Not Going beyond the Orientalist History of Indian Railways

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Most books on India’s railroad history, particularly of the pre-independence era, have been written by British officials, and almost all such writers claim that the arrival of the railway played an important role in making the Indian society more equal. In the same endeavour, they do not resist from implying, just like the railway officials of the colonial era, albeit implicitly, that inequity and class/caste stratification was unique to the country. With this premise, justifications are given as to why there was a need to segregate passengers in different carriages based on caste and religious differences. While the multiplicity of caste and religion was a reality, and consequent hierarchy in society a stark manifestation of it, the segregation of railway coaches into various classes was not unique to India.

Railroads in the southern part of North America played a critical role in “working out gendered, class, and racial hierarchies” (Prasad 2015). The developmental narratives that are employed in colonial railway writings need to be read in a critical manner, for how the “modernising railway project was executed through processes that traditionalised Indian society and culture”—the separate waiting rooms were a case in point (Prasad 2015). Even in Britain “there were seven classes of travel in British Railways” (Simmons 1997: 85). While such demands for segregation on race and religion/caste lines were demanded by the colonial as well as native elites, these demands were “not unequivocal” and “when voiced, such suggestions also generated public outrage” with one local newspaper also warning “political consequences of such exclusionary beliefs” (Prasad 2015).

The patronising character of the early promoters of railroads was evident most often in the books and reports that they wrote. William P Andrew, chairman of the Scinde, Punjab and Delhi Railway Company, referring to the early days of railway planning in India, mentioned how “nothing was better calculated to arouse than the whistle of the locomotive, the apathetic Hindoo to the knowledge of the value of time” (Andrew 1884; emphasis added). However, later in the book, he does not shy away from contradicting himself when he quotes Colonel Ouseley, Political Agent at Chota Nagpore, “the natives can appreciate well, and better in some cases, as we can, the advantages of rapidity of transit” (Andrew 1884). Displaying quintessential orientalist approach, he first appreciates how there is no other country whose people are “so rich and intelligent,” yet “roads were so few and travel so difficult” (Andrew 1884). Recommending the construction of railways, Andrew refers to Europe where, with the introduction of the railways, “it is found that barbarism becomes converted into civilisation, barrenness into fertility, poverty into wealth” (Andrew 1884). The last sentence should be contrasted with the running theme in most chronicles of railroads in India, which suggests how India was unique in its backwardness, and it is the railway that brought development and modernity, concurrently also implying how Britain has been the harbinger of modern values and critical thinking to this country. Colonial officials cum historians, who could treat the Indian society and culture with such “proprietary hauteur” are often quoted by most modern railway historians, creating a fairly negative picture as far as the perception of new technologies by the Indian populace in the mid-late 1800s was concerned (Said 2000: 97).

Lack of Relevant References

The faulty premise is evident in the very first paragraph of this book under review, where the author, in the introductory chapter, says that the arrival of railways in India “led to surprise, fear, superstition, gossip and awe” and makes a rather misplaced conclusion that the “acceptance for this ‘new’ technology came in slowly, with caution, but eventually, completely” (p xi). Probably, he is just reflecting the practice of writing the Indian Railway’s history from the British imperialistic perspective. It is only very recently that a range of exceedingly great works in this field has broken this pattern and has given a more nuanced perspective—Laura Bears, Christian Wolmar, Aparajita Mukhopadhyay and Ritika Prasad being the main anchors of this fresh endeavour. Unfortunately, this work by Rajendra Aklekar, which he himself terms “fabulous,” tries to turn the clock back and commits the same historical error, at least in the first three quarters of this book, which the aforementioned authors (Bears, Wolmar, Mukhopadhyay, and Prasad) tried to break (p xii).

