

# Sena MLA screams 'rats' as he faces flak for holding up train

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MUMBAI: A day after Shiv Sena MLA Hemant Patil from Nanded held up 1,200 passengers for an hour at the Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus by pulling the alarm chain of the Devgiri Express as he was given a side berth, the Railway Protection Force (RPF) lodged a case against "unidentified persons" on Thursday.

Interestingly, while the maximum punishment for this offence is a prison term and/or a fine of a maximum of Rs 1,000, officials admit that courts give out jail sentences very rarely as the offence is considered a petty one. The MLA, Patil, however blamed the railways for their "poor service."

"What will you do if rats start nibbling the food in your plate? There was no water in the toilet and we had to use bottled water instead. The bed linen was dirty. Elderly MLAs were provided with upper berths and youngsters were provided lower berths," Patil told TOI in his defence.

"This is a frequent problem on the railways. We, Marathwada MLAs, have written three to four times to the speaker of the legislative assembly . On April 4, I had raised the issue through a `point of propriety' and had a meeting, on Tuesday , with senior railway officials. But there has been no improvement," Patil added.

"On Wednesday night, when we tried to call top railway officials, they didn't answer our calls. There was only a ticket-checker present on the spot," he alleged.

The RPF as well as the commercial staff of the railways had tried to broker peace, but other MLAs came out in support of Patil. "It's unreasonable to detain a train because a passenger does not want a side berth. We called in additional personnel to ensure the issue did not snowball into a lawand-order situation," a senior RPF official said. "We will now go through CCTV footage of CST to identify witnesses and record their statements. After sufficient evidence is collected and all the accused identified, their names will be entered in the FIR," the official said.

"When a special compartment is being provided for Marathwada MLAs through legislation, how can the railways allow agents to sell tickets for the same compartment?" claimed Patil.

But railway officials have refuted Patil's allegations about the unhygienic conditions in compartments. A senior railway official also said they were extra-cautious when it came to accommodating MLAs on trains. "There are 46 berths in 2A coach. Of these, 38 were allotted to MLAs and their workers. Though there were 8 berths remaining, we refused to allot them to waitlisted passengers. This is despite the fact that tickets are in demand due to summer vacation," a Central Railway official said.

"MLAs travel with their workers and get special passes through which the PNR is generated. There is no provision in the software to allocate only lower berth to MLAs. In this case, the MLA concerned should have had a discussion with other colleagues and adjusted. In the past too, politicians have held up trains for trivial issues without bothering about the impact on operations of services," the official added.

Rail activist Subhash Gupta said, "Patil is trying to wriggle out of the situation by levelling baseless allegations. He has to be held responsible for keeping thousands of people hostage."

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It is odd that the RPF has filed a case against 'unidentified persons' when it is clear that it was a Shiv Sena legislator who held up the train for an hour and caused disruption of so many services. The MLA must be held accountable if the message has to go out that VIP status does not allow anybody to indulge in disruptive activities.