

Perhaps the most important decision Prime Minister Manmohan Singh will take later today, assuming the Cabinet reshuffle is not postponed again, will be the appointment of the next Railway minister and the kind of oversight he exercises over the new incumbent. Since May 2009, when Mamata Banerjee became the Railway minister, the ministry has been headless, given Banerjee's sights were always on Kolkata and the way there via Singur—her predecessor Lalu Prasad was also preoccupied, with Bihar, but he gave the Railway bureaucracy a free run, something Banerjee was loath to do. As a result, financials have badly slipped, so much so Railways have not been able to contribute fully to safety and depreciation funds. With no one at the helm, Railways safety record went for a toss—from 43 people dying in accidents in 2007-08, the figure rose to 80 by the time Banerjee took charge and was a stunning 247 in the April-November 2010-11. And that's when the number of accidents fell, from 129 in 2007-08 to 65 in the first 8 months of 2010-11. The death toll is the number to keep track of, and not the fancy statistics put out by the ministry which show a significant decline in train accidents from 0.29 per million train km in 2004-05 to 0.17 in 2009-10.

The most damning indictment of the safety in the Railways is the CAG performance audit made last year of the first phase of the corporate safety plan (CSP) for the 2003-13 period. Though the CSP proposed the replacement of overaged locomotives by new locomotives with enhanced safety features, Railways still have 223 overaged BG diesel and 82 overaged MG locomotives which, the CAG said, raised the possibility of derailments/accidents. The CAG also noted that out of the 1,252 rail over- and under-bridges that are to be completed by 2013 only 158 (12.62%) have been constructed as of March 2009. Out of the 171 level crossings test checked (92 manned and 79 unmanned) by the Audit, it was found that many of the safety features were not provided at the level crossings. The CAG also noted that the railways was surrendering about half or more of the funds allotted for road safety works. In the case of rails, the CAG found that the use of alumino thermit welds, due to which tracks are prone to frequent weld failures, was still widespread and the use of more efficient mobile flash butt welding is yet to be introduced in 11 out of 16 zones. Further since rail/weld failures are caused by overloaded wagons, the CSP had proposed installing in-motion weigh bridges selectively on identified routes at originating points. But not only were half the weigh bridges not installed, it was also found that though a fifth of the wagons were found to be overloaded, they were allowed to proceed without any remedial action which had serious repercussions for the tracks. Hopefully Banerjee's successor, though from her party, will be more serious about his charge.