

# Deadly train fire highlights poor safety conditions on Indian Railways

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30 December 2013

Highlighting the poor safety conditions that prevail on the state-owned Indian railways, a train fire killed at least 26 passengers in southern India early Saturday morning. Two AC (air-conditioned) coaches of an express train travelling from Bangalore, the capital of the southern Indian state of Karnataka, to Nanded in the western state of Maharashtra caught fire near the small town of Puttaparthi in Andhra Pradesh.

Many of the dead suffocated from smoke inhalation after becoming trapped, because the coaches' doors failed to open.

There were sixty-seven passengers in the two cars when the fire broke out about 3:30 AM and almost all of them were sleeping. Woken by the screams of a woman passenger, panicked passengers broke windows in an attempt to find a way out as the blaze and thick black smoke went racing through the coaches. Many managed to save their lives by jumping from the moving train, but more than a dozen were seriously injured as a result.

The train was brought to a halt when a Traveling Ticket Examiner pulled the emergency brake. Subsequently, he, the locomotive driver and several passengers decoupled the rest of the train from the two coaches to prevent the fire from spreading. Fire fighters put out the blaze, forced the doors open and made their way through thick black smoke searching for survivors. Amidst the dead, they found about a dozen living passengers.

What caused the deadly fire is as of yet unknown. Railways Minister Mallikarjun Kharge and Director-General of Police B. Prasada Rao have said that preliminary reports indicate the fire may have been due to an electrical short circuit. In a move that suggests the authorities may be looking for a scapegoat so as to divert attention from their own negligent attitude toward safety, Kharge warned that if an electrical short circuit was found to be the fire's cause, those responsible would face harsh punishment.

Kharge visited the site Saturday and in an attempt to contain popular anger announced that 500,000 rupees (about \$US 8,000) in compensation will be paid to the families of each of the dead. Those who were seriously injured will receive 100,000 rupees and the other injured payments of 50,000 rupees.

Kharge appointed an inquiry team headed by Railway Board Chairman Arunendra Kumar and Member (Electricals) Khulbhushan to investigate Saturday's train fire. Such inquiries happen frequently, but usually fail to produce serious improvements in railway safety, thereby ensuring further accidents and loss of life, because their recommendations are ignored and/or the government refuses to provide the requisite funds to implement them,

Whatever the cause of Saturday's train fire, most, if not all of the victims' lives could have been saved, if the train had been equipped with an automatic fire alarm system. Indian Railway authorities have failed to install such systems on a majority of their long-distance trains despite repeated fires. During this year, there have been at least five incidents of fire on running passenger trains. Just 18 months ago, 32 people were killed by a fire in the Tamil Nadu Express train that runs from Chennai to New Delhi. In November 2011, a fire in a coach of the Howrah-Dehradun Express train burned 7 people alive. In April 2011 three coaches of the Mumbai-Delhi Rajdhani Express caught fire while travelling through Madhya Pradesh.

Although Indian Railways has announced plans to place automatic fire alarm systems on all air-conditioned coaches of its Rajdhani, Shatabdi, Garib Rath and Duronto trains, as of yet they have been installed on only two Rajdhani trains. This is because financial pressures have caused Indian Railways to slash even its own limited plans to introduce elementary safety measures.

Accidents, including derailments and collisions, are common on Indian Railways. Most of these accidents are due to poor maintenance, which in turn is caused by the government and railway authorities' failure to provide adequate funding. Just last month, on November 15, four passengers were killed and 23 injured when a train derailed at Nashik in Maharashtra

In an article titled "Frequent fires point to poor maintenance," *The Hindu*, a Chennai daily, has observed: "[Indian] Railways has apparently not learnt from past incidents. ...

"Distressingly, the causes of fire during 2012-13 have mostly been attributed to a failure on the part of the cash-strapped Railways, which has virtually thrown up its hands."

According to the *Hindu* report, during the past three years India's state-owned railway has only spent between 65 and 79 per cent of the money it had budgeted for safety measures.

As in earlier train accidents and fires, Saturday's tragedy has shed light on the failure of Indian governments to invest in basic railway safety and maintenance even as they lavish tax concessions on big business and the rich and sell them public assets at fire-sale prices.