

A thought for today
The safety of the people shall be the highest law
MARCUS TULLIUS CICERO

Criminal Negligence

Utkal Express derailment highlights deep rot in railways' processes

The derailment of Utkal Express in Khatauli, UP, that has claimed 23 lives, highlights yet again the abysmal state of railway safety. That the mishap occurred due to unofficial repair work on the track, without a proper time block for maintenance, exposes the culture of negligence that has seeped into the mass mover. No speed restriction warning was put at the maintenance spot just so delays wouldn't reflect poorly on the performance report of the division and zone. This is far more dangerous than any infrastructure issue, as it represents a breakdown of basic systems and processes.

Suspensions and transfers may not be enough to send a strong message on accountability for the disaster; those found responsible should be tried for criminal negligence. A quick look at the statistics reveals a shocking state of affairs. The 2016-17 period saw more people die in derailments than in any of the last 17 years. And of the 586 rail accidents in the last five years, around 53% were due to derailments. Plus, the arrears of track renewal are constantly mounting leading to disproportionately high maintenance effort. It appears that maintenance simply can't keep up with requirement, forcing short cuts that inevitably compromise safety.

Add to this the administrative structure of the railways that prevents proper safety oversight. The railway board is rule maker, operator and regulator at the same time. This prevents accountability from being fixed. The need of the hour is an independent and empowered regulator, outside the ambit of the railway ministry, to audit rail safety. In addition to existing safety issues, the railways also needs to be aware of non-conventional threats such as terrorism. The Kanpur train accident last November that led to the deaths of more than 140 people has been blamed on sabotage. Probes and committee reports on such cases need to be put out in the public domain and preventive measures taken.

The current NDA dispensation may be good at painting and selling big visions like that of bullet trains, but what the railways desperately needs is better implementation of routine procedures on the ground. Railway minister Suresh Prabhu did well to begin his innings by not giving into the populist tendency to announce new trains. However, his track record in turning the mass mover into an efficient and safe outfit has been below expectations so far.



Devi Shetty



The Gorakhpur tragedy has exposed the weakness of the public health system. Instead of finding a scapegoat, let us look at how India's broken public health system can be mended. There are three main problems with Indian public health, and none of them have to do with lack of money. The problems are (i) acute shortage of medical specialists; (ii) lack of career progression for nurses; and (iii) accountability.

Shortage of medical specialists is evident even in a state like Karnataka which has the largest number of medical colleges. Yet there are over 1,200 vacancies for specialists in government hospitals. Unlike in the past, an MBBS doctor with adequate training but without a post graduate degree is legally barred today from performing a caesarean section, an anaesthetic procedure, an ultrasound or interpreting a chest X-ray.

The top 10 causes of death in India cannot be treated by an MBBS doctor. In simple terms, even a brilliant MBBS doctor cannot do anything more legally than what a housewife is permitted to do. These rigid regulations were created by the Medical Council and upheld by the Supreme Court for patient safety.

Unfortunately, we also have an acute shortage of post graduate seats needed to convert existing two lakh MBBS doctors into specialists. Because of the shortage of specialists, Indian maternal and infant mortality rates are worse than some sub-Saharan African countries.

The Lancet Commission on Global Surgery recommends preparedness for "bellwether procedures", ie emergency caesarean section, laparotomy and surgery for open fractures at community health centres - of which there are 5,500 in India - as an indicator of an efficient public health system. Today, 60% of deaths are due to non-infectious diseases. According to the commission, while only 3.83 million people die globally due to malaria, HIV and TB, 16.9 million people die due to lack of access to safe surgery every year.

India needs 65 million surgeries



Uday Puro

annually, but only 26 million are performed and the rest suffer and die. Legally, only specialists can perform surgeries and treat non-communicable diseases. This is the reason a hospital without adequate number of specialists is of no use for the patient and the community.

Ten years ago, maternal mortality rate (MMR) of Maharashtra was as bad as in the rest of the prosperous south Indian states. In 2009, Maharashtra's health ministry recognised diplomas from the then 96-year-old College of Physicians and Surgeons (CPS) to convert MBBS doctors into specialists. Today, nearly a thousand specialist medical officers working for Maharashtra health service are not MD or MS but diploma holders from CPS. By 2013, these diploma holders had produced a Maharashtra miracle: they dramatically reduced its MMR from 144 to 68, half of Karnataka's MMR. Very soon, Maharashtra will be challenging Kerala for the number one spot.

