

Chauri Chaura ya Chaubees Chaubees

An age-old contest between two trains vying for precedence in the CNB-ALD section, now in its seventh episode

Timetables : 15003 dep. CNB 1730 hrs, arr. ALD 2100 hrs; 12424 dep. CNB 1829 hrs, arr. ALD 2029 hrs

BEFORE THE JOURNEY

Drawing the battle lines

The context for the battle is the same as it has always been – a trip from Kanpur Central (CNB) to Allahabad Junction (ALD) to spend a weekend at home, a break from the hectic routine of the semester. This sem there is a problem – my project advisor has scheduled a meeting on every single Saturday. Since Friday is not a virtual holiday like it was last year, weekend trips have effectively got home, starter and advance all red. The one slot which still survived however was the August 15th to 18th period – while the extra-long break would be eaten by the professor, the pair of 17th (Sunday) and 18th (Janmashtami) would still be left intact to be treated like an ordinary weekend.

The choice of train this time is not easy. On 16th I will be able to catch both 15003 Anwarganj (CPA) to Gorakhpur (GKP) Chauri Chaura Express and 12424 New Delhi (NDLS) to Dibrugarh Town (DBRT) Rajdhani Express, and a ticket on the latter costs a lot more. But Raj carries an assurance of punctuality which Chauri (or any other Mail/Express/Superfast train in this section) does not. Over the last week or so, 2105 hrs has been 12424's latest arrival at ALD while 15003's timing has fluctuated between 2030 and 2300. On such a short trip, even one extra hour makes a big difference and I decide in favour of Raj. Twelve days before the trip however, seat availability will be a big factor; Indian Railways (IR) is not going to keep vacant seats on 12424 just so that the Great Railfan can travel in it. And sure enough, the current status on 12424 is Waitlist (WL) 1.

Till date, neither I nor my family members have ever managed to travel on a ticket which was initially waitlisted, and I automatically abort the booking and get a side lower in 3A on 15003. But then I come back and buy the waitlist ticket anyway. After all, one year back I had been exceptionally lucky as regards seat availability on Dibrugarh Rajdhani and who knows, a miracle might just happen again. And if the Dibru ticket somehow confirms, then I will still have enough time to cancel the Chauri ticket before its chart is prepared.

Thus, this time there is another dimension to the contest in addition to the usual race to the finish – which one will be *my* train ? Of course, it's Chauri now but it can become Dibru. The next question is who will reach ALD first – me or the opponent ? It will be really stupid if my Raj ticket confirms and I board it only to pull into ALD behind Chauri Chaura. Conversely, if the Raj ticket does not confirm and the train gains an hour's lead over my Chauri, then that will be very frustrating. If it's Raj reaching first then there is an additional matter – will its victory be convincing or borderline ? If I am on Raj then a 10-minute lead over my opponent will still be unsatisfying while if I am on Chauri, then a narrow defeat will not carry any degradation (and from a more practical viewpoint, any inconvenience). Of these questions the first is impossible to settle – a website called Trainman.in says that there is a 2/3 chance of the waitlisted ticket's getting confirmed, but since the webmasters share neither their data nor their algorithm, the prediction remains dubious. As for the other questions, let me look at the data I have gathered from past experience.

Precedents

[Spoiler warning : The outcomes in two previous trip reports have been summarized here, so read those first if you want the suspense.]

