

Statement of the Peoples' Commission on Public Sector and Public Services on the recent railway accident

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The recent rail accident in West Bengal involving a freight and passenger train on June 17 has once again highlighted the government's lack of focus on safety in the Indian Railways. In particular, this accident, and the several others in the last year, raise five sets of important issues that point to problems of a systemic nature that have a bearing on railway safety in India:

- the high incidence of signal failures and the lack of clarity to railway staff on the processes to be adopted in such situations
- the failure of Government in resolving the inhuman working conditions of loco pilots.
- The large number of vacancies in the safety category
- The tendency of the Railway authorities at the top to put the blame for any accident on the safety category of workers such as loco pilots, station managers, signal and telecommunications, pointsmen instead of accepting their own responsibility.
- the inordinate delay in the deployment of Kavach, the anti-collision system

Signal Failures

Most of the collisions and accidents in the recent past have been due to Signal Passing at Danger (SPAD) when the signal had failed or had been defective. The recent accident has highlighted the fact that there is utter confusion about the procedure to be followed by loco running staff and other railway workers when signals are defective or do not work. The recent accident as well the accident in October 2023 occurred because the train drivers and the station masters did not have clear instructions about the procedure to be followed when signals "fail".

It is startling to note that the incidence of signal equipment failures has not declined in recent years: 54,444 in 2020-21, 65,149 in 2021-22 and 51,888 in 2022-23. The Commission regrets to note that this information is no longer available in the Indian Railways' bulletin of monthly statistics, marking yet another instance of hiding data from the public when such information is inconvenient to those in power.

Inadequate rest and long working hours for loco pilots are a safety hazard

The Railways' own special Task Force on safety noted in 2017 that SPAD often occurs soon after the loco pilots resume duty after home rest. It concluded that this happens because loco

pilots have not had adequate rest before reporting for duty. It determined that the large number of vacancies among loco pilots to be the primary reason for their being denied adequate rest.

It is astonishing that in this day and age railway workers still do not get weekly rest as do most workers in organised industry; instead they only get 30 hours rest, once in 10 days. Indeed, in the railways this is termed as “periodical rest”! This Commission endorses the longstanding demand of the railway workers that they be entitled to 30 hours of continuous rest after 16 hours of rest at headquarters four times a month. This is important not only for the health of the loco running staff but for maintaining safety standards in the Railways. For example, reports indicate that driver of the freight train driver in accident on June 17 had availed rest of 30 hours, but only after finishing four consecutive nights of duty, indicating that he had inadequate rest prior to the accident. Indeed, the Commissioner for Railway Safety (CRS) had recommended after an inquiry into the accident at Vizianagaram in October 2023 that loco pilots must not be made to work for more than two consecutive nights.

Another longstanding demand of the loco pilots has been their demand to reduce the length of their working day. Indeed, the Government had, as far back as 1973, conceded to their demand that their working day be limited to 10 hours. However, in the half a century since then, successive governments have dragged their feet on this crucial issue. The problem is particularly serious in the case of loco pilots manning freight trains, which do not follow a regular timetable, resulting in long and unpredictable working hours.

Women loco pilots, who number about 3,000, face an additional burden because they are forced to report for work six months after delivery; they are denied menstrual leave; and they are unable to nurse their children. Strangely, a government that swears by Swachh Bharat, still has not thought it fit to address the problem of lack of toilet facilities in locomotives.

The rules in the Indian Railways classify loco pilots as “continuous” workers and require them to work for 104 hours a week. However, internal circulars issued to loco pilots stipulate that they actually work for an average of more than 125 hours a week. Naturally, this “excess” work has adverse consequences for railway safety.

Vacancies and the increasing work load

The longer working hours and the inadequate rest for loco pilots is a direct result of the Railways not filling up vacancies. The total vacancies now amount to a staggering 3.12 lakh persons. Specifically, there are more than 18,000 vacancies for loco pilots. In fact, the Railway Board had only announced recruitment of 5696 loco pilots and only because of the recent accident and the ongoing agitation of loco pilots in the Southern Railway, has it recently announced plans to recruit 18,799 loco pilots. Going by past experience, by the time the recruitment actually happens the number of vacancies may climb even further.

