

TRANSPORT IN OUR DEVELOPING ECONOMY

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At a time when we are engaged in raising our standard of living, few things are more important to our economy than the provision of efficient and adequate transport. Economic development primarily involves increased production and distribution of goods. But what is produced becomes useless unless it can be transported to the centres of further production, consumption or export. Further, the output of one factory is often raw material for another factory, so that the number of stages at which transport is required may often not be reflected proportionately in the net increase in production. In short, efficient and cheap transport is the *sine qua non* of industrialisation. Secondly, transport must be available when it is required and not a week or month after the need has arisen. To take the instance of coal required by a factory or of foodstuffs required by the public, if transport is not provided when it is needed, but at the convenience of the agency of transport, it will result in factories being closed down or people starving for want of food. Therefore, transport must be available on tap and must be at the beck and call of the transport user. Its relation to the user should be more in the nature of a servant to its master and not *vice versa*. If the transport agencies are in a position to dictate to the users, as is inevitable when a transport monopoly is created, it will tend seriously to slow down the rate of production and the volume of commerce. That is why industrial and commercial establishments in western countries, in spite of higher costs, are increasingly resorting to the practice of

"People must come to accept private enterprise not as a necessary evil, but as an affirmative good."

—EUGENE BLACK
President, World Bank

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operating their own fleets of road transport vehicles in preference to using cheaper modes of public transport, whether rail or road. Railways, particularly, have witnessed the transfer of large parts of their earlier traffic to private carriers in north-western Europe and in U.S.A. because the manufacturer finds that his efficiency is impaired unless his quick decisions in the field of production can be implemented by equally quick delivery of goods by immediate availability of transport.

Before considering to what extent transport is fulfilling its role in India, we shall take stock of the overall transport facilities in India today. Firstly, of course, we have a Railway system which ranks as the largest in Asia and the fourth largest in the world. In relation to the area of India, viz., $1\frac{1}{4}$ million sq. miles, however, our railway mileage of a little over 35,000 is not large. Actually on the basis of the Neogy Committee Report, the density of our railway mileage is only 25% of that of U.S.A., 15% of that of the United Kingdom, 21% of that of Japan, and 16% of that of West Germany. Nevertheless nobody would suggest that Indian rail mileage should be expanded to the same density as in any of these countries. On the contrary, technological advances are pointing in the opposite direction and parts of railway systems in many countries have become obsolete. Thus, U.S.A., Britain, France and Germany have in recent years pulled out some of their railway tracks. Again, several railway sections in some countries, while not abandoned altogether, have been closed to passenger traffic. According to the Neogy Committee, 13% of the railway mileage in U.K. and Belgium, 22% in Netherlands, 24% in France and a much greater percentage in the U.S.A. are now no longer carrying any passenger traffic. Extension of railway mileage in India has, therefore, to be undertaken very cautiously in order that our railways may not be overtaken by the fate of their counterparts in western countries.

Coming to roads, India has 144,000 miles of metalled roads apart from 250,000 miles of unmetalled and unmotorable tracks and bridle paths. The motorable mileage works out to roughly 12 miles of roads per 100 sq. miles of the

country's area. This road density is as low as 6% of that in the U.K., 10% of that in the U.S.A., and 7% of that in West Germany. These figures indicate that if India is to have a road system bearing the same relation to western countries as our railway mileage does today, our motorable road mileage will have to be approximately trebled. Even so, Railways and roads in India would not strictly be on a par, because while Indian Railways have a gauge slightly higher than that of many advanced countries, the quality of our metalled roads and, therefore, their carrying capacity is far inferior to theirs. For example, even of the 15,000 miles of roads classed as National Highways, only 2,230 miles have two traffic lanes. The remaining 12,770 have just a single lane surfacing. Moreover, the total thickness of the road crust is in most cases insufficient for modern road traffic and they break and undulate in a short period. The result is that failing periodical repairs and reconstruction, the roads are filled with ruts and pot-holes, reducing the efficiency of the traffic using them and causing avoidable damage to the vehicles.

