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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# BRITISH PERSPECTIVE ON INDIAN RAILWAYS

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### ABSTRACT

Le développement des Etats passe par la santé de leur population, ainsi ils se donnent les moyens pour assurer leur bien-être. En Côte d'Ivoire, ce désir est possible grâce à la construction des édifices sanitaires, à la formation des agents de santé et à l'organisation des activités scientifiques. Aussi, des programmes de prise en charge vaccinales gratuite leur sont offerts pour maintenir leur santé en bonne état dès leur naissance. Au nombre de ces programmes figurent le Programme Elargie de Vaccination (PEV), qui permet à la population d'éviter certaines maladies. Malgré les actions menées par l'état pour prévenir et guérir les maladies, la couverture vaccinale dans l'air sanitaire d'Anyama reste faible. Alors cet article veut comprendre les raisons qui justifient l'inobservance de la vaccination des mères d'enfants de 0 à 11 mois. La méthodologie qui a présidé au recueil des données est l'approche qualitative. Les outils mobilisés sont un guide d'entretien et une grille d'observation in situ. Les résultats de l'étude montrent qu'au-delà des représentations des mères, les facteurs comme les manifestations post-vaccinales indésirables (MAPI), l'occupation des mères, la distance des ménages du lieu de vaccination, et le recours aux soins traditionnels justifient de l'inobservance de la vaccination chez les mères d'enfant de 0 à 11 mois dans ledit district.

## INTRODUCTION

The rail labourers had a multi-regional proletarian composition which created some problems of racial and linguistic barriers. It created differences between Bengali and Non-Bengali, in castes, language, and creed. Their disunity, ignorance, helplessness were exploited by the British capitalists. The railway working-class movement, however, can be classified into the following phases:

- The first phase covers the period of Swadeshi days to the First World War.
- The second phase was from post-war period to 1927.
- The third phase was from 1927 to 1929.
- The next phase from 1929 to 1947.
- The final phase from 1947 to 1974.

The 1974 railway strike and the Emergency period marked the end of rail strikes in India until now. The last rail strike was of utmost significance. It involved international significance as well. The initial rail strikes were not united organised but with the passage of time and experience these strikes became very vibrant and well planned, and then executed.<sup>1</sup>

**British Perspective on Indian Railways:** Apologists for empire like to claim that the British brought democracy, the rule of law, and trains

to India. Many modern apologists for British colonial rule in India no longer contest the basic facts of imperial exploitation and plunder, rapacity and loot which are too deeply documented to be challengeable. Instead, they offer a counter-argument. The construction of the Indian Railways is often pointed to by apologists for empire as benefitting the subcontinent. The railways were first conceived of by the East India Company, like everything else, in that firm's calculation, for its own benefit. Governor-General Lord Hardinge argued in 1843 that the railways would be beneficial to the commerce, government, and military control of the country. In their very conception and construction, the Indian railway was a colonial scam. British shareholders made absurd amounts of money by investing in the railways, where the government guaranteed returns double those of government stocks paid entirely from Indian, and not British, taxes. It was a splendid racket for the British, at the expense of the Indian taxpayer. The railways were intended principally to transport extracted resources—coal, iron ore, cotton and soon, to the port—for the British to ship home to use in their factories. The movement of people was incidental, except when it secured colonial interests, and the third class compartments with their wooden benches and total absence of amenities, into which Indians were herded, attracted horrified comment even at the time.<sup>2</sup> Indians were not employed at higher posts in the railways. The prevailing view was that the railways would have to be staffed almost exclusively by Europeans to protect their investment. Starting from directors of the

1. Shyamapada Bhowmick, "History of the Bengal Nagpur Railway Working Class Movements 1906-1974", Krantik Publications, 1998

<sup>2</sup>Sashi Tharoor, [www.theguardian.com](http://www.theguardian.com), 8 March 2017.

