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Railways and Everyday Life in Colonial India

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For my grandparents

Kanti Prasad, Kumar Nandan Prasad,
Rajeshwari Prasad, and Sumitra Prasad

who lived many of the experiences that I write of here.

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List of Abbreviations

BBCI	Bombay, Baroda, and Central Indian Railway
BLR	Barsi Light Railway
BNR	Bengal–Nagpur Railway
BNWR	Bengal and North-Western Railway
BR	Burma Railway
D-U-K	Delhi-Umballa-Kalka Railway
EBR	Eastern Bengal Railway
EBSR	Eastern Bengal State Railway
EIR	East Indian Railway
GIPR	Great Indian Peninsular Railway
IMR	Indian Midland Railway
MR	Madras Railway
MSMR	Madras and Southern Mahratta Railway
NGSR	Nizam's Guaranteed State Railway
NWR	North-Western Railway
O&RR	Oudh & Rohilkund Railway
PNR	Punjab Northern Railway
R&K	Rohilkund & Kumaon Railway
RMR	Rajputana–Malwa Railway
SIR	South Indian Railway
SPDR	Sind, Punjab, and Delhi Railway
SMR	Southern Mahratta Railway

Introduction

On 18 June 1920, cultivators in the Chai and Fakria areas of Bhagalpur congregated in vast numbers at Jhanjhara. Aggrieved and desperate, they stressed how in the last few years the high and poorly drained embankments of the Bengal and North-Western Railway had converted the regular and seasonable floods that occurred in the area into catastrophic ones. In 1917, the Ganges flood had breached the railway line at Mansi and Mahadeopur Ghat stations and left several villages submerged in six to nine feet of water. As a result, 'hundreds of lives' were lost, cattle died, and property was destroyed. Despite repeated appeals, little had been done to increase the inadequate waterways provided in railway embankments.[1]

Roughly at the same time but hundreds of miles west, a shopkeeper in Gujranwala was hoping that railway timetables would help alibi him against charges of treason.[2] Under section 121 of the Indian Penal Code, a martial law tribunal had accused Jagannath of fomenting agitation and inciting violence in the town between 12 and 14 April 1919. In his defence, Jagannath pointed out that it was impossible for him to have committed the crimes that he was being accused of for he had left Gujranwala on 12 April by the 5 p.m. train

[1] Chai and Fakria Parganas Combined Tenants' Conference, 18 June 1920, no. IP-3 of 1919, PWD: Railway: A, Bihar and Orissa Prog., IOR.P/10744, British Library (BL), London.

[2] M.K. Gandhi, 'Jagannath's Case,' *Young India*, 30 July 1919, reproduced in M.K. Gandhi, *Law and the Lawyers*, compiled and edited by S.B. Kher (Ahmedabad: Navjivan, 1962), 170–74.

en route to Kathiawar. Further, railway timetables unequivocally proved that he could not have been physically present in Gujranwala after 6 p.m. on 13 April. The *foujdar* of Dhoraji could testify to his being present there on 16 April and even the fastest train from Delhi took 44 hours to reach Dhoraji.

At first glance, much distinguishes these two accounts from each other. One details the distress engendered by unseasonable flooding in Bhagalpur while the other recounts the legal travails of a shopkeeper from Gujranwala. Yet these two experiences are, in fact, part of the same historical story: one that explores how railway travel, technology, and infrastructure became palpably present in the everyday lives of Indians. Of course, neither Bhagalpur's peasants nor Jagannath were the first in colonial India to experience the increasing presence of railways in their lives; by the time we encounter them railways had become quite ubiquitous. Figures for 1919–20 show that in that single assessment year alone, 520 million passengers travelled across a railway network stretching to more than 36,000 miles.[3] The significance of these numbers is heightened by the fact that the 1921 census estimated India's population at 318 million.[4] It is equally true that neither railways nor railway travel spread either instantly or evenly across the country. In 1854, the first year that railways were open to passengers, only 0.5 million people travelled on the limited 35 miles of track open, all of it concentrated in Bombay Presidency.[5] However, both the number of railway passengers and the extent of country covered by railways grew continuously in the 1860s and, from the 1870s onwards, quite remarkably. By 1875, the length of track had expanded to over 6,500 miles and the annual number of passengers had increased to 26 million.[6] By 1900, these same numbers had increased exponentially to around 25,000 miles and 175 million passengers, respectively.[7]

These figures suggest that from the mid- to late-nineteenth century onwards, increasing numbers of Indians felt the ever-increasing presence of

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[3] *Statistical Abstract Relating to British India from 1910–11 to 1919–20* (London: HMSO, 1922), 138–44.

[4] Ibid., 252 (Appendix D—Population Census of 1921).

[5] *Statistical Abstract Relating to British India from 1840 to 1865* (London: HMSO, 1867), 58.

[6] *Statistical Abstract Relating to British India from 1867/8 to 1876/7* (London: HMSO, 1878), 88–90.

[7] *Statistical Abstract Relating to British India from 1894–95 to 1903–04* (London: HMSO, 1905), 138–40.

railways in their lives. Further, that like millions of people across the globe, they were gradually but inexorably compelled to negotiate the substantial transformations being wrought by this new technology. Passengers were the most immediately and visibly affected but they were not the only ones. Even at a glance, railway tracks, embankments, and crossings reshaped familiar landscapes; railway construction was increasingly correlated with miasma and ill-health; towns and villages alongside well-frequented railway lines began to be seen as particularly susceptible to epidemic contagion; train timetables announced new formats of organizing and comprehending both railway and civil time; and railway stations became the foci of popular politics and dissent as much as spaces for commerce and exchange.

