

Indian Railways in the Clutches of Monopoly Capital – Destruction of Public Transportation System

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Our present ruling class has been vigorously campaigning that India is now Fast Growing and Shining economy due to the strong implementation of Neo-Liberal policies for the last nine years. However, the so called development is intensely associated with job loss growth continuously for the last several years. The government consciously fails to recognise consequent critical lives of many people owing to the loss of livelihoods constantly. Moreover, our shining economy will be top in the issue of starvation as indicated by Global Hunger Index. Further, ours is one in the two emerging economies which have extreme economic inequalities. This indicates the excessive growth in the affluence of wealthy class. Therefore, this class is desirous of wonderful super luxury goods and world class experiences. In this process, they require Vande Bharat trains characterised by relatively high speed with modern facilities as well as the modern and well equipped Amrit Bharat Railway Stations with breathtaking amazing appearance. Therefore, the privatisation of Indian Railways have been excessively increased since 2014. Everyone knows that recently, our Union Railway Minister, Ashwini Vaishnaw, daily talks about alleged 'great' Vande Bharat trains and Amrit Bharat Railway Stations and our Prime Minister, Modi will flag-off for Vande Bharat train somewhere in India.

In order to increase the number of Vande Bharat trains, it is declared that they will introduce 2-3 trains per week in 2024. They are seriously popularising that the measures of connecting entire India with 4500 Vande Bharat trains by 2047, laying foundation stone by P.M. Modi to modernise 508 railway stations out of 1309 selected for Amrit Bharat Railway Stations with Rs. 25,000 Cr, introducing bullet train in future between Mumbai-Ahmedabad, with the partnership of Japan, allotting Rs. 2.4 lakh cr. in 2023-24 Central budget for this process are only to fasten our fast growing economy. Whether these modern, luxurious trains and railway stations will be accessible to oppressed class is really a serious prime question. Shortly, all of them will be handed over to monopoly capital on the name of lease as part of the Asset-Monetisation programme. Already, the privatisation of trains, rail routes and railway stations has been started.

It is a fact that the Indian Railways is the true public transportation system which caters to the needs of 2.5 Cr common people. It is built by the hard and dedicated work of labour force and people for the last several decades. This is the only system that is accessible to poor at the cheapest possible charges. Therefore, they are able to go to towns and cities from their small villages, for many activities like - to do small businesses, to go to hospitals, schools etc. Its privatisation and handing over to monopoly capital will surely result in the demise of public transportation system in line with education and health. This will be a loss even to other public transportation systems including RTC because they are also developed to connect the railway stations. Thus, the oppressed people will be deprived of even the railway transport.

It is known to all that the survival of lakhs of people depend upon trains and railway stations as they earn as chaiwalas, vendors of various food items and render different services. Moreover, the railway platforms, surrounding places, the adjacent congested places along with

lakhs of kilometers of Railway track, even damaged wagons and coaches will provide shelter to lakhs of people. This is the dire situation of our poverty. All these places will show the real face of our so-called shining economy. The privatisation of railway stations on the name of modernisation, handing over of surrounding places to monopoly capital to develop it as a commercial centre on the name of Business Model, will not leave even the critical lives of many. Further, no collective land will remain even to stand on the road.

In fact, the railway system is under the ownership of government in all the global countries except US. The services are accessible to people at cheaper rate. The emergence of Neo-Liberal policies to strengthen the process of privatisation, suddenly started stating powerfully, that the railway system must be privatised because private is synonym to efficiency. No basis for this statement. No evidence that shows the success of railway privatisation in any country.

Railways Privatisation – Experience of Various Countries

The railway system under the ownership of government is, in fact, true public transport system in terms of accessibility and charges. Moreover, they are safe with less accidents. It will provide decent jobs to the people. Still, the neo-liberal policies state with deafening and resounding voice that private is great. Many countries influenced by this and divided their railways into different corporations and privatised them. This did not bring any additional private investments but resulted in the high rise in the charges despite subsidies. They, further exploited heavy traffic timings and heavy traffic areas by imposing still more excessive charges. It is estimated that during 1995–2015, the railway charges in Britain increased by 117 percent. The main goal of private is to get more and more profits. They take less number of workers and make them to work for longer hours. Number of jobs will decline and pressure of work will rise. Moreover, they take unskilled or semi-skilled as contract workers. Contrarily, claims that they are efficient in reducing the cost. All this resulted in the abnormal rise in the accidents. This is blatantly proved by the experiences of Britain and Argentina. No success of any work done by public-private partnership. In view of the intensity of problems, people protested on a large scale against transport privatisation in Britain in 2011. Owing to these bitter experiences, the proposals are forwarded towards re-nationalisation.

