

4-in-1

Four days. Four trains. Four locos, each a WAP4. Four pilots ranging from the lacklustre to the brilliant. One sector, that too the one I have been on most frequently – the 195 kilometre stretch deep in the heart of North-Central Railway, Kanpur Central to Allahabad Junction.

BEFORE THE JOURNEY

Late June 2013

It is the tail end of the summer vacation, and I am sitting with the academic calendar of the upcoming semester. Registration will be in the fourth week of July, and the seven day recess is scheduled for the first week of October. The weekend of August 24-25 seems a nice time to plan a little trip to Allahabad and spend a couple of days with my dad. I don't know my timetable yet, but possibly I will have a lab on Friday, which will last till 1700 hrs or longer. In that case, my usual options such as Chauri Chaura or North East Express will be ruled out. In fact, there will be only one train which I will be able to board comfortably and still get home by dinnertime. That train is 12424 New Delhi (NDLS) to Dibrugarh Town (DBRT) Rajdhani Express. While they won't allow a reservation from Kanpur (CNB) to Allahabad (ALD), the extra booked distance from NDLS will be worth the extra time I will get at home. My schedule isn't even known yet, but I already get a ticket on 12424 for August 23 – after all, one can cancel whenever one wants, but seats won't remain available for me whenever I want.

Early August 2013

The semester has started and settled into its groove. Far from a lab, I have just one class on Friday, from 1200 to 1300 hrs. The Rajdhani ticket is no longer a necessity and I book another ticket on 15003 Chauri Chaura Express. It is not something I feel like doing, but booking extra distance on Raj just for railfanning purposes is wasteful. I hope that at least my Chauri Chaura does not get overtaken by Raj. Back in May, it had bravely held its own against Raj's most aggressive attacks, and a repetition will provide quite a bit of drama in an otherwise nondescript ride. Still, I do not outright cancel the Raj ticket, just in case.....

Monday August 19, 2013

It is the Monday before the long-awaited trip and things have so far gone according to plan. The first hint of a destabilization comes when the instructor announces that the Friday class is rescheduled to Thursday, 1815 to 1915 hrs. So this Friday becomes a virtual holiday, a day which could have been spent at home.... I formulate some vague plans about taking an earlier train – maybe Intercity, maybe North East.... of course I will have to check the availability before making any concrete program.... The bombshell comes a couple of hours later, in a class on mechanisms and machines. The prof has made a passing comment on 'railway engine' in the lecture, and I am happy at my favourite machine being mentioned. Right at the end comes the announcement, "Class, we will have a special lab session on Saturday, August 24, 2-4 PM. Attendance is compulsory as the session will contribute to your final grade." Bloody hell.

The rest of the day is spent in limbo – I can concentrate neither on my classes nor on replanning the trip. All that I know is that the ostensibly easiest solution of shifting the trip to the next weekend is not feasible. Starting August 31, a whole row of weekends is blocked; either my dad has travel or I have exams. So it is either this weekend (if anything can be worked out) or never. At 1800 hrs, classes are finally over and I get into overdrive mode, thinking of how to process the two bits of information I have received over the last

few hours. I work out a solution, but even as the idea takes shape, I know it is absurd – somehow I must try to go to Allahabad on Thursday night, come back Friday evening or Saturday morning for the lab, go again after the lab and then return to CNB by the train originally planned, 22441 Intercity Express. Such a program will impose ridiculous constraints on the train links I must use. Thursday night has to be a Rajdhani, either Howrah or Patna; it will be 1945 or so by the time I leave campus, 2100 to reach CNB, and after that there are only Rajdhans going towards Allahabad. The return on Friday night or Saturday morning will be easier, as a whole range of trains will be available, but Saturday's journey again poses a problem. The lab can easily extend beyond 1600 hrs (it often does) and Chauri Chaura will not be practical. The only decent option will be Dibrugarh Raj, on which I had booked a ticket (for the wrong day of course) two months in advance; how can I expect tickets with two days' notice ? I try to think of more practical ways around the hurdle but draw a blank; a trip built around the lab is my only option, and for that to work, both the Raj links are essential. Even the standard last resort of General class travel is not an option now – there are no Mail, Express or Superfast trains to suit my timings, only Rajdhans. Which of course means that my Allahabad vacation is effectively cancelled.

Reaching my hostel, I rush forthwith to the computer room (who has the time to switch on the laptop and wait for it to come out of hibernation ?) and open Seat Availability. I have to start with the Saturday link – if that is available but Thursday is not, it may still be worthwhile to go for a day. But just Thursday by itself will not be satisfactory, so if Saturday is unavailable, the whole trip will have to be shown the red signal. As fast as possible I press the buttons, 12424 NDLS to ALD – I beat the pop-up ad away as soon as it appears – the date does not even need to be reset, for they show the next six days status by default – and then wait for the response. It takes hardly an instant but those seconds seem like years. And then comes the surprise of the day (or maybe the year) – Available 1. I cannot believe what I see. I double check – surely I did not type in 12324 or something ? No. Indeed, one last seat from Delhi to Allahabad is available on Dibrugarh Town Rajdhani Express on Saturday, August 24. Quick as lightning I log into IRCTC and proceed with booking. There isn't a single hitch and within five minutes I have the ticket in my hands. My eye flashes and my plans soar up like fire. My ecstasy however is tempered by the realization that the Dibrus journey at least is five days away – for the Thursday train there's not even 72 hours left till charting! Again I begin a desperate search on Seat Availability – Howrah Raj is fully booked, and 12310 Patna Raj remains the only possible saviour. NDLS-ALD is waitlisted – there are seats on Friday and Saturday but not Thursday – I extend the reservation to MGS, but no luck there – finally I try upgrading class to 2A – the site hangs and I close the browser and start again – for the second time the pop-up ad tests my patience – and then comes the second big surprise – Available 1 again ! Another rush through the IRCTC website, and I reach 'Transaction being processed' and then get a failure notice. Maybe something went wrong with the debit card, so let me now try from a credit card. This time IRCTC is completely unresponsive. Almost instinctively I close the website and rush for the PRS counter at the campus gate. The rickshaw creaks and crawls to the gate – it's quite a long distance; walking takes 15 minutes, this rickshaw will take 10, a car/auto takes 5, a Rajdhani will probably smash it up in 45 seconds or so.....but of course I still don't have the Rajdhani ticket. I have always been a devout railfan and I pray to the Rail Gods to forgive whatever blasphemy I have committed especially with regard to seat availability, and keep that one berth on 12310 free until I can claim it. Fortunately, the PRS counter is empty and I quickly fill the form and hand it to the operator. The suspense is crushing as the roll of ticket paper unwinds and the crude but trusty printer head goes back and forth, back and forth. Whatever it writes is final – all my tears will not wash out a word of it. Finally it's time to see what it has written, and I offer a huge thanks to the Rail Gods as I see a coach and berth number in the extreme left. The Impossible Trip has become reality after all ! Now it just remains to complete the chain with the ALD-CNB ticket for Friday or Saturday; I choose 14163 Sangam Express on the evening of Friday, August 23. Unhurriedly I fill up a second form, and leave the PRS counter with all the ingredients necessary for the whirlwind tour.

