

To Overtake or not to Overtake

Technically, 15003 Chauri Chaura Express from CNB-GKP is an Up train; however due to convention of Rajdhani and Superfast, CNB-ALD will be referred to as the Down direction and ALD-CNB as Up direction.

Dramatis personae

15003 Kanpur Anwarganj to Gorakhpur Chauri Chaura Express : Scheduled departure from Kanpur Central 1730 hrs, scheduled arrival at Allahabad Junction 2100 hrs.

12424 New Delhi to Dibrugarh Town Rajdhani Express : Scheduled departure from Kanpur Central 1839 hrs, scheduled arrival at Allahabad Junction 2039 hrs.

BEFORE THE JOURNEY

Prelude

I can barely remember the last occasion I have taken a train ride just for a lark. Nearly always it has been travelling with a purpose, which has resulted in almost all my train trips being concentrated in one particular sector. Since the start of this year I have been on the Kanpur (CNB) Allahabad (ALD) route maybe a dozen times and the trips here have become almost monotonous. Well, *almost*. With every new trip, I am amazed at the variety which this 195 km long stretch can display. Like a chameleon constantly changing colour, this sector seems to continuously change character from one day to the next. There can be an aggressive run battling reds and yellows through a jam-packed section or a sedate cruise through a slew of greens. When lucky, we get to be king of the Through line, showing obvious disdain for freighters and lower priority passenger trains in loops. A reversal of fortune can on the other hand turn us into a refugee sheltering in loop lines paying our respects to Rajdhans, Superfasts and maybe even Mails/Expresses.

Action at CNB – scheduling issues

“Yatrigan kripya dhyan dein gaadi number 1-5-0-0-3 Anwarganj se Gorakhpur Chauri Chaura Express via Allahabad, Varanasi thodi der mei platform number 3 par aa rahi hai,” the announcement rings out loud and clear at 1655 hrs on May 02, 2013. Within minutes, just as I emerge from the underpass onto the platform, the loco crawls past with the 16 coach rake in tow. As expected it is a WDM3A from Gonda. 16594 is the number. It is in LHF and as the short hood passes I see it has Daulatram DBR. So it is a modern Deemer, closer maybe to WDM3D than to the original 3A. Quickly I am settled in my berth (A1, 13) with the luggage stashed away under it. The lower berth means that I can have the window, and there being more than twenty minutes to departure, I now turn to the scheduling of this train.

The rationale behind the timetables of Chauri Chaura and Dibrugarh Rajdhani is weird at best. Chauri Chaura has four halts between CNB and ALD – Fatehpur, Khaga, Sirathu and Bharwari – given which its travel time of 3h 30m from CNB to ALD seems wildly inflated. 22441/2 Intercity can do the same stretch in 3h 5-10m with three more halts than 15003. Of course Intercity gets a better loco but surely loco does not make so much difference. Our arrival/departure times at the various halts are even more paradoxical. Upto

Fatehpur the schedule is quite tight and from there to Bharwari it is a super squeeze, which only a Rajdhani or Duronto can possibly achieve. Such an unrealistic squeeze can only mean one thing – the scheduling is done so that these intermediate stations cannot in any way constrain the eventual arrival time at ALD. But this interpretation goes for a toss as there is a gaping slack after Bharwari, with us being allotted an hour and a quarter to cover barely thirty five odd kilometres. Most of the slack time is spent in the loop, generally at Bharwari itself, waiting for Royal Highness Dibrugarh Rajdhani to grace the station with its august presence. More often than not the wait is absurdly long at half an hour or even more so that the great dictator may not have to see even a double yellow on account of a minnow like Chauri Chaura.

