[Khalid Bhatti](https://www.thenews.com.pk/writer/khalid-bhatti)

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**Reviving the Railways**

Pakistan’s poorly managed and decaying railways system took away 65 precious lives on June 7 when two passenger trains collided in Sindh in which five passengers were killed and nearly 100 injured.

The fact is that we are not properly maintaining our tracks and trains. Even more tragic is the fact that railways officials were aware of the depleting condition of the railway track, but nothing was done to fix it.

Train drivers have been warning administration to focus on track rehabilitation for the safety of passengers, line staff and rolling stock. Many fatal accidents took place during 2019 in which more than 120 people were killed and scores injured. Instead of repairing the track and signal system between the Multan-Sukkur-Karachi sections, the authorities continue to wait for the launch of the ML-1 project which is part of CPEC; the entire existing ML-1 from Peshawar to Karachi would be revamped under this Chinese sponsored project. Even after the completion of the ML-1 project, the railway authorities will need to come up with a well-prepared plan and strategy to fully utilise the upgraded tracks and infrastructure.

After every such horrific accident, we look for scapegoats. Sometimes, we blame faulty functional signal systems and poor signalmen for the tragedy and on some other occasions we blame train drivers and other low-ranking officials.

But the fact is that no government in the last four decades has made adequate investment in Pakistan Railways to upgrade the tracks, infrastructure, signal system, engines and carriages. No proper plan and investment was made to modernise the railway infrastructure. Pakistan Railways is a classic example of how we have destroyed our national assets and public sector.

There is a simple formula to develop a crisis situation in any institution, public service or department. Just stop investing money in it. Stop investing in human resources and new technology. Bureaucratic control, nepotism, corruption, mismanagement, flawed policies and incompetence will do the rest. Just ignore it and leave it to rot. First create a crisis and then use this crisis to privatise the state assets. That is what happened with most of the public-sector entities in Pakistan.

Millions of ordinary Pakistani citizens use the train network for travel around the country. To be precise, in the 2018/19 financial year, Pakistan Railways served 70 million passengers.

The loss of lives in every major train tragedy in Pakistan just reminds us that we need to fix this mess on a priority basis. We mourn the loss of life for a few days and then forget to fix the broken rail system.

Pakistan Railways used to be a profit-making entity. However, over the years, lack of investment, inadequate technology, poor policies, corruption, incompetence, nepotism and depleting revenues left the Railways with huge deficits running in billions of rupees.

Pakistan Railways was used to export carriages to different countries. Now we import carriages from China. We used to produce spare parts in workshops which were able to meet the needs of the railway network in Pakistan.

The workshop complex emerged at its present site in 1904 to manufacture, repair and overhaul passenger coaches and freight wagons for the North Western State Railways. It was also used to repair steam engines and later diesel engines.

But no effort was made to upgrade the workshops and to introduce modern technology and techniques. What were once state-of-the-art workshops of Pakistan Railways are in shambles now.

The Pakistani ruling class has preferred road networks over the rail network since the 1980s. While the quality of roads was improved and motorways were built, the rail network was ignored. Passenger numbers have plunged from the peak of 149 million in 1978-79 to nearly 60 million in 2019. Many train lines have closed and the freight business, the lifeblood of any train service, has crumbled.

At its peak in the 1970s, Pakistan Railways used to run more than 200 passenger trains and nearly 90 freight trains. It runs hardly a few freight trains. Before the Covid-19 pandemic hit Pakistan in March 2020, Pakistan Railways used to run nearly 70 trains but now it runs around 40 trains.

A lot has changed in the last 40 years for Pakistan Railways as competition from private goods and passenger transport has increased enormously. The motorways and improved road connectivity have made road transport a more viable option for many passengers.

Pakistan Railways needs innovation, better planning and a business model to compete with the private sector. It was the predominant mode of freight transportation from the coastal ports to the interior parts of the country. At their peak, between 1955 and 1960, Pakistan Railways handled 73 percent of the country's freight traffic (compared to less than four percent in 2015).

Over the past ten years, road traffic – both passenger and freight – has grown significantly faster than the national economy. Currently, it is accounting for 91 percent of national passenger traffic and 96 percent of freight.

Rail freight traffic remained roughly constant between 1971/72 and 1980/81, but the rail share of freight traffic decreased from 48 percent to 26 percent. During the same period, rail passenger traffic grew by about 70 percent. But its share declined from 20 percent to 15 percent. It has further dropped to just nine percent.

The National Logistic Cell (NLC) took away most of the freight business from the Railways. The NLC grew at the expense of Pakistan Railways. The loss of goods business made Pakistan Railways a loss-making entity.

Up till 1980, Pakistan Railways accounted for 56 percent of Pakistan’s freight traffic. By 2009 this was cut down to nearly 15 percent and now it teeters at one percent or even less.

For revival, Pakistan Railways needs a comprehensive plan and huge investment on a priority basis. We can learn from China and India in this regard. Both India and China have developed and expanded the rail network with public investment.

The writer is a freelance journalist.