A book with the mandate that Aklekar claims in the Introduction to have, should have meant extensive referencing to valuable available resources. If it was “to capture the flavour of almost two centuries” (p xii), the author should have referred to chroniclers like W P Andrew (Indian Railways As Connected to the British Empire in the East, 1884), Davidson (The Railways of India: With an Account of Their Rise, Progress and Construction, Written with the Aid of the Records of the India Office, 1868), Horace Bell (Railway Policy in India, 1894), Huddleston (History of the East Indian Railway Company, 1906 & 1939 editions) and Nalinaksha Sanyal (The Development of Indian Railways, 1930) for the evolution and history of railways in India. And if he really wanted to capture the “clash of cultures,”
“changing social life of the country’s remote villages and the people’s journeys” (p xi), he should have consulted the post-colonial sociocultural tomes by Laura Bears (Lines of the Nation: Indian Railway Workers, Bureaucracy, and the Intimate Historical Self, 2007), Ritika Prasad (Tracks of Change: Railways and Everyday Life in Colonial India, 2015), Christian Wolmar (Railways and the Raj: How the Age of Steam Transformed India, 2017) or the most recently published work by Aparajita Mukhopadhyay (Imperial Technology and ‘Native’ Agency—A Social History of Railways in Colonial India, 1850–1920, 2018). While the author does refer to the work by Ritika Prasad, it is only regarding the railway resources used during World War I, and for the data on latrines in coaches; he leaves out entire portions dealing with railways’ sociocultural impact and counter impacts.

Ironically, for this piece of work on the history of the Indian Railways, the Indian Railway Fanclub Association seems to be the major reference resource—almost 10% of the total 139 references—which is a pity, and a wasted opportunity. Such referencing tends to take away the seriousness and authenticity of pursuit from a book that is making an attempt to capture the history of railways in India for a general audience; these shortcomings end up making the work appear almost a nonchalant endeavour. The book seems to be suitable not for the entire general audience, but for someone who has never read a non-fiction work on the Indian Railways before.

The cavalier attitude towards the significance of prior research and referencing for such an important subject is evident throughout the book. There is no referencing whatsoever when the author suggests that “the masses, of course, considered it (railways) evil, as they couldn’t imagine how a fire-spitting metal could have a life of its own and run a few hundred kilometres” (pp 30–31). Superstition is mentioned as one of the challenges that the English engineers could not foresee (p 32), although no example or source has been provided to justify this statement. Probably, he is reflecting on the opinion of an average British chronicler of railway history of the time. In fact, the author’s inability and lack of concern to go beyond the orientalist historiography is what ails the book in entirety. Statements often quoted from the British officials of how they gave India the railways go on to only prove, as Tharoor (2017) says, the “British self-conception of imperial purpose.” It would have been exceedingly meaningful had the author also given the non-colonial, non-orientalist perspective. Given these major lacunae, a more suitable title of the book could have been “The Land of the Snake Charmers Blessed by the British Who Brought Railways.” By using phrases like “sacrifice life to power trains,” “steam runs required a corpse per km,” “all powerful mystical creature would soon spread its ill effects on society,” the author is just playing to the stereotype gallery, more so when none of these have any documented source or referencing in the book (pp 46, 48–49).

Central Theme Ignored

Flashes of brilliance cannot salvage the book from the vicious cycle of author’s mixed-up priorities. A short history of such a mammoth entity, so closely connected to the modern history of the nation, means every page is precious. Wasting page after page on tigers, ghosts, sati spots, shaitaans, double murder, and humorous incidents does not take the book anywhere. Of course, to make the book interesting and popular among general readers, the narrative, many a time, needs to be “spiced up” (as the author himself mentions in the acknowledgement), but when the peripherals start occupying the centre stage, quality and acceptability go for a toss.

In the introduction, the author mentions that this book is about those “tales that made Indian railways what it is today, tales that look at its legacy, growth and development;” the publishers on their website mention that this book is a people’s history of Indian Railways. But what follows is a flimsy account reasserting the stereotypes about Indian culture and way of life, a White people’s history of the Indian railways.

Wherever the railway was started, it acted as the harbinger of change and had a profound impact on the culture and way of life. This was not at all peculiar to India, and the country and its society responded in a similar fashion that countries like Britain and Austria had earlier responded. Opposition to railways in Britain came from almost every section of the society, and those involved with the field of railroads had to issue appeals for assuring people’s concerns (Godwin 1837). During the initial phase of railway development (1825–1844) in Britain, most of the construction projects were contested for one reason or the other (Williams 1852: 38). The renowned poet William Wordsworth led one of these oppositions against the construction of Kendall and Windermere lines in his Lake District which, he felt, would desecrate the area well known for its natural beauty; in his desire to protect his neighbourhood district, he was impetuous enough to write a poem criticising the impending construction (Williams 1852)! Other opposition was more rational and made more out of fear for life and safety. Railway accidents were leading to an unusually high number of deaths and injuries—in the first six months of 1852, there were 113 deaths and 264 injuries (Dickens 1852: 255–57). So much so that some believed train rides could cause instant insanity, and the bye-laws of Victorian railways instructed that these passengers should be isolated “in a compartment by themselves” (Hayes 2017)! Women were thought to be particularly vulnerable from the high speeds of 20 miles per hour, which might make them breathless, and they could faint or even die.¹

