

See the Sinking Sun

[This is yet another episode of the daily contest between 15003 Chauri Chaura Express and 12424 Dibrugarh Rajdhani Express in Kanpur-Allahabad section. The action is dated September 28, 2014. For the musically minded, allusions have been made to Franz Schubert's Piano Trio D. 929, a recording of which may be found at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xPhhTdRHBWM>.

A list of relevant station codes and other acronyms and abbreviations is given below.

- *CNB – Kanpur Central*
- *CNBI – Chandari*
- *CHK – Chakeri*
- *FTP – Fatehpur*
- *FYZ – Faizullahpur*
- *RUB – Rasulabad*
- *KGA – Khaga*
- *SRO – Sirathu*
- *BRE – Bharwari*
- *BMU – Bamrauli*
- *ALD – Allahabad Junction*
- *BSB – Varanasi Junction*
- *GD – Gonda*
- *GZB – Ghaziabad*
- *MGS – Mughal Sarai Junction*
- *PNK – Panki*
- *ACP – Alarm chain pulling*
- *DBR – Dynamic brake resistor*
- *EMD – Electromotive Division, General Motors*
- *GPS – Global positioning system*
- *LHF – Long hood forward*
- *LP – Loco pilot*
- *LR – Learning road*
- *MPS – Maximum permissible speed*
- *NCR – North Central Railway*
- *TSR – Temporary speed restriction*
- *WTT – Working timetable]*

DELAYED START

“Yaatrigan kripya dhyan dein, gaadi number 1-5-0-0-3 Anwarganj se Gorakhpur Chauri Chaura Express via Allahabad, Varanasi apne nirdharit samay shaam ki 5 baje se 20 minut deri par aane ki sambhaavna hai.” This announcement, blaring out on the PA system at CNB at precisely the nirdharit samay, has me in dismay. Because for Chauri Chaura Express, a delayed start is not a good omen. Given the attitude of the NCR section controllers, the delay often magnifies en route. And even if it doesn’t, then too it might prove impossible to stave off the overtake by 12424 Dibrugarh Rajdhani Express. Today is a Sunday and traffic is at the week’s minimum level. Train Enquiry told me that 12424 had crossed GZB as early as 1435 hrs and was then setting the tracks on fire. An 1845 or so arrival at CNB is a distinct possibility; such timings can mean only a minuscule chance of success for an on-time Chauri Chaura and zero for a delayed one. Which is the scenario that I will have to deal with today.

Truthfulness is not one of the CNB station master's prerogatives. If he says that the delay is 20 minutes then you can bet on your life that it is quite different from 20 in reality. So no surprise when at 1720, it's not Chauri Chaura but 18192 Utsarg Express which makes an appearance. How a train originating one kilometre away can be late is a wonder, but that's what Chauri is like. The best thing to hope for is that Chauri is trailing Utsarg, in which case a 1730 arrival might still be possible. And indeed it seems, that is the case as the imminency call is given for 15003 on Pf 3.

It is late September and though the heat is reminiscent of May, the daylight is not. The reddish sun is in the last segment of its arc and the black silhouette of the approaching LHF loco blocks out half of its face. The number is visible only after the loco passes – it is 16478 of GD shed. As the rake proceeds slowly and solemnly towards the starter ahead, the scene is a startling reminder of the song which Schubert immortalized in his trio, "see the sinking sun.... you flee dear hope ?" (The picture below shows the scene; also visible is the short hood of WDG3A 13439 which is being refuelled, see next pic.)



Certainly there is little reason for hope not to flee – the sun has clearly set on Chauri Chaura's fortunes and its hopes of holding Dibrugarh Rajdhani at bay. My track record till now is 3 rides in Chauri of which 2 were victories (one a moral victory) and 5 rides in Dibru of which 4 were victories. While that is a very high success rate, two of the Dibru triumphs were achieved very recently – on September 06 and August 16 to be precise – and that does not bode well for Chauri today. On both these occasions, the overtake had been soft to boot; in one case, a right time departed 15003 was sidelined for an aggressively driven 12424 at Kunwar, and in the other case an hour-late 15003 was overtaken by half-hour late 12424 (coincidentally with the same LP in charge) at Chandari itself. Added to that, Chauri Chaura was lucky only yesterday – despite a drubbing by 12274 at Fatehpur, it somehow crawled into ALD five minutes before its pursuer.