Till now, I have personally witnessed the race between 15003 and 12424 for a total of six times – thrice from either train. Two of the three Raj rides resulted in victories. One of the three Chauri rides ended in clear victory, a second in clear defeat, and the third though eventually a defeat, was morally a victory. The outcomes were understandable in some cases, incomprehensible in others. The first Chauri ride was in October 2012 with Gonda (GD) WDM3A 16062 as the power. Leaving CNB at right time and reaching Bharwari (BRE) at 2015 hrs, we were held up for close to 25 minutes before the Mighty One passed by with a show of sound and fury. The controller's decision in this case was inexplicable as BRE is the last stop for 15003 before ALD, which is a further 35 km ahead. Factoring in the entries and exits from loop lines, an average speed of about 1 km/min can be maintained in this section in the absence of cautions (as the condition was on that day). The travel time for Rajdhani is only 10-12 minutes less and it should have been possible to ensure a right time arrival for Chauri with no impediment to Raj. My second Chauri ride in May 2013 was (in retrospect) more predictable. A spirited LP commanding GD WDM3A 16594 started from CNB at right time and took us to Bharwari at 2002 hrs, half an hour clear of our pursuer. The green was given almost immediately and we were at ALD home by 2030, eventually arriving at 2050, ten minutes ahead of 12424. My latest experience with Chauri (September 2013) featured Andal (UDL) WDG3A 14704 in charge. A punctual departure from CNB saw us at BRE within 2005 hrs, and we were given green signal there for a before time arrival at ALD ahead of Raj. Unfortunately, Platform (Pf) 9 at ALD, which is required for 15003 to go over to the Varanasi side, was being occupied by some other train so we were forced into the loop at Subedarganj (SFG). Rajdhani rushed past, and we arrived as late as 2145 hrs. Nevertheless, in this instance the moral victory belonged to us as we would have made it but for some other late train and the speed of all trains post-SFG is the same (there is a PSR of 100 and lower between SFG and ALD).

From Rajdhani's viewpoint, the outcome is perhaps even more random. All three of my rides had featured departures at 1900 hrs, give or take a minute. All three had got all green signals en route (hardly any surprise there). The first occasion (September 2012) had featured Ghaziabad (GZB) WAP4 22334 as the power. After the 1859 departure from CNB, acceleration had been poor, partly due to the loco's reduced current tolerance and the rest on account of the loco pilot's (LP) lack of skill. Nevertheless, a single caution order en route (between Khaga-Katoghan) had seen us clocking a journey time of 1h 55m with a soft overtake of Chauri Chaura at Bharwari. On my second Dibru ride (November 2012) I had got a good loco but a bad driver. The LP was not equal to the task of extracting good performance from GZB's 22691, and, starting from CNB at 1858 hrs he lost two minutes upto ALD because of the two cautions en route. Seeing the LP's performance I had given up hope of the overtake and was surprised to see Chauri waiting patiently in the loop at Bharwari, as if the very name of Rajdhani had sapped all its desire to fight. The third time (August 24, 2013), the overtake was a near-certainty. With three cautions on the way the section was tight, and starting at 1900 hrs LP Bhawnath Jha and his machine GZB 22699 embarked on a blitzkrieg which remains the best WAP4 run I have seen till date. The presence of another fast train on the section – 12274 had departed CNB more or less midway between 15003 and 12424 – more or less eliminated Chauri's chances of winning, so you can imagine my surprise when we pulled breathlessly into ALD at 2058 hrs to find Chauri Chaura as part of the reception committee.

Lead-up to D-Day

So much for flashbacks, now let me come back to the present. Of late, Rajdhani seems to be having a distinct edge over Chauri Chaura. There are several reasons for this. One is the preponement of Rajdhani's timings from 1839 dep. and 2039 arr. to 1829 dep. and 2029 arr. While the change was implemented

several months ago [without being reflected in the working time table (WTT)!], in the recent few weeks it seems to be getting realized. Previously, timings less than 4h 50m for NDLS to CNB were virtually unheard of but now 4h 35m if not 4h 25m has become quite common. Also, CNB-ALD is consistently taking much less than 2h 0m, often as low as 1h 47-48m. An LP confirms that this is because there are very few cautions (sometimes zero, sometimes one) in the section. The two taken together, 12424 is quite often arriving at ALD between 2030 and 2040, making things tight for Chauri. On some occasions, Chauri is managing to retain punctuality despite the overtake while on other days it is not – must be the controllers are running freights ahead of it.