Besides these two major communication systems, the other agencies of transport are air and water transport. Of these, air transport is very much in its infancy and its role in the general civilian traffic of the country—particularly in freight haulage—is very limited. Taking scheduled and non-scheduled services together, Indian aircrafts at present fly about 31 million miles carrying nearly 1 million passengers and 75,000 tons of cargo including mail. The Civil Aviation Department controls and operates 86 aerodromes. Three of these, viz., Bombay, Calcutta and Delhi (Palam), are international ports. Till our national income increases sufficiently, it is true that the potentialities for development of air transport cannot be as spectacular as those for the other agencies of transport. It should be noted, however, that during the past ten years, the number of passengers carried by air has roughly doubled. In fact, the scheduled services now operated by the Indian Airlines Corporation are not able to meet fully the demands of passenger traffic. Obviously, much larger investment, both in aircraft and in

landing facilities, is necessary before this agency of transport can achieve any degree of importance.

Lastly, there is water transport', the story of which is one of unpardonable neglect or of wanton decay. In pre-railway days, India's coastline of over 3,000 miles was studded with hundreds of ports catering to a flourishing traffic. Likewise, river transport played a dominant role in the country's transport system. A hundred years ago, there was a steamship service between Calcutta and Agra; today, steamers cannot ply on the Ganges upstream of Patna.

A recent report of the Estimates Committee of Parliament quotes a note by the East India Company in 1828, which described the state of river navigation 'as follows :

"There is no river in the world, unless those of China be exceptions, on which there is so large a navigation as on the Ganges and its tributary streams. Major Rennell, writing in 1780, reckoned that no less than 30,000 boatmen found their livelihood from this source, and as that was a time when trade was far less flourishing than at present it might not be too much perhaps to assume the number of boatmen in the present day to be double that estimate Everybody that has lived on the banks of the great Ganges has been struck by the constant succession of boats moving up or down, the river never appearing for a minute altogether clear, and as this is nearly the same at all seasons and in all places, it leaves an impression of the extent to which this magnificent stream ministers to the wants of commerce and of the traveller, such as defies the attempt at computation. It is not Ganges only as a single steam that confers these benefits; all the larger rivers that bring down the waters of the Northern hills are navigable more or less throughout the year and almost to the foot of the first range."

Canals too were once an important part of the transport system of the country. Most of the irrigation canals were designed for navigation as well. The canals on which

navigation is still active by country-boats, though much declined in volume, are according to the Estimates Committee, the upper and lower Ganga canals, the Orissa Canals, the Godavari and Krishna Delta canals and the Kurnool-Cudappah canal. Some canals were also constructed exclusively for navigation, viz. Buckingham canal, Vedaraniyam canal and the West Coast canal in South India, Orissa Coast canal connecting West Bengal and Orissa and canals around Calcutta. A portion of the Orissa Coast canal was abandoned as late as in 1928. Navigation is also active on the back-waters of Kerala.

Why has inland water transport fallen into disuse? The answer is simple. It has been crippled mainly by the policy of the Railways. One illustration will suffice to show how this was done. The Acworth Committee appointed in 1920 mentions how the railways throttled the transport on the Buckingham canal. At one time this canal, which runs most of its course through Andhra, used to carry heavy freight and passenger traffic, but this was nearly obliterated by calculated railway policy. The Committee says, "It was admitted on behalf of the railway company that they put in exceptional rates so low as to leave them (canal traffic) a very small margin of profit in order to divert traffic from the canal."

The total mileage of navigable inland waterways in India at present, excluding tidal creeks not connected with any inland water transport system, is about 5,760 miles comprising of :

1,537 miles of rivers navigable by steamers
1,476 " " " by large country boats
2,748 " of canals and backwaters navigable by country boats.

These water transport facilities are mainly confined to the States of Assam, West Bengal, Uttar Pradesh, Orissa, Andhra, Madras and Kerala. Companies organised on a large scale, operating mechanically propelled vessels are

concentrated mainly in North-East India on the Ganga-Brahmaputra system of rivers. However, such vessels constitute but a small proportion of the total navigation on these rivers; which consists principally of country boats.

