

TRAGIC TRACK: ON THE BALASORE TRAIN ACCIDENT AND CORRECTIVE MEASURES BY THE INDIAN RAILWAYS

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The [rail accident in Balasore](#) in Odisha on June 2, involving [the collision of three trains](#), is a tragic reminder of the challenges that India faces in modernising and expanding its rail services. At least 275 people were killed and over 900 injured when the Shalimar-Chennai Coromandel Express, the Yesvantpur-Howrah Express and a freight train collided in [the worst rail accident in two decades](#). But an accident of this kind had been foretold, as recently as February this year when a collision between two trains was averted at Hosadurga Road Station in the Birur-Chikjajur section of the Mysore Division of the Railways, thanks only to an alert loco pilot and the moderate speed of the train, which could be brought to a stop. The train had gone off its intended track, which was reported as a result of faulty signalling system and dangerous human intervention. An official record of that incident called for “immediate corrective actions... to rectify the system faults and also sensitizing the staff for not venturing into shortcuts”. The accident in Balasore, it now appears in a preliminary inquiry, followed the same disastrous sequence of mechanical failures and human errors.

The Indian Railways carries nearly 15 million passengers every day now compared to the peak of 23 million a day the year before the COVID-19 pandemic. India has an ambitious plan to improve its rail infrastructure, and in the year 2023-24, 2.4-lakh crore has been allocated for capital expenditure. Accidents per million train kilometre have fallen over the last decade, but poor maintenance of tracks and the rolling stock and overstretched staff are problems that the Railways can no longer camouflage with glitzy facades. Safety measures including anti-collision systems are expanding, but evidently not at an adequate pace. In 2021, the Prime Minister announced that 75 new semi-high speed trains labelled Vande Bharat would be started over 75 weeks, and several have been started already. There has been attention on passenger amenities also, but nothing can be more important than safety. The accident in Balasore should prompt India's railways development plans onto the right track. Speed should be strived for, but safety is paramount. Sabotage is not ruled out in the Balasore accident, which will be probed by the Central Bureau of Investigation. More important will be the corrective measures by the Railways at the operational and planning levels. It will have to find more resources to modernise and rationalise its priorities.

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