In this context, this book asks how railway technology, travel, and infrastructure became increasingly and inextricably woven with everyday life in colonial India, how people negotiated this increasing presence of railways in their lives, and how the ensuing processes of adaptation, contestation, and accommodation have materially shaped India's history. In colonial India, railways became integral to how inordinate numbers concretely experienced many of the historical abstractions shaping their contemporary world, specifically the intrusion of a new and alien technology structured through the demands of capitalist expansion and imperial dominance. However, even as millions found it impossible to ignore the increasing presence of railways, they also sought to inhabit the ensuing changes in ways that accommodated their specific needs. This was as true of a cultivator who destroyed a railway embankment that trapped rainwater and flooded crops, as of the shopkeeper who tried to used railway timetables to establish a legal alibi; as true of the passenger avoiding medical inspection by alighting a few miles ahead of her destination, as of the one who gained access to a racially exclusive retiring room by donning a hat and changing his name from Jnanamuttu to John Matthew. Consequently, everyday life became a space of daily and continuous negotiation between people and the new technology that permeated their lives. It was where popular needs, actions, and experiences engaged with the structural power of technology and where colonial society shaped its historical present, both individually and collectively.

In arguing for the importance of railways in people's lives, questions of continuity and change are important. First, imperial claims notwithstanding, railways did not introduce travel in India. A range of scholarship has established that varied networks of mobility and patterns of circulation existed in precolonial India, not only before railways but also well before any of the

massive communication projects undertaken by the colonial state.[8] Second, scholars looking at the nineteenth century have emphasized how railways should be situated 'amidst the existing patterns and networks of circulation in which the role of roads and ferries was crucial.'[9] Some emphasize the complementarity of multiple modes of travel and transport—often in the same journey—while others stress the competition among these. Thus, in his study of nineteenth-century Awadh, Robert Varady demonstrates the competition that roads posed to the railway line that opened in 1867, not only in relation to passengers but also merchandise and livestock; in contrast, Ravi Ahuja describes how the 'transport revolution' of railways and steamships 'superimposed itself upon older patterns of land and water transport, rather than superseding them altogether,' while Nitin Sinha shows the intertwining of travel mechanisms when discussing how colonial-administrative practices of touring 'used a variety of means of transport—horses, palanquins, boats, steamships and not least railways.'[10]

Recognizing such continuities is important to historicizing communication patterns in colonial India: as scholars have cautioned, the history of transport in the nineteenth century is not simply the history of railways.[11] In many areas, railway links were only completed in the closing decades of the century; even where railways were built earlier, they became part of existing networks of

[8] Kumkum Chatterjee writes that while the 'Bengali middle-class' travelled for multiple reasons, 'pilgrimage was probably the motive for long-distance, cross regional travel inside India.' 'Discovering India: Travel, History and Identity in Late-Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century India,' in Daud Ali, ed., *Invoking the Past: The Uses of History in South Asia* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), 197. In contrast, discussing eastern India, Nitin Sinha argues that the Company-state was 'well aware of' a diverse group of mobile people and groups who were not travelling for purposes of pilgrimage. *Communication and Colonialism in Eastern India, Bihar: 1760s–1880s* (London and New York: Anthem, 2012). For a discussion of circulation networks between 1750 and 1950 see Claude Markovitz, Jacques Pouchepadass, and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, eds., *Society and Circulation: Mobile People and Itinerant Cultures in South Asia, 1750–1950* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2003). Ravi Ahuja discusses conceptual differences between mobility and circulation in his *Pathways of Empire: Circulation, Public Works and Social Space in Colonial Orissa, c. 1780–1914* (Hyderabad: Orient BlackSwan, 2009), 69–74.

[9] Ahuja, *Pathways of Empire*, 5, 39; Sinha, *Communication and Colonialism*, xx–xxi.

[10] Robert Varady, Rail and Road Transport in Nineteenth Century Awadh: Competition in a North Indian Province, unpublished PhD. dissertation, University of Arizona, 1981, quotes on 73–75; Ahuja, *Pathways of Empire*, 39; Sinha, *Communication and Colonialism*, xx–xxi, xxx, Chapter 3.

[11] Ahuja, *Pathways of Empire*, 6.

communication. At the same time, it is equally vital to delineate the increasing importance of railways both in and to people's lives. Thus, even as he describes how roads competed with railways in Awadh, Varady also documents that in the 20 years after the railway line opened, its earnings increased 'roughly thirty-fold from £22,000 to nearly £665,000.'[12] Similarly, discussing eastern India, Sinha recognizes that: 'Undeniably, from the 1860s a stable and clear policy was evolving that kept railways in the centre of the emerging communications grid, followed by four types or categories of roads, devised to connect the "interiors" with the nodes of railway communication.'[13] The disproportionate focus on developing railways is also documented in Ahuja's study of colonial Orissa, where he points out that while government expenditure on roads was estimated at £1.5 million per year in the three decades before 1889, the capital expenditure on railways 'amounted to an annual average of almost £4 million between 1849–50 and 1878–79.'[14] Even as they document the colonial state's increasing interest in railway infrastructure, the figures also suggest the growing *material* presence of railways in colonial India and in the lives of its population.

Railways and the everyday

As Indians embraced the speed of railway transport in numbers far beyond what colonial authorities had expected, the daily details and routines of being passengers became integral to simultaneously homogenizing and stratifying social relations in colonial society. Nearly 90 per cent of Indians could afford only the third or lowest class of travel, whose discomforts and indignities exposed them collectively to the intertwined structures of capitalist profit, colonial control, and state paternalism that determined the concrete shape of technological change on the ground. Passenger experiences certainly differed, for railway companies varied in size, capital outlay, the combination of private and state ownership through which each was controlled, and the local conditions under which lines operated. However, railway policy and law were centrally constituted and, differences notwithstanding, significant aspects of third-class travel remain comparable.

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[12] Varady, Rail and Road Transport in Nineteenth Century Awadh, 73–75.

[13] Sinha, *Communication and Colonialism*, xxxiv.

[14] Ahuja, *Pathways of Empire*, 96–97. Further that between 1880–81 and 1897–98, investment in railways was Rs 1,925 million, 'as opposed to the Rs 988 million in roads and building' (97).