It is not that Raj ever arrives on time though. The 4 h 34 m allotted to it for NDLS-CNB is hopelessly inadequate given that it is an isolated Rajdhani running through a section densely packed with goods, Mails, Expresses, Superfasts etc. all of which have lower MPS and need to be overtaken. Most of the time Raj takes about 45 minutes or more to just make it to Ghaziabad from Delhi and the subsequent 110 km/hr plus average required for a punctual CNB arrival is near-impossible. Like having an 11 runs-per-over asking rate in an ODI or 22 per over in IPL. A delay of 15 to 20m at CNB is inevitable, and the run from thence to ALD generally takes the full 2h 0m which is scheduled. 1850 at CNB and 2055 at ALD would have been more realistic timings for 12424 and that would automatically enable poor Chauri Chaura to stave off the overtake by cutting just ten minutes from the huge slack time.

But the schedule is as it is. The section controllers usually give some leeway to the goods trains in front of 15003 (hardly a surprise given its profile) and it reaches Bharwari at around 2010 hrs or so. For a 2055 arrival, Raj should pass Bharwari at around 2030-35 so the overtake occurs about 20 minutes after Chauri Chaura arrives. As overtakes go it is a real scorcher with the Raj at the limit of its prowess, sweeping through the tranquil station like a tornado. One moment it is just a triangle of light in the distance, the next moment it is rushing past with horns blaring and coaches clattering madly. The sound and vibration persist long after the flashing tail light has vanished into the void. The tracks, the platforms, the signal cabin and the static rake of 15003 all echo Raj's strident roar, basking in reflected glory. At least the brilliance of the action partially mitigates the frustration and humiliation arising from this degrading scene.

KANPUR TO FATEHPUR

Start to MPS

At 1731 the CNB starter softens from red to yellow and 16594 comes up with the archetypal response. We are six or seven coaches behind the loco and the shrill sustained blast of the EMD style horns assaults the eardrum like ocean breakers buffeting a fisherman's yacht. Some people on the platform clap their hands to their ears and some even stop in their tracks. A thousand conversations are interrupted, speech drowned out by the scream which no electric loco can ever aspire to. The chugging as the train pulls out is not audible even from the non-ac area. Hardly a surprise as the LP would use barely first or second notch to take the 16 coach rake past the turnouts. I come back to my window seat which faces the loco and looks out on the right. I will get a clear view of crossings and also of the eventual overtake. Right now it is a different view to which I am treated. The turnouts have been cleared and we enter a curve towards the right. The loco with its blue and white Gonda livery is clearly in view, its length heavily contracted and dwarfed by its height. Behind it a couple of coaches can just be made out. As the curve becomes sharper, the view improves and the loco acquires a more normal appearance. We are still heavily inside Kanpur city and there are settlements right next to the tracks which are barricaded off by a mostly continuous wall. At every gap in the wall there are people impatiently waiting for us to clear off and let them cross the tracks. Not surprisingly the loco which is crawling at 20 km/hr (MapmyIndia is in superb form as usual) is screaming itself hoarse, the horn clearly audible even from inside the ac area. Like every trackside

settlement the surrounding locality is somewhat shabby and run down. Sometimes the shanties are so close as to obstruct the line of sight to the loco on the curve ahead. The settlements however are over long before the curve is and the view across the relatively open spaces is now excellent. Suddenly there is a smoke column rising from the loco and the needle of the speedometer starts showing a slight upward trend. The LP takes a second puff on his big cigar and the acceleration is steady now. The initial plume of smoke as the engine powers up dissipates as it stabilizes at its new rpm. Even in the steady state however a greyish vapour can be seen rising from the exhaust vent and getting lost in the surrounding atmosphere. We have accelerated to the sectional MPS of 40 km/hr and are going steady and still the track shows no sign of straightening. There is the Alco out in front, idling now that MPS is up, no smoke issuing from its chimney. The curve gives a false impression of closeness – it seems that the loco is only a stone's throw away from my coach instead of the actual 150 metres or so. 'Catch me if you can,' it seems to taunt the coaches. From the somewhat seedy parts of Kanpur we transition into a more posh area as a large road (MapmyIndia says it's Napier Road) emerges from the right and becomes parallel to the track. Cars and motorbikes easily scoot past us as we proceed steadily for Chandari. At long last the loco and the front coaches swing leftward, becoming more and more contracted till they disappear from view. I have no idea how many degrees of angle we have covered in this great curve, but my guess would be at least a right angle.

