

# Rlys to retool infra for more SUVs on tracks

DHRUVAKSH SAHA & DEEPAK PATEL

New Delhi, 24 October

Indian Railways is redesigning wagons and overhauling track infrastructure so that more cars, especially sports utility vehicles (SUVs), can be transported on its good trains, *Business Standard* has learnt.

Through these steps, the Railways aims to halve the cost of freight for automakers, its officials said. Indian Railways transported 2,206 rakes of passenger vehicles (PVs) across the country in the current financial year, registering a growth of 68 per cent over the previous year.

Almost half the 2.27 million PVs sold in India during the first half of FY23 were utility vehicles (UVs), accord-

## E-COM FIRMS CHOOSE RAIL, ROAD OVER AIRLINES

In the Diwali week, domestic airlines are propped up by robust demand. But this time around their fortunes are mixed. While passenger demand remains strong, cargo loads have dropped as e-commerce firms have switched to trucks and trains. ▶

ing to Society of Indian Automobile Manufacturers (SIAM).

While overall PV sales were up 35.5 per cent in H1FY23, the sales growth in the UV segment was 45.51 per cent. The UV segment consists of SUV and MUV (multi-utility vehicle).

Maruti Suzuki and Tata Motors, two of the top five SUV makers in the country (see chart), have welcomed the Railways' steps to boost SUV transportation.

### Taller wagons for bigger cars

The national transporter will have taller wagons that can include more cars — especially SUVs — within the same goods train, a Railways official said. The current design of double-decker wagons is too small for cars to be loaded on both decks. The national transporter says the new design, which had been demanded by automakers for a while now, can halve the cost of transporting SUVs.

# Rlys to retool infra for more SUVs...

Currently, Railways uses Newly Modified Goods (NMG) wagons, which have the same external design as a regular passenger train coach, and can carry 3-4 vehicles in a single wagon, depending on the vehicle's length. Railways also use double-decker wagons. However, the dimensions of the wagon do not make it conducive for SUVs to be transported on the upper deck, which mainly sees loading of two-wheelers or hatchbacks.

"Two new-design wagons having a higher height are under development and can accommodate SUVs in both decks — lower and upper. One rake of these wagon designs can carry almost twice the number of SUVs which can be carried in the current design wagon (BCACBM) rake," a senior ministry of railways official said, requesting anonymity.

Officials said the prototype of one new wagon has been manufactured and will undergo testing and trial runs, while the design of another wagon is still being finalised, after which prototype will be manufactured and tested.

The new designs are part of railways' Mission 3000, which entails capturing 3,000 million tonnes (mt) of freight by 2027, or more than twice its current loading of 1,418 mt in 2021-22. A large part of it can be realised by shifting automobile freight from roadways to railways. The national transporter currently has a 16 per cent share in the transportation of PVs in the country.

## Track infra revamp, dedicated corridors

Meanwhile, an issue the railway board had raised in its previous deliberations with automakers was the need to alter its entire track and bridge infrastructure and increase the height of its overhead equipment (OHE) infrastructure to accommodate these taller wagons.

A second official told this paper, these changes are also in the works now. While some stretches on the railways network will require more work, newly built tracks and corridors such as dedicated freight corridors (DFCs) are already equipped with the infrastructure to make OHE networks taller and run these new wagons once they are commissioned. Therefore, the new wagons may begin their journey in the states of Haryana, Punjab, Gujarat, Rajasthan, and Maharashtra, while some southern states are also being targeted.



Four-wheeler makers have welcomed the initiative to bring down carbon emissions in the sector and reduce the cost of logistics. Most cars today are transported by road, which uses more fuel, is anti-environment, and costlier.

Maruti Suzuki, one of the early birds in the trend of shifting transportation to railways, is looking forward to these new wagons to optimise its supply chain. "If and when this design is validated, efficiencies in railway logistics will increase significantly. Enhanced rail mode transportation will further bring down congestion on roads, reduce emissions and give faster access to customers based in different parts of the country," Rahul Bharti, Executive Officer, Corporate Affairs, Maruti Suzuki India said.

Bharti added that as part of its green logistics efforts, Maruti Suzuki has been increasing the use of railways for its outbound vehicle dispatches. In H1 FY 2022-23, the company has already dispatched over 160,000 units by rail, which is nearly 17 per cent of its total volume, more than double from 8 per cent in 2018-19.

Tata Motors spokesperson told this paper, "High Capacity BCACBM (new Double Decker Designs) run under AFTO (automobile freight train operator) scheme are better designed and maintained. However, these do not permit transportation of mid-size and normal sized SUVs, due to their overall height limitations."

Railway's decision to redesign the wagons is a welcome step, the spokesperson mentioned. "This will enable OEMs to transport most of their SUVs, through AFTO Wagons, without losing out on overall capacity and economy." Hyundai, Kia, and Mahindra and Mahindra did not respond to queries sent by *Business Standard*.