Chapter 1 explores those conditions that defined everyday travel for ordinary Indians across region and railway line: the limited sitting space and rampant overcrowding that characterized third-class travel; the discomfort generated by the fact that, until the early 1900s, hardly any third-class carriages were provided with lavatories; the inability of third-class passengers to leave their carriages at intervening stops, whether to use the facilities or to procure food and water; and the use of insanitary goods wagons to transport people, many of whom had paid for third-class tickets. Such routine discomforts and indignities, especially when shared across regions and continuing across decades, meant that for large numbers of Indians negotiating technological change and negotiating colonialism often resided in the *same* experience of third-class travel. Railway and state officials were adamant that such discomfort did not result from any structural paucity of amenities but instead that it was caused by the physiological and psychological 'peculiarities' of third-class passengers themselves. Thus, despite repeated complaints and appeals, many of these conditions persisted. At the same time, the collective demographic strength of third-class passengers made them a critical political constituency whom neither the colonial state nor the emerging nationalist one could afford to ignore.

While shared conditions—and difficulties—created a distinct affinity among third-class passengers, the aggregation of people in railway space generated unprecedented opportunities for proximity and contact. Chapter 2 examines how anxiety about unregulated proximity, whether in railway compartments and carriages or in retiring and refreshment rooms, generated minute conversations about inclusion and exclusion: who could or could not sit next to whom; whose bodies were not permitted to come into contact with whose; which railway spaces would be reserved for which groups of people; who would eat where, who would serve them, and what food would they be served. Such conversations sparked demands for exclusive reserved spaces that were justified through a mobile and layered set of arguments: combining social and religious proscriptions on physical contact with narratives of hygiene and sanitation as well as with claims of privilege premised on wealth and status. Colonial officials and railway functionaries were quite sympathetic to demands that food, water, and spaces of commensality be organized around caste and religious difference. However, they were less amenable to demands that railway carriages be similarly differentiated, dismissing this as being logistically unviable (while using the very fact that such demands existed to justify racially-based privilege in railway spaces). Irrespective of whether exclusionary demands were aimed at maintaining a privileged position in colonial society or at securing creature comforts during railway travel, the fractious public conversations and

legal confrontations that ensued from them compelled millions of railway passengers—and hence colonial society at large—to grapple with fundamental questions about inclusion and exclusion on a daily basis.

After exploring how daily routines of railway travel affected people, the next three chapters examine how the process of building and coordinating India's vast railway network changed the everyday environment in colonial India. Not many could remain insensible to such changes: even if one never boarded a train, one was faced with vastly altered landscapes, new forms of measuring, organizing, and scheduling time, and swiftly changing channels through which contagion now spread. Those whose property had been commandeered for railway construction—from surveys to preparing the permanent way, as well as allied activities like brick making or housing workmen—were affected before railway travel actually materialized. As more and more of the permanent way was laid, people across the country found their physical surroundings altered by thousands of miles of track, interspersed with signals, crossings, gates, bridges, and embankments. Neither were these changes only visual. Instead, as Chapter 3 argues, structures like railway embankments had a material impact on people's lives and livelihoods. Similar to other parts of the world, railway companies in India utilized embankments as a cost-effective mechanism for dealing with substantial changes in gradient as well as for laying tracks across low-lying, deltaic areas with uneven terrain. However, problems arose when railway companies built high embankments without providing adequate drainage outlets for the rain and floodwater that these structures trapped. The height of the embankment blocked old drainage patterns without providing new ones and converted seasonable flooding that used to be beneficial for cultivation into calamitous events that destroyed lives, crops, and property. Facing repeated losses, many sought redress; more often than not, however, they found themselves marginalized by the needs of railway construction, with arguments about 'public improvement' effacing the human cost of such undertakings.

Other everyday negotiations elicited by railways were no less substantive even if some were less explicitly adversarial. Chapter 4 traces how in the half-century between 1854 and 1905 the time of a single meridian was standardized as supra-local railway time, synchronized with the time of the Greenwich meridian in England, and then deemed civil time (continuing as India's national time). Standardized railway time was spawned by the needs of coordinating safe interchange between multiple, intersecting, railway networks spread across India's longitudinal breadth. However, the fact that railway time was gradually mandated as civil (and national) time meant that it permeated

the daily lives and routines of more than just railway passengers. Thus, train schedules, railway timetables, and station clocks were not merely the technical instruments that railway passengers needed on an everyday basis. Instead, they became artefacts that influenced and changed everyday understandings of time, speed, and mobility among the colonized population at large, whether these were expressed in wide-ranging demands for train schedules to better reflect people's daily routines or in nostalgic laments that the speed of railways had erased the sensory excitement of journeying on foot. Significantly, while reified ideas of colonial (and metropolitan) time-sense informed the discussions and decisions of the colonial state, the ways in which people in colonial India actually apprehended temporal standardization remained analogous to similar processes in different parts of the world.

While the speed of railway travel compressed distance, it simultaneously expanded the purview of other influences, not least that of disease. Chapter 5 examines how a widening network of trains and tracks began to be linked with the spread of contagious diseases and with facilitating the epidemic spread of cholera and plague. Epidemic outbreaks during fairs, festivals, and pilgrimages were said to be aggravated by the frequently unhygienic conditions of railway travel as well as the fact that railways substantially increased the number of people who could congregate at each event. Even those who did not travel could not ignore what trains brought—disembarking passengers were associated with the entry of contagious diseases into areas far from centres of contagion. At the same time, some among India's medical and sanitary establishment repudiated the suggestion that diseases like cholera travelled through channels of communication; significantly, however, they argued their case by correlating the timing, spread, and intensity of epidemics with the presence or absence of railway links in various areas. Meanwhile, railway infrastructure itself began to be used to contain the spread of other diseases like plague, saving the state from the commercial and financial consequences of invoking general quarantine. Instead, thousands of railway passengers faced a web of preventive surveillance, being medically examined and possibly detained, as well as having their belongings inspected, cleaned, or destroyed. Some tried to evade this intrusion, which remained severest towards third-class passengers, the poor, and the itinerant. However, the perceived success of such surveillance encouraged colonial India's medical and sanitary establishment to suggest it as a routine mechanism of control, not only over health and disease but also over popular mobility.