As Chandari approaches I go outside the ac area. Checking the area to be free of TTEs, railway staff and officious passengers, I open the door on the left side and park myself a safe distance away from it. While opening doors, I always prefer the left side as the right one has greater risk from the swirling air currents generated by a crossing train. The khalasi shows us the green flag at Chandari and since the speed remains constant at 40 km/hr I assume the starter must be green as well. There are intermittent blasts of the horn – since the platform is on the left of the loop line, this is more than adequate for the sedate passage down Through. In due course of time the entire rake has cleared the points at Chandari and now we should be ready for some speeding action. Sure enough, the chugging of the Deemer soon becomes audible for the first time. The loco must be at full throttle and the sound is crisp and powerful, closer to the WDM3D/ new G3A engine noise than the more imprecise sound of the WDM2. As the speed crosses 50 km/hr the chugging gets swamped out by the clatter of the coach bogies and the hum of the alternator working hard to charge the battery. The battery surely needs a lot of charging – the ac coach was uncomfortably hot at and after CNB. As the chugging vanishes, for a second I think that the throttle must be off but no, my GPS is showing a steady increase. Speed is built up smoothly but slowly. The acceleration is not perceptible on an instantaneous basis but over sufficiently large intervals of time one can see that yes, the surrounding structures are disappearing from view faster than they were before, the grassy area next to the track is more indistinct, the coach is clattering at a more rapid tempo and the rumble of metal rolling on metal has grown louder. From the initial 40 km/hr, we make a virtually imperceptible transition to its double and continue further on. There is an enormous difference in the acceleration profiles of the diesel and the electric locomotives. Behind a WAP7 or a well-driven P4, a 24 coacher appears like a MEMU. The Wappie is a monster, a maniac hell-bent on reaching Maximum Permissible Speed in minimum permissible time. In contrast, the Deemer appears relaxed and at ease, heading for MPS no doubt but not in any great hurry to get there. As the speedometer comes closer and closer to three figures, the level of development of the trackside areas becomes lower and lower. Settlements become more and more isolated – most are standard brick houses but of the type more found in villages than in cities. Occasionally there are large structures, maybe godowns and warehouses. More and more area is just flat land, some portions of it under cultivation. Kanpur city is fast losing its hold on Chauri Chaura Express which is now cruising through the 103-4 km/hr range. As in the 90 range, the Deemer takes it easy, almost aimlessly, like it does not have a care in the world. Even though the speed is now the same as in a Wappie run, this one somehow has an unhurried feel. The cultivated land on the trackside is criss-crossed by cart roads, some of which lead to unofficial level crossings, with mostly pedestrians, a few cycles and the occasional tractor waiting patiently for our passage. The relaxed atmosphere means that several times I forget to check the watch and the GPS for measuring acceleration – I too seem to be more intent on just enjoying the track sounds and the scenery rather than focusing on facts and figures. On a Wappie run I am always on high alert, waiting for the minute to be up or for the speed to cross say 80 or 90 or 105, eagerly noting down the clocked figures and

comparing them with the best I have seen previously, trying to see if any new record has been created. The Deemer however is anything but a racer and records and statistics seem to be the last thing on its mind. Once a while, it is really invigorating to be far from the madding crowd of heavily loaded electrics with their throttles wide open, vying with each other to shave a few milliseconds off the acceleration run. Suddenly the Deemer breaks into a loud fit of honking, the claxon striking a jarring note in this hitherto tranquil scene. In my opinion the harsh EMD horn is more suited to the uncompromising electric monsters rather than this diesel kid. Must be Chakeri approaching. Sure enough there is a jerk as we ride the crossovers, and a second jolt as the loop line branches away. We have finally reached 108 km/hr and we hold this level steady as we pass the platform with ceaseless honking and the empty loop line merges back into the Through.