Fortunately, the Union health ministry is considering recognising CPS diplomas across India. National Board of Examinations is also converting large government

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hospitals as teaching institutes to train medical specialists. With trained and certified gynaecologists, paediatricians, anaesthetists and radiologists, community health centres and taluka and district hospitals will become the most vibrant hospitals.

Second, the nursing profession is in crisis in India. In the US, 67% of anaesthesia procedures are administered by nurse anaesthetists. In India, a nurse who worked in an ICU for 20 years is legally not allowed to prescribe even a painkiller. The younger generation will never take up a profession where there is no career progression. Recently, the health ministry and Indian Nursing Council launched the nurse practitioner course, which will be a

turning point in Indian nursing profession. Nurse practitioners can reduce doctors' workload in government and private hospitals, improving clinical outcomes.

Third, the accountability question. People need hospitals only for the procedures. Health ministry should monitor hospitals on just four parameters for every government hospital - outpatient numbers, number of diagnostic tests, number and outcomes of surgeries and number and outcomes in critical care service. This data should be uploaded real time to a cloud-based app. Based on this data the ministry can grade every government hospital, plan budgetary allocation, increments and promotions of staff. Real time data in public domain will hold the mirror for policy makers to reflect on. We believe in god, but the rest is data.

When I was growing up, government hospitals were the most vibrant institutions and government doctors were our heroes. My brother, a doctor himself, insisted on my getting a tonsillectomy in a government hospital. If there were 20 full-time paediatricians working at Gorakhpur's BRD hospital, tragedy would have been averted.

Medical specialists are always at the highest level of the government pecking order. Young and qualified medical specialists will insist on improvement of infrastructure to practice their newly acquired skill and build their reputation. As always happens in India, one of the 20 paediatricians would be taking care of a senior minister's or politician's grandchild, thus having access to the state's power centre.

Maharashtra's experience has convinced us to believe that recognition of CPS diploma courses across the country will be a turning point in the history of vibrancy of government hospitals, along with empowering nurses and digital accountability tools. I am convinced, after spending my entire professional life in managing hospitals, that private enterprise cannot replace government hospitals for rural healthcare. If you think government is not capable of managing hospitals look at Jayadeva Institute of Cardiac Sciences Bangalore, UN Mehta Heart Institute Ahmedabad and ILS Delhi which make India proud.

The writer is a cardiac surgeon and Chairman and Founder, Narayana Health

Learn from Khatauli - the habits of 'jugaad' and 'chalta hai' are incompatible with rail safety

Raghu Dayal



Prima facie it appears that the train derailment at Khatauli on Saturday, mangling up the Utkal Express, could have been avoided, if the prescribed mandatory operating procedure had been observed.

Preliminary enquiries suggest that after detecting a crack in a 'glued joint' the engineering staff asked for a 20 minute 'block' for repairs, yet the repair work was taken up without authority - in gross violation of the safety protocol.

Indian Railways' general and subsidiary rules lay down that, in case of emergency, repairs to the track may be carried out after taking mandatory precautions such as exhibiting 'Stop' signals. Further, a senior engineering official must first bring the train to a stop and advise the train driver through a written memo about the need to stop the train, and simultaneously arrange to send a message to the station master and obtain his written confirmation. This essential drill was not followed and elementary safety norms were violated.

Pending a detailed probe by

the commissioner of railway safety, in a rather unprecedented move, a central government secretary level technocrat - member of the railway board in charge of the engineering department - has been summarily sent on leave, along with the two top jurisdictional officers - the general manager of the northern railway zone and the divisional railway manager of the Delhi division. In addition, the zonal chief track engineer has been moved out on transfer, while



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the senior divisional engineer, among other junior engineering officials, has been suspended.

Much as the swift and stern action by government underlines its stated 'zero tolerance for unsafe rail operations', the fact remains that most political dispensations have followed warped priorities with respect to the nation's lifeline, leaving it battered and bruised. Elsewhere in the world, today

technology enables fatality-free rail travel. Japan's Shinkansen 'bullet' trains have been operating without fatality for over 50 years. These technologies demand a modern mindset, appropriate management structure, and skilled workforce. With more than 85% of its train accidents ascribed to 'human failure', IR has also been constantly investing in newer technologies, mechanisation of maintenance, upgradation of track structure, including higher capacity long welded rails, their ultrasonic testing, on-track and digital machines, and electronic monitoring of track geometry.