After examining how few could ignore the palpable changes wrought by railways in their immediate environment—physical, temporal, and

epidemiological—Chapters 6 and 7 together examine how railways and railway spaces lay at the heart of military control, political action, and dissent in colonial India. Chapter 6 explores how railways were viewed as being qualitatively different from other, previous forms of military links, their potential for swift transport seen to overcome challenges not only of distance but also of disease and seasonality. The state's ensuing anxiety about protecting railway links was reflected in the increasingly severe penalties prescribed for any interference with railways; this same anxiety, however, generated space for railway sabotage as a form of both public protest and political action. In the mid- to late nineteenth century, interfering with or sabotaging railway property became a way for people not only to draw administrative attention to their immediate needs and complaints or to settle local jealousies and conflicts but also part of more organized forms of anti-colonial radicalism. However, even as railway sabotage became a mechanism to challenge imperial control, train journeys themselves became a staple part of planning and executing it, its organizers relying—much like the state itself did—on the regular, uninterrupted, and timely functioning of railways.

Moving from sabotage to mass politics, Chapter 7 explores how colonial India's trains, platforms, and stations became everyday spaces central to popular action. Nationalist elites used railways to engender mass support, physically transporting themselves and their ideas of *satygraha* across India; at the same time, railway spaces were also where popular radicalism challenged elite dictates about the content and limits of political action. Thus, while crowded train doorways, politically tense railway platforms, and burnt signal rooms certainly marked the nation reclaiming railways from imperial control, yet railway spaces were notoriously contingent, being as amenable to nationalist rituals and collections as to the making of 'rogues,' as some less than obedient *satyagrahi*s were described in an elite lexicon. To maintain control over mass action, nationalist elites sought to exclude such dissident acts from the purview of nationalism, ousting those who sabotaged railway infrastructure from the bounds of *swaraj* itself. Thus, how one deployed railways became central to distinguishing citizen from denizen, a process acutely visible in 1947–48, when railway trains became the vehicle in which millions experienced their past and future being sundered from each other.

Everyday life and the state

In exploring how people encountered, navigated, and refashioned railways, I use 'everyday' in its most colloquial sense—as a space of continuous, daily,

negotiation between people and the technology that permeates their lives.[15] At the same time, the book relies upon critical insights addressing two specific concerns. The first stresses how everyday life is indispensable to retrieving as historical and political subjects those who have been deemed anonymous, silent, and subordinate. The second pertains to understanding use or 'consumption' as simultaneously productive and transgressive, encompassing a range of tactics through which people actively inhabit (or consume) the abstractions that they are confronted with, whether technology or infrastructure. Most immediately, these concerns inform much of the work done by scholars of the Subaltern School as well as those invested in the study of *Alltag* or everyday life.[16] Neither need introduction but their methodological influence is succinctly captured in Dorothee Wierling's description of *Alltag* as the domain in which people 'exercise a direct influence—via their behaviour—and on their immediate circumstances.'[17] Equally relevant is the assertion that *Alltag* 'is not limited to the so-called basic facts of human existence; it is more than the routine of daily labor; it is not just private or shaped by "small" events.'[18] On the one hand, this allows for the purview of *Alltag* to extend beyond the domain

[15] In his *Everyday Technology: Machines and the Making of India's Modernity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), David Arnold explores the 'small' everyday machines that people negotiate with on a daily basis—from bicycles to typewriters—and their importance to how Indians both understood and constituted 'modernity' in the colonial context. David Arnold and Erich deWald also stress how 'everyday technology' illuminates inner histories and local narratives. See their 'Everyday Technology in South and Southeast Asia: An Introduction,' in *Modern Asian Studies* 46, 1 (January 2012): 1–17.

In contrast, Gyan Prakash and Kevin Kruse use 'everyday' to depict 'a distinct space of routines produced and governed by modernity.' *The Spaces of the Modern City: Imaginary Politics and Everyday Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 12.

[16] A significant part of the seminal work of Subaltern Studies' scholars resides in the multi-volume *Writings on South Asian History & Society* published by Oxford University Press from 1982 onwards. The emphasis on studying the everyday is discussed in Alf Ludtke, ed., *The History of Everyday Life: Reconstructing Historical Experiences and Ways of Life* (translated by William Templer, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995); Ben Highmore, *Everyday Life and Cultural Theory* (London: Routledge, 2002); and Michael Sheringham, *Everyday Life: Theories and Practices from Surrealism to the Present* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

[17] Dorothee Wierling, 'The History of Everyday Life and Gender Relations: On Historical and Historiographical Relationships,' in Ludtke, *History of Everyday Life*, 150–51.

[18] Wierling, 'The History of Everyday Life,' 150.

of the individual, private, and domestic with which the category is often associated. On the other hand, it permits a conceptually broad use of the idea of transgression, including within it those acts through which people actively inhabit the large-scale technological abstractions that they routinely face and, in so doing, demonstrate 'the everyday's capacity to disrupt the systems that seek to encapsulate it.'[19]

The emphasis on transgression also underscores the extent to which people's attempts to navigate the new and alien technology of railways involved negotiating with the state. In colonial India the state not only had substantial financial investment in railway profits but also a good degree of control over mandating the nature of railway facilities. Thus, it both informed and regulated how people experienced railway travel and railway infrastructure: What kind of accommodation would be provided to which groups of passengers? To what standards of passenger comfort would railway companies be held accountable? Which of the many popular suggestions for changes and improvements would merit attention and redress? When and where would railway time become civil time? How much state protection would be afforded to railway property? Would those who interfered with it be criminalized through the legalities of malicious damage or of treason? These are just some of the questions that suggest how vital aspects of popular experience with railways technology were mediated

[19] Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988 [1984]), 165–76. Specifically, he discusses the relationship (and conflict) between strategic use and tactical use, with the former defined (or authorized) by the producer and latter representing the manipulations of the consumer. What is of import here is how, in the act of consumption, the consumer 'invents' in texts something different from what they 'intended,' thus detaching them from their origins. De Certeau discusses such creative consumption in relation to the ascendancy of the written word in Western culture, yet his concern with 'society as text' (166–67) makes his insights relevant to broader discussions of technological change. Also, Sheringham, *Everyday Life*, 48.

