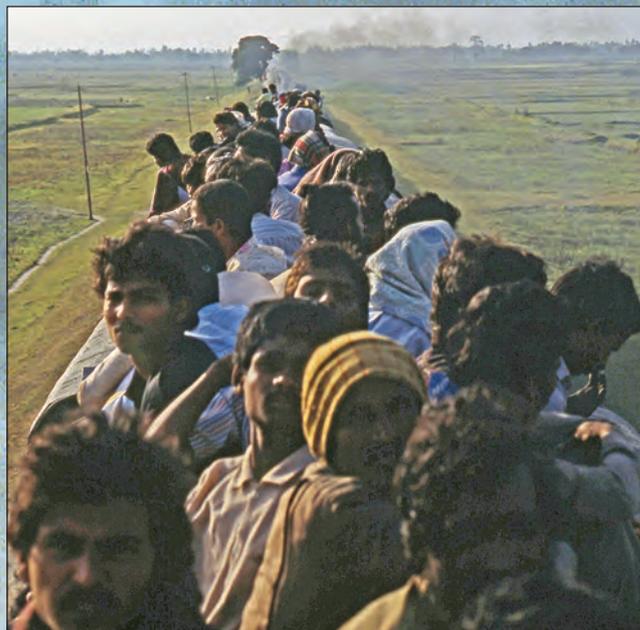


# Adventures in Nepal

*Richard Pelham* avoided arrest in 1993 to obtain remarkable photos of the Janakpur railway in the dying days of steam haulage.



Nepal has featured regularly in the world's news over the last few years, and the cross border 2ft 6in gauge railway from Jaynagar in India to Janakpurdam in Nepal has recently also become a focus of media attention. The railway press has reported on the eventual broad-gauging of the line, to link with the Indian Railways former metre gauge line (now broad-gauged) from Dharbanga, and a recent television documentary highlights how the Nepalese railway has declined into virtual inactivity, due mostly to lack of government funding. The line also featured in *NGW*105.

All this mention of the railway reminded me of a visit I made in 1993, and I thought readers might like to hear of my adventures. It was a case of 'narrow gauge sans frontiers' – well, legal ones anyhow!

As a regular visitor to India in the 1980s and 1990s, particularly for steam-hauled narrow gauge, the Janakpur railway was, once some of

the most accessible lines had been visited, a priority destination. The reason was its locomotive stud – a real mixture of designs and wheel arrangements. The scenery was definitely not part of the equation, as the railway runs across a level plain for all of its 35 miles. Indeed, this part of Southern Nepal is more like the great flat tracts of Bihar, the neighbouring Indian state, and shares a common predominant religion, Hinduism, rather than the rest of Nepal which is both mountainous and Buddhist.

In 1984 I had visited the remains of the erstwhile Nepal Government Railway, which also originally provided a cross-border supply route from India to Nepal. It had since 1965 shrunk to a mere cross-border siding from Raxaul in India to Birganj in Nepal, though it had once crossed the plain into the Himalayan foothills on the way to Kathmandu (which it never reached). To this end it had required Garratts, one 'Mahabir' built in 1932 and the other

**Main photo: Our first sight of the train arriving at Jaynagar – 'a fiery kitchen dragging a village behind it'!**

**Facing page, left: Rooftop riding on the afternoon 'international'.**

**Facing page, below left: 'Guhyeshwari', the last War Office Hunslet 4-6-0T design from World War One in service, poses for its portrait.**

**Below: Afternoon departure from Jaynagar on our first day.**

**All photos by Richard Pelham, March 1993**

'Sitaram' in 1947, though these were no longer in evidence, having been moved to the Janakpur Railway in the 1970s. All that was left at Birganj were two derelict wheel-less North British built 2-8-4Ts obtained secondhand from the South Indian Railway, and a Jung diesel for the cross-border traffic.

So, with the knowledge that a visit to the more easterly (and less accessible) Janakpur Railway was essential, I joined Laurie Marshall's Great Indian Railway Journey tour for a few days in 1992, when I was already in North Bihar. This was a pleasant day out (though in rainy weather) travelling by special train to Janakpur and back to Jaynagar, and constituted a useful reconnaissance, though by no means satisfying my desire to bash the railway comprehensively by service train.

The reason for this reconnaissance was that Laurie Marshall enjoyed a privilege granted to him and his group by Indian Railways – namely the right of entry to Nepal by this railway. Normally, the border at this point was closed to all except Indian and Nepalese citizens. My travelling colleague on other Indian 'bashes', Mike Cuningham, had arrived at the »





*“When the crowds (and hopefully the police) had dispersed after 30 minutes, we climbed down on the side of the train away from the platform and scuttled over to the narrow gauge station...”*

Bisalpura). The station master was expecting us as we had written to the railway in advance for permission to take photographs. He seemed unaware that we could be arrested, and was anxious to fill in the intervening hours by taking us to drink chai in the town, which we had vigorously but politely to decline. Our plan involved keeping a low profile in his office, which our reluctance to leave caused much bewilderment on his part!

