Stalled on the Tracks: Institutional Failures and Comparative Reform Analysis of Pakistan Railways

Saba Anwar[1*], Saneela Aslam[1]

Affiliations
1. Pakistan Institute of Development Economics Islamabad

*Corresponding Author Email:
saba@pide.org.pk

Abstract

Pakistan Railways has been in long-term decline, facing issues like poor service delivery, financial losses, and weak governance. Although various reform plans have been proposed over the years, most reforms failed due to poor implementation, political interference, and lack of continuity. This research aims to examine why these reforms did not succeed and to identify the main challenges in improving the railway sector. In this study we used a qualitative research approach based on thematic analysis. During Research process data was collected through semi-structured interviews with officials from the Ministry of Railways and other relevant departments. Secondary sources such as reports, articles, and policy documents were also reviewed. Key findings show that the main problems include lack of strategic planning, political inconsistency, weak institutional structure, financial constraints, and limited use of technology. The study also focuses on successful reform would require stronger leadership, reduced government interference, improved planning, and better public-private partnerships. This research contributes to the understanding of why state-owned enterprises like Pakistan Railways continue to underperform. It also offers practical policy recommendations to make the sector more efficient, competitive, and sustainable in the future.

Keywords: *Pakistan Railways, Railway Reform, Public-Private Partnership, Governance, Qualitative Research*

JEL Classification: *F1, F12, F60*

1. Introduction

Railways have long played a critical role in inclusive economic development by facilitating the movement of goods, people, and services in an efficient and environmentally friendly manner. Globally, rail is considered one of the most reliable, affordable, and safest modes of transportation. With advancements in renewable energy and electric trains, modern railway systems are also becoming carbon-neutral, helping to combat environmental degradation and climate change. Railways support key sectors such as agriculture, mining, manufacturing, and logistics, making them essential to national economic growth and sustainability.

Despite its immense potential, Pakistan Railways has experienced a continuous decline over the past several decades. Once the backbone of Pakistan's transportation infrastructure, it now suffers from chronic under-performance, institutional mismanagement, political interference, and outdated infrastructure. While Pakistan Railways remains the country's second-largest public institution after the armed forces, it is burdened by colonial-era systems, aging equipment, and a bureaucratic governance structure that resists reform. Horrific accidents, declining passenger and freight shares, and an increasing financial deficit underscore the sector's worsening condition. This persistent decline is not simply a technical failure; it reflects broader governance and policy challenges facing Pakistan's state-owned enterprises (SOEs). Frequent political transitions, inconsistent leadership, and a lack of long-term planning have hindered reform continuity. Reforms introduced by one government are often abandoned by the next, preventing any meaningful institutional transformation. Repeated restructuring plans have failed to bridge the growing gap between policy and implementation. Consequently, the Pakistan Railway remains trapped in a cycle of inefficiency, absorbing increasing public funds without delivering measurable performance improvements.

The railway sector's struggles are emblematic of the state's inability to manage large public enterprises effectively. Political patronage, strong union pressures, a lack of professional autonomy, and competing stakeholder interests have further weakened the sector's capacity to reform. Despite budget increases—such as the Vision 2025 plan that allocated 25% more funding to transport—no corresponding efficiency gains have been realized. Railways continue to lose ground to road transport, which receives greater policy focus despite its environmental cost.

This study takes a qualitative approach to explore the reform process of Pakistan Railways. It aims to understand why past reform attempts have failed and what institutional, financial, and political barriers prevent progress. It further examines how governance failures, lack of accountability, and weak institutional mechanisms hinder the sector's development. The research investigates key questions:

Why have railway reforms consistently failed despite repeated efforts?
What governance and institutional gaps are preventing sustainable change?
What role can public-private partnerships play in revitalizing the sector?
What lessons can Pakistan learn from the more successful railway reforms in India and Bangladesh?

The study applies a thematic analysis of qualitative data collected through semi-structured interviews with officials from the Ministry of Railways, transport experts, and planners. It is grounded in the belief that understanding the reform failure requires capturing the views of those involved in the system. By highlighting policy gaps and implementation barriers, this research contributes to the discourse on SOE reform in Pakistan and proposes practical, context-specific solutions.