De Certeau's ideas of consumption *as* production can be used to engage with Pierre Bourdieu's argument that transgressive practices ultimately, even if indirectly, bolster established structures as well as with Roy and McLeod's arguments about people and societies accepting or rejecting technology en masse. Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (1977); Roy McLeod and Deepak Kumar, eds., *Technology and the Raj: Western Technology and Technical Transfer to India 1700–1947* (New Delhi: Sage, 1995), 19. They can also be correlated with Georg Simmel's explication of how people (and societies) simultaneously internalize and counter structural impositions, especially 'The Metropolis and Mental Life' (1903).

by a diverse range of state actors—at multiple levels, in various departmental bodies and organizations, embodying varied and contradictory concerns.[20]

People's everyday relationship to railway technology was not only structured through their relationship with the state but also recorded through it. Methodologically, historians of South Asia have long been concerned with how many of the historical sources that speak to the trials and tribulations of ordinary people are recorded in state-generated official documents, frequently under conditions of conflict and duress—in Shahid Amin's evocative words 'Peasants do not write, they are written about.'[21] As Ranajit Guha emphasized in his canonical study of peasant insurgency, such 'elitist' evidence—which stamps 'the interests and outlook of the rebel's enemies on every account of our peasant rebellions'— is a 'staple' of most historical writing on the colonial period.[22] Thus, speaking of courtroom records, Amin points out how historians (among others) have learned 'to comb' such state-generated documents for the voices of subaltern populations, describing these records as texts in which 'peasants cry out, dissimulate or indeed narrate.'[23] Consequently, even as they

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[20] Without suggesting that the British-Indian colonial state and its postcolonial successor are identical, it is useful to think in terms of C.J. Fuller and John Harriss' discussion of exactly how important a role the Indian state plays in the daily lives of Indians and the range of relationships that it mediates, especially in relation to infrastructure. C.J. Fuller and John Harriss, 'For an Anthropology of the Modern Indian State,' in C.J. Fuller and Véronique Bénéï, eds., *The Everyday State and Society in Modern India* (New Delhi: Social Science Press, 2000), 1–30.

[21] Shahid Amin, *Event, Metaphor, Memory: Chauri Chaura 1922-1992* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995), 1.

[22] Ranjait Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* with a foreword by James Scott (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999, first published in 1983), 14. Significantly, Guha stresses that while 'folklore' can be seen as a way of combating such bias, yet this remains limited—not only in quantity but also because 'it can be elitist too.' Of course, Guha is speaking specifically in the case of peasant militancy but his point emphasizes how sources conventionally seen as more 'authentic' accounts of popular experience require the same interpretive analysis that state-generated records do (14-15).

[23] Amin, *Event, Metaphor, Memory*, 1. There are a host of studies of popular culture and of subaltern populations in western Europe that rely heavily on state-generated documents, from courtroom records to church records. Some of the well-known ones include Carlo Ginzburg's *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth Century Miller* (1980); Natalie Zemon Davis' *The Return of Martin Guerre* (1983); and David Sabean's *Power in the Blood: Popular Culture and Village Discourse in Early Modern Germany* (1984). While

raise a host of interpretive concerns, state-generated records remain invaluable to studying the everyday. Further, Guha highlights the historical *relationships* that such documents allow one to recover, stating that:

> It is of course true that the reports, minutes, despatches, etc. in which policemen, soldiers, bureaucrats, landlords, usurers, and others hostile to insurgency register their sentiments amount to a representation of their will. But these documents do not get their content from that will alone, for the latter is predicated on another will—that of the insurgent.[24]

Thus, while it is indisputable that the colonial state in India collected information for its own purposes of control and classification, it is equally true that in the process it generated an overwhelming corpus of historical sources about people's everyday concerns, complaints, problems, and distress. To take an example, the literal, physical, experience of travel for many of the poorest among India's travelling public—relegated to goods vehicles during times of heavy traffic like fairs, *mela*s, and pilgrimages—is found in complaints documented in official pilgrim committee reports generated by local governments under orders from the sanitary and medical establishment. Even when such complaints elicited no action, with many being written off by officials who blamed passengers for the discomforts they were forced to endure, they *do* detail the conditions of travel: long bogies, ventilated only through small *jhilmil*-patterned openings, the floors dirty and the interiors coated with the residue of sharp and flinty *kankar*, sticky jaggery, or the dust of powdered chillies.

Equally importantly, a large proportion of such state-generated records (stretching across railway, public works, home, medical, sanitary, police, judicial, and legislative proceedings) provide detailed analyses from multiple railway companies working across various regions, and dealing with questions specific to their areas. Such records are important in comparing experiential similarities and differences across regions and railway lines: for instance, how the more general problem of overcrowding in the third class became fatal in those specific areas where the summer months brought dramatically high temperatures. Equally important in plumbing the local depths of people's

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Ginzburg and Davis' texts remain contained within the sixteenth century, Sabean's text stretches through to the beginning of the nineteenth century.

[24] Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency*, 15.

experiences are the native newspaper reports series that, while collated by the state for its own purposes, engage extensively with local issues and concerns. It is the local specificity available in this series that allows one, for instance, to explore how people in different areas sought to reorganize train schedules so that these better met their needs: from demands to change the time of the interchange between the Delhi–Ghaziabad and Ghaziabad–Meerut trains to that of a halt at Manakpur, or another for rescheduling the night Olavakode train to meet the special train connecting Tirur to Calicut. Thus, while far from an unmediated link to the everyday life of ordinary people, official documents remain important to recovering many of their experiences.

