

Putting the Railways on right track

In its 150th year of operation on India soil, this largest organisation in India is all set to make a new beginning. ■ by Shivam Singh

The Indian Railways is the largest employer in India. It is one of the largest railway networks in the world, transporting over 2.5 crore passengers a day. An organisation as massive as the railways is bound to have problems. If the age old saying 'first impression is the last impression' was true, the Indian Railways wouldn't impress. The first thing most passengers notice upon entering a railway station is the cleanliness, or the lack of it. After receiving constant complaints on the issue, the Railways have started to take notice.

Mr Neeraj Sharma, the Central Public Relations Officer (CPRO) of Northern Railway points out that "there is an improvement in cleanliness. We have expanded mechanised cleaning for stations and coaches. Station masters of small stations which did not have cleaning staff posted can now hire people from outside on a daily basis. Further, 104

large stations were identified by the railway board where special emphasis is being put on cleanliness."

He expresses hope that constant monitoring by the divisional railway managers (DRMs) will lead to drastic improvements in cleanliness.

Sharma also says that the railways is working on addressing the other major complaint that they receive. To improve catering and food on trains the Railway Board is undertaking a new initiative where passengers travelling on certain sectors will soon be able to order meals online from an extensive menu. The service will start soon for the Delhi-Jammu and Delhi-Amritsar sector on a trial basis. A provision such as this is expected to improve food quality and provide wider choice for passengers.



Neeraj Sharma, CPRO, Northern Railways.

The railways has also made a lot of progress in the electrification of railway lines. Currently 36 per cent of the tracks are electrified and this number is increasing at a fast pace. Sharma informs us that "after the recent electrification on the Moradabad to Mughalsarai via Lucknow route, the entire track from Pathankot - Howrah is electrified."

One of the major challenges the railways face is that of security and safety of passengers. A barrage of Naxalite attacks on trains — the most recent one taking place on board the Dhanbad-Patna Intercity Express on 13 June, 2013 — has prompted the railways to undertake major steps to address security concerns.

According to the CPRO of Eastern Central Railway,

Amitabh Prabhakar, "the general manager, Madhuresh Kumar, has approved the plan for a bomb detection squads within the Railway Protection Force. A sum of Rs one crore has been sanctioned to procure the required kits and give advanced training to RPF personnel."

Sources also confirm that the railways have chalked out a comprehensive plan to introduce bomb detection squads first in Maoist-infested Dhanbad division, followed by Danapur, Sonapur and Mughalsarai. The railways are also constantly working to improve safety on board trains in other regions. Equipment like X-ray machines and metal detectors have already been put into use at stations like Delhi and the Board is evaluating the cost implications of deploying more security personnel on board trains.

Talking on the issue of accidents at railway crossings, Neeraj Sharma says that the railways is undertaking an awareness generation campaign to inform people of the dangers of trespassing on railway tracks or

crossing closed crossings. They have organised 101 street plays at various stations and posters have been made to inform people of the danger. He also says that "there is a very visible improvement in safety within trains in recent years."

Manual scavenging

A major criticism that the railway faces is about its use of manual scavenging.



Course undertaken to sharpen skills of RPF.

According to the Construction of Dry Latrines (Prohibition) Act, 1993, and the even more ambitious Prohibition of Empowerment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Bill, 2012, the employment of manual scavenging has been declared illegal.

Even though it is illegal for anyone to construct toilets where a human being is needed to manually carry the excreta, the government's largest organisation continues to use open toilets on its trains. Mrs Kamlaben Gurjar, chairperson,



Even in 21st century, Indian Railway depends on manual cleaning of its coaches.



For a safe passage: A security person guards along a railway track.

National Commission for Safai Karmacharis states that “The railways have always found ways to avert the issue.”

Neeraj Sharma informs us that the railways are taking measures to address the issue. He says that “railways have committed to the Supreme Court that by 2021 all railway toilets will be converted into bio-toilets. All new coaches being procured have bio-toilets and the process of converting toilets in old coaches is ongoing as per an action plan.”

Sharma also talks of many new initiatives that the railways are tak-



Hightech surveillance for monitoring a crowded platform.



For safe travel, the Indian Railways has beefed up securities measures taking help from sniffer dogs.

ing to eliminate touts and ticket scalping from the system. He says that “making ID proof compulsory has helped a lot. We have also separated the timings for normal and *tatkal* booking, and have proposed increasing the punishment for those caught scalping rail tickets.

More innovations

Even though airfare in India has come down, the occupancy rate of the railways is at an all-time high. With rising population and a slow growth in rail infrastructure, there is a need of constant innovation that

allows for the overburdened organisation to function efficiently.

Though conditions of the railways have improved, the passengers of the Indian Railways can expect a lot more in the coming years. Manoj Singh, adviser-transport, Planning Commission, told at a CII seminar on logistics that “during the 11th Plan period, the railways received a mere Rs 3,000 crore investment through the public-private partnership route. We expect PPP investments of Rs one lakh crore in the current plan (2012-17) period.” Such a drastic rise in investment is sure to lead to many new features and services for the passengers in future. ■