

Odisha Train Tragedy: To heal our national distress, let there be a collective commitment to safety, accountability, equity

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We have to find a semblance of healing for the deceased passengers' families, the algorithms of whose lives and memories lie agonisingly altered. This needs honest inquiry and fixing accountability. But after the sorrow has sobered down, will we raise questions on institutional challenges confronting the railways? Do we want to be the spectators of a green-flag signalling of euphoric railway projects or responsibly vigilant citizens?

Arup K Chatterjee

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By adding more trains on the same infrastructure, Indian Railways has surrendered the little safety margin it had in maintenance. (File image)

It is over two days since the crash involving three trains (the Shalimar-Chennai Coromandel Express train, the Yesvantpur-Howrah Superfast Express train, and a goods train) – at Bahanaga Bazar station, near Balasore, in Odisha – with about 2,200 passengers on board.

The death toll from Friday's train crash is approaching 300 (275 at the time this was written) with over 800 people injured, and nearly 100 in critical condition. It is the most catastrophic accident that has occurred on the Indian Railways since the 1995 accident near Delhi which killed over 350 passengers. It is also a little over a week since the inaugural run of the indigenously-built Vande Bharat Express (plying from Dehradun to Delhi) was flagged off by Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

Amidst the marathon over-50-hour-long monitoring and rescue operations headed by the Union minister of railways, with sweltering summer heat crossing 37 degrees, hundreds of lives were saved by teams of local rescuers, Indian army and navy personnel, doctors and medical professionals from Odisha, neighbouring states, and Delhi, as blood donation camps, long queues, and the identification of passengers became the leitmotifs of the aftermath of the tragedy at Balasore.

A Narrative Of Healing

While the locals of Odisha have doubtless emerged as the uncrowned heroic protagonists of this dreadful saga – as also marked in the Honourable PM's laudatory note – the least we can do is to not rush into casting the villains of this tragedy. In this moment of national distress, we need to hear the truth in a tongue that can help us heal and remedy our collective lapses.

One way to disseminate the semblance of a means of healing – for the deceased passengers' families, the algorithms of whose lives and memories lie agonisingly altered, and those who are raising questions on the railways' administrative efficiency – is to ascertain whether the horrible crash was not the outcome of the administration's inattention but that of a sabotage. The Railway ministry, on Sunday, jointly attributed the crash to "a change made in the electronic interlocking and point machine," overruling the possibility of a signal malfunctioning. The Prime Minister too has promised the strictest punishment for the guilty.

There is merit in a willing suspension of disbelief towards the ministry's claims, since it is not fiery questions hurled at the railways but a belief that the fourth-largest railway network in the world did not let its people down that can help us draw a breath of sobriety at this wounded juncture.

Beyond Spectatorial Approach

But when the sorrow has sobered down, questions pertaining to the institutional challenges confronting the railways, may continue to linger. How well we pose these before the powers that be may determine whether we want to be the spectators of a green-flag signalling of euphoric railway projects or responsibly vigilant citizens for our own sakes and that of the railways.

The frequency of railway derailments has come down progressively since 2000, and particularly since 2014. Beginning with a record of railway casualties touching 300, annually, in around 2000, in 2020, India recorded a two-year period of zero railway

casualties. By 2019, India had reformed thousands of unguarded railway crossings, increased its underpasses and frequency of signal conductors. Nevertheless, about 98 percent of British India's railroads were constructed between 1870 and 1930, leaving a rail system that is potentially still in need of greater professionalisation and infrastructure reforms.

This is not least because the 2022 report by the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG), Derailment in Indian Railways claims that close to 70 percent of railway accidents during 2017-2021 were attributable to derailments – what occurred before the collision at Bahanaga Bazar on Friday. The CAG report also indicates a systemic underutilisation of funds from the Rashtriya Rail Sanraksha Kosh (est. 2017-18), noting a downward trend between 2018 and 2020 in the funds allocated for track modernisation.

Heeding Premonitions

Problems of understaffing and surrendering of railway allocated funds do not get adequately highlighted in the citizen's imagination amidst celebrations of a technological nationalism aided by the government's otherwise praiseworthy initiatives on bullet trains, superfast trains and pilgrimage circuits. Furthermore, while the anti-collision system (Kavach) has been in the works since at least 2011, it is yet to become operational on many sections of major routes like the Delhi-Howrah and Delhi-Mumbai sections, come 2024.

Perhaps what will come to haunt us the most are the premonitory warnings of flaws in the signalling system that were reported in February 2023, in Hosadurga, from an incident that was uncannily similar to the one that occurred near Balasore. Following the February incident – in which the locomotive pilot was agile enough to apply brakes and avert a clash – the chief operating manager of the Southwestern Railway had informed the ministry about deficiencies in the signalling system, whose failure could lead to more hazardous reprisals.

One way to heed the premonitions that came our way – en route to the disaster that we are still sorely coping with – is to stand with the Ministry of Railways and seek earnest accountability from our ministers and bureaucrats rather than demanding their resignations or distracting them from the fundamental goal of equitable reforms in the railways or letting populism lure them into celebrity projects.

Arup K. Chatterjee is a Professor at OP Jindal Global University, and the author of The Great Indian Railways (2018), Indians in London: From the Birth of the East India Company and Independent India (2021), and Adam's Bridge (2024). Views are personal, and do not represent the stand of this publication.

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