Many such sources register another interpretive layer, for recognizing that which Niraja Jayal has termed the 'representational mode' of colonial politics, means recognizing how several of the concerns and demands of subaltern populations were communicated to the state through elite mediation.[25] Thus, while *Alltag* remains substantively concerned with the concerns of ordinary people, especially the subaltern and marginalized, this book also includes a discussion of how the more privileged in colonial society negotiated with railways. Three historical considerations inform this decision. First, subalternity was the dominant Indian experience of railway travel. While some Indians could and did travel in the first or second classes, yet almost 90 per cent of all railway passengers in colonial India—and, consequently, an even higher percentage of Indian passengers—travelled in the third class. This means that many who could be included conventionally among elites travelled in the third class. Second, the presence of railways was both broad and deep enough to affect the entire colonized population. Thus, while elite and privileged groups in colonial society negotiated railways with resources different from those available to subaltern populations, yet many of the changes that both faced remain comparable—from standardized time to the spread of epidemic contagion, from changing landscapes to the politicization of railway spaces. Third, in its role as one of the largest public spaces in colonial India, the railway was, in fact, where the content of the categories of elite and subaltern

[25] In her discussion of the colonial 'Subject-Citizen,' she points out how imperial perceptions of India as a society composed of disparate communities engendered a modernist representational mode of rule in which individuals could represent these diverse communities. Niraja Gopal Jayal, *Citizenship and Its Discontents: An Indian History* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2013), 39.

was negotiated. In which group should we locate those financially elite Indians who could afford to travel first class but remained excluded from first-class retiring rooms that were, in practice, reserved for European and Anglo-Indian passengers? Or, how should we understand the case of those high-caste Hindus who could only afford third-class travel but who continued to insist that they were, ritually speaking, social elites who should have segregated carriage space? That high-caste Hindus harassed 'untouchable' passengers in third-class carriages certainly highlights the discriminatory politics of elite and subaltern in railway spaces, but it also points to the fact that these self-proclaimed elites were travelling in the same space as those whom they chose to harass.

Habitation, local and global

In asking how people *inhabit* large-scale technological change, the book stresses habitation or consumption as historical production. It thus complements scholarship that assesses the impact of railway technology in colonial India through questions about capital, labour, management, and bureaucracy. Daniel Thorner's detailed explication of the process through which British investment in Indian railways was secured forms the earliest critical scholarship on the subject.[26] Subsequently, Dipesh Chakrabarty's essay on 'railway-thinking' among Bengal's commercial elites contextualized their support for railways within the range of choices presented by the colonial economy, while Ian Derbyshire's and Mukul Mukherjee's analyses of the United Provinces and Bengal respectively, focused on how railways transformed inter-market commodity flows, agricultural prices, and wages in each area.[27] The economic impact of railways continues to inform more recent debates. Tahir Andrabi and Michael Kuehlwein argue that railways played a 'surprisingly modest role'

[26] Daniel Thorner, *Investment in Empire: British Railway and Steam Shipping Enterprise in India 1825–1849* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1950); and *idem*, 'Capital Movement and Transportation: Great Britain and the Development of India's Railways,' *Journal of Economic History* 11, 4 (Autumn 1951): 389–402.

[27] Dipesh, Chakrabarty, 'The Colonial Context of the Bengal Renaissance: Early Railway Thinking in Bengal,' *Indian Economic Social History Review* 11 (January 1974): 192–206; Mukul Mukherjee, 'Railways and their Impact on Bengal's Economy, 1870–1920,' *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 17, 2 (1980): 191–209; Ian D. Derbyshire, 'Economic Change and the Railways in North India,' *Modern Asian Studies* 21, 3 (1987): 521–45.

in grain price convergence in British India. In contrast, analyzing the period between 1874 and 1912 through the lens of total factor productivity, Dan Bogart and Latika Chaudhary see railways as 'an important engine of growth for the Indian economy.'[28]

Questions about labour and management are equally central to railway history. The most substantive treatment remains Ian J. Kerr's discussion of the processes involved in building India's railways, especially the management and control of the vast labour force that was involved.[29] More recently, Manu Goswami and Ravi Ahuja have explicated railways within a larger colonial ideology of infrastructure and public works, while Laura Bear has penned a rich ethnographic history of India's 'railway caste,' the term designating the large numbers of Anglo-Indians for whom railway service became the single largest source of employment.[30] While Bear correlates the economic and the 'intimate' historical selves of these workers when exploring their marginalization in the narration of race and nation, Nitin Sinha examines labour politics through analyzing strikes by railway workers, especially at the large locomotive workshop at Jamalpur.[31] This complements Ian Kerr's early analysis of how, during the nineteenth century, the railway workforce used collective action to protest arrears and reductions in wages, demand higher wages, dispute supervisory practices, and complain about working

[28] Tahir Andrabi and Michael Kuehlwein, 'Railways and Price Convergence in British India, *Journal of Economic History* 70, 2 (June 2010): 351–77, quote on 352; Dan Bogart and Latika Chaudhary, 'Engines of Growth: The Productivity Advance of Indian Railways, 1874–1912,' *Journal of Economic History* 73, 2 (June 2013): 339–70, quotes on 341, 358.

[29] Ian J. Kerr, *Building the Railways of the Raj* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995). An overview of the subject can be found in John Hurd and Ian J. Kerr, *India's Railway History: A Research Handboo*k (Leiden: Brill, 2012).

[30] For Manu Goswami, see Chapter 3 of her *Producing India: From Colonial Economy to National Space* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 103–31; Ahuja, *Pathways of Empire*; Laura Bear, *Lines of the Nation: Indian Railway Workers, Bureaucracy, and the Intimate Historical Self* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007). She argues that when estimated in 1923, 'nearly half of the Anglo-Indian community was employed or associated with the railways as dependents of employees' (8–9).