DAY 1

Thursday August 22, 2013. 12310 New Delhi to Patna, Rajendra Nagar Rajdhani Express

Sightings

It is 2030 hrs as I step into the lobby at Kanpur Central and confirm that the Big Barrage from Delhi is coming at right time. I make my way to Platform 4 where Patna Raj is scheduled at 2157. Right now it is another Bihar-bound limited-halt train which stands there – 12368 Vikramshila Express to Bhagalpur. Within a minute it leaves, and the horn reveals the loco as a WAP4. I wonder whether Mahabodhi Express has already arrived or is due – in the latter case it will make a certain overtake victim for my Raj. I ask a random man on the platform as to its whereabouts, and he does not know. Pretty soon, an announcement clarifies the matter – Mahabodhi is running late by three hours or more and the Rajdhani have already left it high and dry. In due course of time, 12034 Shatabdi from Delhi is declared imminent on Pf 3, and it arrives behind a Ghaziabad (GZB) WAP7, 30223. This train used to get a WAP5 earlier but now it seems to have become regular with the P7. While Shatabdi enters, Ranchi Raj is declared imminent on my platform. There is a bustle as the coach position indicators come to life and hordes of passengers relocate themselves. Several coolies materialize from nowhere and go up and down with heavy suitcases on their heads. The high triangle of the headlamp and markers rounds the bend and approaches steadily, accompanied by the crescendoing rumble of the LHB generator car. A couple of shrill blasts warn passengers off the platform edges, and 22724 of GZB advances majestically to the starter with the 16-coach rake in tow. Like in a game of musical chairs, the imminency call for Sealdah Raj is issued just as Ranchi comes to rest. The Ranchi starter soon turns yellow, the HT horn emits a long howl, green sparks fly from the loco and the guard's compartment and within a minute the flashing tail light of the trailing EOG disappears from view. Ranchi Raj must be at Chandni when Sealdah arrives behind GZB WAP7 30208. This is a bit of an unusual link, and at first I misread it as 30280. I get a strong temptation to board this train – every time in the past I have come to CNB at this hour, it has been to catch a Rajdhani headed for Kolkata. On the dot at 2125 hrs, 30208 emits a whining honk and leaves.

A chill goes down my spine when an announcement comes about Sangam Express, on which I am due tomorrow. I expect to hear “Platform number 1 par khadi hai” but instead the announcer goes “apni nirdharit samay...” The quantum of delay is soon revealed – it is a whopping 1h 45m; the train is expected to arrive at 2305 instead of 2120. If such a thing happens tomorrow then the entire trip will really be rendered a pain rather than a pleasure. As it is, I am running on a pressure-cooker schedule, and unholy delays will just make the whole thing sour.

There is a considerable gap between the departure of bang-on-time Sealdah Raj and the arrival of Howrah Raj, which is about 15 minutes late. Once again it is an older WAP7 doing the honours, 30229 of GZB. I wonder what the new kids 30278-94 are up to; the Kolkata Rajdhani are generally their monopoly. Howrah Raj is still on Pf 6 when 22824 Bhubanewsar Rajdhani pulls in adjacent to it behind GZB 22731. The next Rajdhani will finally be my one, and with some luck we should be having a roaring run through the section. Howrah and Bhubaneswar Rajdhani will be taking care of all the traffic and Patna Raj should not have to see a single red or yellow signal en route. I also wonder if I will finally get to see a crack WAP4 run with a Rajdhani. I have been on P4-hauled Rajdhani thrice; on the first ride I did not have any GPS equipment and also did not understand the issues involved, while the other two rides were disappointments. I have seen a couple of trailblazing Superfast runs with WAP4, but till date never a Raj, and I hope that my jinx gets broken now.