Water transport also includes coastal shipping. Besides our six major ports there are over 150 minor ports to serve such shipping. But the jetties and piers as also the arrangements for handling traffic at most of them leave much to be desired: at most of these ports, steamers have to discharge their cargo in stream. Coastal traffic also has been deliberately crippled by the Railways in the same way as inland navigation. Once again, to quote the Acworth Committee, "Evidence was also given of an agreement between the South Indian Railway and the British Indian Steam Navigation Company the effect of which was to induce the steamship company to cease to call at certain small ports and so leave to railways a monopoly of traffic. Again a letter was submitted to us in which the agent of the same railway put forward the proposal that Government should close the small port of Tirusalavasal and so force the local traffic on to the railway of which the Government was the owner." Today, the gross registered tonnage of steamers engaged in the coastal traffic is roughly 3 lakh tons. In addition, country crafts account for a tonnage of about 1½ lakh consisting of nearly 2,000 sailing vessels.

I have described so far the extent to which India possesses transport facilities in each field. But to appreciate the role played by each agency, I must refer to the traffic handled by each in the context of the total demand for transport in the country. The target of total production of agricultural and industrial goods in the country in 1960-61, according to a report of Chief Engineers of States, was 240 million tons, which together with an estimated import of 15 million tons, meant a total demand for transport of 255 million tons. Again, according to the Chief Engineers, one fourth of this requires only short distance transport which is provided mainly by bullock carts. The remaining three

fourths amounting to roughly 192 million tons represents long distance traffic. Out of this, the railways, in that year, carried 154 million tons, water transport about 8 million tons and motor transport 12 million tons. Motor transport also provided all the feeder traffic for railways and water transport since these latter agencies can operate only between fixed terminals and not from door to door. Thus all these three agencies put together carried about 174 million tons of long distance traffic, leaving, according to my calculations, a gap of about 18 million tons unprovided for. This estimate of the shortfall is very conservative, considering that our ex-Chief Commissioner of Railways, Mr. Badhwar, puts it at a much higher figure of nearly 50 million tons. Taking the total target of additional production during the Second Plan at nearly 80 million tons, the shortfall in transport for 18 million tons means that about 22 per cent of the target of the Second Plan failed to materialise mainly through our failure to provide the requisite transport. Does not such a situation, which spells the virtual doom of our Five-Year Plans, call for a searching analysis of its causes?

The barest examination will show that with the laying of the first railway line a hundred years ago, the interest of the Government in India in other means of transport suffered a decline. Particularly during the past four or five decades, when developments in transport technology induced every country in the world to plan and encourage road and water transport—in addition to railways—we in India were content with developing railways and railways alone, to the neglect of transport by road and water. Such a policy which has resulted today in an overall shortage of transport facilities, was also at one stage responsible for a surfeit of railway capacity in the country. But the only result of this latter contingency was the deliberate suppression of road transport by the Government. This was how it happened. A few years before the Second World War an economic depression swept the world and Indian Railways could not get enough traffic to pay their way—and thus

came into financial difficulties. The existence of unused capacity on the railways led the Government to divert as much traffic as possible from other means of transport to the railways. This was the genesis of the Motor Vehicles Act of 1939 which at one stroke of the pen eliminated the inter-State truck services which were in operation during the pre-war years. What is worse, it placed simultaneous restrictions even on intra-state traffic. There is no need to elaborate on the extent of damage caused by this measure, which has written such a sorry chapter in India's transport history.

The present transport shortage, thus, has its roots in policies adopted consistently over the past few decades to throttle all agencies of transport: so as to feed the Railways alone. However, it cannot be said that we have not had sufficient warning about the implications of this policy. Apart from the local voices of protest which have consistently been ignored, the World Bank team which visited India in 1956 drew the country's attention to the paramount need of maximising the total quantum of transport—even in respect of agencies for which the cost of the service is comparatively high—and to the need of revising railway rates so as to provide more incentive for the utilisation of other means of transport. The team said :

"We urge that the Government review its whole transport policy and programme with a view to maximising transport by all available means—by rail, road, coastal shipping and inland waterways. While we are unable to suggest in detail how this might be accomplished, we consider it important that both the level and structures of railway rates be revised promptly so as to provide more incentive for the utilisation of other means of transport. We are inclined to discount the objection that an upward revision of rates would impose an excessive burden on the economy, because there is no justification for maintaining rates at economically unrealistic levels, particularly if these result in a transport bottleneck which would make it impossible to achieve the production targets of the Plan."

We have paid a heavy price for ignoring this advice.

