

**Ritika Prasad, *Tracks of Change: Railways and Everyday Life in Colonial India*, Cambridge University Press, Delhi,
First published 2015, ISBN 978-1-107-08421-6, pages X+316,
(Hardback), Price: Rs.795/-**

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India's railway history has mainly been studied from the perspective of economic history or how it was constructed in the colonial period, through the ages. Railway management, construction, railway economics, labour, technological impacts are the major themes for research on Indian railways. Ritika Prasad's work, *Tracks of Change: Railways and Everyday Life in Colonial India* is a very exciting and refreshing addition to the existing historiography of Indian railways. The author fascinatingly discusses how railway became an integral part of the everyday life in colonial India and also the Indian responses, resistances to adopt the new technology or 'tools of Empire', which 'materially shaped India's History' (p.3). The brilliant scholar on railway history, Ian J Kerr, in his book 'Railways of the Raj', (*Building the Railways of the Raj: 1850-1900*, OUP, Delhi, 1997) discusses the men-women and children who built the railways through their physical labour and who had only one connection with the companies i.e. 'labour power'. More recently Manu Goswami (*Producing India*, Chicago, 2004) and Ravi Ahuja (*Pathways of Empire*, 2009) explicated railways in India within a larger colonial ideology of infrastructure and public works. Thereafter the outstanding works by Laura Bear, Marian Aguiar, Nitin Sinha have also brought out the cultural and ideological dimensions of the transfer of railway technology in nineteenth century India. John Hurd

(*27 Down, New Departure in Indian Railway studies*, Orient Longman, Hyderabad, 2007) in his study has raised the question that railway was an efficient and ever expanding system but in India, it failed to achieve the economic development and growth in the colonial period. He explains that railway system linking India to world markets altered the economic and social systems. Indian railway network played a crucial role in purveying India's raw materials to world markets and providing a market for finished goods from industrialized countries. The study of Latham and Neal ('The International Market for Rice and Wheat, 1868-1914', *Economic History Review*, Second Series, 36, 1983) has shown that railways enabled India to become major players in international trade by the 1880s, especially in wheat, rice, oilseed, jute, tea, etc. I D Derbyshire, ('Economic Change and the Indian Railways in North India, 1860-1914', *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol.21, No.3, 1987, pp.521-545) in his article shows how railway dramatically changed the equilibrium of North Indian agricultural production by opening up number of new marketing possibilities through cheap overland transportations commencing in the fertile heart of *doabs* and cutting westwards through Central India to Bombay and Karachi. In addition to this, railways offered the speed and possibility of new monsoon shipment, which opened new types of trading and encouraged the development of the

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less stratified trading community. Daniel Hedrick (*The Tentacles of Progress: Technology Transfer in the Age of Imperialism*, OUP, 1988) linked technology with imperialism and tropical economics. He describes how various technological projects such as Ships, Railway, Telegraph, Hydraulic and Mining helped to spread colonialism or imperialism and in what way 'technology transfer' and 'technical education' were linked with the colonial politics. These analyses helped to understand the methodological as well as the historiographical development of Indian railways within the broader political and economic context.

In this context the work of Ritika Prasad's *Tracks of Change: Railways in Everyday Life in Colonial India* is different from the earlier research, and it focused on socio cultural transformation that brought through the railway in the lives of common people during British India. It was true that railway was the biggest colonial project implemented in India for its own economic and military interests. In the year 1854, railway was started in India, and at that time only 0.5 million passengers traveled in thirty-five miles of track. By 1900 the numbers of railway passengers had increased exceptionally, around one hundred and seventy five million and railway lines constructed about 25000 miles (p.2). These statistics prove the necessity and demand of railway lines on one hand and on the other hand, it also proved acceptance of this new technology in colonial life. Ritika Prasad's *Tracks of Change* discusses the socio- cultural impact of railways, changing course of 'time' in our lives in British India. The Railway was a completely new technology for the Indians. But it was very interesting to study how people negotiated with this new technology in their everyday life and how the 'process of adaptations, contestations and accommodations' ensued (p.3). It was impossible for them to neglect the growing material presence of railways in colonial India. Ritika Prasad tries

to explain the railway as a 'local story of global negotiations' and also a 'global story of local negotiations' (p.22). Thematically this book focuses on 'everyday life' in colonial India. Seven chapters of this book excluding introduction and conclusion are well organized and dedicated to everyday life and experiences encountered with the new technology in British India. Here the author used 'everyday' in the most colloquial sense- as a space of continuous, daily negotiation between people and technology (p.10). Prasad argues that the use of 'everyday' allowed her to discuss the wide range of encounters between common man and vast railway network. The impact of 'railway time' on 'everyday understanding of time', speed, mobility, railway as a site of everyday contestations are the major themes of the book.

The motives of railway introduction were mainly commercial and military. The British government also thought that railways would not attract the Indian peasants and income from passengers' traffic would not be profitable. But from the 1870s passenger traffic increased massively and ninety percent of passengers travelled in third class railway coaches, because of comparatively lower fare. But the railway companies did not give proper attentions to the betterment of passenger's facilities. So the first chapter of this book titled 'The Nature of the beast? An elementary logic for third- class Travel' discusses the passengers everyday experiences in the railway coaches. Limited space and overcrowding, travelling with cattle, use of goods wagons to transport people, non-availability of water and food, absence of lavatories and lights in both coaches and platforms were common experiences for the 'native' passengers. For the betterment of amenities, several suggestions were submitted to the officials and the problems were highlighted in various contemporary newspapers. But the government did not take sufficient initiative to solve the problems. For them, it was

the 'physiological and psychological peculiarities' (p.26) of the native passengers. The routine discomfort was never ending, but the third class (constituting 90% of railway passengers) provided a critical platform for the emergence of new India. Prasad argues that railway coaches brought population together, publicly and its 'structural discomforts and routine indignities created share body of knowledge' (p.26) and for most Indians, 'their encounters with technological change were intertwined with their practical experience of colonialism' (p.57).

