Indian government attempts to find scapegoats for horrific Odisha train disaster

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Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government and the entire ruling elite are desperately trying to cover up their responsibility for the decades of rail infrastructure neglect and cost-cutting that caused last Friday's three-train crash in the eastern Indian state Odisha. The Balasore disaster—the deadliest in India in more than a quarter of a century—killed nearly 300 passengers and injured over 1,000.

The media continues to report distraught families of victims still trying to locate loved ones among the dead. Short-staffed hospitals are struggling to treat the overwhelming number of injured passengers.

"Outside hospital, two large screens cycled through photos of bodies, the faces so bloodied and charred that they were hardly recognizable," the Associated Press said, noting that many of the dead are unclaimed.

"I have been to all the hospitals and I've found out nothing," Lalati Devi, told CNN. She was looking for her 22-year-old son. Many others are going through the same tragic experience.

While the press has reported that over 1,000 people were injured in the crash, there are few details. Some indication of the extent of the injuries, however, was provided by Anushuman Purohi, one of the survivors. "I actually heard the wail of humanity, crying out in pain, crying out for water and crying out for help," he said to CNN.

"There were a lot of people lying on the tracks, they were injured, there was blood everywhere, there were broken bones, and it was time for us to stop thinking about ourselves and help the injured… It was chaos, it was something I can really not describe… I saw a head without a body, I saw skulls crushed, I saw bodies completely crushed by the metal, it was horrifying."

On June 4, the *Hindu* published an article titled, "Senior official flagged serious flaws in Indian Railways' signalling system in February." The story referred to a letter by Principal Chief Operation Manager Hari Shankar to the principal chief signal and telecommunications engineer, over a "serious unsafe incident" that occurred at the Hosadurga Road Station in the Birur-Chikjajur section of the Mysore Division in southern India on February 8 this year.

Like the Odisha incident, a signal was given to the Sampark Kranthi Express for passing on one line but the path was altered to another track where a goods train was stationed. A head-on collision between the two trains was only averted because of the alertness of the train's locomotive engineer who brought it to a halt.

Shankar's letter warned: "The present incident must be viewed very seriously and immediate corrective actions are required to be taken to rectify the system faults and also sensitizing the staff for not venturing into shortcuts leading to a major mishap." Last Friday's tragedy occurred precisely because this warning was totally ignored by authorities.

Prime Minister Modi, in a clear attempt to cover up his government's responsibility for the Odisha disaster, declared, "Whoever made the mistake, strong action will be taken."

Indeed, Modi and Railway Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw have already set the stage on how any "inquiry" into the train crash will proceed by announcing that it would involve the central government-controlled Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI). In fact, the CBI was pushed to start its own investigation on Monday, long before the railway ministry has completed its findings.

Former Union Revenue Secretary E.A.S. Sarma

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challenging the rapid involvement of the CBI, told the *Wire*: “To me, it appears to be a move to mislead the public about the larger issues of failure in governance at the level of the Ministry of Railways.”

Modi and his railway minister are now involved in a desperate damage-control exercise. They are worried that the train disaster is trashing the government’s global image and could impact on the prime minister’s fortunes in next year’s general elections.

The Modi administration and successive Indian governments over decades have consciously allowed the rundown of vital services, such as the vast railway network, which is crucial for millions of workers and the rural poor. There are a staggering 8.4 billion passenger trips across the network each year.

Contemptuous of the transport safety of workers and the rural poor, who cannot afford private vehicles or air travel, India’s ruling elite has failed to fully implement the sort of advanced technologies that prevent “human errors” and “signal failures.” Railway officials have admitted that the “Kavach” anti-collision system was not available on the rail route where Friday’s accident occurred.

In 2012, the press reported that the railway ministry appointed a high-level committee under the chairmanship of Dr Anil Kakodkar to review safety and suggest improvements.

The committee recommended the adoption of an Advanced Signalling System (akin to the European Train Control System) for the entire trunk route length of 19,000 km within five years at an estimated cost of 200 billion rupees. More than a decade later, on March 31 this year, there were still 110 railway stations out of 6,506 that had not been upgraded to the Advanced Signalling System.

The Indian railways are also seriously understaffed, another major factor in the dangerous state of the system. Railway Minister Vaishnaw has admitted in the parliament that there are more than 300,000 unfilled vacancies in the railways, with over 77,000 of these in the signals, telecommunications, traffic and transportation departments.

Addressing the *Economic Times* Global Business Summit 2023 in February, Modi boasted about of his government’s “efficiency in reimagining infrastructure facilities” in India. While the Odisha accident is a particularly tragic exposure of Modi’s demagogic claim, it is just one of many infrastructure disasters.

A few days after Friday’s train accident, a four-lane concrete bridge being built across the Ganges River, in the east Indian state of Bihar, collapsed for the second time in just over a year. Although no casualties were reported, it would have been a horrifying disaster with hundreds of deaths if it had collapsed after it was completed.

Last year a bridge collapsed in Modi’s home state Gujarat, killing about 135 people. In the last three years alone, ten bridges, including the previous two mentioned, have collapsed in India, largely because of poor construction.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* noted in its June 5 Perspective: “[T]he experience of rail workers in many countries is that even when the most modern technology is introduced, it is not used to make railroad operation safer, but to increase the profits of the rail bosses and their financial backers. This has been the purpose of Precision-Scheduled Railroading (PSR), introduced in recent years in both the United States and Canada, which has been used to reduce railroad crews to the status of industrial serfs, on call 24/7 for work.”

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