And what probability that Fortune will shower her blessings on this forsaken Express train two straight days in a row ?

MAKING HAY WHILE THE SUN SHINES

Fortunately the delay in departure from CNB does not equal the delay in arrival. The station master has the good sense to compress the half-hour halt and give us the yellow starter at 1742 hrs. While we were static, WDG3A number 13439 was being refuelled in the pit line directly outside my window (yes, I have a lower). The process was the same as in a car – a fuel pipe from the supply machine fit into an inlet above the tank. The only difference was that the pipe was perhaps four or five inches in diameter (see the pic alongside).

There is the usual parallel action with cars and mobikes on Napier Road. We are doing 45 km/hr or so, a cautious margin below the permissible 50. This means nothing though; quite often I have seen LPs taking the city stretch gingerly but going all out after hitting the open line. The road vehicles are more or less level with us; most are keeping abreast while a few are falling behind. An SUV with an aggressive driver weaves in and out of the traffic, overtaking all that it encounters including Chauri Chaura Express. Road vehicles are not my concern however – it is Rajdhani which, though still far away, can never really be off my radar.



The T-board comes along as it should, at the Chandari starter. WDM3A is not exactly an acceleration fiend and today there are extra General Class coaches so my expectations are modest. And they are neither surpassed nor let down as we start off at a decent 15 km/hr.min. I do not think acceleration figures will be too important today – the eventual outcome will be determined not by the minute details but by the larger picture. Even though the climb to MPS may take long, if the line is clear and we can hold the level steady until Fatehpur, then there is a chance of getting into a vantage position with respect to Raj. As they say, make hay while the sun shines, both metaphorically and literally – we must cover as much distance as possible before the last of the light fades into darkness and before 12424 Dibrugarh Rajdhani Express enters the CNB-ALD section.

But what is this ! The speedometer has gone slack at 65 and is now dipping slowly. The loco is coasting; I suppose Chakeri distant is at double yellow. A very long braking run however sees us levelling off just below 30; must be a caution order then. This guess is confirmed as the reduced speed is maintained through the Chakeri platform. A protracted coasting and brake run into a caution is not a sign of an aggressive LP at all – even for a Chakeri caution, the fast pilots keep accelerating as long as possible and then brake hard. But anyway, no point cribbing about details and caution will be caution for Rajdhani too. The caution is a prolonged one, very likely a full kilometre, but eventually it gives over and the Deemer pours on the power. Just as we are about to breach three digits the acceleration is again interrupted, by the red Sirsaul starter as it turns out. We give our opponent a further five-minute advantage before resuming our onward

progress. I go to the door to see if the engine is at all audible but only the EMD style horn can be heard so I return to my seat. Finally, MPS is hit for the first time well ahead of Prempur where a BCNA rake acknowledges our superior priority.

At this point the run stabilizes into a rhythm although the speed maintenance is erratic. Sometimes we are knocking on MPS' door, at other times we seem to be comfortable at 10 below the max. Nevertheless we continue smoothly, and every few minutes there is the characteristic clatter of a station skip. A false carefreeness pervades the air – we are skipping along as though blissfully unaware of the complications which can crop up at any moment. Right now the controllers are giving us good priority but forever there is that niggling thought in the back of my mind – they will give Raj even more. The station name boards cannot be read due to the darkness and the speed, so I now rely on counting and road-learning to get our location. Of course, MapmyIndia is there as a fall-back. The two women sitting on the opposite berths (numbers 25 lower and 26 upper) have taken out a plastic bag full of namkeens. I too extract the packet of chips which I had purchased on the CNB platform. Since we have not had any interaction yet, there is no sharing. Berth 27 is mine and 28 is unoccupied. Side lower 29 went to sleep as soon as we departed CNB while the man on number 30 and of age about 30 is either doorplating or sitting somewhere else. After a while he comes back to our compartment and sits in seat 28.

