

# Dozens killed in Indian railway accident

**Sujeewa Amaranath****23 March 2015**

At least 34 persons were killed and around 50 injured in a train derailment near Rae Bareli in Uttar Pradesh in northern India on Friday. The engine and two carriages of the Janta Express travelling between Dehradun and Varanasi went off the rails at Bachhrawan railway station, about 28 miles from the state capital of Lucknow.

More than 400 passengers and 85 employees were on board at the time of the accident. An eyewitness said: "Dead bodies after dead bodies were being pulled out. The injured were crying in pain. God has been very unkind." Rescue workers used cutting machines to free passengers and recover bodies from the mangled compartments.

An investigation is due to begin today, but the cause of the accident appears to be failed brakes. An unnamed official told the *Times of India* that the driver had been forced to slow the train from 50 kph in an area where the top speed is supposed to be 15 kph. As the brake was not working, he applied the emergency brake, which stopped the train suddenly and caused the derailment.

The state government has announced compensation for victims—the next of kin of the dead will receive 200,000 rupees (\$US3,225) and the injured 50,000 rupees. This limited compensation is aimed at silencing any criticism of the railway system and the national and state governments.

India is notorious for rail accidents. The yearly figure of fatal train accidents has risen sharply since the 1980s, mainly due to poor maintenance. In the fiscal year of 2013-2014, 54 people died in 71 accidents while in 2014-2015 the death toll rose to 123 in 80 accidents.

Rail accidents in recent months include:

\* On March 2, three coaches of the Ernakulam-Nizamuddin Mangala Express derailed. While no one was killed, the accident raised questions about the

quality of track maintenance.

\* On February 22, at least 8 people died and 12 were seriously injured when a train in the eastern state of Bihar hit a car at an unmanned rail crossing. In January another collision between a train and a vehicle at an unmanned crossing in northern India claimed 12 lives. There are over 1,100 unmanned crossings in the East Central rail system alone.

\* On February 13, the Intercity Express travelling between Bangalore and Ernakulam in southern India jumped the tracks killing 9 passengers and injuring another 20. A preliminary inquiry identified the cause of the derailment as a fracture in the tracks.

\* On January 26, 12 members of a family, including four children, were killed and three others were injured when their vehicle was hit by the Dhuri-Sirsra passenger train in heavy fog at an unmanned rail crossing.

A BBC correspondent in Delhi said that the Indian rail network had a patchy safety record. There has been little investment in upgrading decaying tracks and signals and the country lags behind on anti-collision technologies.

The Indian rail system is among the oldest and most heavily used in the world. Its daily operations involve 12,000 passenger trains, catering for some 23 million commuters. In addition, it moves 1.49 million tonnes of freight daily and has a workforce of 1.4 million.

However, successive governments, both Congress and Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)—have allowed the rail network to run down even as it has been forced to cater for growing demand.

A 2012 report of the High Level Safety Review Committee (HLSRC) appointed by Railway Ministry warned: "The financial state of Indian Railways is at the brink of collapse unless measures are taken." The HLSRC blamed the rail authorities for not taking "concrete measures" including increasing train fares, covering up the role of governments in failing to

allocate sufficient funds.

The report called on the government not to increase the number of trains without modifying the track system to cater for growing demands. However, its call for rational planning is completely at odds with a government agenda of systematically cutting public spending. Despite media allegations that the government uses the rail network to keep unemployment levels down, many key positions have been left vacant for years.

Such is the size of the rail network that it has a separate annual budget. According to the report for the 2015 financial year, Indian Railway had suffered a \$5,540 million loss. Successive governments have blamed losses on the “social obligation,” meaning low railway fares. Having starved the network of funds, however, the same governments bear responsibility for the lack of maintenance and inadequate safety equipment.

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi expressed his “grief” over loss of lives and requested the Railway Minister Suresh Prabhu to take steps for speedy rescue and relief. At the same time, his government is pressing ahead with plans to privatise the railways.

The *Hindustan Times* reported last July that the Department of Industrial Policy and Promotion firmed up policies to permit 100 percent foreign direct investment in rail. It moved a cabinet note to “bring structural and institutional changes required to facilitate the process.”

The newspaper also reported Modi as saying: “This is economically viable too. And I have discussed it with my rail friends. In this private parties would also be ready to invest because this is a good project economically and will benefit everyone.”

The privatisation of the rail network will not only lead to a massive restructuring that will result in the destruction of jobs and working conditions, but also in a further deterioration of safety standards amid the drive for profit.



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