There is a freak railfanning trip on August 13th when I have to go to the city and I decide to return to campus by 14723 Kalindi Express. The link is a GD WDM3A, 18829 – since the waitlist has shown no signs of clearing, I will very likely get to see the same brand of loco three days later. The beast is lying completely dead, and when the LPs arrive I move up to watch it being started. Somewhere I had read that



a diesel starting is a sight to behold – ringing bells, smoking chimney and whining turbocharger. So I was a bit disappointed when the LP just pressed a button and whoosh! the engine was on. There were hardly any more bells and whistles than there are with starting a motorbike. As Kalindi prepares to leave, Chauri Chaura pulls in behind some Deemer whose number and shed I fail to spot. So right time arrival and hopefully a right time departure for Chauri. The Kalindi journey is decent – the coach despite being General Class is quite empty. The run till Anwarganj is painfully slow and there we are held up

for a Down train (the section is single track). After that we start picking up but are interrupted at a level crossing where the khalasi has been slack about lowering the gate – Kalindi is no Rajdhani that everyone will be at attention hours ahead of its arrival. We again accelerate and skip Rawatpur in style. Breezily chugging past an array of tempos, cars, buses and trucks on the parallel GT Road we arrive at Kalianpur more or less on time. Later that evening I am surprised to see that Chauri Chaura has frittered away a 75-minute advantage and handed victory on a platter to Dibrugarh Rajdhani at Sirathu.

Independence Day and one of my friends is going to ALD by 15003 (he doesn't have a meeting tomorrow with his advisor). "Dekh overtake kahan hota hai, Khaga Sirathu ya Bharwari," I poke fun at his train when it arrives at CNB with a 20-minute delay. Train Enquiry shows that it pushes off on time though and seems to be getting a clear run towards ALD. Meanwhile, 12424 reaches CNB at 1837 hrs and extends its halt by one minute beyond the schedule. Still, a 2035 arrival at ALD should see it comfortably overtaking Chauri Chaura en route. As the runs progress however it seems that Chauri is putting up a really resilient fight. It has taken as little as 1h 02m to reach Fatehpur and is sticking tightly to its schedule all the way to Bharwari where it halts at 1953 hrs. Meanwhile 12424 is approaching Khaga – seems today it will take a little more than the expected 1h 50m or so. There are eight blocks separating the two contestants and the decision will be a close call. For a long time there is no update of 15003 and I assume that the overtake sequence has been initiated. Suddenly however the website refreshes and Chauri's position comes out as Bamhrauli while the track-burner is still at Shujaatpur or Bidanpur something – I have to eat crow for my earlier taunts at the winning train.

Considering that Dibru is still on WL1 I should have been elated at Chauri Chaura's escape from its pursuer. And yet, I somehow want the overtake to happen, I want to see my favourite 12424 establish

itself as undisputed King of the Section. In a sense, 12423/4 Dibrugarh Rajdhani is WAP4's last bastion – the sole Rajdhani with a full load of 19-21 coaches to get a WAP4 (GZB) as regular link. For some time after the upgradation of 12309/10 Patna Rajdhani Express to 21 coaches, it had retained its Mughal Sarai (MGS) WAP4 allocation. In fact, my only ride on this train (CNB-ALD by 12310 last August) had been on one of its last days with the old loco. The LPs were systematically unable to stick to the tight schedule and in September the Railway Board permanently changed the link to a GZB WAP7. Of course, Bhubaneswar and often Ranchi Rajdhani get WAP4 links but their loads are comparatively light. Only Dibrugarh Rajdhani acts as a continual reminder that WAP4 is not a loco for small or slow trains but one for the heaviest and fastest. Thus, on the eve of battle I find myself with mixed allegiances; on the one hand I am rooting for Chauri Chaura which I must board tomorrow and on the other I am secretly hoping for victory for the trusty and indigenous workhorse of IR, WAP4.

THE DAY OF RECKONING

One question resolved

0855 hrs on Saturday, August 16th 2014 and I make one last check of my ticket status while the situation is still fluid. I have a class from 0900 till 1030 (yes, in addition to the project meeting), and after that the decision will have become final – either confirmed or waitlisted till eternity. Any hopes I had harboured of an overnight clearance are quickly dashed as the recorded voice intones “waiting list 1”. For all my 12424-fanning it seems I will not get the opportunity to board it this time. The bulk of the class is spent getting accustomed to this reality – I vaguely construct a few scenarios in which Chauri Chaura can prevail over its competitor. With no information about any of the relevant parameters (starting times, caution pattern etc.) these scenarios are just wild fantasies, ranging from VIP passengers on 15003 to loco failure on 12424. The instructor meanwhile is going on and on about processes with two possible outcomes – fan ON, fan OFF; spin UP, spin DOWN.....Chauri WIN Chauri LOSE.