It is the issue of food and drink which eventually breaks the ice. The women ask if there is no tea available on the train. Both me and the man explain that 15003 lacks a pantry car so the only chance for tea will come at Fatehpur. "How far away is that?" Not much, we should be pretty close to Malwan and from there it is just two stations and a block hut. The throttle is taken off almost immediately after clearing Kurasti Kalan and once again the brake run into the platform is agonizingly long. I wonder why the LP cannot utilize the powerful DBR of the Deemer. Back in May 2013 ("To Overtake or Not to Overtake") when we had scripted a heroic victory over Rajdhani, the braking had been very hard. And clinically precise, with no distance being wasted in a dead slow crawl to the starter. Further, the speeding too had been tight. While I don't want to crib about trivialities, the driving of this particular train might just shift from being a minor statistic to a major concern. A systematically poor maintenance of MPS is worrisome and might well cost 7-8 extra minutes on the overall run as compared to an aggressive LP. At least five (CHK, FTP, KGA, SRO, BRE and maybe more if there are more cautions ahead) slack braking runs might be another 5-7 minutes. And 15 minutes is not a trifling amount at all; in fact it can very well mean the difference between victory and defeat.

There is a tea stall on the FTP platform quite close to where our coach has drawn up. Both me and Number 30 make a beeline for it and meet disappointment, "chai nahi hai". Oh well. The halt lasts about five minutes and when we start moving, there is still a huge crowd of General Class people on the platform trying desperately to shove and jostle their way in. I fear for ACP but thankfully we exit the platform unimpeded. It is just short of 1900 hrs and that is actually an improvement over yesterday's edition which had departed FTP at 1904. But of course, Rajdhani's position is still unknown. Time now to get a handle on that.

THE BATTLE INTENSIFIES

"Departed from PNK at 1858 hrs" comes the reply from 139 when I try to SPOT 12424. So very likely a 1915 arrival at CNB and a 1920 departure. This is even later than yesterday's train, which had clocked a CNB departure of 1913 and ALD arrival 2113. And right now we are earlier than Chauri was yesterday, so it suddenly starts appearing like a comfortable win for us. "Sms se itna kya dekh rahe ho," Number 30 asks so I give a brief account of the whole situation. It turns out he is already familiar with the basic plot, but the two women are intrigued. Even though there is no tea, they take out a packet of biscuits (Good Day Choco Chip) and this time everyone partakes of the treat. I too have a bisk pack in my bag; will keep it for Khaga or Sirathu.

MPS is attained a little after Ramva and once again held weakly. But since Raj will very likely not be arriving ALD before 2115, I refrain from criticizing the LP. As the run stabilizes, the conversation in the compartment also increases to a robust level. It turns out that the man is going to Varanasi while the two women are bound for the train's terminus. The single line ALD-BSB section is apparently fickle; Chauri Chaura can run through it like Rajdhani if it is lucky and like a maalgaadi if it is not. Hard to imagine a section more fickle than CNB-MGS though. Amid the bustle and babble, the GPS has receded into the background. But many times I have seen that MapmyIndia actually plays a valuable background role in the compartment; it is the equivalent of a passenger information system. When conversation tends to flag, the position and speed often act as fillers, even among complete non-railfans.

GPS comes rushing back into focus when the needle suddenly starts to dip. The best case to hope for is caution order so I am all alert when we are close to 30. But no, that does not seem to be the target speed here as we enter the twenties and then the teens. Well, a caution for 20 is still possible though it is rare. But then there is renewed braking and we start that ominous crawl which heralds a red. And then we stop.

One minute. We remain static. Two minutes. There is still no sign of moving. We have to be on Through line as I am quite sure there were no crossovers or loop entries encountered for a long time. And the pitch black surroundings don't even look like a station. "Kahan khadi ho gayee gaadi," one of the women gives voice to the question hanging in the air. GPS is not giving the location other than showing that we are on a railway track. I am not even sure what was the last station we crossed; if it had been Faizullahpur then we are likely stuck at the block hut between FYZ and RUB. But somehow I have the feeling we have come further than FYZ. I go to the door to check. "Puura andhera hai," I reply to the eager queries when I return to the compartment. I go again, this time with a torch. "Uss se kya pata chalega," one of the women is incredulous and her expression suggests I am half-crazy. This time I return triumphant, "hum Sath Naraini karke ek station ke bahaar khade hai". I explain about chainage masts and about the LR sheet in my hand (in my Blackberry to be precise) which connects mast numbers to geographical locations. The halt is longish and by the time we finally pull in for the scheduled halt at Khaga it is 1940 hrs.