A Wonderful Tale

It is with these aspects mentioned in preceding paragraphs that one needs to evaluate the current book under review. The author’s take on evolution of steam railways and the story of Porto Novo surely gives a novel perspective, hitherto not well known; and the first chapter takes the readers on an interesting journey on what went before the railways was introduced in India. He weaves a wonderful tale on the early functioning of stationary steam engines in Bombay and Calcutta, and how it laid the foundation for the introduction of the railroads in

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India. This chapter also gives a sneak peek into the works of Indian merchants and philanthropists who were associated with early efforts in one way or the other, and the readers also come to know about cp Tank, and how Seth Framji Cowsaji Banaji helped Mumbai to solve its water crisis (pp 6–7).

The author continues to build on the railways’ initial history, and his take on the ancestors of Indian railways in Chapter 2 is something all the readers will cherish and get an idea of the attempts that went into starting the railways, some successful and others failed and forgotten (Red Hills and Captain Cotton’s efforts). The story of how Mumbai (erstwhile Bombay) won the race from Kolkata reads like a thrilling episode. However, the editing mistakes start to show when Captain Cotton becomes Sir Cotton—it makes reading a bit edgy (pp 11, 12, 16, 18, 20).

Chapter 3 leads the readers to the various initiatives that were undertaken before the commencement of railways. An important instruction given by the then Governor General in his minutes was to ensure simple station buildings and tracks, without “embellishments” or “extravaganza” (p 30). Nevertheless, such iconic structures as the Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Terminus (erstwhile Victoria Terminus), Chennai Central Station (erstwhile Madras Central), Howrah Junction, Lucknow Charbagh Station, etc, were all constructed during the British rule; probably the directive was heeded fully by Indian officials post-1947! There is probably no post-independence railway station building in India that can truly be called iconic.

However, the broad chronology, as far as institutional attempts to start the railways are concerned, starts from the mid-1840s in the book, which is a bit different from what happened historically. Sanyal categorically mentions “the first idea of railroads in India was conceived in 1831–32 in the Presidency of Madras when it was proposed before the Parliamentary Select Committee on the Affairs of the East India Company that in consideration of the deplorable state of communication and commerce in that part of the country, both canals and railroads should be undertaken so that the whole peninsula might be crossed from sea to sea” (Sanyal 1930). As per this proposal a line of 150 miles was suggested from Cauverypattam to Caroor along the Cauvery river embankment (Sanyal 1930). Sanyal goes on to mention that later, in 1836, it was Captain Cotton who, in his minute, advised the need for railroads in India and specifically “conceived for the first time of a line connecting Madras with Bombay by a route of about 862 miles via Wallajahangore, Arcot, Nellore, Bangalore, Bellary and Poona” (Sanyal 1930). Surprisingly, the author has skipped this trivia about Captain Cotton, even though he has written about his various other efforts in the preceding chapter including the first train from Chennai to Wallajah Road in 1854 (p 60).

Chapters 4 and 5 completely lack substance when the author deals with the arrival and spread of the railways, with the earlier chapter full of undocumented response and superstitious beliefs of Indians when they saw an operational steam locomotive for the first time, and the later chapter full of verbatim reports and letters, with 4 pages from Jules Verne’s Around the World in Eighty Days (pp 67–70). Chapter 6 mentions the impact of the 1857 great revolt on the railways and how railroads expanded post this event.

Chapter 7 captures the gauge issue and the development of light railways in princely states very well. The formation of the Railway Board, impact of World War I, separation of budget, and the start of electrification form Chapter 8. In Chapter 9, the author again mentions sati spots, tigers and other mysteries (pp 117–20). However, the topic on toilets in Indian trains might interest general readers. The anecdote about a tiger eating a station master is quite gruesome and it seems that, in the book, tragedies are being bundled together to be presented to the readers as a source of amazement without acknowledgement, in the same degree and kind, of the great pain, suffering and sacrifice that every railway staff, not just the high officers, endure to keep the wheels running.