The experiences of Britain, Japan, Malaysia, Latin America, Argentina, Brazil and Mexico clearly proves that the privatisation of railways is profitable only to monopoly capital but seriously harmful to railway employees and people at large. Further, it resulted in the more number of accidents. The Estonia privatised in 2001 and re-nationalised in 2007. The New Zealand in 2008, Argentina in 2012 have re-nationalised their railways. The International Transport Workers Federation, with the representatives of 147 countries has prepared a report on the basis of global experiences.

It is to be noted seriously in regard to the evidences that show the greatness of railway system under the ownership of government. The government owned Swiss Federal Railways are one of the best in the world. Two largest railways in the world belong to Russia and China are state owned. The World Famous Moscow Metro and Stations constructed during 1920–30 by the then USSR government is still, one of the best in the World. The government owned railway system is always superior as its main aim is people's welfare. The constructions, their quality, durability and usability is further superior in the socialist system and this is certainly proved even in this case.

It is a serious contradiction that despite dangerous global experiences of railways, privatisation is accentuated since 2014 in our country. Measures are initiated speedily for the strong privatisation of railways with an accelerated speed. The serious question emerges that

for whose benefit they are doing all this? The re-nationalisation also not at all a loss to the monopoly capital. The aim is to appropriate entire budget now on the name of lease, incentives and concessions and later on in terms of compensation.

Privatisation of Indian Railways:

Since 2014, the present ruling government is implementing neo - liberal policies aggressively with the sole aim of transferring entire wealth of nation to the monopoly capital. For this, it is privatising Public Sector Enterprises, Minerals, Coal, Ports and Airports and even Space Sector. Thus, handing over them to imperialist monopoly forces. The Indian railways are more attractive to monopoly capital as it possess as high as Rs. 60 lakh crores of assets and it is largest railway system in Asia and its place is 4th in the World. Our government takes measures that are favourable to monopoly capital.

The Assets of Indian Railways in March 2020 :

1. 67,415 Route kilometers
2. 7,349 Railway stations
3. More than 20,000 passenger trains
4. 2,89,185 Goods wagons
5. 74,003 Passenger coaches
6. 12,147 Locomotives
7. 1,23,542 Km length of track (As on March 2021)
8. 14 - 16 lakh employees

The privatisation of railways came forward in 1994 when P.V. Narasimha Rao was the Prime Minister. However, the GATS discussions in 2000 led to the introduction of railways privatisation in the world. In 2001 the Vajpayee government appointed Rakesh Mohan Committee for this purpose. The Committee recommended that non-core activities that are not directly related to the transport of freight and passengers will be privatised. The 9th Five year plan (1997-2002) and 10th Five year plan (2000-2007) also stated the need of involving private sector in the railway services. Therefore, to encourage privatisation, schemes of Own Your Wagons, Build - Own - Lease - Transfer were started. However, these services are discontinued as they did not yield expected benefits to the private.

In 2007 the Asian Development Bank strongly forwarded an argument about the need of structural reforms and customer orientation in Indian Railways and the rise of private participation in it. Consequently, the Manmohan Singh government appointed Sam Pitroda Committee in 2011. The Committee recommended that the private sector should be given big push through PPP, the government must take the risk and should bear the losses, the private should be given guarantee for profits as well as profit rate. Is it not a humorous contradiction that so called efficient private should be given guaranteed profits by "inefficient" public sector?

The "Expert Group" appointed in 2012 to modernise Indian Railways has stated that PPP is suitable for high speed passenger trains and for the construction of corridors, world class railway stations.