Class over, I dial 139 to know what Fate has finally decreed. “You have entered 2-4-6-1-8-3-3-7-0-1” – there's no way to cut this short and obediently I press 1 to confirm. There are a few seconds of silence and then the verdict starts coming out. “For passenger number 1, status is,” I mouth the words in sync with the record. And then, for the second time in one year, the miracle occurs. It is a coach and berth number which tumble out of IR's database – B1, 34.

Now of course the whole situation turns around. If a loco must fail, it had better be on 15003 (12424 has not had a failure incident since January 06). If there are VIPs, they had better board 12424 (which they are likely to do anyway). I cancel the Chauri ticket and open Train Enquiry to see how CNB-ALD section had fared yesterday. Dibrugarh Rajdhani had finally reached at 2040 hrs, taking 1h 57m. Howrah Raj had been the fastest at 1h 55m and Patna Raj the slowest at 1h 58m. The timings are a pronounced and consistent increase from those of the last two to three weeks. Yesterday the section must have become bicautions and very likely today also it will remain so. Damn T-409. Every additional caution increases the chances of Chauri giving us the slip to ALD. For one, the caution may be at a location where Chauri has a halt, whereby its effect will get nullified. Secondly, the later our absolute arrival time, the greater the probability that the section controller and station master will allow the Express to sneak into ALD ahead of us. Anyway, there is a limit to the amount of speculation one can indulge in before a two hour journey. At around 1545 hrs I take a couple of printouts of the signal chart from CNB-ALD and set off for Kanpur Central.

Sightings

[There is a long list here and this section may be skipped without loss of continuity. The link of 15003 is GD WDM3A 16329.]

Sightings action begins at the IIT gate itself. The level crossing is down and I get ready with the camera. A steady stream of pedestrians bends double under the lowered bars and strolls across the tracks. At some point the khalasi comes out with the red and green flags and starts pleading with these people, “express gaadi hai, achaanak se aa jaayegi aapko pata bhi nahi chalega, paanch minut ruk jayye....”. Some heed his entreaties, some don’t. I wonder which train it is – could be 15107 Chhapra-Mathura Express. Trucks and buses are honking nonstop on GT Road and five times I set my camera on alert after mistaking them for a loco horn. One claxon seems to be more persistent than the others though – a continuous blast rather than the sharp but short toots of the lorries. Its rapid crescendo leaves little doubt; no vehicle on GT Road will be going at even one half the speed. The green flag unfurls as the last of the pedestrians scatter. The outline of the loco is apparent – it is a long hood forward EMD and clearly is at its MPS. The ground has started vibrating and it is becoming difficult to hold the camera steady. Suddenly, out of nowhere a cow comes onto the track. There are less than 200 metres between it and the train – my god, it is stupider than the pedestrians ! It seems to be totally oblivious to the thousand tonnes of metal hurtling towards it at 100 km/hr. The LP is honking nonstop but to no avail. I remain frozen to the spot, and so does the cow. Fortunately, the khalasi reacts like lightning. Picking up ballast from the trackside, he starts throwing it in fistfuls at the confused animal. It turns this way and that and then half a second before collision, steps off the tracks onto the road. Emergency is over and the train is upon me, just in time for the shot. It is not 15107 but 19716 Lucknow Jaipur Express, led by Bhagat ki Kothi (BGKT) WDG4 12626 “Kerala Express”. The two



stroke engine at full power is emitting every frequency from deepest growl to shrillest whine, and the brass fanfare on top of that is reminiscent of the climax of Beethoven’s Seventh. From the ground, an EMD is probably IR’s most spectacular locomotive, outstripping the electrics by miles; from inside the train though, it cannot come even close to the P4 and P7’s pyrotechnics.

