

Why is our rail safety so awful?

Do not delay in setting up an independent regulator

By cracking the whip after last week's train accident in Muzaffarnagar, railways minister Suresh Prabhu has addressed what had remained a crying need: Of holding the top rail bureaucracy accountable for its acts of omission and commission. Only on two occasions in the past 70 years has administrative action been initiated against Grade-A officers of the Indian Railways after an accident. The last time was in 2010, when a divisional railway manager was suspended following a train tragedy, but the order was revoked within two days. Section 175 of the Railways Act of 1989 insulates Class-I category officers from culpability in train accidents, as it holds rail employees such as permanent way inspectors or supervisors as being responsible for accident 'violations'. It can be argued that certain accidents could have been prevented, had the senior rail bureaucracy—from the general manager downwards—been particular in adhering to the schedule of on-line inspections.

Mindsets are an issue; but there are other serious challenges to rail safety. In the 64-year period from 1950 to 2016, passenger and freight traffic grew by 1,344% and 1,642% respectively, while the network increased by a mere 23%—causing huge network congestion. With the time available to carry out routine repairs (overhead signaling systems or tracks) having shrunk, short-cut methods—of the kind that caused the Muzaffarnagar accident—are being routinely resorted to. The situation has worsened on account of the low spending on safety works. In 2009-10, for instance, ₹1,102 crore was allocated for safety works (revised to ₹923 crore), while the actual spending was ₹906 crore. The following year, ₹1,302 crore was allocated (revised to ₹998 crore), while the actual spending was ₹911 crore. Manpower shortages have also not helped. Against the total sanctioned strength of 746,676 employees, 122,736 safety category posts (or 16% posts) are vacant. The need for setting up an independent safety regulator has also remained unaddressed.

To his credit, Mr Prabhu has made an effort to bring about a transformation in the way the transporter does its business. A rail safety fund with a corpus of ₹1 lakh-crore has also been created. But, until these initiatives begin to bear fruit, the threat of a possible repeat of the Muzaffarnagar kind of mishaps will continue to hang.

Language chauvinism has no place in India

BJD's T Satpathy must be applauded for standing up to the BJP's Hindi obsession

When BJD Tathagata Satpathy replied in Odia to Union minister Narendra Singh Tomar's official letter in Hindi, he was upholding a long tradition of protest against attempts to impose Hindi on states in which it is not widely spoken or used as the official language. In the 1950s and 60s, when the language debate was in its heyday, there were many attempts to make Hindi a 'national language'. But these attempts proved unsuccessful. It took three years of debate in the Constituent Assembly to devise the Munshi-Ayyangar formula (after KM Munshi and Gopalaswamy Ayyangar) in 1949, which decided that there would only be "official languages" in India and no "national language". When the debate was rekindled in the 1960s, there was again no consensus on Hindi as official language.

The great wealth of literature, poetry, theatre, and music that stem from and flow through different languages are each as Indian as the next. It should be a matter of pride that even today as many as 780 different languages are spoken in the country. It is easy to argue that a language that is spoken by a "majority" of people should become a 'national' language, and everyone must learn it; but it would be disingenuous to force a people to learn a new language for no reason other than empty patriotism. To diminish the pride of the native speaker in her own mother tongue will not inculcate any love for the State.

It should not be necessary for boards on the Namma Metro in Bengaluru or highway markers in Tamil Nadu, or indeed letters to officials of states to be written in Hindi for a united country. What is needed is to respect each other's differences and celebrate them.

China's waging a water war on India

Beijing is denying hydrological data on upstream river flows even as floods ravage Indian states

BRAHMA CHELLANEY



Tibet, a treasure-trove of natural resources, including water and precious metals, is a great strategic asset for China in its pursuit of an often improvident style of economic growth. The sprawling Tibetan plateau also arms Beijing with water leverage over downstream countries because it is the starting point for most of Asia's great rivers, many of which are being heavily dammed just before they cross into neighbouring nations.

China is sharpening its leverage with co-riparian India. Water indeed has emerged as a new divide in Sino-Indian relations, as Beijing quietly and opaquely builds dams, barrages and other structures on rivers flowing to India. It spurned then Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's 2013 proposal that the two countries enter into a water treaty or establish an intergovernmental institution to define mutual rights and responsibilities on shared rivers. The flash floods that ravaged Himachal Pradesh and Arunachal Pradesh between 2000 and 2005 were linked to the unannounced releases from rain-swollen Chinese dams and

barrages. At a time when the Doklam face-off has entered its third month and the risk of a Chinese military attack on India is growing, there is more troubling news: Beijing is fashioning water into a political weapon by denying India flood-related hydrological data since May, even as major flooding has hit the region from Assam to Uttar Pradesh. Data on upstream river flows is essential for flood forecasting and warning in order to save lives and reduce material losses. China's data denial crimps flash flood modelling in India.