[31] Nitin Sinha, 'Entering the Black Hole: Between "Mini-England" and "Smell-like Rotten Potato", the Railway-Workshop Town of Jamalpur, 1860s–1940s,' *South Asian History and Culture* 3, 3 (2012): 317–47.

conditions.[32] Smritikumar Sarkar's recent discussion of how the colonial state acquired land for the initial burst of railway construction has not only foregrounded a little explored subject but also linked it with contemporary concerns about land acquisition for public works.[33]

Lisa Mitchell's essay on the practice of pulling alarm chains to stop trains also elides the temporal divide of colonial and postcolonial, tracing the colonial genealogy of a form of political action that remains common in contemporary India.[34] Her piece also signals a way to understand the impact of railways distinct from questions of political economy, market integration, monetization, commercialization, labour, management, and bureaucracy. Mitchell is not alone. Ian Kerr's more recent work focuses on two such questions: how railways changed the nature of pilgrimage traditions in colonial India and how railways have been represented in cultural mediums.[35] Both issues have been further explored, the former in Ravi Ahuja's work on changing circulatory regimes and the latter in Marian Aguiar's literary analysis of the motile representation and signification of railway spaces.[36] In its textual focus, Aguiar's text can be paired both with Prabhjot Kumar's analysis of how railway space is configured in fictional and cinematic representations of Partition and Harriet Bury's

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[32] Ian J. Kerr, 'Working Class Protest in 19th Century India: Example of Railway Workers,' *Economic and Political Weekly* 20, 4 (26 January 1985): PE34–PE40.

[33] Smritikumar Sarkar, 'Land Acquisition for the Railways in Bengal, 1850–62: Probing a Contemporary Problem,' *Studies in History* 26, 2 (August 2010): 103–42. Dennis Weitering's 'Sharing the Burden: Licensed Porters of Dadar Railway Station, Mumbai, and Their Search for Work, Income and Social Security,' in Ian J. Kerr, ed., *27 Down: New Departures in Indian Railway Studies* (with CD) (Delhi: Orient Longman, 2007) shifts the discussion of railway labour into a more contemporary context.

[34] Lisa Mitchell, '"To Stop Train Pull Chain": Writing Histories of Contemporary Political Practice,' *Indian Economic Social History Review* 48, 4 (2011), 469–95.

[35] Ian J. Kerr, 'Reworking a Popular Religious Practice: The Effects of Railways on Pilgrimage in 19th and 20th Century South Asia,' in *idem*, ed., *Railways in Modern India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005 [2001]), 304–27; and Ian J. Kerr 'Representation and Representations of the Railways of Colonial and Post-Colonial South Asia,' *Modern Asian Studies* 37, 2 (2003): 287–326.

[36] Ravi Ahuja, '"The Bridge-Builders": Some Notes on Railways, Pilgrimage and the British "Civilising Mission" in Colonial India,' in Harald Fischer-Tiné and Michael Mann, eds., *Colonialism as Civilizing Mission: The Case of British India* (London: Anthem Press, 2003), 195–216; Ahuja, *Pathways of Empire*; Marian Aguiar, *Tracking Modernity: India, Trains, and the Culture of Mobility* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011).

suggestion that late-nineteenth century descriptions of railway journeys were vital to articulating the spatial relationship between definitions of regional and national in colonial India.[37]

Many of these works represent not only an increasing interest in understanding how railways affected social relations, political action, and cultural production, but also suggest a different historiographical impetus, moving away from questions about the theoretical potential of railways to galvanize capitalist processes and their historical failure to practically do so in colonial India.[38] From Thorner's explication of how colonialism retarded the capitalist possibilities generated by railways to Sumit Sarkar's explanation of why the 'normal multiplier effect' of railway investment was lacking in India, the 'transition narrative' (or rather its failure) has informed much of the vital scholarship on the subject.[39] Even those who disagree with such conclusions of failure do not necessarily repudiate the transition narrative itself: Derbyshire emphasized how railways opened up numerous marketing possibilities in the traditionally 'constrained' economy of the United Provinces and ensured that there were no significant regional food shortages after 1900, while Mukherjee explained how railways began to dominate as bulk-carriers in Bengal.[40]

Critiquing developmental narratives of modernization as well as the binary opposition with 'tradition' that these frequently employ, scholars like Bear, Goswami, and Aguiar have instead foregrounded interstitial groups and spaces and highlighted the extent to which the modernizing railway project was executed through processes that traditionalized Indian society and culture. Thus, Bear discusses how the Anglo-Indian railway family fused *jati* with

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[37] Harriet Bury, 'Novel Spaces, Transitional Moments: Negotiating Text and Territory in Nineteenth-Century Hindi Travel Accounts' and Prabhjot Parmar, 'Trains of Death: Representation of Railways in Films on the Partition of India,' both in Kerr, *27 Down*. In this context, see also Sinha's discussion of the fluidity of the category of 'interior' in his *Communication and Colonialism*.

[38] Cf. Dipesh Chakrabarty's critique of developmental teleology as 'the central problematic of the study of colonial India.' *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

[39] Thorner, *Investment in Empire*; Sumit Sarkar, *Modern India, 1885–1947* (Delhi: Macmillan, 1983), 37–38, 129.

[40] Mukherjee, 'Railways and their Impact' and Derbyshire, 'Economic Change and the Railways,' 525, 540–43. Similarly, in his general assessment of the colonial economy, Tirthankar Roy stressed how the inter-regional crop movements made possible by railways decreased the incidence of famine. Tirthankar Roy, *The Economic History of India: 1857–1947* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000), 263–65.

'political sentiments and class sensibilities,' Goswami comments on how the liberating and levelling railway project actually ensconced prescriptive hierarchies, while Aguiar uses literary analysis to highlight the presence of counter-narratives to modernity 'within the Indian context.'[41] Cumulatively, their work critiques a developmental teleology that intertwines spatial and historical movement and it instead turns the spotlight on 'miscegenations' through which processes of modernization are articulated in colonial contexts.[42] The intervention is especially important because, to quote Alan Trachtenberg: 'Nothing else in the nineteenth century seemed as vivid and dramatic a sign of modernity as the railroad.'[43] However, even as it acutely sensitive to how modernity's abstractions are shaped under colonial compulsions, the analytic of 'colonial-modernity' continues to examine railways through somewhat normative distinctions between tradition and modernity, albeit now in relation to social forms and cultural practices rather than economic processes.[44] Further, in theory, frameworks of vernacular or hybrid recognize that everywhere a normative modernity is articulated through local specificities; in practice,

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[41] Cf. Bernard Cohn's work on traditions of modernity. Aguiar, *Tracking Modernity*, xiii–xviii; Bear, *Lines of the Nation*, 9. Cf. Laura Bear, 'Miscegenations of Modernity: Constructing European Respectability andRace in the Indian Railway Colony, 1857–1931,' *Women's History Review* 3, 4 (1994): 531–48; Goswami, *Producing India,* 112–31.