2. Literature Review
2.1. Theoretical Literature

Railway transport is central to national development due to its low-cost, eco-friendly, and mass transport capabilities. In the context of public administration, railway performance is often used as an indicator of governance quality and public sector efficiency. Several theories explain public sector failure—especially in SOEs—including bureaucratic inefficiency, lack of competition, and political patronage. According to Cantos et al. (2010), reform models in Europe highlight the role of vertical and horizontal separation, public-private partnerships, and institutional autonomy in enhancing railway productivity. Similarly, Di Pietrantonio and Pelkmans (2004) describe how governance reforms—rather than just technical upgrades—are critical to improving service delivery in state-owned rail systems.

In Pakistan's case, the governance and administrative structure of Pakistan Railways remains largely unreformed since the colonial period. It is still a monolithic state-run entity, with little accountability, limited market responsiveness, and bureaucratic resistance to change. As argued by Durrani (2011) and Khan & Khan (2021), without addressing institutional inertia, financial aid or structural adjustments alone cannot bring sustainable improvements.

2.2. Empirical Literature

Several studies have analyzed Pakistan Railways' performance using quantitative indicators such as revenue, efficiency, and passenger volumes. Looney (1998) traced the decline in rail usage from the 1970s onward, highlighting the state's failure to prioritize railway infrastructure. Tahir and Tahir (2020) applied time-series data to assess operational efficiency but did not explore the underlying administrative and political challenges that inhibit reform implementation.

Chang (2007) and Raballand et al. (2015) emphasize that SOE reform requires more than structural changes—it needs clear governance rules, accountability frameworks, and reduced political interference. In South Asia, India and Bangladesh have taken steps to restructure their railway systems through corporation,

decentralization, and public-private partnerships, with varying degrees of success. These examples provide useful reference points for Pakistan, which continues to lag behind in policy execution.

In Pakistan, the share of rail in freight transport has declined drastically from 49% to 23% over the last two decades. Despite reforms and budgetary support under Vision 2025, inefficiencies persist. Government reports and PIDE blogs (Anwar & Gul, 2020) have noted that Pakistan Railways remains one of the top loss-making SOEs, largely due to policy inconsistency, institutional resistance, and lack of transparency.

2.3. Research gap

The earlier studies of Looney (1998) and Tahir and Tahir (2020) have estimated the efficiency and effectiveness of the Pakistan railway using time series data. Pakistan Railways, there is a lack of in-depth qualitative research that analyzes the reform process itself, particularly from the perspective of government officials and key stakeholders involved in decision-making.

This study fills that gap by offering: A thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews with officials from the Ministry of Railways and related agencies. First-hand insight into why reforms fail after approval, how institutional barriers persist, and how governance dynamics undermine performance. Thus, this research adds an original contribution by documenting the lived experience of institutional actors, identifying deep-rooted governance challenges, and proposing realistic reform strategies grounded in stakeholder perspectives. It broadens the literature on railway reform in Pakistan from a technical and financial discussion to an institutional and governance-focused analysis, which has been underrepresented in existing scholarships.

3.Methodology and Model

3.1 Study Area

The research methods that are chosen to highlight the problems and challenges of the Pakistan railway that reflect the usage of the substantial qualitative method to find the result of this study and the ultimate conclusion. It is vital to contemplate key factors that are influencing the interpretation of the case of higher and lower development position (Johnson, Vindrola-Padros, & Medicine, 2017) and (Baškarada & Koronios, 2018).

3.2 Data Collection Techniques

The unit of data collection for this research is the Ministry of Railway, Planning Commission, Ministry of Transport, Ministry of Communication, their data and information. The information that will be used in this research is based on primary as well as secondary sources, which is mainly collected from Pakistan Railways yearbook, Bangladesh Railway information book, national and international reports, and news articles.

