

On the recent spate of railway accidents - Urgent need to demand accountability

Statement of the People's Commission on Public Sector and Public Services

Date: 22.08.2024

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The People's Commission on Public Sector and Public Services expresses their deep concern and outrage over the recent series of accidents on the Indian railway network. The spate of railway accidents since June 2023, starting with one of the worst-ever disasters, at Balasore, and the most recent one, just a few days ago in August, highlights serious problems with the administration of the Indian Railways. There is an immediate need to apportion responsibility for this unfortunate situation, starting right at the top of the political and administrative leadership.

Most urgently, allowing a part-time minister to administer India's largest single enterprise is no longer tenable; in fact, it is downright irresponsible to entrust such a key ministry to a person who has other responsibilities. To make matters worse, every time there has been an accident the current minister has displayed poor leadership skills, demonstrated by the alacrity with which he has blamed those at the lowermost rung, instead of owning up to his own failings or of those at the highest level of the railway administration.

The Railway Minister's response to the spate of accidents has been shockingly irresponsible. While we appreciate that he, in political stature, bears no comparison to stalwarts of yesteryears like Lal Bahadur Shastri, who stepped down as Railway Minister after a train accident in 1956, the least that was expected of him was the acceptance of failure and a statement of a plan to address them. Instead, he and his government proceed as if these accidents are of no consequence.

The abandonment of a separate Railway Budget has proven to be a fatal step, which has not only curtailed Parliamentary oversight but also prevented the government from focusing on the specific needs of such an important department that has a commanding influence on national social and economic life. The lack of accountability that this has endangered has significantly eroded public confidence in the Indian Railways, an institution that has been the nation's pride.

The recent track record on safety

Shockingly, in July-August 2024 alone there have seen eight derailments and collisions.

- August 17 – More than 20 coaches of the Sabarmati Express derailed near Kanpur – no fatalities
- On July 31, two wagons of a goods train derailed near Rangapani railway station in West Bengal. On July 29, the Howrah-Mumbai derailed near Chakardarpur, Jharkhand. Two persons died and 20 were injured
- July 30 -- Howrah-Mumbai express derailed near Jamshedpur, Jharkhand, killing 2 people and injuring 10.
- July 18 – Derailment in Gonda district, Uttar Pradesh - Four people killed and several injured.
- July 19 -- derailment at Valsad, Gujarat
- July 20 -- derailment at Amroha, U.P.
- July 21 -- derailment at Alwar, Rajasthan.
- July 26 -- a goods train derailed at Bhubaneswar, Odisha.

Now for some facts to situate the recent incidents in context:

- According to a report by the Commission of Railway Safety, the number of railway accidents increased from 35 in 2021-22 to 48 in 2022-23, with serious accidents doubling in successive years. From 2013-14 to 2019-20 in contrast, there was “a declining trend” in railway accidents.
- The report noted that derailments caused most of the accidents, accounting for 75 per cent of the total in 2022-23 and over 77 per cent in 2021-22. Collision and fire were the next biggest causes.
- In 2024 there were 15 derailments till June 2024; since then, there have been 8 more, taking the total to 23 derailments so far in 2024. In comparison, in the full year of 2021-22 there were 27 derailments and in 2022-23 there were 36 derailments. Clearly, the number of derailments in the current year is already very high.
- According to a CAG report published in 2022, which examined the causes of derailments, one-fourth of all derailments were attributable to poor or inadequate track maintenance. It is significant that allocations for “track renewals”, which is supposed to address this specific need, has been dwindling in recent years.

The Commission, aware of its responsibilities, does not wish to indulge in scaremongering. However, it contests the government’s rosy claims, which are based on the citation of partially relevant statistics relating to the performance on the safety front. In particular, immediately after every accident, officials cite data on the number of accidents relative to train running operations, pointing to the fact that they have declined – from about 0.44 accidents per train km in 2001 to just 0.1 accidents per train km in 2023, which translates to an accident for about 10 million train km. The Commission does not believe this selective use of statistics reflects the true picture of the state of railway safety for several reasons.

First, the Indian railway operations are much denser than in many other countries. On average, about 23,000 trains run every day – 14,000 carrying passengers and about 9,000 ferrying freight. If one assumes that each of these trains travels 500 km each day, this implies that every day, on average, train services run for about 1.15 million train km. This implies, that an accident of some kind, somewhere on the network, is happening every 10 days. The Commission believes that this frequency of accidents is unconscionably high, especially given the dense traffic in the Indian rail network.

Second, there is widespread consensus - among the railway's own workforce as well as among others -- that many accidents as well as lapses are NOT being reported. There is reason to believe that there is gross under-reporting of the number of derailments, signal failures and many other kind of equipment failures. In fact, certain classes of failures are not even released by the railway establishment in recent years.

