

Another rail disaster in India claims 59 lives

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27 June 2001

Another tragic rail disaster has taken place in India—the product of deteriorating infrastructure, inadequate budgets, official indifference and a social system that puts profit before the lives of people.

At least 59 passengers died last Friday when a bridge over the Kadalundi River in the southern Indian state of Kerala collapsed and three rail cars—part of the Mangalore-Chennai Mail train bound for Madras—plunged into the swollen waters. More than 200 people were injured—about 80 seriously.

Local police admitted that the death toll would have been much higher if local workers, villagers and fishermen had not rushed to help the victims. Some risked their lives to pull victims out of the river. Others assisted by keeping the road free of traffic for ambulances, helped care for the injured and made blood donations.

The accident happened around 5pm on Friday and by Sunday afternoon, despite lengthy delays caused by heavy monsoonal rains, the rescue operation was called off. According to rail authorities, there was no longer any hope that anyone would be found alive and all the bodies had been recovered. The three rail cars had been lifted from the river and three others that had been derailed were removed.

Indian Railways Minister Nitish Kumar has ordered the Commissioner of Railways to conduct an inquiry into the crash. “The bridge was 120 years old,” he admitted. “One possible reason for the accident might have been the sudden sinkage of one of the bridge’s girders,” he added. Preliminary investigations appear to confirm that the sinking of one of the bridge’s girders or piers was the immediate cause of the accident.

There are a number of theories as to why the pillar collapsed—heavy rains and a swollen river, vibrations from construction work taking place on a new bridge, and, according to India’s junior railway minister O. Rajgopal, geological activity. Other commentators have pointed to the possibility of track failure and the inadequacy of the train’s braking system as contributing factors.

The government of Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee and top rail officials are now engaged in an elaborate public relations operation aimed at deflecting attention from the

most obvious factor—the age of the bridge and its state of repair—and thus their own responsibility for the tragedy.

Junior minister Rajgopal appears to have been delegated the job of countering criticisms. He told the media on Monday that the rail bridge concerned was not a “distressed bridge” or, as he went on to explain, one that was so badly in need of renovation that restrictions had been placed on its use. “Just half-an-hour before the fatal accident, two express trains had crossed the river on the bridge,” he reassured reporters.

Warming to his subject, the minister continued by explaining that India has more than 120,000 railway bridges, of which around 51,000 are more than 100 years old and were built by the British. Of these bridges only 11 fall into the category of “distressed”. Then as if to try and clinch the argument that he could not possibly have been expected to foresee such an accident, he added: “There is no fixed term for the life of a bridge.”

Of course, the fact that the bridge was not officially recognised as “distressed,” or that two trains had successfully crossed 30 minutes before, offers cold comfort to the victims and their families. Both local residents and a number of the major Indian newspapers have commented scathingly on the official whitewash that is now proceeding.

“The railway officials have to take the blame. It was sheer negligence on the part of the railways and the officials,” said Abdullah Khoya, a local villager. “They renovated this bridge 10 years ago and I am sure that the work was done in a haphazard manner which eventually caused this accident.”

Local people had complained that the bridge pillar that collapsed was not in good condition. According to them, fishermen passing under the bridge had noticed bubbles coming from the bottom of the pile each time a train passed over. The matter was reported to authorities, who duly held an inquiry, dismissed the concerns and did nothing.

The *Indian Express* in its editorial “Bridges of Death” commented: “Even as the figures of death keep mounting in Kozhikode [nearby town], a sheer disregard for human life lost is on display. There is simply no remorse, no guilt. There will be a routine investigation, which will conveniently blame ‘the system’. No babu or neta will be

called to account. There will be no disquiet at the fact that the death toll on the tracks each year is higher than the total deaths in Kargil [fighting in 1999]...

“The pillar of the bridge gave way even though the water in the river was much below the danger level. And the entire tragedy was avoidable, if only someone in the Railways, some babu, some neta, had been listening to the numerous warnings issued by expert committees on the sorry state of bridges in the country.”

Declaring that India has “another world record of criminal negligence when it comes to bridges,” the newspaper went on to point out that the 1999 report of the Railway Safety Review Committee headed by Justice H.R. Khanna had identified 262 rail bridges as “distressed” and in need of urgent repair. “Rehabilitation/rebuilding of distressed bridges should be accorded a high priority on par with track renewals,” the report suggested.

The report, however, has been gathering dust. Moreover, as the bridge over the Kadalundi River is not officially considered “distressed,” it was accorded an even lower priority when money was handed out. A replacement has been planned at an estimated cost of 113.33 million rupees. But only 100,000 rupees has been allocated and progress has been correspondingly slow.

An editorial in the *Hindustan Times* commented: “This was no accident in the sense of ‘an event occurring by chance or arising from unknown causes’. It was something that was forewarned and simply waiting to happen. One can present a reel of statistics to show that railway safety in this country is an oxymoron...”

“According to a 1989 Bridge Rehabilitation Committee report, the bridge [over the Kadalundi] should have been scrapped long ago... If one takes this gross apathy into account, not only does it seem that Friday’s accident was bound to happen, but that it was actually made to happen.

“The latest safety performance report shows that rail ‘accidents’ are up from 397 in 1998-1999 to 463 in 1999-2000. What these and other details fail to expose is that the Railways really do not have any safety program at all. The Railway Safety Review Committee chaired by H.R. Khanna in its 1999 report actually noted with disbelief that there was ‘nothing resembling a railway safety policy document’.”

In response to this media barrage, the government and rail authorities have kept up their campaign of excuses. Gopal Krishnan, Additional General Manager of Railways, claimed that the track and bridge had been regularly maintained and monitored. He joined Rajgopal and senior rail minister Kumar in conveniently speculating that “geological” activity caused the bridge collapse.

Krishnan also attempted to shift the blame onto the train’s

speed—60 to 70 kilometres per hour—saying it should be taken into account in any inquiry. This crude attempt to make a scapegoat out of the train driver was immediately challenged by a number of experts. Moreover, the rail bureaucrat did not try to square this explanation with the one offered by the rail minister—the bridge was not “distressed” and therefore required no special precautions on speed.

The Khanna committee report conservatively suggested a one-time allocation of 150 billion rupees to the Indian railways to phase out aged assets and improve safety measures. Needless to say, the Indian government has not made the money available. The last budget, which was framed with an eye to the requirements of international investors, boosted spending on defence and concessions to big business. Spending in other areas remained stationary or was cut.

The government’s attitude to inquiries was summed up in Rajgopal’s response to calls for a judicial investigation into the latest disaster. As reported in the *Hindu*, “Mr Rajgopal ruled out a judicial probe because similar probes in the past had been extremely time-consuming. The report on the worst-ever railway accident in West Bengal in 1998 was submitted only this year. Judicial probes into the recent accidents at Khanna and Rajpura too are taking time.”

There is not the slightest sign that the Kadalundi accident will be dealt with any differently to the long line of previous disasters. While the Indian press has written biting on the reasons for the crash, its only demand is that someone—preferably someone high up—should be held responsible. But there is a far broader issue.

In a social system in which profit not human need determines government priorities and where the markets demand small budgets and less spending on social services and infrastructure, the government has no intention of providing the money necessary to upgrade the railways. The inevitable result will be further tragedies like the one at Kadalundi.



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