In this research purposive sampling is used. Here is purposive sampling used because the required information is not collected from the common person. Only an official person can answer the questionnaire. Following this sampling to generate informed information, discussion, saving time and money the respondents that are selected for the interviews (Campbell et al., 2020) are secretary of the railway, former secretary of the railway, general manager of Pakistan railway, director general of Pakistan, director (operations), deputy directors, deputy chief planning, etc. All the above-mentioned members of the Ministry of the Railway are interviewed with the question of railway reform failure, challenges of the railway, institutional reform, public-private partnership, and failure of the fund allocation for the railway sector. This study covers the overall analysis of Pakistan's railway sector reform under the area coverage of Islamabad and Lahore. Each hurdle and barrier are recognized and discussed under the developed themes and codes.

3.3 Duration of Study

It takes one year to complete this study. It was started to collect reading materials from different papers, journals in 2022. Completed reading table, annotated bibliography, finalized research question, concluded

variables, drafted questionnaires, define study area, collected possible respondents list and collected information. Data collection and processing, write draft paper, and finally complete the study.

3.4 Theoretical Model

The study is more concerned with the development of the instruments that are helpful for the generation of effective policy for railway development and achieving the 25% growth rate according to Vision 2030 (Wu et al., 2017) The respondents are selected on their age, experience and designation who have full command of the highlighted problem. For the analysis of the trends, arguments, and opinions the instruments of the questionnaire are shaped in parts to achieve a better outcome. The questionnaires are designed according to answers to all questions that are highlighted in this research. On the other hand, in the form of secondary data like the book, reports PIDE Blog, journals are followed as a tool for information collection. During conducting interviews different perspectives on the issue also highlight the gruesome situation of the Pakistan railway sector (Sofaer, 2002).

3.5 Empirical Model

This study is based on the qualitative method of research. On this basis, semi-structured interviews are conducted to understand the challenges of why reforms are never implemented despite approval from the government, and what challenges create a hurdle to implementing the reform for the development of the railway sector (Cypress, 2018) and (Kallio et al., 2016). The questions are developed to find out the answer to the highlighted objectives in this study. The technicalities of conducting interviews are the inclusion of key determinants and respondents to ask about the different perspectives on the failure and poor implementation of the Pakistan railway sector reform process.

However, the participants are mostly senior officials of the railway department, academic experts, and think tank members that talk about the Pakistan railway sector reform process as a major hurdle in the way of progressive railway reform and how public-private partnership is successive for the development and revival of Pakistan railway. To some extent, poor leadership, lack of decisive policies, absence of training and financial constraints, and successive governments more focus on the development of the road pushing the Pakistan railway worse department of the state own enterprises (SOEs). The interview is divided in the following scheme (Smith, 1995) and (Dearnley, 2005).

Looney (1998) presented early data on Pakistan's rail decline due to policy neglect and misaligned priorities. More recently, Tahir and Tahir (2020) used quantitative models to assess the technical efficiency of Pakistan Railways but did not explore the deeper administrative and governance issues underlying reform failures. To better understand Pakistan's situation, it is valuable to examine how other developing nations have approached railway reform:

India

India's railway reforms have focused on corporation, decentralization, and investment in freight corridors. The creation of Indian Railways Catering and Tourism Corporation (IRCTC) and Dedicated Freight Corridors (DFCs) has improved efficiency. While still publicly owned, Indian Railways has introduced competition, technology, and limited PPPs to boost performance (Lodge, 2003).

Bangladesh

Bangladesh Railway, while still government-run, has made progress in adopting donor-supported reform programs. Focus has been placed on safety, modernization, and gradual autonomy. However, like Pakistan, it struggles with implementation delays and political interference.

China

China adopted a vertically separated model where infrastructure and operations were split. This allowed for high-speed rail expansion, improved safety, and massive investment under a centrally planned but market-driven approach (Yu, 2015).

Brazil and Mexico

Both countries embraced privatization and concession models in the 1990s. Campos (2001) explains that Brazil's railway restructuring helped attract private investment while Mexico used long-term concessions to improve freight services. However, social obligations such as unprofitable passenger routes remain a challenge.

South Africa

South Africa experimented with separating infrastructure ownership from operations, with mixed outcomes due to weak regulatory enforcement and capacity issues (Chauke & Maluleke, 2005).

