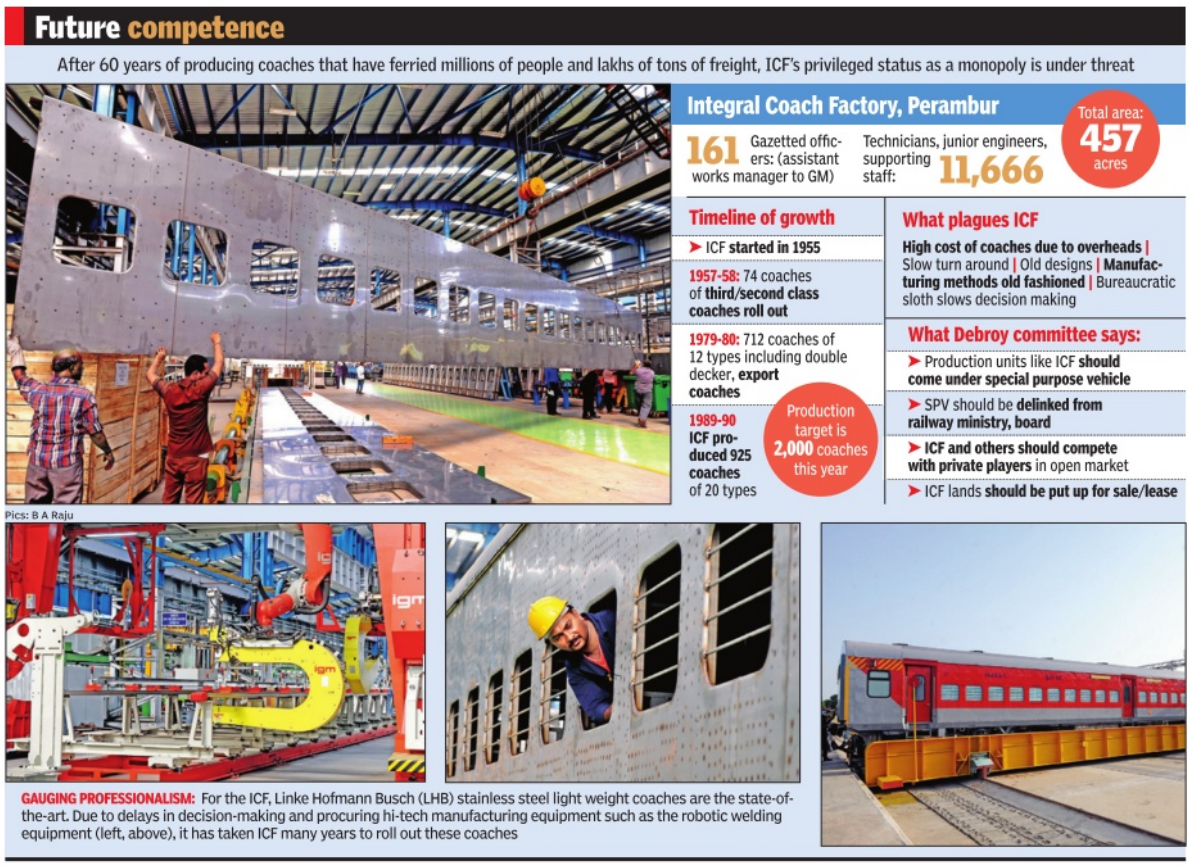
Jul 08 2015 : The Times of India (Chennai)

WARNING SIGNAL FOR ICF

Ayyappan V

Weighed Down By Inertia, Coach Factory May Find Debroy Panel's Recommendations A Bitter Pill



Ared-and-ash liveried coach fresh out of the shop floor was displayed at Integral Coach Factory (ICF) on Monday as the future design that they are going to adopt in the coming year. However, the LHB (Linke Hofmann Busch) second class coach lacks in aesthetics and sheen when compared to the ones produced abroad.

The LHB is the state-of-the-art for ICF and is inspired by a German design of the 1960s that Alstom supplied in 2003. The reason for the delay in rolling it out: The factory lacks production automation and autonomy in decision making. It was only last year that it received a robotic welding system needed to make these coaches, and it took more than a decade for the railway board to decide that the factory should manufacture the LHB coaches.

ICF manufactures air-conditioned metro rail coaches that has automatic doors for Kolkata. But for the finish, the coaches may well be on a par with the metro coaches made by Alstom for Chennai. This shows that the factory has expertise but cannot bid for projects.

Railway board member Hemant Kumar says that “ICF can manufacture metro rail coaches. But we are not able to bid for Chennai Metro Rail or other metro rail projects because being a government factory decisions are taken at the ministry level.“

And decisions are made at snail's pace at the ministry and needs several levels of approvals and verification.

Though railways got the LHB technology in 2003, it took a decade to decide that ICF can start making the coaches. Approval for expansion of the factory and sanction of funds took two more years.

A production unit like ICF is controlled by many directorates of the railway board and approval for expansion or introduction of a new facility needs to pass many stages. A minor change in design or introducing new amenity like fixing a plug point for charging mobile phones inside the coaches will need extensive studies and approval from Research Design and Standards Organisation (RDSO) even though the factory is competent to introduce the change. And the plug points that were introduced after much study cannot be used for laptops.

A senior railway official said, “It takes seven years for a design to be implemented from drawing board to the coach. It is very difficult to modernise production processes because the factory cannot choose its machinery as per its requirement as all purchases are made by Central Organisation for Modernisation of Workshops founded in 1978 to modernise production units.“ In spite of the existence of such an organisation, ICF has not automated painting and welding used while making conventional coaches.

In ICF, it is typical that expensive machinery lies unused as the production pattern may have changed by the time the equipment landed at the door of the factory. “The ministry and the board decides which type of coach needs to be made at ICF. The focus changes suddenly. Under pressure to meet deadlines, the factory is forced to outsource,“ he added.

For instance, the new LHB sleeper coach that was showcased on Monday was made using components supplied by private companies. The side walls, roof and undercarriage of the shell were also supplied by a relatively new private company.

The Debroy committee set up to find ways to reform railways has suggested autonomy for ICF, allowing it to face competition from the private sector. Given its track record, taking on firms like Alstom -whose hi-tech plant in Sri City, not far from Perambur, looms -would be a big challenge for the government-owned unit.

Indian Railways Technical Supervisors Association (IRTSA) senior joint general secretary K V Ramesh said, “We need autonomy for the factory so that decisions can be taken. The committee report is dangerous on two counts. It leaves scope for privatisation and suggests exposure of ICF to competition. It says the special purpose vehicle can be initially with public sector but can be disinvested. At this stage, it is dangerous to expose ICF to competition because it will fail“.

He continued: “The general manager of the factory should be given the ultimate sanctioning power. There should also be inventory control by bringing in just-in-time procurement system and controlled outsourcing. Available infrastructure needs to be assessed and benchmarked before work is outsourced.“

Email us your feedback with name and address to southpole.toi@timesgroup.com