Why Mumbai’s rail commute is (only) a sentimental spectacle

Kavitha Iyer

Mumbai’s trains and their commuters have long been romanticised which gloss over the defeated, dejected faces of the millions on board who face everyday dangers that range from suffocation to ripped kurtas, sexual assault to physical injury.

Now is a good time to remind everyone expressing shock at the death of 22 Mumbaikars in a stampede at the Elphinstone Road railway station that the daily death toll on the city’s suburban railway network is between 9 and 10, on average. These people die trying to get home or to work, falling off when a fingertip grip in an overcrowded train loosens, or slipping into the gap between the train and platform, or taking a desperate shortcut across the rail tracks to avoid a foot over bridge not unlike the site of Friday’s tragedy.

That citizens in Mumbai, urbs prima in Indis, die simply trying to get to work or back home is curiously not provocation for daily outrage.

If anything, Mumbai’s trains and their commuters’ can-do attitude have long been romanticized in tiresome accounts of the ‘spirit of Mumbai’ that gloss over the defeated, dejected faces of the millions on board who face everyday dangers that range from suffocation to ripped kurtas, sexual assault to physical injury.

The numbers are now well known. Overcrowding on trains ranges from 100% to 130%. Peak hour density for standing passengers’ averages 12 persons on every sq m of space.

Commuters risk their lives to get to work because there is no alternative, not because of some sentimental notion of how Mumbaikars overcome adversity while whistling ‘Yeh Hai Mumbai Meri Jaan’ under their breath. Train brawls, gangs of bullies on board, pickpockets, the absence of clean toilets at stations, roaches in compartments, are so commonplace, part of the humdrum, as to mostly not merit remonstrance with railway authorities.
Exactly a year ago, senior railway and state officials, and elected representatives met to formulate an “action plan” to make the daily railway commute safer for Mumbaikars. Accidents would be down by 50% within two years, MP Kirit Somaiya promised. A year has passed, and little is known about that action plan’s progress, except that it was to involve ensuring that the height of all suburban platforms is flush with train footboards, building pedestrian subways, installing escalators and checking incidents of trespassing (crossing the tracks).

Much of this was to be done by March 2018. Meanwhile, since January 2017, 2,166 people have died in suburban railway accidents, keeping the daily average death toll at 8. Expectations are high from Railway Minister Piyush Goyal, the second successive Mumbaikar to hold the portfolio. But Goyal’s grand “Dussehra gift” to Mumbaikars — 60 new services, whose announcement had to be hastily cancelled on Friday — actually comes at the cost of further stretching resources that are already at breaking point — in this case the strength of motormen. Officials have already expressed concerns about staff shortage.

Such ad hocism is actually a recurring feature of infrastructure planning in the financial capital — for public memory is short, and winging it is expedient.

In 2011, when the then government scrapped the Worli-Haji Ali Sealink (it was not just proposed at that point, but contracted out for construction), the proposed alternative was a coastal road, a “Western Freeway”, to be built on minimally reclaimed land and on stilts, hugging the coastline but causing minimum damage to mangroves, with a couple of small bridges along the route.

With an aggressive deadline of five years, it was to be a cost saving marvel — INR 100 crore per km instead of the INR 600 crore per km that the Sealink would cost. Six years on, the latest on that project is that it will now cost INR 12,000 crore, or about INR 330 per
km. Work could begin by March next year, well in time for the 2019 polls. Incidentally, to work around protests by residents of the seaside localities on the west coast, sea links connecting Bandra-Juhu-Versova are back on the drawing board as part of this Western Freeway.

If road infrastructure is deemed expensive and non-inclusive, catering only to car-owners, mass transit projects haven't fared better. In 2004, when a INR 1,100 crore project for a ferry route connecting Borivali and Nariman Point was contracted out, it was already delayed. The deal then fell through in 2008, was re-tendered and, in the nine years since, has passed from the hands of the Maharashtra State Road Development Corporation to the Mumbai Maritime Board, and has run into environmental law hurdles.

The estimated cost is now INR 2,000 crore. Work on the Borivali jetty was to start in October 2017, but that deadline stands deferred. Neither agency has any freshly updated data on anticipated ridership.

The Metro Rail network, planned through the 1980s and 1990s, is finally being built — with multiple routes under simultaneous construction, and promising a painful gestation. It is, nevertheless, the single big city mass transit project that can extensively mitigate the commuting problems of Mumbaikars. But even with the Metro, continuing protests from some suburbs are evidence of the absence of participatory processes in infrastructure planning.

Senior urban planner Sulakshana Mahajan says the only solution is to put all of Mumbai's transportation infrastructure and operations in the hands of experts, “like a patient in an ICU where nobody but the most qualified doctors are allowed to touch any part of the patient’s body”, remove political interference and politically expedient decision-making entirely, and work step-by-step on a masterplan that will hold good for the next 50 years.

Most Mumbaikars will be willing to wager anything that such radical ideas die as routinely as passengers on Mumbai locals.