Tracking reveals that 12424 has finally entered our section. CNBI 1935 is the status, and I now start making estimates of how the situation might pan out. CNBI 1935 means a CNB departure at around 1925, and in turn an ALD arrival of 2120 or later. That gives us about 1h 30m to make it to ALD from here, which seems a feasible target given the two stops we have left. Of course, this is an approximate calculation but unless there are more red homes, we should not have to worry about improving the accuracy.

Certainly, the post-KGA run is going on smoothly. But I do wish the LP would spend a little more effort in maintaining the speed. The man in my compartment asks whether I work in the Railways, since I seem to be knowing such a lot. Not yet, I tell him. Most of my information is from friends who are loco pilots. Some of it is from a website where like-minded people discuss Railways. To my surprise it turns out that he too has a couple of LP friends, and has actually footplated a diesel loco. Apparently it is extremely difficult to drive because the seat is very hard and there are violent jerks at every crossover and loop access. In electrics, the situation is the reverse – MPS stations skips are almost imperceptible if you have your eyes and ears closed. I cannot agree with him however that our LP is driving badly because of the bad conditions. I relate an incident where an LP was faced with a machine (WAP1 number 22047, GZB) having a defective voltmeter, ammeter and cab light but still drove it like the wind. Also, 16478 is a rebuilt WDM3A and should be having ergonomic cabs. I suspect that he had footplated an old WDM2; since he does not remember the number I cannot verify this. Anyway, time flies and so does Chauri and before I know it we are at Sirathu, at 2002 hrs. I take out the packet of Jim-Jam biscuits from my backpack.

The scenario now has a clear parallel with that of last May when we had beaten Dibr. That time we had been at BRE at 2002 and Raj had been on track for ALD at 2100. Today we are 20 minutes behind that performance and so is Raj, so the outcome should be the same. On the way out from SRO I track Raj again. BKO 2004 – so in the last 25 minutes, the gap between us has closed from 106 to 92 km. At this rate it will

take a further three hours to dwindle to zero. But of course, this is naive thinking. Shujaatpur is skipped at MPS and predictably enough, the retardation for Bharwari commences even before crossing Bidanpur. What's the point of having a Daulatram DBR then – might as well have run with vacuum braked stock.

THE FINAL DECISION

We reach our final stop, Bharwari, at 2020 hrs. Generally, if the overtake occurs, it does so here. Once again, I track 12424 : it is at FTP at 2019. About 77 km between us, and though the gap is closing faster now, it seems just enough. Might as well do a realistic calculation instead of relying on hunches and guesses. The first step is to precisely define the condition that the overtake will not occur. Given the attitude of the controllers, the realistic condition is that Chauri will be allowed ahead if and only if Rajdhani does not have to see anything other than green as a consequence. Since Chauri is generally given Pf 9 or 10 at ALD, the routes of the two trains diverge at ALD home. Now this signal can be made permissive for Raj only after Chauri has cleared the turnout entirely. At this point, Raj must be at least three signals, or 3 km, behind if it does not want to get a double yellow. No, make that 4 km as the Raj LPs will sight the double from a kilometre off and presumably you do not want even that. Now for a through train, BRE to ALD stop on Pf 4 takes 28 minutes as per the working time table, excluding slacks. To account for the BRE halt, add 2m acceleration time and 1m loop clearance time and make it 31m. But ALD home to Pf 4 starter is almost 2 km which takes 4m at the mandatory speed of 30 km/hr. So it is 27m from BRE to ALD home and 2m more to take the turnout and clear the fouling mark. Now add on another 2m to account for our LP's driving style and, with a 2022 departure from BRE, you have a projected time of 2053 hrs when ALD home can be yellowed for 12424.