railway board to ticket collectors were all white men—whose salaries and benefits were all repatriated back to England. British economic policies gave them a monopoly over India's large market and raw materials such as cotton, jute, coal, iron, steel, silk, tea, etc. In 1912, the British passed an act of parliament explicitly making it impossible for Indian workshops to design and manufacture locomotives. Between 1854 and 1947, India imported around 14,400 locomotives from England. The main goals of British to introduce railways were to lower transport costs and open the Indian market to British manufactured products such as cotton textiles. Parallely, railways led to increased agricultural output, the export of food grains, widening of markets, and commercialisation of agriculture and hence, cropping patterns. As the railways widened the markets for the agricultural sector, Indian agriculture became linked to the world's trade cycles. Lord Dalhousie introduced this new system of internal communication in India through the railways. He was the "Father of Indian Railways". Dalhousie's famous Railway minutes of 1853 convinced the home authorities of the need for the railways and laid down the main lines of development. The railways integrated the markets and increased trade. It facilitated the investment in different industries as now the movement of finished goods became easy. Jute, cotton, iron and steel industries were established.<sup>3</sup>

The performance of the Indian railways can be classified into two periods: pre-1920 and post-1920. Farms and freight charges exhibit similar patterns with dividend guarantee of private ownership. Private railways were organised as joint-stock companies set up via commission contracts entered into with the Secretary of State for India seated in London. The contracts were enforced and administered by the Government of India under the direction of the Governor-General of India. More than 90% of the company shareholders were British and almost all the capital was raised through equity rather than debt. The shareholders were represented by a board of directors in London which included retired members of the British military and other members of the British financial elite. Railway companies were organised as multi departmental organisations.<sup>4</sup> They had the authority to supervise construction and subsequent operations. They made a contract (GOI and East India Company). The contract cost on the early lines exceeded exportations and cost almost 20,000 pounds per mile compared to the initial estimate of 12,000 pounds. The early lines remained unprofitable for several decades. There were several railway mergers shortly after the old guaranteed railways were taken over. For example, the Sind, Punjab and Delhi railway was merged with the state-owned Indus Valley and Punjab Northern lines to create the Northwestern Railway system managed by the Government of India. The British had made a reduction in railway fares and freight charges. This profit added on to the colonial treasury. The estimated social savings was Rs. 1.2 billion which was 9% of the national income which increased to 50%. Thus, the railways were the most important infrastructure development in India from 1850 to 1947; in terms of politics and economy, the railways brought both money and power into the hands of the British.<sup>5</sup>

**Railways in India and Bengal:** The foundation of the British colonial economy in India was laid well before the introduction of the railways. The railways mainly strengthened the foundation of the British Empire in India. It is not surprising that the cotton barons of Lancashire were the most vehement supporters of the Indian railway project. They had a double objective: firstly to sell their cheap machine-made cloth to the millions of Indian masses and secondly, to secure a more reliable source of raw cotton than the United States. Karl Marx, in 1853 prophesied, "...the English millocracy intend to endow India with railways with the exclusive view of extracting at diminished expenses the cotton and other raw material for their manufactures."

The railways pushed India into an era of classical colonialism. This was characterised by Indian exports of agricultural raw materials and imports of British-manufactured products. India's economy was twisted to fit this classical colonial pattern. Throughout the 19th century, Britain enjoyed a trade surplus with India. But it had a growing deficit in its overall international trade with other nations, which were offset by a substantial Indian export surplus. These exports primarily constituted agricultural raw materials such as cotton, jute, tea, coffee, wheat, oilseeds, opium, sugarcane, tobacco, etc. Imports were made up of mostly cloth from English mills, and railway and military hardware. Thus the Indian economy exclusively serviced British economic interests.<sup>6</sup>

The British devised a rather clever way to transfer huge sums of money from India to England. Every year funds were transferred to pay off debt on secure and profitable capital investments on the railways. The colonial system required the annual transfer of funds from the colony to the metropolis to meet an array of home charges. By the end of the 19th century, India had become the chief export market for British goods including textiles, iron and steel goods, and other products reflecting Britain's industrial strength. India, in return, supplied Britain with raw materials in the form of unprocessed agricultural goods. The economy primarily became agrarian as the proportion of those dependent on agriculture grew to over 70%. The railroads also became a captive and publicly subsidised market for English steel makers and locomotive builders: British obsession and purity for railroads neglected all other public works projects. The railroad system consumed 13 times as much investment as all hydraulic works up to 1880. Imperial investment in irrigation also complemented the railways in promoting commercial crops for exports rather than grain crops. The colonial state and the railway companies followed policies from which British industry and financial institutions were the primary beneficiaries. The railways gradually depleted the reserves of wood to make charcoal. Coal became the major source of energy used to run the railways. In Britain, the railways triggered the development of heavy industries such as iron and steel. But, in India, this did not happen because the railways became an instrument of extracting raw material rather than triggering industrialisation. So, the major project like the railways, instead of becoming the leading sector, failed to generate the multiplier effect needed for India's industrialisation.<sup>7</sup>