In Chapter 10, the history of Punjab Limited Mail and Frontier Mail is extremely interesting and a couple of more such trains could have been included, but only three pages have been devoted to such an important topic, while much of the remaining chapter deals with frothy aspects like train robberies and a double murder incident. Chapter 11 on Notes from World War II is full of wonderful details and information on how the United States (us) troops ran the trains in Assam line and how the rail workshops became production units for grenades and armoured cars.

**Significance of Third Class**

Chapter 12 poignantly brings out M K Gandhi’s concern for the abominable conditions of third-class passengers, and how as a symbol, a third-class train was specially run with his ashes in 1948 as a mark of respect for this class of passengers. However, this chapter could have become richer had the significance of third class for railway revenue and how efforts were made to keep the fare low been covered. Rather, these issues have been completely skipped. What this book fails to cover is that by 1860, the third-class traffic was 16.5 times more than the first and second-class traffic put together (Bell 1894). However, the lowest class passenger in India was being charged far more.

It was being seen that in Britain, a labourer could use the railway to travel 18 miles using his day’s wage, whereas an Indian could not travel even four miles with his daily wage (Sanyal 1930). These observations were not lost, and the government in India kept on pitching to the home government in England to fix the third-class fares “at the lowest possible amount;” this was so as “it is to this class that returns must be looked for from passenger traffic in India, and that therefore fares should be pitched so as to secure the greatest possible number” (Bell 1894). Even in its internal communications to the various provinces, the Government of India took up this issue “as it can neither be to the financial interest of the company nor to the well-being and prosperity of the country, that the fares should be pitched so high that the millions may
not be induced to travel" (Bell 1894). It stated to the Secretary of State that the third class “was the one that paid,” and subsequently the government, through a resolution, recommended a maximum of two and a half paise per mile for the lowest class (Bell 1894). Partition and its effects on train running, which in turn played a great role in ferrying people to safety, is well-captured in this chapter.

Chapter 13 covers how the Rajdhani was conceived and run, though it could have been dealt in a more detailed manner. Chapter 14 deals with the harsh realities of politics and how, many a time, it led to the sacking of top officials. While this is discussed, details of the great work done by officers like Bankim Chandra Ganguli and Mohinder Singh Gujral should have been discussed in far more detail, particularly in the latter’s case as to why Prime Minister Indira Gandhi put so much faith in him and how he had revolutionised freight train running in India, the benefits of which Indian railways is reaping till today.

Scope for More Depth
The last chapter (Chapter 15) seems to have been hurriedly put together and the narrative is incoherent and keeps jumping from one to another, though it also deals with one of the saddest incidents in the Indian railways (the serial bomb blasts in suburban trains in Mumbai), which the author was privy to. The author’s narrative does culminate into a salute to the Indian railways’ tenacity and resonates emotional chords among the readers. Devoting almost four pages on the repealing of the railway era acts is too much and could have been done in half the space. The Delhi metro and the role of E Sridharan and the fight on the repealing of the railway era acts tend to act as an anti-climax. Clarifying the logic behind including disputed anecdotes, he justifies that they are in the book “for the reader’s pleasure!”

Issues like verbatim reproductions going on for pages (double murder—four pages, Jules Verne—four pages, multiple letters and despatches) really take the joy out of this book. Repeating the same thing twice like Gaekwad’s Baroda State Railway, first on page 85 with some detail, and then again with greater detail on page 90 is irritating to readers. Formatting too could have been better and silly errors could have been easily avoided at the editing stage; in Chapter 2 (p 13), it is not clear whether the paragraph under “Trial at Porto Novo Iron Works” is an excerpt from J T Smith’s notes or the author’s own statements.

Reading this book, I was filled with pride and pity at the same time, pride about the evolution, growth, role, and significance of the railways in India, and pity as the book seems to have been a wasted opportunity.

Views expressed are personal.
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NOTES
1 “Petition against Stockton and Darlington Railway,” NPR, viewed on 12 February 2020,
2 Captain A P Cotton’s Minute dated 4 May 1836 to Inspector General of Civil Estimates.

REFERENCES