

V Pattabhi Ram

# Indian Railways: Version 2.0

What can happen to budget making in the hands of a hard core professional, belonging to a majority government that is not dependent on external support for existence, is best exemplified by Suresh Prabhu's rail budget. I am thrilled by what this it sets out to do.

**NO, I AM** not talking about "no increase in the passenger fare". This is always contentious. Raise the fare and someone would say it's inflationary. Don't raise it, and someone would scream, "users should pay the full cost for usage." These are arguments, which depends on from which side of the bed you get up.

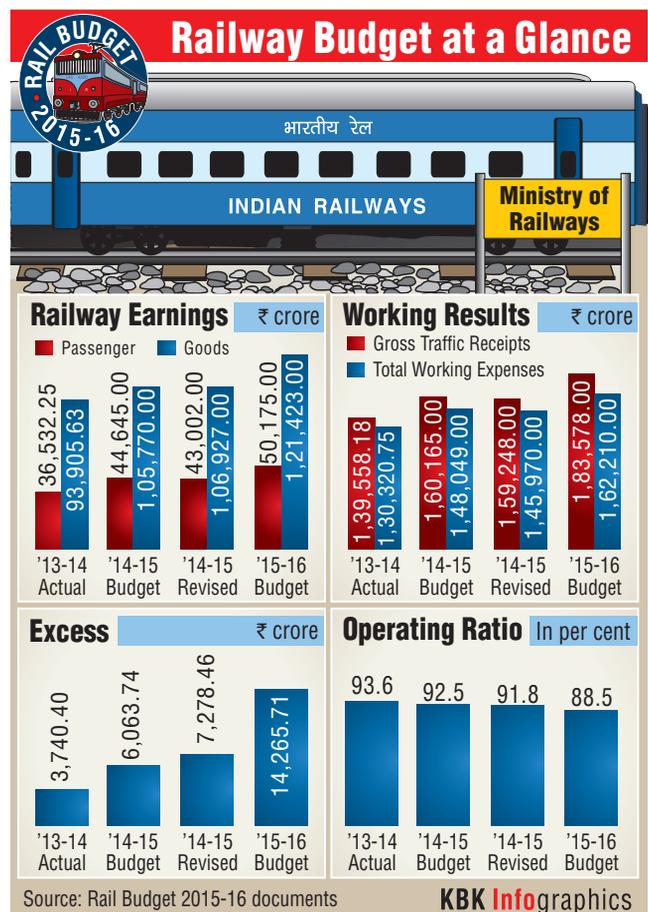
I like this budget for FIVE reasons.

## Clean India

It promises to 'clean up' the Railways, literally. If you have travelled by our trains, you would know that the condition of the rest rooms is pathetic. And if you travel long distance, you had it. Even in Shatabdi Express trains that cover short distances (and charged high), run short of water in the compartments and make them stink. It's not just that the Indian Railway is the global leader in open defecation. It is that the hygiene is so horribly bad, that decision to have bio toilets and airplane type vacuum toilets is salutary. This must, over time, be extended to all trains and to all compartments. There is the additional issue of cleanliness in the compartments itself. Towards that the railways is setting up a new department for cleanliness, which among others, will engage professional agencies and train staff in the latest cleaning practices. Wow. After all, cleanliness is next to godliness.

## Safe India

Next comes safety inside the coaches. In the light of the episodes that have been taking place in our trains the promise to install surveillance cameras in select coaches and ladies compartments for women's safety is absolutely welcome. An all-India 24x7 helpline number, 138, will become functional to attend to the problems of passengers, and a dedicated toll-free number 182 for receiving security related complaints. There, however, does not seem to have been any great mention about the safety in the running of trains on track.



## Speed of thought

The IRCTC website, once the butt of all jokes, today works super fast. What needs speed is offline booking. What I like in the idea of 'Operation 5 minutes' is that it is not just about buying an open ticket fast but is about how fast. That's SMART. Specific, Measurable, Actionable, Realistic and Time-bound. There is the promise that you can now buy an unreserved ticket within 5 minutes of joining the queue. Also unreserved tickets will be issued on smart phones.

Train speeds will now go up to 200 km/hr. Mark it Delhi to Mumbai can now become overnight! Indian

Railways is collaborating with National Institute of Design to develop ergonomically designed seats. Railways will also progressively replace all coaches with LHB design coaches. The railways also propose to introduce a ‘very modern train system’ called train sets. These are like bullet trains in design and can run on existing tracks without an engine to haul them. That way, you could see the railways slowly beginning to compete with airlines.

### Food is God

On long distance travel, you take railways food because you can't starve. You tend to eat sketchily because you aren't too sure if you have adequate resistance power. If the railways live up to the promise of offering an array of food choices that can be pre-booked and be provided by quality food chains, then they would have walked into our hearts.

### More conveniences...

Mobile phone charging facilities in general class coaches, Wi-Fi in all A and B category stations are initiatives to stay connected. Online booking of retiring rooms, concierge services through the IRCTC, online booking of wheel chair, SMS alert services: all these add to the levels of convenience and will make travel a pleasure. Ditto when it comes to the decision to give TTE's handheld devices to check tickets. If courier boys can have it, why not TTEs?

### How will this happen

It's going to cost Rs. 8.5 lakh crore across five years. That's 1.7 lakh crore per year. The money is intended to be raised from multiple sources including multilateral development banks, and will be executed through partnerships with the states as also PSUs. The technology will come from abroad and the private sector too could be roped in to play a positive role. ■

