The Government of India, the Ministry of Finance, and the Indian Railway Board Share Responsibility for Railway Tragedy

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It is surprising how this accident unfolded within the automated section. The incident occurred when the Palasa passenger train was halted due to a signal in the automated section, and the Rayagada passenger train approached from behind and lost control. This situation warrants a thorough investigation, as in the automated section, there is typically a sequential operation of multiple train cars, a system implemented by the railways. It is imperative to identify the causes and factors contributing to this incident.

When discussing the safety of the Indian Railways, it's essential to acknowledge its vast scale as the world's fifth-largest rail system, spanning over 80,000 kilometres of tracks. Each day, this extensive network operates more than 21,000 trains, involving approximately 13 lakh workers across 350 different job categories. These dedicated employees labour around the clock to maintain safety standards.

The occurrence of recent accidents underscores the urgent need for safety system enhancements. In particular, the Ministry of Railways' decisions, made in the name of economic efficiency and workforce reduction, are questionable. These decisions, reached without adequate consultation, have the potential to jeopardize railway safety, not only in the short term but also in the long run. It is imperative to reconsider the balance between cost-cutting measures and ensuring the safety of this vital transportation system.

Whether we consider the Balasore accident, the subsequent incident in Bihar, or the recent occurrence near Vizianagaram, a common thread emerges upon closer examination. The decision by the Ministry of Finance to withhold approval for new posts within the Indian Railways has been enforced. Consequently, addressing safety concerns within the railways and the challenges faced by the authorities and workers in upholding safety standards have become increasingly complex and demanding. In the past three years, Indian Railways has successfully constructed 19,000 kilometres of new railway lines. However, it's concerning that the necessary new positions required for maintaining these railway lines have not been approved as of now. This highlights the pressing need for the authorities to acknowledge the potential consequences of neglecting the maintenance of railway tracks.

As another illustration, the Government of India has authorized the establishment of a Midlife Coach Reconstruction Workshop in Kurnool, Andhra Pradesh. This significant project demands 900 new positions for its operation, yet not a single one of these positions has been granted approval thus far. The local railway authorities are making efforts to address the shortage by reassigning vacant positions like those in categories 5, 10, and 12 to the new

workshop. Despite their best intentions, this approach might not ensure the optimal maintenance of coaches as originally envisioned. Consequently, there remains a risk of accidents and mishaps due to these operational challenges.

Furthermore, there's a crucial need to reinforce the signalling system. The Government of India's and the Ministry of Railways' decision to transition the entire railway system to electric traction is indeed commendable. This shift promises heightened efficiency, improved speed, and potential reductions in pollution. However, it's essential to recognize that this transition necessitates substantial assets, particularly in the traction rolling, disaster department, including engineers, technicians, and other personnel responsible for maintaining the overhead equipment. Equally important are the engineers, track maintainers, track welders, and helpers needed for track maintenance. Therefore, the government should make decisions that do not compromise these critical requirements. Training, retraining and repression training should be given priority to all categories of safety-related roles within the railways, including loco pilots, assistant loco pilots, stationmasters, signalmen, track maintainers, engineers, and the dedicated technicians working in these various departments.

Loco Pilots and Assistant Loco Pilots who have driving skills while navigating the train should be provided with facilities without any difficulty. For instance, in places like Vizianagaram and Visakhapatnam, where summer temperatures reach 43 degrees, the temperature inside the locomotives can soar to 49 degrees. This means that LP and ALP must operate the train in such extreme heat conditions. While the Railway Board has approved the installation of air conditioners in locomotives to mitigate this issue, the authorities have encountered challenges in fully implementing and maintaining these air-conditioning systems.

Moreover, locomotive operators are often required to be on duty for extended periods, with trains running for up to 9 hours. Adhering to this rule can be extremely taxing, as individuals are expected to maintain focus and perform their duties without the opportunity for breakfast or tea during this time. It is essential for the Government of India and the Railway Board to acknowledge the difficulty of maintaining concentration and performance after 9 hours of uninterrupted duty. Therefore, revising employment regulations to reduce working hours, which could improve worker health and concentration, is a viable approach to preventing accidents in my opinion.

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