With highly expensive and sophisticated equipment steadily ploughed into IR, along with myriad technological aids

increasingly made available for maintenance, the extent of assets failures that still occur is unacceptable. IR's assets failures, jeopardising safety, show a disturbing trend: rail track fractures and weld failures increased from 3,237 in 2015-16 to 3,546 in 2016-17; diesel and electric locomotives failures remained at about the level of 4,500 in the year; and detachment of passenger coaches from trains run in excess of 810; failures of overhead electric wires increased from 378 in 2015-16 to 447 in 2016-17; signalling equipment failures were of the order of 1,30,200 in 2016-17.

While the enquiry commissioned by IR will establish the cause of Saturday's accident, safety is itself symptomatic of opera-

tional efficiency and discipline, to be viewed as integral to all operations. The glaring fault lines of the Khatauli accident expose IR's silo-based set-up, where departmental compartmentalisation loses sight of the overall organisational goals including safety.

The Anil Kakodkar led rail safety committee report echoed the prevalent perception of IR's creeping infirmities: "Centralised, top heavy and hierarchical along departmental lines." It also emphasised the status quo ante to be restored for senior general management posts, to be manned only by those well versed in train operation, much like the senior command posts in the defence establishment are filled mostly by the fighting arms.

Still the non-implementation bug bites, not IR alone; and selective amnesia has been government's forte. It is definitely time for change, for a new way of thinking in the rail industry, to enable IR to regain primacy in the country's transport domain, to become the economy's engine of growth. There should be no place for an attitude of just 'jugaad', or, as Prime Minister Narendra Modi has stressed, of 'chalta hai'.

The writer is former Managing Director, Container Corporation of India

Amma's Children

Two AIADMK factions have merged, with a little help from BJP

The political turmoil that Tamil Nadu witnessed since the death of chief minister J Jayalalitha has subsided for now, with a merger of the two AIADMK factions. The AIADMK (Amma) faction of chief minister Edappadi K Palaniswami and the AIADMK (Puratchi Thalaivi Amma) group led by his predecessor O Panneerselvam have buried their differences and arrived at a compromise formula, both having agreed to nullify Sasikala's appointment as party general secretary and keep her clan out of party affairs. The Palaniswami faction had already passed a resolution cancelling the appointment of her nephew TTV Dhinakaran as the deputy general secretary. Also worked out were the positions offered to team OPS.

BJP spotted in the churning a wonderful opportunity to make inroads into a state where non-Dravidian parties had only a minimal presence, and made the most of it. It is an open secret that it was BJP which orchestrated the sequence of events that led to the merger. In the process, it now has a vice-like grip over the united AIADMK, which is well aware of the threat to the stability of its government from a bruised Dhinakaran who purportedly has about 20 MLAs with him. The success of the BJP mission has dealt a body blow to DMK that was hoping AIADMK would disintegrate, paving the way for it to fill the vacuum. With the general election not far away, a weakened Congress-led UPA will now have to rethink its strategy.

It's advantage BJP at this point. Save Karnataka, the south has always been a tough nut for BJP to crack. Its perseverance appears to be yielding fruit. However, in a state where Dravidianism is the bedrock of politics, it will be no mean task for the party to consolidate its position. Tamil Nadu could well be heading for yet another phase of uncertainty.



House guests and fish

Both of them begin to stink up the home after about three days

Bikram Vohra



It is truly said that house guests and fish have a common factor: After three days they begin to stink. You arrive at the host's place full of warmth and sunshine and thoughtful gifts and they give you the hastily refurbished room with spanking new sheets, a fresh bar of soap, a fluffy towel smelling of naphthalene (saved in the suitcase for a special occasion) and a tube of toothpaste.

Come next morning and they have told you, relax, no rush to wake up, get over your jet lag, so you are lying there not making a noise in case they wake up and they are in the adjoining room lying there not making a noise in case you are disturbed and this absurd scenario in mutual accommodation can go half way onto lunch and then finally both have the same thought, they have to go and so the encounter occurs outside the bathroom door and now there is a flurry of no, no, you go first, no, you please, no hurry, all yours, it's okay.