The second chapter, 'Demand supply? Railway space and Social Taxonomy' continues with the theme of the first chapter and also discusses the everyday experience in railway spaces or during journey time. The high rate of railway fare compelled most of the Indians to travel in third class. For the Indians caste hierarchy, religious differences was not possible to maintain in the railway coaches. There was also demand for the separate space according to higher social rank, religious taboos and also seclusion for female passengers. The third class fare allowed 'a sweeper or a *chamār*' or a Muslim to access the same carriage with high caste Hindus and it was not acceptable for the upper caste Hindus. Later demand was also made for separate coaches for women where lower caste women or prostitutes would not be allowed. After providing a separate coach for women passengers, problem arose about their 'protection', 'respectability' (p.67). So the demand for separate space according to caste, religion, race, gender and contradiction within the Indian society were majorly discussed in the second chapter.

The third chapter of this book discusses how the railway embankments destroyed the natural drainage system and created floods in India and the author also linked the problem with the issue of 'Crime and Punishment'. Prasad gave several examples of destroying railway embankments during floods in northern India,

particularly in Bihar (p.108). For example floods in Monghyr in 1904-06, floods in Burdwan and Allahabad. In 1917 nearly five hundred people gathered with *lāthis* and *kadālis* to cut the railway lines between Pasraha and Narayanpur in Munghyr district of Bihar (p.117). In colonial India, railway lines were mainly constructed from eastern side to northern side or western part to northern part. So it was obvious that railway embankments would create obstacles for natural drainage, create floods, even some small rivers changed their river courses and it adversely affected the cultivations of that area. Even railway authorities and colonial government were not ready to accept that economic disasters caused by floods, which affected farmers or villagers, were mainly done by 'railway embankments' (p.131). Apart from these issues Prasad successfully shows that cutting of railway embankments or protest against the constructions of railways lines were judged by the colonial government as deterioration of law and order situation or 'sabotage'. So this chapter linked railway with recent issues like railways impact on environment and ecology and raises the question of 'responsibility' of the colonial government.

How railway timetable influenced and became an integral part of the colonial life and standardization of railway timetable throughout India related to speed and mobility are the main themes of chapter four, i.e. 'Railway time: speed, synchronization and time sense'. The author argues that uniform railway timetable, synchronized with Greenwich time made colonized people 'modern and rational' (p.136). After the standardization of railway timetable, people's 'time sense' became more standard and life was negotiated with the mathematical abstractions of timetables. Demand was also raised to change the train timetables according to the everyday needs of the passengers. There was no doubt that within few decades of its introduction, railways became the lifeline of India. It improved

connectivity, mobility, compressed time and distance on one side, on the other hand, railway embankment created floods, destroyed agricultural land and also spread infectious diseases. During the first decade of the twentieth century India's railway network began to carry unprecedented number of people and simultaneously spread cholera, plague, malaria, etc. The following chapter, 'Contagion and Control: Managing Disease, Epidemics and Mobility' discusses the role played by railway to spread the contagious diseases like cholera and plague in colonial India. Contemporary government reports also accept that betterment of railway communication was majorly responsible for 'faster and further' spread of infectious diseases (p.165). But railway authorities were not ready to accept this fact and did not want to acknowledge that passengers were compelled to travel in a brutal unhygienic condition. Prasad argues that 'nexus between pilgrims, pilgrimage and railway travel became central to official narratives about contagion and epidemic spread in India' (p.167).

Railway was the most important tool to consolidate the British Empire in India. Railway became the most effective means of military transport than both roadways and waterways (p.203). Thus Chapter six, 'Designing Rule: Power, Efficiency and Anxiety' argues how railways helped to design the colonial rule effectively, or spread power and how railway was used as a tool of imperialism. For the railways commercial concerns were important but 'military ones remained critical in planning and building' (p.201). So this chapter followed the earlier historiographical trend to look at railway as a 'tool of empire'. She also shows the 'strategic concern' that influenced the early railway policy and how 'British manufacturing and trade dominated the

initial conversation about building railways in India' (p.203). In chapter seven, 'Marking Citizen from Denizen' argues how railways became central to the language and practice of dissent in colonial India. Railway was the most important medium through which people came in contact with nationalist leaders, and acted as a medium to spread the messages of nationalist ideas (p.235). This chapter also argues that railway spaces served the dual purpose of providing a platform for anti colonial protest as well as making a disjunction between elite and popular politics (p.235).

Railway as a technology has changed significantly everyday life of the Indians, creating revolution in the field of transport. Railways' impact on our society, culture, and economy and everyday life in British India is the main theme of this book. Ritika Prasad did it very successfully and this book is a valuable contribution to existing literature on Indian railways. Massive use of sources and impartial analysis are the main features of this work. But I expected more use of indigenous sources particularly newspaper reports, journals during the nineteenth century in the first two chapters. In chapter five discussions on railway diseases mainly concentrate on the incidents of the twentieth century, with little mention of the incidents of the early days of railways, the spread of malaria fever in Bengal etc. The book also omitted to undertake a discussion on famine and its relation with railway. Apart from these, detailed discussions on various themes, judicious use of archival sources, official reports have enriched the book in many ways. Viewing railway from very different perspectives has advanced the contemporary railway literature. This work deserves a wide audience and it is a very useful reading for the historians, social scientists and also for general readers.