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 Indian railways – a menace to public health.
 

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Op-Ed

### Short Communication

The Indian Railways spin a web through the length and breadth of the country, spanning over 63,940 km with 39,936 coaches and 7,339 locomotives. It runs a total of 14,244 trains daily, including about 8,702 passenger trains and it transports around 6 billion passengers annually across 27 states and 3 Union territories.<sup>1</sup> While spinning the web through the railway lines, railways spray human fecal matter throughout the length and breadth of the country due to its open toilets which horrifyingly discharge the waste into the open tracks. The tracks have become an ‘Augean stable’ which has to be cleaned and kept clean. These stables existed in Greek mythology and because they had not been cleaned for years, Hercules was given the task of cleaning them as they harbored filth and disease.<sup>2</sup>

Medical science has proven the hazardous nature of human excreta and the health implications of its unguarded disposal into the open environment. Human excreta always contain large number of germs, which causes diarrhea, Cholera, Typhoid, Hepatitis A, Parasitic infections etc.<sup>3</sup> The seemingly innocent actions of the Railways contaminate the environment and promote unsanitary conditions, magnifying the propensity to spread diseases including Dengue and Chikungunya, Typhoid, Jaundice – the threat of which is very real in the whole country.<sup>4</sup> These diseases lead to poverty by several mechanisms including work days lost to absenteeism and the economy of households crunched due to the burden of the disease. However, above all, these factors drive the inhabitants to migrate into habitats (slums) that are more prone to disease infections and give rise to a vicious cycle of poverty and disease.<sup>5</sup>

### Relevant global/national policies and programs

The mentioned health issues can jeopardize India’s aim of achieving WHO’s Sustainable Development Goals (SDG). Unless it addresses the health issues, it cannot hope to achieve the SDGs.

The following are the SDG goals relevant to the problem:

- Goal 3- Good health and well being
- Goal 6- Clean water and sanitation
- Goal 15- Life on Land

However, the fact that Indian Railways is running successfully does not imply that the government of India does not have legislations against such malicious practices. The country’s governance aims at achieving the SDGs and has several laws in place to counter such issues.

As per the Constitution of the Republic of India, the applicable statutes in Environmental Sanitation are<sup>6</sup>:

1. Environmental Protection Act, 1986 – Violation of Section 3 (Prevention, Control and Abatement of Environmental Pollution), Subsection 7 (persons carrying on industry operation, etc., not to allow emission or discharge of environmental pollutants in excess of the standards) and subsection 17 (offences by government departments)
2. Water (Prevention & Control of Pollution) Act, 1974
3. Air (Prevention & Control of Pollution) Act, 1974
4. Hazardous Wastes (Management & Handling Rules), 1989
5. Code of Criminal Procedure, 1973
6. Indian Penal Code, 1860

Despite the stringent laws in place, it seems that this issue is like a child of the lawmakers has gone rogue. It does not matter that the Indian Railways is a product of the central government because it violates the laws laid down by the Republic of India and the Centre itself is answerable to the citizens.

### Poverty and Health Context

Poverty in India is a historical reality. During

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colonization, the majority of Indian states suffered from extreme poverty and perished by spells of famine and disease. After its Independence and rapid economic growth since 1991, extreme poverty has seen a drastic decrease in the country; however, India still lacks basic facilities like safe drinking water, sanitation, basic health services impact millions.<sup>7</sup> As per 2011 data, India shares a global burden of 20.6% of the World's poorest.<sup>8</sup>

Research has demonstrated that poverty makes people sick by driving them to seek shelter in cheaper and uninhabitable accommodations that lack basic facilities.<sup>9</sup> An average Indian loses up to 51 working days per year due to sickness and the condition is even worse for daily wage workers.<sup>10</sup> When combined with poor sanitation and habitats, the disease burden leads to the population being exposed to diseases like Tuberculosis, Dengue, Cholera etc. These diseases limit valuable working years from the population, which further pushes them inside the lethal paradox of poverty and ill health.

#### **Other Donor Initiatives related to this problem**

1. RITES Ltd. (A subsidiary of Indian Railways) started its project on developing new generation diesel locomotives to reduce air pollution in 2012.<sup>1</sup>
2. Public interest litigation on pollution by Railways was filed in the year 2011 in the High Court of Kerala with WP(c) no. 26217 of 2011 by Dr. George Joseph Themplangad. Final verdict is pending.<sup>1</sup>
3. The Indian Railways proposed a prototype for Biological toilets in January 2005 & Vacuum toilets for coaches in February, 2005.<sup>1</sup> However, no progress has been noted ever since.

Surprisingly, no significant activist actions have been undertaken by any groups at the international or national level regarding this very obvious public health evil.

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