Against this background, we have to consider what the demand for transport will be in the future years and how far we are preparing ourselves to meet it. The Third Plan envisages that in the fifteen years ending March 1976 the National income has to increase from Rs. 14,500 crores to Rs. 33,000 crores, i.e., by 136 per cent. The implications of a rise in the national income of this order on the transport requirements can best be judged by drawing on past experience. During the ten years, April 1951 to March, 1961, against an increase of 42 per cent in national income the growth of our industrial production was 94 per cent. The aggregate volume of rail and motor transport increased during these ten years from 30.3 billion ton miles to 65.3 billion, an increase of 115 per cent. Thus a rise of 42 per cent in the national income was accompanied by an increase of 115 per cent in surface transport. In other words, an increase of one per cent in national income required an increase of 2.74 per cent in transport facilities. And still the total demand for transport could not be met! However, even if we assume that transport has to be provided in the next 15 years at a slightly lower ratio than that of the past two Plans, or say at $2\frac{1}{2}$ times the rise in national income, a 136 per cent rise in national income calls for an increase of 340 per cent in our present volume of transport. This means that the present long distance traffic of 192 million tons will rise to 650 million tons. An expansion to 3.4 times the present volume will also be needed in the feeder, short distance and local transport which is exclusively catered to by roads.

Obviously, therefore, our entire plan of economic development leans heavily on the availability of this quantum of transport during the period. In what manner can transport facilities of this magnitude best be created?

Hitherto the Government of India seems to have assumed that transport is synonymous with rail transport. Such an attitude, however, simply cannot be continued in the

future. The present rail capacity of 154 million tons a year has been developed over the past, 104 years. To provide rail capacity for an additional 500 million tons traffic in the next 15 years is not at all a practical proposition for a variety of reasons which I shall presently mention. The very magnitude of the task compels us to approach the problem in a completely unbiassed rational manner, taking in view the trends in other countries, the physical and geographical limitations under which we suffer, the advantages of each agency of transport, the capital cost for providing a given quantum of traffic through each mode of transport, the cost of service to the consumer and the returns from the various agencies of transport to the public exchequer.

Incidentally, of the additional production of about 515 million tons of goods in the next 15 years, no less than 240 million tons or over 46 per cent will be coal. Coal is carried at an average concessional rate of 3.33 nP per ton mile by the railways against the average rate of 6.1 nP for all revenue earning traffic. Whether a railway line carries a low-rated or high-rated commodity, its initial capital cost is the same. Therefore, new railway construction for carrying mainly a low-rated commodity like coal will give only about half the return on the investment made in the track and is, therefore, uneconomical. Will not the development of railways to carry such a colossal quantity of coal on the basis of their low concessional freight rates spell financial ruin to the Railways? Should not other ways and means be thought of for the carriage of coal, at any rate within the areas of Bengal and Bihar where our heavy industry is concentrated? Why not explore the possibilities of the Durgapur canal? Why not confine a marked area to road transport alone by providing suitable roads and multi-axle vehicles of high capacity?

So far as the capital cost of providing a road or rail service goes, it is true that the rolling stock in either case entails practically the same outlay. However, the cost of constructing a broad-gauge railway track is Rs. 7 to Rs. 10 lakhs per mile as against Rs. 24 to 34 lakhs for a first class

two-lane concrete road with cross drainage. Besides, roads can carry at least twice the traffic of a railway. On a single line railway track, not more than one train at a time can run on a block section which means that only 2 furlongs out of a 4 miles block section can be used at any given time. Thus not more than 24 goods trains can normally be carried by a track per day! This means that the track capacity is 36,000 tons per day since a train can normally carry 1,500 tons of goods. On the other hand if a new road is reserved for heavy motor traffic, just as the railway line is reserved for trains, it can carry uninterrupted streams of traffic in each direction as is being done on many arterial roads in north-western Europe and in the U.S.A. There are roads in London carrying over 90,000 vehicles per day and roads in America carrying over 180,000 vehicles. However, even if only 8,000 vehicles run on a road, each with a carrying capacity of 10 tons, the road can carry in India 80,000 tons of traffic which is more than twice the capacity of the railway. Thus for transporting a given volume of goods, the cost of the track for rail transport is six times as heavy as that for transport by road. Can India, with her meagre resources, afford to ignore this more productive and efficient agency of transport?

