

This injured wounded  
and incapacitated for  
life



This fatality rate is 25 times that of USA. On an average 6 persons die every day on the roads of Delhi alone. Similarly, the railway tracks are virtually red with human blood.

During the last three year, (ending September 1997) there were about 1400 deaths in train accidents. The number of those killed in train accidents in the current year is already over 200. The unmanned railway crossings also take their heavy toils. Many people die while crossing the railway lines at such points. Recently in a train accident of the Ahmadabad-Howrah Express at Chempa, near Bilasir in Madhya Pradesh, over 100 passengers lost their lives. The marked rise in the number of train accidents in India is a matter of great concern and yet the concerned authorities have not done much to make the traveling by train's safe and secure, it has become a routine to order an enquiry after an accident, pay compensation under the rules and then everything is forgotten till another tragedy strikes and passengers die while traveling. The number of those injured wounded and Incapacitated for life is many times hip her than those killed in railways accidents. It amounts to colossal losses in men and material and also a great national tragedy.

It is a sad commentary on the poor managementof our railways and continued apathy towards railway safety and maintenance. The Champa railway accident was the result of sheer negligence and casual approach to the safety measures. Intheis case all the mandatory safety rules were thrown to the winds. The track was under repair and yet on caution order was not issued to the driver of the train from the control from nor was the red flags put up at the required place to Synopsis: warn the approaching train of the repairs going on the track. The flag was put up only 16 meters from the

repair site instead of mandatory 1, 200 meters away. Moreover, the repair work was being carried out even while the sun was setting against the strict rule that no such work should be done while the sun is setting when the visibility is really poor.

The driver of the ill-fated Ahmedabad-Howrah Express train had to apply emergency brakes just 16 meters away from the site of accident.

Consequently the train derailed and five of the coaches rolled down into the river while the sixth one remained dangling in the air over the bridge and the seventh was only derailed but did not overturn. This is not a case of negligence and callousness insulation. The tragic tale keeps on repeating itself. Just a few days after this accident another train Delhi-Ahmedabad Express derailed near Jaipur. Indian Railways is the largest public sector undertaking which boasts of having 7, 043 stations spread over route length of 62, 000 km with a fleet of 7, 806 locomotives, 39, 929 coaches, 3, 444 electric multiple units and 3, 46, 394 till 1933.

It is also the largest employer in the world with about 2 lakh employees. But as far as safety is concerned, it is far below the international standards. The poor and common passengers are the worst victims, there are too many mechanical and human failures resulting in frequent accidents. It is said that there is lack of funds which does not allow the required improvement in the safety standards. But on the other hand there was open criticism of the railway Minister Paswan and it was alleged that his monthly food bill alone amounted to Rs. 3 lakh. The railways had to spend Rs. 5 lakh to host his iftaar party during Ramjan.

It is said that Mr. Ram Vilas Paswan has also been indulging in distributing favours and largesse. During the preceding 6 months alone he gave away Rs. 1.11 crore as cash prizes to various railway employees and officers of his home State Bihar. On July 21, 1997 he went to his constituency Hajipur in Bihar and rewarded 8 officers with a cash prize of Rs. 20,000.

The same day he gave away Rs. 50,000 to the Railway Protection Force personnel who had given away Rs. 20,000 again to RPF personnel who had escorted him to riot-affected areas in Mumbai. The story of his largesse, doles and favours is endless. It is not applicable to him only. His predecessors too, had indulged in such doles at the public expense. It reminds of Nero, the Roman Emperor (37-68 AD) who made merry while Rome was on fire.

Unfortunately India has many Neros, while the capital of Rome had only one. In reply, as is usual, Mr. Paswan denied the allegation of extravagance and said the reports were exaggerated. Undoubtedly, there is no accountability and responsibility in the operation of Indian Railways. Take, for example, the construction of over bridges on railway crossing where innumerable accidents take place and poor people lose their lives. The Railway authorities say that the expenditure on the construction of the overhead bridges at railway crossings is to be shared 50:50 between the concerned State Governments and the Railways, but the former in many a case do not pay their share and so the over bridges are not constructed. Similarly, in the case of bomb blasts in railways, and on its tracks, the minister concerned says that it is the responsibility of the State governments to ensure such safety

and security in their respective territories and not that of the Railways. Bomb blasts and explosions in the trains are now on the increase.

