

Inadequate safety measures behind rail disasters in India

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The BJP government in India is trying to use the August 2 train crash to launch a crackdown on 1.6 million railway workers in the country. Four days after the train crash, which killed 303 passengers, India Railway Board Chairman V.K. Agarwal told reporters an "army-type discipline" would be imposed on railway employees to achieve a "zero accident rate." He added, "The railways are over-stretched and operation will be absolutely strict, with war-situation discipline."

This statement was intended to place responsibility for frequent train crashes in India on the railway employees.

At midnight on August 2 the Guwahati-bound Awadh-Assam express and the Delhi-bound Brahmaputra mail train, running on a same track, crashed in a head-on collision at Gaisal railway station in West Bengal, killing and injuring hundreds of passengers. At the conclusion of a three-day rescue operation the government announced that 288 bodies had been recovered from the scene of the accident and 15 of the injured had succumbed. Only about 65 bodies could be identified, the others having been burnt and shattered beyond recognition. The West Bengal State government ordered the mass cremation of the bodies which could not be indentified.

In an attempt to diffuse anger over the disaster, the BJP government suspended five senior officers in the division where the accident occurred, and ordered the area general manager to go on leave. In addition, after hesitating for several days, the BJP prime minister accepted the resignation of Railway Minister Nitish Kumar, who said that he wanted to "punish himself" for his "moral responsibility."

The prime minister then announced the appointment of a commission to inquire into the accident and railway safety. But the government had already

declared that the accident was due to human error.

It has become a virtual ritual for the government and top bureaucrats, after every rail disaster, to attribute the accident to "human error" or "mechanical failure", and appoint a commission to investigate and submit recommendations. But other than naming new scapegoats, nothing has changed and the existing system has been absolved.

The trains involved in the Gaisal crash had not been fitted out with automatic warning systems, which would have forced the trains to break in the event of a danger signal. "So far we have only managed to fit these systems into suburban trains, and it will be three to four years before they come into common usage", Railway Ministry Secretary Shanthi Narain said, commenting on the crash.

One report said the Gaisal station master did not have a tracking panel, which would have let him know that two trains were racing toward each other on the same track.

The *Hindu*, a prominent Indian newspaper, reported August 4 that some 2,000 recommendations had been presented by various commissions appointed after major train crashes, without being implemented. One of the main proposals was to modernize the rail safety system using up-to-date technology.

Prior to the Gaisal disaster, the worst rail accident occurred in August 1995 at Ferozabad in Uttar Pradesh, claiming over 300 lives. "Wrong signaling" was given as the cause of that crash. But, according to *Frontline* magazine, it was subsequently revealed that there had been no track circuiting system, considered an essential safety feature in complex railway systems. These systems insure that no train is allowed onto a section of a track without firm confirmation that the last car of the preceding train has completely crossed.

At the time of the Punjab accident in November 1998, which claimed 211 lives, track circuiting systems had been introduced only on northern rail lines. "India Railway had been tardy in introducing [this system]," according to *Frontline*, "on account of financial constraints."

The Punjab accident occurred when the Frontier mail train derailed and some of its compartments fell onto another track on which an express train was running. It was suspected that the derailment occurred because of a crack on the rails. But railway workers lack the developed technological equipment needed to detect such faults, and are forced to rely on visual inspections aided by rudimentary implements.

Even though the railway system in India is vast and complex, and its freight and passenger traffic has increased by six-fold over the past four decades, spending on the system has increased only two-fold. Some 60 to 70 percent of all rail accidents have been attributed to human error, but it is clear this so-called "human error" is largely a result of backward technology. It is precisely the introduction of modern technology that enables the work force to overcome such "human errors." Indeed, a former India Railway board member, C.M. Koshla, has shown that a marked increase in the volume of work has reduced the reaction time for railway staff.

The question arises as to why the recommendations of past safety commissions were not implemented by the present BJP regime or its predecessors. The Indian media has noted that many lives would have been saved had the proposed changes been carried out.

Over the years governments in India have drastically reduced investment in the railways. In the 1997 Indian Development Report researcher R. Ramanathan noted:

"The budgetary support to Indian Railway has been decreasing... A review of investments indicates that the outlay on the railway sector fell to 5.9-6.9 percent in the last four plan periods, from about 11.1-15.5 percent in the first three plan periods." This means investment has been reduced by about half.

In July of last year Railway Minister Nitish Kumar presented a White Paper that said the largest public sector enterprise was "reeling under pressure from declining finances, increasing pressure from pending projects and competition from highway transport". In India 24,239 level crossings are unmanned. However

the resources needed to man these crossings or build bridges or underpasses are "not available," the Railway Minister reported.

Reductions in rail investment in India are part of the downsizing of budget expenditures demanded by the IMF. The rail system is one of the public sectors identified by the IMF for a "scaling down" of subsidies.

At one time India Railway was hailed as a mighty tribute to the national economy and the nationalist policies of the Indian ruling elite, especially the Indian National Congress. In recent years it has been systematically downsized and opened up to private investment.

Along with the spending cuts, the government is seeking to retrench nearly one third of the work force. According to the *Economic and Political Weekly* of September 19, 1998, an internal study suggested a 30 percent cut in employment, but the government was able to achieve only a 10 percent reduction.

The systematic privatization of Indian Railway has already begun. One form of this process is the Build-Operate-Lease-Transfer (BOLT) scheme. This applies to the construction of warehouses. Another scheme, "Own Your Wagon," was recently introduced to invite private sector investment. The India Development Report of 1997 noted that the private sector had sought to operate eight tourist circuits and rolling stock under this plan by 1997.

The safety of millions of passengers, the existence of an affordable means of travel for the poor, the jobs and working conditions of hundreds of thousands of rail workers are all under threat because they are subordinated to the rule of the Indian bourgeoisie and its collaboration with international finance capital.



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