Patna Supercrawler

As the imminency call is issued and the coach position displays come on, I see that I am standing just where A2 is due. With a full 21 coaches, Patna Raj has the longest rake of any Rajdhani and the coach indicators are active all the way from the starter to the end of the platform. The headlamp and markers are in a straight line, so it must be an older P4, and indeed, it is 22278 of Mughal Sarai (MGS) who is doing the honours. At 2220 hrs (scheduled is 2202) the starter turns yellow and we make an imperceptible transition from rest to motion. The first few minutes of the run are typical, as they are governed by heavy restrictions – 10 km/hr through the platform line, 15 thereafter, and 50 through Kanpur city till Chandari home and 40 through the Chandari platform. As the Chandari stationmaster's green baton gives us the clearance to hit the open line, I gear up for some action. Patna Rajdhani is one of the tougher loads for a WAP4 and a crack run here will prove for once and for all that P4 is equal to any challenge IR may throw in its way. My inseparable railfanning companion, MapmyIndia Road Pilot is in superb form as usual. But the loco pilot seems to be in less than superb form. It has been a minute since the 50 km/hr mark was breached and we have barely touched 65 ! Another minute raises it to 80 – the acceleration is so slow that the GPS needle goes two steps forward and one back – 71, 72, 71, 72, 73, 72, 73, 74..... After 80, the next minute makes it 90 or so – I have stopped recording the exact figures, which are even more disappointing than on my previous two instances. Chakeri arrives just as we sluggishly push past the three-digit mark. This is terrible – a P7-hauled Howrah or Sealdah Raj always blasts this station at 128-9 flat. Even Chauri Chaura Express had managed 110 at Chakeri – that is a smaller rake no doubt but is there any comparison between WDM3A and WAP4 ? And then the brakes are applied, (with slightly more vigour than the throttle) and we find ourselves at 30 km/hr. On my last N rides there has never been a caution order here, why today ? In due course of time, after clearing Rooma, the caution is terminated and we once again begin a painful climb up to MPS. It takes 8 or 9 god knows how many minutes for the speedo to hit 125 – Sirsaul is long gone, we just can't hit the maximum in one inter-station interval – and then it again starts dipping. We remain in the 121-4 range; at first I assume it must be a double yellow somewhere, though why we should see anything other than clear green beats me. Then it seems no, this is where we are going to operate today. Station after station passes with us holding just above 120, and I start wondering if our MPS is 125 by any chance (it is NOT, as I later confirmed from an LP). The coach is almost completely darkened by now and I come out into the washbasin area and make myself comfortable on the attendant's seat; it is marginally less depressing from there. The coach is emitting a strange whine which I have never heard before on LHB rakes – the sound gives the impression that maintaining the reduced speed is a titanic struggle for the train. At long last (56 minutes after start to be precise) we cross Fatehpur (FTP), the skip being as mundane as the rest of the journey with a 50 km/hr entry into the platform and a 30 km/hr exit. It must be another caution or something; I am almost past caring.

The pick-up post Fatehpur is as bad as it was before and I desperately want the journey to be over as fast as possible (a paradox all right). It has been a long day for me with classes from 0800 to 1930 (there were breaks in-between of course, but still), then there was the station trip, and now this horrible ride enervates me. But of course, the end is still very far away; FTP divides the journey in a neat 2:3 ratio and the bigger part lies ahead. At an (inexplicable) ceiling of 125 km/hr, and most of the time well below this ceiling, heaven knows how long we will take to reach Allahabad. A third caution order at Katoghan does precious little to aid things; and though the acceleration out of the caution is somewhat better, any hopes of a higher speed level are quickly dashed. At regular intervals we undergo station skips, but the pending list of stations before ALD seems inexhaustible like the Water of India. At some point we cross some Express train with P4 in lead – ah that must be late-running Sangam Express, on which I am due tomorrow. Tomorrow ! Just 17 hours in ALD (hopefully – one does not want a rerun of today) in between two trains – the whole thing suddenly appears a mere gesture, an exercise in futility. What benefit can there possibly be out of just half a day at home ? The lab on Saturday was a clear sign from Uparwala that the trip has to be shelved – out of what childish bravado did I challenge that authority and go ahead with this crazy plan ? I feel like somehow calling it off, going back to CNB.... but no, I have sown the wind and must reap the whirlwind.

A few minutes later, my own pessimism amazes me – the feasibility of the trip was a stupendous piece of good fortune and how can I even dream of cancelling it all ? The pathetic ride must be driving my thoughts negative – 120-124 km/hr in a stretch where Rajdhonis routinely flaunt their speed and aggression. But at least we are nearing the end now; we have crossed Bharwari which is the last halt before ALD for trains like Chauri Chaura and Intercity. At the very end the LPs seem to realize that their performance has been subpar, and we enter the platform at ALD with a head of speed before braking hard for the stop. It is 0025 hrs. The run has lasted 2h 05m, just one extra minute above the timetable. Not a bad show that way, but we were late to begin with and I am very disappointed at the thought of what might have been.

DAY 2

Friday August 23, 2013. 14163 Allahabad to Meerut City Sangam Express

At precisely 1745 hrs, the twin tone horn of CNB 22275 reverberates round Allahabad Junction as the 24-coach hulk of Sangam Express shudders to life and lumbers out of Pf 1. The few hours at home have been a success, and this departure carries the reassuring feeling that it is absolutely temporary, I will be back again tomorrow. The Sangam rake actually consists of two trains joined tip-to-tail – the first 10 or so coaches are the real ALD-MTC (Meerut City) Sangam Express while the remaining ones get detached at Aligarh Junction and head off to Dehradun as 14113 Link Express. This latter train has rake sharing arrangement with 14119/20 Kathgodam Express, hence it usually carries these name boards. A unique feature of this train is that during the first hour or so from ALD it halts at every single station like a passenger train. Post Bharwari it picks up, stopping at every two or three stations till Fatehpur and then it embarks on an uninterrupted run till Kanpur. I have already verified that yesterday's delay was a one-off; somehow the incoming train had got late whereby this one had departed late and had then been punished by the section controllers. If Sangam travels right time though, it generally gets a clear section free of overtakes.

We drift along from one station to the other, accelerating when the whole rake is clear of the loop line, holding steady for a short while and then braking for loop entry at the next station. I have not pre-activated my GPS as the attachment will be trivial from the slow/stationary train and anyway there is not much to monitor during the first hour of travel. At some point I switch it on and connect the charger. The maximum we are hitting is in the 80-90 km/hr range – the lower value for a short stretch such as Subedarganj to Bamhrauli and the higher limit for a longer stretch like Sayyid Sarawan to Manoharganj. We reach Bharwari at around the scheduled time of 1843. The first chance of breaching the three-digit mark comes now as the next station Bidanpur will be skipped. The acceleration is not exactly jaw-dropping but is sufficient to see us past 100 at Bidanpur, where we finally undertake our first skip.