As I step into CNB, I am greeted by a Duronto-liveried LHB rake moving up along Pf 5, accompanied by the growl of an EOG. My first reaction is it must be 22805, but that doesn’t have EOGs. Hell, surely it can’t be 12259, ten hours behind schedule ? As I cross the overbridge towards it, the loco appears like a WAG5 or M4. Unlikely to be 12259 in that case, and indeed it isn’t. It is 02112 Lucknow Mumbai AC Special train, being led by Bhusaval WAM4 21329. Two hours late coming from Lucknow; this train is certainly getting ‘special’ treatment. Another train is late at the outset : 51809 Passenger to Tundla is waiting on Pf 3 behind Lucknow WDM3A 16503; it should have been close to Etawah by now. Yet more delay announcements are being broadcast for Up trains; two hours for Neelanchal, three and a half for both Howrah Jodhpur and Sealdah Ajmer and five for Northeast. This North Central Railway (NCR) is amazing; no train here ever runs on time.

Except that is for Chauri Chaura. Within five minutes of its scheduled 1700 hrs it had arrived on Pf 2 behind GD WDM3A 16329. Of course, now that my waitlist has cleared, Chauri is going to clock a before-time ALD arrival. I am on the overbridge to cover the imminent Neelanchal when the rake of 14124 CNB-PBH (Pratapgarh) Intercity Express arrives on Pf 1 and 51809 departs amidst a royal cacophony. Forgetting Neelanchal I shift towards 14124; after all, last year too it had been part of the sightings list, exiting CNB simultaneously with 15003. That time the loco had been GD 14134; this time it is TKD (Tughlakabad) Baldie, 14015. From Pf 1 it is another shift to Pf 2 where Chauri Chaura should be leaving in 5 minutes – with all the walking up and down platforms and overbridges, railfanning at a big station can be hard exercise.

Precisely at 1730 hrs, the starter on Pf 2 turns yellow and the LP wastes no time in reacting to the permissive signal. 16329's horn has the pitch and tone of an EMD but the volume of an Alco so it doesn't add to the damage to my ears caused by 12626 and 16503. The start is almost imperceptible with the engine at idle power. The ultra-slow acceleration gives ample time to the passengers who were loitering on the platform; most clamber into their respective coaches with the confident air of people who have done it a thousand times before. Someone is less savvy though; barely have the first two coaches passed me than the rake grinds to a halt and the LP starts blowing the horn code for an alarm chain pulling (ACP) incident. An ACP after half an hour's halt is scandalous but nobody is bothered in the least. One would like to see what happens if I do an ACP while Dibrugarh Rajdhani exits CNB; I suppose I will have to blow up my wallet in bribes. Anyway, all pax settled in their berths, Chauri resumes its departure. The jam-packed general coaches are followed by marginally less crowded sleeper coaches. S1, S2... there is a smoke plume ahead and a couple of chugs as 16329 asserts its presence for the first time; S3 and a moonphaliwala is vending his product with gusto; S4, S5, a Hindi song being played on a cheap Chinese mobile wafts out the windows. Suddenly the scenery changes as the AC coach passes – bare outlines of men, women and children are visible through the large but tinted windows. The coach seems like two tier, and indeed it is A1. The next is B1 and the side berths are facing the platform. One of these is number 39, which belonged to me until a few hours back. I had checked the reservation chart, and it is not going empty; my good fortune has translated into someone else's good fortune too. After the two AC coaches, there are three or four more general coaches, each more crowded than the other. Finally there is the trailing SLR with the guard still standing at the door. The flashing tail light and the yellow X mark bend leftwards out of the platform limits and then rightwards as they dwindle into the distance. 1735 hrs and Kanpur Central has no remaining trace of Chauri Chaura Express.