4. Results and Discussions

In this chapter primarily we can discuss the facts and information that is collected through the semi-structured interviews which are discussed in the previous chapter. The main purpose of the qualitative research design is to evaluate the reform and understand the reason for the failure of implementing reforms of the Pakistan railway (Hennink et al., 2020). However, there is a clear relationship between the research method and research design that provides information to see the cause-and-effect relationship followed by the specific research design.

4.1 Analysis of Qualitative Information

Analysis of qualitative information provides the various factors and drivers of the Pakistan railway sector reform process and is reflected in the form of discussion and organization of the responses of the respondents. The questionnaire that is prepared for the data collection from the concerned stakeholders is obtained through open-ended questions. The participants through the questionnaire provide deep information about the hurdles and barriers to Pakistan's railway sector reform process failure.

Part 1: Strategic Planning Deficiencies

Respondents unanimously pointed out a lack of long-term and goal-oriented strategic planning. Policies are often reactive, with no road-map for the future. There are strong footprints and interference from the government which provides fewer chances for the railway board to work independently. If powerful boards are not made with less government interference, the problems of inefficiency and sunk cost remain the same. Nothing will change because the railway board acted as the brain of the Pakistan railway including stakeholders / technical heads from our department. *"There is no strategic planning for the next five to ten years. We only respond to crises."*

Part 2: Political Interference and Governance Breakdown

One of the most consistent responses was the detrimental effect of political instability and interference. Successive governments change policies without follow-through. The Pakistan railway is a state-own enterprise (SOE) during the time of 1970s Pakistan railway had the largest passenger carrier share but over time its deteriorating quality of service providers also reduced the share of passengers and freight. To some extent the situation in Pakistan, the railway is due to political inconsistency.

"Political inconsistency is a hurdle; reforms are started but never completed."

Part 3: Limited Implementation of Public-Private Partnerships

While PPPs are often mentioned in policy discourse, respondents noted the absence of implementation mechanisms or successful models.

"PPP is a good idea in theory, but we don't have frameworks or risk-sharing models to attract investors."

The public-private partnership model if applied in a true sense will bring modern business techniques (such as Tics, leopard services) to the organization and joint venture with local technical organizations such as NESCOM, SPARCO will save the foreign exchange.

Part 4: Weak Institutional Autonomy

Pakistan Railways lacks operational independence. Most decisions are overridden by government authorities, reducing the ability of professional staff to manage the system efficiently.

"The railway board cannot function independently; everything is dictated by the ministry."

Performance based Evaluation strategy. Performance-based management should not be based on seniority but on achieving the given goals and objectives. Efficient leadership with background knowledge of the subject and professionalism help to achieve the goals and tasks of the Pakistan railway sector. Some of the reforms of capacity building are in progress including customer relationship management (CRM) is working for the tracking arrangement, SMS alerts, and call centers for providing information about the timing of trains' arrivals and departures done in the railway department.

Part 5: Financial Constraints and Mismanagement

Respondents reported severe budget deficits, poor financial planning, and ineffective resource allocation. Much of the budget is consumed by non-development expenditures like pensions and maintenance.

"Despite increasing annual budgets, there is little progress in infrastructure due to poor fund utilization."

There is also a lack of management and clear-cut policy which led the railway into a creeping deficit. Pakistan railway has a lower investment. Most of the allocated funds for the railway are used for buying the locomotive, repairing and maintenance needs more investment and budget for Pakistan railway infrastructure development.

Part 6: Preference to Roads on the Coast of Pakistan Railways

Respondents noted that government policies and PSDP allocations heavily favor road development at the cost of rail. But unfortunately, our successive government policies are in favor of road infrastructure development instead of railway infrastructure .

"Almost 70% of transport investment goes to roads, while rail is neglected."

Part 7: Resistance to Reform from Within

Resistance from unions and internal actors is a major barrier. Staff fear job losses, accountability, and changes to existing privileges. The Pakistan railway board is in a position to work independently. It is always dictated by the higher authority of the government that it should be autonomous.

"Union pressure and internal resistance block any meaningful reform effort."