The British industrial economy dominated every facet of the Indian colonial economy putting the latter in a disadvantaged position. Planned and constructed to serve the strategic and economic need of the metropolis, the railways facilitated the movement of troops, dispersal of British manufactured goods and the extraction of raw materials from hinterlands to port cities. The railways failed to stimulate the growth of other ancillary industries because most of the equipment and hardware was imported from Britain. Solid rails, bridge girders and work engines were all bought and brought from Britain. Locomotives, rolling stock and other iron goods were also imported from Britain. India became pre-eminently the land of large iron railway bridges whose ironworks were largely fabricated in Britain and then assembled and erected at the Indian bridge sites. In addition to railway machinery, platelayers, fish plates, points, rails and sleepers, the colonial state also invited British skilled labour, management, equipment and financial capital. Skilled workers, foremen and engineers were brought from Britain and paid twice the home rate plus medical care and allowances. This gave Indian railways a colonial character.<sup>8</sup> Indian Railways did not experience any serious competition from alternative modes of transport. Neither the Government of India nor private companies showed much interest in

<sup>6</sup>Arthur W. Silver, *Manchester Men and Indian Cotton, 1847-1872*, Manchester, 1966, pp. 92-107.

<sup>7</sup>Zaheer Baber, *The Science of Empire: Scientific Knowledge, Civilization and Colonial Rule in India*, Delhi Publishing House, 1996, pp. 214-219.

<sup>8</sup>Ian Derbyshire, "The Building of India's Railways: The Application of Western Technology in the Colonial Periphery, 1850-1920" in Roy Macleod and Deepak Kumar (ed.), *Technology of the Raj: Western Technology and Technical Transfers to India, 1700-1947*, New Delhi, 1995, pp. 185-189.

<sup>3</sup>Andrabi, Tahir and Michael Kuehlwin, "Railways and Price Convergence in British India", *Journal of Economic History*, 70(2): 351-377.

<sup>4</sup>Dan Bogart and Latika Chaudhury, "Railways in Colonial India: An Economic Achievement?" August 2011, www.springer.com

<sup>5</sup>Government of India, *History of Indian Railways*, Delhi: Government of India Press, 1947.

building canals, roads, river channels for steamers, boats or carts. There was no government regulation of the railway companies. Each company operated as a profit maximising entity. The total rail business was controlled by five companies, which were all British. There was virtually no competition among them. The railway companies also charged differential rates to maximise profit. The railway clearly encouraged classic colonialism in India. Railway was the kingpin of the new free trade regime. Far from industrialising the Indian economy, it led to a dependence on British industry. The railways were used for the progressive subjugation of the Indian market for the English industry.<sup>9</sup>

**Forests and Railways:** Since railroads sprawled throughout the subcontinent, none of the forests were spared. It all began with the teak forests of the Malabar Coast and the Western Ghats. Long before the beginning of the railways, Malabar teak was severely reduced to meet the needs of the British royal navy. The railways further decimated the forests. By the 1870s, the teak of the Malabar Coast was already depleted and the great teak forests of upper Burma began to be harvested for export to India. The rich Sal forests of the submontane areas stretching for thousands of miles from Western Terai down into Bengal became the target for the railway project because of its tough fibres that were particularly resistant to white ants. The rich Sal forests got rapidly depleted for the production of sleepers. In the 1860s, faced with the depletion of stocks and rising costs of both Sal and teak, the colonial railway builders of northern India set their gaze farther into the mountains on deodar stands. When the construction of major lines was undertaken in north western India in the decades of the 1870s and 1880s the commercial exploitation of deodar reached its climax. In the early 1870s, for example, the single largest project that stretched from Delhi into Rajasthan required 8,00,000 sleepers. For this enormous undertaking, the deodar forest of the Punjab hills, Kashmir, upper Ganges and Indus basin were requisitioned. The annual harvest of trees for railways in Western Uttar Pradesh alone fluctuated between 78,000 and 1,47,000 in the 1870s.