A parallel departure of 15003 and 14124 was of course not possible today as Intercity was stabled on the wrong side of Chauri Chaura. Now that the latter is gone, it should be given the starter. But no, it seems a MEMU coming from Lucknow is going to get precedence and only after it settles down does Intercity start rolling out. There are frequent blasts of the horn as the train cuts across track after track, starting from Pf 1 and headed leftwards of Pf 9. With this, the station becomes temporarily empty, just as it had done last time. As on that occasion, there is a lone BOXN rake standing between the outer platforms. The direction



this time is reversed; in 2013 the freighter had faced Lucknow but today it faces Delhi. The loco is a WAG9 followed by a WDG3A; the only logical explanation is that the G9 had brought the train from ALD side but now the DG3A will take it further on via the unelectrified Kalianpur-Farrukhabad line.

As I shift platforms for the last time and head towards the starter of Pf 4/5, the imminency call for 12274 NDLS-HWH (Howrah) Duronto on Pf 6 is given; it causes no visible reaction. The coach indicators continue showing 'CNB' and nobody runs from one end of the platform to the other with heavy

baggage. At technical halt stations, Durgam is hardly a major presence; all the ripples and shock waves are reserved for the open lines. The water fillers do get into position however, and as the loco approaches, a pair of pilots pulls up near the starter. Amazingly, the lead LP is the same man who had driven this train when I was standing here last August; I don't know his name but I can recognize the face. The loco is 22402 of HWH and after no fewer than four long blasts of the horn, Durgam exits CNB at 1803 hrs. This one will certainly overtake 15003 and dent its performance, thus increasing our chances of pushing past it en route.

Second question resolved

I wish that 12424 too would have had the same LP as it did last year. It has been quite a long time since I last saw LP Bhawnath Jha in action. And with him in charge, the performance is guaranteed. Of course the acceleration will depend partly on the loco assigned but the speed maintenance will be tight regardless of loco number. I wonder who are the LPs today; even though I am hovering near the starter, I cannot see them. One pair whom I had approached turned out to be the crew for 18192 which has just arrived on Pf 5 behind UDL WDG3A 13045. The chaos and commotion caused by its presence is heady and it is a relief when the starter is served. As the rake exits, the PA system blares out the announcement which I am waiting to hear, "yatrigana kripya dhyan dein, gaadi number 1-2-4-2-4 Nayi Dilli se Guwahati (sic) Rajdhani Express via Mughal Sarai, Patna, Barauni Junction thodi der mei platform number 4 par aa rahi hai". It is 1825 hrs so there is hardly any delay. And hell, where are the LPs – surely they must be somewhere on the platform by now. At the very least I need to know the caution pattern on the route.

I spot the LPs at almost the last possible moment – they are hiding on the strip of platform ahead of the starter. Damn, it was careless of me not to have looked there earlier. The lead LP is Shri Parvez Zahid, with whom I had earlier had a brief interaction when I had visited the LP retiring room at CNB. Sharing responsibility in the cab is LP Ram Charan Singh. It turns out there is only one caution en route, at Bindki Road; 30 km/hr must be maintained between mast no. 974/10 and 974/08. Further discussion is precluded by the sudden appearance of a larger-than-life WAP4 in front of the starter. The headlamps are mounted in the middle so a newer loco is ruled out. Inwardly I curse; there go all chances of a 1300 A current tolerance on the traction motors. The number is 22564 – the loco earlier belonged to Vadodara shed, which is not exactly cause for cheer. My assigned berth is a middle; since MapmyIndia will not work except from the window, I look for space outside the ac area and settle at the back of B2. The high tone horn of 22564 wails like a P7 and at 1839 hrs we begin the crawl over the turnouts.

Our departure is perfectly on time as per the old time table and 10 minutes late according to the hasty revision. Normally that would put Chauri Chaura in a tight spot. Its minimum running time as per WTT is 2h 54m. This minimum includes no cautions but does account for the Rajdhani overtake. Throwing in the caution and the ACP but subtracting the overtake time will keep it more or less as it is. And then there is the overtake by 12274 – 15m extra in normal circumstances, 10 if extraordinarily lucky. All together, Chauri cannot arrive ALD earlier than 2040-2045 hrs. On the other hand, our minimum running time is 1h 47m and the caution will make it 1h 51m or so, hence our expected time of arrival (ETA) should be 2030 hrs – a clear lead over 15003. Victory seems assured as we trot past Napier Road in Kanpur city, towards the exit of the goods bypass at Chandari. There is a PSR of 50 km/hr here are we are doing about 45-6; not the tightest speed control yet but it does not matter much till the open line is hit. We drop below 40 as the bypass line comes into view on the right – maybe we are doing a brake feel test. But even as the tracks merge with a dull thud, there is no tendency to pick up. The platforms have started – surely the T-board comes before that ? In the absence of cautions, a steady less-than-40 through the platform can mean only one thing – a red starter. A fellow is doorplating on the left and I request him to check the signal; "koi light dikhai nahi de rahi" is his response. Fantastic – what's the point of doorplating a Raj without knowing even the basics. We are coasting and the display on my navigator is slipping, in

