The Indian Railway and Global Transportation Infrastructure

By Author(s), Date

Off the Rails?

As the Indian Railway network continues to be the premier transport organization of India and the largest rail network in Asia, there is a distinct air of uncertainty in the lead up to the recently proposed 'Vision 2030.' The Indian railways touch every sphere of life and business - offering opportunities of employment, convenient travel and efficient freight transportation. Therefore, given the increasing number of passengers over the last decade, the Indian government has reoriented its efforts towards "bringing about a transformation through modernisation and upgradation of its infrastructure."

Even as the 'Vision 2030' surfaces, certain implicit structural shortcomings of the Indian Railway such as operational inefficiencies, delays in decision making, and unregulated crowd movement make the system increasingly vulnerable, necessitating commensurate attention. In the previous fiscal, for instance, the Indian Railway failed to execute 458 projects, burdening the organization with Rs 4,83,511 crore in debt (about $65 billion USD). The balance between a self-reliant organization and cheap transport system has yet to be achieved. The passenger fares usually remain static for years, burdening the Union Budget. While due attention is being accorded to passenger-related facilities and comforts, the realm of railway infrastructure needs to be addressed immediately.

The partisanship within the railway board makes the Indian Railway a complex, over-departmentalised organisation with inefficient decision-making. This not only fosters unhealthy competition among departments for appropriating a larger share of scarce resources, but also poses a threat to teamwork and cohesion, by insinuating a power struggle within departments. To aid these issues, the restructuring of the Railway has two major components - the first involves unification of existing Group A services into a single service: the Indian Railway Management Service (IRMS); and the second involves reorganising the Railway Board itself. The Indian Government has set a vision of "making railways a 100% safe, fast and reliable mode of transport for passengers and freight."

In the future, railways are expected to play an indispensable role in the country from the perspective of sustainable development, in terms of creating both "low-cost and energy efficient transportation system and also providing crucial socio-economic linkages." The restructuring would enhance employment opportunities and catalyze overall economic growth and development of the country. Therefore, there is a need to implement 'technology driven solutions' and provide force multipliers to the security agencies to increase their reach, presence and effectiveness.

Indian Railways play a pivotal role for the entire lower and upper middle class travel segment. In the present day, Indian Railway stands at a juncture where a series of earlier reforms have started showing initial results. It is envisaged that the expansion and modernization of railways can contribute 2% enhancement in India's GDP. As India embarks on its journey into the next decade, the envisioned paradigm shift in the premier transport organization in the country, could make this transition more efficient; consequently achieving ‘Vision 2030.’

The Ivory Trade: Balancing Economic Growth and Animal Rights

Nothing expresses the effects of wealth and greed more pungently than the ivory trade. The Indian railway, as proposed by the government, is meant to connect Asia through the Indian subcontinent. However, it has also been used to foster illegal ivory trading. Since the 14th century, ivory from the tusks of elephants has been exported out of Asia and Africa to be used as anything from billiard balls to piano keys. While the international community agreed to ban the trade of the exotic material in 1989, illegal trading has filled the vacuum quickly, fulfilling as much of a demand for ivory as there was prior to the ban. Due to the sporadic nature of demand, the history of this trade is quite complex. Yet one thing that has remained constant over time: these inhuman violations of animal rights. When discussing the ivory trade, the most common approach is from an activist’s perspective, but analyzing the economic side of the trade is far more revealing.

The major players in understanding the ivory trade are The Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), African and Asian countries, and the United States. CITES was enacted to protect endangered species in all parts of the world. African and Asian countries are the primary sources of producers and consumers for ivory, and America is the self-proclaimed protector of these endangered species. In 1978, CITES enacted the Endangered Species Act came with a loophole, referred to as a “special rule,” that permitted ivory trade to continue with extensive regulatory measures in the form of sanctions. This regulation proved massively ineffective, as the African elephant population was cut from 1.3 million in 1978, to 600,000 ten years later. By 1988, over 90% of ivory in the international ivory trade market came from poached elephants. Counterintuitively, these regulations actually increased the price of ivory, as they increased the demand of the good. Ivory became greatly coveted with the introduction of this legislation. Without the guaranteed enforcement of a 100% ban, CITES made African elephants even more endangered.

An international trade ban is required to enforce the protection of elephants rather than a sanction on exports. The world must distinctly acknowledge that any black market activity concerning the ivory trade is putting a bullet in the literal gun aimed at the animal populations. The ramifications of a ban would be minimal, as the economic profits from the ivory trade are concentrated primarily in private groups. The closest the world has gotten to this point was in 2013. In November of that year, the U.S. government destroyed six tons of ivory in a symbolic attempt to start a ripple. By the end of the year, China and Hong Kong joined the U.S., demonstrating a concerted global effort to stop tolerating the ivory trade.

In hindsight, these acts did not amount to the revolution they initially seemed to be catalysts for. Since the end of 2013, the ivory trade black market has seen a rebirth, as countries have for the most part given up on solving the crisis. While China has implemented a full ban in 2018, other actors have not taken the necessary steps to stop this trade. Real change will only be realized through the agreement of all countries to ban ivory imports and exports. The economics of the situation suggest that unless the international community agrees on an outright ban of the illicit good, the status quo will remain at the expense of the livelihood of the animals subject to this trade.