

The Economic Times

1.3 lakh safety staff shortage derails railways

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The safety employees, who include trackmen, pointmen, patrolmen, technicians and station masters among others, are directly responsible for the safe running of our trains. And, this crippling shortage of the key force on the ground, experts and unions opine, imperils the lives of passengers.

This has also resulted in the overworking of existing workers, almost all of whom are toiling more than 15 hours a day — leaving enough room for mistakes that could result in grave incidents like the one on Sunday, which claimed more than 100 lives.

The railways, which has been more than enthusiastic in spending on 'designer uniforms' and other branding exercises, has exhibited nothing but apathy when it comes to filling up safety posts.

As of 2013, the number of such vacancies was 1.42 lakh and in three years, that has only reduced by about 19,500. According to information accessed from the ministry of railways, the national carrier has an overall shortage of 2.17 lakh employees. Of this, 56 per cent or 1.27 lakh are in the safety category.

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Pointing out that the pressure is immense, a loco pilot, who did not want to be named, said, "Depending on the route and division, a locopilot could be driving continuously for 8-13 hours. The shortage affects us because we are all humans, we become sick, we get tired, and then mistakes can happen. When we have lives of so many people in our hands, you must understand the kind of pressure we work under."

While the Railways officially maintains that it accords the highest priority to safety with measures like "replacement of overaged assets, adoption of suitable technologies for upgradation and maintenance of track, rolling stock, signaling and interlocking systems et al," union members say that the sheer lack of people to implement all these is what is resulting in accidents.