Third, this track record on safety is incompatible with the aspirations of running a modern railway system that supposedly is aiming for a zero-tolerance policy for safe train operations.

Fourth, the large number of near misses that have come to light after every accident, several of them

previously unreported, indicates that only providence, rather than any systemic approach to safety, has made things appear better than they actually are.

Those familiar with the intricacies of railway operations, and those familiar with its workforce agree that the draconian methods adopted by the senior authorities, with the knowledge and connivance of the top officials, have undermined long-established practices of railway operations that are necessary for the safe running of trains. As a result, railway employees are regularly forced to work in violation of operational procedures and guidelines prescribed in the rulebook. In particular, the mounting exigencies of traffic operations have dominated operational safety-related rules, criteria, and standards that are generally regarded to non-negotiable for the safe running of trains.

The Commission is of the view that safety needs to be institutionalised in the conduct of operations, in which every segment of the Railways' workforce is empowered to participate and strengthen. Instead, the current regime, which is antagonistic to the workforce, not only forces workers to violate safety norms, but **not** report instances of transgressions so that those at the higher level in the Railways' hierarchy can present a more rosy picture to their superiors along the chain of command.

The Commission suggests that a strong whistleblower framework be adopted by the Indian Railways so that employees are actively encouraged to expose such violations. This will have the effect of not just resulting in a much better database on the actual performance on the safety front but also ensuring better accountability.

The Commission wishes to highlight that there is a human dimension to these pressures. For some time now, across the Indian Railways, its specialised workforce has been forced to run trains in unsafe conditions. loco pilots, station masters, train controllers, points men and telecommunications staff and track maintainers are being forced by higher authorities to ignore, avoid or violate safety norms for running trains. Senior leadership in charge of train operations regularly force the operating staff to violate standard safety procedures in order to accommodate the needs of traffic. Workers refusing such patently illegal instructions are often punished and even dismissed from service. It is obvious the Railway Board is aware of this rampant practice.

A spate of accidents

June 17 2024 -- Kanchenjunga Collision, near New Jalpaiguri, West Bengal

A goods train collided with Kanchenjunga Express between Rangapani and Chattar Hat stations in West Bengal. The loco pilot of the goods train, the train manager of the express train and 14 passengers were killed and nearly 50 injured. The CRS submitted its preliminary report on July 11, 2024. It noted that inadequate training and lack of uniform protocols led to the accident, and urged the Railways to upgrade its systems to prevent recurrence of such accidents.

June 2, 2024 -- Goods Train Collision in Ambala, Punjab,

Both the loco pilot and his assistant on a goods train fell into micro sleep. The loco pilot was on his fourth consecutive night shift and had already been forced to do 12 night shifts in the month. This is what plausibly caused the accident.

February 2024 -- Kathua -- Roll down of a goods train

On February 25, 2024, an unmanned freight train rolled down from Kathua Railway in Jammu for 84 kms. Fortunately, there was no movement of passenger trains on this route at the time. Four railway employees were summarily dismissed.

The train consisted of 53 goods wagons but, shockingly, did not have either a brake van, nor was it issued a brake power certificate. This train was ordered to move without a TrainManager.

October 29, 2023 -- Vizianagaram, Andhra Pradesh

Fourteen persons including two loco pilots and a Train Manager died in this accident. The Railway Minister blamed loco pilots for watching a cricket match! The CRS later debunked this.

This accident was similar to the Kangchenjunga train collision of June 17, 2024. Here again, the automatic signalling system, which had been recently installed, had failed and, in this case too, the protocol was not made clear to the concerned workers and staff.

Triple Train Accident, Balasore, Odisha , June 2023

On June 2, 2023, there was a triple train accident near Bahanga Bazaar Station, in which nearly 300 passengers died and nearly a thousand were injured. The CBI was summoned with the sole purpose of scuttling the probe. To this day the CRS report is not in public domain because of the unprecedented intervention of the CBI, whose competence in investigating railway matters is suspect.

Working Conditions and their impact on safety

Vacancies

The total vacancies now amount to a staggering 3.12 lakh persons. 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. About eight lakh workers are being employed on contract basis or outsourced; their working conditions are worse.

Loco pilots

The most shocking aspect of the lives of loco pilots is that there is, in this day and age, no upper limit to their hours of duty. Often, they are called to work for 14, 16, or even 20 hours in a shift. The authorities, knowing that anything in excess of 12 hours is a violation of the law, force the loco pilots to sign a declaration to the effect that they had signed off at an intermediate station. A single trip is thus split into multiple trips creating the fiction that the loco pilot has not had a continuous shift extending way beyond that permitted by modern labour legislation.

