Indian Railways vs COVID-19

CASE STUDY

By Ankita Sharma
Invest India - Strategic Investment Research Unit
INDIAN RAILWAYS vs COVID-19: A CASE STUDY

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on nearly all spheres of the Indian economy. Due to restricted connectivity during the lockdown, supply-chains, exchange and transfer of essential goods and services and distribution of various commodities have all been affected. However, a critical public utility has emerged as a beacon of hope and public service in this crisis: the Indian Railways.

India’s multi-layered and mammoth network of railways – the world’s fourth largest – has not only weathered this ongoing storm with remarkable resilience but is also proving to be an essential lifeline for those in need. Between 25 March to 17 April, under the aegis of the Ministry of Railways, special parcel trains have been instrumental in transporting 5.2 million tonnes of food grains across the country. In addition, the supply of fuel stocks, medical equipment and supplies, Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) and general goods are being made available in cities and villages through the Indian Railways. Due to this proactive stance, shortages of goods and food stocks have been largely minimized.

Indian Railways staff has been working tirelessly since 28 March 2020 to provide hot cooked meals to needy people after the lockdown due to COVID-19. Railways has been providing bulk cooked food with paper plates for lunch and food packets for dinner through IRCTC base kitchens, RPF resources and contribution of NGOs. As of 20 April, Indian Railways crossed three million mark in distribution of free meals.²

Undoubtedly, the efficient response and farsightedness of the Indian Railways during this emergency is an exemplary testimony of public commitment. Acknowledging this, Prime Minister Narendra Modi recently said in a tweet, “Proud of the Indian Railways team. They’ve been continuously helping our citizens in this crucial hour.”³

This paper examines the various noteworthy measures taken by the Indian Railways so far, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

---

3. https://twitter.com/PMOIndia/status/1289271988032823804
PROACTIVE MEASURES UNDERTAKEN PRIOR TO THE LOCKDOWN

EXECUTIVE/ ADMINISTRATIVE MEASURES

1. Creation of an ‘Online Dashboard’ for better coordination between officials of the Railway Ministry and various Zonal Railways. Through this dashboard, online monitoring of day-to-day COVID-19 preparedness activities and their progress can be tracked.

2. Constitution of a ‘COVID-19 Rapid Response Team’ comprising of six executive directors from Railway Board to coordinate the efforts of Indian Railways across all the zones. The Indian Railways has a total of 17 zones or divisions in which it operates. One nodal officer from each zone will serve as a point of contact for all COVID-19 preparedness measures and will be in constant touch with the COVID-19 response team of the Railway Board.

3. Advisories were being issued to passengers to avoid non-essential train journeys and to ensure that they do not have running fever while they are commencing the journey. At any point during the journey if a passenger feels that he is having fever, he can contact the railway staff for medical attention and further assistance.

ADDITIONAL MEASURES

1. To discourage unnecessary travel and to prevent the vulnerable category of senior citizens from undertaking unnecessary travels, concessional booking of all tickets except patients, students and divyangjan (specially-abled) category (for unreserved and reserved segment) were suspended on 20 March 2020.

2. As a precautionary measure and to discourage non-essential travel and overcrowding of trains, a total of 155 pairs of low occupancy trains were cancelled up to 31 March 2020.

3. Indian Railways had also facilitated return of students stranded in northern part of the country, due to sudden closure of educational institutions, to their homes in southern, northern-eastern and eastern regions of India.

4. To avoid unnecessary crowding at railway stations in wake of the spread of COVID-19, it had been instructed to Divisional Railway Managers (DRMs) to review the situation in railway stations and raise the price of platform ticket to INR 50 wherever necessary.

5. Regular announcements were being made on railway stations and in trains to sensitize public about COVID 19.
CANCELLATION OF ALL PASSENGER TRAIN SERVICES IN THE WAKE OF COVID-19 ON 22 MARCH 2020

Following Prime Minister Modi’s instructions, the Ministry of Railways announced, “In continuation of the measures taken in the wake of Covid-19, it has been decided that all passenger train services on the Indian Railways, including premium trains, mail or express trains, passenger trains, suburban trains, Kolkata Metro Rail, Konkan Railway etc. shall be cancelled till 31 March 2020.”

The ministry also mentioned, “Adequate arrangements shall be made to facilitate hassle-free refund to passengers affected by train cancellations.”

It was on the same day that the Delhi Metro Rail Corporation too announced that its services shall remain completely closed till 31 March 2020. However, these travel bans were later extended to 3 May 2020.

Since the very beginning Indian Railways has been relentlessly working closely with the state governments and the central government to fight COVID-19 and helping the country during this unprecedented crisis. Minister for Railways, Piyush Goyal stated, “With relentless dedication, hard work and meticulous planning, Railways keeps the nation running smoothly.”

Continuing its stride, the Indian Railways has spearheaded and introduced a number of initiatives during the lockdown period as well, which have been widely acclaimed.