The calculation for 12424 is simpler. FTP to BMU is allotted 51 min as per WTT excluding slacks. That amounts to a BMU passing time of 2110 for 12424 and two more minutes before the potential double yellow comes into view. If all goes according to plan, there are clear 15-20 minutes between Chauri's passing ALD home and Dibru's catching its tail. This analysis assumes that the BRE-ALD section is incautious, but even if there are cautions their effect will not be significant as they will set back both trains by roughly equal amounts, give or take a minute. The controller's decision seems obvious and I feel silly for my pessimistic predictions at CNB – predictions which were based on omens rather than on reality. Even a kid knows that the sun sets early in September and its half-appearance behind a 1730 o'clock train is just a fact of nature, not a portent for a black journey.

When the horn sounds loud and clear, I am relieved. One of the two women receives a call from her relatives who have tracked the train and informed that it is 45 minutes late. Naturally, she is perturbed; the more so as she believes (like most people) that an initial delay will only balloon and burgeon en route. I explain about timetable slack and reassure her that we will very likely cut back the delay en route to ALD, the more so as we are going ahead of Rajdhani and will remain that way till the end. Manoharganj is despatched in style, and Sayyid Sarawan too follows suit. Even when the needle hits the 90s and then the 80s, I am not bothered. I brush it off as a caution order; since the overtake has not happened, it will be better for the controller to give us a clear path and thus ensure a smooth sail for Rajdhani. 29, 28, 27... I am still reluctant to accept anything other than a caution order. But then we again start that dreadful crawl.

The first thing to do is to determine where are we – Through or Loop. I open the door on the right – one track there. I then open the left – there is nothing. So it is Through, and not at a station. I check again; some platform lights are visible a few hundred metres ahead. Has to be Manauri and we are stuck at home again. At least Dibru cannot catch us in this condition. The halt isn't long but the pick-up seems more laboured than usual. No use trying to anticipate what the reason might be – I just have to wait and watch. I take up position on the right-hand door while another man who has also been attracted by the halt stands near the left. Clack – clack, a track branches out to the right, glimmering in the light from the open door. That track just curves and joins Up Through – of course; in my tension I have even forgotten that the crossovers come

before the loops. Another clattering sound, this must be the decider..... and there it is! an S-shaped curve is forming behind us like a serpent emerging from its burrow while the straight track is moving further and further away to the right. It is 2044 hrs and defeat has been snatched from the jaws of victory.

As bogie after bogie trundles into the loop towards the red starter, it is a painful reminder of the sunset scene at CNB. The stately rhythm of the wheels is an almost exact fit to the funereal song. This time the sun has really set on our fortune; the hope of vanquishing Rajdhani, which had flashed and flared up during the journey has well and truly fled. All the cheerful and speedy run of the last three hours was just an illusion, a vain attempt at cheating the fate which had already been preordained. And had Schubert not expressed this very sentiment in his monumental trio ? Just when the tragic tune is almost forgotten amidst the bustle of the Scherzo and the Finale, does it not come surging up from the depths to rear its ugly head ? The great composer seems to have anticipated NCR's machinations by two hundred years.

Never mind that there were at least 15 minutes separating the two trains. Never mind that Rajdhani is running almost an hour late while we had the potential to make it to ALD on time. Chauri Chaura is Chauri Chaura, Rajdhani is Rajdhani. One is a mere Express, carrying mostly Sleeper and General Class passengers for whom the bosses care nothing despite their populist speeches and actions. The other is the King of the Section, laden with netas and babus from Delhi who must be kept happy at all times. A Railway fellow shoos us away from the doors – there is no point resisting as the overtake will not even occur within the next maybe half an hour. Why not exercise this vigilance against the recurrent ACP prevalent on this train I wonder.