Fly in the ointment - recovery

It is unfortunate that the Deemer's carelessness is in all probability going to be its undoing. A relaxed journey is indeed very refreshing (as the poet says "What is this life so full of care/ You have no time to stand and stare" or something at least close to this) but it can be foolhardy in the long run. Especially if there is someone else behind you who has relaxation as the last of his/her priorities. 12424 would not be sparing itself to prevent every additional second of delay over its tight timetable. The 5000 HP of the WAP4 in the lead would be catapulting the 18 or 19 LHB coaches to MPS at every green signal and after every TSR. And the one thing Raj would love to do would be to teach little Chauri Chaura a lesson. We seem to be proceeding oblivious of the threat looming at us from behind. Suddenly I see that the TTE has arrived on the scene. I brace myself for the rebuke about the open door. How irresponsible am I to play with my life. Don't I know that if I fall out I will not only be 'troubling' myself but also harassing and delaying a whole trainful of passengers (yes I have heard this one too). I have my ticket ready and show it before he can say waitlist not allowed. The inevitable question comes, why have I opened the door. To enjoy the scenery, I reply. To my surprise he says ok as long as you stand where you are and do not go close to the opening. What a miracle not being prevented from doorplating. TTE also asks why don't you travel in sleeper since you prefer the outdoors to the ac. Well, sleeper is very difficult if you are carrying a lot of baggage. He agrees.

The first sign that Chauri Chaura is not really a superfast comes two or three minutes after Chakeri. I am back to my seat and have connected the GPS to the charger when the speed slackens quickly to around 60 or so and then tails off more slowly, sometimes holding level and sometimes plunging further. At least the first brisk run has made the ac coach nice and cool, a welcome change from the 45 degree heat outside. The retardation pattern seems more like yellow signal than caution order and yes, at Rooma station the red starter stares fixedly at us like a basilisk. Fortunately we are on Through so at least it is not going to be an overtake. Must be a freighter in the block ahead. So this is what they are going to do - run freighters ahead of Chauri Chaura until both are shelved to make way for Rajdhani. Well, it is barely 1800 hrs now and even a freighter should be able to make it to Bharwari within 2030. The halt does not last long and as we push off I go to the door with the GPS, determined to be disciplined and take the measurements this time. At first the LP does not take many notches and I think I can barely make out the slow, soft chugging. In fact, perhaps I am just imagining the engine noise. But at 15 km/hr the LP notches up and the Deemer comes to life. At that low speed, there are few extraneous noises from the coach and the continuous stream of sharply defined, evenly spaced reports from the prime mover is clearly audible. The pounding rhythm appears like the beating of a huge drum, as if bandmaster 16594 is calling upon his sixteen battalions to march into the battlefield.

Detour – technical discussion

20 km/hr is the obvious choice of baseline for the minutewise GPS measurements and the first minute sees us doubling our initial tally and earning one bonus mark. During this time there has been a further throttling and the drum has picked up from a military march to a frenetic tarantella, as if to exorcise ourselves in advance of the impending curse of Rajdhani. We must be on full notch, and as before the chugging soon fades out, swamped by the noise of the coach. Creditably, we add on another 20 km/hr in the second minute, thus making it 61 by the end of two minutes from 20. The next minute appears a little slower and sure enough, 15 is added to the total. A continuous but monotonically decreasing acceleration is a good sign however; it means that the loco is at maximum power and has not been interrupted by any adverse signal or anything. From 76 at the end of three minutes we pull up to 88 in the fourth. I suspect that the next minute might see less than 10 being added and indeed that is the case, with the Deemer falling just one short of this 'target'. Well the sixth minute should at least see us past the three digit mark and it does, the run starting three below 100 and ending three above it. The station of Sirsaul arrives during this minute and there is a BOXN in the loop line. This must have caused the adverse signal at Rooma and I am relieved that the nuisance is behind, for the time being at least. The entire overtake takes about 20 seconds and our speed increases by 1 km/hr between the caboose and the WAG7 in the lead. Will we ever reach MPS, I wonder. The track here is perfectly level and one cannot claim that gradients have spoiled the figures. At the end of the seventh minute we finally hit 108. It goes up a little more, briefly touching 110 before stabilising at the 107-8 mark. As before, the acceleration process appears sedate from this distance. It would have been less tranquil had I been closer to the loco and in a position to hear the nonstop chugging of the engine and the whine of the turbocharger. Then the loco would have appeared not relaxed but plain incompetent, puffing and panting from 20 km/hr to MPS in seven minutes with a mere 16 coach rake, of which only two coaches are ac.