Dietrich Brandis, a German forest agent was appointed as an inspector-general of Indian forests by the colonial state. He made extensive surveys and wrote many reports recommending the commercial use of Indian forests. He estimated an annual railway demand of over 5,00,000 sleepers. The story of forest depletion was repeated all across. The establishment of the Madras Railways triggered the large scale depletion of forests in Madras Presidency. After depleting reserve forests, the colonial government purchased large quantities of firewood from private forests. The idea of protecting forests was not so much for conserving the ecological balance or protecting the environment. Forests were protected and reserved only to be cut down for railway use. The pressure on forests to service the railway demand was quite heavy. In the revenue year of 1859-60, some 2,45,763 berths were supplied to Madras Railways and all were made of wood. Thus, the legacy of colonial forestry in India in the 19th century is that the colonial state extracted large quantities of timber from both private and government forests.<sup>10</sup>

**Railways and Disease:** In 1859, the cholera epidemic decimated thousands of labourers working on the railroads as they arrived from far off places in Bengal. Apparently, in that epidemic some 4,000 rail coolies died on site. However, cholera was not the only killer of labourers building the colonial railroads. Malaria, smallpox, typhoid, pneumonia, dysentery, diarrhoea, and ulcers also attacked the coolies. In some longer sections, at times, 30% or more workers would succumb to epidemic disease. In 1888, on the Bengal-Nagpur line, some 2000-3000 workers died in a single stretch and their bodies were strewn all along the line and rotted with no claimants. The deaths of large numbers of labourers was not every surprising

considering the living conditions at worksites. There was a lack of proper housing, sanitation, cooking facilities, drinking water and protection from extreme weather conditions like rain, heat and cold. Generally, large bodies of workers were mobilised on construction sites, hence, the epidemic spread rapidly as an outbreak. The construction techniques provided favourable conditions for the breeding of malaria-carrying mosquitoes. Earth for railway embankments often was dug from burrow pits along the line of work. These abandoned pits filled up with water and vegetation during the rains and became mosquito hatcheries. The railway lines were laid on raised beds that often interfered with the natural lines of drainage and created unwanted ponds and water holes that became breeding grounds for malaria vectors. Malaria was the biggest killer. The environment at the worksites created conditions for the repeated outbreaks of malaria and cholera. The life was grim and hard for the poverty-stricken, malnourished, weakened, disease-ridden men, women and children. The labourers lived in crowded, unsanitary and unhealthy conditions. The proliferation of so many diseases leading to deaths clearly indicated that the colonial development of railways and canals was fundamentally flawed and environmentally unsound. The ecological transformation was the principal reason for the scourge of killer diseases such as malaria and cholera. Colonial railways transformed endemic diseases into epidemic outbreaks. Modernising works created serious obstacles to water flows, drainage and sanitation. Cholera slaughtered millions but the British government continued to invest heavily in the railways and not much in public health.<sup>11</sup>

So, despite the British claims of railways as the light of civilisation to India or Britain's benevolence to backward people for their moral and material progress, it is argued here that the colonial railways in fact had a regressive impact on the land, environment and the people of South Asia. The Indian nationalists in the 19th century decried not so much the railways, but its colonial and exploitative character. Nevertheless, the British imperialists until the very end had the "illusion of permanence" and continued to believe that they were in India for the welfare and security of its people and to maintain law and order. They continued to believe in the beneficial effect of railways and canals. But the post-colonial scholarship on South Asia has established that the impact of British imperial railways was quite contrary to the official ideology of the Raj.<sup>12</sup> Lord Dalhousie's famous minutes on the railways in 1853 gives us an idea about the intention with which the then-British Government had set up the railway lines in India. The railway system became the forerunner of modern industry in India.

Two private British companies, namely the East Indian Railway Company and the Great Indian Peninsular Railway Company founded in London in 1845, started construction of the Indian Railways. Up to the end of the 19th century, £ 226 million were spent on railways resulting not in a profit but in a loss of £ 40 million which fell on the Indian Budget.<sup>13</sup> Colonial India's railways expanded and re-oriented India's overseas trade and promoted internal trade. Railways created national markets in many agricultural commodities. But also affected at the regional and local level. Farmers, merchants, and manufacturers responded to the wider marketing opportunities the railways made possible. Railways and railway workshops became the centres of industrial capitalism thus leading to an emergence of class consciousness.<sup>14</sup> Thus, the introduction of the railways in India was of utmost significance. It had a political, economic, cultural, and social impact on all sections of the Indian society during the colonial period. The railways, though conceived for the betterment of the British, actually served Indians as well and helped in their commutation and

<sup>11</sup> Arabinda Samanta, *Malarial Fever in Colonial Bengal, 1820-1939: Social History of an Epidemic*, Kolkata, Firma KLM Private Ltd., 2002, pp. 46-72.

