

## **The Economic Times**

### **1.42 lakh rail safety staff posts vacant across India**

HYDERABAD: The derailment of the Hirakhand Express comes in close succession to at least four similar train mishaps across the country in the recent past. Weeks ago, a goods train derailed at Wihirgaon station on Kazipet-Balharshah section of South Central Railway, leading to a major disruption of train movement on the important “trunk route”.

While authorities get down to checking the possibility of Saturday’s train mishap — the fifth in the last six months — being the result of sabotage, the number of vacancies for safety officers shows a clear case of neglect and apathy.

In the East Coast Railway sector, where the accident occurred, there is a 24% vacancy in safety official roles, as per records of East Coast Railway.

Meanwhile, 1.42 lakh posts for safety staff remain unfilled across India, which, experts say, is a major concern and clear case of official apathy.

“The pressure on crucial safety staff has remained very high over the years and this has also been pointed out in various internal reports over the years. Not only are there huge vacancies but the existing staff work under sub-standard conditions. While higher-ups in the ministry might be awaiting the assistance of technology before filling vacant posts, the automated anti-collision device tested previously does not seem very promising. The posts need to be filled up immediately,” pointed out a retired senior official from SCR.

As against a sanctioned strength of 6,398 engineering staff posts, there are only 4,827 filled; the remaining 1,571 are vacant in the East Coast Railway. Again, 67 posts in security, 93 in signal and telecom, and 613 in electrical local running are vacant as per details from the Railway Board. “With such high vacancies in critical posts, mishaps are bound to happen. Engineering staff, signalling staff, and even loco pilots are frequently working 20- 24 hours straight due to vacant positions. Even SCR zone has over 10,000 vacancies in safety staff,” said K Shivakumar, divisional secretary, SCR Mazdoor Union.