The Bibek Debroy Committee has been appointed immediately in 2014, when the BJP came to power under the leadership of Modi. The Committee gave radical recommendations such that there should not be any special status to railways and its budget should be merged with Central budget. Further, the entire Indian Railways should be privatised. The Indian Railways are responsible only to maintain tracks. Thus, the prestigious Indian Railways will remain simply as a track holding company. The Committee also states that the Indian Railways should compete with private trains.

The recommendations are perfectly favourable to Modi Government's goal of privatising entire Indian Railways speedily on the name of modernisation. The tasks related to privatisation are accelerated immediately. For them, the privatisation is strongly associated with foreign capital. In 2014 the 100% foreign investments are permitted in 17 key sectors of Indian Railways. In 2016, the implementation of Business model started to convert surrounding Places of railway stations as commercial centres on the pretext of modernisation.

In 2017 special stations and special budget of Indian Railways ended. Railway budget merged with Central budget in 2017. The Habibganj railway station in Madhya Pradesh is handed over to Bansal group of Bhopal to develop it as Amrit Station and to maintain it. The group will construct Shopping complexes, Multi speciality hospitals, Five star hotels in 17,245 sq. ft of surrounding area which is in Four land parcels with Rs. 350 crores. All the four land parcels is given to Bansal group for 45 years lease.

In 2019 Tejas Express that belonged to private sector is permitted to run between New Delhi-Lucknow route. 150 private trains are given permissions. PPP appraisal committee decides the routes. In these trains, entertainment, hygiene, foods, packed water bottles, insurance at free of cost, theft/robbery coverage for Rs. 1 lakh and Tatkal and Premium Tatkal will be available. In the post-covid period, the businesses related to food, hospitality and insurance increased rapidly. Therefore, the investments of foreign companies also increased into these sectors. The panic of people is successfully transformed into insurance business. All this reality clearly shows the inbuilt exploitation principle of domestic and foreign capitalists in the form of privatisation of various sectors. However, the private domestic/ foreign investments will enter into sectors which yield excessive profits including valuable land transfers.

The National Railway Plan (NRP) is declared in 2019-20 Central budget. It is estimated that the investments to the tune of Rs. 3.85 lakh crores are necessary to develop Railway system between 2021-2051. Therefore, it is decided to sell all the railway assets. As per NRP all the freight trains should be privatised by 2031. The AC coaches which yield profits should be privatised. The Indian Railways are responsible to run loss-making second class coaches. Moreover, 30% of railway stations should be given to monopoly capital.

The year 2020 is significant for horrible lives of majority owing to covid-19 pandemic. It is astonishing to note that the government called for bids for the operation of passenger trains. The permission is given to 151 private trains in 109 origin destination routes on Indian Railways Network. These routes are divided into 12 clusters, 12 trains in each cluster and each train contains 16 coaches. All the 150 trains will run by 2027. The fares will be decided by private sector. Further, 400 railway stations are recognised to make them world class stations. As many as 23 railway stations among them are given to Bansal group. To run the trains 35 years permission is given. Orders issued that the staff of Indian Railways should work for the success of private trains. "Private success with public staff". The private trains will use our train track, signaling system, booking system and other infrastructure facilities of Indian Railways. Further space in the depots should be allotted for the maintenance. Further, 60 minutes prior to the departure of private train, no similar train will depart from originating station in the same route to ensure sufficient passengers in the private train.

Indian Railways have been divided into 12 corporations and their shares are sold in stock market and thus, privatised. The ICF in Perambur, RCF in Kapurthala and Modern coach factory in Raebareli belonged to Indian Railways are converted into PSUs and then sold. Handing over our industries to monopoly capital is the reality of so called great "Make in India". The private firm will appoint station facilities manager. The platform tickets, food courts, rents of spaces given to advertisements etc will go to the private. The lounge waiting charges will be charged

by the private. This is already happening in Habibganj in Madhya Pradesh and Gandhinagar Station in Gujarat.

The Central Budget, 2021 expressed the plan to introduce private goods trains on the Western and Eastern dedicated freight corridors when they are completed in 2022.

The monopoly capital organises super luxury, speed Vande Bharat trains and Amrit Bharat stations with modern facilities for the wealthy class at their payable charges. No space for common people.

