

Rail Freight and Regional Inter-dependence
A Study Based on Commodity Flows in India

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Introduction to the Study

This study is concerned with examining the pattern of spatial interdependence in India using the freight movement by railways during 1986-87 as its data-base. It is a description of the structure of interdependence, and the underlying assumption is that a description has to precede any statement of the processes of change and evolution.

On the question of whether, in view of an increasing share of road transport, railway freight flow data may be itself be regarded as adequate for the purpose, it is maintained that the railway network still remains the most comprehensive one, particularly so for long-distance transport. It is, in this sense, most suited to bring about inter-regional interdependence. But whether it has indeed fostered this is the question.

It is accepted that there exist basic principles, which govern the movement of commodities, and policies that influence and modify it. But the emphasis in this study is deliberately on consequences rather than causes: the idea is not so much to explain the observed flows as to comment on its consequences in terms of spatial articulation of the economy. The presentation is therefore, kaleidoscopic, and the attempt is to elicit the pattern by viewing the data in a variety of ways. Such a presentation is facilitated by the richness of the data-base providing, as it does, point to point movement information of over 600 commodities.

The spatial units chosen for analysis are the railway zones and the states of India. Besides, the role of urban areas in general, and that of the million-plus cities in particular, is highlighted. Commodity flows are taken to represent the most manifest economic links between these spatial units.

To be sure, such an exercise has been undertaken by researchers earlier. However, not only have been few in number, but over a decade has elapsed since the last one. The intervening period has been marked by an intensification of circulation of commodities and an emergence of three additional urban areas as million-plus cities. These, and other related developments, do suggest that the spatial structure would have undergone significant changes. By documenting some

facets of the present situation, this study hopes to provide a picture comparable with the past ones and enable future researchers to enquire into the processes of change. More significantly, since the treatment is at a level of desegregation not hitherto undertaken, it also brings to the fore some additional interesting features.