Meanwhile my compartment has gone into sleep mode. I am on a lower berth (52 – this is AC 3-Tier) and one passenger in our block (49-54) has not arrived. The others have all stretched themselves out on the various berths excluding (fortunately) the middle berth on my side. They have also switched off the lights and drawn the curtains, so the compartment has acquired a very gloomy air. After a few minutes I decide I have had enough and move off in search of other vacant seats with the lights on. The coach in fact is quite empty and the search is easy; the lower berth 44 in the adjacent compartment itself is unoccupied. Somewhere between Sirathu and Khaga Junction we cross Chauri Chaura Express – the name boards are of course not legible but the high whine of the turbocharger, audible for an instant before the crossing, gives the leading Deemer away. The length of the train, and the time and location, also fit the bill. This had been the train I would have taken in the absence of the last-minute alterations to my plan, and I wonder if it's going to get overtaken by Dibrugarh Rajdhani at Bharwari. Let's try tracking Raj; a call to 139 quickly reveals that it has left CNB as late as 1912 hrs. So today also Chauri Chaura will very likely get by without the humiliation of a Raj overtake.

I now try to anticipate the time when Raj will cross us. Starting CNB at 1912, it should be hitting Fatehpur somewhere around 2005-6 (53-55 minutes is what I have been seeing on Train Enquiry over the last few days). We have left Khaga somewhere around 1940, and should be in Fatehpur at around 2015. So the crossing should occur at roundabout 2010 hrs, between Faizullahpur and Fatehpur. At 2005 I shift to high alert; after all the calculation can easily be off by 5 minutes. My window is non-trackside so the view has to be across the aisle. A Sardarji temporarily blocks my vision in climbing down from Side Upper to Side Lower berth, but he settles down when Dibr Raj is still nowhere in sight. Suddenly, upon a whim Sardarji draws the window curtain. I rush outside the ac area and stand near the door so as not to miss the crossing. At 2011 hrs it finally happens – the loco is a WAP4 and the train is at a medium pace. It must be that same TSR which had slowed down 12310 at Fatehpur. As the large windows of the LHB coaches pass by, revealing details of the interior and the passengers, I can almost visualize myself inside tomorrow's Raj, glued to the window with the GPS. Unless of course by any chance the ride is worth enjoying from the door.

At 2015 we trundle into Fatehpur, where the Up platform lies on the loop line. The halt extends one minute beyond schedule and at 2018 hrs 22275 blows the twin horns. 1h 02m is enough time to reach CNB comfortably, if there are no cautions or yellow signals en route. Even if there are a couple of adversities, we should still reach CNB within 2130. As the loop line merges into Through the throttle is applied. As before, the acceleration is average at around 30 percent below the benchmark figures (which are 3.5 minutes for 30 to 110). Well, getting the maximum out of a WAP4 is not easy and on a train like Sangam, it is not even worth the effort. The speed maintenance is pretty decent though with the 107-8 mark being held more or less steadily. There are occasional dips to 105-6 but then, Sangam Express is not exactly the train where you expect a blitzkrieg. Yesterday's Rajdhani did give rise to a lot of expectations, but what did I get out of it? The stations post Fatehpur are taken down one after another in routine fashion – many of the loops are empty but a few have freighters, mostly BOXN rakes with WAG7s or G9s. I suppose these freighters had run along Through line ahead of us till FTP, while we kept diving into the loops. Now the roles are reversed and the freighters have to get into loop while we cruise past along Through. We are at Chandari at 2110 hrs, and on-time arrival seems inevitable when there is a red signal at CNB home. 12440 Ranchi Rajdhani crosses us with a WAP7 in lead. The unscheduled halt does not last long thankfully, and at 2125 we ease into Pf 1 of CNB past stationary Sealdah Rajdhani on Pf 5 with its GZB link 30212.

DAY 3

Saturday August 24, 2013. 12424 New Delhi to Dibrugarh Town Rajdhani Express

Sightings

"Yatrigan kripya dhyan dein, gaadi number 1-5-0-0-3 Anwarganj se Gorakhpur Chauri Chaura Express via Allahabad, Varanasi platform number 3 par khadi hai," the announcement greets me as I pull into CNB for the third day in a row. As it turns out, the lab has not overshot and the Kanpur roads were empty, so I have reached the station with about five minutes to go before Chauri Chaura's departure. Of course with such a margin one cannot reserve tickets on a train, but going by Patna's performance, Chauri Chaura will probably do a better job than the great Dibrugarh Raj on which I am booked. I go to the starter to watch Chauri Chaura's departure – the link is the standard Gonda (GD) WDM3A, 18752. The engine is dormant, subdued by the harsh glare of the red starter. 12179 Lucknow Agra Intercity pulls in on a



remote platform behind its usual GZB WAP7 link. Today it is 30256 who is doing the honours with this train. I wish they would give a WAP7 to Dibrugarh Raj – I have had just about enough of underperforming WAP4s. The Chauri Chaura starter remains red even at the scheduled departure time of 1730 hrs; it is another two minutes before the train gets the signal to proceed. The horn is fortunately not an EMD one so my ears remain intact. The LP takes the first notch and the engine remains as it was but the train starts inching forward. A second notch results in the more familiar chugging sounds issuing from the loco as the train builds up the permitted 10 km/hr. On the adjacent Pf 4, 14124 Kanpur Pratapgarh Intercity has also been cleared for departure and the loco which is hidden behind the exiting Chauri Chaura rake is honking away. By the time Chauri Chaura clears out, Pratapgarh has not yet started. It is another Gonda WDM3A in charge, 14134; bit of a coincidence that the train number and the loco number differ by 10. The retreating Intercity reveals yet another train behind it – this time it is nine hours late running 12590 Secunderabad Gorakhpur Express behind 18744 of Jhansi (the IRFCA loco Database mentions it as WDM3A derated to WDM2 as of July 2011). A few minutes after 14124, this train too effects its long-overdue departure.