[42] Bear, 'Miscegenations of Modernity.'

[43] Alan Trachtenberg in Wolfgang Schivelbusch's, *The Railway Journey: The Industrialization of Time and Space in the 19th Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), xiii. A glance at the scholarship on railways confirms the preoccupation with modernity: Ian Carter, *Railways and Culture in Britain: The Epitome of Modernity*. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001); Todd S. Presner, *Mobile Modernity: Germans, Jews, Trains* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007); and Michael Beaumont and Michael Freeman, eds., *The Railway and Modernity: Time, Space and the Machine Ensemble* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2007).

[44] Partha Chatterjee, *Our Modernity* (author's translation of Srinjan Halder Memorial Lecture, 1994) (Rotterdam/Dakar: SEPHIS and CODESRIA, 1997), 3; Gyan Prakash, *Another Reason: Science and the Imagination of Modern India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 201–2; Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'Witness to Suffering: Domestic Cruelty and the Birth of the Modern Subject in Bengal,' in Timothy Mitchell, ed., *Questions of Modernity*, Vol. 11 of Contradictions of Modernity (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), xviii, 49–86; and David Arnold, *Science, Technology, and Medicine in Colonial India, The New Cambridge History of India*, Vol. III–5 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) 17.

however, the hyphenated modern frequently remains the marker of colonial contexts, distinguishing these structurally from other non-colonial (and hence non-hyphenated) ones.

While sharing many of these critical concerns, this book simultaneously frames processes of negotiating technology as a global one. Suggesting this is not to minimize historical specificity but instead to formulate it in dialogue with shared and related experiences in other parts of the world. The Indian experience with railways was indisputably specific: it would not be an exaggeration to argue that when they rode a train or encountered the railway, many Indians learned as much about the colonial-capitalist structure of the British-Indian state as they did about railway technology. Early railway construction was financed within a specific colonial guarantee of metropolitan venture capital, railway policy was buffeted between imperial commitments to profit versus 'improvement,' and conditions of travel were premised on imperial perceptions of a colonized population. Railway passengers faced discomforts endemic to systemic subordination even as their demographic strength made them a constituency increasingly important to a colonial state seeking legitimacy in the face of an emerging nationalist agenda. At the same time, several kinds of negotiations had global analogies, whether it involved the spread of suburban living spurred by railways, the introduction of supra-local standardized time, the spread of epidemic contagion, or the extensive degradation of natural habitats exploited for railway construction. What remained historically specific were not necessarily the changes and challenges themselves but instead the combination of resources and constraints through which people could navigate them.[45]

In facilitating this dialogue between local and global effects of railway technology, the lens of the everyday replaces the apocryphal colonial imagined by imperial minds with a material and historical one. It does this by demonstrating that despite technological change in the colony being premised on constructed

[45] To understand India's transition to a capitalist mode of production, Kerr's 1995 study on colonial labour processes not only traced how historical practices specific to railway construction in India showed real and formal dimensions of the labour process at the same work site but also stressed how this duality was 'generally present in the advance of capitalism everywhere.' Kerr, *Building the Railways*, xii–xiii, 9, 13–14, 54, 86, 126, 191–93. Chakrabarty's *Provincializing Europe* and Neil Harvey's *Uneven Development: Nature, Capital and the Production of Space* (1984) offer possible ways to engage with similar ideas.

and reified ideas of colonial 'tradition,' such imaginings could not be—and were not—always executed in practice. The case of female railway passengers is an instructive example here. Scholars have highlighted the colonial paradox that Indian women became modern railway passengers while travelling in special *zenana* carriages that were intended to replicate colonial traditions of extreme female seclusion.[46] Officials and elites at the apex of Indian society certainly insisted that respectable Indian women would use railways only if assured of heavily secluded *zenana* accommodation. Such suggestions also led some railway companies to experiment with building heavily secluded carriages. However, in most cases, constraints of cost and rolling stock dictated otherwise and *zenana* carriages never became commonplace. Thus, most Indian women continued to travel in the usual females'-only carriage, no different from those provided for women passengers in other parts of the world.[47] Eventually, some railway companies painted the word *zenana* on regular females'-only carriages (having failed to import plates of female figures that were to have designated these carriages). However, when travelling in a carriage that was specifically marked as *zenana*—and thus invoked an idea of ineluctable colonial difference—Indian women were actually travelling in a railway space that was rather global.

Similar dialogues between local and global are suggested in different parts of the book. The continuing discomfort of third-class passengers in India cannot be explained without understanding the extent to which they were seen to be 'peculiar' in comparison with passengers in England (which was the model for railway planning in India). Similarly, the discussion about standardized railroad time here cannot be understood outside of official discussions about the temporal 'irrationality' of Indians. At the same time, popular reactions to temporal standardization in India remain analogous to those in other places where local time was replaced with supra-local time and civil time synchronized with railroad time. It was not simply in India that railway embankments provided a cost-effective engineering strategy for building railways across uneven terrain; however, when poorly built embankments wreaked havoc, a colonial bureaucracy privileged the interests of railway companies over those of cultivators. India's medical and sanitary establishment could hardly analyze the relationship between spreading railways and increasing epidemics outside

[46] Bear, *Lines of the Nation*, 12, 36–62; Goswami, *Producing India*, 104, 117.

[47] Ritika Prasad, 'Smoke and Mirrors: Women and Railway Travel in Colonial South Asia,' *South Asian History and Culture* 3, 1 (January 2012): 26–46.