When I return to the compartment, the questions come thick and fast. "Tumne bola tha ki overtake nahi hogi", "aapne kaha tha ki hum right time ALD pahuchenge lekin ab toh lag raha ki delay badh rahi hai." There is nothing I can say in reply to this apart from admitting my mistake. I feel like launching a tirade but that will only worsen my image, 'look at that bigmouth from IIT, he made a wrong prediction like they always do and was very arrogant when his error was pointed out'. A defensive reply too is no good; even a water-tight calculation cannot cut any ice when flatly contradicted by experiment. "Agar timetable mei overtake likha ho toh overtake hogi – train timetable se hi chalti hain, doosri tarike se nahi." 'O yeah, since your dad is the General Manager' is what I think, but what right do I have now to be sarcastic ? This is what comes of being a devout Rajdhani loyalist – when it's some ordinary train that I am on, it lets me down and makes me look a moron. After a couple of minutes I leave the compartment and go to the door at the other end of the coach. I suppose I must derive consolation from the sight of my favourite 12424 with my favourite WAP4 blasting away as it always does. Blasting past while its ardent fan watches haplessly from the trackside.

I SPOT 12424 again and SRO 2054 is the response. So at least another 20 minutes to go before it happens. 20 minutes – that's the clearance we had over our pursuer at BRE and look at the way it is being whittled down. Now we will reach ALD at 2145 hrs or later, as if to pamper Rajdhani's royal ego by being more late than it itself is. For all I know the fool of a section controller can't even do the calculation for the gap between the trains and is blindly arranging for the overtake 'as per the timetable' like that fat man said. And the driver too is an idiot – why couldn't he hold the bloody MPS steady for God's sake when he knows that this train suffers from a potential overtake problem ?

I ignore a long EMD horn and am nearly thrown off balance when we suddenly lurch forward. But barely have we got the new lease of life than it is again cut off – the brakes hiss and the rake halts. Starter cannot be seen from here but advance can, and it is red. Why should it go green now – Raj must still be 20 or 30 km away. The start-stop drama draws a couple of passengers to the door. But no, it is getting on two minutes since the second stop and the hope which had briefly flickered up is again reduced to a dying ember. This is the aspect where Schubert had misjudged NCR – while his trio comes out of the turbulent regions for a triumphant conclusion, Express train runs on NCR can only end in tragedies.

The second start is imperceptible. I dismiss the backward motion of the platform as an optical trick – I want to see it happen that's why I am seeing it. My psychology course last year had fancy names for all this – grandiose delusions and paranoid hallucinations and what not. But it seems the motion is real, not just some psychological crap. The khalasi is showing the green baton. The dead bogies are rumbling and rattling to life. "Kya ho raha hai," asks a bewildered fellow passenger. "Koi idea nahi hai," I reply perfectly truthfully. Then I check the advance – it is green. "Signal green hai, yahan se hum nikal jayenge," I add. It is 2052 hrs and the 20-minute advantage at BRE has become nearly zero. Well nearly but not quite. As we accelerate out onto Through line, I redo the calculation and find there is still a small cushion on which we can ride upto ALD like a hovercraft. It seems the controller too has realized his/her earlier mistake and is atoning for it before it becomes too late. Schubert may have got that ending right after all.

"Overtake ho chuki hai kya," asks the co-passengers when I reappear in the compartment. "Nahi nahi, abhi bhi 10 minut peeche hai Rajdhani," I reply, my honour restored. As if the overtake would have occurred without making the whole train aware of the fact. We skip Bamhrauli at our LP's measly maximum – just one more station to go – but again slow down on the approach to Subedarganj. I suppose they will put us in the third line now and allow 12424 to go past along the main line – a token overtake but an overtake nonetheless. I go to the door again, this time with resignation. But even Chauri Chaura is not twice unlucky – round about 40 we again start accelerating while the third line and the loop branch out on the left. Final score Chauri Chaura 1 Dibrugarh Rajdhani 0.

The ACP of the day occurs when the loco is just twenty metres from the start of Pf 9 where we have been slotted. The halt does not last long as the culprit himself (unlikely to be *herself*) closes the brake pipe and we finally come to a stop at the platform at 2124 hrs. Stepping out, I hear the announcement ending "..... is just arriving on platform number 4" accompanied by the rumble of the EOG. This has been the closest finish possible and I offer my thanks to the Rail Gods for making it happen this way. My thanks are also due to you the reader for your patience in reaching this point.