

Time Modi talked about Railways

Written by Administrator

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By Sidharth Mishra



Last Saturday in the sultry heat of the Indian summer midnight, I spent two horrendous hours on the platform bridge of the Allahabad Junction for my train to arrive from Varanasi. I was waiting for the train eagerly so that I could slump exhausted on my berth immediately after a long day of work. On reaching the station, we were told that the train was on time and waiting at Allahabad city station. As to why the train took more than 90 minutes to cover a paltry two kilometres from Allahabad City to Junction was beyond my comprehension.

Spending those two hours on the station were illustrative of the pathetic state of the Indian Railways.

The pre-recorded automated announcements kept telling us about which train was running late and by how many hours. The announcement system informed us stranded passengers that the trains coming from Bengaluru, from New Delhi, from Okha in Gujarat, from Rajasthan, from Patna, from Kolkata, from Odisha and so on, were all running late. I fail to recollect whether that night any train was announced as being 'on time'.

Hearing about the dismal state of railways being announced continuously from the public address system, your reporter recollected what the Narendra Modi government had to say in the first Railway Budget presented by the NDA II in the summer of 2014. "Indian Railways is on course to fulfil its long cherished dream. I propose a bullet train on the Ahmedabad-Mumbai sector," the Minister had said.

Here is a classic case of a government day-dreaming about building a quadrilateral network of bullet trains when it cannot even run its existing infrastructure efficiently. That night, when the train finally arrived, tired to the bones, I immediately hit the berth and went off to sleep but not before haggling with the coach attendant for something as basic as a clean pillow. In the morning around half-past eight when I woke up, the train was entering Kanpur station. I wondered how could a so-called 'super fast' train take five and half hours to cover a distance of less than 200 kilometres.

"Sir, the train left Allahabad station only around 5 am. There was an engine derailment and so we were stranded," summarily announced the coach attendant. I had a shiver running down my spine by now. On the way to Allahabad from New Delhi a day earlier, I had seen the derailed

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bogies of Muri Express. The accident had taken place a few days back leading to the extremely unfortunate loss of several lives, and now we had just managed to escape a similar catastrophe due to sheer timing.

The alarming and metronomic frequency of accidents taking place has left me worried as to how we would be able to take the load of running bullet trains. When we are unable to manage the running of much lesser trains, how would these titans of the railway track be handled? I do not have any major qualms about the coming of the bullet trains. However, I certainly cannot wait for these mythical bullet trains to arrive in order to have a simple hassle free train ride. Prime Minister Narendra Modi sometime back had said that railway facilities were the same as they were 100 years back and that he wanted to privatise railway stations so as to modernise them. "Stations should be better than airports as most travellers are poor people," Modi had reasoned. "We can easily have trains running below and commercial properties above (floor)." At a time when real estate is very expensive, railways should leverage its properties by allowing private parties to build luxury hotels, restaurants and other facilities, he had added. He said that once this exercise is complete, the government will carry out modernisation of stations across the country.

Mr Prime Minister, I would have been far happier if you had a clear cut plan on how to modernise railway operations instead of the building castles in the air. Private operators would certainly come pitching in to grab the precious real estate of the Railways, which you have put on offer. However, will they show the same enthusiasm when asked to run the mammoth network of trains? If the precedent of Reliance running away from operating the Airport Metro is anything to go by, the Indian corporate does not believe in performing any significant public duties for the nation.

The Indian Railways has nearly 1.25 crore passengers taking its trains every day. If the Prime Minister is so desirous of bringing in good days for the people of the country, why can't he ensure a safe and comfortable journey for its people before he embarks on anything else. The Prime Minister and the Railway Minister just have to carry out a cursory reality check on their computers in the mornings, to know how ticket booking servers crash unexpectedly and how in the name of premium tatkal tickets, poor and middle class passengers are being repeatedly fleeced.

From the time of booking tickets to the time, a passenger alights at the destination station; every moment on an Indian railway train is full of uncertainty. The train can come on any platform, en route it can arbitrarily stop anywhere, you can be fleeced by anybody, there can be theft of one's luggage, the food served onboard can have insects and rodent excreta, the water bottle being sold could be the fake replica of a famous brand and so on.

I am no votary for demagoguery and populism, which some of the predecessors of Suresh Prabhu unleashed as Railway Minister. But at the same time we should not forget that the

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Railways is part of our national infrastructure, which ensures the mobility of India's masses, especially in a country where availability of labour in every sector is dependent on seasonal migration.

The Prime Minister, as mentioned earlier, had said that progress in railways has been dormant for the past 100 years. Your reporter disagrees with him on the issue. The Railways at one point of time gave value for your money. Today it has a devil may care attitude.

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