With this there is a temporary lull in the proceedings, and the station takes on a very peaceful air. I am standing right at the front end of the platform where there are not too many people around. A row of sandbags constricts access to the slope which leads to the ground. A few labourers are moving the sandbags around from one platform to another – the bags are heavy and teams of workers are needed to move each one. Of course they cross the tracks from one platform to the next and I do not blame them. A WDG4 (12193 as is revealed later from a highly zoomed photograph) is standing with a BOXN rake at a remote platform (or more likely on the continuous line between two adjacent platforms). It is quite far away but the station is quiet enough for the two-stroker's whine to easily carry across the intervening distance. I slowly shift platforms from Pf 3 where Chauri was stabled to Pf 5 where Dibrugarh Raj will be coming. As of yet the board says right time arrival, but that means nothing. Over the last few days it has arrived after 1900 hrs every day and why should today be an exception? Just as everyday it has taken 2h 03m or so to go from CNB to ALD – I don't see why there should be an exception today to that trend too. And with such a run, the overtake of Chauri Chaura will be all but impossible – the section controllers will not bend over backwards for a Raj which is already late and dragging its feet about making up.



As if on cue, the announcement blares out a delay of 10m for 12424. Why say 10 I don't know – why not just half an hour or one hour or whatever it is all at once. A WAG7 is idling on a one-ended line which originates from the end of my platform – it is Kanpuriya 28000 flaunting its microprocessor control. 12274 Delhi Howrah Duronto is due on Pf 6 and it pulls in within 10 minutes of the announcement. The loco is a WAP4 of Howrah shed, 22241. As it nears the end of the platform the outgoing crew flash the markers and the signalling lamp, which is promptly acknowledged by the LPs who are all ready to take the train on to MGS. The crew change takes barely a couple of minutes and in the meantime, the WDG4 BOXN rake is served the starter. The strident EMD horn establishes itself easily above 22241's blowers and the train crawls out in serpentine fashion. Duronto is cleared for departure after precisely its allotted halt time of five minutes and the rake proceeds towards the green advance signal further ahead.

Once again, 12274 is a fast train with a WAP4 doing honours. I recapitulate my two previous rides (excluding the recent 12310 fiasco) on board P4-hauled 'hyperfasts' where I had recorded the data – both had been on 12424, the loco being 22334 on one occasion and 22691 on the other. In both cases, acceleration from 30 or 40 to MPS had taken seven to eight minutes or more. Even in the lower speed range, where the motors are supposed to operate at full flux, the pickup had been less than on the best 24 coach Superfast. The speed maintenance too had been nothing to write home about – a steady 126-7 on one occasion and a fluctuating 125-8 on the other. An extraordinarily clear section between CNB and ALD with just one caution order at Khaga had resulted in a record time of 1h 55m being clocked on one of these occasions. The second time around, the section had been less conducive and the train had lost 2 minutes over the timetable which says 2h 00m.

"Get the max out of the WAP4"

By now there is quite a crowd on my platform as more and more of the Rajdhani passengers are arriving. The front end is still relatively private though; after all the passengers are not going to travel in the loco or the EOG. Two men with black bags are sitting on a bench near my location. One is in standard IR uniform – I figure they must be the LPs of our train. Certainly they can't be the security forces, who are sitting on the adjacent bench, looking out for illegal photographers. I decide I will talk to the LPs and find out about our expected acceleration behaviour. I wonder how to start a conversation with them – a direct query on loco performance will be importunate while a naive thing such as "when is Raj going to arrive ?" will make me appear like just any other passenger, and an over-inquisitive one at that. In the end I decide on "what is the number of the loco which is hauling 12424 today ?" While this query is not too audacious it should give me the chance to show off my knowledge of the basic rail jargon and technicalities, and thus establish myself as a genuine railfan. As it turns out, the LP is not informed of the number from beforehand, but his response about the loco being 'conventional' paves the way for some talk about dc versus three-phase locos. On track, the conversation 'veers' round to the acceleration performance of a P4, in particular, the time taken from 30 or 40 to 130 with a standard Raj load. The answer, "it takes a long time – say six or seven minutes" draws howls of protest from me, "no no P4 is a capable machine, I have seen it go 30 to 110 in 3.5 minutes with a superfast which is far heavier – surely it can do even faster with a Raj load". The question naturally arises as to how I get the speed readings, and I fish out my MapmyIndia. Activation is smooth and my location display works perfectly. It even shows the multiple tracks at CNB converging into one another, one line branching off towards LKO another towards ALD etc.

Pretty soon, the LP to whom I have been talking says "ok, I will try my hardest to get maximum performance out of the WAP4". This is just what I have been wanting to hear, and I am thrilled. The imminency call for the train is issued at around 1840 hrs but within two minutes it is retracted and changed to "10 minute deri pe aane ki sambhaavna hai". This is patently false – aagaman ki nirdharit samay se 10 minute ho chuke hai, but perhaps it means that the delay will not be too ridiculous today. The LP has meanwhile gone off on some work and I take this opportunity to give an update on the sightings action which had occurred earlier, parallelly with my conversation. 28000 had emitted a long blast of the LT horn, left Pf 4 and



coupled to the rake of 54152 CNB-FTP Passenger standing on Pf 3. Shortly after, this train had left the station more or less on time. 11124 Gwalior to Barauni, Barauni Mail had arrived a little late on Pf 6 with a

WDM3A in lead. It is still standing there as 12424 is again announced as imminent and the coach position indicators light up. My coach will be somewhat towards the back, but I have no intention of leaving this area before once more securing the 'deal' with the LP to get the max out of the red beast. I do this as soon as the LP comes back, and offer to send him my trip report when it is ready – this also acts as a good opportunity to take his name and his email id. He is Shri Bhawnath Jha of ALD division, and he will be in charge of the controls on the way to Mughal Sarai. The co-pilot will be Shri Aizaz Ahmed, also of ALD division. Shri Jha also confirms that there is a caution order of 30 km/hr between Chakeri and Rooma, and the real speeding will start only after that.

