



# Derailed Priorities

## Has the investments in our safety in the Indian Railways been compromised?

This week, the Sealdah-bound Kanchanjunga Express met with a disaster when a goods train crashed into it near Rangapani station in West Bengal. The violent collision led to the derailment of three rear compartments, leaving at least eight people dead and around 30 injured. Under the watch of Railway Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw, this is the second time within a span of one year that a catastrophic train accident has claimed lives, leaving many more injured.

We, of course, remember the Balasore accident on June 2, 2023, where a catastrophic three-train collision snatched away at least 291 lives and wounded over 1,000 more. The accident involved the Bengaluru-Howrah Superfast Express, the Shalimar-Chennai Central Coromandel Express, and a stationary goods train. The initial impact of the Coromandel Express with the goods train, followed by the Yashwantpur-Howrah Express slamming into derailed coaches, exposed egregious failures in railway operations and safety protocols. Investigations after the accident revealed that an undetected fault in the wiring of a location box near Bahanaga Bazaar Railway Station had lingered for five years. The Commission of Rail Safety (CRS) report laid the blame squarely on the S&T Department and let the government slide through the cracks once again.

But if we look deeper, the government in such accidents is more culpable than meets the eye. There is an urgent need to address 10,000 kilometers of tracks requiring immediate attention, along with the annual renewal of 4,500 kilometers of tracks. The Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) found a staggering shortfall of Rs 103,395 crore needed for track renewal. By the end of the fiscal year 2020-21, the railway system needed to replace aging assets worth Rs 94,873 crore from the Depreciation Reserve Fund. Specifically, around 60% of these funds, or Rs 58,459 crore, were designated for the renewal of railway tracks. However, the CAG report revealed that only a paltry Rs 671.92 crore, or 0.7% of the allocated funds, was actually utilized for this critical purpose. In December 2022, a report by the CAG revealed a disturbing misuse of funds allocated for railway safety in India. The Rashtriya Rail Sanraksha Kosh (RRSK) – a special fund created by the Narendra Modi government in 2017 to enhance railway safety – had its resources diverted to trivial expenses such as foot massagers, crockery, and furniture. Alarming, only a minuscule portion of the funds earmarked for track renewal was used as intended.

In the aftermath of the Kanchanjunga Express calamity, the government has offered compensation of 10 lakh for the families of the deceased, 2.5 lakh for the seriously injured, and 50,000 for those with minor injuries. But such promises do nothing in terms of the structural concerns that are behind the neglect of priorities in the Railways. Such ex-post compensation, while necessary, when considered along with the conscious neglect of safety and reliability related investments (especially in signaling and in track modernisation) implies that the railways have been trading lives for money “saved”, which is entirely unethical.

The government's fixation on flashy projects like the Vande Bharat Express seem to be eating into fundamental safety concerns. Similarly, Local passenger trains are gradually being replaced by express trains like VandeBharat, equipped with amenities such as air conditioning and Wi-Fi. The needs of the majority of passengers, particularly those traveling in passenger and unreserved compartment trains who cannot afford the high tariffs of these trains, have been increasingly ignored. When we look at the frequent videos these days of people being forced to travel like livestock stacked inside the train toilets and vestibules, we should yet again remind ourselves that it is the outcome of conscious decisions of the government. Between 2012 and 2022 the seats/berths in the General section came down from 50% to 43%. Even Non AC Sleeper sections seats/berths have come down from 36% to 33%. While AC coaches have increased from 15% to 24%! Railways are replacing affordable sleeper coaches with more expensive AC counterparts on faster trains that cost over twice as much as the original second-class tickets.

Moreover, attempting to run a few trains at high speed only reduces the carrying capacity further. India has the highest train varieties (in terms of speed) which reduces the capacity of the tracks. By moving towards a standard speed and acceleration that all passenger trains (mail, express, “super-fast”, passenger) achieve, the congestion on the railways can greatly reduce, allowing the rail to run high value low cost trains for all.

The Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) observed a decrease in the punctuality of mail and express trains, dropping from 79% in 2012-'13 to 69.23% in 2018-'19. In a recent report by the Times of India, it was highlighted that the average speed of passenger trains in India has decreased by over 5 km per hour compared to the previous year. Similarly, for freight trains, there has been a decline in average speed by nearly 6 km per hour. These significant developments get shrouded by the fanfare around selfie booths with the PM. As per response to an RTI, it has come to the fore that, in the Central Railway Zone, these selfie booths in railway stations have been set up on platforms, costing Rs 6.25 lakhs each.

The luxurious Vande Bharat trains come at a premium cost. While a standard second-class sleeper ticket on an express train between Delhi and Kanpur costs only Rs 300, the cheapest Vande Bharat fare is a staggering Rs 1,115. Express trains have been rebranded as “superfast”. While there has been hardly any increase in effective speed, ticket prices have soared for the common people. These recent disasters have laid bare the truth that in the name of advances in technology and infrastructure, the fundamental safety of railway operations and affordability is being compromised.

Post the Balasore accident, the government had announced plans to implement the Kavach safety system on 6,000 km of tracks by 2023 on the Delhi - Guwahati route which would have covered Bengal too, but it has only been deployed on 1,500 km. If Kavach had been in place, the Kanchanjunga accident could have been avoided.

In light of these tragedies, we have some key demands to ensure a fair and transparent investigation.

1. To ensure a fair and transparent investigation, it is essential to examine not only this accident but also the series of accidents in recent times. This investigation should aim to identify the systemic reasons for the severe compromise of rail safety and hold those responsible accountable.
2. The findings and proposed safety measures must be presented to the parliament, along with a detailed timeline for the implementation of each measure. Furthermore, progress reports on the completion and compliance of these safety measures should be regularly submitted to the parliament and made available to the public to ensure accountability and transparency.

Our view is that our entire railway network is vulnerable, particularly in Eastern and Northeastern States. It is imperative that stringent measures be taken to secure the safety of our railway tracks to prevent future catastrophes. It is the ordinary citizens who suffer the consequences of systemic negligence.

As per government's own data presented in parliament we have witnessed 71 accidents per annum since 2014. Accountability must be demanded for the millions of lives that rely on the railway network every single day. The blood spilled on these tracks cries out for justice and reform before more innocent lives are lost to the wheels of neglect and incompetence. Is this the true meaning of Modi's guarantee?