

## Luxury for foreigners, but why ignore Indian passengers?

Indian Railways is mulling over a plan to attract foreign tourists with exclusive luxury coaches on all its major trains. But many domestic travellers say the ability to pay, and not nationality, should determine who is taken on board.

According to a railway ministry official who wished to remain anonymous, the public amenities committee (PAC) last week recommended that exclusive 'specially designed coaches' be added on trains for the benefit of foreign tourists.

'The committee's recommendations are not final. The proposal will be examined and feasibility assessed. Then the railway board and the minister will examine the proposal and take a decision,' the official said.

Many Indians have been left wondering about the preferential treatment foreign travellers would get on Indian Railways, the largest state-run network of trains in the world.

'Nowhere else in the world does a train network have exclusive coaches for foreigners. While it may help railways earn more, it would be absolutely discriminatory. The railways is not a private enterprise; they cater to the public!' said Venkatraman Srinivasan, 59, a Delhi-based business consultant.

Nikhilesh Tiwari, a student from Lucknow, said: 'The government should base its judgement on cost, not nationality. The government is just looking for excuses.'

To attract foreign travellers, the select coaches will be designed to have more leg room, better designed seats and toilets, wider sleeping berths and aesthetic interiors. The windows too would be larger to give a better view of the landscape.

Even those supportive of the idea of higher priced luxury coaches don't believe that Indians should be left out.

'It is a nice idea to have luxury coaches. They will help in leaving a good impression on foreigners and in increasing tourism to India. But I don't think to have them only for foreigners is fair,' said Rujuta Phadke, a student from Pune.

Phadke, however, said domestic travellers weren't 'sensitive enough to maintain the facilities provided'.

Faisal Siddique, a Delhi based-researcher, felt 'it would be good idea if the government would do something for the Indian passengers' as well.

'It is really sad that the government has such little faith in the people of our country. I think we are educated enough to respect luxury coaches. Unfortunately, we do not get enough luxury in our own country, which is the main reason why Indians are now preferring international holidays.'

Tourists can currently enjoy lavish facilities only on board Palace On Wheels, Deccan Odyssey, Royal Rajasthan on Wheels, Fairy Queen and The Golden Chariot - all luxury tourist trains run by

the the Indian Railway Tourism and Catering Corporation (IRCTC).

The railways are keen on tapping 'luxury' travel by foreigners by extending better facilities through exclusive coaches.

The committee's proposal also suggests keeping attendants for tourists as well as call-bell facilities in toilets to assist elderly and sick passengers.

'All in all, the idea is to make it a more professional experience for the foreign tourist,' the railway official said.

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