In India, today, according to the Neogy Committee, motor transport, in the carriage of freight, accounts for just 20 per cent of the rail traffic. The bullock cart inclusive of all rural traffic operated by agriculturists may also account for a similar percentage. This means that railways carry $2\frac{1}{2}$ times as much goods traffic as the roads do. How does this compare with other countries? Motor transport in Italy carries 222 per cent of the rail traffic, in Australia 108 per cent, in New Zealand 124 per cent and in United Kingdom 127 per cent. As regards the U.S.A., the Neogy Committee states that the share of Railways in the total goods transport of that country between 1939-1958 has gone down from 64 to 46 per cent. The trend in other countries is unmistakable. Road transport is over-shadowing and superseding railways everywhere except in India.

Why is road transport being used so extensively in preference to rail in these countries? The reason lies in the inherent advantages of modern road transport which consist mainly of speed, door-to-door delivery and reduction in packing costs of goods transported. In America trucking companies deliver consignments up to 500 miles in a single day and up to 1,700 miles in 3 days, making an average daily run of about 570 miles. The average speed of rail despatches in India is about 50 miles per day. Even on the poor neglected Indian roads, highway transport is 3 to 7 times as quick as rail. Speed in transport means a quickening of the tempo of economic development and a greater return on capital for industry and commerce. In this context, Messrs Hindustan Lever's experience should be an eye-opener. By using road transport for half their despatches, they obtained 25% additional return on their capital.

With all these advantages, road transport can carry goods at a cost equal to that of rail if not lower provided it is modernised. The use of articulated trailers in conjunction with the trucks now manufactured in India can reduce road transport cost per ton mile from the present average of 15 nP. to between 5 and 74 nP. If we provide suitable roads and use vehicle units of the same capacity as in other countries, the cost can be brought down to as low as $3\frac{1}{2}$ nP. per ton-mile. Against this, the average cost of railway transport in India including terminal charges at both ends is 8 nP. on the broad-gauge and 12 nP. on the metre-gauge.

Again, the contribution of different agencies of transport to the country's exchequer is a consideration which cannot be overlooked by the Government. The National Council of Applied Economic Research has shown that the yield to the exchequer from Railways is about 5% of the capital invested by the Government in them, while that from road transport is 19 per cent of the cost of the road system after meeting its annual maintenance charges. A ton of

goods going by road means three times as much revenue to the Government as a ton moving by rail.

Under each of the above counts, therefore, road transport scores heavily over railways. It is clear that the national interest calls for road transport to be developed on its merits, to the optimum extent. Especially, in India there is one additional over-powering reason why road transport should be encouraged. It can help in the solution of our grave unemployment problem. The National Council of Applied Economic Research in another of its recent investigations has shown that road transport, though fulfilling only a minor role in India at present, provides employment for nearly 24 million persons as against just over 1 million persons employed by the railways. Calculations made by other authorities indicate that to move a given quantity of goods, road transport provides 7 times as many jobs as the railways do. Even assuming all other things equal, this factor alone should tilt the balance in favour of road transport.

Road and rail are not the only agencies requiring attention in our plans although they have to provide the bulk of our transport needs. As against less than 4 per cent of traffic carried by water in India, the share of Water transport is 11% in France, 17% in the U.S.A., and 27% in West Germany. India's coastline of nearly 3,000 miles and its inland waterways accounting for nearly twice that mileage should both be put to their maximum use since the centres located along them can be served economically by steamers, sailing vessels and boats. True, nature has not endowed us with the blessings of arterial rivers to provide inland water transport comparable to the Mississippi, the Rhine or the Danube. But the idea mooted about a hundred years ago, of connecting up the major rivers and canals to provide a trunk system of waterways, is still considered by experts as worthy of examination. The purpose to be served by such a network, when the idea was first promoted, has since been largely fulfilled by expansion of railways. However, its re-examination is justified by the

magnitude of our present need to increase transport facilities. The Gokhale Committee which recently reported on waterways has suggested that an all-India network of waterways can be judged in its proper perspective only after our multipurpose development schemes have taken more concrete shape. In the meantime, an intensive development of existing waterways and a much larger use of coastal shipping should receive more urgent attention than has been given to them so far.