By embarking on a dangerous game of water poker, Beijing has demonstrated how the denial of hydrological data in the critically important monsoon season amounts to the use of water as a political tool against a downstream country. Indeed, even while supplying data in past years, China's lack of transparency raised questions. After all, like rice traded on the world market, hydrological data comes in different grades and qualities—from good, reliable data to inferior data and broken data.

China's latest action actually violates two bilateral MOUs of 2013 and a 2014 accord, which obligate it to transfer hydrological data to India from three upstream monitoring stations in Tibet every year from May 15 to October 15. No data has been transferred thus far this year, although India, in keeping with the MOUs, paid for the data in advance. While China sells hydrological data to downstream countries,



China has transferred no water data this year although India has paid GETTY IMAGES

India provides such data free to both its downstream neighbours—Pakistan and Bangladesh.

China has long displayed contempt for international law. No bilateral accord seems to have binding force for it once its immediate purpose has passed, as Beijing recently highlighted by trashing the 1984 Sino-British treaty that paved the way for Hong Kong's handover in 1997. China said that pact had lost "practical meaning" because 20 years had passed since Hong Kong's return. Yet it selectively invokes a 19th-century, colonial-era accord to justify its Doklam intrusion, while ignoring its own violations—cited by Bhutan and India—of more recent bilateral agreements not to disturb the territorial

status quo. India should not be downplaying China's breach of commitment to supply hydrological data from May 15. Yet, for two months, the ministry of external affairs hid China's contravention, which began much before the Doklam standoff. When the ministry of external affairs (MEA) finally admitted China's breach of obligation, it simultaneously sought to shield Beijing by saying there could be a "technical reason" for non-transfer of data (just as MEA sought to obscure China's August 15 twin raids in the Pangong Lake area by gratuitously telling the Financial Times that "no commonly delineated boundary" exists there). How can a technical hitch explain data withholding from three separate stations for over two months? Had China been in India's place, it would have promptly raised a hue and cry about the commitment violation and linked it to the downstream floods and deaths.

More fundamentally, the Doklam standoff, the Chinese hydro-engineering projects, the denial of hydrological data, and China's claims to vast tracts of Indian land are all a reminder that Tibet is at the heart of the India-China divide. The 1951 fall of Tibet represented the most far-reaching geopolitical development in modern India's history, with the impact exacerbated by subsequent Indian blunders. India must subtly reopen Tibet as an outstanding issue, including by using historically more accurate expressions like "Indo-Tibetan border" (not "India-China border") and emphasising that its previously stated positions were linked to Tibet securing real autonomy.

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The views expressed are personal

CAUGHTNAPPING



Catalan Mossos d'esquadra officers stand guard at Las Ramblas where a van crashed into pedestrians in Barcelona, August 18 REUTERS

Intelligence failure led to twin attacks in Spain

A day before the two incidents, an explosive favoured by IS was found in a nearby town. But no one read the signs

ALFONS LOPEZ TENA



The Spanish law enforcement agencies have not been under so much pressure in the past decade as they have been over the past few days: Two terror attacks—one in Las Ramblas in Barcelona and the other in Cambrils, a coastal town about 120 km from Barcelona—killed at least 14 people and left hundreds injured. Police have killed at least five terrorists and are trying to trace the remaining suspects.

The attacks in Barcelona and Cambrils are similar to recent attacks in Nice, Berlin, Stockholm and London. What I find disturbing is that the police had no clue that a large and organised network was present in the country and planning these attacks.

Spanish interior minister Juan Ignacio Zoido Álvarez said the terror cell behind the attacks has been "dismantled", but I have my doubts. Did the Spanish authorities miss warning signs? A majority of the 12 suspects behind the attacks are from the small Catalan town of Ripoll, eight of them are immigrants of Moroccan origin and all the suspects are below 35 years.

A recent report by West Point's Combating Terrorism Center shows that of the 265 peo-

ple arrested between 2013 and 2016 in connection to jihadi terrorism in Spain, a quarter of them were from the Barcelona province, about 43% were Moroccan nationals, 50% were unemployed, 75% were between the age group of 18 and 38, and 90% were radicalised within Spain. To prevent such indoctrination and radicalisation, it is important to identify such agents and use legal measures to prevent it. A Washington Post report says that parents of a few suspects said that "their sons were radicalised by a visiting cleric who spent the last months praying, preaching".

The warning signs were there for anyone to see, but intelligence failures have let jihadi elements to operate freely. A day before the Las Ramblas attack, an explosion in Alcanar, 200 km from Barcelona, killed one and wounded 16 people. Why wasn't the terror cell uncovered even after this? At Alcanar, traces of triacetone triperoxide (TATP), were found. We know Triacetone Triperoxide is preferred by IS and was used in Paris (2015), Brussels (2016) and the Manchester (2017) attacks. Without respecting rights and freedoms of Muslims and making them feel welcome in Spain, it will be hard to check local jihadi recruitment.