Compare this with the performance of a Wappie – with a full 24 coach Superfast load it takes less than half of this time to achieve the same increase in speed. The present load would be little more than a joke, and till date I have not had the good fortune to take measurements on such a ride. (INSERTION: Some time after this ride I have been on WAP4 with 16 coach load – 20 to 110 km/hr took 2.5 minutes on that occasion.) Some of the fault obviously lies in the lower horsepower rating of the Deemer – 3100 HP against 5000-6000 for the electric monsters. But I think a second problem lies in the abnormally high starting TE of WDM3A, which is necessary for starting goods rakes but not passenger rakes. The base speed of the traction motors gets determined by the power and the starting TE; for a given power the higher the TE the lower the base speed. In terms of the base speed, the operation can be divided into three regimes : (a) constant TE regime from zero to base speed, (b) constant power regime from base speed to about 2 or 3 times that and (c) degrading power regime beyond this speed. The first two regimes are good for quick acceleration, but the third is not as the TE and the power both fall off very rapidly with increase in speed. And this is the problem which besets the Deemer whose base speed is quite low at about 27 or so km/hr. So upto about maybe 80 plus km/hr the acceleration will be good but it will rapidly deteriorate thereafter, which is just what is seen in the data sets above. A ready measure of the average power output during each minute can be obtained by simply multiplying the difference between the initial and final speeds by the mean of these two speeds. The first quantity is proportional to the acceleration, and hence the TE while the second is just the average velocity, and power equals force times velocity. Of course this process will yield a number with the wrong dimensions and all, but it will still be proportional to the actual horsepower. This quantity for each of the seven minutes of the run is approximately 600, 1020, 1030, 980, 830, 600, 530. This is quite consistent – from 20 to 40 km/hr the power is low as full throttle was not employed at first; from 40 to 90 power is more or less constant and then it is decreasing rapidly as the speed is increasing further. At 100 km/hr it is almost 60 percent of its peak value. I wonder if it will not be a good idea to passengerize some of the Deemers by either changing their motor or more simply by regearing them. The base speed is after all an intrinsic property of the motors, and the corresponding velocity of the train is determined by the gear ratio. Even a change in gear ratio from the existing 65/18 to say 65/21 would suffice to bring up the power

degradation point to about 105 km/hr. At the other end, the revised starting TE of the order of 250 kN would still be more than adequate for a full load passenger train.

Ploughing on

This time around the slow acceleration is not so refreshing. Rooma has already given us a foretaste of what the section may be like and in that case it will be imperative for us to be quick on our feet (or on our wheels) whenever the signals are green. For they will all be green for the big bully behind us, which will anyway not waste so much time in acceleration. Our only hope lies if we can make it to Bharwari within say 2005 hrs, in which case the section controller might just prefer to let us through to ALD rather than detaining us for a full thirty minutes or more. But any later arrival there and Raj will get priority, gaining time at our expense. A halt so soon after CNB and then such a slow recovery does not bode well for our chances of reaching Bharwari with the requisite margin. A passenger train and then a freighter cross us – I miss the locos as I am more focused on the left side where the door is open. The run seems to have stabilized at MPS now as a couple of station skips are undertaken. Most of the trackside area is cultivated land and quite often there are little bridges over irrigation channels. Unofficial as well as official level crossings are quite frequent and they ensure that 16594 is honking almost continuously. Unofficial crossings get short blasts of the EMD trumpet while at official crossings it screams till one wishes it would run out of breath. Recently they seem to have painted a 'zebra crossing' pattern on the sleepers as an LC approaches – alternate brown and white bands warn the LPs of the impending intersection. The sun is close to setting and the level of illumination is decreasing continuously. As the scenery becomes blurred I close the door and come back to my berth to enjoy (or maybe not enjoy let's see) the rest of the journey from my window.

