

Another fatal Indian rail crash highlights decades of official neglect

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At least 44 people are dead and 140 injured, many critically, after a rail collision at Sarai Banjara, 200 km north of the Indian capital New Delhi in the early morning of December 2. The accident occurred when the Howra Mail, travelling from Calcutta to Amritsar, rammed into a Delhi-bound freight train that had been derailed five minutes earlier.

Four coaches of the passenger train were smashed and overturned, trapping more than 200 passengers. Hearing the crash, local villagers rushed to the scene with lanterns to rescue passengers. One of the rescuers, village headman Dhraminder Singh, said that when he reached the site people were yelling and many were trapped inside the wreckage. "A lot of people died in my arms," he added.

Another rescuer, Kartar Singh, a local villager, said: "We had to break open the doors and rush the injured to hospitals on tractor trolleys... When I reached the site, what I saw was horrific. People, many of them cut and bleeding, were screaming from the overturned wagons where they were trapped."

Railroad workers were seen struggling to pull out victims using blowtorches to cut through the mangled metal. Poor conditions on local roads delayed the arrival of cranes to lift carriages.

Initial investigations by railway authorities pointed to technical failures as the cause. Rail company chairman Ashok Kumar suggested metal fatigue in the tracks could have led to the derailment of the goods train. Railway officials said the crash could have been averted if the driver of the passenger train had been warned in time of the derailment. The freight train driver had alerted the nearest stations but the passenger express driver was not warned.

According to reports, the passenger train driver could not see the fallen freight cars on his track due to thick

winter fog. Once he applied the brakes, it was too late. The accident could have been avoided only by detecting the track fault and preventing the freight train derailment.

The crash has once more focused attention on the neglect of the country's rail network. The latest crash is the 253rd this year, bringing the total death toll to 120. Moreover, two years ago, 210 people died in a similar collision between a passenger train and cars unhooked from another train on the same route at Khanna, just 20 km away.

After the Khanna accident, local railway authorities were ordered to conduct regular ultrasonic flaw detection tests on the tracks. But no equipment existed to conduct the tests. Shanti Narayan, a member of India's Railway Board, admitted that the accident highlighted the lack of necessary technology.

Railway Minister Mamata Banerjee did not visit the site until December 3, some 22 hours after the crash. In an attempt to distract attention from the real cause, she said: "There may be sabotage behind the accident. We will see to it." Yet, railway safety commissioner G.P. Garg ruled out sabotage while speaking to reporters at the site.

After being criticised for not immediately visiting the site, Banerjee offered to resign. Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee predictably rejected her resignation. It was another bid to divert the spotlight from the underlying causes of frequent fatal rail accidents.

About 2,400 people have died in such accidents in the last five years, including an August 1999 collision between two crowded trains in West Bengal that killed 286 people and an August 1995 train collision in Uttar Pradesh that caused 300 deaths.

The *Hindustan Times* commented in its Sunday edition: "Indian Railways possibly runs the most unsafe

service in the world. If the trains aren't killing people in collisions, then they are running over people at manned and unmanned crossings ... the body count is too high for anyone to feel safe in a train.” Pointing to the poor state of railway infrastructure, it added: “The railways today have 11,928 kilometres (7,455 miles) of broad gauge and 4,700 kilometres (2,937 miles) of metre gauge waiting to be replaced.”

Banerjee has ordered a judicial inquiry into the crash. This is a time-honoured method of obscuring the real problems. Similar inquiries have been appointed after almost every major railway accident. Some of these reports are still overdue, including the one dealing with the 1998 accident. Even where reports have been issued, their recommendations have not been implemented.

The truth is that funds have not been provided for modern technology to detect possible track failures and for signaling and switching. The provision of optical fibre-based and digital communication signals has been limited to selected routes. Moreover, officials admit that funding shortfalls have hampered even routine inspection and maintenance.

Railways are a relatively affordable way for ordinary people to travel in India. Most of those killed in accidents are in lower class compartments, which are usually badly overcrowded. The failure of Indian governments to provide safe railways expresses callous indifference toward the lives of the poor masses. Huge investment is needed to dramatically improve railway infrastructure, but such funding conflicts with the requirements of private profit.



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