The privatisation of profit making routes lead to no trains for the oppressed class to travel. No stations also. They will be totally distanced from the public transport system. One can observe, decline in general coaches, rise in AC coaches. Further conversion of AC coaches into economy coaches has taken place in which the coach consisting of 76 berths are increased to 82 berths by decreasing the size of berth as well as the space between berths. By decreasing 4-5 halts, the passenger trains are called as express trains. Any small disturbance is resulting in the cancellation of passenger trains and importance is given to goods trains and Vande Bharat trains. Thus, making rail transport not accessible to common people. Though, the number of trains increased to run on the track, the old tracks are not developed and replaced. No recruitments of responsible permanent staff for track maintenance. Instead, constructing track in the rail routes besides national highways to run Up and Down trains simultaneously. What kind of problems it will create, we have to wait and see. Because, the private always give importance to profit and not to the safety which is already proved.

Employment:

The permanent employment in railways is reduced. Consequently excessive rise in the derailments and accidents as per NCCRS, 2021, as many as 3.5 lakh posts are vacant in railways. They are appointing only contract and outsourcing workers. Less wage and more work, increased work pressure. The continuity of corporatisation and outsourcing employment for the last two decades resulted in the decline in the maintenance quality of tracks. Consequently, excessive rise in the derailments and accidents. The prevalence of old signaling system require more number of skilled workers. But recruitment stopped long back. The orders are issued to surrender 50% of existing vacancies and all the new posts created as an austeric measure.

In Tejas Express women workers must work for 18 hours for Rs. 15000 per month. They are punished if the make-up is not up to the mark. The charges increased to the extent of Rs. 700-900. The fares in the Indian Railways for 1000 km used to be Rs 700-900 while it is Rs. 2200 in private. The CAG report 2019 States precarious conditions of contract workers. The temporary workers in open line and constructions has been increased from 34,982 in March 2012 to 73,350 in March 2019. The minimum age has not been given to majority. Further, the facilities related to washrooms and drinking water also not available to them as per CAG report.

Recently, the Indian Railways gave notification for 1,45,000 posts. As high as 2 crore people applied for them. Even if they fill up all the posts less than 1 percent applicants will get the job.

The High Level Safety Review Committee, 2012 clearly recommended to end privatisation and outsourcing and to fill vacancies in the Indian Railways in order to reduce accidents and ensure safe journey.

The Parliamentary Committee states that as high as 60% vacancies in the fields related to track maintenance and railway inspection are the main reasons for increasing accidents. The loco pilots working hours are so long due to shortage of employees. They are not allowed to go to washrooms. Still, it is cruel to outsource 25 tasks of Indian Railways. In addition, obsolete signal equipment resulted in the three horrific accidents in 2023. The ghastly and awful Balasore

accident is one among them. Immediately, govt. calls for CBI enquiry. The crime will be thrown on to lowest cadre employees and they will be punished. No solution for the true problem.

NCRB's "Annual Accidental Deaths and Suicides in India" states that in 2021, the train accidents are to the tune of 17,993 in which 16,931 people lost their lives. On an average 47 train accidents and 45 deaths per day. The Rashtriya Rail Suraksha Kosh (RRSK) has been created in 2017-18 for rail safety with rupees 1 lakh crore corpus fund for 5 years and every year, the Central Budget allocates Rs. 15000 crore. However, the funds are diverted to unimportant issues as stated by CAG report.

Conclusion:

The privatisation has become a powerful tool to hand over Indian Railways to monopoly capital. The Indian Railways achieved extraordinary development with the hard work of its labour and hard earned money of people and now it is possessing Rs 60 lakh crore properties. The trains on the name of speed, railway stations on the name of modern facilities and surrounding places of stations on the name of Business Model extremely valuable collective lands are transferred to monopoly capital. The production units of Indian Railways are privatised and sold. The public transportation system is at the verge of destruction. Shortly, no trains and no railway stations for common people. Decent permanent jobs will end. The survival of youth compelled to depend upon contract and outsourcing jobs characterised by high level of labour exploitation. The people, whose survival depends upon small trade in the trains and railway stations will lose their livelihoods. The policies are strongly continuing to complicate the life crisis of majority. Will this system survive? It is necessary to transform this exploitative system. The oppressed class, intellectuals and progressive people should unite strongly to fight against the system and to build exploitation - free structures.