Before concluding, let us examine briefly the transport needs of the Third Five-Year Plan and the extent of our preparedness to meet these needs. The target for our national income at the end of the Plan is Rs. 19,000 crores as against Rs. 14,500 crores at the beginning of the Plan, which represents an increase of 31.96. On the ratio of 2½ per cent increase in transport for each 1 per cent rise in national income, we need to increase our transport facilities by a minimum of 78 per cent during these five years. In other words, our long distance transport will have to increase by 150 million tons from 192 to 342 million tons and short distance traffic by road will also have to increase in the same proportion. What are our plans to meet this immediate need? The Planning Commission has made no estimates about the overall cost of meeting the transport requirements except in regard to the Railways. It has stated that Railways will be developed assuming certain conditions are fulfilled, to carry 245 million tons, and has made provision for the cost involved. In regard to road transport, it merely says that the number of goods vehicles will increase during the period from 1.6 lakhs to 2.86 lakhs (an increase of 78 per cent). It has further, vaguely, referred to the expectation of a 120 per cent increase in the volume of road traffic without, however, examining the financial outlay required for bringing about this rise in the volume. As regards water transport, no substantial increase in river or canal navigation is envisaged.

The plight of coastal shipping is still more gloomy. As against a target of 4.1 lakh tons of G.R.T. for coastal

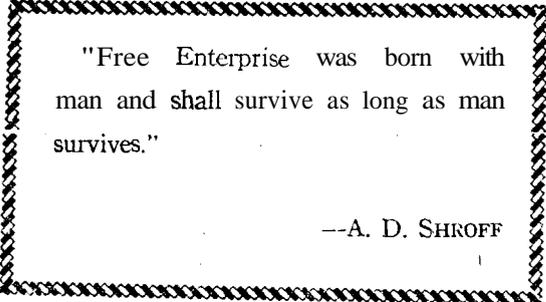
shipping in the Second Plan, we have not even achieved 3 lakh tons. The Plan makes it clear that even at the end of the Third Plan, this target will not be reached. If, as proposed by the Plan, railways carry 245 million tons, the balance left over for roads and water transport is 97 million tons. These latter agencies together had a carrying capacity of no more than 20 million tons in 1960-61. So they have to carry 5 times as much in the next five years besides meeting a 78 per cent increase in short distance traffic. The assistance that can be derived from water transport, it must be admitted here, cannot be very large. If it is given all the funds it needs for development, the maximum capacity that can be expected in the current plan period is 15 million tons which is 90 per cent more than its capacity at the beginning of the Plan. So, unless road transport which carried 12 million tons of long distance traffic last year can increase its capacity to nearly seven times that figure, i.e., to 82 million tons in the next 4 years, there will be a shortage of 70 million tons in 1965-66 comparable with a shortage of 18 million tons in 1960-61.

Lastly, with our limited resources, one cannot over-emphasize the fact that the capital expenditure incurred on the provision of transport facilities should be such as to secure the maximum volume of transport on the minimum employment of capital.

Our transport problems require very comprehensive consideration—not with a view to boosting one agency of transport or deprecating another, but with a view to doing whatever, on merits, is in the best interests of the country. The way to look at the issue is "which agency of transport is in the best position to handle a given load of traffic in the most efficient and economical manner?" On that basis, each agency will have to be allotted a priority for development. The capacity of air and water is essentially limited. The major distribution of traffic, therefore, has compulsorily to be between road and rail. Railways have so far been receiving all the attention that the Planning Commission could give them. That is not so with roads.

We have travelled far from the days when roads were considered a luxury. They have to be accepted for what they are, viz., a full-fledged alternative agency of transport able to hold its own in its legitimate sphere of operations. We have no choice, if we wish to provide an adequate quantum of transport to the country, except to develop roads to the maximum extent. The two major factors that stand in the way of such development are, first, paucity of funds for developing a modern adequate road system and, second, paucity of suitable modern vehicles. These must be remedied at the earliest. To this end, we must find additional funds for modernising and extending our road system. We must also allocate sufficient foreign exchange and instal adequate capacity for the required number of vehicles. If this is not done, we shall be faced with a transport shortage of such a magnitude that the progress we expect to achieve in the current Plan may, in material respects, prove illusory.

The views expressed in this booklet are not necessarily the views of the Forum of Free Enterprise.



"Free Enterprise was born with man and shall survive as long as man survives."

--A. D. SHROFF

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