There is yet another halt at Aung and another slow recovery. There go all chances of staving off the angry Rajdhani. I am dejected at having to undergo a run whose primary distinguishing feature will be an overtake. But luckily, after that the section is clear all the way to Fatehpur. At Malwan a WAG7 with a BOXN is waiting in the loop on the opposite side. We pass Kurasti Kalan with undiminished speed and carry straight on towards Fatehpur, the needle showing no signs of slackening. Surely we are not going to skip Fatehpur in an attempt to ward off the overtake ? That would just be cheating. Well, no. At the last possible minute the deceleration occurs with considerable vigour. The Daulatram DBR does a superb job in combination with the air brakes and brings us from 100 plus to about 60 km/hr in no time. But then again we seem to have levelled off. We are now in the thick of the urban area and pass under a large flyover. Then comes the big level crossing. Hordes of pedestrians, bicycles and motorbikes are all parked on the Up lines reaching straight to Down Through where we are physically blocking their path. I wonder what the two-wheelers would do if there is a sudden train on Up Through. But I suppose they are more familiar with the place than I am so they know that a Through train is not scheduled at this time. Anyway doesn't this LC come right before the platforms ? We are still doing about 60 or so – is the LP out of his mind ? But that is the last thing he is. We plunge into the platform at 55 km/hr like the (Kolkata) BHEL metro entering Rabindra Sarobar or the (Mumbai) Siemens EMU sailing into Bhayandar and then apply brakes, hard. The application is about as late as it can get and one continuous run brings us to a dead stop. Now that's some display of technique by the LP. It is 1843 hrs. The run has been pretty decent overall and though we are behind the timetable by 5 minutes there might just be enough time to make it to Bharwari within 2005 hrs. So the big question is will the overtake occur or not ? The next sections will be of critical importance in determining that.

ONWARDS FROM FATEHPUR

Fatehpur to Khaga

At Fatehpur I hear a horn rapidly growing louder and louder. Has to be a crossing, not an overtake as we are hogging Down Through. From the approach speed it seems like a freighter and not passenger. The horn is low tone but packs a hefty punch so it must be a WAG5 or 7. Sure enough, 27068 rushes past at MPS with a full consist of loaded BOXN. The horn grows even louder as the loco just crosses me and then fades out amidst the deafening clatter and clanging of the speeding wagons. I wonder what the trespassing bikes and mobikes at the LC have done; I suppose there was just enough time between our clearing out and the freighter's arrival.

The halt at Fatehpur is brief and being on the Through line we do not waste time in notching up. The next train to pass Down Through here will already be notched up fully like that crossing freighter, only that its MPS will be close to double that of the goods mammoth. I wonder when it is scheduled to make the skip. It had better be after 1950 hrs if we want to escape from its clutches. Escape is just what we are trying to do now although it is rather difficult to understand the Deemer's intentions. The timings are more or less same as before with a reasonable run up to 90 km/hr or so and then plod plod plod to MPS, which we hit more or less at Ramva. It is pitch dark and the outside can barely be discerned. Even the stations are hard to spot as most of them are little more than a couple of isolated neon lights on a slightly raised, paved stretch of ground. The GPS however provides the position and speed information which is all I want. From Fatehpur to Khaga it is around 35 km and that should not take more than half an hour if the signals are all clear. But I suppose that is too much to ask for. Every few minutes we are crossing a goods train on the Up line and if that one is congested, so must be ours. And yes, our speed has started to flag post Faizullahpur – 109, 8, 7, 6 goes the display on my MapmyIndia – there must be a goods train in the block ahead. Only great Dibrugarh Rajdhani will have the authority to send all traffic into loops hours ahead of its arrival and lay a 200 km long green carpet for itself. Minor players like Chauri Chaura Express will have to tag along behind the bulky cargo. At 102 the brakes are suddenly applied with great force. I clock the brake run and find a deceleration through 40 km/hr in just 16 seconds. At least the Deemer has a big brake even if it is a lulu at acceleration. I wait for the next phase of deceleration from 60 km/hr to 30 and then maybe zero. But again we are luckier than I had thought. We level off and then start picking up once the platform at Rasulabad is skipped. At around 1910 hrs the horn warns me of the next station approaching although my GPS seems to have missed it. It is Sath Naraini; a lamppost near the name board makes it legible. And since the platform is on the far side of the Up loop, the board remains in my field of view long enough for the name to be read even though we are once more close to MPS. The next station is Khaga halt and we pull in at 1916. We have had two decent runs since Kanpur, and two more might just see us at Bharwari well ahead of the raging Raj.