The loco pilots have for long – actually more than 50 years -- been demanding an 8-hour working day. In fact, in 1973, after a series of strikes by the All India Loco Running Staff Association (AILRSA), the Government agreed to limit the working day to 10 hours. Till date this promise remains unfulfilled.

Another glaring incongruity in the working lives of loco pilots, when compared to the rest of the industrial work force, is how they are shortchanged in terms of their weekly rests. Most workers in the organised sector get a weekly off-day, implying a weekly rest of 40 hours (16 hours on the last working day plus 24 hours on the weekly off). However, loco pilots get only 30 hours of weekly rest, four times a month. In effect, loco pilots are shortchanged of one-fourth of their legal entitlement. Given the nature of their work loco pilots have been demanding that their weekly offs be extended to 46 hours.

The Commission extends its solidarity with the loco pilots of the Southern Zone of the Indian Railways who have been on an agitation since June 1, demanding adequate weekly rests and shorter working hours.

Station masters

The workload on station masters, who control train movement, has increased dramatically over the years. The increase in traffic density, has not been accompanied by an increase in the number of station masters. With no additional support staff, and with increased traffic, it is virtually impossible for a

station master to attend to failures on the track or when signals malfunction. The shortage of personnel has implied that station masters often have to work for more than 12 hours at a stretch.

A similar situation prevails among Train Controllers who control the movement of trains. Though their sanctioned strength is 3,000, there are only 2,500 train controllers in the Indian Railways. They also do not get a calendar day's rest in a week.

Signal and Telecommunications Staff

The severe shortage of staff among signal and telecommunications staff, imposes a heavy burden on those in the workforce. The electrical signal maintainers (ESM's) are forced to live close to their allotted headquarters, which may be in remote places. This is to ensure they are on call 24 hours a day. Already overworked during the day, they are called at any time of the night to attend to failures. The fatalities among this section of the workforce suggest that this may be directly related to their conditions of work.

Currently, there are 65,000 ESMs. They have been demanding that this should be increased to a minimum of 1,50,000, so that the Railways can have additional personnel for night shifts. This would also enable ESMs to live in places away from remote headquarters where proper schools, hospitals and other facilities are available for their families.

Track maintainers

The working conditions of track maintainers, those who patrol the vast track network of the Indian Railways, are extremely hazardous. Shockingly, every year nearly 400 track maintainers are run over while on duty. While during the day the track maintainers move in groups, during the night the track maintainers are sent out alone in the night for distances up to 20 kms to patrol the tracks. They must carry equipment which can weigh up to 15 kgs.

The work that should be done by 5-6 track maintainers is now being done by 2-3. The day shift ends at 4 or 5 pm, and often they are asked to report for night duty at 10 pm the same night. The railways tested a safety system called Rakshak Device in 2018, which would warn track maintainers of an approaching locomotive. However, even after 6 years, this life-saving device has not been provided to workers.

Currently, the strength of track maintainers at all India level is around 2.5 lakh workers. However, given that the sanctioned strength is 4 lakh workers, this implies a shortfall of over 1.5 lakh workers. Track maintainers argue that a proper cadre review would reveal that 6 lakh maintainers are required.

Conclusion

The recent spate of accidents has made it obvious that:

- **There is an urgent need for a full-time Railway Minister with independent charge and without other ministerial responsibilities.**
- **An immediate independent probe into the spate of railway accidents since June 2023 must be undertaken.**
- **Reintroduce the Railway Budget. As India's biggest enterprise – private or public sector – and whose operations have a major influence on economic and social life – the budgetary exercise has always allowed for wider discussion on the priorities and plans in and outside Parliament.**
- **The Railways must fill up all posts immediately so that safety is not compromised because of an overworked workforce**
- **Railway workers must be encouraged to act as whistleblowers so that violations/deviations from safety norms are brought to light expeditiously. The Railway Board must guarantee that the atmosphere of fear of victimisation that is pervasive now is ended immediately. Only a fully transparent system can be safe.**

- The severe congestion of the rail network, has a bearing on safety. The prolonged neglect of the Railways by the government has resulted in inadequate funds for modernisation, upgradation and expansion of the network. Obviously, this has a bearing on the safe running of trains. Meanwhile, the misplaced focus on marquee projects like the Vande Bharat trains has only imposed an additional burden on the operations of the Indian Railways.
- Indian Railways should completely overhaul its operating systems and make them transparent to all stakeholders to ensure safety for all – railways workers, passengers as well as the general public.

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.](#)