### **A sight to behold**

Not too long after the appointed hour, our host indicated the narrow gauge train from Nepal might be approaching, and throwing all caution to the wind we crept out, taking cover behind a low embankment, to photograph its arrival. What a sight! It reminded me of Gabriel Garcia Marquez’s description of a Colombian villager’s first sight of a train: “a fiery kitchen, dragging a village behind it”. It was indeed a mass of humanity, covering locomotive and coaches, with smoke belching out from a tall chimney near the leading end of the throng, creeping slowly across the plain.

On its arrival, the crowds dispersed suddenly, as so often in India, to reveal that the motive power was Hunslet 4-6-0T 1536/1926 ‘Guhyeshwari’, a post-World War One example of the famous War Department 60cm gauge design, in black livery with some ostentatious but nevertheless charming lining out.

The train was due to head out on its return journey within half an hour and the station master had ensured the guard was holding a couple of seats for us in the brake compartment as space was at a premium. First we felt we could ask the station master,

Indian metre gauge station in 1991 and promptly been arrested by Indian security forces, to be then taken back under police escort to Darbhanga.

The recce with Laurie’s group revealed that there were no border controls along the 2ft 6in gauge line (the border is about five miles out of Jaynagar), though they were present on the nearby road! Hitherto, the few enthusiasts who had visited the line had trekked across the southern plain of Nepal from Birganj on dirt roads, a journey that was reported to be both lengthy and arduous.

So in February and March 1993, Mike Cuningham and I made a three-week visit to India, with the ultimate objective of spending three days ‘bashing’ the Janakpur railway. After various adventures, which included Mike having to decline an invitation to tea with an Indian princess “in order to make a

rendezvous with bloody Pelham at Kosamba” (his words!), we approached Jaynagar on the early morning train from Sakri Junction. This was steam-hauled by a YP Pacific, as was usual in those days, which we avoided photographing and stayed put within the mêlée in second class to avoid attracting attention.

On arrival at the terminus, in accordance with the recce plan, we remained on the train, hiding below window level. When the crowds (and hopefully the police) had dispersed after 30 minutes, we climbed down on the side of the train away from the platform and scuttled over to the narrow gauge station which stood alongside some 50 yards away.

The next train to Janakpur was not until 4pm (there were two return workings on the ‘main’ line each day and one train on the branch extension beyond Janakpur to

**Above left: View from the cab showing barbed wire on the turbo generator to stop passengers sitting on it!**

**Below: The train caught at first light at Parbaha.**



*“It was indeed a mass of humanity, covering locomotive and coaches, with smoke belching out from a tall chimney near the leading end of the throng, creeping slowly across the plain...”*



**Above right: The 6.50am train passes a small shrine as it leaves Janakpur – a site of Hindu pilgrimage.**

**Main picture: ‘Guhyeshwari’ departing from Jaynagar before it slowed to let us climb into the guard’s compartment.**

who was still enthusiastically hospitable, if we could photograph the departure, and then if the train stopped, we could leap on. This was agreed and soon we were steaming across the plain, flat out at all of 10mph, which the grossly overloaded loco could just manage.

We apparently crossed the border into Nepal, though this was completely unmarked. At the next station, finding the brake compartment very overcrowded despite our reserved seats, I thought it would be worth enjoying the fresh air and wide-open spaces from the roof. It was very difficult getting up onto the roof, with its lack of hand holds and rounded profile, but it was extremely full, despite this. After other travellers made space for me, I

entered into friendly discourse with locals in as far as language allowed.

My opening gambit would often be to offer a duty-free cigarette, and the gentleman next to me accepted with alacrity. It was at this point I observed he had no fingers, and held the gasper between his knuckles. Closer observation revealed he only had one leg! How on earth had he got onto the roof? This was not made evident to me, but did serve to remind me that leprosy was still a widespread scourge in this part of the subcontinent. Darkness started to fall and I returned to the crowded and smelly brake compartment. The locomotive works at the isolated location of Khajuri was passed, but Mike and I decided to defer our visit to the morning of our return.

A comparatively decent but basic hotel was located, as Janakpur is a site of Hindu pilgrimage, and to our surprise there was even a television in the room, which I had not encountered hitherto, so far outside of Delhi. And here we will pause – more about Nepali TV and railways in the next issue! **NGW**