Part 8: To Make the Railway Competitive Provinces Could Take it Over

The participants reflected on the idea that: to make the railway sector competitive provinces could take it over is helpful and also make it profitable but also reduces the strategic importance of Pakistan railways. Some

other responses provided that; the Pakistan Railway can't hand over the provinces because it's a federal subject. As we know that Pakistan railway is a state-own enterprise, if it will provide the provinces it will end up. So the basic solution to make the railway sector competitive is state own enterprise (SOEs). There is a need to elect professionals with expertise, increase the budget, build human capital, and train working persons to revive the Pakistan railway sector.

5. Result
5.1. Lack of Strategic Planning and Decisive Policy Making
Respondents consistently highlighted the absence of long-term policy frameworks. They reported ad-hoc planning, lack of continuity, and reactive troubleshooting approaches in railway management.

> *"There is no strategic planning for the coming ten to five years to achieve targeted growth and development."*

5.2. Political Interference and Institutional Weakness
Interviewees noted frequent changes in leadership, policy reversals by successive governments, and pervasive political influence, limiting the autonomy of Pakistan Railways.

> *"Railway board decisions are often overridden by government directives."*

5.3. Financial Constraints and Mis-allocation of Resources
Respondents expressed concern about budget deficits, inadequate resource utilization, and over-dependence on government subsidies. Most funds are used for repairs and pensions, with little left for modernization.

> *"The railway budget is consumed by pensions and locomotive repairs, not infrastructure expansion."*

5.4. Public-Private Partnership (PPP) Awareness but Limited Action
Stakeholders expressed support for PPP but noted the absence of proper frameworks, pilot projects, or incentives to attract credible investors.

> *"We talk about PPP, but there is no legal mechanism or risk-sharing model in place."*

5.5. Workforce and Performance Issues
The workforce suffers from poor incentives, low morale, union pressure, and resistance to reform. The performance appraisal system is outdated and seniority-based.

> *"Promotion is not merit-based. Staff are not rewarded for efficiency or innovation.*

5.6. Provincial Autonomy: A Divided Opinion
There is a split in opinion. Some officials support devolution for increased efficiency, while others argue railway must remain federally controlled due to strategic importance.

> *"Giving it to provinces might create efficiency but reduce national integration.*

6. Discussion

6.1. Strategic Planning Deficit and Reform Failure

The lack of sustained, long-term planning aligns with findings by Looney (1998) and Tahir & Tahir (2020**)**, who argue that fragmented policies impede reform implementation. Your findings confirm the same structural issues seen in earlier decades.

6.2. Impact of Political Instability on Reforms

Political interference remains a key barrier, consistent with Raballand et al. (2015) and Zhang & Freestone (2013**)**. These studies also suggest that SOEs with strong political oversight tend to be inefficient and face operational stagnation—exactly the case with Pakistan Railways.

6.3. Financial Burdens Reflect Systemic Mismanagement

Consistent with Farooq (2013) and Ali et al. (2024**),** the findings suggest that unbalanced expenditures—favoring pension liabilities and engine maintenance—hinder infrastructure investment and reform readiness.

6.4. PPP Potential Recognized but Unutilized

Like Campos (2001) who analyzed Brazil's reforms, and Chen & Haynes (2015) on China's railway PPPs, Pakistan's scenario indicates a conceptual understanding but lack of operational frameworks, which delays public-private investments.

6.5. HR Deficiencies Undermine Institutional Effectiveness

The issues of union control, lack of meritocracy, and resistance to digitization match the conclusions of Chang (2007**)** and Campbell et al. (2020) who emphasize performance-based HR systems for public-sector transformation.

6.6. Devolution: Federalism vs. Functionality

Split views on provincial control mirror Yvrande-Billon & Menard (2005) who showed that decentralized systems work only when there is capacity and coordination. Without these, fragmentation worsens. There is a shortage of Pakistan Railway's right men for the right job. Most technical decisions are taken by no technical personnel who have no sense of technical revolution. There is also a lack of innovative minds to explore the railway sector's new ventures for the growth and development of the Pakistan railway. One of the important aspects regarding decision-making, they are not good enough at decision-making.

