

Avoidable Tragedies

A railway network that caters about seven billion passengers a year faces the challenge of ending all journeys safely. The derailment of the Patna-Indore express in November with the death toll of at least 146, followed by the derailment of Hirakud express in January with the death toll of about 50, are the stark reminders that the passenger safety is the most neglected one.

The railways has recorded on average of 50 derailments a year and peaked to 68 in the last year. The initial reports on the latest two accidents reveal that rail fracture seem to be the reason. Experts state that rail fractures occur when a small crack turns into a larger one, usually because of the pressure of heavy loads both goods and passenger trains travelling over it. This clearly shows poor maintenance of tracks is the cause of such relatively minor factors that turn fatal when remain unaddressed.

There may be specific reasons for every accident. But the larger picture that emerged over the years is that pure and wanton neglect of safety systems. The reasons for accidents include continuing use of overage loco-motives, incomplete safety measures at level crossings, lack of modernization of signaling equipment, in adequate main-tenance, and lastly but not the least failure to make recruitment to the crucial staff positions dealing with safety.

The worst state of affairs can be judged from the report of high level safety review committee observations in 2012: “with in the railway system everybody is supposed to look after the safety but in reality ... it is no body’s baby”. Yet the government’s commitment to safety is questionable when gauged from the allocations and spending under appropriation to depreciation reserve fund in the railway budget which is used to fund track renewal. In the first budget of NDA rule (2015-16), Rs.7900 crore was allocated, but in the revised estimates this went down to Rs.5500 crore. The worse is in the current budget only Rs.3200 crore has been allocated.

Usual reason put forward by the authorities is the Human failure accounts for 86 per cent of accidents. But it is the result of fiscal austerity that the railways started to practice ever since it began to look railways as a commercial utility rather than a vital infrastructure. Because of this, the “business plans” of railways lay more emphasis on running more and heavier trains on poorly maintained tracks with depleted man power keeping vacant nearly 30 per cent of posts in safety supervision.

Analysis of rail accidents reveal that derailment due to track defects accounts for a significant number of accidents. While this is the pathetic plight of rail tracks in India, there is unwanted thrust to superimpose high speed trains and even bullet trains on Indian railway network. Discarding such a grandiose plans that benefit only foreign enterprises –from building, maintaining and operating – is the rational need. Before embarking on any plan to increase the speed of trains, the urgent priority is to serve the common passenger with safe rail network.