And then it is lunch and they have laid on a veritable feast and you haven't the heart to tell them that you are on a sparse diet (so much for what the health) and this is going to wreck it and why have they bothered and the host is thinking, we never make this much on any other day, costs a fortune and they have pulled out the finest linen and crockery and that silver cutlery set that is used only to impress guests.

Then they have mapped out the tour for you to sightsee and you are not a sightseer and you have to pretend this is the most exciting idea and what you don't know is that the host would rather watch Chelsea play Arsenal and instead he has to go with you because his wife hissed and said, it doesn't look nice if you stay back, it's only a soccer game.

Finally, it is day three and you have both run out of conversation and you are avoiding their obnoxious teenage children who resent you for having 'stolen' their room so they are having to share and the husband and wife are now asking oblique questions to ascertain when you are leaving like should we book theatre tickets for Sunday and your wife sends you a WhatsApp saying take them out for dinner and now you are in this fancy restaurant calculating the bill and it is a sobering thought that it is big enough for you to have stayed in a hotel and watched India play Sri Lanka.

dilbert



Sumit Paul

In any relationship, what matters most is reciprocity. Without it, all relations lose their intensity.

Sylvia Plath wrote the above words to her abusive husband and British poet laureate Ted Hughes. Not just in a love or family affair, reciprocity or mutual intensity is an ineluctable condition in all interactions of life. Agreed, it's well impossible to maintain the same level of reciprocal warmth or intensity, but it must not be ridiculously tilted towards one side.

'Ek qadam tum badhao, ek qadam hum Khade rahne se rishta nahin banta, sanam.'

'Take one step, I too will take a step/ Relation will not develop, if you stand still.' Relationships thrive in an atmosphere of mutual understanding and cooperation. We often take the other person or a bond for granted and when we

take something for granted, we take it for a ride. A kind of frivolity and flippancy creep in. Equal efforts must be taken from both persons involved for the survival of a relationship, whether it's between two individuals or two countries. East and West Germany's equal endeavours helped them get together and a united Germany emerged not so long ago.

Scientists like Robin Hil-ditch and Mortimer Lagons at Colombia University, New York concluded in 2001 that reciprocity between two individuals works like telepathy. 'Lovers feel hurt together/ They feel joyous at the same time/ When there's an element of equality/ Works to make their union sublime,' wrote Robert Southey.

Reciprocity blossoms into empathy, and it's the most exalted human trait. When Nakul asked Bhishma, the grand patriarch of the Mahabharata, the night before Kurukshetra, as to what was

the actual reason for this inevitable confrontation between Kauravas and Pandavas, Bhishma told him in one line: 'Paarsaryam avnati vadanti' - 'The decline of reciprocity between the two.' When reciprocity suffers or dwindles, misunderstanding raises its ugly head and things go haywire.

Nowadays, relationships soon develop cracks because we fail to reciprocate the other person's gestures, moves and actions. There's no mutual admiration or even admonition. The cocooned existence doesn't help a person reach out to the other one and reciprocate on the same wavelength. Psychologist William James called it, 'Break-down in emotional intimacy.'

In 1972, when Pakistan's then Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto visited India along with his charming young daughter Benazir Bhutto to sign the Shimla Pact, Benazir shook the

Sacredspace

An Opportunity

We can take suffering to be an opportunity to learn and to grow. But if we are honest, we remember that this is making the best of a bad job, and that minimising suffering takes priority over optimising its outcome.

Julian Baggini

For Relationships To Thrive, Reciprocity Is Essential

hands of the then Indian prime minister, Indira Gandhi and said, 'Mrs Gandhi, I hope, the reciprocal emotional bonding will remain forever.' Though it didn't last long, young Benazir's wise words impressed the seasoned Mrs Gandhi and she assured that the relation between the two countries would be 'reciprocally' nice and cordial. 'Jazba dono(n) jaamin barabar ho toh mumkin hai

Ek din saari ranjishin mit ke rahengi.'

'If feelings on both sides are same/ Chances are that one day, enmity will be wiped out.'

Equality of emotions is indeed very important in this age of violence and gore. Only with a reciprocal approach and 'mutually interwoven thinking', can we bring people and nations together. Friendly relations - whether between people or national governments - need not remain a pipe dream.

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