Onwards to Bharwari – decision time

Well where is Raj ? I cannot access internet from the train and as we exit Khaga I call up 139 asking for the status of 12424 at CNB. The recorded voice tells me that it has arrived at 1855 hrs. So it is late as usual. And we are more or less on time. I mentally egg on the Deemer to build up some speed quickly. How I wish we had a Wappie in charge today – that would have seen us to MPS even before my railway call was finished. This one has barely reached half the target speed. But they say slow and steady wins the race so better not lose heart completely. It is 25 km from here to Sirathu and clear signals should get the stretch done in 20 minutes or so. At Katoghan there is a BOXN rake on Up loop and a green starter on Through. The home is also green so something must be approaching. I expect 14163 Sangam Express, which has often been my preferred conveyance from ALD back to CNB after a weekend at home. The train comes along – the loco

looks like P4 – but no instead of passenger coaches there are BCNA wagons behind it. So the loco had in fact been a WAG7. I wonder why this freighter is getting priority over the BOXN in the loop; maybe the goods are perishables or something. The Sangam crossing occurs a few minutes later and I can just make out the A1 and B1 coaches of the rake, which are my usual haunts. The loco is a WAP4 with mid-mounted headlamps, must be the usual Kanpuriya. 14163 is in no hurry to get to Khaga – why should it be given the slacks in its timetable ? After Sangam it is the turn of 22441 Intercity Superfast to cross our train which meanwhile has flagged a bit. This intercity is far more businesslike than Sangam. Last time I had preferred this to the Supercrawler and had been rewarded with a quick, punctual run. Even more miraculously there had not been a single stowaway passenger in the reserved non-ac chair car coach. Chauri Chaura is going just below 100 now and I cease to worry about these minor fluctuations. We have had a good run so far and should be able to absorb small-scale deviations. Thankfully there is no significant retardation until we are at Sirathu itself, at 1940 hrs.

20 kilometers in 25 minutes. Should not be an impossible task at all. For that is the distance to Bharwari where the final decision will be taken – overtake or no overtake. And that time frame will see us there at least half an hour clear of the anticipated passage time of the Raj. Any smaller margin and the section controllers..... But keep the gap wide enough and we might just get a chance to turn the tables. Far from being bullied by the big beast we might actually teach it a lesson in humility. From inside the ac coach it is impossible to say whether 16594 is accelerating. With the outside being pitch black and the track sounds effectively muffled and absorbed, I cannot understand whether we are climbing or on level. Modern technology comes to the aid of dulled perception and the display says that we have just inched past the 70 km/hr mark and are continuing steadily, like the proverbial tortoise. We go straight on to 110 and hold it there. Previously also, the LPs were doing a nice job of speed maintenance, usually in the 107-8 bracket but this time they have put on that extra 2. They too seem to be aware of the need to hurry to Bharwari. From Sirathu it is a full 10 km to the next station Shujaatpur and we skip it at MPS, eight or nine minutes after departure. Shujaatpur is the halfway point between Sirathu and Bharwari. Required run rate 0.67 km per min. Current run rate 1.82 km per min. The trophy is in our hands !

Will you overtake or won't you ?