Acceleration alla WAP7

Before I have had the time to move back significantly, the loco is in view. The headlamp and markers form a triangle so it must be one of the newer WAP4s. It is 22699 of Ghaziabad, and our LPs acknowledge the outgoing ones with flashes of a torch. I just climb into the first or second coach – there is a chance of my remaining at the door throughout. Certainly, the initial acceleration will have to be monitored from the door, and I can always move back down the train later if I feel like. Two blasts of the LT horn are followed by a smooth start, at exactly 1900 hrs.

Chandari is almost approaching when the TTE arrives and compels me to go back to my own coach. The attendant explains that he does not have with him the reservation chart for the coaches in the back. Going back is a long, laborious process and the GPS does not work from inside the coach aisles. I can see through the window that Chandari has come and gone, and at any minute the T-board is going to act as the trigger which will finally unleash the P4's power. The readings will be missed, I know, but at least I should be through with the shifting manoeuvre by the time of the real acceleration burst post Rooma. Traversing each coach takes an eternity – somewhere the passengers are standing in the aisle, and somewhere they have constricted the passage with baggage. As I clear every coach and emerge into the corresponding washbasin area however, I can feel that the train's speed has increased markedly. The rumble has grown louder, the vibration from the wheels more insistent. Intermittently the GPS connects to the satellites, and every time it is showing a decidedly higher figure – first 75 or so, then almost 90 and pretty soon the numbers are on the other side of 100. At 115, I can no longer continue my backward manoeuvre and stop at a washbasin to monitor the speed until the caution post Chakeri. The 120 mark yields little resistance, and by the time Chakeri arrives, we are at 125. What a contrast with the Patna ride where we had managed only 100 before the caution. This early burst has made two things clear – (a) the LPs are getting quite a bit of juice out of the P4, and they must be really aggressive to accelerate so hard even though a caution order is approaching, and (b) the WAP4 can belt out a real power show if encouraged to. The braking into the caution section is hard and I utilise the crawl to finally settle down outside my coach. The TTE comes, and as expected he has allotted my berth to someone else when I did not show up at Delhi. Checking the chart, he finds me another berth. I thank him but remain in my position.

At Rooma, the flashing green baton confirms that all is ok with the section ahead, and pretty soon the caution has lapsed. I can see on my display the notches being taken one after the other – the transition from 34 to 35 is faster than from 31 to 32, and 37 to 38 is faster still. By 40, the tolerance current level ought to be reached and I decide to use 40 as the baseline for minutewise acceleration measurements. A sudden link loss from the satellites forces me to reset the baseline to 50. Unlike on Thursday, this time the GPS is no longer fluctuating like the junior school monkey which climbs two steps up the ladder and slips one back. Clearly, 22699 is not giving MapmyIndia the time to show these little monkey tricks – the needle goes up and up past 60 and 70. On my previous P4-Raj rides, acceleration through 20 km/hr is about the best I have seen in one minute – this time that level is breached with almost half the interval to spare. 80 is dismissed as if it were child's play and by the time one minute is up we are at 86 km/hr. The foundation for a solid acceleration run has been laid and Shri Jha is in no mood to rest on his laurels. 22699 too is not complaining as we steadily power past the 90 and 95 marks and hit the century with elan. By the time the second minute

is up we are at 107, challenging the MPS of the Mail/Express and Superfasts. Within a few seconds we leave these slowcoaches behind and head for the unique MPS of our own. Another minute from 107 sees us at 120 and then slowly we level off at around the 125-6 mark. It is 1924 hrs, and we have already hit 125 once, undergone the caution and hit that level again. Just compare this with Patna Raj where we took half an hour to attain this speed for the first time. The overall acceleration run is a few seconds longer than what 30291 of GZB had done in May at more or less the same location with Howrah Rajdhani in tow. Upto about 100, the accelerations are almost comparable; in the last bracket of course the superior power and technology of the P7 gives it the edge.

Speed demon

After the superb acceleration, 125-6 seems a bit of a disappointment. Generally I have seen swift acceleration runs being followed up with tight and relentless maintenance of the speed. But wait, I must be patient. The LP too has to figure out the exact point at which the load will balance, and it is better to do this step at a lower speed before pushing to the limit. And it seems that is just what he is planning to do. After a couple of minutes the speedometer slowly travels upward to 127, then 128 and then 129. There is a tremendous clatter as we dance over the crossover and the loop entry at Prempur. Hell, I was so busy with the GPS that Sirsaul has slipped by without my noticing it. The loop is empty and we flatly run through the little village halt at 129 km/hr. Only a couple of pulses of the flashing green baton are visible before it has cleared my window and vanished from sight. Soon after Prempur, we hit the 130 mark for the first time, though we come down to 129 pretty quickly. This is another plus-point of this ride – many times the whole journey goes by without the exact MPS ever being attained. Soon enough we touch 130 again, and sooner still, yet again. In fact we seem to be transitioning from a 128-9 regime to a 129-30 profile. Karbigwan reveals the hapless 54152 in the loop line – the dc goods loco has little option but to pay its respects to its passenger cousin. For the last minute or so the speedo has remained fixed at 130 – I check if there has been a link loss, but no, the attachment is the usual 10 satellites in view, 6 in use, connection strength class A.