Scores of people die and many times over are injured and maimed in these blasts. Poor passengers travel at their own risk in the trains and are a worried OT till the journey is safely over. The Railways complain of paucity of the funds while its assets utilization rate is not up to the standard. Most of its land lies unused and unutilized which can yield very good dividends if put to proper and planned utilization. It is also reported that 40% of its goods wagon movement is empty.

Moreover, Indian Railways offer over to its travelers so much so that almost half the passengers on a train are discount passengers. During 1995-96 it transportation of essential goods, safety of the passengers cannot be compromised because of lack of funds. It is the biggest public enterprise and must generate enough profits to fend for itself.

But there is no professionalism and accountability and corruption is rampant. Indian Railways have failed miserably in the matter of passenger safety and security. It has failed so far to provide walkie-talkies to the train drivers so that they can contact the control rooms in case of any emergency. Again the lack of funds is advanced as an argument.

If the driver of the ill-fated Ahmedabad-Howrah Express had this facility of walkie-talkie he could have been informed of the impending danger and the tragedy averted. But it could not be done and again the problem of the funds was put forward as a lame excuse. On the other hand the political leaders are busy granting various railway favours to their own people, regions and

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States, for example, the present Railway Minister has set up 45 new unremunerative lines to backward regions incurring huge expenditure and losses simply keeping in view the party interests and its vote-bank. Such populist measures at the cost of public expense and safety are condemnable.

The cases of train dacoities, robberies, thefts etc. are also on the increase. The tendency of introducing new and high speed trains like Shatabdis, Rajdhanis etc. without is also responsible for frequent accidents. In the opinion of the Chief Commissioner of Railway Safety “ in providing maintenance trains is in default.

This is an unsafe practice. Recently on 2nd October (1997) a new high speed train Shatabdi to Amritsar was introduced without proper preparation in respect of infrastructure framework. It was done expressly to please the Prime Minister and his home State Punjab in spite of the opposition by railway officials. It is said that the infrastructure was unlikely to be in place in the immediate future.

These are really disturbing trends. It is reported that Mr. Ram Vilas Paswan has introduced so far 200 new trains since he assumed office of the Railway Minister in May 1996. His predecessor Suresh Kalmadi started 67 new trains during his brief stint and Jaffer Sharief introduced over 300 new trains. The authorities cannot escape the responsibility of introducing too many new trains without proper maintenance and operational facilities.

On the one hand it is said there is paucity of funds, on the other it is alleged that the funds allocated for improvement of tracks, signaling, passenger

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amenities and other safety measures were returned unused. It reflects that there is no responsibility and accountability and a sort of chaos prevails. There is blatant favouritism in granting railway contracts and employment of personnel. There is no accord between the authorities on the top and the various railway officials and resultant deaths and suffering. To reduce the railway accidents and ensure greater safety and security effective and immediate remedial measures should be taken. There should be proper accountability and responsibility and railways should be managed and operated professionally and with commitment to earn enough profits commensurate with the huge investments, it should not be run either as a charitable institution or a personal fiefdom. Modern advanced technologies and automatic signaling systems should be introduced in all sectors of the undertaking, Expert foreign advice and expertise should be sought to eliminate mechanical failures.

Indiscriminate introduction of trains, specially high speed trains, should not be allowed without prior arrangement of infrastructure facilities. The saturated trunk routes between different big cities should be taken special care of in respect of maintenance of engines, rolling stocks, tracks, signaling equipments etc. Proper regular inspection, repairs and up gradation of the tracks should be done. The guards and drivers of all the important trains should be provided with walkie-talkies initially and then the facility should be extended to all trains. Over bridges on the railway crossings should be constructed or at least there should be no unmanned level crossing.

Party and personal consideration should not be allowed to interfere in the policy, planning and operation of the railways. At least some of the operations of

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the railways can be privatized to generate additional profits and to ensure more efficiency. There are huge chunks of railway land which can be exploited commercially. In the rural areas they can be used for cultivation and plantation.

Above all, the corruption should be dealt with an iron hand.