MEASURES DURING THE LOCKDOWN

1. In the wake of pandemic COVID-19, Ministry of Railways, in consultation with Production Units & Zonal Railway workshops, decided to use the manufacturing facilities of its production units like Chittaranjan Loco Works, Chittaranjan, Integral Coach Factory, Chennai, Rail Coach Factory, Kapurthala, Diesel Loco Works, Varanasi, Rail Wheel Factory, Yelehanka to manufacture essential items which can be utilized for the treatment of affected people by this pandemic.

   Essential items included - simple hospital beds, medical trolleys for hospitals and quarantine facilities, stretchers, hospital footsteps, hospital bedside lockers, washbasins with stands, ventilators, PPEs like masks, sanitizers, water tanks etc.

2. Coaches are being modified to be used as isolation wards as a contingency measure.

5,000 coaches are being planned initially.

Each coach will be equipped with one toilet and one bathroom each. To make it more comfortable the middle-berth has been removed and mosquito nets have been fitted on the windows. Fixtures for medical equipment and oxygen cylinders have been installed.

3. More than 6,500 hospital beds of Indian Railways are to be made available to supplement the efforts of government in tackling COVID-19.³ Jagjivan Ram Hospital, zonal hospital of Western Railway, has been converted to a COVID-19 hospital.

4. Railways has transported 32 lakh tonnes of foodgrains between 1st-16th April 2020 as compared to 12.9 lakh tonnes in the same period last year.⁶ On 22 April 2020, Indian Railways created a new record by loading foodgrains of 112 rakes which is equivalent to 3.13 lakh tonnes.⁷

5. Indian Railways Production Units, workshops and field units have started manufacturing PPE coveralls for medical and health-care personnel who are directly exposed to the COVID-19 disease when working amongst infected patients. Railway Minister said, “Indian Railways is at the forefront to protect those on the frontline. From measuring to cutting and stitching, the railways staff works with precision to make Personal Protective Equipment. Aiding the medical fraternity with protective gear, Railways is committed to support India’s fight against COVID-19.” Till 9 April 2020, Indian Railways has produced about 6 lakh reusable face masks and more than 40,000 litres of hand sanitiser.⁸

FOODGRAIN TRANSPORTATION HAS MORE THAN DOUBLED

APRIL’19
12.9 LAKH TONNES

APRIL’20
32 LAKH TONNES
6. Indian Railways is plying ‘Annapoorna’ trains, a combination of two foodgrain loaded trains for timely transportation of essential goods. The Northern Railway zone has formed 5,000 tonnes long haul loaded food grain trains.\(^9\) Up to 16 April 2020, 25 such ‘Annapoorna’ trains had been formed and run by the zone. Like Northern Railways, the South Central Zone has also come up with a unique concept of running ‘Jai Kisan’ special freight trains, as a part of this endeavor, to ensure speedy delivery of food grains to different parts of India. As a result, 5,200 tonnes capacity food grains will be moved in a single path.\(^10\)

7. Working in a team, IRCTC along with RPF and other Railway Departments in various Railway Zones is supplying cooked food with paper plates and food packets for dinner to needy people. GMs/DRMs of concerned Zone and division are also in continuous touch with IRCTC officials to enhance the outreach of these efforts of IRCTC even beyond the station vicinity to cater to the food requirements of needy people in areas surrounding the railway stations with the help of District Administrations and NGOs. From its kitchens, IRCTC has so far distributed about 102,937 meals to the poor and the needy from 28 March 2020 with the help of RPF, other government departments and NGOs.\(^11\)
8. Parcel trains are being currently operated on 65 routes. Such a facility is being provided by the Indian Railway to meet the supply of goods and products. Parcel trains are proving to be a profitable venture to the Railways as over 20,400 tonnes of consignments have been loaded since its commencement was announced and the earnings have already reached Rs 7.54 crores.

On 27 April 2020, the e-commerce giant Amazon India announced that the company will be utilizing the services of these COVID-19 parcel trains, to further its operations in additional 55 lanes during the lockdown.

The facility of transporting parcels through these trains can be availed by any person or company. As per the available trends, following goods are being transported across the length and breadth of the country:

- Perishables (including eggs, fruits, vegetables, fish)
- Medicines, medical equipment, masks
- Milk and Dairy products
- Seeds (for agricultural use)
- Other general goods such as e-commerce consignments, packaged food items, books, stationary, packing material, etc

---

Indian Railways has also been running other parcel trains as per demand of customers during this period which include:

- ‘Milk Specials’ from Palanpur (Gujarat) to Palwal (near Delhi), and from Renigunta (AP) to Delhi
- Milk products from Kankariya (Gujarat) to Kanpur (UP) and Sankrail (near Kolkata)
- Food products from Moga (Punjab) to Changsari (Assam)

INDIAN RAILWAY INNOVATES DURING COVID-19

In the time of social distancing to combat coronavirus, the Indian Railways has developed a wash basin in which the water tap and the soap dispenser are mechanically operated without touch.

The East Central Railway (ECR) spokesperson said the modified wash basin had been developed by the Barwadih Wagon Care Centre of the Dhanbad Division.

To use the modified basin, a person will have to press the lever by foot and water and soap will be dispensed. “An easy to make and easy to use system has been developed by our innovative staff,” the ECR official said and added, it could hold contain the Covid-19 spread.