It is also important for Muslims themselves lead in this fight against jihadis.

The only way to win this war is by winning the hearts and minds of the people—and not by politicising the attack or terrorising groups in anyway.

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The views expressed are personal

Technology can make life easier for foresters

Drones and remote sensing equipment will help officials to manage India's natural resources better



India is blessed with a wide range of flora and fauna but saving them is not an easy task for foresters. India loses more forest rangers each year than any other country in the world. According to the International Ranger Federation, a non-profit organisation established to raise awareness of and support the critical work that the world's park rangers do, India lost 34 forest guards in 2012, 14 in 2013 and 24 in 2014.

First, let's talk about the challenges forest guards, our frontline warriors in conservation, face on a daily basis. From filing challans of offences to wildlife rescue and anti-poaching operations, their hands are always full. In fact, over the years, their role has only expanded: Along with guarding the forests, they are also involved in ecotourism, joint forest management, land regeneration, conserving biodiversity and urban greening.

There are around 110,000 forest rangers, deputy forest rangers, foresters and forest guards in India who work across a wide range of bioclimatic zones, from the Himalayas to the Gulf of Mannar. To put things in perspective, India's armed forces protect the nation with 1.2-million strong personnel, whereas only one lakh-odd forest personnel look after 23% of India's geographical area.

The work load of forest officials will increase in the coming years since the National Forest Policy targets to increase the forest cover to one-third of the country's geographical area.

The Indian subcontinent has a wide geographical diversity, ranging from hills to the western deserts and a staggering 7,500 km-long coastline, making the environmental problems of one area almost different from that of the other area. Yet the forest department is

DATA RELEASED BY THE INTERNATIONAL RANGER FEDERATION, A NON-PROFIT ORGANISATION, SHOW INDIA LOSES MORE FOREST RANGERS EACH YEAR THAN ANY OTHER COUNTRY IN THE WORLD

Parveen Kaswan and Akash Deep Badhawan are with the Indian Forest Service
The views expressed are personal

understaffed, there are 30-70% vacancies depending on the region.

However, we must realise that much of the success of the premier conservation programmes such as Project Tiger, Project Elephant and Rhino Conservation is due to these alert foresters. Recently the National Tiger Conservation Authority report on six tiger reserves showed that these sanctuaries provide annual benefits of Rs 8,000 crore and the stock value adds up to Rs 1,50,000 crore. This puts in perspective the amount of property the forest department is guarding.

It takes a lot of courage to save this property of the nation: Take, for example, the case of late Indian Forest Service official P Srinivasan. How many people outside the forest bureaucracy know that he was the first to arrest forest brigand Veerappan? He was killed by Veerappan later and his bravery was recognised when he was awarded posthumously with the second highest peacetime gallantry award, the Kirti Chakra.

The story of Sanjay Singh, another Indian Forest Service, is equally inspiring. He lost his life due to his tough stand against mining mafia in Bihar. There are many such incidents where the foresters have put their lives in the line of fire for the protection of the nation's forest wealth. And despite working with such single-minded focus for fulfilling their constitutional and statutory mandates of protecting and preserving the ecology of the nation, the general public perception is that we are being anti-development.

It is high time that we acknowledge the role of these unsung foot soldiers have played over the years in making our world clean and green.

To ensure they can continue with their good work, foresters must be aided with modern-day technological tools. For example, Geographical Information System is a valuable tool for managing natural resources. Surveillance done with the help of remote sensing equipment and use of drones in inaccessible terrains can lead to better results.

With the country undergoing a digital revolution, the time is just right to roll out these multifaceted reforms and train the frontline staff in these technologies for increased national productivity.

The war against climate change is usually initiated in international conferences but it is fought on the ground through afforestation and land regeneration. For this also front line staff needed to be trained better and protected.

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RESPECT HAS A POSITIVE IMPACT ON THOSE RECEIVING AND GIVING IT

PP Wangchuk

One of the ways to happy living is to respect others. Be it an unknown person, a poor, a beggar or the maid who works at your home for a pittance, you have to behave with respect and love. Respect not only has a magical impact upon those who receive it, even the giver gets rewarded in various direct or indirect ways.

When you help, with respect, a poor person seeking a few rupees to have a morsel of food, he/she enjoys the food, and gets not

only a sense of satisfaction but one of gratitude also. And that makes your day. You will feel happy and have sound sleep. What does that mean? You are helping yourself by helping the poor.

Even Adolf Hitler understood the value of respect, and said: "And I can fight only for something that I love, love only what I respect, and respect only what I at least know." That means he knew that respecting the self is a sure way that others will respect you.

What is needed to be borne in mind is that

one needs to adopt morals and manners. And those are determined mainly by the way we act and behave in our daily life. Dealings in our day-to-day life with respect make our mundane work more enjoyable and meaningful. Life is nothing but a give-and-take process in a manner that everybody is a gainer.

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