There is also a communication gap between the Ministry of Railways and the railway board in the context of policy and strategy making. In this worsening situation of Pakistan Railway, the government does not indicate the initiatives to minimize the railway losses and improve the services of the Pakistan railway sector. Indeed, making railways competitive and giving a takeover to the provinces is not a solution to the arising problem. Somehow, Pakistan's railway sector can reduce sunk costs and bring revolutionary change by implementing these steps. If these steps are exactly followed, the Pakistan railway can create thousands of jobs and generate billions of revenues in Pakistan's economy which will improve Pakistan's gross domestic product (GDP). Transport policy must be amended. The focus of the Pakistan railway sector should be prioritized. Most of the respondents said that increasing the pay scale of the workers improves the working performance of the railway sector. But the point is that the government is providing increments in salaries. Their increment is annual based not performance based. So, in this case increasing salaries is not a solution to reduce the railway sector deficit. At that time within the institution, they should adopt the capacity-building mechanism that helps to bring efficiency in this sector.

From the comparative performance study of Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh. It is worsening the position of the operating performance of Pakistan among the South Asian countries. The vehicle kilometers per day in Pakistan is 345 KM (2018-19) indicating that the usage of the Pakistan railway is comparatively average to that of India and Bangladesh. The other countries are moving towards up-gradation and restructuring the

railway but Pakistan at that time was on the verge of collapse. The vehicle kilometers per day of another coaching of Pakistan railway are 129 KM (2018-19) which is very low in comparison to the IR and BR.

Overall Pakistan railway moving downwards. In comparison to other countries, the government supports this sector and provides subsidies. But the thing is that massive support of the government allocation for this sector development loses its efficiency.

7. Conclusion and Recommendations

The revitalization of Pakistan Railways requires more than just policy documents and budgetary support. It demands a cultural, institutional, and structural shift that minimizes political intrusion and maximizes professional governance. Without these foundational changes, Pakistan Railways will remain on a track to irrelevance—burdening the economy instead of serving it.

However, the government of Pakistan never sets the goals and objectives for reforms. It should be recognized which are measurable performance indicators within a short period. The major reasons behind the reform failure are the lack of background knowledge of the professionals who are elected through the competitive superior exams (CSS). They have no expertise or experience in problem-solving. Lack of management and resistance from the employees and workers' unionization are hurdles in the way of implementation of Pakistan railway sector reforms. Because according to them increasing salaries and up gradation will help to improve the efficiency of railway department working.

For the passenger trains, there is a need to introduce quality services with season tickets to schools, colleges, and universities on booking tours through the Pakistan railway and make affiliation with hotels to give a standard service to its customer through joint ventures with good profit margins and gain a win-win situation. Improving the freight business by reducing minimum involvement and reducing corruption has a robust mechanism to track books /parcels.

After analyzing the Pakistan railway sector reform process. The policy recommendation is to improve the performance and reform process in Pakistan would follow the market-based solution.

   i. The Ministry of Railways must delegate operational decision-making to a professionally managed, independent committees. This board should consist of experts from engineering, logistics, and finance, not bureaucrats alone.

   ii. Introduce a merit-based evaluation system, replace seniority promotion with performance-linked advancement, and reduce union interference.

   iii. Pakistan Railway is the largest state-owned enterprise (SOE) government shall invest in this entity because it is an environment-friendly transportation system. As we know, adopting a road policy brings congestion on roads and pollutes the environment. Improving railway performance will protect the environment from pollution.

   iv. Last few years the railway has been under a huge deficit. To tackle this issue, making the railway a provincial subject shall help to reduce operating expenses and increase revenue.

   v. To achieve the railway reform objectives, they must focus on the development of a market strategy because there is no marketing structure yet developed to promote this business.

   vi. Govt. should reduce the subsidies that are a burden on the economy and lead the railway to operationalize this sector commercially. Pakistan's railway integration with the private sector give more emphasis on the efficiency of the Railway sector.

   vii. Fully implement Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) systems across departments to reduce corruption, improve procurement efficiency, and enable data-driven decision-making.

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