anticipation of the halt. At 32-3 km/hr however the slide stops and the needle starts climbing 33, 34. Crew to be seated please for take-off.

As the speedo touches 40, I check my watch to count off the minutes. It is already between 1852 and 1853 hrs now at the Chandari starter, two to three minutes later than the stipulated 1850. The ETA at ALD gets revised to 2033. Still clear of Chauri but that's assuming that the 1h 47m for the basic run and the 4m for the caution actually hold. On a heavily loaded (we are 20 coaches) WAP4 with a bad LP, these can easily expand to 1h 50m and 7m respectively and then Chauri might still get an opportunity, however slim, to make it to ALD before us. Or at least to get to SFG and dive into the third line, reducing our victory to the level of a consolation prize. A good Rajdhani LP on the other hand can cut down the basic to 1h 45m or less and hence ensure that Chauri's chance of success becomes identically nil. LP Parvez Zahid's performance in the next few minutes will settle this issue for once and for all.

The first minute is decent; neither scintillating nor subpar. A whine coming from the bogies rises steadily in frequency and the surrounding scenery starts becoming blurred. The acceleration is not physically perceptible however, and at the end of 60 seconds from 40 km/hr, we are at 67. This is a far cry from the 83 which Shri Jha had built up last year, but 22699 was a much better machine than 22564. The difference between good and bad machines (high and lower current tolerance) is most pronounced at low speeds and narrows down at higher speeds so the subsequent minutes will be important. The second minute in fact seems to be going quite well – neglecting the occasional GPS spike or link loss, the needle is climbing at an even rate and is hovering at 90 when the time is up. Seeing the speed, the doorplater decides against further risk and goes back to his seat. 92, 93, 94..... we are no EMU at acceleration but we go on adding one to one and our hundred's soon hit, at the 2.5 minute mark to be precise. The remaining half minute takes us to 2 below 15003's MPS and we smoothly enter the speed band forbidden to Mail, Express and Superfast. Chakeri has still not come, and I lose track of how far it is; we are going way too fast for chainage markers to be read, even with the most elaborate contortions. The fourth minute is still not complete when we surpass the MPS of 12274 running ahead to become the single fastest train in the CNB-MGS section. Almost immediately there is a shuddering jolt as the Chakeri crossover and loop entry sideswipe our bogies. The fourth minute elapses while we are running through the platforms and we hurtle past the starter at 123 km/hr barely ten seconds later; we have almost broken even on WTT for the CNBI-CHK minor section. Chakeri is in fact the locality housing the Kanpur International Airport which handles hardly any passenger traffic; well someone is sure flying through the area today. As the last digit on my display keeps changing, I keep looking at my watch; after all one never knows where we will level off. Moreover there is a neutral section coming, one kilometre ahead of the Chakeri starter. Shri Zahid means business however, and by the time it arrives we have just touched 129, hitting the level in 4m 40s starting from 40.

I am almost certain that the somewhat high acceleration time is entirely due to the loco. Increments of 27, 23, 18, 14 and 12 km/hr (extrapolated) in five successive minutes is a very smooth profile and shows the LP trying to utilize his machine well. When the LP is not good the profile is generally erratic and shows a zigzag trend. A considerable speed loss occurs at the neutral section (as on any other GZB loco, DJ is taking a lot of time to reset) but once it is clear, we are back up to 128. I finally send an SMS tracking Chauri Chaura; it says departed Fatehpur (FTP) at 1846 hrs. The sms tracker however does not differentiate between 'arrival' and 'departure'; given that it is nearly 1900 now, Chauri should have cleared Ramva had it indeed left FTP as the tracker says. Either way, 12274 must be on its heels if not already clear. And now as we despatch Rooma, the separation between the two trains becomes just ten blocks. Our win has become a certainty, and very likely it will be with a convincing margin.