According to a recent response to an RTI application there are about 1.5 lakh vacancies of the total sanctioned strength of 10 lakh in the safety category. The relentless drive to reduce the workforce implies that even this does not reflect the actual strength required for the smooth and safe running of the railways. There is a shortage among all sections of safety category workers -- train drivers, inspectors, crew controllers, loco instructors, train controllers, station masters, electrical signal maintainers, signalling supervisors, track maintainers, pointsmen among others. These workers are crucial for the safe operation of trains. The severe shortage also puts extreme pressure on the remaining workers. The threat of summary removal from service adds another dimension of pressure on these workers.

The Commission urges the Railway Board and the Ministry to address this issue on an urgent basis because it has implications for passenger and worker safety.

Top officials unwillingness to take responsibility but blame workers instead

A disturbing feature of every recent accident has been the tendency of the top authorities – in particular the Minister and the officials of the railway Board -- to put the blame on the lowest rung of the workforce, in particular the loco pilots, station masters, the signalling staff, and other workers. This was repeated in after the recent accident too.

Shockingly, after the Vizianagaram accident, which resulted in 14 deaths, the Railway Minister flippantly alleged that the Loco Pilot and Assistant Loco Pilot were watching a cricket match, which led to accident. Although this was proved to be utterly false by CRS the Minister has not had the grace to apologise for his irresponsible allegation, which has a bearing on worker morale.

Senior railway officials often demand that railway workers cut corners and, in fact, violate standard rules of operation, in order to maintain train schedules in gross disregard of safety norms. Workers refusing such instructions are often punished or even dismissed from service citing specious grounds. It is obvious that such violations, which are well known and are a safety hazard, are happening with the connivance of the Railway Board.

Kavach

The Railway establishment has touted the Kavach anti-collision system as a magic wand that would solve the problem of rain collisions. In reality, it is a system that requires an entire communication system to be in place – at stations, on tracks, on signals and on locomotives – in order to actually work. Progress has been lethargic. In the last three years the system has been installed only along 1500 km and on 65 locomotives, whereas the Indian rail system runs for 68,000 route kms and is served by more than 14,500 locomotives. Reports in the media indicate that there are only three private vendors implementing the system, indicating that their capacity may be very limited to meet the needs of such a large system. In effect, only about Rs 1200 crores have been provided in the last two budgets, which indicates just how serious the government has been about implementing the scheme.

As the recent accident has shown, modernisation is only one aspect of the problem. An even bigger issue is the lackadaisical manner in which human resources have been trained and utilised while working on these assets. The Commission would like to warn that this will be even more important in the case of the Kavach system. For example, if there is a derailment or collision, it is very likely that Kavach infrastructure would be destroyed as well, rendering the system ineffective. Railway workers need to be trained about what to do when such systems fail. Moreover, senior officials need to be hands-on in such situations, unlike what has happened in the recent accidents. This is an important lesson from the recent accidents.

The spate of railway accidents provide ample evidence that systemic failures lie at the heart of the problems in the Indian Railways. The Modi Government's attempts at cosmetic "improvements" such as the introduction of the Vande Bharat trains, instead of addressing fundamental constraints such as the extreme congestion on the tracks, are a vain attempt to deceive and misdirect public opinion. The latest accident, and the several others in the last year, demonstrate that the prime casualty of this approach has been safety.

Conclusion

The Commission calls upon the Union Government to:

- Modernise signal systems by allocating sufficient funds
- Make it mandatory for all railway staff to undergo periodic training on new equipment
- Reduce the working hours of loco pilots to 8 hours a day and 48 hours a week

- Provide loco pilots with regular weekly rest: to start with, 16+30 consecutive hours of rest
- Ensure loco pilots return to headquarters within 48 hours of duty
- Do not make loco pilots work for more than two consecutive nights
- Ensure sufficient funding to implement Kavach on entire network and locos within three years
- The top leadership of the Indian railways – particularly, the Ministry and the Railway Board – must scrupulously avoid rushing to blame workers for railway accidents because this affects worker morale
- The Union Government must treat the Railways as a productive national asset and undertake timebound investments that decongest the Indian rail network, which is the primary cause for railway accidents. The Union Budget must address this as a topmost priority, which will also make rail transport safer.

People's Commission on Public Sector and Public Services

About Peoples' Commission on Public Sector and Public Services (PCPSPS): Peoples' Commission on Public Sector and Services includes eminent academics, jurists, erstwhile administrators, trade unionists and social activists. PCPSPS intends to have in-depth consultations with all stakeholders and people concerned with the process of policy making and those against the government's decision to monetise, disinvest and privatise public assets/enterprises and produce several sectoral reports before coming out with a final report. Here is the first interim report of commission- [Privatisation: An Affront to the Indian Constitution.](#)