<sup>12</sup> Laxman D. Satya, "British Imperial Railways in 19th Century South Asia", *Economic and Political Weekly*, Volume 43, No. 7 (22-28 November 2008), pp. 69-77.

<sup>13</sup> Nrisingha Chakrabarty, *History of Railway Trade Union Movement: A Study*, CITU Publication, June 1985, pp. 1-5.

<sup>14</sup> Ian J. Kerr, "Working Class Protest in 19th Century India" *Economic and Political Weekly*, XX: 4 (26 January 1985), p. 103.

<sup>9</sup> Deepak Kumar, *Science and the Raj. 1857-1905*, Delhi Publishing House, 1997, pp. 46-47.

<sup>10</sup> Ramachandra Guha, "An Early Environmental Debate: The Making of the 1878 Forest Act", *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 27, 1 (1990), pp. 65-84.

luggage movements. The official reports allude to high turnover and absenteeism in organised industries. In 1890, 41% of the jute mill workers had been employed for less than one year. In 1898 Dunstan noted that miners retained rural links and went to the village when the rains started. Turnover was higher among unskilled than skilled, and among blue-collar than white-collar workers. It seems that turnover reflected the difficulty of peasant and artisans in adapting to the factory system; turnover was also related to the working conditions in mines and factories. It would be fatuous to hold that the bulk of the workers had much stake in agriculture. The jute mills often included strikers and workers who were laid off as absentees; a large number of workers were discharged during the strikes of 1928, 1929, and 1934. The season of high absenteeism was the period of greatest incidence of epidemic diseases in the city. In 1927-1928, about 23% of the workers had worked for 15 years and more. In the jute mills, labour turnover was apparently decreasing over the years. In the 1940s, about 28% of the workers had served between 5 and 10 years. Generally speaking, skilled and semi-skilled workers who received higher wages, stick to the mill and turnover is not very high. The engineering worker, especially a skilled one, hardly left the industrial centres since he had little to fall back upon in the villages. In the railways, high turnover was noticed among the gangmen and unskilled labourers who went to their villages during sowing and harvesting seasons. In the coal mines, turnover was high among unskilled labour while skilled labour worked more or less throughout the year. In the Calcutta tramways, which employed 6000 workers, turnover was a persistent problem; 65% of the workers had only 5 years' service in 1928.<sup>15</sup>

**Post-1947:** Post-1947 saw the transfer of power from imperialist to the national bourgeoisie and finally to the working-class. Independence ushered in a new political power held by the capitalist and landlord classes of India whose economic interests and political interests ran directly counter to those of the working-class. The AITUC broke out. There was formation of the *Hind Mazdoor Sabha* and the *Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh*. On the other hand salary hike was initiated through the introduction of the Central Pay Commission. In 1957 the Indian Labour Conference was held. In 1959 the second Central Pay Commission was held. Dearness Allowance was also raised. Yet, in 1960, a rail strike took place. Joint Council of Action was formed consisting of the Confederation of the Central Government Employees', Workers' Associations and Unions, All India Defence Employees' Federation, All India Railwaymen's Federation and National Federation of Post and Telegraph Employees were formed with S.M. Joshi as the chairman to conduct the strike on demands like the merger of Dearness Allowance in basic pay, need-based minimum wage, full neutralisation of the rise in prices, withdrawal of the proposal to retire employees who were alleged to be ineffective or whose integrity was allegedly in doubt, at about 50 years of age. In April 1970, the third Central Pay Commission was announced. The struggle for bonus led to the formation of a Bonus Review Committee and finally the passing of the Bonus Act. In 1974 the last of the railway strikes took place and with it a period of Emergency was declared.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>15</sup>Sunil Kumar Sen, *Working-Class Movement in India*, K. P. Bagchi & Company, 1997, pp. 8-12.

<sup>16</sup>Sukomal Sen, *Working-Class of India: History of Emergence and Movement, 1830-1990*, K. P. Bagchi & Company, 1977, pp. 392-406.