This ride is certainly making up for the Patna disappointment. That time the needle had shown slow oscillations below an imaginary reduced MPS; this time it is perfectly flat at the true MPS. In fact I have never seen such a thing before. Till now my best has been rides where it remains between MPS-1 and MPS-2, and this includes WAP7-hauled trains with their automatic BPCS buttons and their electronic feedback circuits and limiters and snubbers. Maintenance of exact MPS over long periods is unprecedented, and I can well imagine how difficult that is on the 'crude' WAP4 where the power has to be set manually. Bindki Road or Aung, which one it is I forget, has a BOXN in the loop line – the screech of the wheels on rails at 130 km/hr rises to a deafening volume by reflection from the wagons. The formation is led by a WAG9 – it can show off its imported three-phase electronics for all it is worth but today indigenous dc is feeding it a double dose of humble pie. Kanspur Gugauli comes at 1938 hrs; no surprises for guessing the skip speed. At the present rate it should be another 11 minutes to cover the remaining 23 km to FTP, and that will make it one of the fastest CNB-FTP rides which I have seen till date. 22334 with the same train had once done it in 49 minutes but of course it had not been burdened by an extended CO just where MPS should have been attained and held. Malwan is considerably larger than the preceding stations, but not in the eyes of Raj, which barrels down Through line at the same undiminished MPS. For a brief second, the needle shoots up to 131 and then comes back down to 130 which continues almost without deviation till Kurasti Kalan, the station just before Fatehpur. As we plough on and on I wonder whether the caution of Thursday has been lifted, but no, the speed has started decreasing, slowly at first and then rapidly as the brakes are applied hard. At 1951 hrs we coast through the Fatehpur platform at 30 km/hr, having knocked off the 78 km stretch at an average in excess of 90 km/hr.

The caution has affected the average speed no doubt, but it will give me another opportunity to measure the acceleration of the WAP4 with the Rajdhani load. As before, notching is perceptible during the 30s, and I set 40 as the baseline. The needle goes up in leaps and bounds, and halfway into the minute we are just

edging past 60. By any chance will we make it to 80 by the end of the minute ? I had always thought that 40 km/hr.min with a 19-coach Raj rake was the domain of the WAP7, but let us see if I get proved wrong. And I do, with 5 seconds to spare. By the time the minute is up, we are at 83 and pressing furiously. Certainly the LP is not sparing himself to "get the maximum out of the WAP4". The three-digit mark gives over with great ease and at the end of two minutes from 40, we are at 105. The third minute takes us to the MPS of the Sleeper Duronto (12274) ahead of us and the fourth sees us at our own sweet spot. As before, the acceleration is comparable with that of the WAP7 in the lower speed range and is weaker in the upper bracket. The average speed during the acceleration run depends much more strongly on the low-speed performance than the high-speed one, and if I factor this in, the two figures are really close. A transient disturbance sees us come down to the Patna level during the skip of Faizullahpur, but by Rasulabad, we are back to form.

I have never gone inside the ac area till now, and I have no wish to do so. This unique ride of a lifetime is fully enjoyed only from the washbasin area, complete with acoustic and vibrational effects. Unlike on Patna Raj, the coaches here do not whine but roar. In addition there is the metallic grating of the wheels rolling over the rails, not unlike the sound which might come from a huge lathe. There is a fair amount of clatter too, and the periodic clangs increase in volume and frequency as the train speed increases; right now they are like the reports of a cannon which is firing ceaselessly. At every level crossing there is a sudden eerie pause as the bogies negotiate the asphalt section, and then the symphony resumes with even greater vigour. Or rather with exactly the same vigour as previously for our speed is always 130 km/hr – constant does the LP remain to keep it so. At Khaga, an Up train is standing with a WAP4 in lead; that must be Sangam or Intercity. It is a short rake with no AC coaches, hence it is the latter. That is fact is the train on which I am due tomorrow (on board the ripping Raj who even thinks of tomorrow), and the contrast between Intercity and Raj is apparent from their speeds at Khaga – zero and 130 respectively.

Closing in on Chauri Chaura; conclusion of run

Sangam and Intercity suddenly remind me of Chauri Chaura which must be chugging along some distance ahead of us. In all the excitement of the blistering ride, I had clean forgotten about the potential overtake. Now, as I think about it, the overtake seems a distinct possibility, in fact almost a certainty. Firstly, we have not been too late in starting from Kanpur. Secondly, we are going as fast as humanly possible, subject to the loco limitations and the railway rules. Thirdly and most importantly, Chauri Chaura has already had an overtake – 12274 must have hurtled past it either at Khaga or at Sirathu – and that overtake will delay it in reaching Bharwari where it will fall like ninepins to our relentless advance. Even as I work this logic out, the distance between us is decreasing steadily, not-so-slowly and inexorably, heading for the final denouement at Bharwari.

There is yet another caution at Katoghan – my god, how many restrictions in a less-than-200 km route – and it is even more adverse than the preceding ones with 25 km/hr being the permitted speed. The acceleration out of the caution is a veritable carbon copy of the preceding acceleration runs. This is yet another hallmark of a good LP. An average or worse driver invariably shows considerable variation from one run to the next – sometimes he is aggressive with the notches but slack about the shunts, and sometimes maybe the other way round. But the better the pilot, the more consistent the pattern, as each time he is operating as close as possible to the loco's intrinsic limits. Now, the 50-100 profile is identical to that at Rooma, and at 100 we level off temporarily as the restriction is not yet fully terminated. By Athsarai we are back to the standard we have maintained over the last hour or so. With a WAP7, all these things are routine – strong and repeatable acceleration and tight control of speed. Hence, if one wants a guaranteed brisk ride, the P7 is the thing to go for. With P4, there is always a chance that it will be a damp squib. But when the P4 does perform, like today, it affords far more pleasure than any P7 ride – one knows one is watching a superb driving innings, not just some fancy electronics at work.

