020, a proposal to introduce a tram system in Mahabalipuram was floated**, geared towards helping tourists explore the historical town near Chennai.