[Foqia Sadiq Khan](https://www.thenews.com.pk/writer/foqia-sadiq-khan)

June 17, 2021

**Improving the railways**

It has been a few days since 65 innocent citizens of this country lost their lives to a senseless train accident in Ghotki. The collective amnesia is about to set in. We are yet to forget the 65 who passed away and the over hundred injured. It is time to make a resolve not to forget them and all those before them who have been snatched away by senseless train accidents.

The Ghotki train accident on June 7, when Sir Syed Express collided with the derailed eight carriages of Millat Express between the Raiti and Daharki railway stations is the eighth unfortunate train accident since the PTI government took over in the latter half of 2018, and is the 27th in the last two decades since 2002 with hundreds of precious lives lost to the senseless mismanagement of Pakistan Railways. The ferocity of train accidents has increased in the last some years as the infrastructure has become more and more dilapidated.

The railways are generally seen as the poor people’s mode of transport. What these repeated train accidents show is that the present government and the governments in the past have not put high premium on the protection of the lives of the citizens, and not carefully managed the safety aspects of running the Railways. The poor keep on dying year after year, accident after accident and it does not ruffle any feathers in the decision-making circles of the country except for making customary statements after each accident and then forgetting about them all together.

After the June 7 Ghotki accident, Chairman of Pakistan Railways Habib-ur-Rehman remarked that his department was aware of the poor condition of the track in the Sukkur Division and that accidents keep on happening on this track. However, according to the chairman as reported in the media, the Railways did not spend money to improve this track as a big Chinese investment of $6 billion is expected with Main Line (ML)-1 project connecting Karachi to Peshawar and it will disband this track, so the Railways did not spend on repairing the problematic track on which the accident took place. The chairman did mention that they had recommended some emergency repair but the media report stated that the local Railways office was of the opinion that there were not enough funds to carry out the needed repair.

The above-mentioned statement of the Pakistan Railways chairman shows the height of the government’s callousness and neglect. The Railways knew that there were problems with this Sukkur track, they knew that accidents happen due to the bad track and yet they decided not to get it repaired, and instead waited for the Chinese investment for ML-1 that might or might not materialize soon. It just shows that the government does not prioritize saving lives of citizens and is running trains despite knowing it is posing risks to the lives of passengers. Ideally, some civic group would take the government to court for this criminal callousness to hold it accountable for the loss of dozens of lives and injuries to hundreds.

Here are some World Bank statistics on Pakistan Railways: 24,903 million passengers-km were transported through Pakistan Railways in 2018 (the latest year for which the data is available); 8080 million ton-km in 2018 and the rail lines (total route) of the Railways were 7791 km in 2018. Despite running such a huge organization, very little attention has been paid to the dilapidated infrastructure: there is faulty interlocking signal system, bad tracks, and aged rolling stocks. Other than the major accidents that are reported, many minor accidents also happen that are often not even reported. Overall, the safety standards and record of the Railways is extremely poor.

There is no dearth of advice on the measures needed to fix the management of the Pakistan Railways and how to greatly improve the safety standards there. Donors such as the World Bank have been coming up with the analysis and recommendations for decades. The World Bank’s ‘Transport Competitiveness in Pakistan’ back in 2006 has a dedicated chapter on recommending reforms in the Railways.

Pakistan’s geo-economic growth and social development hinges on the area around River Indus. Over 80 percent of Pakistan’s population and approximately 85 percent of its GDP is generated from the area around Karachi in Sindh, and Punjab. The economic hubs of these two large provinces are connected through road and Railways with roughly 1,000 km of flat terrain. There is great potential for passengers and freight along this north-south axis.

According to this report, Pakistan Railways has ceded its huge freight potential to road traffic due to poor management. Over the last more than four decades, the road network has taken over as the main transport carrier in Pakistan due to its lower costs, flexibility, and better private sector management. The Railways needs to reclaim its space.

The report states that there is a need for a reform and restructuring plan. Rationalization of the train routes is also recommended. Core and non-core services (such as dealing with property) should be separated. Modern financial management and accounting needs to be introduced. The overall message is that it is a governance and management failure. Unless the government fixes that, one cannot expect much improvement. Innocent lives are being lost; the government needs to restructure the Railways while ensuring the safety of its operations as the top priority.

The government needs to reform and restructure the Railways both for social and economic reasons. The Railways is the poor citizens preferred mode of transportation for long distance travel. Its economic potential of being used as the hub of freight still needs to be realized. It is about time the government makes it safe for both passengers and freight traffic.

The writer is an Islamabad-based social scientist.

Email: fskcolumns@gmail.com