

Editorial**IRTSA'S PROPOSALS ECHOED BY HIGH LEVEL SAFETY REVIEW COMMITTEE - IMPORTANCE OF TECHNICAL DEPARTMENTS & TECHNOCRATS REITERATED**

High level Safety Review Committee, set up by the Ministry of Railways – *like the previously set up Accident Inquiry Committees* - has strongly echoed what IRTSA has been demanding over the years – Stopping or Financing the Subsidized haulage by the Union and State Governments, Rationalizing of system of Dividend Payment to Central Government, additional Capital Investment by Union Government for New Assets, for New lines and for Modernization of the Railway and of course, above all – rationalization of Freights & Fares – linked to the Price Index – of all inputs.

Indian Railways are one of the world's best - transporting a vast population of people - 365 days a year at an affordable and low cost. Considerable passenger comforts are being introduced without increasing the fares. IR system has 13.5 lakh strong work force which handles 20 million passengers and 2.45 million tonnes of freight and earns Rs.245 crores daily.

The High Level Safety Review Committee, headed by Anil Kakodkar, former chairman of the Atomic Energy Commission, has made many observations and 106 recommendations to bring drastic technical and technological improvements for the safe running of train services and proposed a mode to funding the proposed Rs. 1 lakh crore programme.

The committee looked into several factors, including increase in input costs, and ways to offset the losses suffered by the Railways. Despite steep appreciation in the cost on heads like fuel, electricity, steel, cement and salaries in the last decade, Railways have not taken any serious measures to counterbalance that by increasing fares and freight charges and the Railway fares and freight charges are ridiculously low. While the wholesale price index rose by 300% in the last 10 years the passenger fares for 2nd class remained almost unchanged. This is despite the fact that, Railway had borne the social service obligation of about Rs.15,000 crores which is 17% of its revenue earnings.

Even though the train accidents per million train kilometer have come down from 0.23 to 0.15 during the last 5 years period the safety conditions in Railway is very grave. There were 1600 Railway employees killed and 8700 injured during the last 5 years. Almost 15000 people killed in a year on the account of trespassing.

During last 5 years, more than five hundred new trains were introduced without any addition in the infrastructure posing a serious safety risk. Unmanned level crossings must be replaced by road over- and under- bridges. Installing advanced signaling systems is necessary for switching-over completely to new LHB-design coaches that can safely clock 130-150 km/hour speeds.

The committee observed that 18% vacancies in the safety categories (P.Way, Signal, Bridges) supervisors JE/SSE need to be filled in mission mode.

All the vacancies of supervisors and staff in safety category should be filled up in a time-bound manner within 6 months. The committee strongly mandated that no vacancies should be allowed to remain in respect of essential safety categories of supervisors and staff for more than 3 months.

The present system of general posts like DRMs and GMs being thrown up to all departments who have no background or exposure in safety-related train operations has undermined safety in the Railways. The earlier system of only Operating and Technical Officers being considered for such posts needs to be restored.

The Committee called for better training facilities and improved infrastructure for Zonal Training Institutes and supervisors institutes and recommended for 30% of teaching allowance to attract talented & experienced facilities. The Committee also recommended a special allowance of 25% to the Gatemen.

Committee also recommended for adaptation of modern technologies in maintenance of track, bridges, rolling stock and signal systems.

The committee pointed out that the inferior performance of the Railways was largely due to poor infrastructure and resources, lack of empowerment at the lower levels and tight and cumbersome procedures. It recommended for decentralization of financial powers and three times increase on the powers of DRMs and GMs.

The Committee has suggested practicable plan for financing the projected Rs.100,000 crore investments that would ultimately enhance the IR's capacity to handle increased traffic loads in a sustainable manner. The Committee has called for investing the entire sums over five years, translating into Rs.20,000 crore annually. A quarter of this would come from a safety surcharge ranging from Rs.3 to Rs.50 per ticket, which shouldn't really pinch. The balance would be funded largely by the Centre through matching grants and a deferral of the IR's dividend obligations. The other sensible recommendation that has been made is to have dedicated special purpose vehicles to execute the identified projects.

Safety and modernization of Indian Railways are the need of the hour. All the safety margins have been eaten up. Even though Railways is four times fuel efficient and better placed to absorb fuel price rise.

Passengers want better facilities, amenities and safe travel and, hence, would not mind paying increased fare, but the reluctance of the Ministry to increase the fares in line with the increased operating cost will only further jeopardize the financial viability of Railways.

Railway Ministry and Government should also understand the importance of the Technical departments of Railways and should treat the technocrats in more dignified manner.

Recommendations of this High Powered Committee on Safety on Railways – clubbed with the outstanding proposals of Railway Accident Inquiry Committees (RAIC), should be effectively implemented to ensure Safety on the Railways – at all levels & at all costs.