9. In a major boost to the supply chain across the country, Indian Railways introduced Swift and Efficient Transport of Utilities (SEnT) to ensure unhindered services of time tabled parcel trains for nationwide transportation of essential commodities and other goods. SETU which was launched on 19 April, has a round-the-clock all-India helpline number — 8448848477. It has facilitated the delivery of 30 tonnes of items within 24 hours of launch.

10. To ensure speedy and efficient supply of essential commodities, Railways has upscaled transportation by using Roll-on Roll-off (Ro-Ro) facilities to carry loaded trucks. This proved to be very useful for many transporters in the Konkan region. Railway Minister Piyush Goyal shared a video of the Ro-Ro train and tweeted, “Ensuring speedy and efficient supply of essential commodities, Railways has upscaled transportation by using Roll-on Roll-off (Ro-Ro) facilities to carry loaded trucks.”

11. [Link: https://twitter.com/PiyushGoI/status/1246208220146551665]
11. Indian Railways continued to feed the infrastructure sector and ramp up the supply chain during the COVID-19 lockdown. From 1-11 April 2020, Railways loaded and carried 1,92,165 wagons of coal, and 13,276 wagons of petroleum products (One wagon contains 58-60 tonnes of consignment). Details are as follows:\(^\text{16}\)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sl. No.</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>No. of wagons of coal</th>
<th>No. of wagons of petroleum products</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>01.04.2020</td>
<td>14078</td>
<td>1132</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>02.04.2020</td>
<td>18186</td>
<td>1178</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>03.04.2020</td>
<td>17474</td>
<td>1178</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>04.04.2020</td>
<td>18038</td>
<td>1079</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>05.04.2020</td>
<td>17211</td>
<td>791</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>06.04.2020</td>
<td>17410</td>
<td>731</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>07.04.2020</td>
<td>18215</td>
<td>1450</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>08.04.2020</td>
<td>18225</td>
<td>1273</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>09.04.2020</td>
<td>17387</td>
<td>1536</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>10.04.2020</td>
<td>18137</td>
<td>1338</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.</td>
<td>11.04.2020</td>
<td>17804</td>
<td>1605</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>192165</strong></td>
<td><strong>13276</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

12. As the summer heat increases, Indian Railways with the help of its PSU IRCTC is providing Rail Neer water bottles to policemen stationed at road nakkas and other places in the war against COVID. Till 21 April more than 50,000 bottles have been distributed and this arrangement will continue till 3 May 2020.\(^\text{17}\)

13. As on 18 April 2020, Indian Railways has transported 1,150 tonnes medical items in various parts of the country. The zone wise details of transportation of medical goods are as under:\(^\text{18}\)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Railway Division</th>
<th>Feedback</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Southern Railway</td>
<td>83.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>South East Central Railway</td>
<td>15.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>East Central Railway</td>
<td>1.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>North Eastern Railway</td>
<td>2.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>East Coast Railway</td>
<td>1.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>South Central Railway</td>
<td>47.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Central Railway</td>
<td>135.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>North Central Railway</td>
<td>74.32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>West Central Railway</td>
<td>27.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>South Eastern Railway</td>
<td>2.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>South Western Railway</td>
<td>12.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Eastern Railway</td>
<td>8.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>North East Frontier Railway</td>
<td>2.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>North Western Railway</td>
<td>8.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Western Railway</td>
<td>328.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Northern Railway</td>
<td>399.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>1150.17 T</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

14. Railway Emergency Cell for COVID was formed as a comprehensive nation-wide unit comprising of about 400 Officers and staff from Railway Board to Divisions. During the lockdown, this cell has already responded to about 13,000 queries, requests and suggestions every day, from five communication and feedback platforms namely - Helplines 139 and 138, social media (specially Twitter), email (railmadad@rb.railnet.gov.in) and CPGRAMS. More than 90 per cent of the queries were responded on one-to-one basis, mostly in the local language of the caller, over telephone.19

15. On 27 April 2020, the e-commerce giant Amazon India announced that the company will be utilizing the services of these COVID-19 parcel trains, to further its operations in additional 55 lanes during the lockdown.

CONCLUSION

Minister for Railways, Piyush Goyal recently stated, “The idea for extensive usage of Indian Railways for COVID-19 was first proposed to me by Hon’ble Prime Minister Narendra Modi when he called me on March 22, the same day on which all Indians united to observe the Janta curfew. From that day onwards, Indian Railways has taken quick decisions, bolstered preparedness and worked on a war footing in our battle against COVID-19. I thank my 13 lakh strong Indian Railways family, which has given India many ‘Corona Warriors’ in our response against this global pandemic.”

Public response to the Indian Railways’ exemplary work during the COVID-19 crisis has been extremely positive. Some social media users have hailed the Railways deeming their efforts, “systematic, organized and sensitive to public needs.” In this manner, the Indian Railways has innovated consistently to provide much-needed relief material during the Covid-19 crisis in India.


INVEST INDIA.GOV.IN