Shortly after Sirathu there is a slight dip to around the 115-120 level; that must be a double yellow. The reason strikes me almost immediately – 15003 Chauri Chaura Express must have arrived at Bharwari now and is reluctant to go into the loop line for a second pummelling. Yes, that explanation certainly checks. It is 2025 hrs now and the time is ripe for it to reach Bharwari. On my great ride back in May, it had hit Bharwari at 2002 hrs, riding on a clear section with no unscheduled/extended halts and hardly any yellows. Today, with an extra overtake en route (the May ride had been on a Thursday when 12274 does not run), 2025 seems a pretty reasonable hour. And given that, there isn't a chance in a million that the section controllers will allow it ahead of the mighty Raj. We are less than 20 kilometres from Bharwari now and should be there for the kill at 2035 or so; starting at 2040, Chauri Chaura will comfortably make it to ALD within its scheduled arrival time of 2110. Conversely, allowing Chauri Chaura in front of us at Bharwari will result in a heavily BT arrival for it and very likely constrain us close to ALD. Clearly, there is no point in making an anyway RT Express train BT at the expense of a Raj which is LT and is trying its level best to gain. By Shujaatpur we are once again back up to exactly MPS – this will serve Chauri Chaura right for holding us up at Sirathu – and the overtake is less than five minutes away. The Patna ride has confirmed that there are no cautions at or near Bharwari and we should be able to quash that little minnow in grand style. Bidanpur is one moment here, and then gone forever and I start a mental countdown from two and a half minutes before Chauri Chaura Express succumbs to our fury. The needle remains steady at 130 throughout – Bharwari must be approaching now – slam! that's the crossover – jerk! bang! and the loop line branches away to the left – it's empty! ah yes, Chauri is a puny train, it will occupy only half the loop – hell where is it? – we are devouring large chunks of the loop every second, surely the rake should have appeared by now – and before I realize, there is a second jerk, bang and slam as the empty loop line merges back into Through. I feel cheated – the little whipper snapper has denied us a certain prize! Well, I suppose there will be some days when a mouse will manage to scurry into its hole before the fastest eagle can get to it. And there is something to be said for the Chauri Chaura LPs – they too must have been pretty aggressive to claim victory when defeat was almost pre-ordained.

Thankfully, Chauri Chaura does not obstruct the tail end of our brief but wonderful run. All too soon we are crashing through Manauri, and for the first time, MapmyIndia starts showing the roads of Allahabad suburbia running parallel to the track. Being tailored for the road and not the rails, it auto-corrects our position from the tracks to the narrow path winding through the fields alongside. It also shows an overspeed notice – MapmyIndia does not recommend anything greater than 30 km/hr on that narrow and presumably potholed road. Well, the speed we are doing is unsuitable not just for that road but for any other road in the country – it is virtually unique to Indian Railways and its most prestigious trains. Finally, halfway between Manauri and Bamhrauli, the throttle is off and we begin a long coasting run. The journey has been hard on the LPs as well as their machine, and all three surely deserve this bit of rest at the very end. We are at 115 or so as we pass the Bamhrauli airport and then the station, and the final brake run takes place a little before Subedarganj. There are no adverse signals etc. at ALD home, and we make a smooth entrance into Pf 4, coming to rest at 2058 hrs. The journey has taken two full minutes less than that prescribed by the already tight timetable. On a 195 km section with as many as three cautions enroute, we have clocked an average speed above 98 km/hr. A huge round of applause goes to our LPs Shri Bhawnath Jha and Shri Aizaz Ahmed for this mind-blowing run. A fair share of the credit is also due to the mean machine 22699 of Ghaziabad, which has finally demonstrated that a WAP4 is more than adequate for a heavy and blisteringly fast Rajdhani haul. The unique combination of loco and pilot has just made for one of my best train journeys till date.

DAY 4

Sunday August 25, 2013. 22441 Allahabad Kanpur Intercity Express

After the Rajdhani ride, Intercity is bound to appear ordinary. The biggest surprise comes at the start of the journey when the rake is stabled on Pf 1 – there is no coach D1 in the consist even though I have a ticket for D1, 0049, WS ! Apparently the reservation coaches have been cancelled and the whole train made unreserved, so I have no option other than General Class. Miraculously, the coach is empty as we leave ALD, and the passengers say it will remain so till the terminus. The loco is a Kanpuriya, 22933 and it does a pretty reasonable job with the ultra-light load. The run till Bharwari is brisk, and thereafter we trail Sangam Express till Fatehpur. 12424 crosses us at Faizullahpur at 2016 – it is fast but nowhere close to MPS; I suppose it is still carrying on the post-FTP acceleration run. We reach FTP late by about 10 minutes and true to the co-passengers' prediction, the coach remains empty. Many of the passengers are actually sleeping on the benches.

As the run nears its end, the sightings of the very first day of this unique trip start manifesting as crossings. At Aung, RT running Mahabodhi Express rushes past with a WAP4, and hot on its heels is Vikramshila. We are held up at Sirsaul for 15 minutes while a green carpet is being laid on Down – it is puny but P7-hauled 12250 Delhi Howrah Yuva Express who makes the royal passage. At Chakeri we are again brought to a halt, and a passenger with too much wanderlust climbs out of our coach and starts roaming around on Down Through line, ignoring the warning signs of the green starter and advance and the stationmaster's flashing green baton. The blinding lights and blaring horns of the WAP7 give him a real scare and he stands plastered against our rake as 12314 kicks up a dust storm and crashes past. The Howrah crossing is more sedate with the P7 having just cleared Chandari and still suffering from the after-effects of restrictions. The Bhubaneswar Raj crossing is slower still and the loco number 22688 is just visible. I wonder if we will also cross Patna Raj – on each day so far I have crossed the train I am due to take on the next day, and now a crossing between the last and first days' trains will provide for a nice little cyclic coda to the whole trip. At 2205 hrs, just as we are entering Pf 1 of CNB, bang-on-time Patna Raj starts pulling out of Pf 4 behind its loco MGS 22276.

Thus ends my unique 4-in-1 trip. Thanks a lot for your patience in reaching this point.