The Final outcome

The speed is consistently maintained in the 128-9 km/hr bracket. Occasionally it goes up to 130 and very rarely dips to 127. While this is one notch below LP Bhawnath Jha, who can maintain exactly 130 like a BPCS for minutes on end, it is certainly very tight. Shri Jha is a natural; precious few can attain his level. But Shri Zahid is certainly trying his level best and doing a very good job. The needle goes up to 130 and transiently to 131 between Karbigwan and Aung; there is a downgradient here. The braking for the caution is hard, and as we level off at 30, I open the door to take a look at the chainage masts in the last of the twilight. 974/20 is where we are; we have reached the target speed about 200 to 250 metres before the caution. The acceleration out of the caution is a virtual carbon copy of the one at Chandari, further proving Shri Zahid's competence with the underperforming loco. The neutral section 1.5 km ahead of the T-board causes an interruption when we are at 72; though the DJ reset time is the same, the speed loss is hardly 2 or 3 km/hr. An exceptionally long peal of the horn heralds the arrival of Fatehpur – Pf 2 has alternating regions brightly and dimly lit and they flash like a stroboscope as we blast past at maximum permissible speed. The run to Khaga is completely even except for the predictable dip at the neutral section at Faizullahpur. Katoghan however seems to have thrown up a double yellow distant; the speedo drops to around 100 before starting to recover and indeed there is a goods train in the loop line.

Oh where is Chauri Chaura ?! In the hullabaloo of a ripping Rajdhani ride, I have completely forgotten about the little Express. SPOT 15003 and whoa! it has departed Katoghan at 1939 hrs, just 12 minutes back. So the overtake will occur any minute now, very likely at Kanwar itself. Naturally, I move over to the left side and glue my face to the door. Our speed is just about clear of the Mail/Express threshold – very likely Kanwar distant too was not permissive initially. Now we are picking up but there's a neutral section coming right after the inner. We just breach 120 when the needle again starts slipping down, down, down – nobody can do anything while 22564 takes its own sweet time to reset its DJ. Shocking loco to allot to a Rajdhani I must say, but what better can one expect from GZB. At long last we start picking up again and almost immediately get hit by the crossover. Then the loop line branches away under our wheels. It starts empty and for a second I am surprised. But of course, Chauri is a puny rake and will occupy only half the loop. And yes! there is the guard's green baton – a couple of flashes before it disappears into the void behind. The coaches, which revealed so much detail while passing me at CNB, now whiz by as white dots on a black background. The silhouette of the ac coaches can just be made out – the occupant of B1, 39 is perhaps not feeling too fortunate right now. Here come the Shayan Yaans – the moongphaliwala and the Chinese mobile have scant chances of being heard against the grinding roar of our bogies and the nonstop victory cries of our high tone horn. One window is markedly bigger than others – ah, it's the loco – there's a glimpse of the starters, Chauri red, Dibru green – and then the high triangle of 16329's headlamps and markers rockets into the distance. I check the speedo; we are just under 125. That's faster than Chauri Chaura will ever go under its own steam (or rather diesel). The two back to back thunderclaps from the loop exit and crossover act as the perfect cadence to the overtake scene.

From that point on, it is a typical Rajdhani run with an aggressive LP. There's a freak retardation to nearly 30 at Sirathu; later Shri Zahid said that it was because of a level crossing cleared late. Ironical that the gatemen should mete out the same treatment to Kalindi and Rajdhani. Another three minutes or so is lost on account of this error and we arrive at ALD at 2036 hrs. Later that night I track the status of Chauri Chaura; it has arrived at 2203, more than an hour behind schedule. My decision to opt for Dibrugarh Rajdhani has paid dividends and I am thankful for all the good luck I have got on this trip.