I am almost on cloud nine when Daulatram nearly throws me out of my seat. What ! We have just crossed Bidanpur and surely cannot be knocking at Bharwari's door already. And then forgotten memory comes rushing back – there is an extended caution order somewhere in this region, and it seems it is right here. Over the last year this caution has been steadily migrating towards ALD. When I had first noticed it last September (on board 12424 which had overtaken 15003 at Bharwari) it had been just after Khaga. Since then it has travelled a few km each month and now here it is, at the strategically best location for killing our aspirations of holding a Rajdhani at bay. Like the milkmaid of the fables, I have been dreaming of glory when victory is as uncertain as it was at the start of the journey – Aesop and Panchatantra are good for abstract preaching but they seem to go out the window when confronted with hard reality. Here we are going chug – chug – chug at 28 or 29 km/hr while behind us the Ghaziabad WAP4 must be flaunting an extra '1' before our figure. I sms a friend and fellow railfan to check the status of 12424 on Railradar. Prompt comes the reply, crossed Ramva at 1957. Very nice, no further delay post CNB. Finally, our 30 reduces to 15 and then tails off to zero. We are at Bharwari at 2002 hrs.

The halt is agonizingly long. Each second seems to unfold like a minute, bringing with it fresh waves of alternately anticipation and despair. On each of my last three occasions (in both 15003 and 12424) the overtake has happened. Today will we set a precedent ? Or will it just be the usual story all over again ? A second sms comes at my mobile. Faizullahpur at 2000. Doing maximum permissible speed are you ? Well I suppose I will have to stand and watch you doing MPS here as well. And then it strikes me that it won't do even that for caution order does not discriminate between Supercrawlers and Rajdhanis. If the overtake does occur it will not be a flypast but a crawlpast. And that is more than I can tolerate. Having a Raj pummel

you is still borderline acceptable – after all Rajdhans are meant to pummel all and sundry. But having it amble along for the overtake will be too insulting. I check my watch – surely we have been at Bharwari long enough. But no it hasn't even been 2 minutes. We are on the loop of course but we don't have a choice as the platform is not accessible from Through. Two minutes up and still no sign of motion – if there's another minute that might just mean trouble. The pursuer is sixty kilometres away and will do the stretch in a shade under half an hour, which might just be considered a short enough wait for us. As three minutes are almost up I am on point of resignation. I will just have to accept that a mouse cannot hope to forever scurry out of reach of a pursuing eagle.

Suddenly just after three minutes there is a huge blast of the EMD horn. I quickly rule out the possibility of the horn coming from any crossing train or anything. There is a second blast, like a war whoop, and we are off from Bharwari. So we have achieved the impossible ! 15003 Chauri Chaura Express has got the final clearance to reach ALD ahead of the most high, most mighty and most puissant King of the section. Rajdhani can flaunt its superior loco, its superior MPS and its superior priority for all it is worth but today it has to eat humble pie. All its fantasies of vanquishing a 16 coach supercrawler with a Deemer are crumbling to dust as we are out on Through line and merrily slipping further and further away from its grasp. Before I can say "take that, baby !" we are at MPS and are breezing past Manauri and Manoharganj and Sayyid Sarawan and whatever else comes on the way to the chequered flag. 16594's relaxed approach to the run has been amply vindicated today – even without worrying about competition it has come first. We are at ALD home signal at 2030 hrs and are made to halt due to train movement ahead. Eventually we arrive on Pf 9 at 2050 hrs. As I step out of the coach, the announcement rings out loud and clear "gaadi number 1-2-4-2-4 Nayi Dilli se Guwahati (sic) Rajdhani Express via (blah blah blah) thodi der mei platform number 4 par aa rahi hai". Aa jao bacche, tum aaj bees minute late ho. Aur hum dus minute before time hain.

As I exit the station premises the WAP4 leads its hallowed charge onto the platform. And draws up at the starter on a level with 16594. The northern lights have seen strange sights but even on this sector full of surprises this is one of the biggest I have had till date. Thanks a lot for your patience in reading till here.